



Caine's Story

[Chapter 001]
-- college dorm

I place my mascara down onto the desk and give myself a quick look over in my handheld mirror.

Alright, I think I look decent enough.

This is the last party I'll be attending. After this, I will graduate college and earn my degree in fashion design. Being a third year in college makes everything feel so fast. I swear it was only yesterday that I was still a freshman.

"Come on Joselina, are you ready yet?" asks Sarah, my roommate.

"Just about, how do I look?"

Sarah gives me a head to toe look, judging me internally. She's always blunt and honest with her opinions, so whatever she says, I'll believe it.

"It's cute and it suits you – did you make that top yourself?"

I happily nod my head. "Of course! I've got to put those skills to use, after all. Soon I'll be running my own boutique and sewing my own clothes for customers."

"Let me know when you do, so I can take pictures of them," says Sarah with a chuckle.

Sarah's major is photography, so she loves to take pictures of models and clothing. On many occasions, I would be the one posing in my own clothes and she'd take the pictures. Trust me, it's not fun standing underneath a strong light that slowly cooks you from the inside while blinding you every 2 seconds.

"Though isn't the collar a little too wide?" Sarah wonders out loud.

I touch my collar with my fingers. "No, no, it's supposed to be like that," I explain.

"Alright – you're the expert! Anyways, ready to go to the party?" she asks.

I eagerly nod my head at her.

"I heard Kyle would be there." Sarah looks into the distant with a dreamy look on her face.

I roll my eyes. "Are you still smitten with him?"

"Noooo," she lies. "Well, maybe just a little."

"Ah whatever, just remember not to go home with him tonight. Spare yourself the drama."

"Right!"

We leave our dorm rooms to go to the party. My last college party. It's making me feel a little sentimental.

-- Dimitri's house

When Sarah and I arrive at the party, people are already making a ruckus. The music is loud and obnoxious.

To be honest, I don't even know whose house this is. I simply – along with a bunch of other people – got a 'graduation' party invite.

There's about 50 or so people in the house, all carrying red cups full of alcohol. The smell of beer is hard to miss. Some of them are playing beer pong on the kitchen table, whereas others are taking shots in the living room.

I recognize a few people. Some of them are in the same major as I am, but most of the people are strangers to me.

"Let's get something to drink and loosen you up," says Sarah.

"What makes you think I need to loosen up?" I question her.

Sarah gives me a knowing smirk. "I still remember the last time you were a shy wallflower at Ere's party."

I find myself a little embarrassed at the memory. That was over two years ago and I didn't know anyone at the party. I hadn't even met Sarah yet, though that is where we first met.

"Shut up – that's ages ago," I grumble. "I'm perfectly capable of mingling with people now."

Just as I said that, a guy from my fashion class walks up to me. It's Zak, a friendly face.

"Hey Joselina! Didn't think you'd come," he greets me with a smile.

"Hey Zak." I look over next to me. "This is Sarah, my roommate."

Sarah nods her head at him, then turns to me. "I'm gonna get us some drinks, okay?"

"Sure," I say with a smile.

Sarah leaves the two of us alone.

"It's crazy how we've almost graduated. It'll be weird not to go to college anymore," says Zak.

"True, it's a little sad since I've enjoyed my experience so far." I'm going to miss college.

"What are your plans for afterwards? Me and Gwen are thinking of taking a trip to Paris and meeting some of the fashion designers over there."

"Paris? That sounds cool. But I've got my own plans to open up my own boutique after graduation."

"Oh yeah I remember that. What are you going to call it?" he asks, excited.

"It might change later on, but I think I'm going to go with Sunshine Boutique. It's got a nice ring to it."

"Aw, not something like [2]'s Designs? Or simply '[2]', you know, like those other famous brands."

I shake my head. "I'd rather not name it after myself," I explain. "I'm okay with Sunshine Boutique."

"Suit yourself, you'd never take anyone's advice anyway," says Zak with a shrug.

I narrow my eyes at him, confused. "Huh, what do you mean by that?"

Zak is distracted by someone walking past him.

"Ah, I think I just spotted my future wife," he says and quickly leaves me alone.

What a weird comment to make... I can name my boutique however I see fit, I don't need to take his naming suggestions to heart. I feel slightly agitated now.

Not soon after, Sarah comes back holding two drinks, handing one over to me. It's filled with beer and...

"What's this?" I ask, smelling a whiff of raspberry.

"No damn clue, but it smells *amazing*," she says with a laugh.

I have got to agree; the raspberry is very strong and for once beer doesn't smell bad. I take a sip and find myself quite liking the taste. It barely even tastes like beer.

"Interesting," I say as I look at the cup. "Now I understand how people can become alcoholics."

Drinking alcohol will get my mind off of things like Zak saying something stupid to me.

Sarah chuckles heartily and finishes up her drink. Eventually her eye catches the sight of someone she recognizes.

"Oh, it's Kyle!" she says, sounding a bit nervous.

1. Warn Sarah.

2. Don't say anything.

"Sarah," I say in a serious tone. "Remember the last time you were with Kyle? Don't make the same mistake."

Sarah isn't even looking at me. "I know, I know – but I won't. I know what to expect now. Which is to say, absolutely nothing."

I sigh. "I'm not going to comfort you when he hurts you again."

Inevitably, that's probably what I'm going to end up doing. Sarah's been back and forth with Kyle for over a year now.

"I'm just going to talk!" she says with a pout.

I narrow my eyes at her, knowing exactly how it ended up last time she was together with Kyle. Lots of tears and tissues. Sarah can't get enough of him, I guess.

But it's not my place to warn her over and over again, so I say nothing.

"I think I'm gonna go talk to him," says Sarah.

I sigh in response, but I'm not going to forbid her. "Fine, be careful."

"Be back later." Sarah then makes a beeline for Kyle.

Since I'm alone now, I walk around the house trying to look for people I may recognize.

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The party is still going on an hour later and the people have gotten even more wild. They've made quite a mess of the house.

I feel a bit bad for the parents of the person who lives here. I hope they know that a party is being held, although they probably don't. People like to host parties when their parents are out of town.

I've talked to a bunch of my classmates, several new people, and have had a couple of beers. Not enough to get me drunk though. Only slightly looser, as Sarah would say.

I sit down on an empty spot on the couch, getting a bit tired of standing on my feet. There's a rowdy couple next to me, engaged in some sort of environmental debate.

There's a hard protruding object poking me – I realize I'm sitting on something. I stick my hand underneath my leg and grab the object.

Ah, it's someone's cell phone. It's an older model, though a smartphone nonetheless.

"Excuse me, is this yours?" I ask the girl next to me on the couch.

She shakes her head no, the guy next to her as well, and they continue their debate.

I look around the living room, wondering whose cell phone this could be. No one in my vicinity seems to be searching for something.

I get up from the couch and ask random people if they are the owner of this cell phone. It's got a particular diamond sticker on the back, but no one can recognize it.

After twenty minutes, I give up – no one knows anything. It'd be sad if this person doesn't get their cell phone back. That thing is like your lifeline when you're in college. Can't live without it.

Maybe I can unlock the phone and get some information that way. Hopefully this person doesn't have a password.

To my surprise, I only need to swipe to unlock it. I browse around the apps, looking for some contact information stored somewhere.

I quickly realize that... people don't actually do this. They don't store their name or address in their cell phones. I sigh, maybe I should try and call someone on their contact list and hopefully they know who it is.

I scroll through their contacts.

College.

Dad.

Mom.

Police.

...

This person has no contacts!?

The only numbers this phone stores are the user's parents. That's... rather sad. This person doesn't seem to have any friends, or perhaps they recently got a new cell phone and didn't import their contacts yet.

Then again, it is an older model. It can't be brand new.

I don't really feel like calling someone's parents though. What if they don't agree with their son or daughter going to some party, and I ruined the secret? Yeah, probably best not to call the parents.

Ignoring the contacts, I try one last thing; their gallery. I'm very conflicted about it, because this is really digging through someone's privacy.

But what else can I do? I can't just leave the cell phone here, someone might actually steal it. I've heard horror stories about people losing their cell phone during parties such as these.

Ah, whatever, I'm doing it. Maybe they have a selfie, hopefully.

I open the gallery, bracing myself in case I find any nudes.

And...

I sigh in relief. There are definitely no nudes. Instead, all of the thumbnails show pieces of metal working instead. Lots of pictures of jewelry, rings, necklaces, tools I've never seen before.

Our college does have a metalwork department. A few of my friends have it as their major. They make a lot of sculptures and jewelry. So at least the owner of this phone goes to the same college as mine.

...But this doesn't help me in finding the owner at all! There's not a single selfie in their gallery. The only things I see are jewelry and pictures of street cats.

Frustrated, I put the cell phone in my purse. If by the end of the night I still haven't found the owner, I'm just going to leave it here with the person who lives here. They can sort it out.

I leave the living room to find the bathroom.

I push my way through groups of people who are drunk out of their minds, spilling beer all over the floor. The smell is nauseating.

Finally, I stumble inside the bathroom.

-- **bathroom**

I bump into someone's head. We both collide painfully and I jump back in pain. I drop my purse to the floor as I cling onto my throbbing forehead.

"Watch it!" he snarls at me.

There's a guy staggering in front of me, desperately trying to keep his balance. He smells so much of alcohol, he's clearly drunk.

"I'm sorry, I thought the bathroom was free," I apologize. The door was unlocked after all.

I'm about to grab my purse and make a mad dash out of there, when I realize the guy is picking it up instead.

"This..."

The unknown cell phone had fallen out and the redhead takes it.

"My phone!" he cries.

He then glares at me. "...You stole it!"

"What – no!" I say, feeling insulted. "I found it."

So that's the owner of the phone? Should I believe him?

"Yeah, whatever..." He tucks the phone into his back pocket. He grows quiet for a bit.

"My purse, please," I say, pointing at the purse he's holding in his hand.

"Ah..." he says as he looks down at his hand, just now realizing he's holding it.

The guy holds it out for me and I eagerly take it from him. He wobbles on his feet, almost losing his balance when I tear the purse from his fingers.

Then, like it's some sick joke, the redhead's face contorts into a weird grimace. He starts making this weird retching noise.

Oh no... oh no – he's going to...!

I spin around and jump out of the way just in the nick of time, because the redhead's stomach contents decided to surface right at that moment. The guy collapses onto the floor.

I press myself against the bathroom door, squeezing my eyes shut, listening to the awful barfing noises he makes.

The stench of vomit fills up my nostrils and it almost makes *me* want to throw up. This is disgusting. Gross.

When he's finally stopped, I open my eyes again.

There's... so much disgusting vomit all over the floor. The guy is passed out, resting against the bathtub.

1. Check to see if he's okay.
2. Find someone else to help you take care of him.

Against all my instincts, which are yelling at me to run far, *far* away from him, I move closer to him. I'm careful to avoid stepping into the awful orange puddle of doom.

His skin is sweaty, his hair sticking to his face. He looks completely pale, but he's breathing still.

I bite my lips; this is what you get when you drink too much alcohol. He obviously doesn't tolerate it very well.

I poke my finger into his cheek, waiting for a reaction.

Nothing.

"Hey," I call out and poke him again.

Still nothing.

Great, he's completely passed out – and I really need to pee. What should I do? Leave him here? Notify someone else there's a barely conscious person sitting next to his own vomit?

Hm. Probably.

It's probably best if I let someone know there's a guy passed out in the bathroom. Maybe I can find his friends, who'll know what to do with him.

Otherwise, I'm not quite sure what to do with him...

I take a closer look to inspect him a little bit, to see if he's not dead at least. His chest rises up and down and his eyelids are moving the tiniest bit.

Okay – he's alive. Time to find someone who can help me deal with him.

I take one last look at the guy to remember his features. Red wavy hair, freckles across his cheeks, and I believe cyan eyes? I can't recall.

Either way, I leave the bathroom to find someone who knows him at least.

-- living room

The first person I come across, I immediately ask him for help.

"Hey, there's a person passed out in the bathroom. He's got red hair and freckles; do you know him?"

"Sorry, don't know any gingers," he says while shrugging his shoulders.

I try the next person, but they give me the same answer.

The next five people I ask also don't seem to know him. I'm beginning to believe that either his friends deserted him, or he simply doesn't have any – if his empty contact list is any indication. This is troublesome.

I should probably look for Sarah.

"Sarah!" I call out at her.

She's flirting with Kyle, who has an arm draped around her shoulders. I guess they're back together again.

"Heyyy, what's up, Joselina?" she says cheerfully.

"There's this guy passed out in his own vomit in the bathroom."

"Ew, gross. Don't step in it."

"..." I give her this deadpan look. "Well, I think he needs some help, maybe move him to a couch or bed or something."

"Just make sure he's on his side," says Kyle. "In case he vomits again in his sleep. People can choke on their own vomit that way, you know."

"You're smart," says Sarah coyly.

I roll my eyes. "Well, I just need some help. I can't simply let him stay in the bathroom like that."

"I don't know, I'm sure his friends will come and help," says Sarah, not really caring. She's too drunk to have a serious conversation with.

"By the way, don't wait up for me, I'm going back to Kyle's place tonight," Sarah whispers at me with a wink.

I groan out loud but decide not to say anything. She's a lost cause with Kyle, and I can't babysit her forever.

This time, someone else needs my help, and he's passed out in the bathroom.

"Whatever, just stay safe, okay," I say, and leave the two to their own devices.

I return to the bathroom.

-- bathroom

The awful smell of vomit hits me like a ton of bricks. I try my best to suppress my gag reflex.

The redhead is sitting up straight this time, though still leaning against the tub.

He looks at me, a strange expression gracing his face. He looks so down and defeated, all washed up.

"I just saw a guy pisssss out the window," he slurs, then points to the open window behind him.

Well, at least he's up and conscious this time. That's an improvement. He looks like crap though, but that's to be expected when you threw up your entire dinner.

I point to my own mouth. "You've got a little something, right here."

Quickly, he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. He then sighs, like he doesn't even care anymore.

What am I going to do with this guy...

"Hey, do you have any friends here that I can talk to? So they know you're completely wasted and come get you?"

He keeps eerily still, opting not to respond to me at all. He slowly tries to get up from the floor and stand up straight. Clearly, he's still too drunk, as he almost slips and falls, but leans against the wall for support.

"I can get myself out," he says, determined. Though his speech is still slurred.

With confidence, he pushes himself away from the wall and walks straight towards me. Wait no, if he keeps walking in a straight line he's going to step into the...!

"Wait!" I call out to him.

Of course he doesn't wait. The redhead slips and his body tips over, stumbling forwards.

I catch him. Well, not like I have a choice when he crashes into me. He slams me against the door, and his red hair is all stuffed up in my face, with his head buried in my neck.

This is too close for comfort – not to mention he *reeks!*

"Come on, you smell!" I complain and push him off of me.

He sways on his feet in front of me, his eyes glazed over.

"Sorry," he mumbles weakly.

"Is there anyone I can call for you? Anyone at all?" I ask.

It's slight, but he shakes his head, his wavy red hair bobbing with his head.

Great, there really is no one. I place my hands on my hips and sigh. I know he's just some stranger, but I feel oddly responsible for him since I'm the one that found him like this.

\[n]1, what are you getting yourself into...

"Let's get you home," I say and hold out my hand.

His gorgeous cyan eyes pierce straight through me – I didn't realize how close he is to my own height. His eyes, while droopy, are so vibrant. He takes my hand, wobbling on his feet while looking down to make sure he doesn't trip.

-- Car

I managed to call a taxi, and after seeing the state he's in, I decide to go with him.

We're both in the backseat, the car is driving slowly. I'm wondering what compelled me to look out for someone like that.

My eyes flicker over towards the guy. His red hair is a mess and he's half falling asleep from being so drunk. He's got this vulnerable look, so frail and little.

I guess I have a secret soft spot for people who are in need of help or comfort. I'm hopeless in that case.

The car makes a turn and the boy loses his balance completely and ends up falling slumped against my shoulder. A whiff of vomit fills up my nose.

"Hmm, you smell nice," he says softly.

"And you *stink*," I say as I push him away from me.

"Yeah, yeah," he grumbles.

"At least you're managing to hold everything in at the moment, that's progress," I note. He's not throwing up after all.

I was a little worried he'd get car sick, but while he does still look sickly, he's improved ever since we left the party.

"You sure can't handle your liquor though. Is this your first time getting so drunk?"

He shrugs in response.

"Being drunk is *funnnn*," he says while drawing the last word.

He looks out the window. "It numbs the senses," he mumbles quietly.

I raise my eyebrows, but decide not to question or press him any further. I don't care much for a stranger's problems either.

-- Caine's apartment outside

Eventually, we've made it. The taxi drops us off at an apartment complex. I have to drag the guy to the second floor as he's too unstable to walk straight.

"What number?" I ask him.

I'm looking at all of the doors, their numbers increasing. He's dangling off my right arm, barely holding on.

"212," he says in a raspy voice.

We keep moving until we finally reach the number 212. I stand still in front of his door and shake him off of my arm. He's not budging though, latching onto it like it's his lifeline.

"Keys," I say loudly.

"Pocket," he grumbles back, not making any attempts to get them.

"Dude, I don't know you well enough to stick my hand down your pants," I say in an annoyed tone.

He lets out an exasperated sigh, but pushes himself away from my arm and takes the keys out of his pocket. He fumbles around with them, then ends up dropping them to the floor.

The guy curses loudly before picking them up, then goes for his second attempt to unlock the door. He keeps jamming the key into the hole and misses the mark completely.

1. Take the keys and unlock the door yourself.

2. Wait for him to unlock the door.

I lose my patience.

"Give it to me," I say as I snatch the keys out of his hand and push him aside.

I quickly unlock the door.

"Could've done that myself... ya know," he complains.

"You can barely stand up straight. You're too incompetent to handle holes at the moment."

"That's what she said." He snorts at his own joke.

That joke was so cringe-worthy that I want to drink bleach to forget it. I slap him hard on his back instead, causing him to jump away in surprise and stumble inside his apartment.

"Well, I did my job, got the drunk kid back in one piece. I'm leaving now."

I hold myself back, waiting for him to finally figure out how keys and holes work. Hopefully this century. Still, I don't have all the time in the world.

Then, with a triumphant 'hah!' he finally unlocks the front door.

"Piece of cake," he says, verbally patting himself on the back.

I roll my eyes as he opens the door. I get a small glimpse of his apartment, it's very small and I can tell it's in a messy state. Typical college student.

He walks inside, stopping in the doorway.

"Well, you're home safe now. I'm going back, the taxi is waiting for me."

He turns around to face me, his eyebrows furled together in a frown. He looks confused.

"Ya not gonna ask?"

I shrug. "Ask what?"

He cocks his head to the side, giving me this weird look. "I guess not. Whatever."

Well, I guess expecting thanks from him seems a little far-fetched at the moment. Ahh, I can't believe I spent half my night taking care of this kid.

"Don't forget to wash the stench off of you," I say. "See you."

"Yeah, sure," he mumbles and slowly closes the door.

I take in a deep breath and turn on my heel, ready to walk away and get inside that taxi. I can hear the door close behind me completely.

Before I can catch my sweet ride to freedom however, I hear a loud crash inside of the guy's apartment.

Followed by loud groaning.

My anxiety spikes and I wonder if he's okay – maybe he fell down and hurt himself? My feet bring me back to the front door and my fingers twitch as I hover them over the doorknob.

Should I check to see if he's okay?

I knock on the door. "Hey – you alright in there?"

More loud groaning.

Frantically I fiddle around with the doorknob to open the door – of course he forgot to lock it – and enter his apartment.

[Chapter 002]

-- Caine's apartment

What I see, I more or less expected.

The redheaded guy is on the ground, his feet entangled with a plastic bag. He's trying to get it off of his feet, but is unable to coordinate his hands well enough to free himself.

He groans in frustration. "Why won't you come off!" he yells.

I sigh in relief. He seems to be relatively okay. Next to me, I turn on the light switch.

Finally, I can see the messy state of his apartment. No wonder he tripped over a plastic bag – there's garbage *everywhere*. Empty soda cans, random clothes all over the floor. He's way worse than your typical college guy.

I bend down and quickly pull his foot out of one of the loops from the bag, finally untangling him. Not knowing where his trash can is, I leave the bag on the floor.

"I could have done that," he says with a hiccup.

"Clearly," I say sarcastically.

He finally decides to shut up for a minute, silently brooding on the middle of the floor like a lost looking child. It's a little pathetic, but it speaks to my maternal instincts and I have a hard time leaving him to his own devices.

1. "You should watch where you're walking. I'm afraid to leave you alone like this."

2. "Do you need any help with anything before I leave?"

"You should watch where you're walking. I'm afraid to leave you alone like this."

He looks up, glaring at me with those striking cyan eyes.

"I'm not some fucking baby," he snaps at me. "I don't need babysitting, just go away."

He attempts to stand up by himself but manages to lose his balance by slipping on the same plastic bag from earlier. He trips backwards and lands on his butt with a yelp.

I can't help but chuckle out loud.

"You sure about that?" I ask, feeling smug. "Can't even seem to stand up by yourself."

He grits his teeth and growls at me like a dog. However, he doesn't look threatening in the least - he's more like a puppy dog. He's kind of cute, actually, if I ignore the fact that he smells like vomit and is piss-poor drunk.

I extend a hand out to him. "Come on, let me help you to the bathroom. You reek so much it's hard to look at you directly."

"Do you need any help with anything before I leave?" I ask him. Leaving him like this feels a little dangerous.

"No," he says immediately with a pout.

"How about any friends I can reach out to, to let them know you're okay?"

"Why are you so nosy?" he asks, clearly annoyed.

"Sorry, I'm just a little worried," I admit. "You're drunk, and you can't even stand on your own two feet without falling over."

"Of course I can - just watch me," he says confidently.

The redhead attempts to get up from the floor, but before he can even get onto his knee, he loses his balance and falls to his side.

He sighs in frustration. I try to stifle a giggle.

I extend a hand out to him. "Come on, let me help you to the bathroom. It's the least I can do, seeing you like this."

"I don't wanna," he complains, but still reaches out for my hand.

I help him up, but I didn't expect us to be so close to each other when he's finally on his feet.

Still holding onto my hand, he gazes at me with half open eyes and a quizzical expression on his face. Like this, I can see all of his freckles quite clearly. He tilts his head to the side as if he's inspecting me.

"You're kinda pretty," he says.

I drop his hand like a hot potato and jump away from him.

Trying my best to not let him see me blush, I quickly say, "D-don't get so close to me, you stink."

That made my heart skip! I can't let a drunk like this rattle me.

"So, uhm, where's the bathroom? I can help you clean up. Make sure you don't slip and crack your head open or anything as you wash the smell off of you."

He points to a door on the other side of his messy room.

I help him across the room, making sure he doesn't trip over his own two feet again.

-- Caine's bathroom

I turn on the light of the bathroom – it's quite small. Not as messy as the rest of his apartment though. There's a small shower, a toilet, and a sink. This really is a single's apartment.

He leans against the sink, turned towards me.

"Ya gonna enjoy the show, or what?" he asks, gesturing at me.

"Huh?"

He shrugs at my response. "Well, whatever you want." He then starts to unzip his fly.

Oh! That's what he meant!

"N-no!" I turn around in a heartbeat.

"I'll be, uhm, outside. I can look for some clean clothes. Yes, that's what I'll do. Clean clothes." I'm starting to ramble here, but I'm feeling so embarrassed all of a sudden.

I'm in a stranger's home, and I was just about to mindlessly watch him strip in his bathroom. What was I thinking!?

-- Caine's apartment

I hurriedly leave him to his own devices, hoping he won't slip and fall in the shower.

Looking over his mess of an apartment, I wonder what exactly I'm doing here. Looking after some guy I don't even know, who's drunk out of his mind.

Why do I feel the need to help him out? I don't even know myself; it's hard to resist people in need.

I hear him turn on the shower in the bathroom, filling up the silence with droplets of water.

I survey his living room, wondering where he keeps his clothes. There's a small dresser next to his bed so I open up some of the drawers. Luckily, it's got some clean clothes stashed away in them.

The clothes aren't folded nor ironed and they're all crinkled. Typical college student, once again.

Huh – these clothes aren't what I expected. This guy has got some suave sweaters in his wardrobe, they're kind of stylish. I was expecting plain t-shirts with prints on them. But no, he's got a little sense of fashion it seems.

As I pick out what seem to be his comfy clothes, I finally spot the amount of jewelry lying on his dresser. I almost didn't notice them before, not with all the trash in the way – but there's a ton of bracelets, rings, and necklaces scattered about.

Some of them are clearly handmade and others came from the store. A few pieces catch my eye; they're actually quite cute. A lot of them have stars in their design - I like them.

But why would he have so much jewelry lying around? They all look feminine in design, so I doubt he wears them himself.

Oh, maybe he lives with someone. A girl.

Though, judging by the state of his living quarters and the amount of space available, I doubt that someone else lives here.

The shower stops running and I look at the bathroom door. At least he seems to have survived a quick shower. Right, I should give him his clothes.

I grab his clothes and walk towards the door, just as it's about to open.

Standing in the doorway is a stark-naked redhead.

My ears and cheeks explode in crimson.

"Y-you!" I screech at him, squeezing my eyes shut. "Put on some clothes!" I quickly thrust the clothes into his arms and back off.

"No one wants to see your dangly bits!"

I turn away from him, my heart beating way too fast. I never should have gone to this stranger's place.

"Don't yell so much," he groans loudly. "It hurts my head."

"Stop talking and put your clothes on!"

"I'm trying!" he fires back.

After hearing him mess around with the clothes I picked out, I'm really starting to wonder what the hell I'm doing here. Clearly, he's fine – I should just leave.

"There – you can turn around again. I promise I won't taint your virgin eyes."

I whip my head around to face him. "Virgin eyes?" I repeat incredulously.

He shrugs. "You act like you've never seen a guy naked before."

1. "Coming from the guy who seems to have no one looking out for him."
2. "That's none of your business."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Coming from the guy who seems to have no one looking out for him," I scoff. The nerve of this little shrimp!

He clicks his tongue at me. "No one asked you to."

The redhead tries to play it cool, leaning against the doorpost of the bathroom. He completely misjudges his position though, causing his shoulder to miss the frame. Frantically, he staggers around trying to keep himself upright.

I smirk at him. "Right, but clearly you needed someone looking after you. Especially since your friends ditched you."

He huffs. "No one ditched me, okay?"

Then he looks at me, raising an eyebrow.

"That's none of your business," I say.

Who does he think he is, claiming I have virgin eyes or something? How rude. I've been nothing but helpful to him.

He chuckles at me. "Typical virgin response."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Can you stop that, please? Why don't you go lie down and sleep?"

"I would, but," he looks at me up and down, "I've got some strange chick in my apartment that won't leave me alone."

"Shouldn't you be going – don't you have a taxi waiting or something?"

My eyes widen.

Oh shit – the taxi! I forgot I had it waiting for me all this time! Noooo, that's going to cost me so much money!

"Argh!" I cry out loud.

I turn around to dash towards the front door, yanking it open. Downstairs, I can see the taxi clearly still sitting there, waiting for me.

"I'm coming!" I yell.

I turn to the guy. "Okay, take care. Let's not meet again!"

He puts his hand up as if he wants to protest, but I don't give him the chance to say anything as I sprint out of the apartment, running back to the taxi.

I regret helping that guy – this is going to cost me so much money! So much for having fun during my last college party.

-- **boutique**

Half a year later, I've been scouring the city for a suitable place to start Sunshine Boutique, my boutique.

Now that I've graduated fashion school and have got a bachelor's in fashion design, I can finally make my dream come true!

My grandma, who passed away over a decade ago, left behind an inheritance large enough for me to kickstart my own boutique and fashion line. It's been my dream ever since picking up a sewing machine when I was a little girl.

Well, here it is; Sunshine Boutique! My career is about to start!

-- **boutique**

The inside is still empty, so it will take a lot of work to fix it up.

Thankfully I still kept in touch with Sarah, who has promised to help me out.

It takes us a long time to fix up the boutique, more than a week at least. But when it's finally ready, I can't thank Sarah enough for her help.

"Whew, that took much longer than I thought!" she says with a relieved sounding sigh.

"You and me both – I thought we'd be stuck laying down flooring forever. There was almost no end in sight!"

"Haha, well, feast your eyes on it Joselina; Sunshine Boutique is finished."

I snap a picture of the finished store with my cellphone, welling up with pride. It's finally happening, my long-awaited dream of running my own boutique. Making clothes that people will wear, selling brands of clothing that people have never heard of...

But first, I have to thank Sarah for her efforts.

"Come on, let's go to the mall and eat. My treat. You deserve it."

"You know I never say no to free food," Sarah replies with a smile.

We laugh together then exit the boutique, taking a well-deserved break.

-- **outside city**

After Sarah and I had lunch at a café, we decide to take a stroll in the city and do a little window shopping.

"I'm throwing you a party after your opening day," Sarah says with a smile.

"Is that so?"

Sarah bumps her shoulder into me. "Of course, after all that hard work, we deserve a little downtime and mingling, right?"

"Besides, I invited some guys from college. Who knows, maybe you'll finally find someone that takes you out for a date."

I shake my head. "Sarah, I think I'll be too busy working to worry about some college bro who wants nothing but to party and drink beer."

She shrugs. "Doesn't hurt to make connections."

"Ah yes, my connections to beer is fundamental to my fashion, of course," I joke.

"I think my partying days are behind me. I didn't much enjoy the last one in college anyway."

I remember I had to take some random guy home after he threw up in the bathroom. Ugh. Not a pleasant memory.

"I promise, this time I won't ditch you for Kyle. He and I are through, for real," she says sternly.

I laugh at Sarah. "I better hope so."

Sarah and I walk past a cute crafts store.

"Wanna window shop for your future wedding ring?" Sarah asks and points at the rings in the window.

"Who am I getting married to? Some college bro? Yuck." I laugh anyways.

-- Mandy's store

As I expected, there are a lot of girls shopping around and looking at all of the cute crafts in the store. It's got this home-y feeling, I quite like it.

I walk past the jewelry section and look at some shiny necklaces, wondering if any of them would match my dresses back at the boutique. Perhaps I could buy a few of them and dress my mannequins with accessories and whatnot.

Then a rather odd sight piques my interest.

A young man wearing a beanie quietly tiptoes around the store, hands stuffed in his pockets as if he's bored, yet his cyan eyes are captivated by the jewelry around him.

Wait... isn't that?

Speak of the devil – that's the guy I took home at that college party.

That's him, isn't it? Sure, his red hair is mostly hidden underneath his beanie, but those eyes can't deceive me. They're so clear and memorable.

After that day, I never saw him again, not even at college. But here he is, shuffling around the store, sticking out like a sore thumb.

I end up hiding behind a large display without even thinking about it. Why do I suddenly feel embarrassed? Argh, I didn't expect to run into him.

I never even asked him for his name. Should I call out to him? Would he even remember?

1. Approach him.

2. Mind your own business.

I step away from the display and approach the redhead. When I appear behind him, I give him a gentle tap on his shoulder.

"Excuse me," I try to catch his attention.

He quickly turns around and stares at me with a surprised look on his face.

Does he recognize me? Maybe I shouldn't have said anything after all.

"Remember me?" I ask.

His eyebrows knit together and his lips remain closed. The young man stays silent and I start to wonder if perhaps he's gone mute.

"Sorry lady, I think you've mistaken me for someone else," he says with a huff, then bows down his head and moves away from me.

What – how rude! I definitely didn't mistake him for anyone. It's hard to forget the redhead I had to take care of that one night.

But fine, if he wants to pretend to not know me, I'll leave him alone.

He probably doesn't remember me, I should mind my own business. After all, it was only a single night several months ago - No way would he remember it. It's better if I don't involve myself with him anymore.

Sadly enough, the memory is still fresh in my mind. Along with the god-awful smell, that's something that is hard to forget.

But my eyes keep wandering over to him. He stands out in the sea of girls – he's the only guy right now. I wonder why he's here. Perhaps he's shopping for a present for his girlfriend?

He did have all of that feminine jewelry at his place...

I realize I know nothing about this guy, yet I'm still very curious about him. His cyan eyes left a lasting impression on me, I guess.

Our eyes briefly meet for a split second. I hold in my breath – he caught me staring at him! Embarrassed, I look away. I hope he doesn't remember me.

I walk back to where Sarah is, trying to force myself to look away from the redhead.

However, I can't help myself – my eyes dart back over to where he is. He's still looking around, inspecting some bracelets at the moment.

In a split second, I see the bracelet in his hand disappear.

Wait – what? I blink. Where did it go?

The redhead looks around, he's acting shifty. He picks another bracelet from the display and before I know it, that one disappears as well.

He's... he's stealing!

"Hey!" I call out.

Everyone in the shop looks at me.

"He's stealing!" I point my finger at the thief.

The young man stands frozen on the spot. All eyes are on him as the clerk comes up from behind the counter to confront him.

In a flash, he drops the bracelets onto the counter and starts rushing through the crowd, knocking people away from him. He sprints towards the exit in a panic.

Before anyone could have done something, the thief is gone.

"Wow, I can't believe he'd try to steal something." I'm baffled, actually.

"Should we go after him?" I muse out loud. He did try to commit a crime.

Hmm, I'm trying my best to remember where he lives, but it's been so long and it was hard to see during the night, I can't recall.

Sarah shakes her head. "Not worth it – they've got cameras here, you know. They'll find out who it is."

"I guess so. I never thought anyone would steal in such a crowded store..."

"That's exactly the best time to steal," Sarah points out.

"Huh, how do you know?"

Sarah says nothing, instead glancing sideways with a smirk on her face. She chuckles menacingly.

No way! Sarah stole things before?

"Wait, are you saying you were stealing, too?"

"Not right now!" she hisses. "I mean, I used to."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "The thrill? I don't know. It was easy. I stole cheap makeup like lipstick and mascara."

"If it was cheap, why'd you steal it?" I question her.

"...No comment," she scoffs.

Then Sarah starts pushing me towards the exit. "Now come on, let's get out of here already."

I'm a bit surprised; I never would have pegged Sarah as someone who'd steal. She seemed like such an honest and hardworking student during college.

My image of Sarah has sullied a little. I used to look up to her, but now... Can you really admire thieves?

I shake my head and we exit the jewelry store.

[Chapter 003]
-- boutique

When I see the sun going down, I decide to stop working for the day. I've been doing some fixes here and there to prepare for Sunshine Boutique's opening. Everything has to be perfect.

I'm nervous, but still really excited.

First, I should probably keep myself grounded in the present and buy myself some lunch for tomorrow.

-- convenience store

I head off to the convenience store for some last-minute grocery shopping. It's always useful for small items, or lunchboxes, when I don't have the time to be cooking and prepping myself.

Boon Mart is pretty quiet at night. It's a bit hidden away from the center of everything, so I can shop around, taking my time looking at all of the items. Besides, after 6 PM, their lunches are on sale!

When I enter the store, that's the first thing I do; I head off towards their lunchbox section. I find a neat row of plastic boxes containing small proportioned food, all with a sale sticker on them. My hand reaches out for them, until I accidentally bump into someone else's hand.

"Sorry!" I apologize immediately.

I turn my head to see a shop clerk next to me, who's been putting down the sale stickers on the lunchboxes.

"..."

Alarm bells are ringing in my head – that's him, that redhead!

"You're... you're that thief!"

His eyes widen in surprise when he looks at me, freezing for a second as well.

But then he immediately swaps his expression to something more aloof and cold.

"Thief? I work here," he says in a cool voice.

"No, you were there, at that Lucardo store, trying to steal that bracelet. Don't you remember me?" I say. I can't believe I found him again.

"I can't say that I have any idea what you're saying lady. I've never been to Lucardo before," he dismisses me.

Ugh first he doesn't remember me, now he's trying to gaslight me?

"You can't fool me – you hightailed it out of there when I called you out on it."

He gives me an irritated look. "I really don't know what you're talking about. Perhaps you saw my evil twin instead? Perhaps you were on drugs? I don't know. Please excuse me, I have work to do."

The guy then continues to staple stickers to the plastic boxes in a steady rhythm, completely ignoring me and slowly moving away.

I feel offended, truly. Did I really help out a thief all those months ago? I put up with this drunk kid and brought him back home, but in the end, he's some petty thief and a liar?

"Why don't you just admit that you're a thief?" I tell him. "Perhaps I need to talk to your manager, let them know you might be stealing from the register."

He turns to face me, halting his work. "I am *not* stealing!" he spits at me.

There, I got a reaction out of him, so I smirk. When he sees the smug look on my face, he clicks his tongue and looks away.

"Please leave me alone lady. You have me confused with someone else."

"You're still trying to pretend it wasn't you?" I think for a second, then wonder if I can fool him.

"It just so happens I actually know you from college... I wonder what they would think if they knew you were stealing."

That seems to get his attention, as he freezes once more, his eyes not blinking. He turns to me again, a look of fear on his face. Hah, well that definitely got his attention!

"No, you don't..." he says weakly. "I've never seen you before in my life. You're bluffing."

Seems he really doesn't remember me. I guess I need to say something to convince him and scare him even more.

1. Mock his old cell phone.

2. "Didn't you go to that party half a year ago?"

"Hmpf, I even know you've got a diamond sticker on the back of your stupid old cell phone. What generation is that thing anyway? Does it run on double A batteries or something?"

The more I talk, the wider his eyes grow. It seems he truly doesn't remember me from that night, but I definitely remember all those details as if it happened yesterday.

"How do you know..." he says slowly.

"Because I've met you before, you know, at that party a while ago."

He scrunches up his nose, glaring at me.

"Didn't you go to that party half a year ago?"

He huffs. "I go to plenty of parties. You're just bullshitting me."

"The one held at, uhm, what was his name again..." I try very hard to remember whose house it was that I went to.

I think Sarah told me afterwards... A something. Andrew? Alan?

"Alex!" I cry out triumphantly. "You were there at Alex's party."

He looks at me, eyes slightly wide in surprise. But then he narrows his eyes, glowering at me.

"Who *are* you?" he demands.

It's kind of fun having the upper hand here.

"Who are you?" I ask back, then poke his chest with my finger.

Which is when I realize he's got a nametag on his apron.

"Caine," I read out loud.

So, this guy's name is Caine.

He brushes the spot I poked him with his hand, as if I dirtied him. He gives me this evil look.

"What do you want?" he barks at me. "Just let me work in peace."

I don't really know what I want. I'm just peeved that I helped out a thief when he was wasted.

"You really don't remember me? From the party?" I question him.

He narrows his eyes at me, clearly trying his best to dig through his memories.

"..."

I shake my head, why am I even trying?

"Never mind, you clearly don't."

Caine runs his hand through his hair, resting his palm against his forehead. He looks a little distraught.

"...You are a little familiar. I don't know why," he admits.

That makes me feel a bit better, knowing he hasn't completely forgotten about me.

Oh, but that's not the point of course, I was chastising him for attempting to steal.

"But it doesn't matter, just please leave me alone lady. I *work* here," he stresses.

"Fine, but don't try and steal something again. After all, I know where you *work*," I say sternly.

I leave him alone and quickly get all of the items that I needed.

I feel like I'll be running into this Caine a lot more now that I live so close to Boon Mart. Small world, I guess.

-- boutique

Today, Sarah is coming over, after promising me she's got some pictures to show of the photoshoot we've done before. We hired a model, she posed some of my clothing, and Sarah snapped the pictures. Sarah can fill up her portfolio, and I can use them to advertize my opening day.

It all works out for the two of us.

I'm in the workroom when I hear Sarah knock on the window, so I quickly let her in.

"I've got them, I've got them!" she says cheerfully.

"Hmm, did they turn out alright?" I ask.

"Of course, I shot them, obviously. And with a little bit of editing here and there."

Sarah walks around me to place down her bag, taking out a large folder filled with pictures. She spreads them out on the worktable, and honestly – they look *amazing!*

"Wow, Sarah, these are... they're good!"

I look through the various pictures, seeing the model pose my own clothing line, and I can't believe how good they turned out. The soft lighting makes everything look so much better, and the model really knew how to work it.

I'm getting quite giddy at seeing these in a professional setting – my dream is coming true! My own clothes, and they look really good.

"I like this one a lot," says Sarah, pointing at a picture of the model wearing shorts and a shiny tank top I made.

"Yes, it's basically your style," I say with a laugh. Though I have to admit; that picture does look particularly good.

Maybe I should post them on the forum that I moderate. It's a small forum for hobbyists doing crafts and whatnot. Some make their own doll clothing, some make jewelry, and they sell and trade goods. It's also a place to get advice and criticism on your work.

I've been a member of the forum Daisy Dots for years now – in fact it's been a great help in getting feedback before I managed to start my own boutique. Now I'm the one who usually gives out feedback, and I've been appointed a moderator for a while now.

Yes, I've decided. I'll post these pictures on the forum, I'm sure the members will like them.

"Can you send me the digital files to my e-mail?" I ask.

"Sure thing – I'll give you the 300DPI ones as well, in case you feel like printing them out to display in your window as a banner or something."

I give Sarah a wry smile; she tends to use jargon I'm not familiar with sometimes, but I'm sure she means well. Sarah is the photographer after all, we went to the same art school together.

Though I don't have much of an eye for photography, I know she takes pretty good pictures. After all, the ones lying in front of me are pretty good.

"Anyways, I have to go soon, got another appointment with an aspiring model – I love getting them to model for me for free. They're always looking for pictures to fill up their portfolio."

Sarah quickly gathers the pictures together and stuffs them back into the big folder.

"Be sure to send me the pictures!"

"No problem, I'll send you all of them, I took like 200... ahh, that's going to be one big file." Sarah sighs and shakes her head. "But no matter, you should get them by tonight."

"Okay, thanks," I say.

"See you later!" Sarah takes her bag with her and hops out of the room.

--

Later that night, I receive an e-mail from Sarah and attached is a very large file containing all of the pictures from the photoshoot. It takes a while to download, but once I've got it, I browse through them all.

There's so many of them, but I can tell Sarah picked out the best looking ones to print out. There's quite a few that are blurry, or the model is pulling an ugly face, in the middle of blinking, or the clothes just don't look that great in a certain pose.

Still, it's *plenty* of material for me to post on my forum! I've been waiting all day to do this.

I log onto my account, which I named...

--Name input--

While browsing the forum, I quickly whip up a thread and upload the pictures. I can't wait to hear what other people have to say, I worked pretty hard for this. My opening day is coming closer!

As I wait for responses to come in, I randomly browse the forum and read people's posts. Things have been pretty peaceful, members are being nice to each other, and I barely have to reprimand anyone for not following the rules.

There's a notification on my screen, saying I have replies to my thread. Eagerly, I check them out. A few regular members have posted their comments.

Franine:

"Wow, the fit is gorgeous on all of these! I especially like #3. Where'd you get the fabric for that one?"

Lizzybeth568:

"I love this! #4 and #5 are my favorite!"

CraftMyLips:

"So cute! I really like these – how long have you been sewing?"

GingerTalent:

"I wish I had your talent, or the patience, to make a clothing line such as this. Marvelous. The photos are of such high quality as well. The best I can do is take them with my cellphone camera."

There's a smile on my face as I read the posts, I'm swelling up inside with pride.

There's a new post, so I refresh the page.

Menenimi:

"These suck. Why don't you stop wasting your time trying to get better? Your work will never be good enough."

That prideful feeling disappears and I'm immediately defensive. That's not the way members should speak to each other on my forum! Who does this member think they are?

1. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

2. "Criticism should be constructive."

Angry at this random member insulting my work, I hastily type a reply.

\v[5]:

"You have no idea what you're talking about. Please mind what you're saying, this is your first verbal warning."

I hastily type a reply, reminding this member that criticism should be constructive, and not a straight up insult. We have zero tolerance for unabashed negativity.

\v[5]:

"Criticism should be constructive, that was a straight up insult. Please mind yourself before you get another warning."

A few minutes later, and there's a reply to my post.

Menenimi:

"My bad, let me be more precise. #1 has awful seams and the colors don't match."

"#2 just looks like she fell into a pot of paint and you called it a finished piece."

"#3 I don't know what your goal was here, but the pattern around her crotch makes it look like she's on her period and 'free bleeding'."

"#4 she looks like a turd."

"#5 are you designing for a toddler? Because with that god-awful cloud pattern, it looks like it's made for a 3-year-old. In short; these designs suck. Just give up already."

I can feel my cheeks heat up the more I read these nasty comments. I've never had someone comment like that before! So needlessly mean and aggravating, like this person has no soul.

I get angry knowing I'm just being relentlessly attacked – and those comments are *not* true!

Luckily, another moderator swoops in and cleans up the thread, removing the posts made by this awful troll, and giving him a fair warning.

Thinking that the matter is settled, and I can resume my usual posting, I get a personal message this time. It's from the same person.

Menenimi:

"I knew you couldn't take it, deleting shit because you can't face the awful truth that your designs suck and you need to quit. People always baby you and protect you, making you think you're good, but you're not. Go back to design school, you sham. Go ahead, delete this message as well, it will only prove my point. Or ban me for that matter."

I'm fuming at this point – who does this troll think he is!? I swiftly move my mouse over a few buttons, and I've banned this Menenimi person. I turn away from the computer, positively angry at the troll *and* for letting it get to me. I need to cool down, because this is infuriating!

I know I shouldn't let some random internet troll get to me, but having my clothes being scrutinized like that, and simply bashed into the ground... it just ticks me off.

I *know* I'm good – I won't let that troll get to me.

I try to get some fresh air to cool my head, lest I do something I regret.

-- Outside convenience store

I wander around outside at night, passing by the park, and slowly getting a hold of my emotions. I just want to slap that person in the face... I can't believe such vile people like him exist on this planet!

I shake my head, trying to get rid of the angry thoughts. I come across the convenience store; perhaps a snack might cool me down.

-- Convenience store

As I enter the store, I see a group of young adults in the back, near the alcohol section. I was hoping it would be quiet at this time of night, but I guess some people still like to party. I walk through the aisles to find some snacks.

Something falls to the ground and makes a sharp bang.

"Oops!" says someone in a very unapologetic voice. "I'm sorry, I knocked your phone onto the ground!"

I stand on my toes to look over the shelves, wondering what's going on. I can hear some shuffling, perhaps a person picking up an object from the floor. Then, there's a loud shatter in the aisle ahead of me – a bottle had fallen to the floor.

"Hey, aren't you going to clean that up?" says the same voice.

I hear some more commotion happening and the group bursts out into loud laughter. Then as I look over the bags of chips in my way, I notice what they're laughing at.

It's a store clerk, clutching a mop to his body defensively. Ah, it's that redhead, the thief.

Trying to not alert the group I'm there, I slowly walk around the aisle to get a better look. I round the corner and see some spilled beer on the floor; its brown glass shattered near Caine's feet.

The group consists of three men. The biggest one gives the clerk a small push.

"I asked you a question – aren't you going to clean that up? Isn't that what you're supposed to *do*?"

My mind flashes back to the nasty comments I received from the troll, and I have an overwhelming urge to slap the hell out of that guy. Anger rises up inside of me; he's bullying the clerk! I look over towards the register, but there's no one there. I guess at this time, only one person mans the store.

"Just, please leave..." says Caine through gritted teeth.

"We'll leave when you've cleaned up your mess. Oh, and when you're done, you can take yourself out like the trash you are!"

The three men laugh out loud.

What should I do? I can't just leave him there, it's making me so angry! A bunch of people ganging up on one guy. They're pushing the poor boy around with no one there to help him out. No one except for me, that is.

"Oops, I dropped one too!" says another one, as he picks a bottle from the rack and let's it fall on the floor.

The beer splatters on the boy's apron, and he seems positively terrified by them. I can't let them have their way like that troll had his way with me!

1. Confront the bullies directly.
2. Help Caine in a clever and indirect way.

I muster up my courage and reveal myself from behind the aisle.

"Hey!" I call out to the group.

That got their attention; everyone's eyes are on me.

"Leave him alone," I claim boldly.

"Mind your own business," the biggest sneers at me.

"Come on Thomas, let's leave this stupid place," says the other one.

"Whatever, let's go boys. This runt is not worth our time," says Thomas with a scoff.

As they all start shuffling away, Thomas slaps the redhead hard on his back, making him yelp out loud.

Finally, they all leave the convenience store. I'm left alone with Caine and a couple of broken bottles of beer on the ground.

I muster up my courage as I grab my phone from my purse and place it against my ear.

"No, no he said what!?" I say loudly to my phone as I step into view.

All of them turn to look at me. There's a bundle of nerves brewing in my stomach, but it's overcome by my need to stand up for this stranger.

"Hang on a second, I think some kids here are wrecking the place." I stare down at the one that pushed the Caine around.

"Hey," I call out to him. "Are you done playing with bottles?"

He threateningly squints his eyes at me, like he's about to say something back, when I quickly cut him off.

"No, I'm okay, seems to be just three college aged guys," I say to my phone. "They're just leaving," and I direct my sentence while looking them in the eye.

The guy beckons to the other two, pointing his thumb at the exit, and they slowly start to shuffle away with a lot of murmuring. When they pass Caine, one of them makes a quick move as if to scare him, which does startle the guy and he backs away from the group.

Finally, the three of them leave the store.

I sigh in relief when we're alone. I put my phone away; I'm glad it was convincing enough that I was in a call with someone.

"Are you okay?" I ask him.

Caine simply dismisses me with a loud click of his tongue, then he bends down to start picking up the shards of glass.

I'm a bit taken aback at his reaction. I figured he'd be grateful. I didn't expect him to look at me with disdain.

"Want some help cleaning up?" I offer.

He stands up straight to finally address me.

"Just leave me alone," he bites out at me.

What the...

Hey – I just saved your sorry ass from bullies! At least feel a little grateful, you twerp. I glare at him as I fold my arms.

"Why can't you just thank me?" I question him. "Is it that hard to say 'thank you'?"

"*Thank you,*" he says sarcastically.

Feeling completely discouraged, I sink into myself and back away.

"Okay, I was just wondering if you needed any help..." I turn around to leave him to his thoughts.

So ungrateful! Why did I even bother, he's a thief after all – he's got no morals. Of course he wouldn't appreciate me helping him out again. This is the last time I'm sticking out my neck for this guy.

Ultimately, I end up leaving the store without buying a snack. I see him mopping the floor as I exit the building.

[Chapter 004]

Today is the opening day! I've worked long and hard for this, primping everything, advertizing – so much advertizing – and cleaning until the wee hours of the night.

I'm exhausted and the day hasn't even begun.

I smile to myself and unlock the door; Sunshine Boutique's opening day.

I eagerly tend the counter as I wait for my first customer to show up.

Not soon after, the doorbell rings and I see a middle-aged woman walking into the store. She's highly fashionable, wearing a stunning black one-piece and huge sunglasses.

"Good morning!" I greet her.

The woman nods at me, then quietly browses around the store.

Unfortunately, after a couple of minutes of browsing, she leaves empty-handed. Oh, I guess she didn't like anything here... that's a blow to my ego.

But no worries– she's only one of many! I'm sure I'll get my first sale soon enough!

The next time I hear the chimes, it's a group of three women, chatting and laughing as they enter the boutique.

Together they make comments about the clothes being cute and how this one skirt would look amazing on one of them.

One of the ladies walks up to the counter, holding a blue skirt.

"Excuse me, where can I change?" she asks.

I point at the back. "Right over there, ma'am."

"Thanks!" She disappears into the changing room.

The other two chat among themselves, browsing around my racks of clothes. One of them take an interest in a dress that I designed – one of my favourites, actually.

It's a little creepy stalking the behaviour of my customers like this, but I can't help it – it's my first day and I haven't had my first sale yet! I'm too anxious. I want everything to go over smoothly today.

A couple of minutes later and the three of them walk up to my counter. It seems the lady really liked the blue skirt and wants to buy it. I'm so happy I could burst out into rainbows and unicorns.

I check out the skirt – as well as the other lady who wanted to buy a top – and the three of them are on their way again.

I look down at my register, opening up the drawer. I see the cash neatly stored in the right compartments. My chest swells up with pride.

My first sale.

I feel like I can take on the world!

--

Customers have been walking in and out of the boutique the entire day. They're buzzing with curiosity, and of course, the discount deal I made for the opening day is very attractive to a lot of people.

I can't believe I actually managed to sell a lot of my own clothing! I'm so happy that people showed up on opening day, not to mention walking out of the store with a bag in their hands.

I couldn't wish for more.

After closing hours, lots of people stick around and Sarah comes to visit me as well.

"Look at all of these people!"

"I know – everything went really well!"

"Alright, ready to mingle? I invited some of my contacts from the industry to come. A lot of them work with fashion designers, or are models looking for a designer to work with," Sarah explains with a more serious tone.

"Can't believe you did all of that – what about food and drinks?" I ask, a bit concerned I may not be able to entertain these people properly.

"All taken care of!" Sarah reassures me. "Got some guy coming over to bring some wine and beer. Ah, it's on me, here's some cash."

Sarah digs through her pockets to fish out her wallet and hands me over a €50 bill.

"Wow, thanks, I don't know what to say. You thought of everything, didn't you?"

"Obviously, someone needs to look out for you. God knows how stressed you've been, making this day a success." Sarah shakes her head.

"Ahh, I know. Come on, let's get this party started then."

"Right!"

With unparalleled enthusiasm, Sarah charges forwards and mingles with the rest of the crowd.

As people start to enter the boutique, I greet them all warmly and make small talk discussing my business.

--boutique front

I hope the drinks come soon, so I head outside to wait for the guy to show up. Can't let my guests go thirsty.

A moped drives by and stops in front of the boutique, there are two crates stacked on the back of the bike. Great, drinks are here!

I quickly head over to greet him, noticing the delivery came from Boon Mart. Huh, I didn't realize they did late night deliveries.

"Hey, are those the drinks?" I greet the person wearing a helmet.

The driver takes off his helmet and reveals a mop of vibrant red hair.

I'm just as surprised as he is – isn't that Caine, from the convenience store?

His demeanor changes completely when his eyes meet mine. Immediately his face turns into a scowl.

"Yeah," he grunts while avoiding eye contact with me.

Caine takes the crates off of the bike and puts them on the ground.

I feel like I should say something, but on the other hand, this is super awkward.

1. Take one of the crates inside.
2. "Do you need any help carrying that inside?"

To not make matters more awkward, I put my hands on the top crate and lift it up. Oh, it's quite heavy! No worries, I've got this.

"Wait – what are you doing? That's heavy!" Caine says in a startled voice and he reaches for the crate with his hands.

Caine tugs on the crate, causing me to lose my balance and I stumble forwards, knocking the heavy crate into his body.

"Ugh," he winces.

Quickly I let go of the crate and step backwards.

"Uhm, I could have carried that too, you know," I say sheepishly.

"Just let me do my job, okay?" he snaps at me.

I frown at him. "Don't you pick that tone with me," I reprimand him like a child.

He hugs the crate close to his body and walks away from me.

"Whatever, lady," he says indifferently as he disappears into my boutique.

I look down at the last crate on the ground. My mind takes only two seconds before I decide to pick it up and defy his wishes anyway, carrying it inside myself.

-- boutique

I quickly put the crate down near the counter, where I see Caine talking to Sarah.

I wonder; does Sarah not recognize him from that time in Lucardo?

When Caine's eyes meet mine, they hastily flicker away down to the box of drinks next to me. He gives me this look of contempt once he realizes I carried it into the boutique anyway, defying his wishes.

What! I only brought one in – I didn't break my back over it like *he* almost did. I roll my eyes at him from afar.

It doesn't take long for him to leave Sarah alone and he rushes up to the counter to confront me.

"Do you need any help carrying that inside?" I ask him.

Caine shakes his head. "No," he replies dismissively.

He then bends down to pick up one of the crates and carries it inside. I feel a bit useless here, but I hurry up after him. This is his job after all.

I hope he's not here to steal anything...

-- boutique

Inside I spot Sarah and talk to her.

"Hey, where'd you find that delivery guy?" I ask her and point at Caine.

"Boon Mart, why?"

"I didn't realize they did deliveries."

"They don't," Sarah says with a laugh. "You'll have to pay him extra for the delivery."

"Ugh, really?" I knew it was strange. Why would a convenience store do deliveries?

My eyes follow Caine as he brings in the second crate and dumps it at the counter. Such finesse... I hope he didn't break any of the bottles.

I walk up to him.

"Thanks for the delivery." I nod my head at him.

He quickly averts his eyes away from mine. The atmosphere between us feels so awkward because of what happened the last time I saw him.

"...No problem," he says in a quiet voice.

Caine clears his throat to get my attention.

He sticks out his hand. "Pay up."

I blink at him, but then slowly take out my wallet.

"How much?"

"€55, and €10 for the delivery."

"What! You charge that much?" I protest. Sarah only gave me €50, I guess I need to pay the difference.

"You gonna pay or not?" he says dismissively.

I groan out loud and take out some cash to pay him. Luckily, I have the exact amount he needed. He quickly rips the bills out of my hands.

"See yah!" He salutes me, then sprints out of the boutique.

What a strange guy – and rude. Definitely rude.

Whatever, tonight I'm going to mingle and make connections. But most importantly; I'm going to celebrate the opening of Sunshine Boutique, my lifelong dream come true!

I introduce myself to a bunch of people until I come across someone who's got something very interesting to tell me.

"Why not join fashion week?" the blonde haired woman asks curiously.

"Fashion week?" I repeat, confused.

"They hold it every year here in Claner, it's a big event where fashion designers show off their new line and spread their brand. It would be a great opportunity for you."

"Oh huh, now that does sound interesting. When will this fashion week be held?"

"Usually sometime in August."

Considering it's April, that would be four months from now. I've got plenty of time then.

"Awesome, thanks for telling me. Is there a website I could look up for more information?"

"Yeah, I believe it's called ClanerFashionWeek.com."

"Great! I'll check it out when I can."

It may still be only my first day of opening my boutique, but attending fashion week definitely wouldn't hurt my business at all. I should take this opportunity and make something that will dazzle people.

Then again, fashion week is way different than owning a small boutique. With fashion week, I need to have a line of dresses to show, models to hire – it's quite a lot of work.

But for now, I should continue to make connections here!

It's nearing midnight and people are still around, though most have left.

Sarah comes up to me. "Joselina, we've run out of drinks."

"Oh shoot, can we deliver some more?"

"I don't think they deliver at this time anymore... They're still open though."

"Alright, I'll grab another six pack at the store real quick. It's not too far."

"Okay, I'll keep them entertained!"

I quickly leave the boutique, taking my bicycle to visit Boon Mart.

-- Boon Mart

It's completely empty inside. I'm so very happy about their 24/7 opening times though.

I zoom past the aisles to find the alcohol section and quickly pick out a six pack of beer. When I walk up to the counter to check-out, I'm surprised to find out...

...That Caine is tending the cashier and is completely asleep. His arms are folded over each other and he's leaning them onto the counter, his head resting on top of them. His lips are parted slightly and a little bit of drool has accumulated in the corner of his mouth.

Wow, he looks incredibly stupid.

It's almost adorable.

I can't help myself as I take out my cell phone and take a quick picture of Caine sleeping on the job. I grin to myself; this will be useful later on in case I need it.

For, you know, *science*.

I tuck my cell phone away. Caine's still deeply asleep and unaware of my presence.

1. Flick his forehead to wake him up.
2. Clear your throat loudly to wake him up.

I position my index finger in front of his face, then flick him right in the middle of his forehead.

Caine immediately jumps up, wide awake and completely startled.

"Wh-what!?" he shouts in confusion.

After his eyes settle on me, he finally calms down. Then his eyebrows lower as he rubs his forehead.

"Did you just *flick* me?" he accuses me.

"Me? No," I lie straight through my teeth. "What would give you that idea?"

I clear my throat, hoping the sound is enough to wake him up. However, Caine doesn't even budge.

Frowning, I clear my throat once more, louder this time. No response.

"Hey," I call out. "Wake up, you're supposed to work."

Seeing him motionless still, I decide to shake his arm with my hand. This finally evokes a reaction from Caine – he grabs my wrist with his own hand out of reflex. My breath hitches in my throat.

Caine lazily opens up his eyes, his beautiful cyan iris peering through his long eyelashes. When he finally becomes aware of where he is, he promptly lets go of my wrist.

"What do you want now?" Caine asks in a gruff voice.

I gesture towards the pack of beer. "I'm a customer, of course."

He scans the beer with a sigh. "An alcoholic, it seems."

"Hey – this isn't for me. Unlike some people, I don't drink myself into oblivion," I say, recalling the first time we met and he was completely wasted.

Caine narrows his eyes at me. "That'll be €6,99."

I quickly pay with my card this time since I ran out of cash. I'm about to make a quick getaway when Caine stops me.

"Hey," he calls out to my back.

Ugh, what now?

"Did we really meet before?"

I crane my head to look behind me. I clutch the pack of beer against my body.

"Yeah." I pause. "You smelled." I then quickly run towards the exit.

"Wha – hey!"

I don't have time to be talking to thieving clerks – I need to get back to my part and make sure everyone's taken care of!

-- **bedroom**

"Ugh," I groan.

My alarm beeps loudly, ringing in my head, making it throb in response. I quickly shut it off.

I'm seriously regretting drinking so much the night before. I can't even remember when I went to bed, it feels like I only slept an hour or two.

Speaking of work, I need to get out of bed and get my butt behind the counter!

As I get myself ready for the morning, I check out my e-mails on my phone and see I've gotten an e-mail from... my old college? Huh, strange mail.

I read through the mail, it's one of my old professors at college. Seems he was there last night at the party.

...I can't recall. I want to facepalm myself for forgetting.

Continuing with the e-mail, he wants me to come hold an hour long lecture at college about my work to inspire future designers with my own success.

I feel myself grow a blush on my cheeks; that's kind of really flattering to hear. I mean, it's only been the opening day, so I can't say much, but I can definitely put some time aside for it next month or so.

Feeling super giddy, I reply to the professor with my answer.

That's also when I notice I've gotten another e-mail; a notification from the website Daisy Dots about a personal message someone sent me. I quickly check that out as well, perhaps someone needs my assistance.

Menemi2

"I knew you'd ban me. Don't worry, you won't get rid of me, not by a long shot. That's what proxies are for."

I throw my phone down and tear my eyes away from the screen.

Gross – first thing in the morning I have to be greeted by that stupid troll? He should give up already and leave me alone. I delete the PM and quickly ban his second account.

Then I grab my stuff and head downstairs for another successful day at Sunshine Boutique.

I should remind myself to do something nice for Sarah, she did throw me a party after all, and I actually got a few contacts out of it. Plus, a lecture at my old college!

[Chapter 005]

-- Shopping mall

"Hmm, I wonder what Sarah would like," I muse to myself.

It's finally the weekend, so I have the time to shop around. My first week has been quite a success, so I'm treating myself *and* Sarah. She threw me a party after all, I feel like she deserves a little something to show my gratitude for her.

Maybe some cute earrings or a new handbag. Hmm. I sigh out loud as I scan the jewelry around me.

What Sarah *really* wants is a super expensive camera lens, but I'm not about to buy her that. No way.

I look at some golden necklaces until I notice something in the corner of my eye.

Red hair.

My eyes shift to the left, curious about this person in the distance. That's when I realize it's Caine, the store clerk from Boon Mart.

Ugh, how many times do I have to run into this guy? I thought I had seen the last of him on Sunshine Boutique's opening day.

Wait. What is he doing?

Caine picks up one of the silver bangles from the display and slips it into his pocket.

I gasp out loud.

He's stealing again!

My gasp alerts Caine, who suddenly looks up and meets my eyes. There's a long stretch of silence between us.

I open up my mouth to yell out for security, so that they can catch Caine and prevent him from stealing again.

But suddenly Caine runs up to me, so close until we're pressed up against each other and my voice gets swallowed in his sweater. I back off immediately, confused at suddenly getting a mouthful of wool and a whiff of cologne in my face.

"Help! This woman is stealing!" he suddenly yells out loud, alerting everyone around us.

Caine gives me a salute with his hand while sticking out his tongue at me, slowly backing off.

I blink at him – that's what I wanted to say!

Then I notice that there's a necklace ever so slightly tucked away in my pocket. Oh – that weasel! He planted it there!

Before anyone can see it, I take the necklace out of my pocket and put it back on display.

When I cast my eyes upon him to glare, he immediately makes a run for it.

He thinks he can get away with framing me for theft!?

"Don't you dare!" I yell at him and start my pursuit.

No way I'm letting him go this time. He not only tried to steal, but he tried to set *me* up as well! He deserves to be taught some manners, the stupid twerp.

Caine is able to lose me through the maze of clothing racks, but I manage to track him down towards the changing rooms. I pause a little before entering the changing rooms, wondering if Caine really thinks I'm that stupid and can't see him hiding in one of the rooms.

I casually walk towards one of the two occupied changing rooms, my lips pressed into a thin line. I scan the shoes sticking out at the bottom of the brown curtain; they're Caine's shoes.

Scratch that, not only does he think I'm stupid enough to not know – he himself is stupid enough to think he could get away with hiding in the changing room...

I slide open the curtain with a loud "Gotcha!"

I'm greeted by two lonely shoes on the floor, the rest is completely empty. Caine isn't here.

Behind me I hear another curtain sliding open followed by a flurry of footsteps. Red hair bobs away in the corner of my eye. My face heats up as I realize he jukeed me.

That sly fox!

Feeling rage build up inside of me because he got the better of me, I chase after him.

I can't help but feel a burning desire to set him straight.

I lunge after Caine when he's starting to slip out of my range. My newfound fury manages to propel me forwards enough so that I body slam Caine into one of the changing rooms.

We stumble right through the curtain.

"Ugh!" Caine grunts in pain as his body smacks against the wall and we both go down.



It's a mess of arms and legs as I'm completely tangled up with Caine, who is groaning in pain and cursing underneath his breath.

"Get off me!" he hisses loudly.

"I'm *trying*," I hiss back at him.

I try to pick myself up, almost succeeding before I feel a sharp pain on my head and I'm pulled back.

"Ahh!" I shriek out involuntarily.

My hair! It's tangled with the zipper of Caine's pants! It must have gotten stuck when I tackled him earlier.

I place my hands on top of his thighs trying to create some distance between my face and his groin – because I would definitely rather be staring at anything else at the moment.

"What are you doing!?" he demands angrily.

"I'm stuck!"

Caine starts to squirm around, pulling and tugging my lock of hair along, basically torturing me at the moment. That really hurts!

"Stop your squirming," I bark at him.

"Then stop shoving your face into my crotch! And get your hands off of me already!"



I promptly take my hands off his thighs and then reach for his zipper.

Caine's eyes are wide in shock as he sputters loudly. "W—where are you touching me!?"

My fingers slide down my traitorous lock of hair, which has gotten tangled with his zipper's button, and I try my best to untangle it.

Suddenly Caine's hand is on top of my head, trying to push me away.

"Stop!" he yells. "This is sexual harassment!"

Ignoring Caine's pleas, I manage to free some of the tangled hair, but Caine's consistent struggling prevents me from freeing myself completely.

"Would you just quit it!" I yell back at him. He's making a mountain out of a molehill!

"Stay still so I can get it out."

Ah, almost got it! I twist the hair around one more time, and it finally untangles from the button.

Freedom!

"What is the meaning of—"

A store clerk appears behind us, dumbstruck at the position me and Caine have found ourselves in.

The three of us are completely quiet for what feels like the longest second in the world.

Then, blood rushes to my cheeks as I realize the implication of the position that we're in and I sit up straight.

"No wait, this is not what it looks like," I start to protest, trying to salvage what's left of my dignity.

"I don't know what you two were thinking – but sexual conduct is forbidden in the premises! Please leave at once!"

"No!" I shout. "It's not, I mean – this guy's a thief!" I point at Caine.

Caine's not saying anything, he simply looks bewildered and his face is eerily pale.

"Leave now before I call the police and fine you two!"

Caine is the first one to move, he scrambles to get up and he dashes out of the changing room, picking up his shoes from the other room in the process.

Still beet red, I mutter out a small sorry under my breath and quickly leave the changing area. I try to shield my face with my hands, hoping no one in the store recognizes me.

I've never been so embarrassed before!

Caine is not far behind me, also rushing out of the store after putting his shoes back on.

-- shopping mall

When the both of us have made our way out of the store, I spin around on my heel to scold Caine. I'm so angry at him right now.

"Look at what you did! You almost got us fined!" I lash out at him.

"Me!? *You* were the one touching me in weird places!" he snarls right back at me.

"I was trying to get my hair loose, you idiot," I explain. "I wouldn't be in that stupid position if you weren't going around stealing things again."

Caine bites down on his lips and he gives me this deathly glare.

"I wasn't stealing at all! How dare you accuse me of theft."

"Gee, I wonder why I'd accuse a thief of stealing when he's running away from me after I call him out in the act." I roll my eyes at him.

"I was running away *because* you were chasing me!" he replies angrily.

"I wasn't chasing!"

"And then you *body slammed* into me – jesus christ woman, what the hell do you eat for breakfast? Steroids?"

1. Retort back.

2. Try to diffuse the situation.

My cheeks feel even warmer.

"I do not eat steroids," I say loudly. "You're just too weak in comparison, look at how skinny you are. Do you even eat breakfast at all?" I retort back.

"I do eat!"

"You should try milk sometime, maybe you can grow a little bit taller while you're at it," I say, the insult effortlessly leaving my lips.

That seems to have hit a nerve, because Caine's face pulls into a scowl.

"And maybe you should start leaving cookies out of your diet – because you weigh like a ton of bricks."

I gasp. "Are you saying I'm fat!?"

"Yes – yes I am!"

"Why you little rat..." I shake my fist at him.

I take a deep breath to calm myself down. Then I stick out my hand, palm up.

"Give it to me."

Caine cocks an eyebrow at me, then scoffs loudly. "I'm not giving you shit."

"Cough it up, I know you stole it. You have to return it."

"I didn't steal *anything*," he stresses. "You need to get your eyes checked."

I close my eyes and take in a deep breath; I don't need to stoop to his level and engage in a petty verbal fight with him. I'm an adult.

"Look, I'm sorry for tackling you—"

"You'd better be sorry, I'm pretty sure I broke a rib or two. You weigh like a ton of bricks," Caine immediately cuts me off.

"—But I know you stole something, I couldn't let that pass."

Caine crosses his arms across his chest. "You're mistaken, I didn't steal anything."

"I clearly saw you steal that necklace," I insist. "Don't act coy with me."

"What's with you and looking at me all of the time – are you a stalker?"

I feel myself blush at his comment, as there is some truth to it – I was looking at him after all.

"I'm not," I deny. "Why would I spend my time looking at you?"

"I don't know, you tell me. Always accusing me of stealing the moment you see me."

"That's because you are always stealing when I see you! I know you stole something."

"For the last time – I didn't steal anything!" he cries out loud. "You were mistaken."

1. "Unless that's a banana in your pocket, you definitely stole something."

2. "I see it, it's in your pocket."

I scoff. "Unless that's a banana in your pocket, you definitely stole something."

Caine's cheeks turn a fiery red. "Why, you want to feel me up there too just to check? Are you some kind of sexual deviant!?"

"I—I'm not going to feel you up!"

And I am not a sexual deviant, you little prick.

"Are you sure? I feel like I need to protect myself from you right now, you pervert." Caine grabs both his arms and visibly shakes his entire body to portray his disgust.

"Gross."

I angrily point my finger at the bulge in his pocket. "Then what the hell is that? Huh?"

Caine effortlessly slides his hand into the front of his pocket and pulls out a black wallet.

He then crudely thrusts his hips forwards while grabbing his crotch with his other hand, keeping his wallet in the air. He's so vulgar!

"Suck on that, I didn't steal shit."

I scoff in return. "I see it, it's in your pocket."

Caine digs his hands into his pockets and pulls out... his wallet. He holds it up in front of my face.

"This is the only thing in my pocket – my own damn wallet. Or are you going to accuse me of stealing some guy's wallet as well?"

I hold back my tongue, realizing the bulge in his pocket was his wallet and not the shiny necklace that I saw in his hands.

I guess he really didn't steal anything and put it back when I spotted him. Maybe I spooked him too much.

Clenching my hands, I look away from him. "My mistake..." I admit.

Caine arrogantly throws his wallet in the air and catches it with his hand.

"See, I knew you'd come around and believe me. I didn't steal anything. You're always accusing me of theft but I—"

In a flash, someone rudely bumps into us and then bolts away on foot. His hurried footsteps stomp loudly on the ground as Caine and I both stare at the perpetrator in shock.

He's got Caine's wallet in his hands.

"My wallet!" Caine cries out. "Stop, you fucking thief!"

Caine dashes after him and I'm not far behind, also taking chase. No way am I going to let that guy run off with someone's wallet!

We run past groups of people who spring out of our way. The thief is still within our sight, still wildly running away from us. He manages to exit the mall, so we follow after him.

-- street shops

Out on the street the thief turns a corner and disappears into an alley.

Caine doesn't hesitate for a second and follows the thief.

Me on the other hand, I keep running, taking the long way around and sprinting as much as I can to be able to cut him off at the other end of the alley. If Caine is on his tail as well, then we can corner him and catch him!

My breath comes out as raspy little gasps – I haven't used my body like this in such a long time, I'm running out of stamina fast.

-- alley

I round the corner of the building and I'm right at the exit of the alley. Footsteps approach and I don't waver at all as my instinct takes over and I tackle whoever pops out of the alley.

The thief and I both go down onto the pavement, I land on top of him. His screams are muffled underneath my skirt. I quickly scan the area and see he's dropped the wallet onto the ground from when I tackled him.

I lunge forwards to grab the wallet while the thief quickly pushes me off and gets up from the ground.

"Hey, stop!" Caine yells, running out into the open.

The thief makes a mad dash towards safety and runs out of the alley completely.

I'm sitting on the pavement with my knees scraped and bleeding while my hands are throbbing painfully – but I've got Caine's leather wallet.

I can't believe I managed to steal back a wallet from another thief. I'm good at stopping thieves. I could go pro. Maybe I'm in the wrong profession.

Caine walks towards me, seeing the wallet. There's a look of shock on his face.

"There's that steroid strength again," he says.

"I got it though," I say with a grin. I fan myself with his wallet.

"Okay, now give it back."

1. Don't give it back just yet to teach him a lesson.

2. Give it back.

Caine tries to grab the wallet, but I pull it out of his reach so he grabs nothing but air. He glares at me.

"Seriously, give it back."

"Now you know what it feels like to be stolen from, don't you?" I say condescendingly.

"Shut up – just give me my wallet." Caine steps over my body and his fingers wrap around mine, plucking them off the leather.

I tug it away from him, causing him to almost stumble over my body, but he quickly balances himself in an upright position. He growls at me.

"Geez – a simple thanks would have sufficed. You're so impatient." I finally get up from the ground, and my knees sting in pain.

Ouch. All that adrenaline rushing through my veins made me forget that I actually tackled someone and floored him, scraping my knees open. Ugh, this is going to hurt walking home.

"I don't care." Caine makes a quick show of the hands, plucking the wallet from me.

"How about you show me a little gratitude?" I say as I hand over his wallet.

Caine quickly swipes it from me with a snort. "I'm not thanking you. It's your fault it got stolen in the first place."

"What! How is it my fault!?"

"If you weren't around, I wouldn't have taken out my wallet in the first place. So yeah, your fault. Stupid."

"So much for helping you out." I roll my eyes at him.

This is the third time I'm helping him out and he's been nothing but an ungrateful little brat.

"I never asked for your help," he fires back. "Quit your complaining."

I look down at the ground; my knees are stinging and my skirt is all dirty.

"Would it really hurt you to be nicer every once in a while? I did just get your wallet back, you know," I grumble at him.

"Fine, you want me to be nice?" Caine walks up to me and forcefully grabs my arm, lifting me up from the ground.

I wince in pain; my knees have seen better days.

"There. How's that for being 'nice'?"

I glare at him, unable to prevent myself from saying. "Wow, you have a shred of common decency, what a shocker."

Caine ignores me and opens up the wallet to count all of the money, making sure the thief didn't steal anything while he was on the run.

"I should report you to the police," I muse out loud. He's such an ungrateful little shit.

Caine sticks up his nose. "I thought we established I didn't steal anything."

"For in the future," I mumble under my breath.

No doubt this little troublemaker will try and steal something again. Which only serves to remind me how I got kicked out of the store just now; I hope they don't ban me indefinitely – it was a legitimate misunderstanding!

"Whatever, I got my wallet back, see yah." Caine stuffs his wallet back into his pocket and briskly walks past me.

He shoves me aside and I narrow my eyes in pain. The cuts on my knees are making my eyes tear up. When Caine sees the expression on my face, he raises both his eyebrows.

"I barely touched you – why are you making that face?"

I sigh and lift up my skirt enough to inspect my knees. Both of them have been scraped from tackling that thief earlier and skidding across the pavement. They're bleeding and dirty, I should really do something about it before I leave.

"Oh," he says in a soft voice when he sees the state I'm in.

Caine looks towards the street, then back to me, a look of conflict etched into his expression. He seems torn about what to do.

Finally, he sighs deeply. "I guess I should..." he starts to mumble.

"Should what?" I ask in a clear voice.

"Thank you for getting my wallet," he finishes, albeit with disdain in his voice.

"*You're welcome*," I reply. It seems he's got some manners left still.

Caine turns away from me. "Come on – there's a drugstore across the street."

"Yeah, your point?"

He faces me with an annoyed expression. "Do I have to spell it out for you?" he barks at me.

"Huh? Don't be intentionally vague!" I snap back.

Caine points at the drugstore. "Bandage." He points at my knees. "Bleeding." Then he pokes his own chest. "My treat."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "What's with your speech, were you a caveman in another life before?"

Caine's face suddenly turns reddish as he stomps his foot on the ground like an impudent child.

"I'm saying I'll treat your wounds!"

Then without waiting for an answer, he grabs my wrist and pulls me along.

"Hey!" I yell out, my eyes tearing up from the pain. "It hurts to walk, be careful!"

Caine walks ahead, slowing down his pace, but doesn't let go of my wrist. I can see that the tips of his ears are bright red.

I really have no idea what to expect of this brat, but I follow him across the street regardless.

[Chapter 006]

-- drugstore

I don't know how I keep getting myself into these situations. Regardless, here I am, in a drugstore, along with a thief, scanning the aisles for self-help care.

Caine crouches down to see all of the bandages on sale, picking a random one off the rack.

"Sterile bandages... Adhesive bandages... I don't know which to get."

"I don't need a bandage per se, just something to clean up the blood and sterilize the scrapes."

Caine picks a different package from the rack, it's a box filled with sterile pieces of cloth to clean wounds with. He looks up at me and shakes the box.

"Good enough, no?"

I nod my head. "That'll do."

Caine stands up straight, his eyes focused on reading the description on the back of the box. He almost doesn't notice that he's invading my personal space and if he continues to walk forward without looking...

I try to move away from him in time, but due to the stinging pain in my knees, I'm too slow to evade Caine and he bumps into me.

Caine's cyan eyes fly wide open and he backs off in surprise.

"S-sorry," he says quickly.

Finding myself feeling bashful at the proximity between us, I look away from him.

"It's ok," I say. "Let's check this out."

I pause, before adding, "and don't steal it."

Caine rolls his eyes at me while clicking his tongue, then walks up to the register.

Surprisingly, he really does pay for it, not that it was expensive or anything, it's only some sterile cloths, but I didn't expect him to. Not from a thief anyway.

-- outside

When we're outside I sit down on a bench next to the drugstore.

Caine plops down next to me and hands me the box. I open it up and then lift up my skirt to reveal the cuts on my knees.

1. Force Caine to clean the wounds.
2. Clean the wounds yourself.

Before I start cleaning away the blood, I turn my head to look at Caine. When our eyes meet, he gives me this puzzled look. I hand him the box.

"You do it," I say.

"What?" he asks, confused.

"It's your fault I got hurt in the first place – so you clean it."

"What the fuck makes you think I'll be your slave just because you fell down and hurt yourself?" Caine asks, completely insulted.

I smirk at him. "Because I got your wallet back. So be a good boy, clean my wounds."

Caine has got this incredulous expression on his face, like he can't believe someone would ever ask him something like that.

He then gets up from the bench. "I could just leave right now," he spits out.

"Hmm, yes, you could," I respond absentmindedly.

Caine stands in front of me, glaring me down with those feisty eyes of his. "And never bother with you again."

"All very possible." I stick out one of my legs and smile up at him.

Caine balls his hands into fists, clearly agitated by my attitude towards him. It's only fair I think; I've helped him out so many times now, it's time he showed some compassion as well.

"Argh, I hate you," Caine grunts as he bends down in front of me.

In this position, I kind of feel like a queen and he's my loyal servant bowing down to my feet. Feels good, to be honest.

Caine angrily tears open the box to take out one of the cloths. He then begins to clean my wounds, touching the cloth to my knee.

Caine follows my line of sight.

"Looks like you're pretty banged up."

"I may have overdone it a little," I admit. Tackling the thief was a bit excessive.

"A little?" Caine asks with a snort. "You tackled him – just like you tackled *me*. You're like a bear."

I find my cheeks heating up. "A bear!?"

"Strong and stubborn as one – seriously, what do you eat for breakfast?" Caine asks me sincerely. He then touches my bicep with his hand as if to gauge my strength.

"D-don't feel me up," I say as I pull my arm out of his grasp. "I'm just an ordinary girl, you know."

"Ordinary or not, you still got hurt."

"That's why I'm going to clean it right now." I open up the plastic and take out one of the sterile cloths, bringing it to my knees.

Caine's hand is suddenly on top of mine.

"I'll do it," he says.

"Huh?" What, is he for real?

"I said I'll do it," he grumbles as he takes the cloth from my hand and then sits in front of me.

"You don't need to, I can do it myself," I protest.

"Shut up and let me clean your scrapes before I change my mind," he says with a huff.

I decide not to say anything and let him do his thing. Caine brings the cloth to my left knee, touching the skin around the wound.

"Ah!" I shriek out. I forgot that stings like hell!

"Sit still, you baby," says Caine as he gently dabs the cloth against my skin.

"Don't look up my skirt," I say, not knowing what else to say because it kind of hurts and I'm trying not to cry.

Caine snorts loudly. "Too late."

I clamp my legs shut in lightning speed, my face suddenly burning with a blush.

"Y-you didn't...!"

Caine rolls his eyes. "I was kidding. Now, spread those legs for me."

"Don't say it like that!" I feel icky all over.

Caine doesn't wait for me to comply, and simply lifts my leg with his free hand, his fingers feel warm to the touch. Then he applies pressure against the wound, cleaning away the blood.

I'm getting used to the sting and start to relax a little. But there's this weird anxious feeling I get whenever Caine touches my skin, it's hard to shake off.

He's quiet as he diligently cleans up the cuts, his fingers are so very careful, I didn't expect him to be this gentle. I guess I expected him to be rough – to get it over and done with – but Caine has got some finesse to his movements.

It's almost like he uses his hands daily to have his movements be so fine tuned and so delicate.

Ah. That's only because he steals, isn't it? He's got to be quickhanded and swift when it comes to snatching something away without being seen.

After a little while, Caine pulls away, blinking his eyes up at me.

"There, done."

While my knees do still hurt, at least they're clean of any debris and blood. Putting a bandage on them would not be wise for this kind of scrape.

"Thank you," I say. It's the least he could do after all of that.

Caine stands up. "Now we're even," he says as he throws the cloth into the trashcan next to us.

Even? He thinks we're even? If we're going to keep score, then I'm pretty sure what he did just now doesn't even come close to evening up our score. How about when I took his drunk ass home?

"Do you really not remember me?" I ask him.

Caine cocks his head to the side. "Remember how much of an annoying pest you are? Yes, yes I do."

I roll my eyes at him. "No, I mean, from before."

"Before what?"

"The party from half a year ago."

Caine grows quiet as he sits down next to me again. I can tell he's making an actual attempt to try and recall that night. He sighs and runs a hand through his fluffy hair.

"...I don't remember much," he admits.

"I guess not, you were quite drunk."

"Did we meet then...?"

1. "I stuck my hand down your pants."
2. "Yes, you were passed out in the bathroom."

I feel like messing with him a little, so I intentionally try to be vague.

"I stuck my hand down your pants," I say flippantly.

Caine's eyes widen. "W-what!?"

"And I saw you naked," I point out with a grin.

I didn't expect Caine to turn red in record speed – his face almost matches the shade of his hair colour.

"No – no you didn't, you're lying!"

"It's the truth."

Caine grabs a fist full of red hair, looking lost and scared.

"But... that doesn't make any sense." He gulps loudly. "Did we...?"

"Did we what?" I ask innocently, knowing full well what he means.

"You know..." His blush has gotten even more red as he looks away from my eyes.

I lean in closer to him and whisper in his ear, "You mean, did we have sex?"

"...!!" Caine buries his red face into his hands.

Oh my – I didn't expect such a big reaction from him! I feel really gleeful right now, after all the shit he pulled, it feels good to put him in his place and embarrass him.

Though I should probably tell him the truth. I move away from him and sit up straight.

"You were super drunk at the party so I brought you home. You asked me to take the keys out of your pocket – which I refused to do by the way – and then I helped you take a shower."

Caine peeks through his fingers.

"...Did you really see me naked?" he asks in this tiny voice.

"That is unfortunately true," I say with a sigh. "You were so drunk you got out of the bathroom without wearing any clothes yet."

Caine looks a little relieved. "So we didn't...?"

I shake my head. "I left after that."

"Ah," is all he says.

"Yes, you were passed out in the bathroom," I explain.

"I vaguely remember being in the bathroom," he says.

His eyes shift over to me. "I don't remember what happened after that, I don't remember *you*."

"I found someone's phone – turns it out it was yours."

"Ugh, you found me like that?" Caine groans loudly.

"Believe me, that's not how I want to find anyone, passed out in their own vomit."

Caine groans out loud again. "Shit – really? I don't remember, I have no clue how I even got back to my own place."

I purse my lips a little as I look down at the ground, wondering what he'd do if he knew I was the one that helped him.

"Uhm, it was me."

"You...?" he drawls out.

"I helped you get back home," I admit. "At first I looked around to see if you had any friends at the party to help you out, but I couldn't find anyone."

Caine looks away from me. "...Why didn't you just leave me?"

I sigh. "I don't know – if not me, who else would have helped you?"

"I'm sure I would have been fine, I don't need anyone to help me," he says.

A silence grows between us. Caine seems adamant on not accepting help from others. It's like he considers it some kind of character flaw to reach out for help when he needs it.

"Well, I brought you home anyway."

Then he whips his head around as if he suddenly realized something.

"Wait – I remember something."

"Huh, you do?"

Caine runs a hand through his hair, gritting his teeth. "Yeah I..."

His face suddenly grows a shade darker.

"I think I was naked..."

The memory of a naked Caine standing in the doorway floods my mind. I had mentally blocked it until now.

Caine fidgets on the spot. "Did we..." He looks away from me. "You know?"

I find myself matching his blush. He thinks we slept together!

I raise up both my hands and quickly shake my head. "No – no we didn't! You took a shower and then I left."

"Ah, okay." Caine rubs the back of his red neck. "Good."

A silence grows between us, making me feel uneasy. I twiddle my thumbs together, unable to really say anything. I don't know what I should say, now that he knows it was me who helped him out.

Caine keeps quiet as well, his blush slowly fading away. It's starting to feel very awkward now...

"What's your name?"

The sudden break in silence startles me. I blink a few times at Caine, tilting my head to the side.

"My name...?" I repeat.

"Yes, stupid, your name." Caine pouts. "You haven't told me."

I rack my brain trying to remember if I ever told him my name. However, I really don't recall ever introducing myself.

"It's Joselina," I say. "Joselina \n[2]."

Caine huffs. "Finally, I can put a name to that face of yours."

I bring a hand to my cheek. "You're saying that as if there's something wrong with my face."

"Everything is wrong with it," he replies nonchalantly.

"Hmpf!" I turn away from him and fold my arms across my chest.

"As I recall, you said I was pretty when I was at your apartment."

"I can say a lot of things that aren't true when I'm drunk."

I feel my face heat up – why is he suddenly insulting me like this?

Then I feel his red hair touch the side of my cheek, his breath tickling my ear. He's suddenly really close!

"Thanks, Joselina," he whispers in my ear.

I feel a shiver run down my spine. When I whirl around to face him, Caine has already gotten up from the bench and is walking away from me, his head hanging low.

He's rubbing the back of his neck; I can tell it's red, along with his ears. I can only stare at his retreating back.

-- **boutique workroom**

At home I check on my e-mails. One of them is from my old professor Berg, I've been corresponding with him about the lecture I'll give at college.

He wants me to bring a few pieces of the clothes I've made to show to the rest of the class. We've settled on next week Friday. I'm supposed to be open that day, but I guess I can take a really long lunch break.

So far, everything has been going well for Sunshine Boutique.

After replying to Berg and confirming the date, I browse around the internet a little bit more. Which reminds me, I should check out that website for the fashion week! I eagerly type in the URL.

A flashy website greets me; full of models running down the runway, wearing really cool and extravagant designs. I feel a little humbled after seeing the pictures; I'm much less high fashion than these designers.

I prefer to design clothes for people that they would actually wear. Not these... avant garde designs. However, it's still a great chance to showcase what I can do, perhaps I can even net some clients who like my work. Fashion is all about networking anyway.

Seems the deadline to sign up is the end of May, I still have a month left then. The Fashion Week will start on August 18th, a Saturday.

Ugh, I have to pay for it. I guess you pay for a confirmed spot to showcase your talent. It's a little pricey, especially combined with the fact that I will have to spend money on materials as well, but in the long run, it's worth it.

I bite the bullet and sign up for Fashion Week in August. That's still four months away, I've got plenty of time to come up with a line-up.

To brainstorm a little, I visit the Daisy Dots forum. Sometimes people post designs over there that really inspire me. Plus, I still need to make sure everyone's abiding by the rules.

Which is when I notice there's been a ton of reports since I last checked. When I check one of the reports, it seems a user reported a troll. I read the comment:

Meniniimi:

"Seriously, this looks like a potato sack. Go back to design school, you're trash."

That troll is back! They really aren't giving up. I hate it when members can circumvent the ban by simply getting a new IP, you can never seem to get rid of them.

I quickly ban the troll once more, telling them to stay gone.

[Chapter 007]

Today is the day! With my bag in tow, I'm going to go to my old college and hold a small presentation about owning your own boutique. I'm really excited! I brought my portfolio, a few pieces I've made before, and I'm ready to answer any question anyone will fire at me.

On my way over to the Art Institute of Claner, I reminisce about my college days, which weren't too long ago, but it makes me nostalgic nonetheless.

Long days spent in the workroom, sewing, fitting, and doing it all over again. I kind of miss it! I'd really like to see professor Berg again, since he's helped me so much in my fashion.

Once I step foot on the campus, I am immediately taken back to when I still went to college here and stayed at the dorms. When Sarah was my roommate and we had loads of fun together. I even had a boyfriend during college, though that relationship didn't last all that long.

Campus is busy and full of people, so I worm my way through the crowd towards the main building where my presentation is being held. At the entry I'm greeted by a familiar face.

"Miss \n[2]!"

It's professor Berg!

"Hello!" I greet him back.

"It's so nice to see you could make it, why don't I escort you to the lecture hall?"

I'm nervous, but so excited as well! Professor Berg leads me to the lecture hall, passing by students on our way there.

"How's it going with your boutique so far?" he asks me.

"I've got everything set up, and while I'm not making any profit just yet, I do get more customers each day."

"Sounds like it's going well then," he says with a nod. "I've always had high hopes for you, \n[2]."

I blush a little at the compliment. "Aww, thanks Professor Berg. I hope I exceed your expectations."

"If there's anyone who can do it, it's you! Now, shall we head to the lecture hall?"

I take in a deep breath; you can do this Joselina!

"Let's!"

— college campus

The sun is bright and warm when I step outside onto the campus. Students are sitting down on the grassy fields, studying and chatting with friends.

The lecture is finally over.

It lasted for an hour, there was a large group of people in the lecture hall that listened to me. I was so nervous, but I pulled through.

I talked about my creative process, how to start your own business, how to make a name for yourself – I tried to cover as much in the little time I was afforded.

I feel exhausted now, I'm ready to go home.

Ahh, it really does feel nostalgic coming back here.

Suddenly a person bumps into me, causing me to drop my bag to the floor, spilling all of its contents.

I bend down to pick up some of my stuff, like my wallet and my keys. The person who bumped into me leans down to help me gather my stuff as well.

"Sor—"

Caine's eyes widen.

"You!" he exclaims loudly, standing up and pointing a finger at me.

Wait, what is Caine doing here? I grumble something under my breath as I'm left to collect my things on my own.

"Are you some kind of stalker!?" Caine demands.

Is that what he thinks this is? I glare at him as I reach for my notepad.

"Of course not! Why are you here?"

"This is my college, and I'm pretty sure you're not a student here either. So, what are you doing here? Spying on me?" Caine scoffs at me.

"Do you think I follow you around for fun?" I say with a sigh.

"Yes," he replies, completely serious. "Why else would you be here?"

1. Answer with an attitude.

2. Answer him honestly.

"Well, whatever, you keep thinking like that. I'm here to do real business. I don't need to waste my time on small fry like you." I roll my eyes at him.

"Small fry!? Is it because I'm short!?"

Oh, that seems to have hit a nerve. For some reason, I can't contain my grin – so he doesn't like being called short.

"Drink some more milk," I fire at him.

"Ugh! Just get off of my campus! Stop following me around."

I stick out my tongue at him. "It's a free country! I can do what I want!"

"You're not even a student here!" he protests.

"Doesn't matter, Professor Berg asked me personally to drop by. I've got an excuse, what's yours?"

Caine stuffs his hands into his pockets, giving me a stink-eye.

"For your information, I was invited here by Professor Berg to give a lecture," I explain. "No need to be so suspicious of me."

Caine narrows his eyes at me. "I'm always suspicious of our encounters – you're usually up to something."

I cock my head to the side. "Don't you mean the other way around...? Aren't you usually the one causing a ruckus?"

"Hey – I try to be stealthy, *you're* the one that acts like bull in a China shop."

"I'm not some bull – I've got control of my motor functions, thank you very much."

"I meant your pure strength," he says with a roll of his eye. "Are you even a girl?"

"Why would that matter!?" I ask, suddenly embarrassed. "Are girls not allowed to be strong?"

"It's just that I've never seen anyone like you," Caine muses out loud.

"Whatever – are you going to help me pick up my stuff, or not?" I finally ask and gesture towards my belongings on the ground.

Caine clicks his tongue and kicks his foot against the ground, making it obvious he doesn't want to help me out. I grab my portfolio, grumbling under my breath that he isn't going to help.

But then he's suddenly at eye-level with me, I'm staring right into his eyes. He blinks then looks away, handing me a couple of papers that were thrown about. He seems a bit apprehensive.

I accept them, neatly stacking the papers containing my designs and storing them in my portfolio.

"How are your knees?" he asks a bit bashfully.

I'm surprised he would even ask.

"My battle scars are healing up quite nicely."

Caine snorts at my comment of calling them battle scars. There's even a tiny hint of a smile on his face, it looks rather nice on him.

"You design?" Caine asks, as he hands me over another piece of paper.

"Yes. I went to college here for fashion design. I own the boutique you delivered drinks at."

Caine looks down at the ground. "Oh. Didn't realize you were the owner." He scratches his nose.

"What's your major?" I ask out of politeness.

"Metalwork," he says. Caine finally hands me the last thing left on the floor.

Before I can thank him for his help, Caine suddenly springs up right, his eyes widening slightly. He then takes off without saying a word.

I frown at his back, shrinking into the distance. What in the world was that about? It's like he saw a monster behind me and ran away.

I pick myself up from the ground and make sure I didn't leave anything behind. However, I spot a pencil case of mine on the floor still.

Another hand picks up my pencil case right as I try to reach for it.

"Here you go," he says.

I kindly accept it and stuff it in my bag. "Thank you, at least some people still have some manners."

"Ah, yeah, I saw you run into Caine just now."

I study the young man in front of me. Spiky hair style, fashionable clothes. He's staring at me with curiosity. I don't recognize him, must be another student here on campus.

"Are you two friends?" I ask.

"No!" he hastily denies.

The boy kicks his foot against the ground, sulking. "We're not really..."

He looks a bit dejected, I wonder why?

"Well, I'm not a friend of Caine's either, if that's what you're wondering about."

He shakes his head. "I don't think anyone here is."

Before I can question him further, wonder what he meant by that, he suddenly grows all shy and starts to mumble something under his breath.

"I... I saw your designs in your presentation, they were really cool."

"Oh! You saw my presentation?" I ask him cheerfully. I'm so glad someone thought positively of it!

Not expecting my reaction, his eyes simply grow wide and he starts to stammer his words.

"Y-yeah..." He clears his throat.

"Your designs are really cool... I like them." He flashes me this cute and bashful smile.

"Aw, thanks, that makes me happy," I say, feeling pride swell up in my heart.

"Though the green one was a bit odd."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "Odd?"

"It reminded me of uhm, something I saw... A-are you familiar with this website called Daisy—"

"\n[2]!"

I see my old professor Berg running after me, interrupting my conversation with the young man.

"Thank goodness I could still catch up to you, you forgot this," he says as he hands over my agenda.

I'm just losing everything today!

"Oh, thank you so much! Without this I'd be a mess with planning." I quickly stuff the agenda in my purse.

The professor looks over at the young man, giving him a nod.

"Sterling, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Professor Berg."

"Kevin Sterling here is a student majoring in fashion much like you did. Miss \n[2]'s a great role model to have."

The boy named Kevin slowly starts to get a pink hue on his cheeks.

"I'm... I'm sure she is. N—now if you'll excuse me, I need to get back to class."

Kevin trips over his feet as he tries to scramble away from the two of us, then quickly runs away.

Huh, I wonder what that was all about. Was he going to ask me if I knew about the website Daisy Dots? It sounded like it...

"Feel free to come back, we'd love to have you around again," says professor Berg.

"I'll think about it! But now, I have to get back to work," I say with a smile.

We both bid our goodbyes and walk away from each other.

As I continue walking down campus, I realize I've gotten a bit famished. I wonder if I can visit the canteen and get something to eat there before I leave.

-- canteen

There are a bunch of students eating in the canteen, their conversations are lively and loud. I feel like I'm back at college again, I could fit right in.

I manage to score myself a really nice chicken sandwich. It used to be my favourite meal here, I've kind of missed it!

As I look around for a spot to sit and enjoy my lunch, I notice Caine sticking out like a sore thumb among the sea of students. He's sitting at the far back, in the corner, all alone at the table, eating his lunch.

Oh, why is he all alone? Didn't that spiky haired guy say something like that? That no one is friends with Caine?

Seeing him poke at his food while leaning his chin on top of his hand makes my heart ache for him.

When I was still in college I had Sarah to hang out with; I was never really alone. However, I can't imagine how lonely it must feel to not have anyone to talk to.

I feel a strong urge to walk up to him, my feet have a mind of their own as I wade through the other students.

Caine doesn't notice me at all as I approach his table.

1. Sit on the opposite side of him.

2. "Is this seat taken?"

I take a seat on the other side of the table, putting my sandwich and purse down as well.

Caine finally looks up, his brows knitted together in confusion. With his mouth hanging open like that, he looks a bit like a fish out of water.

Ignoring his obvious stare, I unwrap the plastic from the sandwich and sink my teeth into the bread, taking the first bite. Ahhh – it's so good!

"What do you want?" Caine sneers at me. "Don't you have somewhere you need to be?"

"Can't I enjoy lunch as well?" I fire back. Then I take another bite of my sandwich and munch on it, staring at him as if to make a point.

"Is this seat taken?" I announce my presence to him.

Shocked to hear someone talk, Caine looks up at me. When he sees it's me, he immediately pulls his face into a scowl.

"Tch, it's you."

"Well, can I sit here or not?" I press him.

"Do whatever you want, I don't care," he says flippantly, pulling his beanie down to cover most of his face.

I take a seat opposite of him, putting down all my belongings next to me. I carefully unwrap the plastic of the sandwich and take my first bite. Hmm – it's good!

Caine taps his fingers onto the table, not touching his food.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're like a cockroach you can't get rid of?" asks Caine.

I stop chewing. He's comparing me to a cockroach!?

"How – how rude!" I say with a mouth full of chicken. "Don't compare me with such an unsanitary bug!"

"How about a dung beetle then?" Caine offers.

I grit my teeth. "Only if I can call you a shrimp."

Caine purses his lips, glaring at me for my remark. Well – he started the name calling! To think I was feeling sorry for him just a minute ago, I should have known he'd give me an attitude.

I take another bite of my delicious sandwich.

"By the way, why'd you run away with your tail between your legs?" I ask. He ran off without saying a word when he helped me out.

"Huh?" Caine looks confused. "What do you mean with my tail between my legs?"

"Well, you took off without saying a word – how else should I describe it?"

A light bulb goes off as Caine understands what I'm talking about.

"T-that's nothing!" he deflects grouchy.

"I couldn't even say thank you. You were gone so fast."

"Tch, I don't need your thanks. Seriously though, why are you here?" he asks as he folds his arms across his chest.

He's so grumpy! Why can't he let loose a little?

"Do I really need a reason other than to enjoy the magnificence that is this chicken sandwich? Dear god, I've missed this so much... you can never get them grilled and breaded like this anywhere else."

Caine's eye twitches. "I don't care about your stupid sandwich."

I hold my sandwich close to my body, protecting it from Caine's hurtful comments. "Shh, it can hear you."

"Don't be stupid, it's a *sandwich*," he argues back.

"My precious," I say, stroking the bread with my fingers.

Caine looks visibly creeped out. "You're disgusting. Stop making love with a god damn sandwich!"

"I'll let you have a bite if you ask nicely."

"I'm not touching that shit with a ten-foot pole," he immediately replies.

I shove the sandwich up in Caine's face. "It's the best you'll ever have, try it."

Caine deflects the sandwich with the back of his hand.

"Don't go shoving that in people's faces!" he barks.

"Ahh come on, you know you wanna try," I say in a sing-song voice, once more hovering the sandwich near his mouth.

Caine's face is starting to get redder from being so annoyed.

"Stop bugging me already!"

Caine finally slaps the sandwich away this time, knocking it out of my hand and it lands with a thud on the table.

Immediately I realize I've gone too far with my teasing and I sit down in silence. I was just trying to cheer him up – he looked so sad before, sitting all alone. But I guess it was stupid to try and be friendly with him.

"Alright, I'll leave," I say. I take my sandwich from the table and gather my belongings before I stand up.

1. "I know when I'm not wanted."

2. "Sorry for disturbing you."

"I know when I'm not wanted." I quickly turn on my heel and walk away from the table.

I look down at my feet. "Sorry for disturbing you."

Then I turn around and quickly walk away from him.

--boutique

Back at the boutique, I've told Sarah to drop by so I can give her my present.

"Aww, thanks so much!" Sarah says with a big smile.

"Do you like it? I wasn't quite sure if you'd use it or not... The clerk at the camera store said every photographer should have one."

Sarah shakes the camera lens cleaning kit box at me. "Of course! Lenses need to be cleaned, especially the mirror, which can sometimes catch some dust when you change lenses. One speck of dust can destroy an entire picture!"

I nod, pretending to follow along. "Right."

Sarah looks pleased, so I'm happy with the purchase.

"How's your business coming along?" I ask her.

Just like me, Sarah has started her own business. She's a photographer, specializing in portraits and even fashion.

"It was going slow for a while, but I managed to net a client this time that wants me to shoot her wedding."

"Wow, your first wedding!" I'm excited for her.

"Yeah, it'll be exciting for sure! I've never done a wedding before, but I'm sure I can pull it off. The client saw my pictures on another website and asked if I'd be available."

"So, when are you getting married?" I ask jokingly.

Sarah grins at me. "Why, are you proposing?"

"Does a cleaning kit count as an engagement ring?" I ask.

"It does if you offer it to a photographer."

"Then I guess I'm proposing!"

Both Sarah and I laugh at our silliness. I've missed hanging out with her, I've been so busy lately, and Sarah has as well. It's not like it used to be back in college, when we were roommates and spent so much time together.

Now we have to make time for one another, which is a little sad.

"The wedding is in July, so I've got plenty of time to prepare. The client sounded like she had a lot of cash to spend though, so it's going to be a huge wedding."

"Ahh, a fairy-tale like wedding, that sounds so dreamy. I'd love to design my own wedding dress."

"Of course, you'd think about the dress first and not about who you'll be marrying," Sarah points out. "Classic, Joselina."

"Hey – are you saying I'm not romantic?"

Sarah shrugs. "I'm just wondering who'd want to marry you. You *can* be quite demanding."

I pout at her; that's a blow to my ego.

"Don't say that, I'm not going to end up an old spinster."

"Let's hope not! Met anyone cute lately?" Sarah asks with a laugh.

"I did see someone at our old college the other day."

"Oh right, you had to do that presentation thing – how did that go?"

"Went alright, it was fun. Makes me miss going to college, you know?"

Sarah sighs. "I know what you mean, the real world is much less fun when you've got adult responsibilities to take care of."

"I do like living on my own though," I say with a giggle.

"Hey! You didn't like living with me?" Sarah pouts at me. "Was I a bad roommate?"

"Nah, you were the worst," I say, sarcastically. "But it's good to be on my own."

"Hmpf. So, who did you meet at college?"

"Actually, I think you'd be into him," I say.

I recall Sarah having a thing for red eyes and people who gel their hair in ridiculous ways.

Now she looks interested.

"...Tell me more."

"Tall, red eyes, orange spiked hair, seems to be fashionable, had a cute smile."

"Damn it – why am I a working adult!? I want to go back to college," Sarah complains. "So many cute guys there."

My mind wanders over to Caine, the redheaded loner. I try to push my thoughts away; I don't need to think about him anymore. It's not like he and I were ever friends, I don't need to deal with him anymore.

"By the way, I signed up for fashion week," I mention, changing the subject.

"Right, that's great! You have to come up with your own line, don't you?"

I nod at her. "Yep, there will be a ton of people there – even celebrities! And I have to cast models. That should be fun."

"Judging people on their appearance? Yes, that does sound like a lot of fun." Sarah grins mischievously.

"I wonder if I can manage to get myself a backstage pass so I can take pictures," Sarah wonders.

"Try looking on their website, if you get in early, you might get a spot!"

"Yeah, I will!" Sarah flashes me a confident smile.

"Anyways, I should go now, I need to go edit a picture of someone's dog."

"Sounds absolutely riveting," I joke.

Sarah rolls her eyes at me. "I'll remember that!"

She bids her goodbye and leaves the boutique. It felt good to have a little chat with her, I'm glad I bought her that present.

[Chapter 008]

I sketch some designs in my sketchbook for the upcoming fashion week, feeling inspired all of a sudden. I need to come up with at least ten suitable designs. I think I'm going to go with the theme of...

Hmm... I look around my store. What kind of idea should I go for?

I hold the tip of my pencil against my sketchbook, but I'm unable to come up with anything.

The doorbell rings and I look up from the counter.

It's that spiky haired boy from before.

"Hello," I greet him.

Wait – how does he know I work here?

"Hi..." he says as he approaches the counter quite timidly.

He's looking around the boutique with curious eyes.

"Remember me?" he asks, pointing a finger at himself.

"Uhm, yes." I totally forgot his name though...

"I'm Kevin. You said your boutique was called Sunshine Boutique, so I decided to come check it out," he explains.

Oh, of course. I'm stupid; I did mention Sunshine Boutique's name during the lecture. How could I forget?

He shyly looks away. "I'm a second year, so this is really... inspiring to me."

He's so adorable! Does that mean he looks up to me?

I'm suddenly feeling this adult persona rise up inside of me. I'd love to mentor someone!

"Well, if I can do it, so can you!" I cheer him on with a smile.

"Ah, I'm totally broke though," he says with a defeated smile. "I wouldn't be able to start anything just yet."

"Yes, that is the sad truth; you need to have money to earn more money."

Kevin looks at one of my mannequins, studying the garment being displayed. I walk up to the mannequin, touching the dress with my hands.

"Do you like it?" I ask him.

"Y-yeah!" he says, acting all flustered. "It's cute."

"Oh, is that weird for a guy to say? Hmm..." he looks away.

I shake my head. "No, of course not."

I kind of want to introduce him to Sarah; physically he's totally her type. I'm not quite sure about his personality though; Sarah has a thing for bad boys. Kevin seems to be the opposite of that.

Kevin leans in closer to the dress, staring at the hemline of the skirt. He lifts it up, holding it in between his fingers to better see the stitching.

"Hmm," he muses.

"What is it?" I ask, curious as to what he's looking at.

"This is a machine stitch, no?" he asks.

"Yes, that's correct."

"Wouldn't it be better to use a hand stitch here?"

I frown at him. "Not when the fabric is stretchy like this one, see?" I hold the fabric and tug at it a little, showing that it stretches.

Kevin drops the hemline and awkwardly rubs the back of his neck with an apologetic smile.

"Ehehe, I guess I shouldn't question the professional. I'm only a second year, after all."

I smile at him. "You'll learn soon enough."

"So uhm, how do you know Caine?" Kevin asks.

I'm a bit surprised he'd ask me that out of nowhere.

"Uhh, I don't really know him," I say. "I met him at a party. Why? Are you friends with him?"

Kevin shakes his head. "No, no, we're not. He's uhm..." he looks to the side.

"He doesn't like me."

"To be fair, I don't think he likes anyone. He's kind of a grump," I point out.

"I know," Kevin agrees with a stilted chuckle. "I tried being friends with him, but he just brushes me off."

"Why do you want to be his friend so much? Do you have a crush on him?" I ask him, eyeing him suspiciously.

Kevin blushes pink. "N-not like that!" he yelps.

That just makes me more suspicious.

Crap, if he's gay, then there's no point introducing him to Sarah. I should remain optimistic though; he could be bi!

"Do you know what he does, what he makes?" Kevin asks with a sigh.

"Uhh, I'm unsure what you mean."

"He makes jewelry. The finest I've laid my eyes on so far. You know that when we graduate, we have to come up with a final line to showcase, right?"

I nod my head.

"I want the models to wear Caine's jewelry – they're just too good!"

"...But he won't listen to you."

Kevin hangs his head in defeat, giving me a tiny nod.

"Yep, he avoids any type of socialization. I can't even get him to say hello to me, let alone ask him for a favour."

Then his eyes start to sparkle as he looks at me.

"B-but you on the other hand; it seems he doesn't mind you very much... you can get me in!"

I've only met Caine a handful of times, I don't even have his contact information. The last time we met, I'm pretty sure my presence was unwelcome.

"Well, I'm not sure how much help I'd be. I've only met him a couple of times, and I don't think he likes me very much."

"Are you kidding me? I saw you having a full-blown conversation with him before I ran into you. He's never even said hello to me!"

"Yeah... we're not on the best terms, either. But I guess I can try to get us all together?"

Because then I can introduce Sarah to him! Even if I don't end up running into Caine anymore, I can still maybe get my best friend a date.

"R-really? Thanks! I'd appreciate it!"

We exchange contact info. I'm sure I could set something up for Sarah. Not so sure about Caine – who knows if I'll ever see him again – but Kevin doesn't seem to question my motives.

"Text me if anything comes up!" Kevin says cheerfully.

"I'll try," I say with a smile.

"Oh right – I wanted to ask you the other day. Do you know a website called Daisy Dots?"

I stare at him blankly. Of course I know that website, I moderate the forums. Why would Kevin know about it?

"Yes... why?"

"I knew it!" he says with a nod. "I thought I recognized one of your designs. You post on the forum, no?"

Suddenly I remember the troll on the forum and I narrow my eyes at him. If Kevin knows that's me... who exactly is he?

"I do, but how do you know, are you a member as well?"

Kevin scratches his cheek. "Well, uhh..."

Then he quickly backs away from the counter. "I-I need to go now! Bye!"

Kevin dashes out of my boutique.

That was *highly* suspicious. Kevin knows I post on Daisy Dots, he recognized my designs. He could just be an innocent member as well, but he could also be... that troll, Menenimi.

I stare at his phone number on my phone, wondering if I really should be introducing him to Sarah.

-- **bathroom**

This is the worst!

Ahh, it looks like a murder scene down in my panties!

I sigh out loud and throw the pair away in the trash; they're completely ruined.

Seems my period came suddenly and I wasn't prepared... I've got no tampons or any pads lying around. Ugh, this sucks. I'll need to get an emergency stash from the convenience store.

I guess I'll just use toilet paper for now.

-- **Boonmart**

I dread knowing I may run into Caine.

But it's the closest store, and I had a surprise bloodbath in my panties, so I need to get some pads.

I brace myself as I walk through the electric sliding doors.

Like a ninja, I dash through the aisles, hoping I don't run into him again. Seems he works mostly night shifts, so I'm extra careful. I hope he's not working today.

I know I promised Kevin I'd talk to him or something, but I'd prefer not to talk to the little thief whilst my ovaries are currently crying in pain.

Loud voices startle me and I almost jump out of my own skin.

A group of people are laughing, making quite a racket in the store. Must be drunk teenagers or something.

I'll just avoid them; I don't need anything from the liquor aisle, only my hygiene products.

Then I hear even more boisterous laughter.

"Come on – I thought you said you'd do anything for me, huh?" taunts a female voice.

"I bet he still thinks he's got a shot –ahaha," laughs a male voice.

This feels very much like a repeat from the time I saw Caine getting bullied by a group of guys... It couldn't be that again, right?

I peek my head around the corner of the aisle and spot the exact same three guys from before. This time, there's a girl with them as well.

Caine is pushed up against the snack aisle; he looks pale and isn't talking.

Thomas grips Caine's shoulder, plucking the fabric of his sweater.

"Little loser Caine – still wearing garbage bags, I see."

"I bet he'll show up in literal garbage bags at the reunion," scoffs the girl.

"This little shit doesn't even have the balls to come. He won't even look at me."

Thomas leans down to peer into Caine's face. He's obviously much taller and more muscular than Caine, who's trembling before him.

"Do you, Caine? Do you have balls? Or are you really just a girl?"

The other two guys snicker in response.

"Short *and* no balls," huffs Thomas.

1. Defend him.
2. Wait for an appropriate time to step in.

"Hey – leave him alone," I snarl at them and stand in front of Caine.

I know he's a little twerp who gets on my nerves more often than not, but I can't stand for this group bullying. Picking on one kid with everyone isn't fair!

"Who are you? Stay out of it," says the guy.

"Ah... uh." Caine is stammering behind me, at a loss of words.

"I bet she's his babysitter," says the girl with a laugh. "He has to pay people to hang out with him."

I glare at the girl; that's such a low blow.

"No one is paying me, but I bet *you* could use a few babysitting jobs because obviously you don't earn enough money to buy yourself some nice clothes," I snap back at her before I know it.

The girl turns bright red at my insult and she immediately shuts her mouth.

"How dare you insult my designer clothes—"

"—Designer? I thought you fished them out of the dumpster behind the €1 store."

My quick-witted insults leave the girl fuming on the spot as she's unable to retaliate. Hah, doesn't feel so good now that someone does it back to you, now does it?

"Who the hell are you and why are you butting in!?" she yells at me.

There's movement behind me, and suddenly Caine's hand slips into mine and he grips it tightly; I can feel him shaking from nerves. Wait – what is he doing?

He steps in front of me, facing the girl head on.

"This is my girlfriend, and she's going to have the best dress at the reunion – it'll make yours look like it came from a swamp," he hisses at her.

I feel like it isn't my place to say anything, so I hang back and watch. I can't just go bursting out there.

But to gang up on him like this... That's just unfair. Why can't they leave him alone? I'll be keeping an eye on them.

"Can't believe you have this loser job," says the girl.

"This is the only place that'll take him in – he's too short to get hired anywhere else," the toughest looking guy laughs loudly.

He places an arm around the girl, pulling her into his chest.

"Losers like you don't belong anywhere."

He then kisses the girl in front of Caine, who looks like he wants to die on the spot. I feel awkward watching this unfold.

"That's why you won't be coming to the reunion, will you? You've got nothing to show for – not even a girlfriend for a loser like you."

Well that's a low blow – Caine doesn't need a girlfriend to attend a reunion! It's not like a milestone or anything that needs to be celebrated. I can feel my blood boil.

As I try to calm myself down so I won't do anything rash, I end up knocking something over on a shelf, alerting everybody of my presence.

Caine stares at me for a solid three seconds, eyes wide and caught off guard. Then he reaches out for my hand and grabs it, pulling me closer to him. I almost trip over my feet.

"Then who the hell do you think this is!?" he yells at the other guy.

"That's right, my girlfriend! She's coming with me to the reunion!"

I whirl around to stare at him, wide eyed, and tug on his hand, *hard*. Girlfriend!?

"Hah," the girl scoffs. "No one believes *you* got yourself a girlfri—"

Caine yanks on my hand and I stumble towards him.



Our lips meet.

...

I'm quite literally shocked, so much that I can't move. My eyes are wide in surprise and I'm unable to do anything at the moment.

Caine presses his lips against mine even harder, causing me to stumble backwards. His eyes are squeezed shut and I can feel him trembling against my lips.

He's... he's kissing me!

Then he pulls back, facing the group of bullies with a glare.

"*That's your girlfriend?*" Thomas looks genuinely shocked.

"Ah man, I can't believe Caine scored someone as hot as her," mumbles the other guy.

The girl stomps on the ground then elbows the guy into his ribs. She growls at us, clearly annoyed.

"Fine, we'll see about that at the reunion then!" She turns on her heel. "Come on guys, we're leaving."

They all mumble as they walk past us towards the exit of the convenience store.

I'm left alone with Caine.

Caine lets out a relieved sigh. Our hands are still locked, but that's mostly because he's got a death grip on my hand and I'm starting to feel numb.

"...Caine, you're hurting me."

He promptly lets go of my hand, shaking it off as if he's suddenly realized he's touched a hot stove.

"..." I'm a bit speechless, which doesn't happen very often.

Caine avoids my eyes, then stuffs his hands into his pockets and kicks at the floor with his foot.

1. **Angrily demand an explanation.**
2. **Wait for Caine to explain himself.**

"Caine, please explain to me why you just suddenly kissed me and *why* you said I was your girlfriend before I slap you."

He backs away from me in fear, his eyes shifty and looking at everything besides *me*.

I'm pretty ticked off that he thought he could suddenly kiss me without any consequences.

Caine doesn't say anything however, he just casts his gaze onto the floor and stands there, shoulders slumped and hands in his pockets.

I threateningly raise my hand.

"It was – it was just in the spur of the moment!" he sputters quickly while holding up his hands in defense.

I'm so confused, but I wait for Caine to explain himself. Why did he suddenly kiss me in front of all those people and claim I was his girlfriend?

When Caine realizes I've been staring at him all this time, he shrugs at me.

"What?"

"...Aren't you going to explain yourself?"

"What's there to explain?" he mumbles.

I glare at him.

"What made you think you could get away with kissing me?" I question him.

"I didn't!" he exclaims loudly.

"Didn't seem to stop you!"

"It was – it was just in the spur of the moment!" he yells.

"You thought it was a great idea to kiss me!?" I demand.

"Yeah – no! I mean. Yes." Caine runs his fingers through his hair, messing them up even more. "I'm confused."

"Being confused doesn't give you the right to assault me," I say through gritted teeth.

Caine points his shaky finger at me. "It's your fault!"

"What – how!?"

"You provoked them! You insulted Chelsey!"

"Chelsey saw you!"

Oh, Chelsey, that's her name? Now an otherwise really nice name leaves a bitter aftertaste in my mouth. I pull my face into a scowl.

"So what, 'Chelsey' was insulting you as far as I can recall. But that still doesn't explain why you kissed me! No one gave you permission to!"

Caine's face suddenly starts turning a very deep shade of red. He slowly bites his lips, taking his sweet time before he answers me.

"...Chelsey was a girl that I liked back in high school," he says softly.

I stare at him with a blank look on my face.

"...Do I look like I care?"

Caine glares at me. "You wanted an explanation, then listen! God, you're so impossible sometimes."

"Nobody's got time for your high school drama."

"You...!" Caine glares at me and bites down on his lip as if he's holding himself back.

"Don't you ever listen!?" he snaps at me.

"Fine, I'm listening." Not really. My hand is itching to slap him.

"Whatever – I didn't want them to think I was still hung up on her, so I kissed you in front of everyone. Happy now?"

1. Slap him anyway.

2. Accept his explanation.

"Yeah, wait, give me a second."

"Huh?"

I slap Caine across the face.

"There, now I'm happy."

Caine holds his cheek, incredulous that I slapped him.

"You...!"

He sighs. "Fine, I guess I deserved that."

"Fine, I guess. But I'm not happy about you kissing me without my permission," I scold him.

Caine grunts loudly. "I'll be sure to ask for your consent next time," he says sarcastically.

I raise my eyebrows. "Next time? Not in this lifetime."

"Ugh, you know what I mean."

"Now what's this thing about a reunion? How did I get roped into this?"

Once more Caine starts to blush.

"I... like I said, it was a spur of the moment kind of thing. I – I just wanted to show them that..."

"...That you didn't like this Chelsey anymore," I finish his sentence.

"Right."

Alright, I've heard enough. High school drama – I'm too old for that kind of bullshit.

"Okay, well, good luck with that." I turn around, ready to leave the store.

"Wait!" Caine shouts as he yanks on my arm to prevent me from leaving.

"*What?*" I breathe out at him in an exasperated voice.

Caine looks at his hand that's holding onto my arm; he's conflicted about something. And embarrassed, definitely embarrassed.

"I need you to come to this reunion with me. I can't show up without you now."

"That's not really my problem, is it?" I point out.

It's not my fault Caine decided to declare to everyone that I'm his girlfriend and kiss me in front of them. I had no say in this, he's on his own here.

"Please... I beg you," he whines. "They'd torment me even more if I showed up alone, or not at all. They expect me to be there now."

Caine looks away, his pride clearly hurt being forced to admit to something like this.

I take a second to think about my situation.

Ever since we've met, Caine has caused me nothing but grief. Stealing things, being rude to me – kissing me! I barely even know him!

But...

I feel bad for him. This is the second time I've seen him getting harassed at his own workplace.

Not to mention I promised Kevin I'd talk to Caine, and I really want Kevin to meet Sarah...

Ugh, what am I getting myself into?

"I'll go," I declare.

Caine's eyes widen, looking baffled that I agreed.

"Really?"

"But," I start.

"But..."

"You can't steal anymore."

Caine lowers his eyebrows and glares at me instead.

"What are you, my mother?"

"Thank god I'm not," I say in relief. "You're such a brat, I'd disown you in a heartbeat."

"Whatever," he says dismissively.

"And..." I think of Kevin. "You have to hang out with me when I ask you to."

He gives me this long sideways stare, mulling it over in his head. I can tell he's trying to come up with any ulterior motive I may have since he doesn't trust me at all.

"You're weird," he says eventually.

"I'm the weird one?" I scoff. "Have you looked into the mirror lately?"

"All I'd see is a loser anyway," he says in a self-deprecating way.

I'm shocked he'd say this about himself, but before I can get a word in, he continues on.

"But whatever, fine, I'll accept your stupid conditions. But you'll have to pretend to be 100% in love with me – completely."

I sigh loudly. "Seems impossible, but I'll try."

Caine sticks out his hand. "Deal?"

I look at it for a second, wondering what kind of mess I'm about to get myself into.

I'm doing this for Sarah's love life!

I take his hand and shake it.

"Deal."

Then I quickly drop his clammy hand and look away.

"By the way, I need some pads."

Caine's face contorts into a grimace.

[Chapter 009]
-- café booth

The next day, I meet up with Sarah at the café. I needed to vent to someone.

"And he kissed me!" I say loudly.

Sarah shakes her head disapprovingly.

"Want me to beat him up for you?"

I lean back against the booth with a long and drawn out sigh.

"No... I think he's already getting beaten up."

Caine and I exchanged numbers afterwards. He told me the reunion was next month. I'd be attending it with him, as promised.

"So, tell me again – why are you agreeing to this ludicrous plan?" Sarah raises an eyebrow at me.

"Because!" I take out my cell phone and show it to Sarah. "Because I've got this guy's number."

"Huh – who?" Sarah awkwardly takes the phone from my hands.

"I met this cute guy at college and got his number. He's totally your type."

Sarah's eyes light up; she's definitely interested.

"Oh, is that so? How'd you meet him?"

"At college; he majors in fashion as well. Should I set you up?"

"Sure!" she says, delightfully.

Now I have to figure out how I can set Kevin up with Sarah. He probably wouldn't want to meet up unless Caine is involved... I guess I need to get all four of us together somehow.

"So, this reunion thing – have you got something to wear?" Sarah asks, curiously.

"I'll probably make something myself. I have to look good after all."

"What about the loser?" Sarah rolls her eyes. "He won't be showing up in rags or something to embarrass you, right?"

I take a moment to think. Sarah brings up a good point; I have no idea what Caine would be wearing to his reunion.

What if he does show up in an awful fitting store-bought blazer or something? Hmm, I have to make sure he wears something nice.

"I'll give him a makeover, if I have to."

"Anyways, let me see if I can get you to meet this new guy."

Sarah simply grins at me, excited at the prospect.

Eventually, Sarah has to leave earlier than planned – something about a client being unsatisfied with their pictures. I'm left alone at the café, still finishing my drink.

"Hey – you're that chick from before," says a deep voice from behind me.

I turn my head around and see that it is that guy, Thomas, from yesterday. The one that was bullying Caine.

Without even waiting for a reply from me, he sits down in the same booth as me, looking arrogant.

"I didn't catch your name."

I don't really feel like talking to bullies.

"That's because I didn't give it to you."

Thomas leans back into the seat, crossing his arms. There's a smirk on his face, as if he's enjoying this.

"Are you really Caine's girl? Or is he paying you?"

My eyes widen at the implication.

"And if so – how much? Because I know someone who might be interested in a little side booty." Thomas cocks an eyebrow at me.

1. "I'm not for sale, you dumb oaf!"
2. "Please leave. You're bothering me."

"I'm not for sale, you dumb oaf!" I roar.

How dare he accuse me of being some kind of prostitute!

Thomas looks genuinely shocked by my outburst, but immediately composes himself.

"Chill – it was a joke. Caine's gotta be paying for you somehow. No way that nerd manages to score someone as hot as you."

I know I shouldn't be engaging with a buff guy who's clearly not averse to harassing people – but I'm feeling rage fill up inside of me.

Not only do I get accused of selling my body – but Caine is getting dragged through the mud as well. I can't stop my mouth from doing its own thing.

"If you're looking for a sex worker – why don't you go back to your girlfriend? I'm sure she'll oblige."

Thomas growls darkly under his breath, slamming his fist down on the table.

"You leave Chelsey out of this!"

"Then stop talking shit about me and Caine. Leave me the hell alone, would you? Can't you bother someone else? Your right hand, perhaps?"

"What a pretty little mouth you have," Thomas huffs at me. "A shame it isn't around my dick."

I gag and feel my stomach contents crawling its way up.

"You're disgusting. I'd never touch your filthy dick, not in a million years."

"I just can't believe it. That ginger, with you? No way. He's not that lucky."

"I'm done listening to you – just piss off already."

"Please leave, you're bothering me."

Thomas puts his hands up in the air, feigning innocence.

"I'm just having a friendly chat with Caine's girl – what's wrong with that?"

I grit my teeth at him; this is anything but friendly. He's out to insult Caine and gather intel on me.

"You *are* Caine's girl, right?" he asks me.

"Yes..." I admit.

I have to keep up with this lie; Caine was adamant about it.

"So, how'd someone like him get someone as hot as you? That's what I'm wondering. There's got to be some kind of payment involved."

"Is it that hard to imagine?" I fire back.

"Of course, he's an ugly little ginger – what would anyone see in him?" Thomas scoffs.

"Caine is not ugly!" I raise my voice.

I feel my heart beat loudly in my chest from the adrenaline.

This time it's not a lie; Caine isn't ugly. Not in the least.

"Whoa, no need to shout, missy. I'm just curious, 'tis all."

"Can you just leave me alone? I don't want to listen to you sitting here, insulting him."

"Tch, whatever. No use getting any answers from you."

Thomas finally gets up from his seat, his eyes staring straight into mine. He's so suspicious of me.

"See you at the reunion."

Thomas finally walks away from my booth.

I'm fuming though – what an asshole! I haven't met someone like that in a very long time; a real stereotypical bully, whose brains are probably hiding in those bulky biceps.

Poor Caine... he's had to deal with him all this time. With the way he talks about Caine, there's definitely some history there. I can tell, Caine has been tormented by this guy for a while, maybe even years.

I'm starting to understand Caine's actions a little more, though it doesn't excuse kissing me. No wonder he's so desperate to get me to come to that reunion. Even *I'm* pissed off and want to rub it in Thomas' face.

The longer I stay here thinking about it, the worse I feel. Argh – this ruined my day even more!

-- living room

Finally at home, I start sending a text message to Caine. I need to let him know I ran into Thomas.

Joselina:

"You owe me big time. I just ran into that jerk, Thomas."

Caine:

"Huh? What happened?"

Joselina:

"He implied I was a prostitute and that you were paying me."

Caine:

"Well, fuck him. Did you say anything?"

Joselina:

"No, don't worry, your secret is still safe... which is why you owe me. He ruined my day, you know?"

Caine:

"...Fine. I owe you. Again. What do you want?"

Joselina:

"Come join me and my friends at karaoke."

Caine:

"Pass."

Joselina:

"Your funeral."

Caine:

"Seriously, karaoke? Why? I hate singing. I don't know your friends."

Joselina:

"Then you'll get to know them!"

Caine:

"I don't want to get to know them!"

Joselina:

"Please? I'll text you the time and location."

Caine:

"I hate you."

Joselina:

"See you there!"

I grin to myself; now all I have to do is invite everyone else for karaoke. Time to hook up Sarah with Kevin, if I can.

-- Karaoke lobby

It must be my lucky day, because I manage to get everyone invited to karaoke. Currently, Sarah and I are waiting for the other two to show up.

"Is he really cute?" Sarah asks, very curious.

"Yes! I'm not sure if he's straight though..."

Sarah flips her hair away from her shoulder with a confident huff.

"Let's see about that. I can be a very charming lady, you know."

"More like an old hag."

Sarah and I turn to see Caine sauntering inside, hands stuffed into the pockets of his pants. He came!

I was a little worried he wasn't going to show up, so I'm quite impressed.

"Who are you calling an old hag?" Sarah threatens him.

"What – aren't you guys like thirty or something?"

My mouth drops open.

"T-thirty!?"

I turn to Sarah. "Do I have wrinkles already?"

"No, you have a beautiful face – this shorty needs to get his eyes checked. We are nothing but young maidens."

Caine looks genuinely surprised.

"Wait, how old are you then?" he asks, looking at me.

"I'm twenty-three. Do I really look like I'm thirty? Geez..."

"Seriously!? You're only two years older than me?" Caine stammers.

He averts his wide eyes, staring at the ground, looking shocked at this new information.

Ouch, I didn't think I looked *that* old.

"What the hell, I thought you were this mature, working adult..."

I puff out my cheeks.

"Are you saying I'm not?"

"He totally is," Sarah chips in.

"Nothing. Forget it. Who's this anyway?" Caine points at Sarah.

"Sarah Jones – *not* an old hag."

"Could have fooled me," he says with a shrug.

He's intentionally provoking Sarah! Why can't he behave?

1. Hit him over his head.

2. "Come on Caine, be nice."

I hit him over the head with my hand, giving him a stern glare.

"What?" he protests in a shrill tone.

"Don't be rude to my friend."

Sarah nods in agreement with me.

"Come on Caine, be nice," I warn him.

Caine rolls his eyes. "Whatever."

"Now I see what you mean about his attitude," Sarah muses out loud.

"Hah?" Caine cocks an eyebrow at me. "What does she mean?"

"Joselina!" a cheerful voice calls out to disturb us.

We all turn to see Kevin walking inside the lobby. Great, he came!

Sarah looks very pleased the moment she lays her eyes on him. Caine, however, looks less than pleased. In fact, he looks frightened with those wide eyes of his.

"Carrot top?" Caine asks, bewildered.

Kevin smiles broadly at him. "Oh – you remember me! I'm so happy."

Caine cringes and looks like he's about to run off.

"That's not a very nice nickname, you know. Aren't you a ginger yourself?" Sarah points out.

"Oh hell no – *this* is your other friend!?" Caine turns to me, anger flashing in his cyan eyes.

"Yes, is there anything wrong with that?" I ask in return.

Caine angrily points a finger at Kevin.

"That's my stalker! Why did you invite him!?"

Kevin's face falters.

"S-stalker? Is that how you see me? I'm hurt. I just wanted to get to know you..."

Sarah steps in with a big smile.

"Ignore the pipsqueak, how about the two of us get to know each other? I'm Sarah Jones, Joselina's friend."

"Ah, I'm Kevin Sterling," he says, nervously.

"I-I'm not a stalker – honest!" he adds weakly.

"Alright, everyone is here, let's get a room and sing!" I say cheerfully.

Caine grabs my arm to get my attention, leaning in close to me so that the others can't hear what he's about to say.

"I don't want to be in a room with him. Did you know he's been following me around campus? He's like a cockroach I can't get rid of!"

"Don't be dramatic, I'm sure he just wants to be your friend."

"Ugh, I don't want to deal with this." Caine releases the grip on my arm and turns away from me.

"You owe me," I call out to him.

Frustrated, Caine throws his hands up in the air and growls out loud. What a petulant child sometimes, throwing a temper tantrum in the middle of a karaoke lobby.

-- Karaoke room

Eventually I drag Caine into the room with the rest of us. It's a small room with a nice couch lining the wall and a big TV screen on the opposite end.

Sarah immediately grabs the tablet from the table to browse through the list of available songs. She plops down onto the couch as Kevin sits next to her.

Caine remains standing near the door, arms crossed over his chest, a defiant pout on his face.

I sigh out loud. "Why don't you take a seat?"

"I'm not sitting next to him," he says with a scoff.

1. "You're welcome to sit on my lap instead."

2. "You can just sit next to me."

I sit down next to Kevin and then pat my lap.

"You're welcome to sit on my lap instead," I suggest candidly.

Caine's cheeks flash pink.

"Wha – why would you say that!?" he splutters awkwardly.

"Weirdo..." he sighs as he runs a hand through his red hair.

"You can sit next to me," I suggest as I sit down next to Kevin.

"See, no need to worry about seating arrangements."

Caine huffs. "But then I'm sitting next to *you*."

"Is there a problem with that?" I narrow my eyes at him.

"Stop your complaining and sit down already," Sarah groans.

Caine sighs loudly, but drops down onto the farthest point of the couch, away from the rest of us.

"So, Kevin, is there any particular music you like?" asks Sarah with a beaming smile.

It seems I was right about him being her type. I'm glad I got to set it all up, even though Kevin has no idea about my ulterior motives.

I look over at Caine, who's sulking on the far end of the couch. What a grump.

Maybe some food will cheer him up. I grab the menu from the table and open it up, looking at all of the available snacks we can order.

As Sarah selects a song to sing a duet with Kevin, I scoot a little closer to Caine.

"Hey – you hungry?" I ask.

"..." Caine just gives me an icy glare.

"...It's on me," I say, begrudgingly.

"In that case!" Caine eagerly takes the menu out of my hands.

Sarah's song finally starts and she's singing along with a reluctant Kevin. Caine pays no attention to them and is engrossed in reading the menu.

I lean in closer to Caine so that I can talk to him through all the noise.

"Try not to go for the expensive stuff," I warn him. "I may be a working adult, but I'm not rich."

"Fries and this deep-fried breaded chicken, that's what I wa—"

Caine turns his face towards me, not realizing the distance between us has shrunk. The words die on his lips mid-sentence as he stares at me with wide, cyan eyes.

I can see the glimmer of the TV reflect in his eyes, it feels entrancing. That red hair of his really brings out the brilliant hue of his eyes.

Caine backs away from me with a cough.

"Stop getting all up in my personal space, would you?" he complains.

Realizing I've just been staring at his face, I shyly look away as well.

"Sorry," I mumble.

I look over at Sarah who is singing her heart out, smiling broadly at Kevin, who seems to be enjoying the song as well. I'm glad they're getting along.

"Let's just pick something everyone can eat from. Those party snack deals don't seem too bad."

Caine closes the menu and places it back on the small table in front of us. He nods at me in agreement.

I take the tablet and punch in our new order.

"Wanna sing?" I ask Caine after I'm done ordering.

"Over my dead body."

"They've got a competitive mode. We can compete against each other, scoring points for how well we sing. Sounds like fun, no?"

"I'd rather listen to a cat in heat than listen to you sing."

I can feel my eye twitch. I know I managed to get Caine to the karaoke box, but getting him to have any fun seems like an impossible feat.

"You haven't even heard me sing, how do you know if I sound bad?" I point out.

"I already listen to you whine. I know exactly what you'll sound like when you sing."

Angrily, I select a duet song on the tablet and then pick up the remaining two microphones from the table, thrusting one into Caine's arms.

"You'll sing with me!"

When Sarah's song finishes, the one I selected starts to play.

"You're red, I'm blue," I tell him.

"Amazing, Caine's going to sing," says Kevin. He looks excited.

"You better beat him!" Sarah encourages me.

Caine simply looks irritated, gripping the microphone hard until his knuckles turn white.

I look at the TV screen and see my lines in red popping up. I start to sing – a song that's been pretty popular these past few weeks.

My pitch is just right and I score a bunch of points for singing my part. Then Caine's part shows up on screen and I look at him anxiously.

The music plays along but Caine isn't singing the lyrics.

Well, that's disappointing. He's not even going to compete with me. I thought that would lure him out of his shell...

But then I hear the faintest voice murmuring into the microphone.

It's soft and kind of muffled, but Caine is reciting the lyrics of the song. My eyes light up in joy and I look at how well he's doing on the screen.

Despite mumbling most of his lines, Caine is scoring pretty well due to having the right pitch. I'm still in the lead though.

I flash him a grin when his part is over, to which he awkwardly averts his eyes away from mine. Hah, that's kind of cute.

Revitalized, I sing the next part with more enthusiasm. My points are racking up!

"Woohoo, you're winning, Joselina!" Sarah fistpumps the air.

Then it's Caine's turn once more, but this time he doesn't miss a beat and sings along a little louder this time.

"But look – Caine's catching up!" Kevin shouts.

Now I'm fired up! I get up from the couch to stand and sing hard into the microphone.

Caine looks surprised at my excitement, but then shoots a smirk at me.

When both red and blue are up next, Caine jumps up from his seat as well, hands clasped around the microphone.

"When it's you and me, it's just like it's meant to be," we sing together in unison.

My heart is beating to the beat of the song, it feels so thrilling to sing together with him. I can hardly keep my breathing steady.

"I just want to feel you. Please don't wake me up from this dream," we finish our part.

I glance sideways to see Caine's cocky expression – he's having fun! Our eyes meet and Caine holds my gaze.

"You're the light in my darkest place, so please don't wake me up from this dream," he sings.

"Don't worry, I won't let you go," I finish the chorus with as much passion as I can muster.

We sing one more verse together and then the song is finally over.

I try to catch my breath – I put in more effort than I usually would have done, but it was fun!

"Well, Joselina still won in the end," Sarah mentions after seeing the final score.

Caine huffs and drops the microphone onto the couch.

"Maybe if you got your lines right in the beginning, you could have had a chance at beating me. Maybe," I say with a smirk.

"Challenge accepted, bring it on!" he replies.

I giggle in response.

Caine ends up picking out a song himself, another one in competitive mode. This time he immediately sings along, glancing at me with a cocky grin.

I grip the microphone and hold it close to my mouth, singing along the best I can.

I didn't expect to be enjoying myself so much. I expected Caine to be a stick in the mud and not join in at all. I'm pleasantly surprised...

Our food arrives after the song is finished. We ordered a bowl of deep-fried party snacks.

Caine is the first one to reach for the bowl to eat whilst Sarah starts up another song again.

"So Caine, have you given it some thought?" asks Kevin.

"Eh?" Caine cocks an eyebrow at him. "Think of what?"

"My proposal!"

Sarah drops her mic with a wide open mouth.

"Y-you proposed to him!?"

Both Caine and Kevin look at her, wide eyed.

Caine immediately turns pale, whereas Kevin turns a bright red. He madly starts to shake his head.

"N-no! That's not it!" he whines.

Kevin awkwardly touches the tips of his fingers together, clearly panicked by the misunderstanding.

"I just... I just wanted to use Caine's jewelry in my final exam for my models to wear..."

"So, you guys aren't together?" Sarah asks.

Caine gags. "Fuck no! I'm not gay!"

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with that," I say with a huff.

"Argh, you know what I mean. I'm not into guys. Especially not *him*." Caine pouts at me.

"You've got a girlfriend, Kevin? Or boyfriend? Or—"

Sarah gets cut off by an increasingly embarrassed Kevin.

"N-no, I'm... single." He shyly looks down at the table with a cute blush on his cheeks.

"Sarah is single as well," I say with a wink.

Sarah grins at Kevin, who only turns even more red, stammering his words.

"O-oh..."

Caine rolls his eyes at us. He finally gets up from the couch and walks towards the door.

"Are you leaving?" I call out to him, worried he's going to ditch us.

"I need to take a leak – or do I need permission for that, too?"

"No, of course not. Go ahead."

Caine leaves the room.

I treat myself to the snacks in the bowl as I watch Sarah and Kevin sing a duet together. He seems to be back to normal; not so embarrassed anymore.

It's a little funny thinking about Kevin proposing to Caine.

Three more songs have passed, and I start to realize that it's taking a while for Caine to come back.

Wait... did he leave? For real? No way!

To think Caine would try to bail out on us after all...

"I'm gonna go find Caine, okay?" I tell the other two, leaving them alone.

-- Karaoke lobby

As I make my way over to the bathrooms, hoping to spot Caine – I notice someone else instead.

A group of girls are chatting near the bathroom, blocking my way. I recognize one of them, the black-haired girl.

She's the one that was at Boon Mart bullying Caine. Great, I just keep running into these people, don't I?

I suck in a breath and try to make my way around the group, hoping she doesn't recognize me.

"Hey – you're that bitch!"

I wince; too late, I'm spotted.

[Chapter 010]
-- Karaoke lobby

A group of four girls are glaring at me, blocking me from going through. The one with black hair looks like she's about to murder me.

...I legit forgot her name.

I stare her down.

"Could you move?" I ask.

"Look girls, this is her – that loser's girlfriend." Her eyes are judging me up and down.

The other girls are clicking their tongues at me. This is annoying, I just want to find Caine, if he's still in the building that is.

"Seriously, can you let me through?" I ask once more.

"Are you really coming to the reunion? That will be a sight for sore eyes, can't wait to see what kind of trash you'll show up in."

Well, now I'm really getting annoyed.

1. "Anything is better than what you're wearing now."

2. "Please let me through."

"Anything is better than what you're wearing now," I say with a chuckle.

The girl lowers her eyebrows at me.

"How dare you! I'm wearing a real Cornier! It's way more expensive than whatever is on *your* body."

"Yeah, why don't you shut your mouth?" says the other girl.

"Did your daddy buy it for you, or did that brute Thomas pay you for your company?" I smirk.

She looks genuinely insulted and gasps out loud.

"Now seriously, get out of my way before I push you away," I threaten.

"Come on Chelsey, this bitch isn't worth ruining your clothes over – let's go."

Chelsey just growls at me, but eventually the group disperses, disappearing from the hallway.

Which is exactly when Caine decides to pop up. He shuffles out of the men's bathroom, looking at me with astonished eyes.

"I can't believe you talked to her like that..."

"She started it," I say defensively.

"No, I mean, it was kind of cool."

"Please let me through," I repeat. I'm not going to give in to her childish insults.

"Really, no response? Figures, just like that twerp, you can't say anything. Both of you are losers."

I close my eyes, taking in a deep breath. I'm getting sick of hearing that. Loser.

"Caine isn't a loser," I say in a low voice.

The black haired girl just laughs out loud.

"Sure he is! Do you... do you even know what he did?" she looks eager to tell me something.

"I don't want to hear it from you," I say, standing my ground. "Just let me through already."

"Come on Chelsey, let's go back to singing already," says one of the other girls.

"Fine, whatever. See you at the reunion, ta-ta," she waves at me as she walks away with the group.

Which is when Caine finally decides to show his face. He shuffles out of the men's bathroom.

"Oh, there you are!" I call out to him.

Caine awkwardly looks away from me.

"Thanks..."

"Huh?"

"For saying I'm not a loser..."

"Oh! You heard." I feel myself blushing a little. "No problem."

We both stay quiet for a bit, until I realize Caine's been hiding in the bathroom to avoid confronting Chelsey.

"By the way, were you hiding?" I ask, eyeing him suspiciously.

Caine shuffles his feet, looking down at the floor.

"No..." he lies.

"You can't face her?" I ask.

Caine rubs the back of his head.

"As you can see, she loves calling me a loser. I have to listen to that each time I see her. So, I'd rather avoid that, you know?"

My heart aches with a small pang of pain, knowing Caine gets bullied like this. I'm starting to understand a little bit why he wants me to show up at this reunion of his with me.

Which is why I put on a large smile. I have to get him to cheer up and to stop thinking about her.

"Come on, you get to listen to us sing instead, Sarah is on a roll."

Caine cracks a tiny smile at that, his eyes softening.

"Do I have to listen you again as well? I don't think my ears have recovered from the last time I heard you."

I can tell he's jesting, what with a gentle expression on his face.

"I'll make sure to shatter your ear drums this time," I joke and start to walk back to our room.

Caine rushes after me, walking by my side.

"Yeah, but, not really, right?" he asks, a little concerned.

I keep my lips sealed, showing him nothing but an innocent smile.

"Right!?"

-- Karaoke room

Despite running into an unpleasant person from before, Caine's mood doesn't seem to have been affected. He's right back to singing along every now and then.

Sarah is happily chugging down some alcohol and blaring along to a song.

Caine looks over the menu once more and orders some alcohol for himself.

"Are you sure you want to drink?" I ask.

Caine looks up from the menu at me.

"Huh, why? Can't I?"

"Last time, I had to bring your drunk ass home."

"I'll be fiiiine, stop worrying about me." Caine rolls his eyes.

"Joselina, let's do a duet!" Sarah chimes in.

"Sure!"

Sarah and I sing a duet together, while Kevin seems to be making small talk with Caine. I'm glad it's going well between them, despite Caine's accusations that Kevin is a stalker.

When our song is finished, I reach for the bowl of snacks to grab the last chicken nugget, but I bump into Caine's hand who had the same idea.

Flustered, I pull back. "Sorry!"

Caine clears his throat, awkwardly settling his eyes elsewhere.

"Go ahead, you can have the last one," he murmurs.

Wow, that's so thoughtful of him, I expected him to swipe it out of my hands, since he's good at swiping stuff.

"You sure? I thought you were hungry."

"Yeah, I already ate most of them anyway."

I roll my eyes at him – of course that's the reason why. He's already stuffed with chicken nuggets!

I grab the last one from the bowl and pop it into my mouth. From the corner of my eye I can see Caine fiddling with his thumbs, not saying a word.

"Wanna do another battle?" I ask with a grin.

I point at Sarah and Kevin who are in the middle of singing.

"You and me against them."

Caine throws his head back and flashes a cheeky grin.

"Let's get 'em," he chuckles.

We end up spending two hours singing in the karaoke booth. The only reason why we quit is because everyone's voice has gotten hoarse, and Caine's gotten a little drunk.

"Ahh, that was fun, but my throat hurts so much. Remind me to never do it again," Sarah whines.

"Y-yeah, you sound like a heavy smoker," Kevin points out.

"Really!? Ahh, tomorrow will be worse!"

"You sound just like my granny," Caine says, smirking.

"Granny," he repeats with a chuckle.

"Go home Caine, you're drunk." Sarah crosses her arms.

"Am not," he denies.

"Should I take you home?" Kevin offers. "You look a little too drunk to get home yourself."

Caine childishly hides behind my back.

"No! I want Joselina to take me home."

"Am I now?" I arch an eyebrow at him.

"You brought me home last time."

"I don't know about that, you don't really look all that drunk to me."

"I told you – I'm not drunk!" he protests.

He then gives Kevin a dirty look. "I just don't want him to know where I live."

Kevin looks a little dejected.

His eyes shift over to Sarah. "I uhh, can walk you home? If you don't mind?"

"Of course not!" Sarah grins at him.

I guess I'm stuck with babysitting duty and taking the little redhead home. I sigh out loud.

"Alright, I'll take this guy home, in case he gets lost or something."

"Excuse me? I'll have you know I have a very good sense of direction. You always need to know your exit strategy."

Exit strategy...?

"You what now?" I ask, bewildered at his response.

"Let's gooooo." Caine starts pulling on my arm.

"Alright already! Make sure she gets home safe." I direct my gaze at Kevin.

He gives me a shy smile.

"I will."

Sarah nudges her elbow into Caine's side, causing him to jerk back.

"Don't try anything with Joselina again – one more kiss and I'll grab you by the—"

"—Okaaaay, we don't need you to finish that sentence," I say quickly.

"Wait – kiss?" Kevin looks confused.

Caine sticks out his tongue at Sarah.

"I'll do whatever I want," he retorts immaturely.

"Ahh, so it's like that between you." Kevin sagely nods his head.

Wait – no! Don't misunderstand!

"Then I won't get in your way. Come on, Sarah."

Sarah gleefully walks after him, both approaching the door.

"Good night everyone!" Sarah bids her goodbyes.

Well, time to leave and get this drunk baby home.

-- Outside walkway

It's already night time outside when we exit the building. Sarah has left with Kevin, seems they were definitely getting along alright.

"Tell me you live nearby." I turn to Caine next to me.

"It's not too far, a 15 minute walk." He shoves his hands into his pockets and starts to walk.

We walk along in silence. Caine seems to be relatively sober enough to get home on his own, it's not like I need to walk him home or anything...

Yet, for some reason, I don't mind. I enjoyed hanging out with him tonight. He exceeded my expectations. I was already prepared for a night of Caine sitting alone in a corner and being a grump.

But he actually sang along.

"I had fun today," I break the silence. "Did you?"

Caine stares up at the sky, slowing down his pace.

"The sky is clear tonight," he mentions, ignoring my question.

I stand still and look up as well. The clear sky does pave way to the stars, but the lights of the city drown out most of them.

"Too bad we're in the city, otherwise we could see the Milky Way or something."

There's a soft smile on Caine's lips, he looks relaxed. Maybe because he's buzzed?

"I like stars..." he mumbles quietly.

I hum in agreement, I can't dislike them either.

Caine starts walking again and my feet follow along in his footsteps.

"Everyone at school says it's girly," he huffs loudly.

"What's wrong with liking stars? How's that in any way a gender issue?"

"They say my work is too girly. Too celestial inspired."

"Work?" I ask, confused. "You mean... your jewelry?"

Kevin did mention something about wanting Caine's jewelry.

"Yeah, I get a lot of shit for it. Everyone just wants to make cool and modern jewelry that's used in high fashion. I don't care."

"I'm curious about your work now, you should show it to me sometime."

"You'll just hate it," he huffs. "Most people do."

"Well, I'm not most people, I promise I won't hate it."

Our conversation lulls to a halt, the both of us remaining silent during our walk.

Seems Caine really doesn't fit in at his college. Not only does he seem a little friendless, but even his classmates are making fun of his work. Then there's that brute and that girl...

"So, what's the history between you and that black haired girl? I know you said you liked her before, but... how come she hates your guts?" I ask loudly.

"Why do you care?"

"For one, I'm being forced to play the part as your girlfriend... At least let me know *why*."

Caine doesn't respond, biting down on his bottom lip as he stares at the pavement.

It seems like it's hard for him to open up about it, but I hope that the alcohol has made him a little more loose than normal. He does seem to be relaxed right now.

"That girl you saw earlier, her name is Chelsey," Caine starts slowly.

"The one calling you a loser, right?"

He shoots me a dirty glare.

"...As you already know, I used to like her," he admits in a tiny voice.

"You have very questionable tastes," I say, offhandedly.

"Used to!" he cries out. "Just let me finish, okay?"

I nod at him, waiting for him to continue.

"We went to the same high school – we all did, including Thomas. Back then, I was as much of a loser as I am now, a frequent target for that asshole."

He takes in a deep breath as a painful expression settles on his face.

"Twerp, midget, runt, ginger, freckle-face, I think I've heard it all by now..."

I wince, that definitely sounds like bullying alright. That can't have been very easy.

"When our high school prom came up, I knew I wasn't going. No way in hell was I going to show my face to them, showing up all alone without a date."

I can imagine, if you're getting bullied, prom definitely won't be fun for you.

Caine looks to the side.

"But then she asked me out."

"Chelsey?"

"Yeah."

"Wow, you must have been super happy."

"Of course I was... I've never been asked out before, and I really liked her. I bought a suit and corsage. She wanted to meet up at school."

I don't like where this is going...

"She was there alright." Caine huffs.

"With her arm hooked around Thomas, surrounded by their friends as they all took pictures of me on their cellphones, laughing their asses off."

"It was all over social media within minutes, everyone there knew what happened. It was just an elaborate plan to humiliate me into thinking someone wanted to go to prom with me."

Oh wow, I don't know what to say – that's a really shitty thing to do to someone!

"I should have known – who wants to take a loser to prom anyway?" Caine kicks the ground with his foot.

1. Ruffle his hair to cheer him up.

2. "You're not a loser, Caine."

Not being able to stand this atmosphere, I simply place my hand on top of his head and ruffle his red hair.

Caine bows away from me, throwing his hands up defensively.

"Hey! What was that for!?"

"Caine, you're not that bad, you know," I admit.

"Oh gee, thanks."

"That is a pretty terrible thing to experience I imagine – but you're not the biggest loser you claim to be. What you just told me, says more about them as human beings than it says anything about you."

And to put a cherry on top, I mess his hair up one more time.

"And if you stop stealing, then you might be a decent person after all."

"Ugh – come on! Leave my hair alone!"

"Haha sorry, it's just begging to be touched!"

"You're not a loser, Caine," I tell him.

Caine clicks his tongue at me.

"What do you know?" he huffs.

"Not much, to be honest. But no one deserves to be treated like that. What they did to you was despicable. I'm sorry that happened to you."

I give him a sympathetic look and Caine looks genuinely confused. He quickly averts his gaze away from mine.

"Tis okay, it's in the past." He shrugs timidly.

"Aside from stealing – including that kiss – I think you can be a decent person, not a loser."

Caine pouts at me, but I smile in return. After tonight, I feel like I've seen a new side to him.

"Stop staring at me, you're pitying me!" he protests, quickening his pace.

I grin at him. "I'm not!" I hurry up after him.

I keep smiling at Caine, a little happy he chose to share that with me. It explains why he doesn't get along with that group, and why they bully him.

"Is that why you're so desperate to get me to pretend to be your girlfriend?" I ask. "So you can show them you're not a loser after all?"

He rubs his nose and shifts his eyes away.

"Yeah, maybe. What of it?"

I stop walking, causing Caine to halt and look back at me.

I've changed my mind.

The only reason why I was going along with this stupid plan was because I wanted Sarah and Kevin to hook up, and because I did feel a tiny bit sorry for Caine.

But now I feel vindicated. I want to show these people that Caine isn't some loser that they can bully without consequences. What they did to him was despicable, I hate people like that.

"Don't worry, Caine. I'll be sure to make them all jealous of you when they see you at the reunion."

Caine quirks an eyebrow at me.

"Huh? Why so suddenly?"

"Because both of them have been nothing but rude to me as well. One asked for a booty call, and the other called me a bitch! I'd like to see their faces pale." I rub my hands together.

"And to start – I have to make sure you look like a star. So, I'll be making you a suit, or a really nice vest."

"Huh, a suit!?"

"Yep!" I say, determined in my plans.

"I was just gonna buy one at the department store, it was on sale for like €20..."

I gasp out loud in horror.

"No! Not those ill-fitting suits!"

I shake my head and cross my arms over my chest.

"No, my date needs to wear something that fits him perfectly. I'll have to get your measurements."

"I... I'm not gonna pay!" he says quickly.

"Don't worry, it's on me."

Caine simply stares at me, a blank expression on his face. But his eyes are flickering with an emotion he's trying to hide.

He balls his hands into a fist, glaring down at the pavement.

"Why are you doing this? Going so far... I'm just some loser that forced you into this."

1. "Because I'm kind of starting to like you."

2. "Because I feel like you deserve justice."

"Because I'm kind of starting to like you," I say playfully.

Caine's eyes widen in record time and he comes to a screeching halt.

"Hah!?"

His is steadily gaining colour. He's so embarrassed! How cute!

I giggle to myself.

"Yeah, you're not bad, Caine."

"D-don't just casually say that you like me," he grumbles at me.

I point a finger at his cheeks.

"Haha, look at you blushing."

"Because I feel like you deserve justice."

To go through something traumatic as that, while still being harassed by his former tormentors... It doesn't seem like he's got many – or any – friends either.

I can't stand by and watch it happen.

His expression changes and he grunts loudly.

"Are you taking pity on me?" he accuses me.

"No, it's not that..."

I bite down on my lip and look at him.

"I don't think you're a bad person, you definitely don't deserve that kind of treatment. So, what's wrong with wanting to help you out?"

Caine rubs the back of his neck, clearly a little unsettled.

"Ahh, whatever, let's stop talking about this. We're almost at my apartment."

Caine quickly walks away from me. I can't tell whether he's angry or embarrassed. Or maybe a little bit of both.

-- **Caine's apartment complex**

It doesn't take too long for us to reach his apartment. It was over half a year ago that I was here last time, but it still looks the same.

I guess this is it, time to go home.

"Should've been the other way around," Caine suddenly mumbles.

"Huh?" I turn to him, a little confused. "What are you talking about?"

He pouts at me.

"Should've walked you home." He plays with a curly lock of hair near his ear.

"I'm the guy, after all."

I chuckle at him; that's what he's worried about? The stereotype that the guy should be taking the girl home?

"Relax, I don't mind dropping you off this time."

Even though it looks like Caine has sobered up by now. He seems a lot more awake and aware than before. Still, it wasn't an unpleasant experience, walking him home.

Caine leans against his door, eyes focused on something in the distance.

"Well, have a good night then!" I tell him.

But before I can leave, Caine stops me with his voice.

"Uhm!"

"Yes?"

"It wasn't bad..." he mutters.

"It wasn't bad...?" I repeat.

"To your question before. It wasn't bad. I didn't hate it." He crosses his arms across his chest, pouting at me.

"Oooh." I can't help but smile at him. "You enjoyed yourself."

"Just a little, don't get cocky," he huffs.

Well, look who's being a little dishonest right now. With his puffed out cheeks, he resembles a hamster, a harmless and cute fluffball.

"And about before..." he starts in a quiet voice.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done that."

"Uhh..." I'm totally confused, what is he apologizing about?

I think back to our night together, and can't really think of much that he did that was super annoying or anything. Other than eating most of the food.

"The chicken nugget? It's okay, it's just a piece of food."

Caine stomps his foot on the ground, clearly getting irritated at me.

"No, you idiot – I mean the kiss!" he shouts.

"Hey, don't go calling me an idiot – I can't read your mind and know what you're talking about!" I raise my voice at him.

"Argh, never mind I said that! Go home!"

I let out an exasperated sigh. We were doing so well before, talking without arguing.

"Fine. I'll text you later for a date so I can get your measurements."

I finally wave him goodbye and walk away.

-- Daisy dots website

When I get home I check my computer, browsing the Fashion Week website. I really need to start cracking down on some designs!

I just don't know what to make yet... inspiration hasn't hit me still. But I've got plenty of time left, I don't need to stress myself.

I should browse Daisy Dots so I can maybe get some inspiration from other people's designs. As I open the homepage, that's when I notice I've gotten a message from a member.

Meeenimi123456:

"Why don't you kys."

Ugh – it's that troll again! He won't give up! It's been a quiet week so far, but they decided to resurface again. Telling me to 'kill yourself'.

I quickly ban the troll once more and angrily turn off my computer. This is really annoying. Oh, I totally forgot to talk to Kevin about the forum! I wonder what his username is?

[Chapter 011]
-- Boutique

A couple of days later, after I close up shop, I've asked Caine to meet me at Sunshine Boutique so I can get his measurements. After all, I promised to make him a dazzling suit.

I play around with a pencil and stare down at my sketchbook, trying to come up with a concept for Fashion Week. My brain doesn't seem to want to cooperate, so my thoughts wander elsewhere.

Thinking back on that night we went to karaoke, I remember Caine talking about liking stars. Too bad we couldn't really see them back then. I guess we'd need to go somewhere out of the city to get a good glimpse of them.

The beach would probably be a good spot to stargaze!

I crack my neck and start sketching out a few designs inspired by the beach. Maybe something with a water theme.

Eventually I start sketching out the dress I'll be wearing at Caine's reunion.

Finally, I hear the doorbell jingle, and look up from the counter.

"Yo," Caine gives me a curt nod. He's wearing his beanie today.

I close my sketchbook and walk around the counter.

"Great! You're finally here. Come on, follow me."

I lead Caine to my workroom.

-- Boutique workroom

With curious eyes, Caine looks around my workroom, inspecting all of the tools and materials lying about.

I walk over to my crafting table and fetch a measuring tape and small notebook to record his sizes.

"Uhh, I've never done this before," Caine starts awkwardly. "Do I take off my clothes...?"

I can't help but snort loudly, trying to keep in my laughter. The thought of Caine stripping down to his underwear just so I can get his measurements is a pretty funny image in my head.

But no, he can keep his clothes on. Though it's very tempting to mess with him... as revenge for that forced kiss.

1. "Yep, you need to strip down to your underwear."

2. "Don't worry, you can keep your clothes on."

"Yep, you need to strip down to your underwear." I smirk at him.

Caine gulps, his face steadily gaining colour.

"S-seriously?" he stutters.

I simply continue to smirk at him, I want to have fun a little while longer, making him uncomfortable.

Wordlessly, Caine starts lifting up his sweater over his head, exposing his bare stomach.

This time, I can't keep control of myself and burst into laughter.

Caine glares at me, his eyes shooting daggers and his mouth pulled into a snarl.

"What the hell is so funny, huh?"

"Ahaha, sorry, I was actually kidding. No need to take anything off. I can measure you through your clothes."

I flash him an innocent smile.

"Why don't you do me a favour and go walk off a cliff," Caine hisses at me as he puts his sweater back on.

I shake my head at him. "Don't worry, you can keep your clothes on."

Caine looks relieved to know he doesn't have to strip to his underwear in the middle of my workroom. And frankly, I have no desire to see him in his underwear either, even though it's a funny image.

I've been traumatized enough since the last time I saw him exiting the shower without wearing anything. I don't want a repeat of that.

"Good, I don't want you touching me all over my naked body."

I roll my eyes at him.

"Trust me, I don't particularly want to, either."

Caine sticks his tongue out at me in return.

I stretch the tape between my hands.

"Now, it's time to measure you. Buckle up!"

Caine huffs and crosses his arms over his chest.

"Just get it over with already."

"Stretch your arms out, like this." I stretch out my arms to both sides.

Caine mimics me, standing in the middle of the room like a grumpy scarecrow.

My mind flips a switch and I'm in professional mode. I circle Caine around until I can put the tape measure against the nape of his neck and pull it all the way down to the small of his back.

I note down the measurements and swiftly switch over to his shoulders, pulling the tape along. Next up are his arms, inside and outside.

Eventually I'm in front of him, wrapping the tape around his chest and tightening it to get the right size.

Caine's been deathly silent the entire time, but his cyan eyes have been following my every move. It's a little unnerving that he's so cooperative with me.

I drop the tape from his chest until it falls down to his waist.

"Breathe out," I instruct him. "Can't have you wearing a blazer that's too tight on you."

Caine obeys and lets out a deep breath so that I can measure his waist.

I write everything down in my little notebook before I bend down to my knees.

I reach towards his crotch with my hand, tape measure ready.

"W-what are you doing!?" Caine jumps back from me, clearly flustered.

"I need the inseam of your leg, please stand still."

Giving me a defiant pout, Caine awkwardly waddles back on the spot.

"Spread your legs a little," I say. He's keeping them shut as if he's guarding some kind of treasure behind them.

"That's what he said... haha... Hah," Caine jokes nervously.

I look up at him from the ground.

"Actually, that's *exactly* what you said to me before," I note.

He did tell me to spread my legs when he was tending to my knee.

Caine's cheeks turn rosy and he quickly whips his head around.

"Whatever..." he mumbles. "Just do your thing."

Once more I reach up towards the seam of his crotch, placing the tape against the inside of his thigh, as high up as possible without making him even more uncomfortable than he already is.

Caine's body becomes super stiff and I can tell he's holding in his breath. I'm trying my best not to accidentally brush against something forbidden.

I pull the tape all the way down to his ankle and finally remove my hand from his body once I note down the numbers.

Caine lets out a sigh.

Quickly I wrap my tape around his upper thigh, measuring that, too.

One more measurement for the outseam and the final; his hips.

Still hovering in front of him down on my knees, I wrap the tape around his hips and pull it tight. I lean a little closer to him to read the numbers on the tape.

Caine turns his head to look at the standing mirror next to us.

I'm too busy to focus on what he's doing, so I continue with one more measurement of his leg and I'm finally done.

"Done!" I say cheerfully as I get up.

I'm greeted by a cherry-red Caine, who's refusing to meet my eyes or even look in my general direction. What's got him in such a tizzy? Was I *that* close to his crotch?

"What's with your face?" I ask. "Why are you blushing so much?"

Caine grits his teeth, but still doesn't make eye contact with me.

"Because!" he says, his voice cracking a little.

His eyes flicker over towards the mirror again, but then he shakes his head.

"No, never mind, forget it."

I guess measuring him made Caine a bit shy. It's kind of cute, actually, that he's so awkward about it.

"Well, I got your measurements, I'll make you a nice suit. Do you prefer a certain colour?"

"I don't really care," he says with a shrug.

"Alright, I'll decide myself then."

Caine shuffles on the spot for a bit, rubbing and scratching his arm, not quite knowing how to behave like a human anymore.

"Are you always shoving your face up in a guy's crotch?" he asks me out of the blue.

Taken aback, I shake my head.

"I don't make a habit out of it."

"This is the second time you were fondling me."

This time I feel blood rush to my cheeks.

"Don't say it like that! I didn't fondle you the first time, and I certainly didn't touch you right now. This is how measuring is done. This is my job, you know."

Caine himself is also sporting a nice blush on his cheeks. Ah, it seems he's simply embarrassed.

"Well, a little warning next time," he mutters.

I flash him a cocky grin.

"Next time? Are you implying there will be a next time?"

Frantically he whirls around to hide himself from me, showing only his back.

"N-no! Stop imagining things!"

Caine quickly heads towards my door.

"I'm leaving!"

I chuckle lightly at him.

"Alright, thanks for dropping by. I'll keep in touch!"

Caine bolts out of my boutique. It's kind of fun to see him flustered like that, I guess he isn't used to close contact. I tried to keep it professional, though.

I look down at my notebook with Caine's measurements, and then start to sketch something in my notebook. Time to design!

-- livingroom

I manage to finish both Caine's suit as well as my own dress within the timeframe. Less than a month wasn't a lot of leeway to work with in the first place, but I powered through it.

Today is the day of the reunion, so I told Caine to come over as I have his suit.

I hope everything will go well at his reunion. No more calling Caine a loser.

Either way, I should take a shower and prep myself.

-- bathroom

As I step out of the shower, I check the time. It's later than I would have liked it to be. Caine is supposed to dropping by soon.

I start drying my hair and styling it into a bun. Then, I apply make-up to my face.

Make-up always takes so long – I'm so bored, but I manage to finish it all. I look decent enough. Now, time to get into my dress.

Hmm, where is it? Oh, I must have forgotten to bring it to the bathroom; which means it's still downstairs. I guess I'll get ready in the workroom then.

I head downstairs wearing nothing but a towel around my body.

-- boutique workroom

Ah, there it is! It's still on the hanger near my mirror. The sequined blue dress with a deep V-cut, open back, and a slit that rides up high.

It's a very showy dress... After all, Caine asked me to look sexy, and this dress certainly brings that out.

It really feels like I'm getting ready for a date. I want to see the looks on their faces when they see us, fabulously dressed.

I take the towel off my body and slip into my panties. Luckily, I don't need to wear a bra – I sewed support inside of the dress.

As I grab the dress from the hanger, I hear my door open.

"Joselina? Are you here?"

Oh crap, that's Caine. I left the door unlocked!

Not knowing what to do, I simply stare at Caine, one of my hands holding the dress in mid-air. My naked breasts are on full display. He stares back at me.

1. "I'm going to have to charge you if you stare at me any longer than that."

2. Cover your breasts.

"I'm going to have to charge you if you stare at me any longer than that," I say calmly.

Caine gapes at me, but then quickly whirls around, covering his own eyes.

"The fuck are you naked for!?" he cries out.

I huff. "I'm changing, obviously."

"Here!?"

"Stop freaking out, it's not the end of the world."

I lay the dress out in front of me and then step inside of it, hoisting it up over my body. Caine is adamant about keeping his back turned to me.

"Why would you change in here... you knew I was coming," I can hear Caine muttering behind my back.

"And what do you mean you'd charge me..." he continues to mumble.

"Caine, I can hear you," I say with a huff.

Caine yelps and then finally shuts up.

"You can turn around now," I say once I've managed to pull the dress on.

Caine slowly turns around, shifting his gaze left and right to see if the coast is really clear. He's not making any eye contact with me. He looks rather embarrassed after running into me like that.

I can feel my face heat up and I quickly cover my breasts.

"W-why are you naked!?" Caine cries out as he turns around.

Ahhh, he saw my breasts! I want to crawl in a hole and die!

"I was just changing! Stay there, don't turn around!" I shriek at him.

"Like I'd want to!"

"Why didn't you knock!?"

"I didn't expect a pair of tits when I walked in – okay!?"

"D-don't describe my delicate features with such vulgar words!"

"Can you *please* just put something on?" he asks in an exasperated voice.

With shaky hands, I grab the dress and quickly slip it onto my body. My heart is racing so fast, this is not good for my blood pressure. Why did he have to walk in at that exact moment!?

"...Are you done yet?" he asks after a while.

I'm a little surprised that Caine hasn't tried to take a peek. Like a true gentleman, he's had his back turned to me the entire time.

I try to will away the blush from my cheeks.

"Yes, you can turn around now."

Caine awkwardly faces me, trying his best not to make any eye contact. He looks rather embarrassed and out of sorts as well.

It's then that I notice I haven't tied the back of my dress. As I try to do it myself, I realize it's much easier if I had some help. I grit my teeth as I avert my eyes from Caine.

"Can you help me tie this in the back?" I ask him.

I turn my back to him, which has a small lace corset worked into the dress, but it's hard to tie it on my own.

Caine shuffles closer and he hesitantly reaches for the lace at the back.

"Pull it tight," I instruct him.

"You made this dress yourself, right? Why not make something that would be easier to get inside of by yourself?" Caine asks begrudgingly.

"I could have gone for a zipper as well, but zippers tend to crinkle and it'd look really ugly on my butt. So, I decided lace would be better," I explain.

I brace myself as Caine pulls on the lace hard, tightening it around my waist, and almost pulling me against his body. Deftly, he ties it together so it'll hold up.

"Anything else?" he asks.

Well, isn't he rather compliant today? I turn around and shake my head.

"No, I'm finished. It's your turn now."

Caine places his hands on his hips. "Well, where's the suit?"

I quickly grab the suit which has been neatly hanging in the back. Shirt, blazer and slacks. Check.

"You know how to get dressed?" I ask him.

Caine roughly takes the hanger from me. "Of course I do, I'm not a baby."

I want to make a witty comeback to that, but instead I decide to keep quiet for now.

"Come upstairs when you're done, okay? The door is unlocked," I say.

Caine raises his eyebrow at me. "Why?"

"...You want me to stay and watch?"

A slight blush tints his cheeks. He hastily shakes his head.

I leave the workroom.

-- bathroom

I prep myself some more, fixing some of my make-up and making sure my hair is okay.

I give myself a look over in the mirror. I don't look bad. Rather scandalous. It's not my usual style, but it should get a few heads to turn. Hopefully it'll make that Thomas and Chelsey jealous enough. I'm just a prop to be seen, after all.

Which reminds me how Caine saw my breasts. I grip the edge of my sink, closing my eyes. I want to burn the memory from my mind.

After a while, I hear Caine walk upstairs and roam the hallways.

"In here," I call out to him.

I hear a sad knock on the door.

"...Are you dressed this time?" I can hear his voice from outside the door.

"Yes, geez, come in already, let me have a look at you."

Caine opens up the door and shuffles inside. He looks out of place.

"Well?" he asks impatiently, showing me his suit.

"Hmm..." I take a step back to look at Caine.

He's wearing everything properly. The shirt is tucked in, the blazer looks to be the perfect length on him, slacks are fine – everything is in order.

He looks good in a formal suit. Dashing, almost. But there's something missing, I wonder...

Caine averts his eyes. "Take a picture, it'll last longer," he gripes at me.

I reach for my phone on the sink.

Caine's eyes grow wide in a panic. He quickly rushes over towards me and bats my hand away.

"No, don't take any pictures of me," he says hastily.

I stare at his slight blush on his face, which is almost matching his red hair.

That's when I realize what's missing; a new hairstyle.

My fingers touch a lock of his red hair. Caine immediately backs up.

"W-what was that for?" he asks, bewildered.

"Your hair, we need to do something with it."

He huffs. "No, we don't. My hair is fine."

"Come on, it's part of the deal. When you're going to dress up, your hair needs to be styled as well. I think I may be able to straighten out your curls."

"Well, I don't want to," he replies childishly.

"I either take a picture of you, or you let me style your hair. Your choice." I stick out my tongue at him.

Caine throws his hands up in the air. "Ugh – fine."

"Do what you want. Stubborn woman."

"Says the stubborn thief," I fire back.

I put the lid of the toilet seat down and point at it. "Sit."

Begrudgingly, Caine sits down in front of me, his arms crossed over his chest. He's got this pout on his face, like he really doesn't want to do this. He's like a kid that's forced to go visit the dentist.

"Should I give you some candy to wipe off that sour look on your face?" I ask him.

"—Just do your thing already!" he complains.

I finally shut my mouth and get to work. I grab the straightening iron from my drawer and start heating it up. Time to tame that wild hair of Caine's.

...It'd be nice if I could tame his difficult personality as well.

Caine averts his eyes when I lean in closer. Hmm, I wonder how I should style it. Slick it back? Nah, he probably wouldn't look good like that. Maybe parted? I could try.

I spray some product in his hair so it doesn't get damaged by the straightener. Then I run my fingers through his red hair. It's as soft and fluffy as I imagined it to be.

There's this urge that prevents me from removing my fingers as I twirl it around a piece of red hair. It's *really* soft! I end up just grazing through his hair with my hand, feeling his smooth locks brush against my skin.

So far, Caine has been very quiet.

"Your hair is so soft," I say with a smile. "What kind of shampoo do you use?"

"I dunno..." he responds weakly. "Just whatever is on sale."

"Lucky, your hair is really healthy."

I drag my fingers across his scalp, fluffing up his hair. It's kind of turned into me massaging his head. It's fun. Though I should probably start on styling his hair instead of petting his head, we don't have enough time to mess around.

When I pull my hand out of his hair, I notice Caine's got his eyes closed. He looks... relaxed.

"Oh... You like having your head massaged?" I ask.

Caine's eyes spring open. "No!" he immediately claims.

I stifle a chuckle. So quick to deny!

"*Reaaaally?*" I drawl out as my hand hovers above his head.

Playfully, I twirl my fingers around a lock of hair. Caine looks down at his lap instead. I notice the tips of his ears reddening.

Hah! He totally does enjoy this!

However, I finally place his hair between the tongs of the straightener and start to straighten out his hair.

"I like it, too," I admit with a small smile.

"Hmm?"

"People massaging my head, or running their fingers through my hair. It feels nice."

"Oh." Caine doesn't say anything else.

Silence fills up the space between us. I'm a little more aware of him as I straighten his hair. It's not an uncomfortable silence though.

The sizzling of the tongs and Caine's steady breathing is the only sound I can hear.

"I've only had hairdressers touch my head..." Caine mumbles, breaking the silence.

"And they usually have those fake, long nails and end up scratching me."

I can imagine it clearly; Caine getting annoyed by his hairdresser because she's got manicured nails. It's a little funny to think about.

"But this... this is nice."

Caine closes his eyes, looking quite peaceful.

Suddenly my heart skips a beat.

Caine is always so guarded and quick to deny anything, so it's a little strange to see him be honest for once. He's showing me a vulnerable side like this, one that I did not expect.

I try to curb any weird feelings and focus on taming his hair. But now I'm conscious of where I'm touching him and how close I am to his face.

With his eyes closed, I take a brief moment to study his face. Cute freckles are dotted across his cheeks and nose. His eyelashes are light in colour and he's got thin lips that are pulled in what I can only deduce to be a satisfied smile.

He was against the idea of styling his hair – yet look at him now; Caine is enjoying it.

I can't stop smiling in return. I guess this little redhead has got his cute sides after all.

A few minutes pass and I've managed to straighten out his wavy mane and styled it into something more suitable for a formal party.

"There, done," I say, taking a step back to admire my work.

Caine's cyan eyes pop open and he stares at me.

Oh... He's rather handsome now. Combined with the suit, Caine is giving off this entirely different vibe than usual.

"What?" he asks, cocking me an eyebrow. "Does it look stupid?"

1. "You look really attractive."
2. Shyly look away and say nothing.

"You look really attractive," I say honestly.

"Eh!?" Caine exclaims in disbelief.

With a red face, he turns his gaze away from me. "D-don't make stupid jokes."

It's my turn to react in disbelief.

"It's not a joke. You genuinely look handsome."

Caine grows even redder and awkwardly stuffs his hands into the pockets of his blazer, then marches away from me. He walks towards the mirror to check himself out, grumbling under his breath.

He sighs deeply.

"You don't like it?" I ask him, standing next to him.

Caine immediately turns his eyes away from me. He's still red. It's kind of adorable.

"It looks weird," he replies.

"Well, I like it. Everyone at the party will think you're handsome." I smile at him.

Caine grits his teeth. "Do you always say embarrassing shit like this?"

"Why, you don't believe I'm telling the truth?"

Unable to reply to him because for the briefest second in my mind, I thought he was rather attractive. I can't exactly say that to his face, that's embarrassing.

Caine narrows his eyes at me suspiciously.

"Really? Does it look that awful? Ugh, I should have never trusted you."

Caine starts grabbing a fistful of hair to mess it up.

"No!" I yell out to stop him. "Don't ruin it. It looks fine."

"Yeah well, you act like it looks ridiculous and can't muster the courage to tell me," Caine says with a huff.

"It doesn't," I say weakly.

I feel my cheeks glow as I look at the ground. "I think you look handsome like this."

I see Caine's face contort into a myriad of expressions, finally exploding into a blush as he whirls around away from me. He stands at the mirror, refusing to look at me.

"...You're not lying?" he asks in a tiny voice while his shoulders are slumped.

I shake my head. "Of course not. You clean up well."

"..." Caine pouts.

"...No one's ever complimented me before," he mutters with a very red face.

Oh. That stabs me right through the heart.

No one ever told him he looks good? That's the saddest thing ever.

I give him a light punch in the arm. "Well, you look good. You're going to take their breaths away."

Caine rolls his eyes. "Yeah, no, that's not happening. You can shut up now."

I chuckle at him. "Alright. Shall we go?"

"Finally! No more grooming, okay? I'm done. I will kick a puppy if you suggest we should paint my nails or something."

"Ooh, can I do your nails?"

"No!"

"How about a change of earrings? I've got these really cute ones..."

"Hell no!" Caine stomps his foot on the ground.

"*Fiiiine*," I sigh.

"Oh." Caine straightens his back. "Actually, I almost forgot about this."

Caine digs into the inside of his jacket, taking out a small jewelry box. It looks suspiciously like a box that holds an engagement ring.

I raise my eyebrow at him.

"...You're not getting down on one knee, are you? I know I told you that you were handsome, but this is going too fa—"

"—Ahhh, shut up already. I'm not proposing!"

Caine flings the box at me and I hastily catch it before it drops onto the floor.

"Wear it. Leave it. Throw it into the trash — I don't care." He stuffs his hands into his pockets again. "I'll be outside."

Caine makes a quick getaway.

I look down at the blue velvet box in my hands. Curious to what it holds, I open it up — almost expecting something to jump out and scare me.

There, inside, are two golden pieces of jewelry. They're earrings. There is a blue dome at the top, covered in small golden stars. Long and slender golden rods stick out at the bottom.

It's... the best way to describe it, it's a celestial jellyfish. The shape is that of a jellyfish, but the blue dome reminds me of the galaxy. Honestly, it looks beautiful. A little unrefined, maybe a bit cheap looking — but I'm really impressed.

Caine made this, didn't he? He can be quite surprising.

I guess it's not that bad going out with him. It's not a real date, but as I stare down at these jellyfish earrings, I'm starting to feel a little excited.

I quickly catch up with Caine outside once I put the earrings in. They're not a bad fit with my dress at all.

[Chapter 012]

-- Outside club

We finally arrive at the club with the tacky name W4ST3D.

They couldn't have gotten a better venue? Yuck.

I look next to me, expecting to see Caine, but he's vanished from my side.

"Huh, Caine?" I call out, surprised we got separated.

Then I spot his bright red hair poking out from behind corner of the club. He's hiding.

"Get over here! Don't chicken out," I say.

"I'm not scared!" he replies cheekily, pushing himself away from the safety of the wall and walking into full view.

I quickly check to see if my dress is clean and if it hasn't crinkled from using public transport. I then turn my attention to Caine.

"What?" he asks.

"Hold still."

Caine clamps down his mouth as I quickly brush away a few strands of hair from his forehead, tucking them back with his hairline.

He then bats my hand away.

"Alright, enough already. You're not my mom."

1. "Stop calling me your mom. I'm not that old."

2. "I just want you to look your best."

"Stop calling me your mom, I'm not that old." I say with a sigh.

"Just stop fussing about my hair already. I really don't care," he huffs.

"I just want you to look your best," I say with a sigh.

"Look, I'm sure it's fine. You don't have to look after me," he huffs.

"We're not staying long anyway. Just gotta show my face, maybe drink something, then get the hell out of there."

"What, no dancing?" I ask, a little disappointed.

"Do I *look* like I want to dance?" he says snarkily.

"You look like you don't know *how* to dance," I tease him.

"I can too!"

"Alright – let's dance!" I cheer.

Caine growls out loud.

"Let's just go inside!"

I roll my eyes at him – I'm about to open the doors to the club when I get distracted by Caine's incessant fidgeting.

He appears to be making some weird hand gestures.

"What are you doing?"

Now is not the time to be panicking and having second thoughts!

Caine lets out a frustrated sigh, clearly a little frazzled.

"I don't know where to put my hand."

"Like, do I put it on your lower back, or do we hold hands... or—"

1. "Just put it on my butt."

2. "I'm fine with holding hands."

"Just put it on my butt," I say confidently.

"W-what!?" he squeaks.

"That way it'll really sell the idea that we're *like that*," I say with a flirty smile.

"...*Like that*," Caine repeats, his face turning pink.

He flexes his fingers, moving his arm around my back. I can see him shaking with nerves.

"No! I'm not touching it!"

"Oh, come on, just put it on my butt. Don't be scared."

"I don't want to put it on your butt."

"Don't back out now. Just put your hand on it. It's not going to kill you!"

"Can't I just go for your lower back?"

"Just grab me already," I growl.

"Fine!" he cries out. "I'm putting it on your butt!"

Caine pretty much slaps the palm of his hand against my butt, the sound bouncing off, alerting the people around us.

Everyone starts whispering and I can't help but flush.

"You didn't have to slap me!" I berate him.

"You *told* me to touch it! Suck it!" he argues in return.

The hand on my butt is only lightly touching me, so hesitant and full of uncertainty. He's afraid of really committing to it.

To be honest, I expected Caine to be okay with it, considering how vulgar he seems to speak every now and then.

"I'm fine with holding hands," I reply.

Caine's trembling fingers make contact with my own. Hesitantly he grabs hold of my entire hand. He feels cold and clammy, not to mention he's shaking with nerves.

He's not really going to impress anyone if he walks in there looking like a scared little lamb.

"*This* is what you decide to get nervous about? Holding hands? Really?" I whisper.

Caine shoots me a dirty look.

"I mean, you kissed me before. What's a little hand holding compared to that?"

"Gah! You're making me even more nervous!" Caine fires back.

"Just relax. Just think of me as... moral support. That's right. I've got you."

I squeeze his hand with a smile.

"Please don't act as if I'm some kind of puppy dog on a leash. I don't need someone to look after me," he grumbles defiantly.

But secretly he squeezes my hand back. My heart suddenly leaps into my throat.

Sometimes, Caine can be a little too endearing...

"You know, it wouldn't kill you to be honest every now and then," I point out.

"Shut up, I don't care," says Caine gruffly.

I take in a deep breath.

"Whatever, you ready?"

"...Not really."

"Great, let's go."

I pull open the door and we enter the club.

-- **Club**

The loud music fills my ears. It feels like it's been ages since I last went to a party.

Actually, the last party I went to was the one where I met Caine. Fancy that.

I survey the room filled with people dressed in their nice clothes. Some guys are wearing plaid shirts — yuck. Caine definitely looks way better than the rest of them.

At least the girls in the club are dressed to party.

That's when I notice Caine's been frozen solid this entire time.

Even the hand on my butt has gone stiff.

His entire hand has gone stiff and I start to feel like I won't ever get my hand back in one piece.

"Caine?" I try snapping him out of it.

"Huh, wha – what is it now?"

"Should we get something to drink?"

"Yeah, uhm, I'll get something. Stay here."

Caine lets go of me and slinks into the crowd unnoticed.

Finding it a bit awkward to stand near the entrance, I find myself a spot to sit down at one of the booths.

There are two people making out in the booth, so I try my best to ignore their existence. Looking around, I try to see if I can spot that girl with her brute of a boyfriend.

It's hard to recognize anyone in the mass of people crowded around in this tiny club. I did not realize there were this many people from Caine's reunion. I guess maybe it's from that entire year, not just a class?

All of a sudden, a tall guy walks up to me.

"Hey there! I don't think I recognize you. Were you from the same school?" he asks with a very broad smile.

Oh great, now people are hitting on me.

"I'm not. I came here with someone else." I answer politely.

The guy looks to his left and right, and after only seeing the couple making out in the booth, he deduces I'm alone.

"Seems they ditched you."

"He didn't. He's coming back."

"I bet you're tired of waiting then – wanna dance?"

"No, thank you," I reject him firmly.

"Ah come on. Who could possibly be worth waiting for?"

Caine makes his presence known, stumbling towards the booth with two drinks in his hands. He almost trips over his own two feet, spilling some of the liquid on the floor.

"I don't know what the hell they gave me, but I know it's definitely alcohol," he says as he hands me one.

That's when Caine finally notices the tall guy next to him. His eyes grow wide when he seems to recognize him.

"Wait – Caine? Is that you?"

Caine quickly looks away.

I take the drink from his hand. Now it's my turn to play my part in this.

"Thanks so much Caine. I was getting so bored without you around." I bat my eyelashes at him.

The other guy looks shocked.

"You were waiting for Caine? No way."

Caine timidly brushes his hand against his neck, unsure how to respond.

"Hey... Marvin," Caine greets the other guy.

"Yes, Caine is worth waiting for," I say with a beaming smile. Then I take a sip from my drink.

Oh, it's super sweet. I like it though!

"Wow. I guess people really do change," says Marvin.

He then slaps Caine on his back.

"Way to go dude. And that shit looks expensive, too. Did you get a lot of money recently?" Marvin is pointing at Caine's outfit.

Caine chuckles awkwardly, then quickly takes a chug from his drink.

"I mean, if it's money you want, I'm a lot richer than Caine," he says suavely.

I roll my eyes at him. I have to hold myself back from retorting that I wouldn't even go out with him if people paid me to do it.

1. "He's not rich, but Caine makes up for it in other... intimate ways."

2. "I'm not in it for the money. Caine has his own merits."

"He's not rich, but Caine makes up for it in other... intimate ways." I suggestively wiggle my eyebrows.

Caine coughs and spits out his drink, halfway choking on his alcohol.

Marvin throws his hands up in the air.

"That's my cue to exit!" he exclaims.

As Marvin leaves us alone, Caine can't help but gawk at me with a red face.

"I-intimate ways!?" he chokes out.

I shrug. "What, it worked, didn't it?"

"I'm not in it for the money. Caine has his own merits," I explain.

"Seriously?" Marvin asks, not buying it.

"Yeah, Caine's a great boyfriend," I smile at Caine.

Caine almost chokes on his drink.

"Ah, whatever. Enjoy the night, Caine," says Marvin as he finally leaves us alone.

Caine hides his blushing face behind his hand.

"You make it sound so convincing," he mutters.

"Isn't that the point?"

"I guess so," he admits.

But he grits his teeth. "Still embarrassing to hear you say that though."

"Not as embarrassing as that." I point to the couple next to me who have been slobbering all over each other's faces.

Caine pulls a disgusted face.

"Have you seen that girl yet?" I ask him.

"Chelsey? No, I haven't. I'm sure she's here though. She organized it."

"Do you know everyone here?"

Caine shakes his head. "No, not everyone."

I refrain from asking him if he's got any old friends, since I have a feeling the answer would be a simple 'no'.

Wondering if we're going to run into his bullies at some points, I turn my head to scan the room once more.

My eyes make contact with another guy.

Oh – I almost didn't recognize him with his hair down. That's Thomas!

"Well, well, look who decided to show up after all," he says as he makes his entrance.

Caine grows silent.

Thomas finally spots Caine next to him and he puts on a dramatic show of surprise.

"Whoa, almost didn't see you there!"

Thomas smirks at Caine then flicks his forehead with his finger. Caine bats his hand away and backs off.

"Stop that," Caine growls at him.

"Can't hide that carrot top head of yours though."

"Hey, don't bother him," I warn him.

"I'm just saying hi, you know. Just us two guys." Thomas grins at me.

"I'm still shocked you came. Thought you'd be staying home like a loser. No one wants you here anyway."

Caine doesn't seem to have a reply for that, so he says nothing instead.

"Why don't you go find your girlfriend and bother her? We're just here to have a good time."

"I'll show you how to have a good time," he says while winking at me.

Ugh, so gross.

I get up from the seat, with my drink in hand.

"Is that so?" I say coyly, advancing towards Thomas.

"Can you hold my drink? Then you can show me how to have a good time."

I offer my drink to him, stretching out my arm. Thomas immediately takes it with a smirk.

"Sure thing."

Then I take Caine's drink from his hand, offering it to Thomas.

"Oh, and this one, too."

Not questioning it, Thomas takes it, though his eyebrows are raised in confusion.

"Uhhh," he mutters.

Then I reach for Caine's hand.

"Thanks!"

Quickly, I pull Caine along with me. We leave the booth and Thomas behind, walking towards the dance floor.

"Wait – where are we going?" Caine asks, bewildered.

"We're going to let that rotten man stand there, holding our drinks and looking like an idiot, until he realizes we're not coming back for them."

Managing to worm ourselves through enough people, I finally make a stop in the middle of the dance floor. There are other people dancing to the music, none of them really paying attention to us.

"...I paid for those drinks though," Caine says sully.

"I say the price is well worth it – look, he's still holding them."

I push against Caine's cheek with my index finger, directing him towards Thomas, who is indeed still at the booth, holding both drinks, looking lost.

Then the guy starts walking around with the drinks, probably looking for us.

Seeing Thomas act so confused is funny, so I end up giggling.

Caine chuckles lightly as well.

Finally, Thomas disappears out of our sight, and someone from behind bumps into me, causing me to move closer to Caine.

"Sorry!" they apologize.

Their apologetic tone quickly dissolves when they notice Caine and a scowl appears on their face instead. They quickly turn around to go back to dance.

"Well, that's just rude," I say with a scoff.

"It's true what he said," Caine says softly.

I brush the hair out of my face and lean in closer to him, as the music is drowning out his voice.

"What's true?" I ask.

Caine looks down at his feet, shuffling around on the dance floor.

"That no one wants me here."

For a second, I don't know what to say.

"I wasn't even planning on coming, you know," says Caine with a snort.

Even though it was Caine's idea to drag me along in the first place – begging me to, in fact – in the end, what he really wants is someone to support him. Someone who would want to go to this reunion with him out of their own free will.

But there's no one like that in Caine's life, and he knows it all too well.

My heart tightens in compassion.

1. Pull him in for a hug.

2. "It doesn't matter what people want, I think you're very brave."

My arms snake around his neck and I pull Caine in for a hug. He stiffens up at the physical contact.

Surprised, he cranes his head away from mine.

"W-what are you doing?" he asks with a pathetic squeak.

I hover my lips next to his ear.

"I want you here," I say in a low and sultry voice.

The beat of the music drums through my body, in tune with my heart. It's loud and overpowering.

"Don't listen to them," I tell him.

My body starts to move to the rhythm of the song.

"Just dance with me."

For a second, I believe Caine will reject me or push me away. Grumbling something about not knowing how to dance.

But when I feel his hands clawing at my bare back, gripping me tightly, my breath gets taken away in disbelief.

When I pull back to look at Caine with a smile, I notice the meek look on his face. His eyes are cast downwards at our feet, like he doesn't know how to move.

"It doesn't matter what people want, I think you're very brave."

Caine tilts up his head to look at me in shock. Shyly, he immediately breaks eye contact with me.

"Don't say stupid shit like that," he mumbles.

He's terrible at convincing me that it bothers him.

"Put your chin up, we're here to let people know you're not afraid to show your face."

Caine simply pouts at me.

"Here, just look at me – let's forget about everyone else," I say while smiling.

I move a little to the beat of the song.

"Dance with me," I say.

Caine huffs, not budging from the spot.

"Well, I don't know how," he admits begrudgingly.

I close the distance between us and take his hands in mine, leading them towards my waist.

"Come on, just put your hands on my waist and sway with me," I encourage him.

To show him how it's done, I sway my hips from side to side.

Caine's hands slide down until they rest on my waist. He's still not very cooperative, but at least he isn't running away.

He keeps looking down at the floor, so I wag my finger at him.

"Up here, look at me, don't look at the floor," I tell him as I put my hands on both his shoulders.

Caine's eyes finally flicker back at me. They're so gorgeous from up close, very striking indeed.

The music suddenly changes to a slower pace. Everyone around us slows down and couples start to form.

"Look, even *you* can't go wrong with slow dancing," I tease him. "Just follow my lead."

"Aren't I supposed to lead?" Caine rolls his eyes at me, but he still follows along with my moves.

I giggle at him. "I mean, you can try, but I don't want you stepping on my dress."



Apparently, Caine doesn't like to be challenged, because he immediately puts his hand against the small of my back and pushes me against his body until our hips are practically fused together.

My voice falls short as I'm stunned by his assertiveness.

He shows me this wicked grin plastered on his face. It's so cheeky, it's so *Caine*.

"What – you told me to."

He then tugs at my body, forcing it to move to the beat of the song. His hips grind into mine, suddenly Caine is calling the shots.

The music and crowd fall to the background as Caine's expression captivates me instead.

He'll be meek and insecure one second, and smug the next. Caine is such a whirlwind of emotions that I can't help but smile at him and move with him in sync.

The way his fingers curl against the small of my back, they feel so warm and steady. There's no trace of the hesitation he had before; Caine knows what to do with his hands this time.

"Not bad," I say while grinning at him.

Caine leads me through the crowd, taking me for a spin. The people around us are becoming nothing but a blur to me.

My heart is thumping louder, heating up my body. Or wait – it's Caine that feels hot against me. I've never been this close to him... willingly at least.

Seeing him like this, in the clothes I made for him and his hair styled, it's like he's a different person.

Dare I say... a very attractive person. Combined with that cocky grin on his face, I can't help but admit he's got his own charms.

The grin on his face slowly disappears, his eyes having this glazed over look as he keeps us pressed together, swaying to the slow music. My hands are clasped around the back of his neck where I can feel the tips of his hair brushing over my fingers.

Like this, I'm starting to forget why we're here in the first place.

We look at each other in silence, a moment that's causing my senses to heighten. It's making me recall memories from the last time we were this close.

The time Caine decided to steal a kiss from me.

When the music changes to something fast paced again, Caine eventually tears his gaze away from me, settling on something below my neck.

I feel like I can finally breathe normally now that his intense eyes aren't staring at me anymore. My eyes flutter downwards to his lips.

Suddenly they look a lot more alluring. My heart's being swayed by this music and Caine's warm body.



My gaze settles on his eyes again, which is when I notice he's staring at something else.

Wait... He's looking at my chest.

"...Are you staring at my breasts?"

Alarmed, Caine immediately looks back up at me.

"No!" he lies.

His pink cheeks betray him.

Caine turns his head away from me, though it's hard to hide that blush on his face.

"They're right there, how can I *not* notice?" he grumbles.

When I made this dress, it was with every intention to show off my body and appear as sexy as possible. I came here to be the 'trophy' that Caine could show off to everyone.

Little did I know that Caine would react to my plunging neckline as well.

The realization that Caine's the one checking me out makes me very self-conscious all of a sudden. My head feels lightheaded and my heartbeat is racing.

1. "Pervert."
2. "You shouldn't stare."

"Pervert," I tell him.

Caine groans at me.

"Seriously?" he asks exasperated.

"*You're* the one staring." I grin at him though.

Caine grits his teeth, then starts to pout.

"I'm not trying to, it's just a little hard to ignore when they're right up in my face," he mutters softly.

"You shouldn't stare," I say.

Caine glares at me.

"I'm not trying to!" he immediately fires back.

"Just keep your eyes up here."

"Yeah well, it's a little hard to when they're just up in my face."

I find myself getting a tiny bit embarrassed.

"I'm not shoving them in your face or anything," I reply.

"You don't have to – you're barely covering them and—" Caine's eyes go straight down to my chest.

"You're doing it again!"

"Argh – it's because we're talking about it! You're confusing me!"

"Just stop staring at my chest!"

A guy who's been dancing next to us overhears us. He nods his head at me with a wink.

"That *is* a nice rack though."

Caine suddenly pulls me into his body, away from the guy.

"Shut the fuck up, no one talks to my girlfriend like that."

I hold my breath as my face is squished against Caine's shoulder.

Hearing Caine shout that I'm his girlfriend has me feeling a number of emotions, even though, logically, I know we're just pretending for the rest of them. That still doesn't stop my heart from hammering against my chest, now that I'm being held by Caine so protectively.

"Chill man. Hey wait, is that you? Caine Prins?" asks the guy.

Caine growls at him.

"Wow, didn't think you'd ever get a girlfriend. Thought you'd be forever alone."

Caine tenses up. I can tell this is someone from his past that used to bully him as well.

"Come on Caine, let's go," I whisper to him.

Then I take his hand and pull him along, out of the crowd. Caine doesn't even protest and lets me drag him around.

When we reach a quiet spot near the restrooms, I finally let go of his hand. I take in a deep breath to gather my thoughts.

"Was that someone you knew?" I ask.

Caine huffs. "Just some dickhead that loved throwing food at my face during lunch."

I wince at the thought of it.

"Still, I can't believe it," I point out.

"Can't believe what?"

"You actually told someone off here."

I'm a little proud, to be honest. Every time I've seen Caine getting bullied, he's been quiet as a mouse, unable to say anything back.

Caine suddenly realizes what he's said and starts stammering his words.

"W-well, it just slipped out. Besides, they were talking about you, not me."

I smile at him.

"Thanks for sticking up for your 'girlfriend'."

Caine awkwardly looks away from me. I know he said it in the heat of the moment, but it did make me pretty happy to hear him defending me like that.

"I think you're doing great so far," I compliment him.

"You make it sound like we're climbing Mount Everest." Caine rolls his eyes.

"Well, in a way, it is your mountain to climb. To face your fears, or something like that."

"I'm not scared!" he pipes in.

I grin at him, seeing right through his lie.

"Just a little nervous," he mumbles.

"Haha, it's okay to be. You've done well!" I cheer him on with a chuckle.

"Whatever. I think we should go now. We've been here long enough."

"We haven't seen Chelsey yet though, wasn't that the point?"

"I'm not gonna search the club just for her. Thomas saw us together anyway, he'll pass on the information." Caine crosses his arms over his chest.

"Alright, if you want to leave, we'll leave. But first, I'm going to the bathroom. Wait here."

I push open the girl's bathroom door.

-- Club bathroom

The music gets drowned out as soon as the door closes behind me. I walk past another girl who's on her way out.

"Don't go in the last one, there's a weirdo in there," she warns me.

"Huh?"

Before I can ask anything else, she leaves the bathroom.

Looking at the last stall, which is closed, I pick one near the exit instead. I quickly do my business when suddenly my ears pick up on something.

Subtle crying bounces off the cold tiles of the bathroom. It's unmistakable that there's someone in a stall crying right now.

Standing up to flush, I exit the stall and walk towards the sink, paying no mind to the sounds coming from the last stall. They probably got broken up with or something.

But then I hear wheezing as well. It's almost as if this person is in pain. Perhaps they're experiencing some period cramps? Or maybe the food here doesn't agree with their stomach.

Unable to resist, I walk up to the next stall and knock on the door.

"Hey, are you okay in there?"

Now I can hear sniffing. The girl inside doesn't respond to me though.

"Do you need any help? Or should I let someone know you're in here?" I ask.

"No!" she yells out immediately.

"Don't let him know. You can't." She then continues to groan out loud.

"You don't sound well..." I feel worried now. "Can you open the door?"

The sniffing continues but the door stays locked. Well, I tried, but I'm not going to stick around for some stranger who's refusing my help.

I'm about to turn around when the door finally unlocks.

Chelsey walks out of the stall, looking deathly pale. Her makeup is completely smeared and running down her face because she's been crying. Her entire body is visibly shaking as if she's suffering from a fever.

And that's also when I finally notice the blood on her hands.

"D-don't tell Thomas," she says with some difficulty.

[Chapter 013]
-- Club bathroom

I'm shocked.

Chelsey stands there with blood on her hands. It's streaming down between her legs as well. The smell is suddenly overwhelming.

"What in the world happened to you!?" I ask, starting to panic at the sight of her.

"Just – don't tell him," she says in a shaky voice.

"We need to call an ambulance, hang on." I take my cell phone out of my purse.

But suddenly Chelsey reaches out for my hands to stop me. Her bloody fingers wrap around my arm.

"No, please. Then everyone would know." She sounds genuinely frightened. "No ambulance."

"...You're bleeding, where's it coming from? Where are you hurt?"

Chelsey releases my arm and steps away from me. Her legs and arms are shivering violently.

"I-I don't know. I just got these horrible cramps and..."

Chelsey squeezes her eyes closed and doubles over in pain, dropping towards the floor. I quickly catch her and support her body.

"Okay, you definitely need to go to the hospital. I'm getting you out of here."

Even though Chelsey barely has any strength left to stay on her feet, she still uses all of her willpower to force herself to talk.

"No... I don't want anyone to see me like this. Please." Tears start streaming down her face.

As Chelsey lifelessly hangs onto my arm, her legs and hands covered in blood, I can only suspect she's delirious.

"You are obviously hurt. You need to go to the hospital."

Chelsey shakes her head.

"No, no. No one can see, no one can see," she repeats indefinitely.

Even though her request is stupid and we should be calling an ambulance straight away, I take in a deep breath and nod at her.

She doesn't want anyone to see her like this. Alright, fine. I can respect that.

"Okay, will you go to the hospital if I can smuggle you out without anyone seeing you?" I offer.

Chelsey uses all her energy to nod at me.

"Alright, I'll get you out."

I let Chelsey hang onto me as I reach for my cell phone a second time.

"No, don't..." she says weakly when she sees me dialing a number.

"Don't worry, it's not an ambulance."

The phone rings a few times before the cab driver picks up. I give the driver the instructions to pick us up ASAP.

After that, I dial another number. Caine picks up after a few rings.

"Joselina? Are you stuck in the bathroom or something?"

"Listen to me carefully. Something came up."

"What's wrong? I can barely hear you."

"I need to get out of the bathroom without anyone seeing me. Do you think you can cause a distraction around you so that all eyes are on you?"

"The hell are you talking about? I'm coming in."

"No! Just – please, I need you to make sure no one's looking at the bathroom."

"I don't understand..."

"Just cause a distraction. It's important. Someone's hurt. I'll meet up with you outside, alright?"

"Wait – did you say someone's hurt?"

"I'll tell you later. For now, please just get people away from the bathroom!"

"Argh, fine!"

Caine hangs up the phone. I stare at the black screen mindlessly – What am I getting myself into?

Chelsey really doesn't look great, still shaking on her bloodied legs.

"Let's wash your hands at least. We'll be out of here soon."

I manage to turn Chelsey around and guide her to the sinks. Weakly, she rinses the blood from her hands.

Suddenly, I hear a commotion from outside, with people hollering and cheering. Oh – Caine's done something!

"Come on Chelsey, let's move!"

I swing her arm around my neck and drag her out of the bathroom.

-- Club

Looking around to see if the coast is clear, I notice everyone's moved away from the bathroom and are looking at something on the dancefloor.

The crowd is cheering and yelling, some laughing here and there.

All I can think of is; good luck, Caine.

I drag Chelsey towards the exit as discreetly as possible. Since everyone's eyes are on the dancefloor, no one spots us.

-- Outside club

We wait outside on the curb. The taxi can't come here soon enough.

Caine isn't here yet either.

Chelsey is barely hanging on, only half conscious by now. I'm scared she's going to pass out, or that something worse will happen.

A long silent minute passes, my anxiety growing worse.

Then I hear a flurry of footsteps behind me. I see Caine running my way.

"Joselina!" he calls out.

He jogs up to us, then studies Chelsey who is draped onto my side.

"...What's going on?" he asks.

"I don't know. I found her like this. She's bleeding."

Caine finally notices the blood and he jerks away in shock.

"Holy fuck."

"I called a taxi."

"Call a damn ambulance you mean," Caine grunts.

"No... no ambulance," Chelsey whispers.

"She doesn't want to," I say.

"The fuck is wrong with you? You need to visit the hospital," Caine berates her.

1. "Caine, shut up."

2. "Chelsey is hurt and she doesn't need you yelling at her right now."

"Caine, shut up," I reprimand him.

Caine just glares at me.

"She's hurt and we're taking a taxi to the hospital, okay?"

"Yeah," he says gruffly.

"Chelsey is hurt and she doesn't need you yelling at her right now."

Caine shuts his mouth, unable to argue with my logic.

"Fine," he grumbles.

"Uhm, I'm not getting Thomas for you," Caine speaks up.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, you wanted a distraction – so I created one."

I run my hand through my hair, frazzled at what's happening. My brain is being overloaded with information. I don't have the energy to think about what Caine might have done in the club when I've got a half-dead Chelsey on my arm.

Thankfully, the taxi finally pulls up to the curb.

"Come on, let's get you to the hospital. Caine, help me, will you?"

Caine goes to the other side and with his help, we lift Chelsey up and get her inside the taxi.

-- hospital room

We're finally at the ER. Chelsey is perched on top of the bed, being examined by a doctor.

"Can you tell me where it hurts?" he asks Chelsey.

Chelsey points at her stomach.

"Alright, lie down please."

Caine and I keep quiet as the doctor examines her.

When the doctor asks Chelsey to lift up her dress, I grab Caine's arm.

"Time to give her some privacy."

Caine nods and we both step away from the bed and out of the room.

-- hospital waiting room

We sit down on one of the benches in silence.

This is not how I expected my evening with Caine to end – in a hospital, with the girl that bullies him in the room behind me.

What's more surprising is that I actually helped her out, even though we don't exactly have the best track record with each other.

"What do you think is wrong with her?" asks Caine after a while.

"I'm not sure... I think maybe it has something to do with her period?"

"Do girls really bleed that much?" Caine asks, astonished.

"Sometimes... but I don't think it's supposed to be like that."

"Holy hell, that's just freaky." Caine shivers at the thought.

"She kept telling me not to tell Thomas, though. I wonder what that was all about..."

I look up at the fluorescent lights and take in a deep breath. This has been rather hectic – bringing Chelsey here, and now waiting for her. I feel like I need a distraction so I can calm my nerves.

"Caine?"

Caine turns towards me.

"Hm?"

"What did you do? In the club, I mean."

"Ah..." He suddenly looks scared.

Sheepishly, he rubs the back of his neck. He mutters something under his breath, but I'm unable to hear it.

"What? Say that again." I lean in closer.

"Nothin', just dumped a drink on some dick, that's all."

That crowd was way bigger than just randomly spilling a drink on some guy though...

"...You dumped it on Thomas, didn't you."

"Maybe."

I suddenly feel a little lighter. I give Caine a little tap on his shoulder with my hand, grinning at him.

"No way, I don't believe you," I say in jest.

"I did, I did! Not one – but *two!*" he says eagerly.

"How did you even get out alive?"

"I'm really good at running away," he boasts.

I chuckle at him. "That's nothing to brag about, silly."

We share a laugh together, easing the tension in the air.

"You're full of surprises today, Caine."

"Hm, why's that? Because I tossed a drink over that asshole?"

"Yeah," I reply honestly. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Caine simply huffs at me, pretending to act cool all of a sudden. He remains quiet, as do I.

We stare at doctors passing us by, back and forth, still anxiously waiting for any news about Chelsey.

A deep sigh alerts me from my thoughts.

"Didn't think I had the guts to do it either," Caine admits solemnly.

"Dreamt of it, sure. Fantasized about even worse things I could do to them."

His eyes flicker back to mine.

"But actually do it? Nah."

"What changed?"

I slide my hair behind my neck, looking over at Caine.

"I dunno," he grumbles. "Maybe 'cause you asked?"

"Me?" I'm surprised he'd attribute his newfound courage to me – I didn't do anything.

"Yeah, you." Caine then rolls his eyes at me.

"I didn't specifically tell you to dump drinks on anyone, though."

"Heh, doesn't matter." Caine shoots me a cocky grin.

He lowers his eyes to gaze at the hands resting on his lap. He takes a small breath.

"It feels nice to have someone depend on you," he says softly.

His quiet admission that he likes it when I ask him for help has me feeling a little bashful.

"But seriously though – give me a heads-up next time! I had no idea what was going on. For all I know, someone got murdered and I was helping you cover it up!"

1. "Do you seriously think I could murder someone!?"
2. "I don't think Chelsey killed anyone. That's her own blood."

"Do you seriously think I could murder someone!?" I gape at him.

"Hell if I know. You've got steroid strength. Chasing people, tackling them... You're not normal."

Offended, I turn my head away from him.

"That doesn't mean I go around killing people, geez."

"You do have a habit of sticking your nose into places where it doesn't belong."

Ouch, the truth hurts.

"Yeah well, if I didn't, Chelsey would still be alone in the bathroom. And for that matter – I wouldn't be here in the first place. You wouldn't have a date for the reunion."

I huff at him. "So, you should be grateful I'm a nosey person!"

"I don't think Chelsey killed anyone. That's her own blood."

"Must have been freaky, finding her like that."

"It was. It still is freaky," I admit.

"Can't believe I'm actually helping her – especially after she called me a bitch the other day."

"Yeah, why do you care?" Caine asks, clearly wanting to know my reason for helping Chelsey.

"I don't know, it's hard to ignore someone who's clearly in need of help."

"You're such a nosey person."

I huff. "So what if I am! I wouldn't have helped you in the first place if I wasn't like this."

Suddenly Caine shifts his weight and his shoulder bumps into mine. His red hair tickles my cheek.

"Thanks," he mumbles.

My insides feel like syrup all of a sudden.

"For coming tonight."

My breath gets stuck in my throat. My fear and anxiety about our current situation is replaced by another nervous feeling. A more lighthearted warmth covers my body.

I clear my throat. "No problem."

The door suddenly opens up and a doctor walks out.

Both Caine and I jump up from our seats.

"How's Chelsey?" I immediately ask.

"She's stable. Luckily, everything passed without many complications. She's still shaken and a little lethargic from the blood loss," the doctor explains.

"She will need a ride home," the doctor continues.

"What happened though?" I ask.

The doctor takes in a deep breath.

"Your friend had a miscarriage. It's pretty common for pregnancies to end up in miscarriage in the first three months. Most women don't even notice they were pregnant in the first place."

Caine and I give each other a worried look. Chelsey was pregnant?

"But like I said, everything seemed to pass without any complications, so there's nothing we can treat her for. She just needs to rest."

The doctor smiles at us. "And maybe have a friend near her for support in this difficult time."

I remain quiet – I know I'm not Chelsey's friend, and neither is Caine. Yet, here we are.

"She can take her time getting ready to leave. If you have any further questions, you can call for any of the nurses around here."

The doctor bids his goodbye and walks away.

Caine arches both his eyebrows at me as soon as we're alone.

"What do we even do here?" he asks, worried.

"I guess the decent thing to do is check up on her and take her home."

Caine and I enter the room again.

-- hospital room

Chelsey is sitting upright on the bed, her legs dangling above the floor. Her hands are lying in her lap with her eyes fixated on them.

When she notices us entering the room, she looks up in shock.

I know I don't like her, and she's been nothing but rude to me and Caine both, but seeing her all broken like this – I push our differences aside.

"How are you feeling?" I finally ask, breaking the silence between all of us.

"Like hell," she says with a snuffle.

Chelsey wipes away some of her eyeliner that's run down her face.

She then puts up a tough act.

"The both of you better not blab your mouths to anyone about this," she warns us.

Caine glares at her. "Like I even want to get involved in this mess. You and Thomas can do whatever you want."

Chelsey flinches when she hears the name Thomas and suddenly grows quiet.

"...Don't tell him, okay?" she asks in a worried tone.

"Did he know? That you were pregnant, I mean," I ask.

Chelsey shakes her head.

"...If he knew, he'd..." Chelsey stops, her voice getting caught in her throat.

"He'd what?" I press on.

"Nothing," she says, wiping away a tear from her eye. "It's nothing."

I'm beginning to believe there's a whole lot of something going on alright, but Chelsey simply doesn't want to say it. It's not like we are best friends that share secrets or anything, so I can understand her apprehension.

"Just promise me you won't tell anyone about this," she asks in a quiet voice.

Caine crosses his arms over his chest, then turns around.

"Whatever," he mutters.

Chelsey looks up at me, with those panda-like eyes. I can't say no to her.

"I won't tell anyone," I assure her. "So, let's call a truce for now and take you home."

A ringtone suddenly goes off in the room – It's coming from Chelsey's purse.

Slowly, she fishes out her phone and checks the screen to see who's calling. Even I can tell from here that it says 'Thomas' on the caller ID.

Chelsey stiffens up, her face paling to an eerie white.

The ringtone continues to play as Chelsey stares at her phone with dead eyes.

However, it's Caine that swiftly presses the red button on her phone, rejecting Thomas' call.

"W-what are you doing!?" she gasps at him.

"What you were thinking of doing, duh," Caine replies in a matter of fact tone.

Frantically, Chelsey starts tapping on her screen.

"I can't hang up on him, he'll... he'll..."

"He'll what?" I ask once more.

Chelsey lowers her arms and slips the phone back into her purse, seemingly defeated.

"Never mind, what's done is done."

Clearly, that's something Chelsey doesn't want to talk about.

"Come on, let's get you home," I offer.

Chelsey finally slips off the bed and fixes her hair. It's strange to see her fixing her appearance when her makeup is smeared and her dress bloodied, but I guess she just needs to try and feel a little normal right now.

We all leave the hospital together.

-- boutique workroom

Once Chelsey has been dropped off at home, we take the taxi back to my house. Caine's clothes are still here, so he tagged along as well.

His clothes are haphazardly thrown across my crafting table.

I sit down in my chair, kicking off my high heels with a deep sigh. This is not how I planned our evening to end. The mood feels heavy.

"You think Chelsey was hiding something?" I ask Caine.

"The way she was acting, you mean?"

"Yeah, it was suspicious..."

"Who knows. Maybe it wasn't Thomas who got her pregnant," he says flippantly.

I want to berate Caine for saying something so crude, but I can't say that it doesn't make a little bit of sense. Not wanting to let Thomas know about the miscarriage, she may have been seeing another man behind his back.

On the other hand, we don't know the whole story.

"It's not like those two have any sort of morals, you know," he scoffs.

"That's rich, coming from a thief," I point out.

"That's different," he says with a pout.

"Anyways, I'm gonna change. Can you... you know," Caine wags his finger into a circle, indicating he wishes for me to turn around.

1. "You saw me naked today. It's only fair I get to see you, too."

2. Turn around obediently.

"You saw me naked today. It's only fair I get to see you, too," I say with a grin, trying to lighten the heavy mood.

Caine does not look amused, simply putting a hand on his hip and staring at me with his half open eyes.

"What, can't I make a joke?" I huff, then turn around in my chair, facing the computer.

I spin my chair around so I'm facing the computer instead.

Behind me, I can hear Caine stripping down.

"You can keep the clothes, by the way," I say out loud.

"Why – can't you sell them?"

I can't help but chuckle at the prospect of selling men's clothes in Sunshine Boutique.

"I mostly sell women's clothes. Besides, those are custom tailored for you. Keep them."

Speaking of gifts... I touch the earrings that I'm wearing – the ones Caine gave to me.

"Do you want the earrings back?"

Caine is suddenly all dressed in his regular clothes and standing next to me.

"No." His eyes stare intensely into mine. "They're a gift."

Suddenly, I'm starting to feel a little bashful with him so close, staring down at me. I look down at my desk.

"Okay... thanks. You made them right? They're really cute."

Not knowing how to handle compliments, Caine simply turns around and leans against the edge of the desk. I can see the bracelets he wears on his wrist – they also look handmade.

"They look nice on you..." he mumbles in a quiet voice.

Immediately, my heart leaps into my throat and I feel like I'm choking on air.

A compliment from Caine!?

I stare up at him, noticing Caine is looking away from me.

"Dress," he says quietly.

"Huh?"

"The dress, too," he huffs, embarrassed. "Looks nice on you."

A burning prickle of fire spreads across my face, I'm instantly aflame with a red complexion.

I look away to hide my blush – that was a sneak attack! I didn't expect Caine to ever say something like that! My heart is actually racing.

It doesn't help that I'm instantly reminded of where Caine's eyes went when we were dancing together, making me turn even redder.

Oh god, this blush won't stop.

"Grandma told me you should always compliment your date... I know you're not a real date or anything, but sorry for not saying anything sooner," he grumbles.

I fan my face, trying my best to avoid looking at Caine, willing my blush to go away.

"Thanks..." I say with a gulp.

Caine seems oblivious to my predicament, staring out in front of him. A silence stretches between us as I manage to get a better control over my own face, the blush fading away.

Caine brings a hand up his face, then pushes it through his hair, taking a deep breath.

"This is not what I had in mind when I went to the reunion today..."

I don't think anyone could have foreseen what transpired today.

"What were you expecting instead?" I ask him.

"I don't know – I wanted to... I wanted them to know that..." Caine struggles to find the right words.

I spin my chair so I face him directly, looking up at his stoic figure. I hold my tongue this time.

"I wanted to prove them wrong," he finally says.

His cyan eyes flicker down to mine. There's a loneliness in them that he's always desperate to hide.

He then tears his eyes away, looking straight ahead. His eyebrows are lowered as he tenses up just the slightest bit.

"That what they said about me isn't true."

1. Place your hand on top of his.
2. "You shouldn't let other people tell you who you are."

Quietly, I reach out and cover his hand with mine.

Caine immediately flinches and looks down at me. I give him a comforting smile in return.

Shyly, he averts his gaze once more, preferring to look down at the floor instead. But I can feel his hand inch closer to mine, our skin touching even more.

My heart suddenly aches for him.

"You shouldn't let other people tell you who you are."

Caine looks down at me, then shrugs his shoulders.

"Easy for you to say, as an outsider."

"No, I mean, you shouldn't believe them. You've got your own merits – you shouldn't let other people make you feel bad about yourself."

Caine looks up at the ceiling, letting out a self-deprecating huff.

"Well – it doesn't matter. In the end, they've got their own problems, their own set of issues. It's not like they even think about me at all, so what the hell am I trying so hard for..."

"Yeah..." I agree. "You shouldn't try so hard for people that don't even like you," I point out.

"Pay more attention to the people that *do* like you."

Caine removes his hand from mine as he pushes himself away from the desk, sauntering towards the middle of the room.

Caine pushes himself away from the desk, sauntering towards the middle of the room.

"Well, that's the issue, isn't it?" he says sarcastically.

He flicks his head back, shooting me a painful and forlorn look.

"It's not like there's anyone that likes me in the first place."

He forces a smile.

"I even had to beg you to come with me to show everyone how not pathetic I am."

In that moment, I have a sense of clarity.

After tonight, I'm sure of it now. I enjoy being around Caine, there's more to him than meets the eye. In fact, I want to get to know him better, I actually want to spend time with him.

"Yes," I nod my head at him. "You did have to force me to come with you."

Caine stuffs his hands in his pockets.

"A case in point."

"And you are a pain in the butt to be around sometimes," I admit. "You even steal jewelry."

Caine grits his teeth at me.

"Thank you, for that great assessment. Why don't you kick me while I'm down some more?" he bites sarcastically.

I stick up my nose at him. "And you have a very foul mouth. Sometimes, you swear like a sailor."

"What's your fucking point?" he growls at me.

"But you can also be surprisingly soft and gentle at times. Today, you even showed some courage."

Caine's eyes widen and he immediately doesn't know what to do with himself. Once more, he's unable to handle compliments.

Insults? That's something that rolls off his back, but when people say genuinely nice things to him, he has no idea how to act. It's rather adorable, the way he's still so naïve.

"So, don't be a grump and say there's no one out there that likes you – because I do. I think you're interesting and..."

This is starting to feel a lot like a confession...

"–And I'd like for us to be friends," I finish quickly.

I can feel my cheeks getting warmer – that sounded too much like a romantic confession, which is stupid. I'm just saying I'd like to be friends with Caine.

And Caine isn't answering.

And this turned kind of awkward really fast.

I shift in my seat.

"Come on, at least say something, don't leave me hanging," I mutter.

"S-stupid," he stutters. "Who goes around asking people to be friends? Only stupid people do."

Caine's face is a deep shade of red.

Oh no, I can't handle it. It's contagious.

"If it's so stupid, then why are you blushing, huh?" I point out, ignoring the fact that *I'm* turning red as well.

Caine points an accusing finger at me.

"T-that...!"

"You are, too!"

1. "You're redder!"

2. Turn away from him.

"You're redder!" I argue back weakly.

Caine's right – this is stupid! I can't believe I'm embarrassed right now.

"S-shut up!" he barks.

"The embarrassing stuff you say, so stupid," he grumbles as he turns around.

He grabs the clothes he took off and quickly walks up to the door.

"I'm leaving!"

"What – don't just leave, how rude!" I complain.

But Caine has already opened the door and fled the room.

"Caine!" I yell after him.

I turn my head away from him, knowing I am totally and completely blushing right now.

It's Caine's fault though!

"D-dumbass, why are you the one getting embarrassed? You're the one who said it," Caine grumbles.

"And I meant it," I reply quietly.

"Argh – stop that!"

"What? Stop what? I'm not doing anything," I argue.

"I'm leaving!" he exclaims loudly.

Caine grabs his clothes and makes a beeline for the door.

Before I can say anything else, he flees from my workroom.

I slump back into my seat, sighing deeply.

After a while, the colour of my cheeks finally turns back to a normal shade.

I don't know what just happened – but that was definitely too much for one night.

Going to the reunion with Caine, dancing with him, finding out he's a little pervert, sticking up for me when someone else commented on my looks... saying I look nice in my dress.

I drop my head against my desk.

If it weren't for Chelsey – how would this night have ended?

I sit there, pondering my own thoughts for a while, when I get jolted by my own phone going off. I got a text message.

When I check it, I see I got a text message from Caine. Just seeing his name on my phone makes me feel giddy yet nervous at the same time. What does he want to tell me?

Caine:

"Stupid."

I groan loudly. Getting my hopes up for no reason.

I turn on my computer to check my e-mail and stuff before heading to bed. Surprisingly, even though I was expecting some hatemail from that troll, my inbox is relatively empty. No sign of the troll.

Huh, I guess today the troll took a break.

[Chapter 014]
-- café booth

A few days later, I'm having lunch with Sarah at a café.

"So, tell me how it went! You didn't want to dish out any details over the phone." Sarah looks really interested in what happened at the reunion.

"Where to even start," I sigh.

"From the beginning?"

I feel a little uncomfortable saying this out loud – especially since I told Chelsey I wasn't going to tell anyone... but it's not like Sarah's circle of friends has any overlap with Chelsey's. It should be alright.

Besides, Sarah's my best friend, I can't keep things from her!

I tell Sarah the whole story.

"Huh – a toilet baby," Sarah remarks.

I can't help but snort at her inappropriate joke.

"What a night – sounds wild." Sarah leans back into her seat. "I can't believe stuff like that actually happens to people."

"Believe me, I didn't know either. That's one messed up way to end the night."

"Sounds like it didn't go all that well."

Well, that's not entirely true. Before I stumbled upon Chelsey, I was actually having fun with Caine.

"So, you're not going to talk to him anymore?" Sarah asks, disturbing me from my thoughts.

"Hm, who?"

"Caine. You said you were going to go to this reunion with him and be done with it."

"Oh..."

I already know the answer to that. Especially since I had that weird 'be my friend' moment with him that makes me want to crawl in a hole and never come out.

And it's not even just friends per say...

Sarah gives me a knowing smirk.

"I know that look."

I huff at her. "What look? I'm not giving any look," I quickly deny.

I start drinking my cup of coffee because I don't want my own lips to betray me by saying something embarrassing.

"That look when you're into a cute guy."

"...!" I cough up some of my coffee in shock.

"Oh my god – you totally are, look at you, you're turning red!"

Nooooo, I want to die! It's not true!!

"Ahaha, and here I thought you hated him."

"I never hated him," I grumble at her.

My face feels like it's on fire. This is so stupid, I want to crawl back into my bed and pretend this conversation never happened.

"You sure complained about him a lot!"

"Well – that's because he does a lot of shitty things! He called me stupid a bunch of times. And he kissed me out of the blue, too!"

Sarah grins at me. "Yet you're probably checking your phone every hour wondering if he's going to text you, aren't you?"

Ugh, she's totally and completely right. I have been glued to my phone and watching it, wondering if Caine's ever going to send me a text. I only sent him one more text message after he called me stupid, which was just a boring good night message and thanking him for the earrings...

But he hasn't talked to me since!

"Yeah – so what if I am? I know you do the same thing! Aren't you totally texting Kevin 24/7?" I quickly deflect my embarrassment.

Sarah however, doesn't immediately deny my claim, instead, she happily flaunts it.

"I am, he's super cute. We've been talking about a lot of stuff, he's obviously into fashion, but he's also interested in photography."

I glare at her – Sarah is so confident, owning up to her own feelings, whereas I'm just a mess.

"I thought you had a thing for bad boys?" I point out, knowing her past relationship with 'Kyle'.

Sarah shrugs. "Turns out, I have a thing for the opposite as well. It's kind of fun to bully them, you know?"

I'm slowly realizing the nature of Sarah's and Kevin's budding relationship. Master and servant. That's exactly what it is. Now I feel sorry for introducing him to her.

Goodbye Kevin, it was nice knowing you.

"Hey – why don't we go on a double date? It was pretty fun during karaoke, so why not go out again?" Sarah suggests.

"Like, karaoke again or something?"

"Hmm... nah, I feel like we should take a weekend trip somewhere. Rent out a cabin – it should be fun."

"Oh – the beach! I was thinking about going to the beach recently, since it's easier to see the stars at night."

"I haven't gone in ages, that sounds perfect!"

And that's how Sarah and I got the idea of renting a small cabin near the beach for the weekend.

-- Living room

The next day, after closing up shop, I stare at my phone, my fingers on the keyboard. Caine's chat is open, but I haven't typed anything yet.

At some point I'm going to have to bite the bullet and ask him out.

But that sounds weird and creepy, and I'm pretty sure Caine would instantly reject me.

Maybe it's better if I ask him in person? I kind of want to see him...

Then, I finally start typing a message.

Joselina:

"Are you at your college right now?"

Immediately I get a reply. My heart suddenly jumps into my throat.

Caine:

"No, work, why?"

1. "I wanted to see you."
2. "Oh, I was just wondering if you were free."

Joselina:

"I wanted to see you."

I press send and almost immediately regret it. That's so forward!

My message gets checked as 'seen' by Caine, but there's no response. Oh no, that's even worse than any kind of response!

Several minutes pass by with no answer and I'm feeling super anxious. I knew I shouldn't have sent that. It's weird and forward and stupid and—

Ding.

Lightning fast I check my phone for Caine's reply.

Caine:

"It's a slow day, no one's really here."

My heart pounds hopefully. That's an invitation, isn't it?

Joselina:

"Are you telling me to come over?"

Caine:

"I didn't say that."

I roll my eyes.

Joselina:

"Alright. I had nothing to do anyway, but I guess I'll stay at home."

I pout at my phone as my message is seen but not replied to.

Several minutes pass without an answer from Caine.

Caine:

"No, come."

I practically fly out the door with my head in the clouds.

Joselina:

"Oh, I was just wondering if you were free."

Caine:

"Not really, but it's not like it's busy or anything."

Joselina:

"Slow day?"

Caine:

"Yeah. Boring."

I bite down on my bottom lip. Wondering if I should just visit him at the convenience store.

Before I can answer though, Caine's already said something else.

Caine:

"What about you?"

Joselina:

"I already closed up shop, so nothing much going on here either."

Caine:

"You could come over here and we can be bored together."

It's so cheesy, but damn it if that doesn't make my heart race. Does he want to see me, too?

Joselina:

"Sure."

I put down my phone and head out the door.

-- convenience store

With a spring in my step, I enter the convenience store. As Caine has said, it's not really busy, there's no one else around at the moment.

My heart pounds in anticipation.

When I finally spot Caine behind the counter, I get hit by a ball of butterflies in my stomach.

"H-hey," he calls out when he sees me, his voice breaking awkwardly.

He puts his phone away, seems like he was playing on it before I disturbed him.

I shuffle towards the counter, feeling fidgety and anxious.

"Hi," I answer, trying to sound casual. "You weren't kidding when you said it's a slow day."

"Yeah, uhh, most people are coming home from work and having dinner, so not a lot of traffic. There's the odd office worker grabbing one of our lunchboxes, that's it."

Caine sounds a little nervous, which makes *me* nervous. As we're here, alone, together. Awkwardly, I brush my hair behind my ear.

"Oh," Caine exclaims, noticing something.

"You're wearing them."

My finger touches the jellyfish earring and I try my best to prevent my face from betraying my embarrassment, knowing I haven't taken them off since.

Caine himself seems to be blushing a little. He seems content.

"Uhm, I like them," I explain.

"Cool," he mutters, a smile creeping on his face.

"Didn't think you would," he admits. "Feels kinda nice to see people wear my stuff..."

Ahh, he just looks so adorable right now. If I can get Caine to look at me like that the entire day – I'll never take these earrings off.

I really need to bring up going to the beach without sounding like a ten-year-old that doesn't know how to tie their own shoelaces.

First, I have to see if he's even available during the weekends.

"So uhm, what do you usually do in your free time? You know, during the weekend?"

I then give him a pointed look.

"Don't tell me it's stealing."

Offended, Caine cocks his head to the side and grunts loudly.

"Is that all you think I do, steal shit?"

"Well..."

"Well, I don't, okay? Stop bringing it up!"

"Fine," I say with a sigh. "Then, do you have anything specific you do during the weekends?"

Caine leans his arms onto the counter, looking away from me.

"I dunno, wander around town, look at jewelry. Take pictures of the stars..."

"Oh, you take pictures of stars? What do they call that, there's a certain term for it – Sarah told me the other day..."

"Astrophotography," says Caine in a clear voice.

"Yeah, that's it!"

"Didn't think you would know something like that," Caine mumbles, looking a little happy.

Seeing his tiny smile makes my chest feel tight. Ugh, he looks cute like that.

But hey, this is a great way to ask him to come to the beach.

"You can't really take pictures of stars here in the city that well, can you?"

"That's right, the lights drown them out. I sometimes use a telescope though, but if I want to capture something like the Milky Way, I'd need to go outside the city."

Wow, Caine sounds like this is definitely a hobby of his, he sounds so serious and knowledgeable all of a sudden.

"Well, uhm, I know somewhere you can take pictures of the stars pretty well." I swallow nervously.

"Hmm?"

"Sarah and I are planning a trip to the beach for the weekend, do you want to join us?"

Anxiously, I stare at Caine, trying to read his expression. He continues leaning his arms onto the counter, unmoving, simply blinking up at me.

Before he can answer, I nervously start to ramble.

"We'll split the cost among us four so we can rent a cabin near the beach for one night, it'll just be for the weekend. And the weather's been so nice lately, it'd be good to see the ocean, you know."

"I..." Caine stands up straight, not quite knowing how to answer me.

"No."

Rejected.

Ouch. There goes my hopes and dreams. Hello darkness, my old friend.

"Have you even looked at me?" Caine says in an irritated tone.

"Huh, what do you mean?"

Caine points at his head.

"I'm a ginger – we don't tan, we *burn*. I'd be a fried burger at the beach!"

A very yummy burger though...

Wait – what am I thinking!?

"Ahaha," I chuckle nervously. "I mean, you just need some good sunscreen, no?"

"I don't like the sun."

I glare at him. Listen, you little punk, you are not going to ruin my little fantasy of going to the beach with everyone.

"It'll be good for you – vitamin D."

"Like I care." He closes his eyes.

"And at night, when the sun's down, and the sky is clear – imagine, just seeing the Milky Way with your own eyes."

Caine cracks his eyes open, looking at me suspiciously.

"Doesn't sound so bad now, does it?" I say with a smirk.

He says nothing for a while, pondering over my proposal.

"...You said split among us four just now – who else are you inviting?"

Damn, he's good at picking up details. He's not fond of Kevin either...

"...Kevin," I admit.

Caine rolls his eyes. "Ugh, that guy, really?"

"Well!"

"Do you like him or something?" he grumbles.

1. "Why, you jealous?"

2. "No, it's not like that. Sarah's the one that likes him."

"Why, you jealous?" I fire back at him.

Instantly, Caine turns red like a tomato.

"N-no!"

What's with that reaction!? That's not good for my own heart!

"I mean, you invited him last time too. I don't fucking know if you like the guy or not."

"You want to know if I like him?" I tease him.

"I don't care," he scoffs. But his body language is telling me he definitely wants to know.

"Don't worry, I don't. Sarah can have him, she's the one who's into him."

"No, it's not like that. Sarah's the one that likes him," I explain. I don't want any misunderstandings...

"Oh."

Caine looks a little relieved at that, getting my hopes up.

Then he immediately changes his expression and sulks instead.

"Whatever, it's not like I care."

It's hard to get a read on Caine sometimes! Does he want to come or not?

"So, anyways, are you interested?"

Caine crosses his arms, looking at me through narrowed eyes. It's like he thinks I've got something up my sleeve.

"This is not just an elaborate way to get me to make jewelry for Kevin, right?"

I sigh. "No, it's not. It's just to have fun. You know, people hanging out with friends. You could use a little something like that in your life."

Caine blushes slightly. "Shut up – I'm fine not hanging out with friends."

Ah great, that backfired. He really doesn't want to come. I hang my head in defeat.

"Alright, if you don't want to come, I'll just go with Sarah and Kevin alone."

I turn around to leave, but Caine stops me.

"Wait!"

"What?" I ask.

"I didn't say I *wouldn't* go."

I bite down on my lips. Well isn't he just pedantic today?

"Are you saying you'll go or what?"

Caine rolls his eyes.

"Fine – yes. Are you happy?"

Kinda, yes? I can't help but smile.

"Yeah! Let's go to the beach together! Make sure you have some swimming trunks."

"I will, I'm not going to swim naked, you know."

"Yeah no, wouldn't want to scare off all the other people," I joke.

"My god, can you two stop flirting already – some people just want to get their items and leave."

Caine and I are both startled by a voice behind us.

"Chelsey!" Caine squeaks out.

Wait – has she been here the whole time!?

Chelsey walks up the counter, holding deodorant in her hand, intending to pay for it.

Caine looks a little lost at what to do for a second.

"Well, aren't you going to scan it?" she asks, clearly impatient.

Caine does as he's told in a quiet obedience, though he keeps staring at her. Waiting for her to do or say something else.

I'm tempted to ask her how she's doing, but on the other hand, it also feels like it's not my place to ask.

"How's uhh, how's everything going? Feeling ok?" Caine finally asks first.

Chelsey flips the hair away from her neck.

"Everything's fine."

Oh, I was expecting her to retort or not answer at all, but it seems she's a little more reserved this time.

Chelsey pays for the deodorant, then looks at Caine and me expectantly.

"Thanks... by the way. For your help that night," she admits.

"Oh, no problem," I say, a little surprised at her honesty.

"But this doesn't make us friends!" she huffs, then turns around and walks out of the store.

I chuckle, that sounds a little like Caine, the way he left the last time he was at my place. Faking anger, when he was really just embarrassed.

"You know, if she ever gives you grief again, just remind her what we know," I tell Caine.

"Something tells me I don't need to... She usually starts making fun of me straight away. She didn't this time."

That's when I remember that Chelsey was Caine's previous crush. And suddenly I can feel myself growing jealous at the prospect of Caine liking Chelsey again just because she was a little nicer this time.

"You're not going to start liking her again, are you?" I ask, unable to prevent myself.

"Huh? No way." Caine pulls his face into a snarl. "Hell no," he adds for emphasis.

Alright, that makes me feel a little better...

"Anyways, I'll let Sarah know you're joining us. We can discuss details over text, ok?"

"Sure..."

"Hehe, I'm a little excited to go to the beach now," I admit.

Caine shoots me a tiny smile. "I guess it doesn't sound too bad."

I feel my heart flutter when he smiles like that.

I should leave now before I start saying other embarrassing stuff.

"Ok, I'll text you later! Bye!"

Caine simply gives me a lazy wave and I leave the store.

-- bedroom night

It's the day before the trip! I'm lying awake at night, too excited to sleep.

We managed to work out the details and rent a cabin for the weekend. Two bedrooms, one night. With the four of us, it wasn't all that expensive.

My small shoulder bag is already packed, though I'm not bringing that much with me – just a change of clothes, my swimsuit, and some hygienic products. We'll be taking the train to the beach.

Staring at my phone, I decide to text Caine.

Joselina:

"You awake?"

Caine:

"Yeah."

Joselina:

"I'm too excited to sleep, I haven't been to the beach in a while!"

Caine:

"I've been like, never. So."

Surprised, I take a moment to reply to him. Caine's never been to the beach before?

Joselina:

"Really, never?"

Caine:

"Maybe once as a kid, but I don't remember much. I avoid sunny places."

Joselina:

"You can swim, right?"

Caine:

"Do I look like a moron? -_-"

Caine:

"Of course I can swim!"

Joselina:

"I don't believe you, you have to prove it to me."

Caine:

"I don't have to prove shit. I can stay afloat."

Joselina:

"Floating is different from swimming, you know..."

Caine:

"Just go to sleep already!"

I'm grinning to myself; bantering with Caine through text is fun.

Joselina:

"Alright, don't be late to the station tomorrow!"

1. "Dream of me."

2. "Have a good night."

Joselina:

"Dream of me."

Caine:

"I don't want nightmares!"

Joselina:

"How rude, any dream about me could never be a nightmare."

Joselina:

"Have a good night."

Caine:

"Sweet dreams."

I press my phone against my chest, trying not to squeal out loud. Caine is telling me to have sweet dreams.

Caine:

"See you tomorrow."

I fall asleep with the phone in my hands.

-- **Station**

The weather couldn't be more perfect. It's hot, which means the ocean will be warm enough to swim in, but not so much that I'm sweating buckets.

I stand near the entrance of the station and place my bag down, looking around for the others.

"Joselina!" Sarah calls out for me.

I happily wave at her.

"Hey!"

"Are the others here yet?"

"No, just us two."

I look at the camera bag Sarah is holding.

"Planning on taking pictures at the beach?"

Sarah flashes an arrogant smile. "Of course, it's an excuse to do some cheesy romantic shots."

Kevin comes running towards us in the distance, carrying a large backpack with him.

"Good morning everyone!" he greets us cheerfully.

"Did everyone sleep okay?"

"Peachy!" Sarah answers with a big grin.

Me? Not really. Didn't get to sleep much. I might have looked at the picture I took of Caine when he was asleep in the grocery store that one time, once or... twenty times.

I may have a problem.

"Yeah, slept great!" I answer him and energetically stretch out my arms in the air, hoping no one can see through my act.

Which is how I end up elbowing Caine in the face.

"Ow – what the fuck!" he yelps and staggers backwards.

I whirl around, horrified.

"Oh my god – are you okay!?"

"Obviously fucking not!" Caine is holding onto his nose, looking disorientated.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't realize you were behind me. Is your nose okay?"

"Man, that's some bad luck... Caine's so short I didn't even see him approach," Kevin muses out loud.

"Who are you calling short, huh?" Caine argues with him.

Sarah's laughing in the background at Caine's misfortune, while I step closer to him.

"Let me see," I say as I grab his hand, pulling it away from his face.

Caine simply scowls at me. His eyes are almost being covered by the cap he's wearing. I inspect his nose, which seems a little red, but at least it didn't turn into a nosebleed.

"You don't seem to be bleeding," I sigh in relief.

Caine clicks his tongue at me then rubs his nose one more time.

"Is this how you're going to say hello from now on?" he asks me sarcastically.

1. "I could turn it into a habit if you want."

2. "I'm really sorry!"

"I could turn it into a habit if you want."

Caine simply grunts at me, not appreciating my joke.

"No thanks."

"I'm really sorry!"

"You better be!" he fires back. "I didn't deserve this."

"Does it hurt still?" I ask, concerned.

"Just my pride," he mutters darkly.

"Ahh, stop moping, you'll bounce back, it's not like she broke your nose or anything," Sarah pipes in.

Caine fixes the cap on his head and glares at her.

"Let's just catch our train, alright?" Kevin tries to diffuse the unfriendly vibe between the both of them.

"Yes, it should arrive in 10 minutes, so let's get to the right track," I say, bending down to grab my bag.

Except Caine quickly picks it up for me, swinging it over his back. He starts walking with the others.

I cock my head to the side, raising my eyebrows at him. He's carrying my bag for me?

Caine throws his head back, looking at me with those vibrant eyes of his.

"You comin' or what?"

I rush up to them, feeling my stomach making flipflops just because Caine's carrying my bag for me, and I didn't even ask.

Chapter [015]

-- Train

We find a good spot where all four of us can sit together. It's relatively crowded. I'm assuming a lot of people are planning a trip to the beach, as I'm seeing parasols and beach balls.

Sarah sits near the window and Kevin takes the spot next to her, causing me and Caine to sit next to each other. The train finally starts moving and we're off to the beach!

"How long do we have to sit here?" Caine asks me.

"The planner said it'll take about two hours."

"Luckily, there are no transfers. It's a direct line to the beach! Of course, first we've got to check in with our cabin," Sarah explains.

"We're lucky we could even get one," Kevin points out.

I nod. "There were a lot of cabins that were already taken, but we managed to get one!"

"So, who am I sharing a room with?" asks Caine.

"Kevin," I reply. "Sarah and I are sharing a bed together."

Sarah smirks at Caine. "Were you thinking of sharing a bed with Joselina?"

Caine immediately looks out the window.

"N-no! I wasn't!" he denies quickly. He then pulls the cap over his eyes to hide his blushing face.

Oh bless Sarah for teasing Caine, but it's making my heart race, too!

"By the way, Joselina – I got in," Sarah mentions.

"Huh, got in where?"

"Claner's Fashion Week!"

"Oh, you mean you're now an actual reporter?" I ask excitedly.

"Got a backstage pass, and I can take pictures of the models walking down the runway. This will be so cool."

"What are you two talking about?" asks Kevin with a gentle smile. He seems curious about it.

"Right, you might be interested in it as well, Kevin. There's a Fashion Week in Claner sometime in August. You can sign up for it and you might win the 'newcomer' prize!" I explain.

"That sounds really cool! But I don't think I can join, sadly – I need to focus on my own project at college." Kevin looks a little disappointed.

"So, you're joining then?" he asks.

I eagerly nod my head.

"Yep! Though, I haven't really figured out what kind of line I'm making yet..."

"Oh no... you only have two months left!"

I wince at the thought.

"I know, ugh."

"Well, if you need any help with sewing, I wouldn't mind lending a hand," Kevin offers.

"Thanks, I'll keep it in mind!"

All of a sudden, I feel a finger poke my arm. I look to my side and see Caine pouting at me.

"I... I can help, too," he mumbles quietly. "Custom made jewelry stuff, you know."

A huge grin spreads across my lips. That makes me super happy to hear.

"Thanks Caine, I really appreciate that!"

Caine smiles in return, though he tries to hide his face under his cap again.

Kevin, however, whines out loud.

"What about me? I want your work, too."

Caine huffs loudly.

"I offered to help her, not you. I can't hand out free shit all the time."

"I said I offered payment!"

Caine suddenly pulls out his cell phone and connects earphones to it, popping them into his ears to drown out our conversation. How rude.

"Just leave the grump alone. I'm sure your collection will look fabulous even without his jewelry," Sarah consoles him.

Anti-social Caine continues to stare out the window as he listens to his music. Too bad he doesn't want to try and socialize with Sarah and Kevin, but he may just need some help getting out of his shell again.

Just like that time in karaoke, it took a while before he let a little loose.

Sarah continues chatting with Kevin about the upcoming fashion week.

Unable to prevent myself from stealing a glance at Caine, I see him resting his head against the glass as the landscape passes us by. I tap his arm to get his attention.

Caine flinches, not expecting someone to bother him. With an annoyed glare, he lowers his eyebrows at me, waiting for me to say something.

"Can I listen, too?" I point to his ear.

For a moment, he doesn't say a word. I expect him to say to listen to my own music.

But then Caine takes one earbud out of his ear and sits a little closer to me. So close, our arms are touching, and I suddenly get a whiff of the shampoo from his hair.

It's so fluffy looking... And his eyes are so gorgeous from up close...

Caine's staring at me expectantly, waiting for me to take the earbud already.

"What?" His breath tickles my cheek.

Oh god we're super close.

"Nothing, was just thinking about your hair," I say, trying to calm myself down.

"What's wrong with my hair?" he sighs. "Don't tell me you want to style it again."

"Well, it did look rather good on you."

Caine tilts his head away from me, hiding his bashful expression. He grumbles something incoherent under his breath.

"You gonna listen or not?" he asks, annoyed.

I finally take the earbud from his fingers and put it into my own ear.

A soft melody plays; it's an instrumental piano piece. That was not what I was expecting. My eyes flicker over to Caine's face; he's still so close to me.

"Didn't realize you were into instrumental pieces."

"Something wrong with that?" he scoffs as he turns away from me to stare out the window.

"No, not at all. I like it," I muse out loud. It's a very relaxing piece.

The train shakes a little as it passes a corner. My body weight is slowly being pushed against Caine's arm. He doesn't seem to mind, so I end up leaning against him even though I don't need to anymore. I'm secretly enjoying this.

"It relaxes me," he murmurs.

I can't argue with that. I was pumped up for a day at the beach, but this melody wants to soothe me into falling asleep.

"It helps me focus when I'm working."

"You mean on your jewelry?"

Caine's eyes slowly settle on me again. He nods his head ever so slightly.

"Hmm, got any more songs like these that you listen to?"

A little surprised I'm showing interest in his music choice, Caine shows me the playlist on his phone. His red hair ends up brushing against my forehead.

We're so close like this, it's making my heart race.

Another song starts playing, though it's just as soothing as the first.

1. Rest your head against Caine's shoulder.

2. Lean back and listen to the music.

Gathering all my courage, I lean my head against Caine's shoulder, closing my eyes.

The instant my cheek touches him, his body stiffens up. I can feel his eyes burning a hole through my skull, and I'm waiting for him to push me away or say something about it.

But Caine remains silent.

And his silent permission makes my heart flutter wildly.

Eventually, the rocking of the train and the soft melody playing in my ear lulls me to sleep.

A hard turn stirs me from my sleep. That's when I notice some hair tickling my nose.

I lean my head against the seat and close my eyes, focusing on the peaceful melody. The safe feeling I get from Caine's closeness, combined with the rocking of the train, lulls me to sleep.

A little while later I stir from my nap. I hear whispering.

"Should we take a picture?"

"Totally."

I slowly crack open my eyes. Sarah and Kevin are staring at me with this mischievous look.

"Oh hey, you're awake," Sarah flashes me a grin.

"I thought you said you slept great last night?" There's this knowing look on Sarah, she's oozing smugness.

I nuzzle back in Caine's hair, closing my eyes.

Wait.

My eyes fly open and I'm wide awake. I sit up straight and realize I've been sleeping against Caine the entire time.

But the redhead himself seems to have dozed off as well. He's slumped against my shoulder, his hair brushing against the side of my face, and his lips hovering near my shoulder.

"You've got a little drool, right here." Sarah points to the corner of my mouth with a grin.

Quickly, I wipe off any excess drool, embarrassed I fell asleep against Caine. Not to mention I was drooling and nuzzling into his hair!

...But it's super cute to see that Caine fell asleep, too, and he's using me as a pillow. I don't dare to wake him.

"Shh, quiet, he's asleep." I narrow my eyes at both Kevin and Sarah.

"Seems he didn't get enough sleep last night either," Kevin remarks softly.

Maybe Caine was excited about this weekend, too. Just like me.

A smile creeps on my face as I look down at Caine's slightly parted lips, breathing slowly. So peaceful looking.

Closing my eyes again, I fall asleep once more, feeling slightly content.

-- **Outside cabin**

We've arrived at our destination— the cabin we rented!

"We're here!" I shake the keys in my hands excitedly.

"Kinda small," remarks Caine as he stands next to me with my bag on his back.

As soon as we got off the train, Caine decided to carry my bag for me again. I'm unsure about why he's being so generous and polite, but I'm not going to question it by opening my mouth, lest he drop the bag and never do it again.

1. "You're kinda small."

2. "I'm sure the inside is bigger."

"You're kinda small," I joke.

Sarah giggles behind me.

"Good one, Joselina."

"Hmpf – takes one to know one!" Caine fires back, then he flicks my forehead with his finger.

"Hey! That hurt!" I complain.

"You can take it. You're so thickheaded."

"What – no I'm not!"

Caine's hand shoots out towards my head and he messes up my hair with a chuckle.

"Those steroids aren't good for you, you should quit taking them."

I bat away the hand on my head.

"Obviously I don't take them," I growl at him.

Seeing that smug smirk on his face, I can't help but childishly remove the cap from his head.

"Hey!" Caine yelps. "Give it back! I'll burn without it!"

"Can we get inside already?" Sarah complains, feeling impatient.

I dash towards the door with Caine behind on my heels, wanting his cap back. I giggle loudly as he traps me against the door.

I turn around to face him, not realizing he was super close to me. Suddenly his vibrant eyes are staring me down.

"Mine," he says, his voice deep and raspy.

A shiver runs through my bones. My breath is taken away, as it feels like Caine is saying those words to *me*, and that's making my knees buckle.

Caine takes advantage of me being absolutely stunned by removing the cap from my fingers, and taking the keys out of my other hand.

He pulls back while confidently putting his cap back on. Then, he ignores my wide-eyed stare as he finally unlocks the front door next to me.

"I'm sure the inside is bigger," I say hopefully. The cabin is rather small. It was too expensive to get a bigger one.

"It's got two bedrooms. I think that's pretty big!" Sarah gives a confident nod.

"Besides, it'll be cozy, all of us so close together," I say with a beaming smile.

Caine bites his bottom lip.

"I don't want to cozy up to people – least of all, you," he says while giving me a pointed stare.

I narrow my eyes at him.

"You sure were getting cozy with me in the train..."

In an instant Caine's cheeks are red, and he awkwardly stumbles away from me.

"S-shut up, that doesn't count! I fell asleep!"

"You seemed to enjoy your nap quite a lot," Kevin chirps in with a laugh.

"No, I didn't!"

"Ah yes, you were even mumbling how soft Joselina is as a pillow." Sarah joins in.

Caine's gone entirely red in the face. Unable to say anything at all, Caine just angrily turns around and marches up to the front door.

Awkwardly, I brush the hair out of my face, feeling it glowing a little warmer. They're teasing Caine, but it's making me embarrassed as well...

Then Caine turns around, arms crossed and with a pout on his adorable face.

"You're the one with the key," he mutters, not even looking in my direction. He's too embarrassed.

"Right!"

I walk up the front door, trying to ignore the awkward Caine standing next to me as I unlock the front door.

My eyes glance over to him.

"...Do you really think I'm soft?" I whisper.

"...!"

Caine's face is back to a full-on flambeed look and he quickly pushes past me to take refuge inside.

-- Inside cabin

The inside just has a small common room with a couch, table, and TV. Three doors lead to what I presume are the two bedrooms and bathroom.

Other than that, I think it's quite cute.

Caine's already placed our bags down near the couch and sits on the arm.

Sarah also drops her bag at the door and plops down onto the couch.

"Finally, we're here," she says with a deep sigh.

Kevin walks straight to one of the bedrooms, inspecting the room.

"Looks pretty clean," he remarks. He looks back at Caine. "I guess we can take this room, Caine."

Caine shrugs. "Sure."

"Okay, everyone, go to the bathroom while you're at it, because we're going to the beach soon!" I say excitedly.

"Why? Just pee in the—"

"—Don't you dare say the ocean, because that's gross, and I will smack you," Sarah interrupts him.

Kevin chuckles nervously.

"Ehehe... Caine, just use the bathroom here."

"Pfft, fine."

"That's nasty, Caine," I comment. Peeing in the ocean? Come on — we're swimming in it!

Caine groans loudly, then disappears into the bathroom.

"We can change at the beach, right?" asks Sarah.

"As far as I know, they've got a few changing rooms there, yeah."

"By the way, do we have two keys?" Kevin inquires.

"Oh yeah, here, you can keep the second key, in case you or Caine want to go back earlier." I hand over the second key to Kevin.

"Let's see what we can bring with us and what we can leave behind..." Sarah starts rummaging through her bag.

"Taking your camera with you?" asks Kevin after he sees Sarah take her camera bag.

"Of course, there's not many chances for me to go to the beach. Be prepared for a lot of candid!"

Kevin looks a little uncomfortable. "I don't really like having my picture taken..."

"I don't really either, but if there's one thing you should know about Sarah..." I say ominously.

"Oh don't be so dramatic, Joselina. Pictures are fun! I'll be sure to get your good side."

She flashes him a sly grin. "And you've got many good sides."

Kevin turns beet red, looking away from Sarah and staring out the window instead.

Eventually, we all take our turns going to the bathroom before departing towards the beach.

-- beach

The sun! The sand! The sea! This is totally the place to be during summer.

The beach is crowded with other people, tanning in the sun, lying lazily on some towels or chairs.

There seems to be a bunch of people in the water as well, which probably means the water isn't too cold to swim in. This is great!

Sarah stretches out her arms, smiling towards the sun.

"Ahhh, feels good to be here!"

"I know what you mean. It's been forever since I went to the beach," I respond.

Caine is looking grumpy as always, but Kevin looks especially energetic.

"I brought a beach ball with me! Let's go have fun in the water!" he exclaims cheerfully.

"Let's find some cabins to change in," I point out.

Sarah and I share a small cabin on the beach to change into our bikinis. I made my own, of course. I have to showcase my talent to the world!

"Do you think he'll like mine?" Sarah asks as he strikes a pose for me.

She's wearing a sparkling white bikini, looking very chic.

"Kevin?" I ask.

"Who else – the twerp?" Sarah rolls her eyes at me.

"Of course I meant Kevin."

"You look great," I answer honestly. "Now stop fussing about it and let's go enjoy ourselves."

I step into my slippers and swing my bag across my shoulder, looking around for the guys.

"Oh, there they are!" Sarah points at them in the distance.

"Seems they found a good spot," I say.

We meet up with them and see they've secured two beach loungers for us, complete with a parasol.

My eyes glide over towards Caine who's now only wearing swimming trunks and sitting on the lounger. He's very pale indeed, and skinny. I feel like I'm going blind staring at him while he's in the sun.

"Awesome – I didn't think there'd be any free chairs left," I say gleefully.

"Some family just left, so we immediately claimed it," Kevin says with a grin.

I need to rub myself in with some sunscreen – everyone does. I dig into my bag and take out the bottle.

"Alright everyone, lotion up."

Sarah smacks Kevin's back, startling the poor guy instantly.

"W-what?" he asks nervously, wondering if he's done something wrong.

"Do my back, yeah?" Sarah asks, looking at him all sweetly.

Kevin looks confused, but doesn't seem to be able to reject Sarah's wishes. She can be quite the force to be reckoned with.

"Uhm, sure, yeah," he mumbles.

Happy to have Kevin's hands all over her body, Sarah lies down on the lounge. Kevin seems to be blissfully unaware of her flirting tactics.

I sit down next to Caine in the shade as I wait my turn.

"So... You know how to swim, right?" I ask, trying to start a conversation.

"I know you said you could through text, but floating doesn't exactly sound like swimming to me."

Caine whips his head around and crosses his arms.

"Of course I can. I'm not an incompetent loser."

Good, I guess that's one worry out of the way.

"What about you huh? If you're going to drown, I won't be saving your ass."

"Hey – who says I'm going to drown?" I fire back.

"Just don't drag me down as well."

"I'm not going to drown! I'm a very good swimmer!"

"We'll see about that. Perhaps you need an inflatable tube band to stay afloat?"

"Oh, I actually brought one. A giant donut," Sarah pipes in.

She's doing Kevin's back right now.

"Really? Cool! Let's blow it up then," says Kevin.

He's smiling so much; his teeth are reflecting the sun into my eyes. Yikes, I really could go blind like this.

I guess he and Sarah are getting along just fine.

Kevin and Sarah are finally done and they hand me the bottle of sunscreen as they start blowing up the donut that Sarah brought along.

Caine scratches his cheek.

"But seriously, just stick to me, okay?"

"Huh?" I turn around to look at him.

"If you're getting tired or you get a cramp, don't go too far."

Wait, is Caine actually a little worried?

"Didn't you *just* say you won't save my ass?"

Caine grumbles something under his breath. He toes his slipper into the sand as he struggles to voice his thoughts.

"I've got all of my swimming certificates, so yeah..."

"Ooooh, *all* of them, I see," I say loudly, mocking him.

Everyone gets to take a swimming test here when they're young to get their swimming certificate. However, people can opt to take harder tests for a higher certificate.

"So that means you're trained to save a drowning person, right?"

Caine nods his head.

"Honestly, I'm quite surprised. I thought you said you could stay afloat, so I figured you weren't such a good swimmer."

"Well – I am. So, don't leave my side, okay? Otherwise I'm going to delegate you to donut duty."

Caine points at the inflatable donut that Kevin is blowing up.

I snort out loud.

"Don't worry so much, I really *can* swim you know – I've got my own swimming certificate," I point out.

I won't tell him I got it when I was only eleven years old though.

Caine just gives me this sly smile. "We'll see..."

Oh right, I need to use the sunscreen already. I got a little distracted by Caine. I stare at the bottle in my hand.

1. "Here, do me."

2. "Would you like me to do your back for you?"

I toss the bottle into Caine's lap.

"Here, do me," I say.

Caine scrunches up his nose.

"Excuse me?"

"Rub me."

"What!?"

"Don't be so difficult – it's hard to do your own back, you know."

I shoo him off of the lounge and lie down, grabbing my hair and moving it away from my neck.

Except Caine doesn't do anything. I'm simply lying here, waiting for him to start doing my back.

I'm about to complain when I suddenly feel the cold sensation of the lotion touching my back, quickly followed by Caine's own warm hand.

He rubs across my shoulder, a little hesitantly, as if he's afraid to touch me.

I roll my shoulders, relaxing as he continues to touch my back. It feels sticky, but it's not unpleasant, not at all.

Caine clears his throat.

"Your bikini is in the way."

I shrug. "Just lift it up and go under it."

Silence.

I grin to myself; he's too shy to do it, isn't he?

But then, I can feel Caine hook his finger under the strings and pull them away from my body. He slips his hand underneath it, trailing lotion across my back.

Ah, I guess not that shy.

He moves towards my sides, sliding his hands down to my waist, then back up again.

I feel slightly tingly as I realize just how close he is to my bare breasts. My heart starts to race.

Stupid thing, quiet down. Caine might hear.

...Who happens to be rubbing dangerously close to my breasts.

Then he moves in even closer, his fingertips basically touching the sides of my breasts. A jolt shoots through my body and my cheeks burn with a blush.

"Hey – watch the hands!" I call out to him.

"I am!" he fires back.

Unaware of what he did, Caine continues like nothing happened.

Great, it's just me whose heart is racing because he accidentally came a little too close to my forbidden zones.

With both hands, he makes circles across my upper back, then rubs in my shoulders. This actually feels quite pleasant, I'm really enjoying it.

Caine slows down his pace and massages my neck.

"Hmm, feels good. You'd probably be really good at massages," I say out loud.

Caine immediately pulls away from my back.

"Don't say weird shit like that."

"Why is it weird? I'm giving you a compliment!"

"I don't need them from weirdos like you! And you're done. Happy now?"

I sigh and lift myself up from the lounge to face him.

"Thanks."

I do the rest of my body myself.

Before I can offer to do Caine's back. He's already asked Kevin to do it for him. Aww, there goes my chance.

"Would you like me to do your back for you?"

My hands are itching to use any excuse to touch him.

Caine raises his eyebrows.

"Why?" he asks immediately. "What are you up to?"

A little sad that he's already suspecting me of something, I sigh.

"Nothing, just trying to help you out here. Doing your own back is always a little hard. I mean, Kevin and Sarah did it, too."

Caine eyes Kevin, who's still trying to blow up the tube.

"Fine, I guess."

"Alright! Go lie down. It's easier."

Surprisingly, Caine obeys as he lies down on the lounger. He lets his arms droop to the side and waits for me to begin.

I stand over his body and squirt some sunscreen onto the palm of my hand and finally touch his back.

Caine flinches at the contact – almost as if he were reacting to a burn. I guess he's a little jumpy at physical contact.

I slowly massage the lotion across his pure white skin. Wow, his skin is as smooth as it is white. I can't really feel any imperfections.

I notice he's got faint freckles on his shoulders and spine as well. They're a little adorable, these freckles.

I can feel Caine's body twitch a little as my fingers slide down his sides. Ah, he must be ticklish there. Duly noted.

Must... resist... the urge... to tickle him. No, no, I can't.

With a sigh, I continue rubbing the rest of his back. I can see Caine visibly relax beneath my fingertips.

It's a little sensual to be touching him like this... I'm not going to deny I'm enjoying this. I glide my hands across his back, making sure I've got everything covered.

When I reach the small of his lower back, Caine perks up.

"Don't you dare go lower!" he warns me.

I huff out loud – who does he think I am!? I wouldn't suddenly go cup his butt cheeks or anything. Yuck.

"Just relax already," I tell him. "I'm not going to do anything funny."

Caine grumbles something that I can't quite hear.

I stay faithful to my words and finish up rubbing him in with the sunscreen. No funny business.

"There, all done. That wasn't so bad, right?"

Caine sits up straight, gaze averted down towards the sand.

Oh! He's... blushing!

Why!?

"S-stop staring at my face!" he whines as he hides his face from mine.

His blush is contagious and now I'm feeling a little shy as well. Why would he be blushing because I put sunscreen on him?

Caine quickly does the rest of his body with sunscreen, turned away from me.

I ask Sarah to do my back – I feel like I'd probably be blushing more if he's the one touching me instead.

When we're all rubbed in with sunscreen – the fun can start!

Sarah looks at our beach bag with a worried expression.

"Okay, someone needs to watch our stuff, so let's go out in pairs."

"I propose to test out the donut!" I say quickly.

Caine gives me this weird look, like he can't believe I'd actually like the inflatable tube.

Sarah smiles and hooks her arm with Kevin's.

"Then we'll catch some sun while you two go swim for a bit. Besides, this way I can use my camera a little."

"Aw, okay, I guess I can wait a little bit longer," says Kevin with a sigh.

Caine begrudgingly gets up from the lounge and steps out into the sun.

"Alright, let's go. Take that stupid thing with you."

He doesn't have to say it twice – the donut looks adorable. I grab it and happily strut across the hot sand with it.

Caine just shakes his head as he removes his cap, flinging it on top of our bag. He then follows me into the ocean.

My feet touch the cold water. I haven't been to the beach in ages. The water looks so clear though.

"What are you waiting for? Afraid it'll bite?" Caine asks me.

"Oh no, I was just thinking when's the last time I came to the beach like this. Probably when I was little."

Caine starts walking further into the ocean, until his knees are submerged completely. He's wincing a little.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Cold balls," he wheezes.

I can't help but snort out loud, then quickly hold a hand in front of my mouth to prevent myself from laughing. He meant that seriously, not as a joke!

I then grin at him and start running into the water, splashing droplets all around us.

"Hey – watch it, it's cold!"

He's right, the water is a little colder than expected, but that's why I can have a little fun splashing Caine.

Throwing myself into the water completely, I float towards the top with my inflatable donut. It feels good to be in the water again after so long!

Caine rushes up to me, we're both going deeper into the ocean.

"Your donut looks so stupid."

"You're just jealous," I quip back. I lean my chin onto the tube and grin at him.

"I'm not jealous! You look like a little kid that can't swim."

I kick my feet underwater, swimming away from Caine.

"Well, I'm going to enjoy this donut *al///l* by myself. You can't have it." I stick out my tongue at him.

Caine huffs, then quickly dives underneath the water until I can't see him anymore.

Before I can react, I feel a hand yank on my ankle, dragging me below the surface, slipping out of the tube. I hold my breath and shut my eyes as I'm engulfed in water. I try to swim towards the top again.

Breaching the surface, I take in a big gasp of air.

Caine is smirking at me, now inside the tube himself. Droplets slide down his wet hair, glistening in the sun.

"You!" I call out angrily at him.

Caine starts swimming away from me with the tube, further into the ocean, cackling loudly.

"Thief!" I yell and then frantically try to catch up to him.

"A world class one!" he exclaims with a laugh.

I can't help but laugh as well as I swim towards him.

Caine stops speeding away from me and I finally catch up, resting my hands on top of the donut. My feet dangle in the water; we're in deeper parts now.

1. Splash some water on Caine.

2. "Now look who's the kid."

I splash some water onto Caine's face.

"Hey!" he growls at me.

"That's what you get for stealing my tube!" I say with a grin.

"Salt in my eye, really?" Caine starts rubbing his right eye.

"Oh, are you alright?" I ask, suddenly a little worried.

But then Caine splashes some water back into my unsuspecting face.

"Jerk!" I complain as I brush my wet hair out of my eyes.

"Now look who's the kid," I say, grinning at him.

Caine pouts at me.

"You were having so much fun with it, I had to see it for myself..."

"So, are you having fun?"

He shoots me a cocky grin.

"Only when I can mess with you."

"Hey!" I protest.

"Haha, come on. You can have it back."

Caine slips out of the tube, diving underneath the water.

Then pops back up and puts the donut around me as if he were throwing me a life ring.

"Can't have you drowning on me." He tilts his head to the side with this cocky grin.

I lift myself up through the hole and lie down on the donut, sprawling my arms and legs on the outside so I float on top of the water like a turtle.

"Then I'll just stay like this, no need to worry about getting your hands dirty and saving me," I reply.

"Good, this way you're at my mercy instead," he says sinisterly.

Without giving me a chance to ask what he means by that, Caine starts spinning the tube around, with me helplessly going around in circles.

I can't help but giggle loudly though – it's fun! I throw my head back and enjoy the ride.

Eventually Caine stops.

"Hey, why'd you stop?" I ask, bummed out.

"You looked like you were having too much fun," he replies nonchalantly.

"Oh, is that so. Are you saying I'm not allowed to have any fun?"

Remaining silent, Caine hits the water with the palm of his hand, splashing some onto my face.

I shield myself from the droplets while he smirks at me. Indignantly, I pout at him.

"Hey, no fair!"

I then rake my hand inside the water and throw a small wave towards Caine, who eagerly tries to dodge it.

It becomes a little splash fest between us as we keep trying to throw water over the other.

Eventually Caine submerges most of his head beneath the water until I only see the floaty mass of his red hair. It bobs closer and closer to my tube, until...

"Eek!" I yelp out loud.

I felt something touch my sides! Caine, that little pest – he's trying to attack me from under the water!

Caine resurfaces again and takes a deep breath. His wet bangs almost touch his gorgeous eyes. There's this smug look on his face; he's enjoying himself.

I'm momentarily distracted because damn – Caine looks hot like this.

Whereas I just feel like a stupid turtle.

I can't let Caine get the best of me, so I decide to attack him, too.

"You asked for it!" I yell triumphantly, then I launch myself out of the tube, right on top of Caine.

With a huge splash, I drag him down underneath the water, my hands pushing down on his shoulders.

Until we're both floating in the ocean, serene and calm. My eyes are wide open, the water doesn't sting. Sunlight shimmers through the surface and is reflected on Caine's body.

Caine's eyes are open, too. He meets my gaze in this silent ocean.

A bubble escapes his open mouth. Neither of us seem to pay attention to it.

His hair is so luscious and red, floating around beautifully.

Caine swims up closer to me. Then a hand is suddenly on top of mine. He gradually pries it off of his shoulder, until I've released him.

I can hear my heart thump loudly in my ears.

Slowly, his fingers slip through mine, intertwining them.

The lack of oxygen makes my brain feel lightheaded. I need air, soon.

But I'm mesmerized by this underwater play between me and Caine. Like he's captivated me and I'm unable to move to swim to the surface.

Caine grips my hand tightly and pulls me into his chest until I almost knock my head against his.

Our noses touch. Our lips are so close.

I really need air.

But I think I need this more.

My eyes close, focusing on nothing but the closeness between me and Caine.

And then Caine kicks his legs in the water, propelling us upwards.

We break the surface and I take in a large breath of air. I'm so lightheaded.

Fluttery emotions wash over me like the water itself. I'm staring right into Caine's face, but realize I am unable to look at him any longer.

I was about to kiss him underwater!

My cheeks feel aflame.

"Did you see that?" Caine asks, unaware of my fiery red face.

"S-see what?" I croak out.

Wait, he's still holding my hand.

As soon as I realized he hasn't let go, Caine tugs on my hand and forces me to spin around in the water.

"The fish!"

Caine dives underneath the water, giving a tiny pull on my hand, telling me to follow him. So, I do.

I open my eyes again under water.

And what I didn't see before when I was bewitched by Caine's gorgeous eyes – is the huge school of fish in the distance.

Silver and shimmery, they swim in unison into a single direction. There's got to be about 200 of those tiny fish!

It looks amazing, I've never seen that many!

Caine swims next to me, looking at me with these innocent eyes. He seems excited.

I can't help but smile back at him. Kiss or no kiss, I'm enjoying this.

We hold hands together as we watch the school of fish swim away.

The water is cold, but Caine's hand isn't.

Chapter [016]
-- beach

Eventually, Caine and I leave the water and meet up with Sarah and Kevin again.

The hot sand underneath my feet feels like it's scalding my skin. It's so hot! I dash across the beach back to our spot.

Immediately I sit in the shade and throw the tube onto the ground.

"Hey, how's the water?" asks Sarah while she's holding onto her camera.

"Cold, but you get used to it," says Caine as he grabs a towel from the lounge and starts drying himself off.

"Yeah the water isn't perfect, but it's not super cold or anything," I explain.

"Great, sounds good to me. Sitting out here has made me feel a little dehydrated." Kevin sighs.

"Oh, in that case, how about I get us all some ice cream?" I offer.

"Strawberry for me!" Sarah exclaims immediately.

"Ah in that case, I'd like a lime popsicle," says Kevin.

I look over at Caine, raising my eyebrows at him, waiting for his answer. However, Caine simply throws the towel at me, which I catch.

"I'm coming with yah."

I hug the towel close to my body, a little gleeful he's offering to come with me out of his own free will. I start to slowly dry myself off as well.

"By the way I took some pictures of you." Sarah smiles at me.

"You were spying on us?" I start to wonder how much she's seen...

At least she can't take pictures underwater.

"She must have snapped about a hundred pictures of you two by now," says Kevin.

Sarah shoots him a dirty look.

Caine bites down on his bottom lip, not looking too pleased about someone taking his picture.

"Don't creepily take pictures of me," Caine huffs.

"They're not creepy!" Sarah fires back. "I think they turned out pretty well."

Another annoyed huff and Caine stand with his back turned to us, ready to leave. He throws his head back at me while putting his cap on tight.

"You comin' or what?"

"Coming!"

I slip into my beach sandals and hurry up after Caine.

-- beach store

There's many small stores and cafes lined across the beach, selling inflatable toys, hats, sunglasses and a lot of drinks and ice cream.

"Hey, do you really hate having your picture taken?" I ask Caine.

Caine doesn't look too impressed.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"I guess you're not the selfie type of person, huh."

"Nope."

Caine then turns his attention to the aisle with popsicles.

I guess Caine has some bad memories with having his picture taken. He did tell me that everyone took a picture of him and humiliated him during prom night.

It's a little sad because I would totally want a selfie with Caine... not going to lie. I should definitely ask Sarah about those pictures when we get home.

Caine crouches down to read the menu of their ice cream and popsicle selection. I stand next to him, looking for the flavours that Sarah and Kevin wanted.

"I want the cola flavoured one."

"Sure, I'll get it." I open up the freezer.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I notice Caine tilting his head up ever so slightly, so he can peek at me from underneath his cap.

I catch him staring at me, so he immediately tears his eyes away from mine with a small grunt. His cheeks are gradually turning red.

1. "Are you blushing or is that a sunburn?"
2. "I think you should apply some more sunscreen."

I smirk down at him.

"Are you blushing or is that a sunburn?"

Caine immediately gets up and pulls the cap over his face, hiding away from me.

"Shut up!" he growls, then quickly walks away from me.

I giggle at his abrasiveness. He's so cute sometimes, the way he tries to hide being embarrassed. Catching Caine staring at me gives me a thrill though.

"I think you should apply some more sunscreen."

Caine cocks an eyebrow at me.

"Your cheeks, they're red," I point out.

Immediately Caine stands up straight and pulls his cap over his face.

"I-it's fine!" he insists. Then he quickly stomps away from me.

Eventually I pick out what everyone wants – including one popsicle for myself – and try to carry them in my arms.

Now to find where Caine has run off to.

"Caine?" I call out to him.

I see him standing near the entrance, checking out some hats. Quickly, I walk over to him.

"You really like wearing hats, huh?" I say with a smile.

Caine huffs, turning away from the rack of hats.

"No, I don't," he denies.

"What – not only do you wear that beanie, but look at what you have on your head right now!"

"That doesn't mean anything!" Caine starts walking away from the shop, back onto the beach.

I hurry after him.

"Hey, don't be so grumpy – I like your sense of fashion," I say once I catch up with him.

Caine turns his face towards me, staring at me for a little, before his eyes see the popsicles in my arms. Swiftly, he takes one of them from me and opens up the packaging.

"I'm not grumpy," he says gruffly and puts the popsicle into his mouth.

I simply giggle at him as we walk back to our spot on the beach.

-- beach

Caine quickly heads for the cover of the parasol to get out of the sun and sits on the lounge.

Kevin is sitting on the other while Sarah is down in the sand, catching some sun.

"That looks so good right now!" Sarah happily reaches for her ice cream.

I hand the remaining one to Kevin and start unwrapping mine as well.

"Thanks! These are great to have after being in the sun for a while," Kevin says with a chuckle.

I look over at Caine, who's almost finished with his.

"Whoa, you're fast!"

He pops the stick out of his mouth, showing only a small piece of ice left. He arches an eyebrow at me.

"Yeah, otherwise it melts, duh. Why, are you slow?"

"Well, to avoid brain freeze, I take my time."

"Joselina just knows how to use her tongue," Sarah chimes in with a snort.

1. Sensually start licking the popsicle in front of Caine.
2. "Sarah! Don't say it like that!"

Well, I can't ignore Sarah's comment.

I turn my head to Caine, then slowly dart out my tongue to touch the ice-cold popsicle. His eyes are watching my every move.

Opening my mouth, I wrap my lips around the ice entirely, slowly pushing it into my mouth. I close my eyes as I take in as much as I can, before slowly pulling it out again.

When my eyes open once more, I see Caine staring at me with wide eyes.

"Whoa Joselina, you went to town on that thing," says Sarah in an impressed voice.

"Enjoyed the show?" I wink at Caine.

Bashfully he looks away from me, his eyebrows knitting together. He pulls his cap over his eyes so I can't see his expression.

"The fuck kind of images are you putting in my head..." he mumbles quietly.

"Sarah! Don't say it like that!" I exclaim, feeling embarrassed.

Sarah just laughs at me.

"That's what she said," Caine interjects with his own stupid joke, also chuckling at me.

"Leave your jokes at home," I say, feeling irritated that everyone's laughing at my expense.

Caine bites off the last piece of his popsicle. There's this cocky grin on his face.

"You're an easy target to tease."

I pout at him as Sarah nods in agreement. I defiantly turn away from the both of them as I lick my popsicle in peace.

"What a bunch of friends I have," I mumble.

"Hey, what are friends for if we can't laugh at each other?" Sarah grins at me.

"By the way, Joselina – how much do I owe you?" Kevin decides to ask, changing the subject.

"Oh, they were..." I try to remember how much I paid.

Which is when I realize; I haven't paid for them at all.

The blank expression on my face has Caine looking at me weirdly.

"Actually... I don't remember you paying for them," he recalls.

I start sweating profusely as I look at the *stolen* popsicle in my hand.

I was going to pay for them, but I wanted to find Caine first... and then I got distracted and walked right out of the store with the ice cream and popsicles in my arms, forgetting to checkout.

A sense of dread and shame washes over me; I've never stolen anything in my life before!

Suddenly Caine drapes an arm around my shoulder, having snuck up on me.

"...You didn't pay for them, did you?" he says in this haughty tone.

"I... I..."

"Congratulations Joselina – you are a certified thief!" Caine exclaims as he removes his arm from me, waving his popsicle in the air.

He starts laughing loudly at my misfortune.

"I am not!" I immediately deny.

"Did you really walk out without paying for them?" asks Sarah.

I bury my red face into my hands, groaning loudly.

"It's okay Joselina, it happens. You didn't do it on purpose. No need to feel bad," Kevin reassures me.

"Now who's the thief, huh?" Caine says in this smug voice. "That's so fucking rich."

"I'm going back there to pay for them!"

Caine stops laughing. "What? Don't do that – they probably won't believe you."

"Of course they will, I've got the wrappers. I'll just bring them over to the register."

"Stupid, just enjoy the free grub." Caine rolls his eyes.

"I'm kinda on his side here Joselina, it's only like a few euros, it's no big deal." Sarah gives me a sympathetic smile.

"Joselina doesn't seem to be the kind of person to accept that, though," says Kevin.

"Ahh, you're all driving me nuts! I'm going back!"

I walk around collecting the wrappers and race back to the store.

--

I feel mortified. The clerks at the store... they laughed at me for returning and paying for the items that I took!

My own popsicle has mostly melted by now.

Caine is the first one to ask how it went.

"Well, did you pay for them? Does your conscience feel better now?"

"I did return them," I say.

"What did they say?" asks Sarah.

"They all laughed at me and said I should have just enjoyed the free popsicles and not have bothered to come back."

I drop down to the ground and sit in the sand, my face all red.

Caine, as expected, busts out a gut, laughing hard and without restraint.

"Ahahaha – I told you! Wahaha."

Sarah can't help but laugh as well. "Ahh, I should have gone with you."

"Well, at least you did the right thing." Kevin seems to be the only person on my side.

"Thanks, Kevin. At least some of us abide by the law."

Suddenly Caine puts his cap around my head, pulling it down tight. I whirl around to look at him.

"What's that for?"

"So you can hide your shame," he says while roaring with laughter.

That little...!

I grab a fistful of sand next to me and fling it up at Caine. He merely dodges it and dashes away from me, laughing even harder.

I can't believe I like that guy!

Picking myself up, I run after Caine, trying to catch him. He's circling around our parasol, giggling at my attempts to reach him.

"Get back here!"

"Oh no, Joselina's wrath! Whatever am I going to do?" he says sarcastically.

"Hey you two, keep an eye on our stuff, okay? I'm heading into the water with Kevin," Sarah announces.

She gives Caine a pointed look.

"If my camera gets damaged or stolen, I'm holding you personally accountable."

"What – why me!?"

Sarah links her arm with Kevin, pulling him along towards the ocean.

"See you guys later!"

"B-bye!" Kevin says nervously before getting dragged away by Sarah.

Now that Caine's distracted, I see an opportunity I can't refuse. Reaching behind the parasol, I finally launch myself at Caine.

Not expecting such a move from me, Caine yelps loudly as I tackle him down into the sand.

I pin Caine down, holding one of his wrists so that he can't escape from me. I sit down securely on top of his waist.

"What the hell." Caine looks up at me, clearly caught off guard.

"Do you have a thing for tackling me!?"

"That's what you get for making fun of me."

Caine tries to wiggle himself to freedom, but my body on top of him keeps him trapped.

"Get off of me already," he groans loudly.

"Make me," I say arrogantly.

Caine's free hand shoots out to grab my wrist.

"Hey!" I yelp.

Within a second, Caine's thrown me off of him, and quickly clambers over my body. This time he's the one on top. I stare up at him in surprise, not realizing the extent of his strength.

His necklace dangles from his neck, the pendant swinging back and forth between us.

Caine lowers down his face towards mine, sending my heart racing. Wait, this position is...

"The only one who'll be doing any pinning around here is *me*," he breathes out in a low voice.



Heat rises up to my cheeks in record time, flushing my entire face. A shiver runs down my entire body, responding to his words. I grit down on my teeth and am suddenly feeling like mush beneath Caine.

Caine lifts the cap from my head.

"I'll be taking that back now," he says as he puts it on his own head.

Then he finally removes himself from me, leaving me down in the sand, face red like a tomato. I'm speechless.

Eventually I get up as well, sauntering back to the lounge and plopping down. Caine is lying down on the other one with his cap pulled down over his entire face so I cannot look him in the eye.

I'm a little bit shell-shocked – I didn't expect Caine to get on top and say something that made my heart leap out of my chest.

Well, damn. I guess I really do like this guy.

-- beach restaurant

Eventually the sun settled down, covering the landscape in a warm, orange glow. All of us had our fun in the water, but by now we've gotten pretty hungry.

We went back to our cabin, got freshened up, and found a restaurant to eat at.

"The reviews are pretty good for this place," Kevin mentions happily.

He's been browsing some review app for a while, letting us know which restaurants had good reviews, and which ones to avoid. We settled on this cozy place.

"By the way Kevin, you look super cute with your hair down like that," says Sarah.

Immediately Kevin bashfully looks away from her, growing red in his face.

"Doesn't it take a lot of time to style it like you usually do?" I ask.

Kevin nods timidly. "It does, yes."

"I'm starving," Caine complains loudly, trying to change the subject.

"That's a little dramatic," I say as I turn to look at him.

"Are you kidding me? I only had that popsicle for lunch, *if* you can even call it that."

"I'm famished as well. Let's see what they have to offer." Sarah grabs the menu from the table.

I grab one of the menus as well. Caine's eyes grow wide when he sees the prices.

"This shit is expensive!"

He's not wrong. The average price for a main course seems to be around twenty euros which is nothing to scoff at.

"You can order from the children's menu," says Sarah with a snort.

Kevin chuckles at her joke, but Caine simply glares at her.

"Was that another short joke?"

"Oh, come on, lighten up. I'm sure there's something within your budget."

I lean a little closer to Caine and place my finger down on the menu, pointing out one of the dishes.

"Why don't we share this one? See, surf and turf for two people – it's less expensive if we share."

"I guess..." he drawls out, mulling it over. "Doesn't seem like such a bad idea."

"Do you want to share this one with me then?"

Caine shrugs. "Sure."

When the waiter has taken everyone's order and brought our drinks, I notice something peculiar about Kevin as he holds the glass in his hand.

"Hey... is that a scar I see?"

Kevin follows my line of sight towards his thumb. There's a small and hard to spot scar on his knuckle.

"Yeah, you've got a great eye," he says with a small smile. "Most people don't notice."

"What, I didn't notice!"

Sarah reaches out for his hand, taking it within her own and inspecting it. She doesn't notice it makes Kevin's face turn a little red. Cute, he's getting embarrassed.

"Oh yeah, it's a small circle. How'd you get it?"

"It's going to sound stupid but..."

Sarah and I eagerly wait for Kevin to finish his sentence.

"...It was a water gun."

"Huh?" Sarah looks confused as she drops Kevin's hand.

"Back when I was ten or so, I had a water gun fight with my friends. Every time I'd pump the gun, it would slide across my thumb, scraping away some of my skin."

I cringe at the mental image. "That sounds painful!"

"Oh – it wasn't at all! My hands were so pruny from the water, I didn't feel it. That's why I kept doing it. Next thing I know, it turned into a scar."

Kevin chuckles nervously. "I hope I didn't disappoint you with such a mundane reason."

"Nonsense – every scar is interesting!" Sarah cheers him on.

"That wasn't interesting at all," Caine complains. "A water gun, really? A fight with a dog would have been way cooler."

"Sorry for not being cool," Kevin adds weakly.

"Don't listen to him. Everyone's body has got a story to tell," Sarah says sagely.

"Like what, huh?" Caine fires back.

"Like my battle scars!" Sarah exclaims proudly.

"Huh, you mean the ones on your thighs?" I ask.

"What do you mean 'battle'?" Kevin sounds worried.

"Exactly, what kind of battle have you survived, huh?" Caine asks sarcastically.

"My battle with puberty!"

Caine suddenly snorts out loud at that. Kevin looks a little fazed.

"How...how can you say that so proudly," Caine says with a snicker.

"I can't believe you...ahaha. It's so stupid!" He starts to laugh out loud.

I can't help but join him, until everyone has a good laugh.

"Do you have any scars on your body, Caine?" I finally ask.

I didn't notice any when we were at the beach, but it's not like I was inspecting him under a microscope or anything.

"I've got an epic battle scar under my right foot," he says proudly.

"After wrestling with a burglar when I was eight years old, I threw him through the window, and then I stepped on a piece of glass."

1. "You're such a liar."

2. "Wow, I can't believe you were so courageous!"

"You're such a liar." I poke my finger into his side.

"H-hey!" Caine jumps a little in his seat and glares at me.

"One hundred percent true, no lie."

"*Riiight*," Sarah drawls out.

"No way can an eight-year-old boy throw an adult through a window," I point out.

"I... I know some judo, you know!"

"Really? I never would have known, with the way you let me tackle you all the time."

Caine opens his mouth to retort, but can't find a way to refute my fact, so he shuts it just as fast.

"Okay, fine, I got it because I dropped a bowl of cereal and stepped on a broken shard," Caine says, clearly in a grumpy mood.

"Haha, I knew you were lying." I ruffle up his hair.

Caine pushes my hand away, fixing his fluffy hair.

"Wow, I can't believe you were so courageous!"

Caine proudly sticks his nose up in the air.

"Not just one burglar, but two of them," he boasts.

"Oh nice – did you also toss him out the window?" I play along with his little lie.

"That one I knocked unconscious with a baseball bat!"

I touch Caine's biceps with an amazed expression on my face.

"Oh wow, so strong."

Caine has never looked so smug before. He shoots me this cocky grin and flexes his biceps.

"I've dabbled a little bit in judo," he says smugly.

"Is that so? When was that, before or after you've thrown two grown men as an eight-year-old boy?"

Caine's grin disappears from his face and he pulls his arm back, clicking his tongue at me.

"The judo thing wasn't a lie though," he grumbles.

"But you look so scrawny..." Sarah muses.

"Well, obviously I don't do judo anymore," he huffs loudly.

"What made you do judo, of all things?" I ask.

Caine crosses his arms and looks away from us.

"No reason."

Before I can pry another answer out of him, our food has finally arrived.

Caine and I got a shared surf & turf plate, with mixed grilled meat and seafood, served with a large portion of fries. My stomach rumbles at the sight of all the delicious food.

"Don't eat everything, okay?" Caine warns me.

"Do you think I could?" I probably could...

"Yes."

"Well, tough luck – I'm hungry, too!" I say as I grab one of the shish kebabs and tear off the meat from the skewer.

"Ahaha, better be fast, Caine, Joselina loves to eat, you know," says Sarah with a chuckle.

"Yeah, take an example, Caine," I say with a mouth full of food.

"I'm not a pig, unlike you."

"Nothing wrong with enjoying food," Kevin pipes in.

"Thank you, Kevin!"

Caine looks annoyed that Kevin and I are on the same page. He grabs one of the skewers as well, munching on the meat like a sour grump.

But as soon as he tastes the delicious meat, his expression softens and the corners of his mouth lift up.

Aww cute, he's enjoying the food.

"Is it good?" I ask.

"Yeah!" he replies, amazed. "I don't usually eat out, so this is a nice change of pace."

"Ah, I remember my college days; ramen every day of the week," says Sarah with a heavy sigh.

"Those *are* my college days..." Kevin adds with a nervous chuckle. "Sometimes I forget you two are already done with college."

"We're not that much older than you. Aren't you finished in like a year or two?" Sarah points out.

"A year, for me." Kevin smiles at her. "Then I get to catch up with you."

"Then you get to learn how to cook." Sarah grins back at him.

"Do you cook at home, Caine?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No, I just get one of those dinner boxes at my job. I get a discount, you know."

"*Can* you even cook?" is my next question.

"I can cook!" he responds defensively.

"Not burning toast doesn't count as cooking," Sarah points out with a hearty laugh.

"I can make pancakes, I'll have you know."

"Now *that's* something I want to see." Caine cooking pancakes? I definitely want to see proof.

"You don't believe me, huh."

"Not one bit."

"Fine – I'll make you some damn pancakes. The best you'll ever have."

I grin at him. "I'll hold you to that!"

"Be prepared to grovel at my feet to get a piece of me," he boasts arrogantly.

I stop munching on my food.

"A piece of you?"

"I think Caine is not so subtly implying something here, Joselina," says Sarah.

"You're quite forward, Caine," Kevin adds.

Caine's face suddenly turns pink.

"A piece of my food, I mean! My food!" he quickly corrects himself, looking all flustered at his mistake.

We all end up laughing at Caine, enjoying the rest of our meal in good company with each other. The plate Caine and I shared ends up completely empty. Caine even offers to let me eat the last prawn, which I think is very sweet.

"Ahh, I feel so bloated," Kevin complains.

"Same here. I just want to crawl into bed and pass out," Sarah agrees.

"Come on guys, we need to get back to our cabin."

Caine suddenly taps his finger on my shoulder.

"Hey," he mumbles in a low voice.

"What?"

"I'm going out to shoot pictures of the stars. Do you... want to come?" he asks a little bashfully.

I eagerly nod my head, feeling myself swell up in a warm glow.

"Of course I'll come!"

Caine can't help but crack a tiny smile at me. I can't wait to see the stars with Caine.

Chapter [017]

-- outside cabin night time

We're standing outside the cabin. It's almost midnight at this point. Caine's got his camera with him as well as a small tripod. He definitely came prepared.

Sarah and Kevin are staying behind, opting to go to bed early.

I look up at the sky, but because there's still some light pollution from the nearby city, the stars aren't as bright. We need to go to a deserted part of the beach.

"At least the sky is clear," I muse out loud.

Caine looks a little excited.

"Yeah, I'm hoping we'll be able to see it clearly with the naked eye. Let's find a good spot."

Together we pull out our phones to look for the best spot to view the stars and find one that's pretty close to us. About a half hour walk. That's reasonable!

"You ready?" I ask.

Caine throws his tripod over his shoulder.

"Damn right I am."

Caine starts walking away from the cabin without waiting for me. I quickly run after him.

-- beach night time

Right before arriving at the beach, Caine stops and turns to look at me.

"Close your eyes," he says.

"Huh, why?"

There's this lopsided grin on his face, so boyish and full of charm.

"Because it'll look even better."

"Well – I can't walk when I can't see!" I argue.

Caine throws his camera around his neck, freeing up one hand. He reaches for my own and grabs it.

I'm thankful it's dark, because that threw me for such a loop it made my heart start to race. Caine's hand feels warm and soft. It's making me a little nervous.

"You're really going to guide me?" I ask.

"Why, you don't trust me?"

For some reason, his question stumps me for a few seconds.

Do I trust Caine?

I mean sure, when I first met him, I was apprehensive and on guard around him. I was worried he was going to steal or get me into trouble.

There's no point in denying that I didn't trust him at first, but now that I've gotten to know him, seen all these different sides of him, I guess part of me has started to see him in a new light.

That's why I close my eyes for him.

"Alright, but you better not ruin that trust," I warn him. "There will be hell to pay if you make me walk into a tree."

Caine sniggers at the thought.

"I mean, I could..." he trails off.

"Hey!"

"Haha, come on – give me a little credit here. I'm not a douchebag."

Caine then tugs on my hand, trying to get me to walk forwards. A little hesitant, I take my first step forward.

It's a little mysterious, unable to see anything and simply focusing on Caine's hand as he pulls me towards the beach.

My footsteps are slow and unsteady, sinking into the sand, sometimes stepping on a seashell. The ocean waves are getting louder.

Suddenly, every sense of mine is heightened – even Caine's hand feels more intensive. I kind of really like it.

Caine slows down his pace and I match it until we both come to a halt.

"Okay, this seems like a good spot."

Caine finally releases my hand.

"So, can I open them?" I ask, a little impatient.

"In a second. Let me set down my tripod and camera."

I hear him scuffling in the background as I patiently wait for him to set up his equipment.

Then I feel Caine wrap his hand around my wrist. He's tugging on it.

"Sit down."

I lower myself down into the sand, hearing Caine sit down as well.

"Now can I open them?" I ask again.

"Go right ahead."

Finally, I open my eyes.



A gorgeous view greets my eyes. The sky is littered with stars. I've never seen that many before in my life.

But the most breathtaking part of it all – the Milky Way. A patch of glowing dust stretching across the heavens, twinkling ever so slightly.

I've never seen the Milky Way with my own eyes before, but now that I have, it's so mesmerizing I can't tear my eyes away from it.

The beach is deserted. We're the only ones here at the moment.

"Wow," I breathe out slowly. "It's amazing. I've never seen anything so gorgeous before."

From the corner of my eye, I see Caine slightly turn his head towards me.

"Yeah... pretty."

My heart flips inside my chest.

1. "But you're not even looking at the sky."

2. "I'm so glad I got to see this with you."

"But you're not even looking at the sky," I point out.

Flustered, Caine quickly turns away from me.

"S-shut up."

Feeling a little bold, I press the issue.

"Are you calling *me* pretty, or the stars?"

"Obviously the stars!" he exclaims.

"Ah," I say, unable to hide my disappointment.

He didn't have to deny it so rigorously. That feels like such a blow to my ego.

"...You, too..." Caine mumbles under his breath.

And just like that, my heart is oiled up again and running even faster.

"I'm so glad I got to see this with you," I say with a smile.

Caine rubs the back of his neck, feeling timid.

"You're always saying cheesy stuff," he grumbles.

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

"I guess not." He shrugs. "I'm just not used to people being..."

Caine's eyes meet with mine.

"Genuine."

My heart skips a beat. His eyes are so gorgeous with this starry sky backdrop.

"I'm not lying... I'm really glad we came here together."

He quickly looks away from me, trying to hide the blush on his face.

Caine gets up from his spot and starts messing around with his camera.

"I'm gonna take some pictures now."

I wrap my arms around my legs, staring up at the beautiful starry sky. It really makes one feel insignificant, thinking about the fact that the earth is just a little speck in the universe.

The shutter of the camera closes as Caine takes his first picture. I hear the shutter several times in a row, he's taking a bunch of pictures one after another!

"Wanna see?" he asks, unable to hide his excitement.

I get up from my spot and walk towards his tripod, staring at the little screen on his camera. It's showing the last picture he took of the sky.

"Wow, I didn't realize you could zoom in that far!" I'm amazed at the detail the camera has captured.

"I'm using an ultra-wide angle lens, they can capture a lot of the sky," Caine explains.

"Ooh, that's why it looks so detailed."

"I mean, I'm just using a budget lens. Your friend Sarah is the one with the really expensive lenses... I noticed the one she was carrying around."

"I honestly have no idea. I wouldn't be able to tell you how much anything costs – but regardless, those pictures turned out really good!"

Caine smiles at me, happy that I'm showing interest in his hobby.

"Wanna see something cool?"

"Sure!"

Caine goes back to fiddling around with his camera settings, then presses down the shutter button. I can hear the camera whirring for a few seconds, before the shutter finally closes.

"I just took a long exposure picture of the stars. Which means..." Caine shows the last picture he took.

The stars have turned into streaks across the sky.

"Oh wow, that's neat! They look like shooting stars."

For a while, Caine remains quiet as I study the picture. The sound of the ocean has a relaxing effect on me. I feel so at ease with Caine, out here on the beach.

"Do you think..." he starts out in a quiet voice.

I straighten my back to look at him.

"Do you think I could take a picture of you?"

I'm surprised he'd ask. Seeing the expression on my face, Caine immediately shakes his head at me.

"I mean, you wouldn't be able to see your face. Or anything, really. Just your silhouette. No one would be able to tell it's you. I think it'd look cool against the Milky Way backdrop," he rattles off in a rushed voice.

"Slow down, it's okay," I reassure him. "You can take one."

Caine looks relieved.

"But why don't we take one together? I think that could look rather..."

"Romantic?" he suggests.

Surprised he'd call it romantic, my heart ends up beating faster. The thought of taking a romantic picture with Caine is definitely messing with my hormones.

Caine looks down at the sand, unable to meet my gaze.

"I, uh," he stutters. "Never mind, that sounds stupid."

"It's not stupid. I think it sounds romantic, too."

Awkwardly, he spins around and presses a few buttons on his camera in complete silence. Then he quickly walks towards the water. He beckons me to follow.

"It's on a timer. Six seconds left," he explains.

"Uhm, what do you want me to do?" I ask as I stand next to him.

"Nothing, just be you."

"Me? What do you mean?"

"Come a little closer to me." Caine reaches for my arm and pulls me in closer.

The camera snaps the picture.

Caine doesn't even bother answering me as he dashes towards the camera to look at the picture. I start walking in his direction as well.

"Huh," he says in surprise.

I look over his shoulder to see the picture.

There are two dark silhouettes against the starry sky, we're not in the center, as we're not the focus of the picture, but it does look really nice. Because the camera took the picture as Caine was pulling me closer, it looks like he's got his arm around my waist.

We look like a couple. It's a rather romantic picture, and I sort of really want it as a wallpaper on my phone.

"Not my usual style, but it turned out pretty good."

"Can I have that one?" I ask.

Caine raises his eyebrows, but then smiles at me.

"Sure, no problem. Gotta wait 'till I'm home on my laptop, though."

I'm a little sad to think about going home at this moment. This entire day has been so much fun. I don't want it to end yet.

Caine ends up spending a little more time getting the shots he wants, while I sit in the sand, watching him work diligently. He's got a surprisingly large amount of passion behind his hobby.

Watching the stars like this... I'm inspired, too.

That fashion show I was going to enter? I think I know what theme I want to make now. The stars have always been beautiful to me, but this time it has totally captured my imagination.

And it's also because Caine's with me. It wouldn't feel the same without him.

Caine finally plops down into the sand with me.

"Done taking pictures?" I ask.

"Yeah, I've got a ton. I'm satisfied."

I lean back to look up at the sky. I can stay and stare at this for hours and not get bored.

"What a day it's been," I murmur softly.

Caine also looks up. "It feels much longer than usual."

We stay quiet for a bit, lost in our own thoughts.

Caine pulls his legs up to his chest, then takes a small breath.

"You asked me today, why I did judo, right?"

I nod my head at him, wondering why he's bringing this up.

Caine leans his chin on the top of his knees, staring at the gorgeous view in front of him.

"Bullies."

"Bullies?" I repeat.

Slowly he turns his face towards me, peering at me through his long eyelashes. He's got this vulnerable look on his face, as if he's afraid I'll judge him.

"Hm, bullies."

"Ah, you thought that would help you deal with them?"

"Yeah..."

Seeing the look on his face however, it sounds like it didn't help out much. My heart aches for him. I know how it feels...

I finally want to share some of my own memories.

"You know... I used to get bullied in middle school."

Caine raises both his eyebrows at me, he looks genuinely surprised.

"Really? Why?"

"Why indeed... I don't know. Sometimes I guess I was too pushy and bossy, other times I was too timid and weak – I could never get it right."

"People would tell me I was too stuck-up, and if I tried to be nice, they'd tell me to speak up more. I couldn't win."

I flash him a sad smile. "You're not the only one with a bullied past, you know."

"I didn't know... You seem so great at dealing with people."

"It wasn't like that from the start, it took a lot of courage and hard work to get my self confidence back."

"And people are *still* saying I have issues. Like, unable to accept criticism and whatnot. Those couple of years were definitely lonely, for sure..."

Caine looks right at me, his gaze then faltering.

"Yeah... lonely," he whispers softly.

A peaceful moment stretches between us, with the ocean waves filling up the silence in the background. We're both staring at the twinkling stars in the night sky.

I recall my own memories when I was younger and didn't have any friends. It was a painful period for me, but luckily that changed when I entered high school and I tried my best to make friends.

But the memories of being an outcast will forever linger with you, which is why I empathize with Caine so much.

"Today, I..." Caine starts slowly.

I direct my gaze upon him once more.

"Asking me to join today. Just... thanks. It was fun."

A warm feeling spreads through my body, forcing me to break out into a smile.

"Yeah, I had fun, too. I'm glad I asked you to come."

Caine finally lifts his chin up from his legs, staring at me.

"Why *did* you invite me?"

1. "Because I like being with you."
2. "I wanted you to have fun with us."

"Because I like being with you."

Caine immediately ducks his head away from me, an incredulous expression on his face. I can tell he's bright red, trying to cover it up.

"W-what – how can you say it like that!?" he demands to know.

"Say it like what?"

"Whenever you say shit like that, I can't tell... if you're being serious or not. You're so hard to read." Caine sighs loudly.

"You confuse me."

"I'm not trying to confuse you, I'm being honest. Is that such a foreign concept for you?"

"Yes!" he immediately replies.

"Even that weird thing you did where you went back to pay for the ice cream when you could have easily gotten away with it – I didn't even realize people like you *existed*."

"Geez, way to make me sound like some rare specimen," I say while pouting.

"I wanted you to have fun with us."

"Yeah, but why me? Don't you have other friends to invite?"

I pout at him. "Do you really have to question it? Can't I just enjoy your company?"

Caine averts his eyes as his cheeks glow pink.

"You enjoy my... company?" he mumbles shyly.

"Of course I do," I say with a smile.

"Even though I've been... After what I did to you..." Caine starts to look confused.

"Argh, I don't get you!"

"Huh?" I'm confused at his outburst.

"How do you do it?" he asks.

"Do what?"

"How do you stay so nice to people even though they aren't in return?"

I close my mouth, mulling over my answer. Does he want to know about my moral compass? Why I returned to pay for the ice cream even though I could have scored some free stuff instead?

"I mean, you said it yourself... you got bullied, too. So, I don't get it." Caine looks down at the sand with a forlorn look.

"People treating me like crap doesn't give me the right to treat others the same way. It really isn't that hard, Caine. You just treat people the way you want to be treated. That's it."

"Yeah, there's some shitty people in this world – I've been bullied in the past, and even in the present I still have to deal with them sometimes, but that's no excuse to do the same."

Caine stays quiet, his eyebrows knitted together in a very defined frown. He's lost in his own thoughts.

"I can't do that..." he mumbles. "It's not like I'm a good enough person or anything."

"That's not true! I know deep down, you're the same."

"Deep down?" Caine doesn't believe a word I say.

"I mean, think about Chelsey, she's humiliated you and made your life miserable, no?"

Caine grits his teeth at me. "Yeah, so?"

"And yet you still helped her out. You could have chosen not to, but hey, you did."

I bump my shoulder into Caine's, giving him a reassuring smile.

"See, you're a good person, too."

He turns his head very slightly towards me, flashing me a tiny bashful smile. He's like a little puppy and I kind of want to hug him.

"I think that has more to do with the fact that you were the one that asked me to help her out," he admits. "I don't think I would have helped her if I were alone."

He stares at me, his smile widening. "But you on the other hand, you would. You're crazy."

Then he chuckles, a sound that lifts up my heart as if I'm soaring through the night sky.

"Crazy and amazing."

My cheeks feel like they're on fire as Caine's compliment bounces around in my chest like a bunch of endorphins being released.

I'm unable to keep eye contact with him, feeling really quite happy hearing that, coming from Caine.

"Joselina?"

"Hm?"

"I... I feel bad for dragging you into my mess. That time in Boon Mart, I mean."

"Pretending to be your girlfriend, you mean?"

Caine shakes his head.

"No. I mean..."

He looks at me, his eyes clear as the stars in the background.

"For randomly forcing a kiss on you."

He then shyly turns away, rubbing the back of his neck.

Ah, that part.

"You already apologized for that, I believe."

"I know, but..." Caine rests his chin on top of his knees again, letting out a deep sigh.

"That wasn't cool of me."

Honestly, while I was annoyed at the time that he kissed me without consent, I am over that anger right now.

"It's okay," I reassure him.

1. "I would like a heads-up next time."

2. "I forgive you."

"I would like a heads-up next time."

"Ah, yeah sure – wait. What?" Caine's eyes grow large.

"Next time?"

I shrug and smile at him. I'm not going to deny I want there to be a next time. Only this time around, I want it to be mutual.

"What?" he repeats in a flustered voice.

My hand sinks into the sand as I lean towards Caine, closing the distance between us. Daringly, I tilt my head so that our faces are only inches apart.

Caine can't help but stare at me like a deer caught in headlights. He's turning redder by the second, his face matching his hair.

"I said, I would like a heads-up next time. Ask me, or something."

"Ask?" Caine gulps.

I nod my head.

"...What if you say no?"

"There's only one way to find out." I smile mischievously at him.

Caine's mouth drops open, but no words come out. He seems rather shocked at my assertiveness, but I'm not backing down.

I move just the tiniest bit closer, our noses almost touching. I can feel his breath on my face. I can count the freckles on his cheeks.

He looks so frightened and embarrassed. I love seeing this side of him.

"C-can I?" he stutters.

"Can you what?" I tease him.

Then suddenly, his eyes glaze over, as if he's suddenly not afraid anymore. He tilts his head to the side, leaning in closer, his lips only barely touching mine.

"Can I kiss you?" he asks in this husky voice.

Oh god – yes!



I answer his question by closing my eyes and finally pressing my lips against his.

Caine immediately responds to my touch, pushing back like he's been hiding his inner feelings all this time. And right now, they're out in the open.

"I forgive you."

Caine looks surprised.

"What – really?"

"Yeah, uhm, I was pretty angry when you did it without my consent, but I'm not anymore. I can see that you regret it."

"Ah. Yeah. I mean, getting kissed by a guy like me, no one wants that," he says dejectedly.

"I didn't say that," I disagree.

I definitely didn't like that he kissed me without my permission, but that's not to say that I would never like being kissed by him. In fact, I rather want to.

"I mean, I didn't even know you all that well, at that time. Of course I'm going to be annoyed if some guy suddenly kisses me."

Caine starts to pout, feeling even worse than before.

"Right..."

"But you're not some guy anymore," I admit in a tiny voice.

His eyebrows lift up and he watches me in confusion. I feel myself blushing under his intense gaze. I know what I'm implying, I just hope Caine gets the hint, because it's way too embarrassing to say it out loud.

"I'm not some guy anymore..." he repeats.

Then, Caine places his hand down into the sand, leaning closer towards me, until his face is in front of mine.

"Are you saying I can do it now?" he asks in a nervous tone.

I blink my eyes away from him, staring down his shirt. I bashfully give him a tiny nod of my head.

"Joselina." The way he says my name sends shivers down my spine.

My eyes meet with his again. He's so close. It's getting harder to breathe.

"Can I kiss you?" His breath makes my entire face tingle.

I close my eyes, and once more, I nod my head.



Soft and moist lips are pressed against mine. I feel a surge of emotions overtake me. This time it's mutual. This time I want it.

I respond to Caine's kiss, pushing back lightly against his lips as I feel him suck just the tiniest bit. It's making my body feel weak all over.

He breaks apart, just long enough to take in a large breath, before he hungrily snatches my lips again, unable to leave them alone for too long.

The sound of the ocean waves drowns into the background as my mind starts spinning. Caine's lips feel so warm and nice against mine. It's like he's breathing life into me. My heart beat can't stop speeding up!

I've been lying awake in bed at night, thinking about this moment. Now that it's here, I don't want it to stop.

I grab the front of Caine's shirt, keeping him close to me.

Our lips pull away, then they're back together as if they're magnetic. Each kiss is like a shock; so electrifying. So freeing.

A hand creeps up my back, until Caine buries it into my hair, cupping my head. He pushes me closer, clumsily trying to press every inch of our lips together.

He's shaking. I can feel his entire body quake with nerves and excitement – but I'm the same way. Every movement and every touch is driving me crazy.

Then Caine stops, leaving my lips alone.

He flutters his eyes open, watching me with a glimmer in his eyes, not moving away from his position. He rests his forehead against mine, and we both take in a deep breath.

Caine licks his own lips, an act that seems so extremely sexy to me right now. Slowly, he raises his other hand, and softly presses his thumb against my bottom lip. His cyan eyes are focused on my mouth.

He's quivering all over, as if he's afraid this can all go wrong, but he doesn't have control over his actions anymore. Neither do I.

He brushes over my lip, then gently tugs it down so that my mouth parts open. I let out a breath that I've been holding. His thumb feels so warm.

Then he closes the gap between us again, his mouth on mine once more.

Except this time, he plunges into my open mouth with his slick tongue. That silver tongue that has said so many things to me, is now slithering against mine, exploring.

It's unrefined and surprisingly gentle. Caine's movements indicate he doesn't know what he's doing, but one thing is for sure; Caine isn't letting go until he's lapped up all of me with his tongue.

I roll my tongue against his, causing a deep moan to emerge from Caine's throat. Oh god, I didn't know he could sound like that.

Slick and moist, Caine touches me in places that send shivers and shocks down my spine. This is so erotic, it's hard to keep my breath steady.

But then, his tongue slips out of my mouth, leaving behind a void I didn't know existed.

I blink open my eyes at him, just in time to see Caine pushing his hand against my shoulder, urging me to lie down in the sand. He climbs on top of me and captures my lips with a loud grunt.

I wrap my arms around the back of his neck, locking him in place. I love the feeling of him on top of me, the warmth of his body feels like a protective blanket. Caine holds the side of my face with his hands, lustfully nibbling on my lips.

Caine sucks so hard on them that I feel my blood rushing towards the surface – his tongue licks the bottom with a heavy breath, begging me for entrance.

Who am I to deny it?

He steals my breath away as we exchange strokes with our tongues. I'm locked with him in this endless kiss, making everything I feel for Caine even more heightened.

Then he retreats, hovering over my body as he stares at me with this wanton expression. I've never seen that look on his face, but I decide in this moment, it's my favourite one so far.

The ocean suddenly grows louder until I realize a wave washes over my arm, pulling me back into reality and breaking this spell Caine has cast on me.

I shriek and quickly get up, flinging Caine off of me, escaping the small wave of water. My arm got wet.

Caine sits in the sand, a little dazed.

He sees the water dripping from my hand, then we exchange a look. I crack a grin at him.

He grins back.

His delighted expression makes my heart flutter wildly.

I extend a hand to Caine.

"Come on, we should probably head back now."

Caine accepts my hand, but instead of getting up, he pulls me down.

I tumble forwards and crash into his chest, cradled in his lap. Flustered, I look up at him.

"Wha—"

Caine cuts off my words with his mouth, giving me a tender kiss.

It's short and chaste, compared to what we were doing before, but it doesn't stop my heart from beating a thousand miles a minute.

He leans back, gazing at me, taking all of me in with those cyan eyes of his.

"Yeah, let's," he breathes out softly.

-- inside cabin

We finally make our way back to the cabin. It's dark and quiet inside, so I turn on the light.

Caine places down his camera equipment at the front door. He stops in his tracks when he notices the open door to my room.

"Uhh," he drawls out.

I follow the direction of his gaze and stare at my room. It's empty; Sarah isn't in it.

"Huh, where's Sarah?"

Both of us look at the other room. The door is closed and there's a sock on the handle.

The cogs in my mind start turning – Sarah is in there with Kevin!

"Gross," Caine exclaims loudly.

Doesn't he see the issue here? If Sarah is in Caine's room... that means Caine can't sleep in that room, and he has to sleep in my room.

I mean, we did just make out on the beach and I'm still riding that wave of endorphins, but this is making things a little too exciting!

Caine rubs the back of his neck, looking down at the floor.

"I guess I can't go in there..."

1. "You can sleep with me."
2. "You'll need to sleep somewhere else."

"You can sleep with me," I offer.

Caine halts all movements, standing completely still.

Then he turns bright red.

"W-what!?"

"Oh, come on, I don't bite." *Probably.*

"But you... and me – in the same bed?" he asks incredulously.

"You didn't seem to mind very much when you had me pinned down into the sand."

Caine clamps his mouth shut and turns away from me.

"That's!" he starts, but immediately shuts up again.

"...Different," he grumbles.

"You're welcome to sleep on that dingy couch instead, you know."

"No, thanks."

"Alright, then we share a bed." I smirk at him.

"You really don't take no for an answer, do you," he quips.

"Nope." I walk towards my room with a spring in my step.

The night is just beginning.

"Coming?" I call back for him.

"Fine."

He saunters in after me.

"You'll need to sleep somewhere else," I say.

Caine's gaze settles on the small couch in the living room.

"I guess I can take the couch."

"Well, that's not fair, you paid for your room after all."

"Got any other options?" he grunts at me.

Then he looks at the open door of my room. Oh... he's thinking about sleeping in the same room as me? The same bed?

"I mean, we could..." he trails off, heavily implying we should.

I feel myself getting embarrassed at sharing a bed with him. But I also don't want him to sleep on the couch.

"Never mind, forget it." Caine shakes his head.

I bite down on my lip. It's just sleeping, right?

"It's okay," I say quietly. "We're just sleeping."

And it's not like that's such a huge deal when we were kissing each other before.

"Yeah. Just sleeping," he agrees. But Caine's face is red, too.

"You sure you're ok with that?"

"It's alright. We can blame everything on Sarah tomorrow." I shoot him a small smile.

I walk towards the bedroom, with Caine quietly following me behind.

-- cabin room

I can hear my heart pound in anticipation when I enter the small room.

The double bed stares back at me. I was supposed to be sharing it with my best friend, Sarah.

Instead, I'll be sharing it with Caine, whom I have become very acquainted with in the past hour. Okay, I should probably not let my thoughts go haywire.

It doesn't need to turn into anything. We're just *sleeping*.

...Probably.

I reach for my bag that's next to the bed and pull out my nightgown. I hold it close against my body, then my eyes lock onto Caine, who's awkwardly standing near the door.

"Can you uhm, turn around?" I ask.

Caine sees the nightgown in my hands, then he quickly whirls around.

"I'll just go brush my teeth," he mumbles, hastily exiting the room.

Now that I've got some privacy, I dress into my nightgown. It's pretty thin and very short. If I bend over just a little bit, I'm pretty sure you would be able to see my butt.

I was expecting to sleep with Sarah, so I didn't really think about appropriate sleepwear. Now that there's a guy in the mix, it feels really intimate.

I pull it down a little, silently cursing it for being so short. This is making me really nervous.

Caine enters the room again, loudly clearing his throat.

Then I catch him looking at me. His gaze going from head to toe, and I suddenly feel way more naked than I really am. I hold in my breath as I feel like he's silently undressing me with his eyes.

With rosy cheeks, Caine looks away.

Hey, don't just blush after blatantly checking me out!

"Bathroom's free..." he grumbles.

Not wanting to stay there a second longer with my very short nightgown, I hop out of the bedroom to flee towards the bathroom.

We're just sharing a bed! I don't need to act so on edge!

But we kissed, too... This has been such a rollercoaster of emotions today.

Scene [018]
-- cabin room

My heartbeat drums with each step I take towards the bedroom, until I'm finally there again. The lights are off. Caine is already in bed.

It's a little hard to see in the dark, but I try my best not to knock anything over as I enter the room. I fix my nightgown before I walk towards the bed. Lifting up the sheets, I slip underneath.

I'm so filled with nerves— it's hard to act natural, much less fall asleep.

Caine's back is turned towards me; he's remained quiet this entire time. Maybe he's asleep?

"Caine?" I call out.

"Hm?" is his grumpy reply.

"Oh, I thought you were asleep already."

"Not with you talking, no."

My eyes adjust to the darkness so I can see the faint red of Caine's wavy hair against his pillow. My eyes follow his slender neck which is so pale and smooth. I follow the lines of his body from his shoulders to his exposed, bare back.

He's got more freckles on his back. I wonder how far down they go.

That's when I realize he may very well be naked underneath those sheets.

I swallow a hard lump in my throat, my heart beating faster at the idea of sharing this bed with a naked man.

"C-Caine?" I call out once more, this time riddled with nerves.

"What?"

"...You're not naked, are you?"

Caine's body stirs, until he flips himself over so he's finally staring straight at me. His eyebrows are knitted together.

His eyes flutter downwards, avoiding mine.

"...I'm not wearing any less than you are."

Ah – he's staring at my chest! Lying on my side like this, my breasts are kind of squished together and really exposed, barely being held in by my nightgown.

"You're staring at my breasts again."

"...!" Caine grits his teeth, then he promptly turns over so that his back is facing me once more.

"I wasn't!" he denies.

1. "It's okay to stare."
2. "You shouldn't lie."

"It's okay to stare."

I can see the tips of Caine's ears turning a bright red. He hugs his own body and crawls into a fetal position.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean!?" he demands to know.

"I'm saying I don't hate it," I explain.

It's true, I definitely don't hate it when Caine stares at me. It feels... exhilarating. Just like that time at the reunion, when we were dancing and grinding and...

No, I *want* him to look at me. It makes me feel wanted.

"You shouldn't lie."

"I'm not!" he replies immediately.

The tips of Caine's ears are tinted red. He was definitely staring alright. Just like that time at the reunion.

It's embarrassing, yet at the same time – it makes me feel wanted. I don't hate it when he stares...

"Why can't you admit it," I mumble softly.

Always denying, deflecting and contradicting. Why can't he be honest? At the beach, I saw the real Caine, the one who wasn't afraid to own up to his feelings. The one who kissed me.

Yet here he is, in the same bed, turned away from me.

"Joselina," he calls out my name, his voice riddled with nerves.

I stare at his bare back, waiting for him to continue. My heart rate is speeding up.

"That was... That time..." Caine grumbles. He's nervous about something – afraid, even.

"I..." he cuts off again. It's like he wants to say something, but he's too scared to tell me.

"Never mind," he says with a small shake of his head.

"What – just say what you want to say!"

"I said never mind!"

I huff out loud, a little annoyed Caine can't come out with what he wants to say. He had a lot more courage on the beach.

Then I take in a deep breath; I should be patient with him... arguing won't solve anything. If I can be patient and understanding, then Caine might feel safe enough with me to open up.

"Caine," I start softly. "Whatever it is you want to say, I just want to let you know I'm not going to mock or make fun of you."

Daringly, I reach out to his bare back, my finger touching his shoulder blade. Caine flinches in surprise.

"I want you to trust me..."

I pull my hand back, staring at Caine's body.

Then slowly, but surely, Caine turns around. He's pouting and red in his face. He briefly makes eye contact with me, before looking away.

"...Promise me you won't laugh."

How can I when he shows me this adorable face?

"I promise," I say with a smile.

But Caine doesn't talk, he remains quiet. Whatever he wants to say, it embarrasses him.

My heart pounds in anticipation – hoping that he might say something about me. About his feelings towards me.

"That time in Boon Mart," he starts mumbling.

"Yeah?"

"...'Twas my first."

There's a blank look on my face. His first?

The longer I stare at him, the redder Caine becomes.

"First?" I repeat. What's he talking about?

Caine's eyes flicker back to me, watching me with an intensity that feels almost suffocating. It's like he's trying to communicate with only his eyes.

It was his first in Boon Mart... Not too long ago, he apologized for kissing me in Boon Mart.

"Oh!" I exclaim as I realize what he means.

The kiss! It was his first!

Caine awkwardly looks away once more, the blush not going away any time soon.

Subconsciously, I end up touching my lips with my index finger. I'm Caine's first kiss. That makes me ridiculously happy for some reason.

"Yah not gonna laugh?" he asks, a little apprehensive.

"No, I'm happy," I admit.

"Happy? You're such a weirdo..."

1. "You may not be my first, but I want you to be my next."

2. "I'm happy because it was my first kiss, too."

"You may not be my first, but I want you to be my next," I say in a flirty tone.

There's a look of shock on Caine's face, slowly morphing into confusion, then into denial. There's so many expressions gracing his face, it's hard to keep track of them.

"This is so fucking stupid," he gripes as he closes his eyes.

"What, why?"

He slowly cracks open his eyes. He looks so vulnerable. So adorable. Kind of sexy.

"Everything you say makes my heart race," he groans. "It's so unfair."

An overwhelming sense of joy fills me up; my stomach is filled to the brim with butterflies. Hearing Caine admit to that feels so nice.

"Are you saying I should stop flirting with you then?" I ask, teasing him.

Caine pouts at me.

"...No," he says.

He bites down on his lips. "I just don't know what to do when you act like that. This is all new for me... I've never had a girl show interest in me before."

I grin at him, moving a little closer.

"Just follow my lead," I say as I close the gap between us.

"Wha—"

I press my lips against Caine's and he instantly shuts up. His eyes are wide and his body turns to stone. He's not responding.

Maybe I went a little too far with my flirting...

I pull away from him, sheepishly showing him a small grin.

"Haa..." Caine breathes out loudly.

"You drive me crazy."

And before I know it, Caine captures my mouth with his, passionately pressing down on my lips. The way he nervously moves his lips finally makes sense — I'm his *first*.

Caine lets out a deep breath, following along with my movements.

"I'm happy because it was my first kiss, too," I admit shyly.

Caine blinks at me, stunned for a second.

"What — no way. I mean, you're twenty-three and *gorgeous*."

That feels like an insult and compliment at the same time.

"Hey, you asked me not to laugh, so please don't make fun of me, either..."

He runs a hand through his messy hair, sighing loudly.

"I just can't believe it. I mean, I didn't think you'd be inexperienced... like me."

Caine covers his mouth with a hand, suddenly realizing something.

"Wait — that means I ruined your first...!"

I bashfully look away from him.

"Well, more like stole. You're also the first guy I saw naked," I point out.

Caine turns bright red again.

"Shit. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing, you'll make it worse if you keep saying that."

"R-right."

Caine keeps quiet, but his eyes never leave mine. I feel a little embarrassed letting him know how inexperienced I am, but on the other hand, I'm very happy to find out we *both* are.

"I wish I could do it over," says Caine softly. "So it's something special."

My face heats up thinking of Caine kissing me again. Back on the beach it was already quite heated, but to think of him kissing me right now, in bed? My mind is blown.

"I... I don't mind a do-over," I say meekly.

Caine's eyebrows raise at my words, but then there's this cheeky grin on his face.

"Are you giving me permission?" he asks.

"Maybe."

Caine moves closer to me, the ruffling of the sheets rings in my ears. My heart is beating faster, knowing what's to come.

Now that he's so close to me, Caine looks like he's starting to lose his nerve. The cocky grin on his face has disappeared. Instead he resembles someone as lost and new at this as I am.

If he doesn't kiss me soon, I'm going to faint from all the blood pumping to my face!

Slowly, but surely, Caine presses his thin lips against mine. They're a little moist, but they're warm and addicting. He moves his mouth against mine without a direction in mind. I follow along with him.

I feel overwhelmed by emotions surging towards the surface. Caine's mouth is hot and hungry for more – like he's got a thirst he needs to satiate.

This feels way more intense than the kiss at the beach. Caine's kissing me with intent, expressing how he feels through the way he touches me.

Caine sucks on my lips, then withdraws, our lips releasing from each other with a loud pop. He takes in a breath, and I use the opportunity to do the same.

His eyes are trained on me exclusively, a little unfocused and out of breath.

"Don't want to stop," he mumbles as he smacks his mouth against mine again.

-- < normal

It's like my body is reacting on instinct, as if someone else is taking control and making me move and respond to Caine's kiss. For being his first, he sure knows what to do to make my lips tingle.

His hand wanders over my shoulder, my waist, and down my thigh. It's hard to think of where his hand is going when his mouth is begging for all my attention.

Everywhere he touches me, my skin heats up like a furnace. It's almost like a dull ache; one that forces me to squirm in front of him.

Caine's finger touches the hem of my panties, causing me to draw in a sharp breath.

"Caine," I breathe out as I break out kiss.

Caine's hand freezes and he rests his forehead against mine.

"My name sounds so nice on your lips," he whispers.

He opens his eyes, staring right at me. I feel like I'm trapped in his gaze, with nowhere to escape.

"Say it again." There's a certain allure in his voice. Like he's casting a spell on me.

Unable to reject him, I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Caine..." I say.

Then, his mouth is back on mine again, hungry for more. I've given him permission, and I want him to take me.

Our hands explore each other, all the while I'm lost in Caine's cyan eyes. The expressions he's making, it's all burned into my mind.

Our breaths go faster; they're firing in a chaotic rhythm. My mind goes blank – I can't think about anything else besides Caine.

It accumulates into a single point until we're finally quiet, only trying to catch our breaths. Caine eventually slips out of bed to head to the bathroom, while I lay in bed, trying to process what happened.

Reality is slowly coming back to me.

-- < [Plus content](#)

He licks my lips with his tongue as if he's weaving a spell on me. My body responds to every small touch. I open my mouth and he dips in as if he never left.

It should be disgusting, this slimy mess, but it feels amazing. Like there's this burst of energy swirling around in my mouth, seeping into every part of my body. Everything is hot to the touch and I can't stop my body from writhing in excitement.

"Ah..." Caine moans right into my mouth when our tongues touch.

That's so hot, I want to hear it again, so I make the same movement.

Once more, he groans in response and stops moving for a second as he gathers his thoughts. He seems to really enjoy this – he can't hold back his moans.

I flick my tongue against his again, wanting to see the same response.

And sure enough, Caine squeezes his eyes shut tight and this sexy moan escapes from his open mouth.

Caine's tongue retreats, leaving a trail of saliva between us. Even that seems hot to me.

He takes a few seconds to catch his breath. Then he moves, placing a hand on top of my shoulder, brushing away my hair from my neck to expose my skin. He presses his mouth against me, right underneath my ear.

My body trembles in response and my toes curl up.

But Caine doesn't stop there. He places another kiss, right beneath the first one. He continues to do this until he's left a bunch of kisses on my neck.

"Ngh..." I can't hold myself back. This feels so good.

Caine continues to explore my sensitive neck, finding the spots that make me react the most. It doesn't matter where he presses his lips – everything is making my body tremble in pleasure.

His hand rubs my arm up and down until he places it on my side, pulling me closer to him.

I bite down on my lips as Caine sucks on a patch right above my collarbone. My skin feels like it's on fire, and I want more.

Ahh, he's still sucking. It's going to... it's going to... leave a mark.

It's so hard to think. My mind is spinning.

Finally, Caine releases my skin. It's throbbing almost painfully. But it's a good kind of pain.

"You're so cute," he breathes against my ear, making me turn red.

His raspy voice against my ear is making me shiver and squirm even more. It's a sexy voice. I want to hear him moan again.

I curl up my body a little, raising my legs – until my knee bumps against Caine.

"Ah!" Caine exclaims.

"Sorry!" I immediately reply, thinking I hurt him.

But when I see the way he's biting down on his lip to prevent himself from making any more noise, I realize I didn't hurt him at all. He's quivering not from pain, but pleasure.

My knee brushed against a bump – where it still is. It doesn't take me long to figure out what it is – the thin fabric of his underwear doesn't leave much to the imagination.

That's the contour of Caine's erection.

I touched it by accident.

And now I can't stop thinking about it.

My knee moves on its own, raising just a tiny bit, moving across the fleshy bump.

"Unnghh..." Caine's body twitches involuntarily.

He rests his head against the pillow, his eyes half open as he takes in quick breaths. Seeing him like this, I'm encouraged to continue.

I slowly lower my knee. The bump twitches and grows larger. Caine draws in a sharp breath.

"Joselina, that's...!" he hisses.

I know what that is, and it's not stopping me.

I hold his gaze as I rub my knee against him in a circle.

Caine's eyes squeeze shut and his mouth drops open as he takes in another breath. He's trembling so much, like he's holding up all of this energy that's waiting to burst.

Seeing him writhing around like this is so erotic. I'm as turned on as Caine is.

Then I can feel Caine move. Ever so slightly, he pushes his erection against my knee, keeping his eyes closed.

The hand on my side is now clinging onto me for support. He's enjoying this. *I'm* enjoying this.

Caine grinds his hips against my leg, his hard erection sliding across my knee. He's unable to hold himself back.

I'm surprised when Caine lifts up my nightgown with his hand, slips underneath it, and touches my bare skin. He moves lower, towards my stomach, until he reaches the hem of my underwear.

I hold in a breath, staring at him with wide eyes.

Then, I feel his finger slide across my underwear, dipping further down until he reaches a wet spot – I've been soaking through them the entire time.

Caine gulps down, watching me for a reaction; perhaps a sign to tell him it's alright to do this.

My body is practically begging him to touch me, heating up in places I didn't even realize could get hot.

If Caine's going to touch me, it's only fair I use my hands as well. In response, I remove my knee and instead stretch out my fingers until they touch the bump in Caine's underwear.

My index finger traces the outline of his penis. It feels trapped inside of the fabric, just waiting to burst out and stand up straight.

Caine takes my eagerness to touch him as sign to touch me, too.

His finger presses down right on my sensitive knob, and my entire body reacts to the muscle spasms contracting in my vagina.

I'm so turned on. Just the briefest touch is sending waves of pleasure down my body.

Seeing my positive reaction, Caine slides his finger across the fabric, pressing down in between my lips. I shut my eyes as I start to quiver – that's just the right spot.

I don't want to keep Caine high and dry, so I press the entire palm of my hand against his penis, cupping whatever I can. I can feel it throb against my hand, it's rock hard and full of blood.

"Fshuu," he breathes out this odd sound.

Caine's finger slowly slides up and down my panties, exerting just enough pressure for me to want more. It feels slick and moist, but I don't care about ruining a pair of panties – I want him to continue rubbing me.

I squeeze his erection with my hand, drawing out another low groan from Caine. It still seems like it's uncomfortable for him though, being all restricted by his underwear.

Gathering my courage, I decide to slip my hand down his underwear, lifting up the hem with my fingers.

My fingertips come into contact with his bare skin, and Caine's moan this time is louder than before.

"Ahh! Hmm..." Caine licks his lips, looking at me with such a wanton expression.

My hand wraps around the shaft, moving it until it stands up straight, no longer tied down by fabric. It's twitching and throbbing against my hand, and Caine can't keep his body still as he rocks back and forth very gently.

And just like that, Caine decides to forgo my panties as well, pushing them aside and letting his finger rub against my folds for real.

I arch my back, pushing myself closer to his hand so that he puts more pressure on it. He slides his finger up and down, circling around my clitoris. It's numbing my mind. I'm unable to think clearly.

The only thing I can remember to do is to wrap my hand around his penis and stroke him, too.

The tip is wet with precum, but nothing can compare to the fluids that are coming out of me. His entire finger has become slick and wet with my juices.

Ahh, I want him to enter me already. The way he teases me with his finger... It's starting to become almost painful.

"F-faster," he croaks out, his voice hoarse and dry.

I finally pick up the pace, using my hand to stroke him up and down, pulling along the skin on his shaft. His precum accumulates even more, until I've spread it all across the skin, letting me rub him more smoothly.

Caine's mouth is wide open, his chest is heaving up and down. I've never seen such a sexy sight until now. I want to see the face he makes when he comes...

But Caine isn't done with me yet.

He's been swirling his finger around my clit, but now he finally adds a second finger that circles right around my entrance. I'm shivering in anticipation. Yes, please. I want that very much.

I squeeze his penis hard, wanting him to enter already, and Caine finally gets the hint.

He pushes his two fingers against the entrance of my vagina. It's so wet that it isn't hard to slip in at all. His fingers spread my insides, filling me up. He presses down until his knuckles go in as well, until he can't anymore.

My walls cling around him, throbbing along with the beat of my heart. Caine's penis twitches in excitement.

"You look so... hot," he whispers.

Caine slowly pulls his fingers out, brushing against a very pleasurable spot that makes me squirm.

"I want to hear you," says Caine.

Caine moves closer as his fingers plunge inside of me again. His tongue flicks against my earlobe.

"Let me hear you..."

Everything feels so amazing right now. The fingers inside me, Caine's hot and sexy voice near my ear, or his tongue exploring my skin... Caine grinds his penis against my hand, it feels like he's about to burst. / feel like I'm about to burst.

Caine uses his thumb to rub my clitoris at the same time, causing these almost painful shocks of pleasure to emerge.

"Ahh..." I moan loudly, unable to hold back.

"Yeah, that's it," Caine encourages me.

His fingers slip in and out, my body responds in tune, bucking against his hand, shivering each time.

My grip on his penis tightens as I feel my body building up with pleasure. I stroke down *hard*.

"Nghh," Caine groans loudly.

We stare at each other, stroking, rubbing, letting each other hear all these forbidden noises.

"Imma come if you keep looking like that," Caine grunts.

By now, Caine's entire hand is soaked, but that doesn't stop him from fingering me. It only seems to encourage him.

Just a little more... All this pleasure is about to rupture.

"Don't hold back... let it out," he says.

Encouraged by Caine, I let loose – a long moan escaping from my mouth.

"Fuck, that's so hot."

"C-Caine," I stutter. "I'm..."

"Shit." Caine's body trembles and he rocks his hips against my hand, making his penis slide in and out.

"Say my name again," he demands.

I'm too far gone to care about how embarrassing this all is. Right now, all I want is release, and Caine is my salvation.

"Caine..." I repeat.

His fingers dip in, then out. I'm about to burst.

"Again," he hisses loudly.

That look on his face, so dominant, so sexy – I can't anymore.

"Caine!" I cry out.

I push myself against Caine's hand, forcing his fingers inside once more, until everything comes together. My walls cling around his fingers. I bite down on my lips as my orgasm sends me quivering all over, my muscles contracting violently.

I'm panting hard as I let the wave of pleasure befall me like a gentle blanket.

Then I look over at Caine, still gasping for air, and he's got his mouth open and eyes closed.

"Ahh....Argh!" Caine groans as he slams his hips against my hand.

Immediately I feel my hand getting covered in semen.

Caine continues to groan, his pace slowing down, his body shaking with each spasm of his muscles.

"Nghh," he moans as I stroke him all the way down to the base, drawing out all of his juices.

Caine's fingers finally slip out of me, and I finally let go of his penis.

We're both taking in shallow breaths. Tired and content.

My hand is sticky and covered in sperm, but at the moment, I don't care much. I just want to bask in this glow with him. With Caine.

I'm so glad I got to see him orgasm. That's a face I'll never forget.

Caine finally opens his eyes. That look he's got... I am enamoured by him.

We lie like that for a minute, our breaths returning back to their normal pace.

Caine is the first one to remove the sheets from him.

"Gonna clean up," he mutters.

That's when I realize his entire stomach is covered in semen. I look away from him, suddenly feeling reality returning to me.

Caine gets out of bed and disappears from the bedroom. I take this time to grab myself some tissues from my bag and clean off my hand, and quickly put on some clean underwear.

I throw the tissues into the bin, and I stare at it for a second.

Those tissues are covered with my and Caine's bodily fluids...

Caine fingered me and I jerked him off. It all feels real now. Like a haze that's been lifted.

-- < merge

I hide myself underneath the covers. I moaned out his name like a crazy person, that's so embarrassing! What if Sarah and Kevin heard all of that!? I'd die if they did!

Caine shuffles back into the room, quickly slipping in bed with me. My back is turned towards him so I can't see his face. All I hear is his slow breaths behind me.

My heart starts pounding like mad.

Then I feel Caine's arm slip around my waist, pulling me into his chest.

"Good night," he murmurs against the back of my head.

Caine snuggling up to me is not something I expected, but I'm not going to question it.

I'm going to close my eyes and enjoy it.

--

Sunlight streams into the room, peering into my eyes, forcing me to wake up.

It takes me a second to realize Caine's got his arms wrapped around me, keeping me locked in place.

Oh right, we fell asleep like this.

Memories of the night before come flooding back and I turn crimson. My heart is hammering in my chest, knowing the things we did to each other.

...And it's slowly turning me on again.

No, stop thinking about it!

"Hrmpf, can you stop fidgeting?" Caine's voice suddenly emerges.

My eyes widen in surprise as I stop moving about.

"You feel nice," he mumbles.

Oh no, this isn't good for my heart at all.

Being in Caine's arms like this, after doing all of that...

A knock on the door alerts us both.

"Guys, get up already. We have to leave in half an hour if we want to catch our train," Sarah warns us.

Oh no – we're late!

I roll out of bed and Caine follows suit.

-- **train**

I drop down onto my seat near the window. We're here.

"Can't believe we barely made it," Kevin sighs out loud in relief.

"Next time I'm leaving you behind," huffs Sarah.

"Don't look at me! It was Caine's fault!" I defend myself.

Caine whips his head around, looking insulted.

"Me!? You're the one that hogged the bathroom for twenty minutes! I really needed to pee, you know."

"Exactly, you took *way* too long to pee." I cross my arms and nod.

"You are both at fault!" Sarah reprimands us.

Not liking Sarah's tone, Caine glares at her.

"I wouldn't be in this situation if you just stayed in your own room."

Kevin's face suddenly turns scarlet and he covers his face with both his hands.

"Why, how does me sleeping in Kevin's room make a difference whether or not you two were late this morning?" Sarah questions him.

Now I'm the one blushing – just like Kevin is.

"Because my phone – which has my alarm on it – is in that room!" Caine argues back.

"Oh." Sarah looks a little apologetic.

"Why were you in there anyway?" he asks.

No, Caine! Don't just come out and ask that question! You know damn well what they were doing in there!

"None of your business," she huffs.

Then she winks at Kevin. "It's our little secret."

Kevin's face turns even more red. Oh no, the poor guy.

Caine pulls a disgusted face.

"Besides, I won't ask what you two were up to."

Caine and I look at each other, shyly averting our eyes after a single second. Damn it Sarah, you'll be the death of me.

To distract myself, I check my phone for any missed e-mails. I'm almost expecting an inbox full of hate mail from that troll on Daisydots, but surprisingly, I only have a single personal message. From a member who wanted to ask where I got a certain pattern from.

"Huh," I say out loud. I didn't expect that.

Caine suddenly leans in, trying to read what's on my screen.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" he asks curiously.

"Nothing. No mail," I answer.

"Is that bad? Were you expecting something?"

"No, nothing is good."

When Caine's cap nearly pokes my eye, I realize how close Caine's is to my face.

At which point, Caine's eyes dart over to mine, and we stare at each other for a bit. The memory of me calling out Caine's name in bed surges through my mind. I blush and quickly look away. My heart just won't stop racing when I look him in the eye!

"Did you take some nice pictures last night?" asks Kevin.

"Ah. Yeah, I did. It was pretty clear," Caine replies.

"Don't forget to send me a copy," I point out.

Caine shoots me a small smile.

"You'll get it, I won't forget," he reassures me. The tenderness in his voice makes me swoon.

After last night, things between me and Caine definitely won't be the same anymore.

-- boutique

When I'm finally back home, I throw myself into my work. With a sketchbook on my lap and a pencil in hand, I start scribbling my ideas on the paper.

Ever since last night, seeing the stars with Caine – something's ignited in me. I'm filled with so many ideas and visions of fashion. I'm definitely working on a starry night theme, combining it with an ocean theme.

I'm reminded of the earrings that Caine gave to me; the jellyfish ones with a starry dome. I sketch out a dress with the skirt in the shape of a jellyfish, covered in sparkling stars. Yes, this will do just fine for the fashion week.

Hours later and I've got dozens of sketches lying about, tweaking and fine tuning them to my taste. I've got a concrete idea of what my line should look like – I've got at least nine pieces I want to show off.

All that's left is buying the materials. I'm going to need a lot of cloth.

I've been so busy with sketching that I haven't noticed I got a bunch of messages on my phone.

As I open up my chat app, I see I've got messages from Sarah and Caine.

...I check Caine's message first. Forgive me, Sarah.

Caine:

"Hey, I did some slight editing. Here they are."

There's a download link attached to his message, which I click. It's a file with a bunch of images. The pictures he took that night.

They're simply gorgeous, breathtaking, really. It spurs me on to do my best with my own designs.

Oh – there's the one with me and Caine in the foreground. We really did turn into simple silhouettes, with Caine's arm behind my back as if he's holding me. It's a very romantic picture...

I save it as the wallpaper for my locked screen on my phone and no one can stop me.

1. "I adore the one that has us in it. It's the best one."
2. "They turned out so well! Gorgeous! I'd love them as a print!"

Joselina:

"I adore the one that has us in it. It's the best one."

Caine:

"Yeah, same. It's got the best composition."

Joselina:

"Well, I just like it 'cuz we're both in it :)"

Caine:

"That, too... ^^"

Joselina:

"They turned out so well! Gorgeous! I'd love them as a print!"

Caine:

"No need to overreact. They're just pics."

Joselina:

"Don't undersell yourself. You did a great job."

Caine:

"Thanks :)"

Caine:

"What are you up to?"

Joselina:

"Working on some designs for the fashion week in August."

Caine:

"Oh, cool."

Caine:

"If you need help, just let me know."

Joselina:

"Thanks for the offer! I may take you up on that."

I then check on Sarah's messages. She's just asking me if I got home alright.

Joselina:

"I'm home and at work! Do you want to go shopping with me this weekend?"

Sarah:

"Shopping? The clothing kind of shopping, or the kind that *becomes* the clothes?"

Joselina:

"I'm sure we could combine both."

Sarah:

"Saturday or Sunday?"

Joselina:

"The market is only on Saturday."

Sarah:

"Oh I'm sorry, I'm on a date with Kevin on Saturday :("

Joselina:

"Traitor!"

Sarah:

"Why don't you invite Caine?"

Joselina:

"Haven't actually thought about that. I'm not sure if he'd be interested."

Sarah:

"Girl, he's all over you. Invite him."

I end up rolling my eyes at the screen. But sure, I can try and invite Caine. If Sarah is having her date with Kevin, then I can have mine with Caine.

Suddenly I feel nervous about asking him.

I finally text Caine.

Joselina:

"I've got a question."

Caine:

"What's up?"

1. "Do you want to go out on a date on Saturday?"

2. "Are you free on Saturday?"

Joselina:

"Do you want to go out on a date on Saturday?"

Caine:

"A date? With me?"

Joselina:

"Who else, your evil twin brother from a while ago?"

Caine:

"Hah."

Caine:

"Yeah... I want to go ^^"

Joselina:

"Great!"

Caine:

"Do you have something in mind?"

Joselina:

"I need to go shopping for fabric."

Caine:

"Oh. You're not just using me as a mule, are you? -_-"

Joselina:

"Are you saying you won't carry stuff for me?"

Caine:

"Wtf. No! If that's the reason you want me to come, then forget it!"

Joselina:

"I want to go with you. We can have lunch there, too."

Caine:

"Whatever."

Joselina:

"So it's a date?"

Caine:

"Sure."

Joselina:

"Are you gonna carry my stuff or not? ;)"

Caine:

"Screw you. Carry your own shit."

Joselina:

"Hahaha, I'm just teasing! <3"

Caine:

"Keep teasing and I'll ditch you."

Joselina:

"You wouldn't dare to leave me~"

Caine:

"You are so annoying, you know that? -_-"

Joselina:

"You're the one who said yes to going out on a date with someone 'annoying' ;)"

Caine:

"Regretting it now."

Joselina:

"I'm looking forward to it!"

Caine:

"..."

Caine:

"Yeah, same."

I put my phone down with a grin on my face that I can't wipe off. I asked him out – we're going on a legitimate date!

Joselina:

"Are you free on Saturday?"

\n<\fb\fs[25]Caine]:>\StopMouth()

"Do I look like a guy that's going partying every weekend?"

Joselina:

"You could just answer the question..."

Caine:

"I'm free."

Joselina:

"I need to go shopping for some fabric. Do you... want to join me?"

Caine:

"You mean that monthly market in the city?"

Joselina:

"Yeah, that's the one!"

Caine:

"...Are you just looking for someone to carry your stuff?"

Joselina:

"No of course not :("

Joselina:

"I just want to spend some time with you. If you don't want to go, I'll just go alone."

Caine:

"No, it's ok. I'll go."

Joselina:

"Really? Great!"

Caine:

"So like... are we..."

Caine:

"Is this like a date?"

I have to force myself to not squeal out loud as I stare at my screen.

Caine's asking me if this is a date! I kind of want it to be? I'm just using the fabric market as a perfect excuse to spend more time with him.

But what if he'll reject me if I say it's a date? I mean yeah we kissed before and did a whole lot of other things that night in the cabin, but... my heart can't take it if he ghosts me.

Joselina:

"...I don't mind if it is."

Caine:

"Really?"

Joselina:

"Well, if you ask me, maybe I'll say yes :)"

Caine:

"Oh."

Caine:

"Then. Do you want to go on a date with me?"

Joselina:

"Yes, I'd very much like that!"

Caine:

"Cool ^^"

Caine:

"Looking forward to it."

Joselina:

"Same!"

I finally put the phone down with a stupid grin on my face. My heart is racing. I'm going out on a date with Caine.

Soon enough though, I get another alert on my phone.

Caine:

"So like... do I pick you up? Or do we meet in the city?"

Caine:

"I've never been..."

Caine:

"I mean."

Caine:

"Yeah -_-;;;"

Joselina:

"Why don't we meet at the bus station? At 11:00 :)"

Caine:

"Yeah. Ok. Can do."

I giggle to myself; Caine is nervous, just like me.

I can't wait to go on a proper date with Caine. Things are going well between us.

Chapter [019] -- Boutique

Even though I'm behind the counter, I can't help but check my phone every minute for a new message from Caine.

We're going on a date this weekend and I'm excited and nervous at the same time! I want to see him so bad...

Thoughts of that night we spend together in the cabin come flooding back in my mind and I end up blushing. I still can't believe that happened between us.

Finally, a customer enters the store – a much needed distraction. I can't keep fantasizing about Caine in the middle of a work day...

"Hello, is there anything I can help you with?" I ask politely.

The woman shakes her head. "Just browsing," she replies.

I let her wander around the store on her own, browsing through the available collection. Eventually she reaches the area which has my own clothes and she inspects a cute blouse.

"Excuse me?" she calls for my attention.

"Yes, is there anything you need?" I walk over towards her.

She shows the yellow blouse in her hands.

"Is this in any other colour?"

"Yes, I've got it in green here as well." I browse through the rack to pull out the green version.

She simply looks at it and shakes her head.

"No, that one is an ugly colour as well. Never mind."

Ugly!?

What's wrong with the green or yellow? They're muted colours, I think they look just fine.

"It's too bad. The design is rather cute, but the colours just remind me of puke," she sighs.

I find myself getting annoyed at her tactless comments. My work does not look like puke!

"There are a lot of people who like that kind of colour," I say through gritted teeth.

The woman snorts. "Yeah, people with no taste."

I'm stunned at having this woman insult my work so directly. How rude of her! If she doesn't like my work, she can go ahead and leave!

"Well, if that's what you think, then you probably won't be finding anything you like here," I eventually say in an annoyed tone.

She nods her head. "Indeed, I don't think so either. Have a good day."

She finally turns around and leaves the boutique.

I find my heart racing at her tactless comments; I'm just so annoyed right now! I'm getting worked up about a random woman who probably knows nothing about fashion anyway.

I take my phone from the counter and browse the Daisy Dots website to cheer myself up. Thankfully, I don't have any messages waiting for me from that stupid troll to ruin my day even more.

Saturday can't come fast enough...

-- **station**

Finally, Saturday arrives. It's 11:00 and I'm waiting for Caine to arrive at the station.

I haven't seen him all week. My nerves are getting the best of me.

It's our first date. I'm way too dressed up for simply shopping around, but I don't care. I'm excited.

Then I finally spot Caine in the distance; his red hair is like a beacon at times.

"There you are!" he says a little out of breath.

I cock my head to the side and smile at him. His hair – he changed it. He straightened and parted it like I did before. It's so cute.

"I thought you were waiting at the other exit."

I shake my head. "Sorry, I guess I should have specified."

Caine simply narrows his eyes at me, then lets out a long and exasperated sigh.

Then he stuffs his hands into his pockets, looking down at the floor.

"Whatever. You ready to go?"

"Yeah!" I say cheerfully.

1. "Do you want to hold my hand?"

2. "By the way, you look really nice today."

"Do you want to hold my hand?"

Caine doesn't respond for a second, remaining stoic.

Then the wheels in his head start turning and he averts his gaze towards my hand.

Immediately his cheeks turn red. I can't help but grin at his reaction.

"M-my hand?" he stutters.

"Yes. Do you want to hold hands?"

Caine's mouth drops open.

"I, uhm, I..."

Quickly, he hides his red face by blocking it with his arm, turning away from me. He looks positively adorable.

Then, in a very timid way, his index finger touches the back of my hand. He's hesitant and nervous, but that doesn't stop him from inching closer.

I wait patiently until he's gathered all his courage to fully clasp my hand within his own.

"Sorry, I'm still unsure of what I should be doing..." he mumbles.

"You're doing just fine. Even your hair is looking nice."

Caine finally looks at me with a small and awkward smile.

"You always look nice."

Like an arrow straight through the heart – he didn't even have to be told what to do! What a smooth line.

"By the way, you look really nice today," I compliment him.

Caine shyly scratches the tip of his nose.

"T-thanks..." he mumbles.

"I figured since it's a date I should... tame my hair, or something like that," he admits timidly.

Hearing him say it's a date makes me so happy.

"And, uhm – you look pretty today, too."

My face suddenly burns with a blush. Caine being all honest and forward like this is giving me too many feels.

"Oh, why thank you," I mumble shyly.

"Not saying you usually look ugly or something!" he explains in a rushed voice.

"I mean, ugh, you look pretty every day," he mutters afterwards.

Is he *trying* to kill me!? I can't take this! I'm so happy and embarrassed at the same time!

"Argh, I don't know what the fuck I'm saying – let's go!"

Caine grabs my hand and pulls me next to his side. I almost trip over my feet, but his strong grip keeps me upright.

I don't dare look him in the eye, my face is betraying everything I'm feeling. I can't believe he's complimenting me and holding my hand.

I'm so happy right now my heart feels like it's about to burst into fireworks.

Caine gives a small tug on my hand, and off we walk towards the market, hand in hand.

-- **fabric market**

Velvet! Chiffon! Organza! Silk!

Hundreds of different kinds of fabrics are lined along the stalls. The market has such a huge selection – I don't even know where to begin.

I love shopping for fabric!

"I didn't realize you'd be this hyper," mentions Caine.

"What, how can you not be? Look at this treasure trove! It's got everything I'll ever need!"

I happily strut over to the nearest booth, dragging Caine behind me. He's still holding onto my hand.

"Looking for anything specific?" he asks, genuinely curious.

"A lot of dark blues, gold, and star patterns."

"Stars?"

"Yeah, I told you before, right? I'm going to do a star themed collection."

"I don't really care much about fashion, but that's probably the only time I'll make an exception," says Caine with a grin.

"I like anything related to the stars."

"When you took me out to see the Milky Way, it sort of clicked," I explain.

"I want to capture that feeling and express it through my clothes."

I finally let go of Caine's hand and dig in through the rolls of fabric at the booth. The different kinds of textures feel great against my skin.

Perhaps I can create a velvet dress in navy blue. I'll have to make sure it doesn't look too heavy though, so it would need to be a short skirt length.

As I'm deep in thought, I quickly go towards the next vendor, completely absorbed in my craft.

I get my hands on some dark blue velvet, I feel like I hit the jackpot.

Happily, I turn towards Caine.

"Look!"

Except it's not Caine I see to my right – it's a pole from the stand instead.

In the blink of an eye, Caine swiftly places his hand on my forehead, preventing me from slamming right into it.

Shocked, I stand stock still with the fabric in my hands. I blink at his palm obscuring my sight.

"Geez, watch out," he sighs in relief.

I take a small step back and Caine removes his hand. Wow, I really didn't see that pole. That was some very quick thinking of him.

Caine is, unexpectedly, very observant.

"Sorry," I mumble, unsure why I'm really apologizing.

"I lose track of my surroundings when I'm shopping," I admit.

"I noticed."

Caine then cocks his head to the side, flashing me a cheeky smile.

"But you're kinda cute when you get all lost in thought like that."

I raise my eyebrows at him in shock. My heart does a flip in my chest.

"Huh, cute?"

I wasn't prepared to be showered in compliments today!

"Nothing, never mind, keep looking," he grumbles and quickly looks away.

Even though I'm here to shop for fabric, it still is my date with Caine first and foremost.

This thief is stealing my heart, little by little.

We continue to browse the booths. I've picked out a few rolls of fabric that really suit my needs.

Caine is the one that accepts the bag from the vendor.

"What the hell – it's super heavy!" he complains.

"You don't need to carry it for me. I can do it myself," I say as I reach for the bag in his hand.

He swiftly pulls it out of my reach.

"No way, you'll be complaining you're tired after five minutes. I don't want to listen to that."

"So much for saying you don't want to be a mule," I say with a chuckle.

Caine grits his teeth at me, then extends out his other free hand towards me.

"Whatever, give me your hand. Might as well carry *all* the weight."

I happily hold his hand, snickering at his gruffness. One moment he's super charming and open, and in the next second, he's awkward and unrefined.

He's like a diamond in the rough.

I'm having a great time browsing the selection of fabrics with Caine. Steadily, the amount I've bought is increasing.

Stubborn as hell, Caine carries it all for me. I feel bad for him, though. I don't want him to get tired lugging around all this weight.

"When's this fashion show happening anyways?" Caine asks after a while.

"It starts on August 18th. I've got a spot on the 19th though."

"You don't have much time left," he remarks.

"Yeah, I need to work fast. August is already next month."

I stare at him from the corner of my eye, wondering if perhaps Caine would like to come watch, too.

"Do you want to come?"

"To watch your collection?" he asks.

"My designs, yeah."

"I don't know... how much does a ticket cost for that sort of thing?"

I grin at him, giggling a little.

"It's okay, I can get you a discount – even with backstage access!"

Caine cocks an eyebrow at me.

"Backstage? Why would I want to see what happens backstage?"

1. "To see me, of course."

2. "In case you're interested in seeing what happens behind the scenes in fashion."

"To see me, of course," I state bluntly.

Caine's cheeks gain a steady amount of colour.

"Oh," he blurts out.

"Are... are you going to be a model?"

I shake my head.

"Haha, no. I'll be helping the models get dressed though."

"So, everyone's getting undressed except you."

"Are you implying you want to see me undressed?" I smirk at him.

Caine's eyes bulge out at this turn of events.

"Hah? No, I'm not!"

He drops my hand and angrily stomps away from me.

It's so easy to push his buttons.

"In case you're interested in seeing what happens behind the scenes in fashion."

"Not particularly, no. Isn't it just a bunch of models getting dressed?"

"That, and I'm making any minor adjustments and making sure they're not walking out topless."

Caine snickers at the thought.

"Don't some fashion shows do that? Make the models walk naked."

"Yes they do... I'm definitely not one of them. Trust me, no one's going out butt naked on the catwalk."

"Not even you?" Caine smirks at me.

I pout at him. "I'm not a model."

He suddenly leans in close to me.

"A shame. I wouldn't mind seeing it."

A blush spreads across my entire face and I stop walking from Caine's provocative comment.

His hand slips out of mine as Caine continues to walk ahead. He turns to face me with this arrogant grin.

"You comin'?"

I try and shake the blush away and follow suit.

--

Two hours later and I've bought as much as I wanted.

There's so many bags, Caine couldn't carry them all alone, so I'm lugging around some bags as well.

"Are you done yet? My feet are killing me," Caine whines.

"Look who's complaining now, huh," I point out.

"Well, I'm the one who's been carrying your shit this entire time."

"Alright, alright, let's rest and have lunch."

"Finally!"

"I know a good place," I suggest with a smile.

-- **café**

We stand in front of the register, deciding what we want to order from the menu.

When we've recited our order, I turn to Caine.

"Why don't you go find us a seat while I wait?"

Not saying anything, Caine simply pries the bags from my hand and saunters away. I can't help but stare at his retreating back.

He's been so helpful the entire time, I almost feel pampered. Well, that's not a bad thing.

We even held hands a few times, it really does feel like a date.

Not to mention he's done way more lewd things with his hand... Memories of the cabin flush back into my mind once again. It's making the heat rise to my cheeks.

Okay, I should *not* be thinking of that night while I'm out in public. That's way too embarrassing.

Though I'd be lying if I said I didn't want it to happen again...

Gosh – when did I turn into such a pervert!?

"Ma'am, your order is ready," the clerk calls out to me.

I snap out of my thoughts and quickly take the tray from her.

-- café booth

There's something about looking for Caine's red hair that makes me feel all giddy. I spot him at the furthest booth in the back. All the bags are on the floor, underneath the table.

I set the tray down onto the table.

"Ahh, I'm dying of hunger," says Caine as he quickly grabs a fork and knife and cuts a piece out of his grilled cheese sandwich.

I sit down on the opposite side and smile at the cheesecake in front of me.

"Enjoy, you earned it!" I say cheerfully. "Thanks for carrying around my stuff."

He gives me a curt but bashful nod, then continues his assault on his sandwich.

I try out a bite from my cheesecake as well. The rich texture just melts on my tongue – it's delicious.

"Is it good?" Caine asks, noticing my delightful expression.

"It is, yes! Want to try it?"

Caine shrugs. "If you're offering."

1. Feed him.

2. Hand him the fork.

I cut off a small part and balance it delicately on top of the fork, holding it in front of Caine's face.

This sort of reminds me of that time I tried to get him to eat that chicken sandwich at college.

"A-are you serious?" Caine asks, bewildered at my boldness.

I tilt my head to the side and give him a mischievous grin.

"Why, don't you want it?"

"There's people around," he grumbles defiantly.

"So? We're in the back. No one's watching us."

Caine's face slowly morphs from genuine horror to apprehension, and finally, to submission.

"Fine," he grunts.

Closing his eyes, he leans forward across the table, aiming for the cheesecake on my fork. Slowly, he parts open his lips.

It looks a little sensual from my point of view, but I happily rest the tines on his bottom lip. Caine covers the entire fork with his mouth, then leans back, taking the small piece of cheesecake with him.

I can't help but grin when I see the fork slip out of his mouth. He looks really bashful. I love this expression.

"See, that wasn't so bad, now was it?" I say with a smirk.

Caine ignores me as he savours the taste of the cheesecake before swallowing.

"Is it good?"

"Not bad."

I smile at him, simply glowing at this point for seeing Caine go along with my request.

I push my plate towards Caine and hand over the fork.

"Here you go."

Caine makes quick work of my cheesecake, taking a much larger piece than I thought he'd take. He happily swallows the piece and nods at me.

"Not bad!" he says as he pushes the plate back to me.

"Want to try my grilled cheese sandwich?"

"Oh yeah, sure, why not."

I wait for Caine to push his plate towards me, but didn't expect him to cut off a piece himself. He stretches out his arm with the fork in his hand; he intends to feed it like this to me.

I feel a blush creeping up on my face and I look away.

"Really? Here, in public?" I mumble shyly.

Caine smirks at me, finding enjoyment in my embarrassment.

"Of course – now open up."

"Well, I guess we're at the back anyway..." I say and I awkwardly lean forward.

Caine pushes the piece into my mouth. It's still warm and the cheese melts onto my tongue.

Ahh, he really is feeding me like this in the café!

I quickly sit back and swallow. I kind of feel embarrassed.

"Didn't think you'd be this easy to tease," he says with a chuckle.

I avert my eyes away from him – that cheeky little devil!

"Oh, I guess now's a good time," he says all of a sudden.

My ears perk up.

"Hmm?"

Caine takes something out of his pocket, a small paper bag. It's an envelope.

He timidly scratches the back of his neck as he slides it across the table towards me.

"This is for you."

"Me?" I ask as I lift it up and look at it.

It's really light, but I can tell there's something inside it. I take off the little piece of tape holding it shut and dump out whatever was inside.

A golden necklace slides out of the packaging.

"A thank you... for inviting me out that weekend," he explains.

There's a pendant on the end in the shape of a small, blue moon. I inspect it closer; the moon is decorated with golden stars and it's got glitter inside. Oh cute, it's like it's sparkling with tiny stars!

"Do you like it?" Caine asks shyly.

"It's gorgeous," I breathe out in awe. "Did you make this?"

Caine slowly nods his head. He looks really anxious about my reaction.

"Wow, you're amazing. You've got a lot of talent!"

Caine flops his head down onto the table, hiding his face away from me.

"Let me put it on," I say eagerly and I unclasp the small hook.

I slip the necklace around my neck and try to get the small lock to close. Except I can't get it right...

I look over at Caine, who's having some kind of existential crisis, then I hold out the necklace towards him.

"Can you help me put it on?"

He lifts his head up from the table, staring at me for a couple of seconds before deciding what to do.

"Oh, yeah, sure," he says awkwardly and quickly gets up from his seat.

He walks over to my side and takes the necklace from my hand. I turn my back to him and brush away the hair; exposing my bare neck.

The coolness of the necklace touches the surface of my skin as Caine wraps it around my neck. His knuckles brush up against me, making that area feel warmer.

My skin prickles with goosebumps when I can feel his breath lightly tickling me. He's so close right now...

All of a sudden, Caine's lips are pressed against the side of my neck. I draw in a sharp breath as he leaves a small kiss behind.

...That's such a sneak attack! I'm completely caught off guard!

"Caine!" I call out. There are people around!

"You're the one that said we're in the back," he murmurs against my ear.

My face heats up in response. He's using my own words against me.

What's gotten into him all of a sudden?

Caine withdraws and quickly tries to fasten the necklace, but accidentally lets go of his hold and the necklace slips away from my neck. It falls to the floor, underneath the table.

"Ah, my bad, I'll get it." Caine quickly dives underneath the table.

I press my hand against the spot where Caine kissed me before; it's hot to the touch. I'm getting goosebumps. I didn't expect Caine to be so bold and just go for it.

...But I can't say I dislike it. In fact, I'm craving his touch.

"Do you see it?" I ask him, realizing Caine's taking a while.

"I think it went underneath the booth."

"Just don't look up my skirt, okay?"

There's suddenly a hand brushing up my ankle.

"Too late."

1. "Are you going to kiss me there, too?"

2. "Pervert!"

"Are you going to kiss me there, too?" I ask him.

The back of Caine's hand stalls, lingering on my skin. But then it moves again, up towards my knee, reaching the hem of my skirt.

My heart starts pounding faster when I feel Caine's fingers fan out against the inside of my thigh.

He's seriously going for it!

"Joselina?"

I instantly smash my legs together, crushing Caine's hand in the process. I look up next to me.

I instantly push my knees together.

"Pervert!" I yell at him, completely embarrassed.

Caine simply chuckles in response.

"Relax, it's too dark down here to see anything."

"J-just hurry up and find the necklace," I mumble. "Don't be a perv."

"Perv?"

Surprised, I look up next to me.

Oh crap.

It's Sarah and Kevin!

The heat rises to my cheeks. They've caught us in a very compromising position here...!

I push my hand down on Caine's head, forcing him to stay low. He better not come out of there right now. Not unless he wants to explain *why* he was underneath the table feeling up my leg in the first place.

"S-Sarah and Kevin, hi!" I greet them awkwardly. "I thought you were out on a date."

Sarah cocks her head to the side.

"We are, we decided to get something to drink over here."

Kevin raises his hand and gives me a tiny wave.

"Hello."

"Weren't you out with Caine?" ask Sarah.

I start sweating bullets.

"He's... he's..." My mind is blank, I can't think of anything to say.

Sarah eyes the bags around the booth. Thank god they're obscuring her sight from Caine underneath the table.

"Did he bail out on you?" she asks.

"Uhm, yes!" I immediately reply.

Caine hits my shin in response.

Inconspicuously, I kick him back.

"I mean, he had to leave early. Something came up," I explain.

Please don't notice him, please don't notice the redhead underneath the table.

"I'm sure it was important, I don't think he'd abandon you on purpose," says Kevin with a smile.

"I'm just, uhm, getting something to eat here before I head back home."

Sarah and Kevin look at the table and see Caine's half eaten grilled sandwich. Shit.

"He must have really left in a hurry," Sarah muses out loud.

"What, this? No, no, this is mine." I pull the plate towards me and grab the sandwich.

"I was just really famished," I say as I take out a bite.

Caine flicks his finger against my knee. That little...! Is it because I'm eating his sandwich!?

Sarah and Kevin are giving me an odd look.

Ugh, I need to get rid of them.

"But uhm, don't let me keep you from your date! Please, enjoy yourselves."

"Oh nonsense, shall we join you?" Sarah asks gleefully.

Caine bonks his head against the table, causing the entire thing to tremble and all the cutlery to jump an inch into the air, causing a huge ruckus.

"What was tha—"

"—Ow!" I cry out loud in a high tone. "Sorry, I hit my knee against the table!"

Caine – are you *trying* to get found out!?

"But please, enjoy yourselves alone! I don't want to intrude," I say quickly.

"You're not intruding–"

"–Besides, I think Kevin wants to spend some time alone with you."

Kevin's face suddenly turns bright red.

Sarah looks over at Kevin. Seeing his embarrassed face, Sarah can't help but smile.

"...Alright, if that's what Kevin wants."

Kevin is way too embarrassed to even reply.

"It was good to see you! Have fun!" I say, hoping they'll leave quickly.

"Okay, bye!" Sarah says with a big smile and turns around, walking away with Kevin.

They sit down at a booth near the entrance, away from us.

I sigh in relief; they didn't spot Caine.

A mop of red hair slowly appears above the table, until I see Caine crawling back into his seat.

When he sees his grilled cheese sandwich, he glares at me.

"Why were you eating my food!?"

I grit my teeth at him and slam my hand on the table.

"Why couldn't you sit still!? They almost saw you!"

"Why'd you kick me!?"

"You started it!"

"Argh – it's all your fault!"

"What, mine!? *You* dropped the necklace in the first place!" I fire back.

"I got distracted, okay!"

"By what?"

"Your sexy neck!"

...

"I mean...!" Caine's face turns crimson.

"Uhm!"

I'm blushing furiously as well.

Slowly, Caine slinks back into his seat, halfway disappearing underneath the table again.

"Fuck," he mutters as he covers his face with his hands.

An awkward silence passes between us.

He thinks my neck is sexy? Maybe he's got a thing for exposed skin? I'm so embarrassed for some reason, hearing him say that so bluntly.

"Uhm," I start out slowly. "Did you find it?"

Caine sits up straight again, but refuses to look me in the eye. He hovers his hand across the table and shows me the necklace.

I quickly take it from him.

"This time, put it on yourself," he grumbles.

I'm in complete agreement of that.

I slip the necklace around my neck, and while it's still a little hard to put it on myself, I finally manage to close the clasp. There, it's finally on.

"Alright, let's get out of here already. I feel so awkward with Sarah and Kevin here," I say.

Caine groans out loud.

"One problem."

"What?"

He points at the booth where they are.

"They're right at the entrance. What am I gonna do, just waltz up there and pretend I don't know them?"

Oh no, he's got a point. They'd wonder why Caine was here after I told them he left.

"We could, uhh..." I try to come up with a plan.

Caine sighs out loud.

"Never mind, just go out there alone. I'll figure something out." He stands up from the booth and takes the last piece of his sandwich into his mouth.

"Huh, what do you mean?"

"I can take care of myself. I'll see you out in front."

Caine quickly walks away, towards the bathroom.

Not wanting to question him, I pick up all my bags and head towards the entrance.

When passing Sarah and Kevin, I give them a quick little wave and then dash out of the café.

-- **Outside café**

As I stand out on the sidewalk with my bags in hand, I look around for Caine. I don't spot him anywhere yet.

I walk away from the café, not really wanting to be spotted by Sarah and Kevin by accident.

Then I see Caine walking out of an alley. He jogs up to me.

"Where'd you come from?" I ask.

Caine quickly takes a few bags from my hand.

"The back, of course."

"The back?" I repeat.

"You've always gotta know your exit strategies."

I can't help but laugh.

"Are you serious?" I say while giggling.

That's the same thing he said before when we were out singing at karaoke. Something about knowing your exit strategy. I mean, he was drunk before, but I guess he's actually serious about it.

"What – why's that so funny?" he asks grouchy.

The ease of finally being away from a tense situation, combined with the absurdity of the entire ordeal in the first place, makes me laugh even harder.

Caine can't help but join me, finally laughing as well.

"I can't believe we fooled them!" I say. "And you got away without being seen!"

"I don't mean to brag or anything, but I'm damn good at slipping in and out of places I shouldn't be in." Caine puffs out his chest.

"Until you get caught by me, that is," I say with a grin.

Caine flashes me a genuine smile in return.

"Hmpf, I'll admit. You've got a knack for catching me off guard."

"Hehe. Alright, let's get these bags to my boutique already."

There's a grin on my face that won't leave. Despite our awkward run-in with Sarah and Kevin, I really did enjoy my date today with Caine.

Chapter [020]

-- Boutique

A month. That's all I've got.

Fashion Week is creeping closer and I really need to get my butt into gear if I want to be able to finish my collection in time. I've got all the material I need, now I simply have to construct it.

I throw myself into my work, tending the boutique during the day and working on my designs at night. I've barely got any time to do anything else.

A week passes by in the blink of an eye.

-- Boutique workroom

Sarah is coming over today, she promised to help out a little.

I didn't expect for Kevin to tag along as well.

"Hey!" Sarah greets me.

"Hello Joselina. I hope you don't mind I came as well."

I shake my head. "No, not at all."

"When I told him I was going to help you out with your designs, Kevin suggested he come too, since he knows how to sew."

Kevin rubs the back of his neck and flashes me timid smile.

"I major in fashion, so... Why not, right?"

I break out into a big grin.

"Thank you! Having some extra hands would really help me out."

Sarah pumps her fist in the air.

"Alright – show me what I can do!"

I give Sarah the task of cutting some of the patterns, whereas Kevin gets to sew the parts together using my sewing machine.

"This looks like nothing to me," Sarah says, a little confused as she holds up a piece of transparent paper.

"Well, you're cutting out patterns, the shapes that will make up the dress," I explain.

"And I'm sewing them together!" Kevin pitches in.

"Right, once Kevin's got it all sewed up, I can make corrections. Then I can cut it out of the real fabric."

"Aha, so you're making some sort of mock-up?" she asks.

"Sort of, yeah. It's kind of like a blueprint."

"Gotcha."

"I think it's really cool – the sketches looked great so far," says Kevin.

"Aw, thanks! I'm glad you're helping me today, there's so much I have to do within a month."

I sigh deeply as I pin one of the patterns up on the mannequin.

"Not to mention I've got to hire models."

"But that's the fun part!" Sarah chuckles.

"Maybe for you, but for me it's an exhausting process. Some of them can be a pain to deal with."

"Have you got any specific model in mind?" asks Kevin.

"Not at all, I don't have that kind of money. I'm forced to go with amateurs."

"You could always ask Kevin to model for you," says Sarah with a wink.

Kevin looks up from the sewing machine. "Huh?"

"You're tall! Kind of lanky. I'm sure you'd look good in a dress."

I can't help but laugh as Kevin starts stuttering.

"I'd, uhm, I'd rather just stick to watching..."

Sarah walks over to Kevin and throws a piece of fabric around his shoulders, tying it up like a scarf.

"See – you'd be a good model!" she jokes.

"I could get my makeup," I suggest.

Kevin's eyes start to widen.

"But, but...!"

My phone beeps with a message and I grab it from my desk to check.

Sarah continues to tease Kevin in the background as I check my message. It's from Caine!

Caine:

"Still busy with work?"

Joselina:

"Yep :("

Joselina:

"Sarah and Kevin came over to help out though."

Caine:

"They're there right now?"

1. "Why, want to come over?"

2. "Yes, why?"

Joselina:

"Why, want to come over?"

Joselina:

"Yes, why?"

After that, I don't get a response from Caine anymore. Bummer. I haven't seen him all week, though we've kept in contact with each other through text.

I really want him to start using SnapPic though – the app where you can snap selfies and they disappear after a couple of seconds. I miss seeing him.

When I put my phone down again, I see Sarah messing around with Kevin, holding both of his wrists and trying to wrestle him out of the chair.

"Joselina, help!" he cries out when he makes eye contact with me.

I giggle in response.

"Sarah – try not to ravish Kevin in my boutique, please."

Sarah releases Kevin with a whine.

"Party pooper."

Kevin just looks at me with thankful eyes.

Everyone gets back to work. With two people giving me a hand, things are proceeding much more smoothly. Kevin managed to actually stitch together one of the muslin dresses, which means I can actually start transferring it over to the real fabric!

I pick up a roll of the dark velvet that I bought and start measuring out the pieces.

I'm distracted by another chime on my phone.

Caine:

"Open up."

Joselina:

"Huh, what do you mean?"

Caine:

"You locked your store..."

Immediately I look up from my phone. He's here!?

I quickly rush to the front of my boutique.

-- Boutique

The door chimes as Caine enters.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, completely surprised he came over.

"Don't you have work as well?"

"Nah, I traded my shift with someone else. I'm free."

Caine stuffs his hands into his pocket, trying to appear cool and aloof.

1. "Did you really want to see me that bad?"

2. "I'm so glad you came."

"Did you really want to see me that bad?" I grin at him.

Caine nervously turns away from me.

"I didn't trade in my shift to see you specifically," he denies. "I just wanted a day off, 'tis all..."

"Ahh come on, you wanted to see me – admit it!" I tease him.

He pouts at me. "Stupid."

"And?" I encourage him.

"Fine – I did. You happy now? Geez. I just wanted to help you out, too," he grumbles.

I giggle at his adorableness.

"I'm so glad you came," I say with a smile.

Those words alone make Caine try and contain the grin on his face. Aww, he looks so pleased!

"No big deal, I've got nothing else to do."

"Did you come over to help me out then?"

"I can't be the only one not lending a hand," he mutters, referring to Sarah and Kevin.

"Well, there's a lot of work you could help me with, for sure."

I start walking towards the backroom. Caine quickly catches up to me.

"I don't know much about clothes, but I don't mind helping you out with some stuff."

"Aw, thanks Caine. That means a lot."

I'm so happy everyone is lending a hand. I could easily finish my work on my own, but everyone is so eager to offer their help.

And I'm really happy Caine is here, too.

-- Boutique workroom

I guide Caine to my workroom.

The scene in front of me makes me freeze up. Caine stands next to me, wondering why I stopped walking.

Then he sees it as well.



Kevin is on the floor with Sarah on top of him. She's holding a measuring tape – in fact, she's using it to tie his wrists.

They both stare at me with wide eyes, like deer caught in headlights.

"What the fu—"

I can't help but gasp out loud, cutting off Caine's swearing.

"This is not what it looks like," Sarah starts.

"Oh my god..." Kevin tries to hide his red face but can't do much when Sarah is on top and constraining his wrists.

Caine looks repulsed.

"The hell is going on here!?" he demands to know.

"Sarah, I told you not to ravish him in my boutique!"

"I'm not!" she denies.

No one in the room believes that.

"I was just trying to get his measurements," she says with a confident tone.

"I want to die..." Kevin whimpers.

"Are you trying to see which size handcuffs you should get?" Caine scoffs at her.

Sarah genuinely thinks that one over for a second.



"Sarah!" I chastise her.

"What, don't look at me – it's Kevin's fault. He tripped over the tape."

"That's the same excuse they use in porn," Caine points out.

I turn red at his comment. Kevin looks even worse off.

"Please, Sarah, could you get off of me now?" Kevin murmurs.

"Alright, fine." Sarah finally lifts herself up from Kevin.

Kevin awkwardly slinks away like a worm, crawling behind my crafting table and hiding from the rest of us.

"Ah come on, don't be like that," says Sarah with a sigh.

"I'm so embarrassed, we're in Joselina's boutique..." says Kevin timidly.

Caine turns to me.

"When you said those goons were helping you out, is this what you actually meant?"

"What? No! Of course not," I say a little flustered.

Caine walks around the crafting table, facing Kevin who is still slumped down and having a midlife crisis.

"You are so whipped," says Caine smugly.

Kevin groans out loud.

Cheerfully, Sarah just points at the patterns on the table.

"Look, I finished it at least!"

I shake my head at her in disapproval.

"Come on Caine, I'll show you what you can do."

As I teach Caine some tricks so he can help me out, eventually we're all hard at work prepping my designs. It's mostly just the pattern work, but I'm so glad they're here.

Despite the earlier mishap, the atmosphere is friendly and casual. Caine is a stark contrast from the first time we all met up together at karaoke. Right now, he's actually having a conversation with Kevin.

"Hey, Joselina?" Caine tries to get my attention.

"Yeah, what's wrong? Can't figure out the patterns?"

"Nah, I was just thinking why not shape it like this so you can save on some fabric?" Caine draws a figure on top of the muslin fabric.

I shake my head. Caine doesn't have to go that far to help out; he only needs to follow my instructions.

"I'm good, I've already got everything planned out, no need to worry about saving fabric."

He stares at me for a little, giving me an odd look. Then he shrugs and takes a step back.

"Alright, it was just a suggestion."

Soon enough, he's back at work.

After a couple of hours though, everyone is tired and ready to go home. The place is a mess, but I can clean it up by myself.

"Thank you so much for helping out, I'm ahead of schedule now thanks to you guys!"

"No problem. I just want to see those designs coming down the catwalk," says Sarah with a huge smile.

"I didn't mind, it was definitely a learning experience for me," Kevin mentions.

Caine quietly stands near my computer. He doesn't look like he's getting ready to leave...

"Anyways, I'm hungry, I really need to eat something," Sarah sighs loudly.

"Why don't I treat you to dinner?" Kevin suggests.

Oh, bold move Kevin!

"How could I let a poor student treat me to dinner?" Sarah feigns shock.

"I'll pay for my share, deal?"

Kevin simply smiles at her. "Alright."

"We'll let ourselves out." Sarah winks at me.

"Sure, enjoy your dinner guys."

The both of them exit my workroom and eventually leave the boutique.

It's just me and Caine.

I sigh as I look at the floor. There's scraps of muslin and paper everywhere. I take out a broom from the closet and start sweeping the place.

Wordlessly, Caine starts gathering some of the supplies and storing them away.

I want to ask him if he's planning on going home, but I rather like that he's still here. It feels like our date was ages ago.

I throw away the trash and store the broom back in the closet. Caine picks up the measuring tape left on the crafting table.

His cyan eyes meet mine. A silence stretches between us as we both think back to that moment with Sarah and Kevin.

We burst out into laughter.

"I can't believe what Sarah was doing to the poor guy," I say.

"Poor? It looked like he was enjoying it from where I was standing."

"I shudder to think what would have happened if we walked in a little later."

"I can tell you exactly what would have happened—"

I quickly wave my hands around.

"No, I don't want to hear it!"

Caine simply laughs again at my reaction.

"By the way, it was cool to see you working like this."

"Me?" I ask, confused.

"Who else – Kevin?" Caine scoffs. "*Of course* I was looking at you."

Whoa, my heart rate is rapidly increasing. He boldly claimed he was looking at me.

Realizing what he's said, Caine awkwardly looks away, turning a little red.

"I mean, no, I wasn't looking at you," he suddenly denies.

How typical of Caine; never being honest with himself. He's like a grouchy cat that wants attention from his owner, but then scratches them when they get pet.

It's so cute. I giggle to myself.

Caine stops talking. "What, did I say something funny?"

I shake my head. "No, I was just thinking you were kind of cute."

"Hah?" Caine looks perplexed. "Cute!?"

"Yes, you're always quick to deny anything that makes you embarrassed."

He growls at me. "I do not!"

Aww, he's flustered. That makes him even cuter.

1. Pinch his cheek.
2. Giggle at him.

Before I can hold myself back, I'm pinching Caine's cheek.

"Oww – wha are you doin'?" he snaps at me.

"I can't help it – stop being so adorable," is my flimsy excuse.

"I'm naht."

I shake his cheek a bit just to torture him a little while longer.

"Leggo!" he cries out in despair.

Caine eventually tears himself away from my devil's fingers, rubbing his cheek as if I offended him deeply.

He glares at me in such a pitiful way, I can't help but laugh at him.

I can't help myself, I let out a giggle. He's acting so immature. Before, in the past, it would have annoyed me, but right now, I think it's a little adorable.

Caine, however, looks offended.

"What are you giggling at, huh?" he says, trying to sound threatening.

I can't help but giggle even louder at his reaction. He's so easy to rile up!

"Stop laughing!"

"Haha... why?" I can't control my laughter all of a sudden.

"Because!" he replies most intelligently. He stomps his foot on the ground like a petulant child.

"Or else...!"

1. "What are you going to do? Make me laugh even more?"
2. "Alright, I'll stop laughing if you ask nicely."

"What are you going to do? Make me laugh even more?" I taunt him.

Caine doesn't like the fact that I'm laughing in his face, so more and more, he narrows his eyes at me.

Then, he places the palm of his hand on my chest and pushes me so that I stumble backwards against the table. In a second, Caine is hovering over my body, planting a hand on the edge of the crafting table, trapping me.

"Oooh, I'm so scared, you pushed me up against a table!" I mock him.

"You *should* be scared," he says in this menacing tone. His face is so close to mine.

"Again – what are you going to do?"

I look him in the eye, challenging him. My stomach fills up to the brim with butterflies.

"I'm going to kiss you."

"Then shut up and kiss me, you fool."

I don't know who moves first – but our lips smash against each other, erupting a spark of fireworks inside of me. My eyelids close in response.

I sigh against Caine's lush lips; they're so moist and hot. Who am I kidding – I've been longing for this.

"Alright, I'll stop laughing if you ask nicely," I bargain with him. I giggle some more.

"No way – screw that." Caine glares at me, refusing to comply with my request.

But he looks so adorable when he's mad, so I can't help but laugh even more. In turn, this makes Caine even angrier.

"Ahahaha, your face – it's so adorable!"

"Stop it!" he shrieks.

"Cute!"

"Joselina! I'm warning you!"

"Ahaha–"

My laughter gets muffled as Caine pushes me against the crafting table, his face inches near mine. I'm stunned.

"See what happens if you keep laughing," he murmurs softly, sending chills down my body.

I flutter my eyes at him.

"W-what will happen?" I ask shyly, but my heart knows what's coming.

He sighs. "Well, you're not laughing now..."

I gulp. "Should I be?"

Caine smirks at me, a look that makes me weak in my knees.

"Only if you want me to shut you up." His breath tickles my lips.

"Maybe I want you to..." I admit.

That's all the permission Caine needs before he sweetly presses his lips against mine.

My heart soars in response and I close my eyes to enjoy the ride.

I wrap my arms around his neck to pull him closer – I want to feel his body against mine.

Caine positions himself better, so that one hand braces himself against the table, and the other tangles itself within my hair, scraping against the nape of my neck. It gives me a pleasurable tingle all over.

Caine moves his lips in sync with mine. We keep pulling back the slightest bit, just to meet each other again halfway. He plants a short burst of kisses on me, it's rough and without finesse.

We both part to take in a deep and raspy breath. I open my eyes to see Caine staring at me with half closed eyes and a red face.

I'm so weak to that look.

He licks his lips. "That's what you get for calling me cute."

"...Are you saying I should call you cute more often or not?" I decide to ask.

If that's all it takes to get Caine to kiss me, I'll purchase a thesaurus and call him every imaginable synonym to the word 'cute' in the world.

My knees feel all wobbly with Caine this close to me, and my brain going; *kiss him, kiss him, kiss him*.

Shut up brain.

Caine averts his eyes and pauses for a small moment.

He knocks his forehead against mine, closing his eyes with a sigh.

Well, if he's not going to say anything, I will.

"I think you're very cute, Caine," I whisper softly.

There's not much time to react, all I see is a wave of red hair in my face and, suddenly, he practically crawls on top of me.

Caine only takes a second to gaze into my eyes, but it feels like the longest second of my life, staring into those cyan orbs. I'm left gasping when Caine lowers down his face and captures my lips with his.

I respond to his touch, closing my eyes and pushing back against his lips, a sense of urgency and passion building up inside of me.

Caine is rough with his touch, not being gentle with my lips as he ravishes them, sucks on them, drags them down with his teeth. His teeth!

And yet I shiver at everything he does; I can't find fault with it.

I respond in kind, being just as harsh with my movements as he is. Our lips angrily slide across one another until they feel raw. Caine's body writhes and squirms against mine, heightening my senses.

As Caine starts to nibble on my bottom lip, he draws out a loud and low groan from me. It feels good.

I finally free one of my hands from his grip and I plunge it into his soft hair, raking my fingers across his scalp and pushing him closer until our teeth painfully collide.

But that doesn't stop us, not one bit.

I've been wanting this so bad, no way in hell am I going to stop now.

Caine nips at my lip, the sting hurts yet feels so pleasurable at the moment. I retaliate by scratching the back of his head with my nails.

This causes Caine to release a low moan from his throat, it vibrates throughout my body.

Again – do it again.

Caine finally gives my lips a break from all that gnawing, and this time he touches them with his wet and hot tongue. He trails the grooves and edges of my lips, teasing me by going at a deliberate slower pace than before.

I hike up my thigh in between Caine's legs, causing his body to shift forwards and his tongue slips into my open mouth, where I'm ready and waiting for him.

Our smoldering hot tongues connect, and I don't know whose gasp it is that I hear ringing in my ears. Could be both of us. I don't know.

My body is shivering at the electricity that's being generated as Caine's tongue twirls around mine.

Ah, it's so hard to breathe.

I push Caine's tongue back with full force, and I enter his own hot mouth where we dance around, causing sparks to fly.

"Hahhh," Caine moans right into my mouth.

Oh god that's so hot – make more of those sounds.

Using both arms, I embrace him completely and I arch my back into his body, wanting to feel all of him against me. His body is like a warm and heavy blanket that I don't ever want to remove.

Caine grinds his hips into me, I can feel him push my knee down as his hand slips underneath my skirt. His touch feels too electrifying, I'm buzzing everywhere he makes contact with my skin.

His fingers rest on the inside of my thigh, then he plunges his tongue into my mouth, making me unable to do anything besides respond and meet him halfway.

I dig my fingers into his back – I want nothing more than to continue this. To escalate.

I want Caine.

Caine's tongue slips out of my mouth, taking away all this heat with him. My eyes fly open to look at him.

He's full of lust and wanton – and his gaze is directed at me. It's exactly like that night in the cabin and I'm filled with an even bigger desire to have him right now.

Caine tears his eyes away from me and then uses the hand on my cheek to flick his thumb against my lips. I turn my head a little to kiss it.

With my neck now exposed, Caine dives in; his lips feel like they're spreading a fever across my body when he plants them on the side of my sensitive neck.

I writhe beneath him, biting down on my lip and squeezing my eyes shut as Caine sucks on the patch of skin there.

"Ahh!" a moan escapes from my mouth.

I thrash about and accidentally manage to kick the box of supplies on the table, making it fly off.

The box collides against my mannequin, which topples over.

Caine quickly pulls me off the table, crushing me against his chest as the mannequin flops down on the spot where I was lying only a second ago. It then rolls off towards the ground.

I am panting against his chest; my heart is going out of control.

Ah wait... that's not my heart beat. That's Caine's. I can hear it thump like mad.

"You okay?" he asks breathlessly.

"Yeah, think so."

I push myself away from Caine, shaken up by our sudden interruption. I check up on the mannequin, which had my designs pinned on it.

"Oh no!" I cry out.

Some of the muslin patterns have fallen off!

Caine inspects the damage as well.

"Is it ruined...?"

I shake my head.

"No, nothing is torn, I just need to pin it back up. I spent so much time getting it just right though. I'll have to do it all over again."

Bashfully, Caine looks down at his feet.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

"It's okay, it wasn't your fault."

Though maybe having Caine around my work isn't such a good idea. Things can get heated between us and I'd rather not have sharp objects lying around when it does.

"Do you need help fixing it?" he asks.

"No, I'm good. I'll do it myself. I think we should probably call it a night though; you need to eat as well."

Caine scratches his nose.

"I'll... be more careful next time."

Hearing him say that there will be a next time gets my face all flushed again.

I smile at him.

"Sure."

I finally say good night to Caine and he leaves the boutique.

Chapter [021]
-- Boutique

During the week, an unlikely guest enters my boutique.

Long black hair enters my field of vision and I recognize who it is immediately; Chelsey.

"Oh, it's you," she says as soon as our eyes meet.

"Hello," I greet her politely.

"I didn't know you worked here."

I can't help but chuckle.

"I'm the owner of Sunshine Boutique."

Chelsey looks a little surprised.

"Huh, is that so. Then, do you make your own clothes?"

"Yep, I have a collection of my own clothes as well. They're in that corner over there," I say, pointing at the front of the boutique.

Chelsey inspects one of the mannequins on display. She doesn't appear to be coming over here just to trash my designs.

"That dress you wore at the reunion – you made that one as well?"

I nod my head. "That's right, I did. I made both of our outfits, me and Caine's."

"Well, colour me impressed."

I feel myself glow with pride.

"By the way, I never got your name," she mumbles.

"Oh, that's right. I'm Joselina. Nice to meet you."

I guess starting off on the wrong foot meant I never got to introduce myself to her. We're sort of amicable towards each other now.

"How are you doing lately?" I finally ask.

Chelsey shuffles on the spot, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Not all that great, to be honest," she admits.

"I'm sorry to hear that. You can always reach out to me if you need any help. I promise I won't say a word to Thomas."

She smiles at me with a forlorn look.

"Thanks, I appreciate that. But I'll be okay."

I wonder what's making her so uncomfortable, I can only imagine it has something to do with her relationship with Thomas. Her behaviour about not informing him of her miscarriage was very telling.

Maybe I can cheer her up or give her a distraction from her hectic love troubles.

"Are you into fashion?" I ask.

"Of course, I even run a fashion blog, you know."

"Perfect. Would you be interested in a ticket to Fashion Week here in Claner next month?"

She raises her eyebrows at me.

"Fashion Week?"

"I'll be participating, but there will be a bunch of other designers coming to show off their work. It's basically for the entire week; but I'll be showing my collection on August 19."

I smile at her. "I can give you a discount on the ticket."

"Actually, that does sound rather interesting."

"Would you like to come?"

"I'll have to check my schedule. Do you think you can get me two tickets with a discount, then?"

"Of course, no problem. Just give me your number and I'll let you know."

We exchange contact information. It feels a little weird to have the number of Caine's former crush and bully in my phone, but she doesn't seem to be that bad of a person.

Eventually, Chelsey leaves without buying anything. She said she'd reach out to me if she knows she'll be attending that day or not.

I wonder how well that will go over with Caine.

Taking out my cell phone, I text Caine.

Joselina:

"Guess who came over today?"

As always, Caine's reply is almost instant. It's like he never has anything important to do.

Caine:

"Who? Kevin again?"

Joselina:

"Chelsey was in my boutique."

Caine:

"Really? Did she find out where you work?"

Joselina:

"No, I think it's a coincidence that she walked into Sunshine Boutique."

Caine:

"Small world. Did she try to pick a fight with you?"

Joselina:

"She was surprisingly pleasant. I even invited her over for Fashion Week."

Caine:

"The hell, why would you invite Chelsey!?"

Joselina:

"I don't know, because I'm nice, I guess? It's not the end of the world."

Caine:

"I don't really want to interact with her -_-"

1. "Well, you don't have to. You're coming to see me, not her :)"
2. "I doubt you'll come across each other at the event."

Joselina:

"Well, you don't have to. You're coming to see me, not her :)"

Caine:

"...Yeah, you're the one I want to see."

I'm screaming internally.

Joselina:

"Finally admitting it, huh?"

Caine:

"Shut up, just tell me when I'm getting my ticket already."

Joselina:

"I doubt you'll come across each other at the event."

Caine:

"I guess so."

Joselina:

"If you do have to speak to her, you can just blame it all on me later."

Caine:

"I'll hold you to that, otherwise there will be punishment."

Joselina:

"Punishment!?"

Caine:

"So, when are you giving me a ticket?"

Joselina:

"Hey, don't just change the subject!"

Caine:

" :) So, are you giving me one or not?"

Joselina:

"It should be in the mail tomorrow. Want to pick it up?"

Caine:

"I have to work late though..."

Joselina:

"That's alright, I'll wait for you."

Caine:

"Okay, then I'll see you tomorrow ^^"

I grin to myself as I put my phone away, happy to know Caine will be coming over.

The tickets I ordered for everyone should be arriving tomorrow, including the ones for Sarah and Kevin. If Chelsey lets me know ASAP whether or not she's coming, I can get her tickets in time, too.

-- Boutique workroom

Slaving away at my collection is slowly taking its toll. I'm tired, exhausted, and all I want to do is lie on the floor and be a potato.

But there's not much time left – It's already August. I've got to finish this in time!

Currently, I'm working on a galactic jellyfish dress. It's inspired by the evening I spent at the beach, watching the milky way with Caine.

"Joselina, are you in here?" I suddenly hear someone call out.

I've been so absorbed in my work, I didn't even notice the door chimes going off.

The door opens and Caine walks in.

"You left the front door open," he gestures towards the entrance.

"Yeah, I know, I was expecting you."

Caine walks towards my crafting table and places a plastic bag on top. He looks a little annoyed.

"You really don't check your phone often, do you?"

"Huh, why's that?"

Caine flashes me his cell phone, showing me the conversation between me and him. Apparently, he's been sending me a bunch of messages asking me whether I was still working or went to bed, or if I had eaten already etc.

"I was so focused on work, I didn't even hear my phone going off..."

Wait – I smell something.

"I brought some food."

Caine stores away his phone and then takes out a couple of dinner meals from the bag. They're from Boon Mart.

Seeing my surprised look, Caine quickly goes to explain.

"I told you before, didn't I? I get a discount on them. Figured I might as well take them with me after work."

I see some nice fried rice, stir fried vegetables and a breaded piece of deep-fried chicken. My mouth is watering already; I *am* pretty hungry.

"You got it for me?" I ask, feeling touched Caine was thinking about my wellbeing.

Bashfully he turns his face away, focusing instead on taking off the plastic lid from the dinner box.

"Well, you seemed busy. You hungry?"

I eagerly reach for the box with greedy hands.

"Yes!"

Caine quickly swipes away the box and holds it out of my reach. He smirks at me.

"Hey now, shouldn't you at least thank me before digging in like a pig?"

I pout at him.

"Don't be cruel, dangling food in front of me while my stomach is waging an epic battle against starvation."

"Thanks, I didn't need that visual." Caine grimaces at me disapprovingly.

"Well, don't torture me!" I plead.

"I don't hear the magic words," Caine says in a sing-song voice.

1. "...Please, Prince Shrimp."

2. "Please, Caine."

"...Please, Prince Shrimp."

"Prince Shrimp!?" he repeats incredulously.

"Everything looks like food to me now!" I try to take the box from Caine's hand.

He dodges my attack.

"That doesn't mean I'm a snack," he huffs.

I cock my head to the side, staring at him with innocent eyes.

"What do you mean? You're totally something I want to sink my teeth into."

Stunned at my choice of words, Caine lets go of the box in his hand, dropping it on my table. His face is rapidly changing colour.

I snatch the box away from him before he can react.

"Score!" I cheer loudly.

Grabbing a plastic fork from inside the plastic bag, I finally dig into my dinner.

"Oh sweet heaven, just what I needed," I moan in satisfaction as I swallow a piece of the chicken.

Caine runs a hand through his hair, looking down at the table with a defeated expression.

"I'm not a shrimp..." Caine mutters weakly under his breath as he grabs the other dinner box from the bag.

"Please, Caine," I say sincerely.

"And?" he edges me on.

"And thank you for being so thoughtful and sweet by bringing me dinner after a long day of hard work."

"Oh."

Caine shyly looks away from me.

"Didn't think you'd give in so easily," he murmurs.

I smile at him. "Why shouldn't I, I'm very happy you thought of me."

This makes Caine blush and he timidly averts his eyes. He's not used to me praising him.

"Ah. I mean. Yeah. I just thought you'd be working too much to think about food, or something like that..." he starts to ramble.

It makes my heart swell with joy knowing that Caine's been thinking of me. He's actually quite kind.

Caine awkwardly slides the box across the table towards me.

"Here, just eat it."

I grab a plastic fork from the bag and happily dig in and enjoy my dinner.

"Thanks Caine, you're the best!"

Caine smiles at me in return and grabs the other dinner box for himself.

Together, we eat our dinners in a comfortable silence.

I lean back and crack my neck.

"Ahh, that's just what I needed."

"Damn, you finished so fast." Caine looks almost impressed – he's still finishing up his meal.

"Well..." I awkwardly rub my nose. "I didn't realize I was this hungry until you showed up."

"It's good to take breaks, you know. Don't just drop dead because you forgot to eat, like an idiot."

I grin at him. "Are you worried about me?"

"So what if I am?" he fires back defiantly.

I clamp my mouth shut, not expecting such a brutally honest reply. Suddenly I don't know how to react anymore.

Caine pokes at his food with his fork, a pout on his lips.

"I don't like it when you don't reply..." he mumbles.

Realizing he's talking about not answering his messages, I feel my heart cry out in guilt.

"Aww, I'm sorry I didn't respond. I was just really busy working on my collection."

Caine gives a good look around the room. There's a few mannequins with dresses that are almost finished.

Unable to contain my excitement and wondering what Caine thinks of my work, I quickly hop over to one of the mannequins.

"So, what do you think?" I ask.

Caine hums slowly.

"I like that one a lot," he says as he points his fork at the galactic jellyfish dress.

"Oh, this one is my favourite – it's going to be my closing piece!" I say eagerly.

"It's not finished, right?"

"Not yet, why?"

"Ah, that's why the shoulder still looks like that."

I look at the dress, which has an asymmetric neckline. The neckline is decorated with organza ruffles going up the shoulder.

"Actually, the neckline is done," I explain. "See, the ruffles are meant to look like jellyfish."

Caine's head falls to the side as he raises one eyebrow in question.

"I don't see it. It just looks unfinished to me."

I huff. "Well, it'll look better when the whole dress is completed."

Caine shrugs his shoulders at me.

"What about that one then?" He gestures to my other dress.

"Oh, also a work-in-progress."

"What's it supposed to be?"

"This one is inspired by the design of a killer whale, with black and white swirls showing throughout the designs."

Caine scratches his cheek.

"It kind of doesn't look like it belongs with the rest...?"

"Huh, what do you mean? You don't like it?"

"No, it looks good, it's just that... the others so far have this star theme going on. This one is just black and white stuff. It's too, uhm – modern?"

Feeling like he's attacking my design choices, I can't help but explain my reasoning.

"Well in fashion, you've got a general theme, but there will always be pieces in a collection that stand out from the rest. I don't need to literally use stars for *everything*."

"I didn't say you had to cover it in stars," Caine grunts in an annoyed tone.

"Yeah, well, that's what it sounded like to me. I know what I'm doing," I reply.

"Are you always this difficult?" Caine groans out loud.

"Difficult!?"

"I'm just commenting on your work."

"Well, you don't need to comment on what's finished," I reply childishly.

Caine throws his hands up in the air.

"You *just* asked for my opinion! You're impossible!"

I fold my arms across my chest, feeling insulted.

"Yeah well, I didn't ask for *those* kinds of comments. I'm the designer here, not you."

Caine glares at me.

"Fine. I'm out. Peace."

Caine quickly dashes out of the work room.

"Fine!" I yell after him out of spite.

Caine doesn't know what he's talking about. *I'm* the fashion designer with a degree, I don't need to listen to his opinions – they're wrong anyway.

I huff and puff and decide to clean up, unable to calm down.

That's also when I realize I didn't get the chance to give Caine the ticket to the show.

Well, at the moment, I don't care!

-- Boutique bedroom night

While I lie awake in bed, Caine's comments haunt my thoughts.

Yes, I'm making a star themed collection, no that doesn't mean I can't make one or two pieces that don't look like they belong. You see this all the time in fashion.

I grit my teeth; they *do* belong! The killer whale dress totally fits in this collection.

I writhe and turn in bed all night long.

-- Boutique bedroom day

In the morning I get startled awake by a message on my phone.

When I check who it is, I can't deny the disappointment I feel when I see that it isn't Caine. In fact, it's Chelsey.

Chelsey:

"Can I still get a ticket for the Fashion Week? I only need one."

I take a small moment to fully wake up before I reply.

Joselina:

"Yeah no problem. So, you'll be going alone?"

Chelsey:

"Just me, yes. Don't worry, you won't be seeing Thomas around; we are officially through."

Joselina:

"That's surprising, but great to hear. I'll order the ticket and get back to you at the end of the week, okay?"

Chelsey:

"Sure thing."

I sleepily look out the window; it's raining. What a great start to this day...

-- Boutique Workroom

At the end of the day after I close up shop, I start working on my collection again.

Caine's comments are still running through my mind. I'm starting to doubt my own work.

Looking at the killer whale inspired dress, I just feel like ripping it apart and starting all over again. Ugh, I hate feeling this way.

"Joselina, you here?" I hear a faint voice call out my name.

Ah, that must be Kevin. I asked Sarah and Kevin if they'd help out again, but Sarah had her own work to do, so it's just Kevin and me today.

It could have been Kevin and Caine, but that little prick hasn't texted me all day!

...To be fair, I haven't either.

Kevin finally enters the room. He looks soaked!

"Hey there, the door was unlocked, so I figured I should let myself in."

"Oh no, I didn't realize it was raining that much. Are you okay, do you need a towel?" I ask, concerned.

Kevin chuckles a bit awkwardly.

"No that's okay. It did ruin my hairstyle, but I'll live!"

Kevin sees the designs I've made so far and his eyes widen in surprise.

"Wow you've made a lot of progress since the last time I was here."

I clasp my hands together in excitement and eagerly show off jellyfish dress.

"I know! I've been working so many nights in a row – look, this one is my favourite."

"That one looks amazing, even better than the sketch," Kevin compliment me with a smile.

Ahh see, designers know what they're talking about, they recognize good taste.

I don't need to take Caine's words to heart.

"The ruffles are a little overwhelming though, aren't they? Are you going to trim them?"

And just like that, I feel my heart drop to the pit of my stomach.

"Really, you too?" I grumble.

Kevin looks taken aback by my sudden change in attitude.

"Too?" he repeats.

"Caine said the same thing," I sigh out loud.

I locate my chair and sit down, slumping my back against it for support.

"Well, I mean, it's still a work in progress, many things can change before you're finally done with it," Kevin adds nervously.

Except I was finished with the neckline...

"Does it really look that awful?" I ask in a small voice.

"No – no of course not! I just think that the bottom of the skirt is already very full. Having the top part also scream for attention with the ruffles is making the design feel imbalanced."

Kevin rubs the back of his neck, looking a little anxious.

"But I'm still just a student though... I'm not trying to undermine your professionalism."

I clench my hands into fists, then look up at my proud piece. I know what I wanted to make and how it should look – it's exactly like how I imagined it to be. Does it really need tweaking?

I mean, I don't have to listen to everyone's critique, otherwise I'm making clothes for *them* and not me.

And...

...I'm doing it again. I'm making excuses. I'm deflecting.

I bury my face into my hands with another loud sigh.

"What's wrong? I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to insult your work..." Kevin apologizes meekly.

"No, you're not insulting... What you're saying makes sense," I reassure him.

Kevin smiles awkwardly at me, probably feeling a little uncomfortable right now.

"I have a really hard time taking criticism of my own work," I admit begrudgingly.

"Ah, I see."

He looks to the side. "I kind of noticed."

I suddenly find my cheeks burning with a blush from embarrassment. Was it that obvious?

Am I really that rigid? Unchanging? Stubborn? Ugh, all the stuff people used to make fun of me for is floating back.

"But you know, I think all of us are like that somewhat. We... we just want to protect our creations, so I can understand feeling defensive after someone comments on it negatively," he explains with a sweet smile.

"Sometimes you just need to take a step back, take a deep breath and let it sit for a while. Then try again another day with a new perspective."

"Take a deep breath and step back..." I repeat.

That's something I could've done when that client didn't like the colours of that blouse. Or when Caine mentioned my killer whale dress not fitting in with the rest of the collection.

If I had just taken a step back and not let it get to me, I wouldn't be chasing them out of my boutique.

I've suddenly acquired a new admiration for Kevin. My first impression of him was that he was meek and a little naive – I didn't expect him to be this mature. Who knew he was actually hiding all that sage advice under his innocent exterior?

I can't believe I once suspected him of being that troll on Daisy Dots. There's no way he could write those awful words to me. Kevin is practically a saint.

"Yeah, you're right. You're kind of wise, did you know that?"

Kevin jerks upright, looking embarrassed about the compliment.

"M-me? Wise!?" he squeaks.

"You're mistaken, I'm still just a student..." he mumbles.

I can't help but laugh at him. "Reserved and humble, but actually pretty smart. No wonder Sarah likes you."

This makes Kevin's face explode with a burning blush. Aww, how adorable!

"L-I-like, me...?" he repeats in an astonished voice.

1. Tease him about Sarah.
2. "I like you, too. You're a good friend."

"Oh? Are you blushing?" I tease him.

"N-no!" he denies, trying to hide his face.

"Do you like Sarah?" I ask him, enjoying his reaction.

Kevin ends up freezing on the spot, not budging an inch. Seems like he can't even deny it at this point.

"Is it that obvious?" he asks instead.

I grin at him.

"A little."

"But Sarah likes you, too, you know."

He whips his head back at me.

"She does?"

"I like you, too. You're a good friend," I say with a smile.

"Ahh... haha... Right. Friend." Kevin starts to compose himself.

It's cute how red he became when I said Sarah likes him.

Maybe I should clarify Sarah definitely likes him in a non-platonic way.

"However, I think Sarah definitely sees you as more than a friend," I whisper to him.

"R-really?" he stammers, turning red once more. He blushes so easily!

"Well, if you want to know more, you should definitely ask Sarah about it, not me," I say with a wink.

"Right, uhm – you make a fair point."

"So, shall we start a little work?" I ask.

"Y-yes!"

As I show Kevin what he can do to help out, in the back of my mind, I can't stop thinking about Caine.

I snapped at him when he was only offering his opinion. That I asked for, no less. I behaved so childishly...

I really need to apologize to Caine.

[Chapter 022]
-- boutique workroom

Kevin is still helping me out when someone else shows up to my boutique as well.

Sarah enters the room.

"I knew it – you're both still working."

Kevin looks up from the crafting table. At first, he's happy to see her, then he frowns.

"Aren't you supposed to be resting at home?"

I nod in agreement. "Yeah, I thought you said you were feeling a little sick?"

"Oh come on, I was bored and didn't think it was fair that you two were having this much fun without me." Sarah rubs her nose; she does sound like she has an oncoming cold.

"We're having *so* much fun without you here. A ton," I say sarcastically, holding up a pair of scissors.

Kevin walks up to Sarah, putting his hand on her forehead.

"You feel a little warm. You shouldn't be out here, not in this rain."

Bashfully, Sarah looks away. That's a first to see her this shy all of a sudden.

"It's alright, I brought an umbrella."

"Yeah, Sarah, it's already late – we're about to clean up anyways. Let Kevin walk you home," I say.

"How about we get you some fruit and medicine on the way there?" Kevin suggests.

"You're both worrywarts, I'm fine." Sarah dismisses our concerns with a heavy sigh.

I'd rather not have Sarah help me out when she's getting sick. Getting her home safe and medicated sounds like a good idea.

"We can go to Boon Mart together," I pitch the idea.

Sarah grins at me. "You just want to see Caine, don't you?"

"Yes," I answer honestly.

"Huh, look at you, being all confident." Sarah looks surprised.

"Well, I got into a little fight with him and I want to apologize..."

Sarah tilts her head to the side. "What'd you do?"

"Ehehe, I don't think it matters at this point. Joselina just wants to apologize. We should help her out. Should we all head out together?"

"Sounds like a good idea, Kevin." I smile at him.

"Alright, Kevin, you can share an umbrella with me." Sarah shows the small umbrella in her hand.

I sheepishly shuffle my feet on the floor. "I'm not even sure Caine's working tonight..."

"Only one way to find out!" Sarah winks at me.

We all leave Sunshine Boutique together. I can feel myself growing anxious; I hope Caine won't be too mad at me.

-- Outside walkway night

It's already dark outside; I didn't realize I was working for so long. I should have sent Kevin home a while ago.

Rubbing my eyes and yawning, I step out into the rain with my umbrella. Sarah and Kevin share one together.

I can't help but smile at them; they're very cute like this.

I really hope Caine is working late today... I don't like not talking to him. It makes me feel on edge all day.

Thankfully, we don't have to walk in the rain for too long before we arrive at Boon Mart.

-- Boon Mart

Even before I step foot inside, I know something is off. The air feels tense.

CRASH!!

The three of us are alarmed by the loud clattering of glass falling to the floor.

What's going on!?

I quickly run towards the aisle the sound came from, stepping onto broken glass.

There's Thomas, holding Caine up by his collar, pushing him into a stack of beer bottles. Everything inside of me freezes up.

1. Whack Thomas with the umbrella.

2. "Let Caine go!"

I don't hesitate to wield the umbrella like a bat in my hands. I clench it tightly and raise it above my head, striking a blow on top of Thomas' head.

He immediately lets go of Caine, who falls down onto the floor riddled with glass. Thomas stumbles around in a daze.

"Don't you fucking touch him!" I bite out at Thomas.

"What's going on!?" Sarah catches up to me and surveys the situation.

Caine finally makes eye contact with me. Oh no – he's got a bruised eye and busted lip!

I push the stupefied Thomas out of my way and rush over to Caine.

"Are you okay!?"

Caine seems shocked at my sudden intrusion, as if he's unable to process what's happened.

"You fucking bitch, you hit me!" Thomas roars, appearing from behind me.

Suddenly, I'm grabbed by my shirt and pulled away from Caine. I yelp out loud in response as Thomas throws me across the floor, away from Caine.

Sarah quickly softens my blow with her body, preventing me from sliding further away.

"Hey – stop that!" Kevin yells out.

I get up from the floor, adrenaline pumping through my veins. He hurt Caine, and all I see is red.

"He beat Caine!" I cry out. "You coward!"

"Let Caine go!" I yell out frantically.

Thomas slowly turns his head to look at me, but doesn't let Caine go.

"Stay out of it," he growls at me.

"No – you leave him alone, now!"

Sarah and Kevin round the corner as well, shocked to see the situation in front of them.

"What's going on!?" Sarah demands. "What the hell are you doing to Caine? Let him go!"

Caine finally makes eye contact with me and I see the damage Thomas has done to him. He's got a swollen eye and a busted lip.

Anger flares up inside of me and my protective side rears its head. I hold my umbrella like a weapon.

"Let him go!" I threaten him.

Annoyed that people are yelling at him, Thomas finally drops Caine to the floor and turns around to address us.

He's swaying on his feet.

Sarah threateningly holds her umbrella in her hand, pointing it at the staggering Thomas.

He's barely able to stay upright on his feet. The stench coming from his body also makes it clear as day – he's completely drunk.

"You are all so annoying!" he roars as he knocks down a few more beers from the shelf. "Fucking pests that need to die."

"No one's touching my friends, you asshole. You take one more step and I will fucking end you. You hear that?" Sarah spits at him with a venom I didn't realize she was capable of.

"I'm calling the police," says Kevin in a steady voice, already dialing the number on his phone.

Thomas loses all sense of composure and growls out loud. Pulling his fist back, he charges right at me, intending to strike.

Sarah quickly uses the handle of the umbrella to hook it around his legs, tripping the brute monster. He lands onto the tiled floor with a loud groan. Glass bounces around from the impact of his body.

"You stay down!" Sarah points the end of the umbrella towards his face as a warning.

"You better not try anything," I growl at him.

Thomas grunts loudly and whacks the umbrella away with his hand. Quickly he gets up from the floor, glass falling from his body. I back away from him.

But he doesn't go for me this time – he turns around and charges straight at Caine, who hasn't moved from his spot this entire time.

Thomas grabs Caine by his apron and effortlessly pulls him up to his feet.

"No – leave Caine alone!" Kevin yells.

My heart beats fast like a drum – it's so loud I can't hear anything else. I have to protect Caine at all costs.

Disregarding my own safety, I throw all my reason out the window and jump on Thomas' back, hooking my arms around his neck.

But I'm not the only one to throw themselves onto Thomas.

Sarah tackles his midriff, pushing him away from Caine. Thomas stumbles backwards, unable to throw me off and shake Sarah off him.

"Sarah, Joselina!" Kevin yells out in fear.

It takes all of my strength to stay on Thomas' back and keep him in a headlock. Combined with Sarah holding him down as well, Thomas is unable to wrestle free.

"Get off of me you stinkin' hoes!" he bellows.

Thomas grabs Sarah by her hair.

"Ahh!" she yells out in pain, releasing Thomas' midriff.

And all of a sudden, Kevin is in front of us, pulling back a fist and delivering it square into Thomas' face.

It knocks him off his feet and I quickly jump off his back, letting the rotten man fall back down onto the floor.

Kevin puts his arms out in front of me and Sarah, staring down at Thomas.

"You're not going to lay a hand on any of them ever again! Leave us alone!"

Kevin looks back at us, concern etched all over his face.

"Girls, are you okay?"

"I'm fine – but this oaf is going down!" Sarah answers.

"I'm in complete agreement with that!" I yell.

Thomas doesn't seem like he's going to stay down. The man picks himself up from the floor again. He looks so menacing and big.

But I don't care; I'm going to do whatever it takes.

"The police are on their way," Kevin explains in a clear voice.

Thomas take a few seconds to decide whether he wants to punch Kevin right in the face, or if he wants to heed his warning and escape.

The drunk then turns around and makes a quick getaway from the store.

Kevin takes a deep breath of relief.

"He left..."

"That coward. We should have restrained him until the cops showed up," says Sarah with a huff.

"Agreed, he needs to be locked up. That man is dangerous," I say.

"You two have way more fighting spirit than I do..." Kevin sighs.

He then shakes his right hand a little, as if just now realizing he's punched Thomas.

"And my hand really hurts!"

Finally I turn around to check up on Caine, who's been eerily quiet this entire ordeal.

He's standing far away, his back against one of the coolers – eyes still wide from shock.

"Caine, are you okay?" I ask, deeply concerned about him.

I reach my hand out, towards his bruised lip, but Caine suddenly snaps back into reality and jumps away from me.

"*D-don't touch me!*" he screams.

Surprised by his sudden outburst, I shut my mouth and take a step back from him.

"But Caine," I start weakly. "You're hurt. Let me–"

"–I said don't fucking touch me!" he hisses.

"What the hell Caine, we're concerned about you. Don't yell at Joselina," Sarah pipes in.

He glares at Sarah, then at Kevin, and finally his eyes land on me. There's this look of utter disgust on Caine's face and I feel my heart break into pieces.

Before I can get another word in, Caine bolts right out of the store.

"Caine!" I yell after him.

"Where's he going?" Kevin asks. "The police will be here any second."

I nod my head at the both of them.

"I'm going after him, you both stay here."

With the umbrella in my hand, I disappear out of the store as well.

-- Outside walkway

The umbrella shields me as I step outside into the rainfall.

A blurry figure in the distance runs away. Caine's footsteps are hard to make out in this downpour, but it's him alright.

Why is he running away!?

I rush after him.

-- **Alley**

Eventually I turn into an alley. It's a dead end; Caine's got nowhere else to go.

He's huddled next to a cardboard box, getting soaked from the rain. I can't see his face; he's resting it on his arms.

I stand in front of him, covering the both of us with the umbrella.

"Caine..." I say softly.

He doesn't look up at me.

"Go away," he grunts.

"Caine, are you okay?"

Finally, he lifts up his head.

"I said, go away!" His voice cracks.

The droplets of rain roll down the umbrella, keeping us locked in a makeshift waterfall. He's shivering. I can't tell whether it's because he's cold, or because he's in pain.

Or maybe something else entirely...

"I'm not going away," I tell him my honest feelings.

"Just leave me alone – I don't need you to look after me!" he hisses.

I tighten my grip on the umbrella as a sense of dread looms over me. Caine is hurt and he's lashing out at the people who want to help him.

What can I do...?

"I'm worried Caine, I want to know if you're okay..."

"I'm not okay!" he barks at me.

He's like a feral cat cornered in an alley with no escape.

"Just let me see, please..."

My hand reaches out for him.

But he smacks it away.

"You'll just think I'm pathetic!" he exclaims.

I'm taken aback. Pathetic?

Caine turns his head away from me. His eyebrows are furled into a frown so deep I'm afraid it'll be stuck permanently.

"Don't look at me..." he says, his voice wavering.

He digs the palms of his hands into the sockets of his eyes.

"Just... stop," he sniffs.

"I don't want you to see how much of a loser I really am."

Another sniffle. My heart breaks, seeing Caine like this.

1. Hug him.
2. Wait for him to calm down.

I crouch down to his level. Tossing the umbrella behind me, I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him into my body.

Caine immediately pushes his hands against my shoulders.

"No – I said don't!" he cries out.

His body is shaking violently, his shivers transferring over to me. He's not calming down.

The rain clatters all around us.

"Don't push me away, Caine – it's okay," I say in a soothing voice.

Caine still tries to wriggle out of my embrace, but he's losing the will to struggle.

I bury my hand into his hair and push his face against my shoulder.

"Shh, it's okay. You're allowed to feel hurt and scared. I'm here. You're safe."

Caine hiccups.

"Joselina, please..." he begs.

I rub my other hand across his back, trying to calm him down.

"...Please don't hate me," he says in a wavering voice. He's on the verge of tears.

"I won't. I'm here," I reassure him, still stroking his back.

Not thinking it's appropriate to touch him right now, I simply crouch down to his level, shielding him from the rain.

This is all messed up. Everything that's happened to Caine. He doesn't deserve this.

"Caine, none of this is your fault. You're not a loser," I tell him.

"Stop trying to make me feel better!" he snaps, looking up at me,

"Why wouldn't I?" I fire back. "You're hurt, scared, and I care way too much about you."

His lip starts to tremble; he's fighting so hard to stay brave. To not crack.

I reach my hand out to his swollen cheek. Caine doesn't make any movements, but he does flinch when my fingertips make contact with his sensitive skin.

"Does it hurt?" I ask.

He averts his eyes down to my shoes, biting down on his lip. I can feel him tremble. He's trying his best to keep it together.

I softly cup his entire cheek with my hand. It's so bruised. That must have been a painful hit.

"It's okay now, I'm here now."

His cyan eyes lock with mine; they're quickly filling up with tears.

Caine uncharacteristically lunges forward, planting his face on my shoulder with a loud sniff. I throw the umbrella onto the ground and wrap my arms around Caine in an embrace.



Caine's hands turn into tiny balls, resting limply against my chest. He drops his head against my shoulder, clenching his teeth in defeat.

At first, I don't hear anything at all, aside from the droplets of rain. But then it starts.

Caine's first cries pierce my soul.

"Ah...ahh..." he heaves.

I tighten my embrace around him, shushing softly into his ear.

Caine grips the fabric of my shirt with his desperate hands, clinging onto me as if I'm his lifeline. His cries get smothered in my shirt.

"I can... can never do anything!" he cries.

"It's okay," I whisper.

"W-why... why were you t-there?" he questions through his sobbing.

"Why'd you have to see me like this?"

"It's okay, it's not your fault," I repeat.

Nothing is his fault. Caine is just a victim in all of this, subjected to violence from a monster.

Broken repeatedly, and all alone.

But no longer.

"I'm here for you. We all are."

Caine continues to cry against my shoulder. Each sob louder than the one before. His tears mix in with the rain, as if the world is crying with him.

I've never had a boy cry in front of me before, and I'm a little lost. However, knowing that this is *Caine*, I'm going to do everything I can to support him.

I bury my face into his mane of wet hair and close my eyes. I want to protect him at all costs.

Seeing him cry breaks something inside of me. It's like part of my heart is crying with him.

And I know why.

...Because I love him.

"Shh, I'm not going anywhere," I whisper.

Caine's cries falter little by little, though the emotional turmoil is still very much present.

Then, he snakes his arms around my neck, tightening his grip on me, as if he's afraid I'll run off and abandon him. He rests his chin on the top of my shoulder, letting out small hiccups.

"I hate this..." he says slowly.

I continue to stroke his soaked back.

"I hate how I can't do anything..." he murmurs.

"That's what we're here for. We're going to make sure it never happens again. No one's going to hurt you anymore."

Caine sinks his face into my hair, holding me close. The poor guy is still shivering.

"You're not alone anymore, Caine," I say.

My words cut him deep, as he once more cries out loud.

"Th-thank you," he sobs.

"You... you have no i-idea how long I've waited to hear those words..." His voice is turning hoarse from all the crying.

"Well, it's about time," I say while smiling.

Caine sniffs. "You went all fucking Rambo on him – you're crazy."

I end up laughing out loud. If Caine can joke at a time like this, that means I'm doing something right.

"Sarah helped," I point out.

"You're *both* loonies."

I finally pull away from Caine so I can get a good look at him. His eyes are puffy and red from crying. His hair sticks to his forehead, slick and wet.

"And I'd do it all over again – in a heartbeat," I say honestly.

Caine rubs his nose with his arm, looking rather weak still.

I shoot him an encouraging smile.

It takes him some effort, but Caine flashes me a crooked smile back.

"What do you say we go back and get out of this rain?"

"But they'll see me like this..." he protests.

"Sarah and Kevin?"

He nods weakly.

I brush away the hair sticking on his face and lean forwards. I plant a small kiss on his forehead.

"All they're gonna see is a friend in need. They're worried about you, too."

I grab my forgotten umbrella and stand up from the ground. Extending a hand to Caine, I smile at him.

"Come on."

A little dazed still, Caine accepts my offer and I lift him up from the dirt. He awkwardly stands next to me under the umbrella, trembling slightly.

I tug on his hand and escort him back to the convenience store. I never let go of his hand on the way over there.

-- Boon Mart

The first thing I see when we return is the police car parked outside.

"There you two are!" Sarah exclaims.

She rushes up to Caine and throws her arms around him.

"You little twerp – why'd you go running off!? We were worried!"

Caine freezes up as he gets squished by Sarah's bear hug.

"Are you alright, Caine?" asks Kevin, also worried.

"F-fine," Caine squeaks.

"Sarah, you're crushing me," he breathes out.

Sarah finally lets go of him and Caine takes in a large breath.

A police officer walks up to Caine.

"So this is your friend who got assaulted?"

Kevin nods. "Yes sir, we were all witness to it. You can even see the bruises on his face."

I squeeze Caine's hand, not wanting him to feel alone.

"Alright, you're going to have to come down to the station to put in a statement, as well as take some pictures of your wounds."

Caine's eyes flicker to mine, still looking a little lost.

"It's okay, I'm going with you," I reassure him.

Sarah bumps his shoulder with her hand.

"Yeah, we all are. That asshole needs to be arrested."

"Agreed," Kevin pipes in.

"I can't just leave the store unattended though..." Caine mentions a little conflicted.

"Don't worry about that – we'll just lock it up and let your manager know," I say.

"Can I take a look at the security footage as well?" asks the officer.

"Yeah, it's in the back," says Caine.

At last, Caine releases my hand as he leads the police officer towards the backroom.

True to our word, we go to the police station with Caine, putting down our own statements. I'm with him every step of the way.

We're not going to let Thomas get away with this.

This time, Caine's got friends.

[Chapter 023]
-- Caine's apartment

After our stop at the police station, we all drop Caine off at his apartment. I didn't want to leave him alone yet. No one does.

"You have a very tiny apartment," Sarah remarks, looking around.

Caine, sitting on the bed, simply shoots her a dirty look.

"It's because you're too big – you're fillin' up the place."

I can't help but snort at his remark. At least his spirits are higher if he can joke like that.

Sarah scoffs indignantly. "Why, I never! I hope when I sneeze, it's right in your face!"

"Speaking of faces, why don't we get you cleaned up?" I ask, looking at Caine.

"Here are the bandages we bought, along with cold medicine for Sarah," says Kevin as he hands me the bag.

"I don't need that," Caine immediately refuses.

Kevin looks crestfallen that his help is being denied.

"Yes he does," I say as I take the bag from Kevin.

"Or you can just have Joselina kiss it better for you," chuckles Sarah.

Caine flashes her a defiant pout. He looks like a broken puppy. It's hard having to resist pinching his cheek when I know that's where he's been hit.

"Come on, we can do it in the bathroom," I say with a smile.

"You mean kiss?" Kevin pipes up, confused.

Caine's eyes widen and so do mine. With a groan, he gets up from the bed and snatches my hand, tugging me towards the bathroom.

-- Caine's bathroom

Caine drops my hand and sighs out loud when we enter.

1. "If you wanted to kiss me that bad, all you had to do was ask."

2. "Did what Kevin say bother you?"

"If you wanted to kiss me that bad, all you had to do was ask," I joke.

Caine's face starts to turn a little redder than it already is.

"S-shut up!" he complains. "That's not it!"

"Then why?" I ask, feigning innocence.

"Did what Kevin say bother you?" I ask.

He turns to me, raising both his eyebrows.

Then he lowers them. "Maybe."

"Why?"

"Because it's embarrassing, in front of them..." he admits.

I can't help but giggle. I'm glad he's worrying about embarrassing and non-consequential issues like these, instead of what transpired a couple of hours before.

"How about we clean up your face instead?" I ask with another giggle.

"I don't want any bandages on my face."

"We'll see. Can you sit down?"

Caine puts down the lid of the toilet seat and plops down. He looks up at me, blinking expectantly.

"First, let's clean away the blood."

He averts his eyes. "Didn't realize I was bleeding..."

"Really?" I'm surprised he didn't taste it, as it's right on his bottom lip.

I extend out my hand and softly brush my thumb over his lips.

Caine immediately sits up straight with a gulp.

"Sorry – did that hurt?" I ask, pulling back.

Meekly, he looks away from me.

"No... Just didn't expect it," he mumbles while rubbing his lips with the back of his hand.

"Oh." Caine looks surprised there's a smudge of blood left behind. "I really was."

Caine must have taken a direct blow from Thomas to get that kind of wound.

I take out a small rag from the bag and wet it under the faucet. I turn back towards Caine and bend over a little to reach his face.

"May I?" I ask, hovering the rag near his mouth.

He nods his head.

Softly, I dab the rag against his wound. Caine winces slightly. I take great care to go slowly, as not to hurt him.

Being this close to him, I can see his left cheek is really swollen, including his eye. Most of the puffiness around his eyes is because he was crying though.

Caine eventually closes his eyes as I clean up any dirt or blood from his face.

I stand back, putting down the rag.

"Alright, I think that's it. Unless you've been hurt anywhere else."

Ashamed, Caine looks down at the tiled floor.

"Nope, just the face."

"...And my pride," he mumbles softly.

I can't think of anything to say that would make him feel better. The only thing I can do is be here for him.

"Why were all of you there tonight?" he asks. "It's past midnight."

"Kevin wanted to buy some medicine for Sarah – she's coming down with a cold."

"Ah..."

"...And because I wanted to see you," I admit.

"See me?"

"I wanted to apologize for that stupid fight we had before. I was being defensive again."

I shake my head. "But now's not really the right time for that."

We both grow quiet. A droplet of water leaks from the faucet and splatters inside the sink, echoing our silence.

"I... I didn't think you'd want to talk to me again," Caine starts softly.

"That I screwed everything up by insulting your designs."

I bend down on one knee and grab Caine's hand within my own.

"No, don't think like that. You didn't do anything wrong," I say quickly.

"I'm just too stubborn and really can't deal with criticism all that well," I admit.

Caine takes in a small breath.

"...So, you don't hate me?"

"Of course not!"

A silent tear rolls from Caine's left eye. He quickly rubs it away with the cuff of his sleeve.

"G-good," he chokes out.

That feeling to protect Caine at all costs rushes through me again. I fling my arms around his small frame, embracing him.

This time, he doesn't struggle, but reciprocates my hug, wrapping his arms around my back as well. There's a small sniff as he buries his face into my neck.

Caine's body is so frail, but warm. I'm glad we came over tonight.

A knock on the bathroom door alerts the both of us.

"I was joking about that kissing thing, guys. Please let me in, I need to pee," Sarah warns us.

Caine and I pull away and look at each other. Both of us break out into a grin.

-- Caine's apartment

Sarah quickly disappears into the bathroom while Kevin stands idly near Caine's bed. As if he's too afraid to touch anything in the room for fear of messing it up.

Caine takes a few steps towards Kevin.

"Hey, how's the hand?" he asks a bit hesitantly.

Kevin immediately rubs his right hand, giving Caine an awkward smile.

"I had no idea punching could hurt the puncher," he says with a chuckle.

"Honestly, I was very impressed, Kevin," I compliment him.

He shyly rubs the back of his neck.

"I-is that so? Haha..."

Caine stuffs his hands into his pockets, trying to appear aloof. But I know otherwise; Caine is happy Kevin intervened on his behalf.

"Yeah, kinda cool," Caine admits.

"So, what exactly happened in there?" Kevin decides to ask what's been on all of our minds.

We weren't there when Caine made his statement, he went into a different room with the police officer. I'm just as in the dark as Kevin is.

"Some guy I know usually comes in with his cronies and harasses me at work," Caine starts.

I'm amazed Caine is ready to talk about it.

"I don't know what happened, but tonight he was alone and drunk out of his mind. Started yelling and breaking shit."

Caine takes in a deep breath.

"Going on about some 'bitch' and how she cheated. I was just a convenient punching bag."

I softly touch Caine's arm, to let him know we're still here for him.

"Was he talking about Chelsey?" I inquire.

"Beats me. He was slurring his words and didn't make any sense. Then he started throwing out punches."

"And this is the aftermath." Caine gestures towards himself.

"I'm glad we made a pit stop at your store. I hope he'll be taken care of by the police." Kevin nods at him.

Sarah finally enters the room again.

"Ugh, guys, I'm really beat. I need to sleep."

"You definitely need to rest. Let me take you home," Kevin offers.

We all shuffle towards the front door, getting ready to leave.

"Sleep well, Caine," says Sarah, smiling at him.

"Yeah, take it easy," Kevin adds.

Caine stands there, staring at the floor, as if he's mentally preparing himself for something.

Sarah reaches for the door and opens it.

"Uhm!" Caine starts loudly.

We all turn to him.

"Thanks for, you know... tonight," he grumbles.

Sarah gives him a thumbs up.

"Anytime. That's what friends are for."

"I'd do it all over again," I say, giving his shoulder a slight push.

"I might refrain from punching someone, but yeah, what Joselina said," says Kevin, chuckling nervously.

Caine breaks out into a genuine smile.

They both leave the apartment, whereas I stay behind. Like an unspoken agreement, I stay here with Caine.

I don't want to leave him alone tonight.

1. "Can I stay over tonight?"

2. "Should I leave as well?"

"Can I stay over tonight?" I decide to ask him outright.

Caine turns his head a little, raising his eyebrows.

"Uhh..." he stammers.

He looks around the room; empty cans everywhere, bed unmade, pizza boxes stacked in the kitchen. It's a mess.

"I don't have any space for y—"

"That's okay, we can sleep in the same bed."

Caine clamps his mouth shut, suddenly acting very shy. It's not like we haven't slept in the same bed before...

I bat my eyelashes at him.

"I just really don't want to leave you alone tonight..."

Caine pouts at me, giving into my demands.

"I hate how I can't say no to you," he grumbles.

I smirk at him. "Are you saying you *don't* want me staying over?"

Caine suddenly steps closer to me, tugging on my hand.

"Never," he admits in this serious tone.

With just a single word, my heart flutters around in my chest as if I'm flying on cloud nine.

"Should I leave as well?" I ask him.

Please say no. Please say no.

"Huh?" Caine looks a little confused.

Then he shakes his head.

"And let you walk home alone at night? No."

My heart skips a beat.

"I'd be fine, you've seen me in action." I squeeze my non-existent bicep for added effect.

Caine rolls his eyes at me.

"You can either stay the night, or I'll walk you home."

"No, that's too much effort for you!"

Caine tugs on my hand, suddenly stepping closer to me.

"Then stay. Don't leave."

His voice is like smooth butter to my ears. Just what I wanted to hear.

"Alright, I'll stay." I smile at him.

I look down at my clothes.

"So uhm, can I borrow a shirt of yours?"

Caine's already walking towards his dresser, opening up one of the drawers and digging through his clothes.

"...Preferably something long," I point out, before he gives me something that stops at my belly button.

In a few seconds, Caine sticks out his hand, holding a long yellow shirt.

"Here, this should fit."

I take it from his hands and fold it out; it's barely long enough not to show anything indecent. But I guess it will do.

I disappear into the bathroom to get changed.

Dressed in Caine's shirt, I walk out into his room. Caine's in the middle of cleaning up the place, fetching empty cans from the desk and gathering dirty clothes.

He stops when he sees me, his arms wrapped around a bundle of clothes.

I pull at the hem of his shirt; it stops dangerously high on my thighs.

When he notices he's been gawking at me, Caine thrusts his face into his clothes. He's hiding it from me.

"Ah, sorry," he mumbles.

He sneaks a peek at me through the fabric covering his face.

"...You look so damn cute in my shirt."

Heat rises to my cheeks. This is even worse than when I wore that nightgown in the cabin! I feel so... exposed to him.

...But I don't want him to stop looking.

"That's like a fantasy of so many guys," he admits in a tiny voice.

If I wasn't blushing before, I am now.

"I didn't know," I admit shyly.

"Argh – just get into bed already!" he groans out loud.

Not wanting to be told twice, I dive under the covers. It's a small bed, we would barely fit with the two of us.

I bury my face into his pillow and inhale; it smells like Caine. The shirt, too. It's like he is everywhere.

Caine turns off the lights. There's a bunch of rustling sounds, but I can't tell what's going on in the dark.

Eventually, I feel a weight press down onto the mattress.

"Move over," says Caine.

I press myself towards the wall, making room for Caine.

He settles in, moving around until he's under the covers as well. His bare back touches my arms; it's really cramped. There's no way we can't touch each other like this.

There's something comforting about that fact. I love touching him. My heart's beating so fast, lying together like this.

Caine takes a deep breath and exhales, his back rising and falling. This has definitely been a hectic night.

"Caine?" I call out to him.

"Hm?"

1. "Hold me."

2. "Good night."

"Hold me."

There's a slight pause before he stirs and turns around to face me.

My eyes are getting used to the dark and I see him staring down at me, a serious expression gracing his face.

Without a word, Caine slips an arm underneath my head, and the other snakes across my body. He grabs a hold of me and pulls me into his chest.

My face is pressed against his naked chest. I can hear the rhythm of his heartbeat; it's going fast, like he can't calm down.

"Is this... another fantasy guys have?" I ask in the dark of the night.

Caine buries his face into my hair, I can feel the tip of his nose graze my scalp. He takes another deep breath.

"Yeah..." he admits.

"I can't believe you're real," he murmurs.

I curl up against Caine, wanting to hang onto this feeling that's brewing inside of me.

I really am in love with this redhead. My heart is yearning for him. I want to tell him...

"Good night," he whispers and leaves a kiss on my head.

...But I guess for now, I should let him have a good night's rest. I've got plenty of time to let him know my feelings.

"Sleep well," I reply.

I close my eyes and lean against his chest, listening to the faint thumps of his heart.

"Good night."

Caine's body stirs slightly.

"Hm, sweet dreams, Joselina."

My heartbeat quickens. I love the way he says my name.

I end up staring at his back, my eyes finally getting used to the dark. I want to reach out to him so bad...

I can't stop myself when my fingers touch the skin on his bare back, sliding down his spine.

Caine moves until he's lying on his back, his face turned towards me. Ah, we're so close like this.

Then his hand brushes against my own, until his fingers clasp mine. My breath hitches in my throat.

Without a trace of indecisiveness, Caine boldly intertwines his fingers with mine. He rests our hands on top of the mattress, in between us.

"Thanks." His voice rings loudly in my ears.

"For everything."

I squeeze his hand in return.

"Don't mention it."

I close my eyes as the feelings inside of me grow stronger. I'm being filled up with nothing but Caine.

I'm so hopelessly in love with him. My heart simply won't calm down.

But for now... I should let him get a good night's rest before I tell him my feelings. He's had a lot on his plate today.

There's plenty of time to tell him still.

-- Boutique

The very next day, I'm already back at my boutique. Behind the register as if nothing happened last night.

I'm still anxious – I don't know where Thomas is, or if he'll go after Caine again. I almost wanted to skip work for today, but Caine insisted he's fine and I should go to work.

Stubborn brat.

My phone starts ringing. Oh, someone's calling me.

"Hey." It's Caine's voice!

My mood instantly changes for the better now that I hear his voice.

"Hey, how's it going?"

"I just got a call from the police office," he says.

"Oh, did they follow up?"

"Yeah they arrested Thomas this morning, what with all the evidence we had. He's being charged for a simple misdemeanor and vandalism. Or something like that."

"Just thought I'd let you know."

"Oh that's good to hear! What're they going to do with him though?"

"I'm not sure... I think maybe community service. He's not allowed to be around me anymore, so there's that."

"Good! He deserves what's coming to him."

"Anyways, I just wanted to let you know, yeah..." he mumbles.

"Thanks for the update. Have you spoken to your boss yet?"

"He told me to take a few days off. He doesn't really seem to care, other than that – he's a pretty shitty boss."

"You should really find some other work," I suggest.

"Someday. Right now, it pays the bills."

"Oh right, I totally forgot – you need to pick up your ticket to the show."

"Fashion week?" he questions.

"Yep, when you've got time."

"I can come over after college, I'll be there around five, is that ok?"

"That's closing time for me, that's fine!"

"Okay, see yah."

"Bye!"

I hang up the phone and take in a deep breath.

So, they arrested Thomas. Thank god there's something being done about him. I wonder if Chelsey knows?

My finger hovers over the screen of my cell phone. Well, only one way to find out. I message Chelsey telling her she can pick up her ticket for fashion week.

--

A little after closing up shop, the door opens once more.

My entire stomach is lit up with butterflies when I see it's Caine.

Damn, after last night, it's gotten really bad whenever I see him.

"Hey Caine," I greet him.

His cheek has swollen even more, it looks worse than before.

"That looks like it hurts," I say, pointing at his cheek.

Caine stuffs his hands into his pockets and walks up to the counter.

"It looks worse than it is. I'm fine."

Still, it saddens me to see him like this.

I eventually take out the ticket I kept in a drawer behind the counter. I offer it to Caine.

"Here you go, a ticket for the 19th. You can go backstage with that as well."

Caine takes it off my hands, looking at it with a puzzled expression.

"Alright, thanks. So, it's in like, two more weeks, right?" he asks.

I groan out loud.

"Don't remind me, I'm still not finished."

"I can still help out... if you want me to," he says meekly. "I won't make anymore comments on your work."

I clasp my hands together with a smile.

"No, that's okay, please don't censor yourself around me."

I close my eyes and take a breath.

"I acted irrationally and defensive. Your commentary was totally valid. I'm sorry for chasing you off."

Caine sighs in relief.

"Okay, good, because I'm pretty sure I'm a terrible liar and wouldn't be able to keep my mouth shut anyway."

I laugh out loud; that's just like Caine. He's too blunt.

The door chimes – a customer walks in.

"I thought you were closed?" asks Caine, looking up.

"Oh, it's you," he says, surprised to see Chelsey standing in my boutique.

"Hi," she says awkwardly. "I'm here for the ticket? I figured I'd drop by on my way from college."

"Yep, I got one for you right here!" I take out the ticket and hand it over.

Chelsey then finally notices Caine's face.

"What the hell happened to you?" she asks, looking a little disgusted.

"Why don't you ask your boyfriend?" he huffs loudly.

"Thomas did that?" She sounds genuinely surprised.

"You didn't know? It happened last night. Thomas trashed Boon Mart and beat Caine," I say.

Chelsey shakes her head, gripping the ticket tightly.

"I... I broke up with him two days ago," she admits.

"He was screaming something about cheating," Caine notes.

"I didn't cheat!" Chelsey immediately exclaims.

"I just... broke it off with him. I've been wanting to for a while, but Thomas is..."

She looks at Caine, a sadness showing through her green eyes.

"You know what Thomas is like."

"Did he find out about the miscarriage you had?" I ask.

Chelsey nods silently.

"He did. He was convinced I had cheated on him and..."

Chelsey rolls up the sleeve on her upper left arm, showing her bare shoulder. I gasp when I see a dark purple bruise in the shape of a handprint.

She quickly rolls it down, shuffling on the spot.

"Is this what he's been doing to you all this time?" I ask, concerned.

"Look, he wasn't always like this. He could actually be very sweet," Chelsey says protectively.

Caine snorts loudly. "Right. And I'm a space alien that can fly."

She looks down at her hands.

"I don't know, something changed. He started demanding to know where I'd been, or who I'd spoken to. It was little things at first..." she trails off.

"What else could you expect from a guy like him," Caine sneers. "Both of you have made my life miserable, you know."

1. "Caine's got a point, you owe him an apology."

2. "Caine, maybe now's not such a good time..."

"Caine's got a point, you owe him an apology."

Chelsey glares at me.

"An apology? For what?" she asks indignantly.

"For the countless amount of times you humiliated me! For that time you pranked me in front of the whole school and posted it on social media!"

"Caine, maybe now's not such a good time..."

"No, now is a perfect time! You don't get a free pass just because you got yourself into a shitty relationship."

She turns to look at him, insulted.

"You think I wanted to be in a shitty relationship!? And I never laid a hand on you!"

"You may as well have – your words and actions cut just as deep. You think it's easy to sleep knowing the next day you'll be made into the laughing stock of the entire school?" Caine spits out.

"What the *fuck* did I ever do to you, besides like you?" He bares his fangs at her.

This time, Chelsey says nothing, her lips are pressed into a thin line.

Whatever Thomas did to Chelsey is obviously not right. But what she did to Caine isn't right either. Just because you're abused, doesn't mean you can abuse others.

"You don't... you don't know what it's like. When you're getting torn down by the person you love most – you seek control in other things. *Anything*."

"Anything to make you forget you're not actually in control..."

"And I just happened to be a convenient target for you?"

"What you did isn't right, Chelsey," I add.

Chelsey doesn't respond.

The air around us has gotten so tense. Caine is finally airing his grievances with his former tormenter.

"I didn't have any friends because of you," Caine admits. "Because of what you and Thomas did to me."

"I thought that... when I started college, I'd be done with all that shit."

"But no – you found out where I worked and continued to torment me there."

This time, Chelsey does look guilty. Caine's words are finally getting through her.

"Thomas is a bag of dicks and him hitting you is obviously not okay – but am I not worthy of an apology?" he huffs.

"...Did it even bother you as much as it bothered me?" This time his voice is quiet, soft – like he's on the verge of crying.

What I didn't expect was to see Chelsey cry instead. Her eyes immediately tear up and her lips start to tremble.

"I-I'm sorry." She wipes away her tears.

"I didn't mean to turn out this hateful. I'm sorry."

She then buries her face into her hands.

"–I'm sorry, excuse me." Chelsey practically flees my boutique.

Caine and I are left behind, staring at the front door.

"...Did you have to make her cry?" I ask.

Caine narrows his eyes at me.

"Forget it. Did it feel good to get that off your chest?"

"A little."

"Things are going to be different now. Thomas won't be around anymore and Chelsey... well, I think she'll turn over a new leaf." I smile at Caine, hoping he'll see the positive side of all this.

"Didn't make me feel better though," he admits.

"What would?"

Caine takes a moment to think.

"Punch Thomas in his balls?"

He then nods to himself with more confidence.

"Yes. A punch in the balls. Definitely."

I giggle at his reaction. I hope we'll never have to see Thomas again.

[Chapter 024]
-- boutique workroom

Things have shifted into panic mode.

It is August 7th, and I have 12 days left to finish my collection. Most of my dresses are finished, but not all of them.

True to his word, Caine's been helping me out now and then. Sarah is unfortunately out of commission due to her cold.

When it comes to the situation with Thomas and Chelsey, things have been quiet on that front. I'm not even sure if Chelsey will be coming to fashion week or not.

...In fact, she kind of ran out without paying for the ticket.

But I digress; I've got other things to worry about. Such as finding models at the very last minute, and wrapping up my collection.

Oh god, what am I even doing to myself, how am I going to find models!?

I groan out loud, raking my hands through my long hair.

-- bedroom night time

Even when I'm in bed, I can't stop thinking about all of the things I still have to plan. I need to get some extra fabric, I've run out of dark blue thread, and the model situation...

I can't sleep at all.

Which is why I notice the screen of my cell phone light up. I've got a text message.

Caine:
"You still awake?"

Joselina:
"Yeah, can't sleep. There's so much on my mind."

Caine:
"Anything I can do to help out?"

Joselina:
"Nah, you've done enough. The best thing you can do right now is get my mind off of fashion!"

Caine:
"Should I tell you a joke?"

Joselina:
"...Sure."

Caine:
"They recently opened a restaurant on the moon, but all the reviews complained it has no atmosphere."

I can't help but snicker. That was so bad!

Joselina:
"Ahaha – that sucked!"

Caine:

"Got another one."

Caine:

"The sun didn't need to get brighter by going to college – it already had a million degrees."

Joselina:

"Pfft these are so corny. You really love space stuff, don't you?"

Caine:

"I do :)"

Joselina:

"I can see you using cheesy space pick-up lines as well."

Caine:

"You're so attractive, I can't stop orbiting you ;)"

Joselina:

"You even added the winky face!"

Caine:

"The sky would be empty if a star would fall every time I'd think of you."

Joselina:

"Oh, that one is cute."

Caine:

"Are you the sun? You make me feel warm and you shine so bright."

I know he's joking, but it somehow feels like he's actually saying them to me. They're definitely cheesy and stupid, but it's like my heart can't tell the difference and wells up with a warm glow.

Caine:

"All I want in this universe, is you..."

Joselina:

"Haha, alright... I think that's enough space flirting."

Caine:

"Did they work?"

Joselina:

"Did what?"

Caine:

"The pick-up lines."

Joselina:

"What do you mean?"

Caine:

"Sorry. I suck. I don't know how to flirt -_-"

A blush creeps onto my face. He was trying to flirt for real! Oh my lord.

Joselina:

"I didn't think you were being serious!"

Caine:

"Nevermind."

Joselina:

"If you want to flirt, you can just, I don't know – show me a cute picture of yourself."

Caine:

"No picture of me is ever cute."

1. "That's not true, I think you're very cute."

2. "You haven't even tried it out yet."

Joselina:

"That's not true, I think you're very cute."

Caine:

"..."

Joselina:

"Send me a selfie! :)"

Caine:

"What, no. I suck at selfies."

Joselina:

"Aww, it's just a selfie, and it'll be gone in a few seconds!"

Caine:

"You're really annoying, you know that?"

Joselina:

"Only when I want something."

Joselina:

"You haven't even tried it out yet."

Caine:

"That's because I know it'll suck -_-"

Joselina:

"The picture will get erased in a few seconds anyway :)"

Caine:

"So?"

Joselina:

"So it's not like I get to keep it!"

Caine:

"You really want to see me that bad?"

Joselina:

"Kinda, yeah."

Joselina:

"No dick-pics though."

Caine doesn't respond anymore after our rapid back and forth.

But then my phone beeps and I've received a picture from Caine. Oh – he did it!



My heart thumps loudly.

I was expecting a picture of his face, but...

Caine's naked torso is in full view of my phone. He's lying in bed. It's dark, but I can still manage to make out his face, half obscured by his hand.

Holy hell.

He's hot.

My thumb glides over the screen, where the picture ends right near his...

The picture closes on itself – it's been deleted by SnapPic.

Noooo! I was enjoying that!

Caine:

"There, you saw me."

Caine:

"Your turn."

Joselina:

"Alright, fair is fair."

I lift the phone above my head.

...And like the idiot I am, it slips from my hand and drops on my face.

Argh!

That hurt!

I silently cry out in pain and at my own stupidity, contemplating my life choices.

Gripping the phone in my hand tighter this time, I try to take a selfie again. Thinking about how Caine's going to see this has got me self-conscious, so I try to find the best angle.

I'm in my nightgown as well... so this is going to look very provocative. Maybe I should just do one of my face and nothing below.

1. Take a sexy selfie.
2. Take a face-only selfie.

To hell with it – I want to show off my body to Caine. I raise the phone high enough in the air to capture everything up to my waist.

I turn my face a little and give a seductive smile. I press the button.

There, the picture was taken. I check to see Caine's reaction.

Caine:

"Ugh."

Joselina:

"Ugh!?"

Caine:

"I wanted to look at it longer..."

Alright, I'll just take one of my face, he doesn't need to see what I'm wearing.

I turn my face and get a good angle, then snap a picture. Hehe, I hope he likes it.

Caine:

"I can get used to this."

Joselina:

"Used to what?"

Caine:

"Looking at your cute face."

Woosh, there go my cheeks again, fully ablaze.

Caine:

"I want another."

No way, I'm blushing!

Joselina:

"No, it's one for one!"

Caine:

"Fine :("

Joselina:

"We should try and sleep."

Caine:

"Hm. I hope I managed to take your mind off things ^^"

That's for sure...

Joselina:

"You did, thanks! Good night :)"

Caine:

"Sweet dreams..."

-- **Boutique workroom**

Eureka!

I am one kick-ass designer!

All ten dresses are finally finished! Through blood, sweat, and tears – and sometimes being a potato – I finished my work.

There's literally only three days left until the show.

The models have been picked out as well, thankfully I managed to nab some amateurs that were willing to work on such short notice. All they hear is 'fashion week' and they sign up blindly.

I sit down on my chair, completely exhausted. I need to take pictures of my work and upload it to Daisy Dots – I haven't posted anything in forever.

Gleeful and proud of my own work, I start snapping pictures of each dress on a mannequin.

Nothing can bring me down – not even that Menenimi troll. Though, he hasn't been active in a while.

I quickly create a thread and post all my pictures in it. The old me would have waited around to check the replies, but the new me isn't as concerned about compliments anymore.

Instead, I want to show my work off to Caine! I haven't seen him in the past couple of days.

Joselina:

"I finally finished! Here they are!!"

I spam Caine with all the pictures I just took.

Caine:

"Wow, holy hell, you woke me up with all that vibrating my phone was doing."

Joselina:

"Oh I'm sorry!"

Caine:

"They look great, honestly. I even like the black and white one ^^"

I look at the time; it's 7 PM.

Joselina:

"Why were you sleeping?"

Caine:

"Oh... I'm sick. Think I got a fever or something. Must have come from Sarah."

Joselina:

"What! Why didn't you tell me?"

Caine:

"Because you're busy with work... I didn't want to distract you."

Joselina:

"I don't mind at all!"

Caine:

"It's fine, I can take care of myself."

As much as he says he's fine, I don't want him to be all alone, sick at home with a fever. So I decide to head out and visit Caine.

-- Caine's outside apartment

I grab a few things at Boon Mart. Stuff like soup, fruit, and even toilet paper. It feels a bit strange when I don't see him working. With a small bag of items in my hand, I head on over to Caine's apartment.

Half an hour later I arrive at Caine's apartment and I knock on his door. The bag swings back and forth as I wait, feeling anxious for some reason. I hope Caine is alright and he didn't start throwing up or anything.

There's some commotion going on inside, and I can hear footsteps coming closer, until the door opens up.

Caine's bedhead pops up first – then I see the rest of him; his slightly flushed face... and his rather adorable shark pajamas.

"...You're not pizza," he drawls out in a raspy voice.

"Hey," I greet him with a smile.

1. "Nice jammies."

2. "Can I come in?"

"Nice jammies," I say with a chuckle.

Caine's eyes grow wide in realization.

"Can I come in?" I ask with a smile.

"Joselina?"

Caine looks down at his shark pajamas.

Then he slams the door in my face.

What!?! How rude! I knock on the door again, loudly. Inside I can hear Caine running around, doing who knows what.

"Caine, don't just shut me out! Let me in! I brought food."

The door opens again, and Caine, looking out of breath, steps aside this time to let me in. He's got some clothes on this time, having gotten rid of his shark pajamas.

"Didn't... realize... you were coming," he says while taking deep breaths.

-- Caine's apartment

I walk inside, immediately seeing the amount of pizza boxes has increased since the last time I was here. He hasn't been eating healthy at all.

I walk over towards the kitchen counter, but end up stepping on something with my foot – it's a bunch of school books.

Caine hurries over and gathers them from the floor, stuffing them into his shoulder bag. He sniffs and wipes his nose when he's done and looks at me.

His cheeks and nose are red, and he's got bags under his eyes. He doesn't look too well.

"I uhm, I brought you some things I thought you might need while you're sick," I say and hold out the bag for him.

Caine accepts the bag from me, taking a quick look inside.

"Toilet paper," he says dully.

"You never know when you run out, haha..." I say sheepishly. "Brought you some food, too."

"...Thanks," he says. He places the bag on the kitchen counter. "I ordered pizza though."

Of course he did.

"That's alright, you can eat the stuff I bought tomorrow instead."

Caine gestures towards his unmade bed.

"Uhm, you can sit here, if you want," he says. His voice is still raspy and deep, it sounds so strange on him, kind of more masculine actually.

I seat myself on the edge of his bed, and it's kind of making me uncomfortable. It's like I'm expecting something now that I'm here, alone with Caine.

...I'm getting off track here. Caine's sick. I shouldn't be thinking perverted thoughts.

"How are you feeling?" I decide to ask.

Caine wraps his arms around his body and his gaze lands upon the floor.

"I'm alright. I don't need you babying me."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not babying you. I figured it would be nice if someone was there to care for you while you're sick."

"Come sit down. You need to rest and shouldn't move around so much." I pat on the mattress next to me.

Caine gives me a frightened look, then shakes his head.

"I don't want you getting sick, too."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic."

Not heeding his warning, I reach to grab Caine's arm and pull him closer until he stumbles forwards with a yelp. I force him to sit down on the mattress. Pleased with myself, I give him a grin.

"You want me to tuck you in, too?" I joke.

Caine glares at me, but only succeeds in looking ridiculously cute with that flushed face and bad bedhead of his. I chuckle softly, which only makes him even more irritated.

"Did you come here to make fun of me, or...?" he snaps at me.

"I'm sorry, but those shark pajamas kind of make fun of themselves already," I say with a laugh.

Caine gets up from the bed with blood rushing to his head even more; he's embarrassed! How cute!

"Okay, out with you!" he yells, but his voice breaks up in the middle and it sounds more like a squeak instead. It's hard to take him seriously like this.

"I'm joking, only joking!" I say, trying to stifle my laughter. "Sit down, sit down."

"I don't have the energy to put up with this," Caine says as he reluctantly sits down again. He's still sporting red cheeks.

"How's your temperature?" I ask, and I move closer to him, placing my hand on his forehead.

His skin is blazing hot to the touch, and he gives me this blank and wide-eyed stare. Oh, this doesn't look good at all, his fever is really high.

"I—I'm alright, I told you! It's... it's just a fever." Caine bashfully pulls away from my hand and slightly twists his body from me.

"Are you drinking enough?" I ask as I sit closer to him again. I'm worrying too much about him.

Caine glances at me with judging eyes, then he scoots away to the end of the small bed. He's hugging his arms like he's in some sort of defensive position.

"Stop getting so close, or else I'm gonna get you sick. You've got a show to run, don't you?"

"It's okay, I have a strong immune system," I say confidently.

Caine snorts at me, which gives him a drippy nose full of snot, so he hurriedly gets up from the bed to find a tissue to wipe it off. I try my best not to laugh.

"I'm not going to listen to your complaints when you're sick in bed as well," says Caine while he blows his nose.

1. "You can feed me while I'm in bed."

2. "That simply means it's your turn to drop by and take care of me."

"You can feed me while I'm in bed." I raise my eyebrows at him suggestively.

"Hah!" he huffs. Caine throws his used tissue into the trashcan.

"You know that's not what I'll be doing when you're in bed."

A counterattack! I didn't expect it! I end up blushing slightly.

Oh no, flashbacks are popping into my head from that night of us in bed. His skin felt feverish back then, too, but for a whole different reason.

This conversation is treading into dangerous territory!

"That simply means it's your turn to drop by and take care of me," I point out cheerfully.

Caine rolls his eyes. "Who says I'll take care of you? You're an adult. Take care of yourself."

"Ah, just like yourself, you mean? Should I leave? You're an adult after all..."

"Of course, I don't need you to take care of me. I am an adult, thank you very much."

"Not with those shark pajamas, you're not," I tease.

"That!" he exclaims with a red face. "Just erase it from your mind already," he says.

He's acting so embarrassed and nervous, it's cute.

I'm pretty sure he didn't expect me to drop by, so he clambered to get changed into his regular clothes. He didn't have enough time to clean up the place though, as I scan the room, it's full of empty cartons and soda cans again.

"If you're not feeling well enough to do it yourself, why don't I clean up your place?" I suggest, changing the subject.

"No, that's al—"

I ignore Caine's reply, and I start grabbing the soda cans from the desk, cleaning off the area so he's actually able to use his laptop. My fingers hover over the keyboard to grab a piece of wrapping paper, but suddenly...

"!!!"

Caine races towards the desk, slams his laptop shut, then pulls me away by my wrist, making me drop the can on the floor.

"What?" I ask, confused.

Was there something on his laptop he didn't want me to see?

Caine awkwardly releases his hold on my wrist once he notices how long he's been touching me, and he guiltily hangs his head down. Wordlessly he picks up the can from the floor.

"...You were watching porn, weren't you," I say accusingly.

Caine's cheeks along with his ears turn bright red this time as he crushes the can in his hands.

"W – what!? No!" he immediately yells out.

I can't help but grin at him, I poke his cute little red cheek.

"You were so watching porn."

"Stop! I wasn't!" Caine bats my finger away.

"Ahaha, it's okay – you're a growing young man with, ahem, *needs*," I say with a wide toothy grin.

"Joselina!" he yells at me.

Caine's face resembles a nice tomato by now, so even though he's trying to appear threatening to me, he looks anything but, especially since he's also got a runny nose. He's far from threatening or intimidating – he's like a poor little lamb, completely innocent and defenseless.

I am unable to let the opportunity slip away to tease him mercilessly. I have to!

"I just hope that..." I take a breather to steady my laughter. "It didn't involve sharks." I burst into laughter.

Caine remains silent as I gasp for air from laughing too much. It's just priceless, completely priceless! I should take a picture to commemorate this moment, and then set it as my wallpaper, so I can forever be reminded of the day I teased Caine until his head exploded into a million different colours.

...!!

The air is pushed out of my lungs when all of the sudden, Caine's tackled me out of nowhere.

Our bodies crash onto the bed behind me, both of us yelp out loud as we go down. Caine is sprawled on top of me, but then he raises his body to loom over mine.

I blink up at him, my laughter having died instantly, and instead it's been replaced by a racing heartbeat. His warm hands are on my shoulders, and they're shaking. It's making my entire body tremble. His eyes are dead serious as he looks into my own.

"I thought... tackling was my thing," I say breathlessly.

Caine's fingers press harder into my shoulders, preventing me from escaping his hold.

"It's time for me to be on top," he grunts.

I lick my lips – a heat firing up inside of me. My rational thoughts are slipping.

For a small moment of time, we're both quiet, only sinking deeper into the mattress. Caine's lush lips are parted, he's breathing through them irregularly. Then he slowly starts to lean down towards my face, and my heart jumps into my throat.

We haven't kissed since that night in the cabin. I'd be lying if I said it hasn't been tormenting me every day. The itch to touch Caine, to press my mouth against his.

Now that we're finally here...

And then a droplet of snot falls from Caine's nose, landing onto my cheek.

"Ew, Caine! Gross!" I turn my face away, squeezing my eyes shut.

"Get off me!"

I push Caine off with full force, he falls off the bed with a loud 'oof!'. I quickly start rubbing away the icky snot from my face with his blanket.

Caine's puffy hair pops up at the end of the bed, he's looking disgruntled and annoyed, but still extremely red in the face.

"That's what you get," he says childishly. Then he wipes his nose again with his sleeve. "Don't tease me."

"That's no reason to rub your snot all over my face!" I talk back.

"That wasn't intentional," Caine mumbles under his breath. He leans with his back against his bed and sighs loudly.

Now I feel a little bad for teasing him this much – he is sick and has a fever after all. I shouldn't be trying to raise his temperature even more.

And I definitely should not be trying to lead this into something more than a simple sick visit.

In fact, he should be resting. I sit down normally on the mattress, and reach out for Caine's messy red hair with my hand.

Caine tenses up at my touch as my fingers push through his thick hair. I graze them over his scalp, and I lean down my body to whisper into his ear.

"Sorry, please get well soon." I gently ruffle his hair.

I give him one last scratch before I pull my hand away – except Caine stops me. He places his own hand on top of mine.

"Don't stop," he says softly.

I smile gently at him, and my fingers return to grazing through his hair, touching and massaging his head. Caine rolls his head along with my touch, then he leans forward, exposing the nape of his neck. My fingers trail down through his red hair until I reach his neck, where I draw circles with my index finger.

It's making the hair on the back of his neck stand up straight with goosebumps.

Oh, I didn't realize Caine was so inclined to like being rubbed on his head and neck, it seems to be a sensitive spot. I continue to run my fingers up and down, my nails sometimes scrape over his hot skin. In a way, this seems kind of sensual, doesn't it?

Well, at least it's not sexual.

I smile to myself as I silently continue to play with Caine's hair and massage his skin.

I can feel a lock of hair sticking out near his ear, his bedhead is rather adorable. I tug on the lock of hair, trying to straighten it out, and tuck it behind his ear.

Caine leans towards my hand, shifting his body a bit so that my fingers slide across his cheek instead. They're really hot, I should probably get a small towel and wet it with cold water to cool him down.

He closes his eyes and he snuggles his face into my hand with a satisfying sigh.

My heart thumps against my chest... Caine is too cute! This isn't good for my heart!

There's a loud knock on the door that interrupts us.

Caine's eyes fly wide open in alert.

"P-pizza!" he says as he scrambles to get up and open the door. It's the pizza delivery guy this time for real.

I smile after him. Maybe I should help him out and clean up this place while he's busy paying the delivery guy.

I walk over to his desk again, and I stare at the laptop... it's awakening my curiosity.

Caine really didn't want me to see what was on there, and I have a sneaking suspicion it's porn. My fingers reach for the lid to pry it open.

I know it's invading his privacy, but... I really want to know!

The blinding light of the laptop shines into my eyes as I open it up.

"That'll be €8,99," says the delivery man.

I look at the screen, expecting some kind of video to be paused... but it's nothing like that, actually. He seemed to have been browsing a website, and I recognize it instantly.

It's the forum I moderate; Daisy Dots.

I frown; why does Caine know about this website? Did he get it from Kevin?

I scroll through the thread he was reading, and I come across a picture of one of my dresses. Oh – it's the thread I posted like an hour ago with my collection! That's cute, he was actually looking at my work.

I can't help but smile. How did he find out about it though?

But my smile falters when I notice he's actually signed in on an account.

Caine's a member of the forum.

He's logged in under the username **Menenimi628**.

My brain stops working.

The front door closes.

I'm frozen on the spot, my blood has run cold.

"Hey, you want a piece as w—"

Caine's suddenly behind me, slamming his laptop shut again.

"Why did you look!?" he yells at me.

I can't say anything; I'm still completely caught off guard.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Don't you have any sort of decency!? Don't just snoop around on another man's laptop!"

Caine... Caine, he's... Menenimi?

"Did you see...?" he asks, his voice on edge.

No, no, no, no, no...

I can feel tears well up in my eyes and I cover my mouth in shock.

"Fuck!"

It's him. The troll. The one that's been harassing me and telling me to kill myself.

"It was you...?" I ask, staring at him, flabbergasted.

Caine... is the troll. Caine. The man I'm in love with.

"You shouldn't have looked!" he yells.

I'm going to throw up.

How do you breathe again?

I turn away from him and rush over towards the front door, fiddling around with the handle to open it. All of my instincts are screaming at me to get out of here.

I open the door and run out, not even bothering to look back.

Chapter [025]
-- livingroom

Numb.

I'm numb.

I can barely sleep at night, even though my mind is empty. I've lost my appetite, but it doesn't bother me. It just is.

There's a bunch of missed calls on my cell phone. I've turned it off, just like how I've shut off my own emotions.

Going anywhere near my computer fills me with anxiety. I avoid it like I avoid spring cleaning.

It plagues my mind every second of the day. I run the messages through my head, over and over again.

You sham.

You'll never be good enough.

You're trash.

Kill yourself.

Those were the words Caine wrote to me, under the guise of the Menenimi account.

I'm still in denial, yet it fits so perfectly. Caine has never followed the rules – I knew that from the moment I met him.

Stealing from stores without any regard to authority. Being crude and crass without caring how his words might impact someone else.

I knew it all along... But for some reason, I never thought I'd be the recipient of his bad side. He'd never steal from me; he'd never hurt me on purpose. That's what I foolishly believed.

And now, the ugly truth is staring at me right from the abyss; Caine is a hateful human being.

My heart aches so much. I fell in love with him, but now that I know his secret, I am repulsed.

This is Caine. The real Caine.

How is he in any way different from his former bullies? I defended him so adamantly against Thomas and Chelsey. I stood up for what I thought was right.

But it turns out he was just like them – seeking the thrill of hurting another person.

He knew it was me, too. Why else would he be outraged at me looking at his laptop?

That's the worst part of it all; he knew it was me all along.

Well, actions have consequences, Caine.

I need time to process this.

-- Boutique

Tomorrow is the 19th. I am attending fashion week.

The collection is ready. There's nothing left for me to do except wait.

I want to be excited, but I feel nothing at all. The world has looked so gloomy this past week.

"Hello? Have you gone deaf?"

"Huh?" I turn my head towards the entrance.

Sarah and Kevin have entered the store.

"What is up with you?" she asks accusingly.

"You haven't replied to any of my messages and I can't reach your cell."

I cast my eyes down towards the counter. My phone has been off, I'm too scared to turn it on. I've gone dark on social media.

"I turned it off," I answer honestly.

Sarah walks up to the counter.

"Joselina, what happened?" she asks, concerned.

"Did something happen to one of your dresses?" Kevin asks.

I shake my head.

"No, it's not that..." I trail off.

"Then what?" Sarah sounds impatient.

I take in a deep breath.

"It's Caine."

Both of their eyes widen. I've gotten their attention.

"Did something happen to Caine? Is that guy at it again?" Kevin looks like he's ready for anything.

It honestly makes my heart drop down into my stomach.

"No, nothing happened to Caine." I bite down on my lips. "Caine's done something to me instead."

"What's he done to make you want to avoid him?"

How to explain... Do I want to explain? Sarah and Kevin look so worried, but telling them would mean facing my reality.

I twiddle my fingers, unsure how to start.

"Do you remember that website? Daisy Dots?" I ask.

Kevin nods, but Sarah looks a little lost.

"It's a website for hobbyists, mostly sewing. Anyways..."

"A few months ago, there was a member who would post nasty messages to me. Trashing my work and telling me to go kill myself."

I shrug. "Just some online troll, right?"

"...Yeah, I know what you're talking about," says Kevin.

I give him a wry smile. "For a moment, I thought the troll was you."

"What – me!?" he looks shocked.

Sarah snorts loudly with laughter.

"Ahaha, Kevin, a troll? In what universe? He can't even complain to the waiter that his hot meal was served cold – and he ate it without any comments!" Sarah points out.

Kevin blushes slightly.

"Did you have to say that out loud..."

"Well, when I mentioned Daisy Dots, you acted a little suspicious. Like you didn't want me to find out who you were," I say.

Kevin rubs the back of his neck, chuckling nervously.

"Ahaha... I mean, you're not *wrong*..."

"I mean – I'm not the troll! But, I was just a little embarrassed."

"Embarrassed of what?"

He looks down at his feet.

"It will sound silly, but people think I'm a girl on there."

Sarah whips her head around, completely flabbergasted at this reveal.

"You're catfishing!?"

"N-no! It's not that!"

Well this is a turn of events.

"Members would frequently refer to me as she or her, and I just kinda rolled with it. I was too shy to correct them..."

It is true that most members are women, so people will automatically use she/her pronouns for members. But we've got other genders as well.

I chuckle slightly.

This is all so stupid in hindsight. Kevin didn't want me finding out who he was, but not for the reason I suspected.

"I could never write hateful comments to you," he says in a serious tone.

"But Caine did." There, I said it.

There's a second of silence as they both process it.

"Caine?" repeats Kevin.

"...The troll. It was Caine."

He brings a hand to his mouth and gasps.

Sarah looks completely confused on the other hand.

"Wait, so you're saying this troll was sending you hate messages – but it was Caine all along?"

"Now it makes sense!" Kevin exclaims loudly.

"Huh, what does?" I ask.

"You didn't see?"

"See what?" I have no idea what Kevin is talking about.

"The post! He left a goodbye post! Oh, it makes so much more sense, knowing it was Caine..."

"...Post?" I look at him quizzically.

"So... you really haven't seen it."

"Okay, can someone tell me what's going on – I'm so confused!" Sarah complains.

Kevin whips out his phone and quickly swipes his finger across the screen. A few seconds later he sighs.

"Argh, it's gone. It must have gotten deleted. I was going to show you the post."

Deleted posts are something moderators can still see. I should be able to read the post under my account.

And I have to admit my curiosity is definitely piqued.

I take out my own cell phone, finally turning it back on. I'm bombarded with a ton of missed phone calls and a bunch of notifications from SnapPic.

They're all from Caine, trying to reach me, of course.

I ignore the notifications and browse to Daisy Dots. There's a section for members to post their introductions, but also their farewells. It's the first place I check out for any deleted posts.

And there is one, from Menenimi628, the same account I saw before.

"Found it," I say breathlessly.

"Huh, really? Then go read it!" Kevin urges me on.

The title is: I'm sorry.

Finally, I click the link to read the deleted post.

--

This will be my final post.

I am a troll. You all know this, especially the staff know this.

When I found this website, I was a genuine member, under a different username. I typed up a post about something I made, a piece of jewelry, but it wasn't very popular. It didn't get any responses. In fact, I only got a single reply to my creation – it was a mod telling me I posted it in the wrong place and that I should read the rules. I'll admit, I was a bit... embarrassed, but it also explained why no one was commenting in the first place. It was in the wrong forum after all, no? I followed the rules and posted it again in the right place.

It still got no replies. Instead, that same moderator told me I shouldn't have posted the same thread twice, that they were moving the original thread to the right place already, and I should have just been patient. My second post and again a staff member pointed out something I did wrong. When no one replied to my thread either, I got angry.

A day later, that same moderator posted her own thread with pictures of her work. She got a bunch of adoring fans sucking up to her. I couldn't take it. I was pissed off. I made a new account, with the sole purpose of flaming her work.

None of the things I wrote were true. Everything that was typed was done so out of anger and envy. I hated seeing her getting all of this attention, even though when I tried to seek the same attention, I got nothing but silence in return. I was jealous and envied her work. I convinced myself I thought she had no talent – that she was a sham. I continued to send her PMs filled with atrocities about her work and herself. She and the other staff members would ban me, but I would simply create a new account and continue bashing her.

Honestly, I had nothing else to do.

I spent most of my time on the internet, because real life sucked. My bullies from high school continued to make my life a living hell in college as well. I had no friends; it was depressingly lonely. I was just going through the motions, day by day. Hoping that maybe, perhaps, this day they won't show up.

The internet was my only escape, where I felt just a little bit more powerful than my real self. The only thing I had going for me was the little bit of talent of making jewelry, and even *that* got ignored.

I was angry at the world for ignoring me. I was angry at the world for letting the bullies get away with it and making me feel powerless. So, I took whatever opportunity I had to feel powerful again, to feel like I mattered.

The bullied became the bully. I took out all my anger on this one, innocent moderator. Everything that I bottled up inside, anything that went wrong that day – it felt good bringing her down with me. I never once stood still to think about the fact, that I was saying this to another human being. To me, it was just some random person on the internet that I would never meet. Who cares what happens to them, right?

That's what I honestly, truly, thought.

In this dark time of my life, I met someone. In fact, she caught me shoplifting. Yeah, I shoplift. Big surprise there. But she tried to set me straight, and for some reason, she stuck up for me when no one else would. I got a slight glimpse of friendship – I've never had anyone care about me before. I don't know why she cared in the first place, and I spent many nights in bed wondering about her intentions.

The more she inserted herself into my empty life, the less I felt alone, and the less I trolled. You may have noticed periods where it was quiet and I didn't show up to make all your lives miserable. That's because of her.

Nevertheless, my life still wasn't some gigantic happy rainbow. Whenever I had a bad day, I'd go back to trolling the staff again, telling this moderator to kill herself.

My friend helped me out, just when I felt alone in the world again. She was determined to get things working out for me, and yeah, she did help, by a lot. I basically stopped going onto your forum by then. I wasn't really

angry anymore, in fact, things were looking up. I had friends, I wasn't lonely, and people were recognizing my talent.

Then one particularly crappy day, my former tormentor decided to beat the shit out of me. She saw all of it. I've never felt more humiliated and insignificant than in that moment.

And for some reason... She didn't leave me. She saw the pathetic loser I really was, and she held me in her arms.

Truly, I don't deserve her kindness.

I still lurk here every now and then, but I stopped posting. A couple of days ago, the moderator I trolled uploaded some pictures of her dresses.

Imagine my horror when I recognized the dresses. I *helped* her with those dresses.

There are too many words to describe how I felt at that time. Sorrow, dread, shock, regret, fear, shame, anger, embarrassment – I could write a dictionary. But the strongest feelings were definitely disgust, shame, and regret.

The one person that helped me out, the girl that became pretty much the most important person in my life, is the one I've been trolling online. What excuse do I even have? I'm just like my former harassers – hurting those around me for no good reason.

She was just supposed to be some faceless stranger on the internet that I could yell at to feel better. But she's not. She's never been faceless. She's human, with her own feelings and thoughts. And I stomped on her, repeatedly. I kicked her while she was down. I'm a monster, and I have no excuse for what I've done.

I deeply regret my actions; I am sorry for all of the things I have said. I wish I could take them back, but I can't. What's done is done. You deserve so much better.

I know this is a long shot, but I hope you can forgive me.

Goodbye.

--

I reread it.

Then I read it again for a third time.

An outbreak of emotions fight inside of me; they all feel so conflicted with one another. I'm so messed up.

Tears start streaming down my cheeks – I can't hold them back anymore.

"What's wrong!?" Sarah asks. "What did he write?"

I hand the phone to Sarah and put a hand to my mouth and squeeze my eyes shut. My tears are so salty.

It hurts so damn much right now. My entire body aches. I feel so betrayed, so angry. I don't know how to stop feeling like this.

Why did it have to be you, Caine? Why were you Menenimi? Why couldn't it have been Kevin, as I had suspected all along?

[PATH SPLITS HERE]

--Passionate

I'm in love with him, *but I hate him for what he's done to me.*

Why did I have to fall in love with *you*, who could be so cruel – like a monster.

I would have been better off never meeting Caine at all.

Kevin looks at me with a sad expression. "Are you going to respond?"

I shake my head.

"No. I've got a show to run. I can't afford to think about this right now."

"But... It's Caine," he argues weakly.

"Exactly. *Because* it's Caine."

I wipe away my tears.

"Do you know how much this hurts right now?"

Kevin says nothing, only giving me a sympathetic look.

"I'm sure he's really regretting it."

"Give me a second to catch up. This is like a damn memoir," Sarah huffs.

"Ugh, I need to get ready for tomorrow. I just... I just can't right now."

"There, I read it." Sarah hands me back my phone.

I quickly turn it off. I don't need any more distractions.

"Okay that's uhm, wow. I don't know what to say."

"Look, we all know Caine by now – do you really think he—"

"—I don't want to hear it," I say, quickly cutting off Kevin.

"He made his bed, now he can lie in it. He isn't any different than his bullies."

I huff out loud.

"The *nerve* of him, berating Chelsey in my store about putting her down, when he had been doing the exact same thing to me."

My anger is reaching its boiling point, threatening to explode.

"He's just a damn hypocrite," I spit out.

Sarah's finally caught up to speed.

"I had no idea Caine could secretly be an online troll..." Sarah doesn't look all too happy finding out either.

"Do you think he knew it was you?"

"It says in the post he only found out when Joselina posted the pictures online, so no, I don't think he knew up until a week ago," Kevin quickly points out.

"Does it even matter?" I retort. "Either way, it's hurtful."

"Can't deny that," Sarah agrees with me.

"So what now? Are you not going to talk to him anymore?"

"That's the plan."

"Not even to hear him out?" Kevin suggests.

"I read his post, didn't I?"

"I don't think that's the same thing as a face-to-face conversation..."

I put a hand up to my temple; this is giving me a headache.

"Look, do you two think you can leave me alone for a while? I'll see you tomorrow at the show, okay?"

Sarah chews on her lip, looking a little conflicted on what to do.

"Alright. Call me if you need anything."

Sarah spins on her heel and starts walking towards the entrance. But Kevin is still standing in front of me.

"..." It seems he doesn't know what to say.

"Are you really never going to talk to him again...?"

I look away from him.

"At least right now I won't," is my indecisive answer.

"Alright. But please, hear him out, I'm sure he's got a lot to say to you."

Kevin bows out and follows Sarah, the both of them leaving my boutique.

I take in a shaky breath as I clutch the phone in my hands.

--

Later that day, as I'm closing up shop, a last-minute customer enters.

I'm surprised to see it's Chelsey.

She shuffles on her feet as she enters the store, sticking out like a sore thumb. Last time I saw her, she ran away in tears.

"Uhm, hi," she says quietly.

"Good afternoon," I greet politely. "What are you doing here?"

Chelsey slowly takes out her wallet and forks over some cash. Her eyebrows are knitted together as she hands me the bills, looking a little awkward.

"Here, it's for the ticket, right?"

"Oh right, you didn't pay last time."

I gratefully accept the money.

"I figured you wouldn't come anymore," I mention.

Chelsey tilts her head to the side, quietly contemplating her reply.

"I thought about it," she starts. "But I can't always run away from my problems."

That's surprisingly mature of her.

"I ignored my issues with Thomas for too long... and look where that got me." She rubs her arm, the place that was bruised before.

"Have you heard anything from Thomas?" I ask.

"He's forced to do community service, picking up trash near the shore."

Chelsey sighs. "Honestly, it's a slap on the wrist."

"Agreed. Thomas is a dangerous man – some community service is not going to prevent him from doing anything else."

Chelsey looks a little nervous.

"I just hope he won't come after me again..."

That does seem a little worrying; it's not like Thomas has a restraining order. Even if he did, I'm sure he'd violate it and come seek out either Chelsey or Caine.

"At least tomorrow you'll be surrounded by people," I point out with a smile.

She smiles back. "I'm honestly very curious about your collection."

"Are you going to blog about it? You said you had a fashion blog, right?"

Eagerly she nods her head.

"Yep, I'll be taking some pictures and writing about it."

"Send me a link. I'll read it when you're finished."

"Be prepared. I'm brutally honest in my critiques."

I laugh uncertainly.

"Well, that's just something I have to deal with..."

"So uhm, will Caine be there, too?" Chelsey asks.

A simple name drop in the conversation, and I'm already feeling chills. My anger resurfacing.

"No, most likely he won't."

"Oh? I thought he'd come to see you, too. I sort of wanted to talk to him."

"Why?"

Chelsey pushes her fingertips together, shifting her eyes to the side.

"I guess... I've been thinking about it and... Caine deserves a true apology."

That's right. Chelsey has been Caine's tormentor, for years apparently. Making fun of him, bullying him, humiliating him. All of the things that Caine has done to me.

"Chelsey, can I ask you a question?"

"What is it?"

"Why did you do it?"

There's a silence as Chelsey avoids my gaze. The air feels thick.

"I don't know."

Great non-answer.

"I think... It was pretty obvious he liked me. He'd turn red whenever I'd look into his direction. Thomas thought it was hilarious, and I felt like I was way out of his league."

Hearing her talk about how Caine liked her makes my own heart ache. I'm really angry and hurt – yet I can't just shut off my feelings for him. I still love him.

"It felt good to put him in his place," she answers honestly.

1. "That's heartless of you."

2. "And now?"

"That's heartless of you," I grumble.

Chelsey guiltily looks down at the counter.

"I know. It is."

"And now?" I ask.

"And now I feel disgusted I thought like that."

"Then why did you do it in the first place?"

"It might not look like it, but I struggle a lot with my self-esteem. Thomas would constantly compare me to other, prettier girls, or point out all of my flaws when we were on a date."

She sighs, looking up at the ceiling.

"I felt like crap and I took it out on an easy target."

"There, did that answer your question?"

"...What about now? What changed? Why are you suddenly seeing what you did was wrong?"

Again, she stays quiet for some time, but I want to know. She was nasty towards Caine, so what changed?

What about Caine?

"...You two helped me out that day of the reunion," she mumbles.

"I was so scared, so afraid of what Thomas might do. I couldn't tell anyone."

She looks at me. "And even though I was bitchy towards you, you helped me out. And Caine, too."

"How? I-I mean, you could have just left me there in the bathroom..." she looks genuinely distressed.

"I can't ignore people in need, no matter how much I hate them..." I say quietly.

And I was definitely never able to resist helping Caine. Even now, when he's hurt me so bad, I can't help but feel this way.

"Either way, thank you for helping me back then. I appreciate it a lot."

"Tell that to Caine. He's the one you really hurt."

"I know, and I will. If he even wants to hear my apology."

A sadness wells up in my heart; do I want to hear Caine's apology?

The forum post he made was an explanation of sorts, but not – as Kevin would have put it – a face-to-face conversation.

Do I want to talk to Caine?

The answer is, undeniably, yes, despite my feelings of wanting to run away from him. Kevin is right after all; I need to give him a chance to talk.

"I guess you'll just have to try and reach out to him and see if he's okay with it," I say with a shrug.

"Sure, I'll try." She flashes me a weak smile.

Eventually Chelsey leaves and I close up the shop.

-- Bedroom

At night, I stare at my cell phone. Before, I used to text Caine on SnapPic almost every night.

Everything feels so empty now.

I finally start going through the texts he's sent me before, all 13 of them.

Caine:

"Joselina please talk to me, I can explain."

Caine:

"I'll do anything, just hear me out."

Caine:

"I know this looks bad, I know I fucked up. Please, just talk to me."

Caine:

"I didn't know it was you until yesterday. I'm so sorry."

Caine:

"I'll keep calling 'til you pick up."

Caine:

"Fuck. You turned off your phone."

Caine:

"Joselina please, I beg of you, let me explain!"

Caine:

"I stopped posting in that forum a while ago! I wasn't doing it anymore. I already quit on my own."

Caine:

"God, if I knew it was you... I'm just... I know I'm a piece of shit. I've always known."

Caine:

"I took it out on a random stranger on the internet. No excuses. I fucked up, I know."

Caine:

"I was in a really bad place then."

Caine:

"Please, if you won't read these messages, at least read the post I've made on the forum."

Caine:

"I miss you."

My heart shatters into a million pieces. It was already broken before, but now it's just ripped apart. It hurts so damn much!

Caine, I love you, but why do you have to be such a dick!?

I turn my phone off. This is not helping; I've got so much on my mind right now.

I'm... not ready to face Caine yet.

-- Innocent

I'm broken from what he's done to me, but I'm also completely in love with him.

Kevin's expression has turned grim when he sees the tears rolling down my face.

"Are you going to respond?"

I don't know – should I? Should I pick up the phone the next time Caine tries to call?

"I... I don't know," I say honestly, wiping away my tears.

"I mean, I've read the posts myself as well – though I don't know what he sent to you in private – and I definitely don't condone that behavior." Kevin takes in a deep breath.

"But it's Caine, you know? We hang out, we know what he's really like."

Sarah finally catches up on her reading.

"We *didn't* know he was a piece of shit like this behind a screen," she says in anger.

"It's still a shock to me..."

Kevin looks a little conflicted, much like how I feel.

"It's not right, no, but try listening to what he has to say. I'm sure he regrets it very much."

"I guess I should hear him out... That doesn't mean he's forgiven, though!" I point out.

"Whatever you feel is right. I just don't want you two to fight."

"I'll fight him for you," Sarah butts in. "No one insults you and gets away with it."

I crack a smile at Sarah's willingness to defend me.

"It's okay, there will be no fighting. I'll call him, ok?"

Sarah hand me back my phone.

"Alright, but if he pulls something weird again, let me know."

"We'll see you at the show tomorrow then, Joselina." Kevin nods his head at me.

"Yeah, see you two there."

Sarah and Kevin finally leave the boutique.

I stare at the phone in my hand; about 13 missed calls and a dozen other text messages from Caine. A couple from a number I don't recognize – maybe he tried calling under a new number. I wouldn't know.

I'm too scared to call. My body feels frozen.

Then my phone rings, jolting me wide awake. The display says Caine is calling. Speak of the devil...

Alright, time to pick up. I can do this.

Joselina:

"...Hello?"

Caine:

"...! Joselina!"

Joselina:

"Yes, that's me."

Caine:

"Argh, you weren't picking up, I didn't realize it would actually go through this time."

Caine:

"Shit, now I don't know what to say."

Joselina:

"Then come over."

Caine:

"What, you want me to come over?"

Joselina:

"We need to talk. The front door is unlocked."

Before waiting for Caine's reply, I hang up the phone. I'm riddled with nerves. Here we go.

-- Livingroom

I'm fretting and fidgeting on my couch. Is Caine going to come over anytime soon? What's he going to say? What am I going to say?

Am I going to cry? God, I sure hope not.

Am I ready to forgive Caine? I don't know...

The sound of footsteps echoes in my hallway – Caine is walking up the stairs. He's here – he's really here.

My heart starts pounding uncontrollably fast. Messages of what Caine wrote to me under the guise of Menenemi flash through my head.

A knock on the front door.

"C-come in," I croak out. My throat feels dry.

His mane of red hair enters my vision. Caine looks nervous and out of place.

"H-hey," he greets me in this awkward manner.

I pat down on the couch next to me, inviting him to come sit.

He plops down, still rigid and quiet. His eyes roam around the room, unable to focus on anything in particular. My heart beats even faster, going into overdrive just from our near proximity to each other.

Nothing gets said between us for a long time. I don't know how to start. Honestly, I don't know how to formulate my chaotic thoughts and feelings into words...

Words wouldn't be able to portray how betrayed I feel.

"Did you..." he starts hesitantly. "Did you read it?"

"Read what?"

"My post..." He nervously looks down at the floor. "On that forum," he mumbles quietly.

"I did."

Silence once more. It's unbearable. Why is it suddenly so hard to talk to Caine? It has never felt this hard, nor painful.

And it's all because of what he did to me. Can we ever go back to normal again... knowing he's like this?

"Joselina I... I'm sorry," he sighs.

I take a long moment to myself, staring at him with these judging eyes of mine.

Sorry isn't good enough!

1. Word vomit.

2. "Did you know it was me?"

"How long did you know? Before or after the beach? Did you do it on purpose, knowing it was me? Did you get close to me just to rip my heart out and stomp on it? Did you have fun? Did it make you feel good? How could you ever think it is okay to tell someone to kill themselves?"

There it is; the millions of questions that were waiting to burst out of me. It's like word vomit, I'm unable to stop myself from releasing this frustration directly onto Caine.

Caine doesn't know how to answer, instead quietly listens to me fire question after question at him.

That same emotion I had before rises to the surface again, that feeling of disgust and betrayal.

"I really hated that troll," I say in a dark tone.

The mood between us is heavy and intense.

"I hate me, too," Caine admits.

He looks sad, guilty even – emotions he rarely displays.

"Did you know it was me?" I demand.

Caine fidgets around on the spot, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead.

"It was never my intention–"

"*Did you know it was me?*" I repeat, interrupting him.

Caine gives a tiny nod. "Yeah, I did."

"So, you knew," I spit out. "How long have you been fooling me, huh?"

"Not very long!" he protests immediately. "That, I mean... I wasn't fooling you on purpose."

"Then what the hell do you call withholding the information that you're the one who's been telling me to kill myself online?"

Caine twiddles his thumbs. "... I only recently found out it was you." He sighs.

"Does it even matter that it was me? You told me to go kill myself!"

"I know!" he barks out.

"You made it real – okay?" he snaps at me. "Before it was just... something stupid. Something to blow off steam. I'd log off and go about my day again. I didn't think about it anymore. It was barely even on my mind."

That really hurts, knowing he didn't really care about the hurt he was causing and the hatred he was spreading. I was angry for hours whenever he sent me one of those messages!

"Your vile messages had me upset for hours – sometimes days." I glare at Caine. "Do you know how awful that felt?"

"I know, I know..." he repeats.

"Do you really?"

"I know because I've had those exact kinds of messages thrown at me before as well." Caine sighs and sinks into the couch.

"I don't know why I did that – I know how much it hurts when someone calls you names, when an entire group of people is telling you to kill yourself... *I know this!*"

The first teardrop rolls down on Caine's cheek.

"I'm... so, so sorry that I said those things," Caine says as his voice breaks up in the middle with a sob.

"It wasn't right, not to anyone, but I did it anyway. I'm so sorry for being a piece of shit!" he sobs.

Another tear falls down and is soon followed by one more, until the flood gates open, and Caine is crying his eyes out.

"I – I," he hiccups. "I wish I could take it back – *sob* – I'm really the worst."

By now Caine is shaking, and he squeezes his eyes shut, rubbing away his tears with the cuff of his sleeve. My heart is breaking into even more pieces.

"You didn't deserve any of that. You... you're the most talented person I know. And despite the way I treated you, you were always so kind and patient with me."

Caine sniffs loudly and takes a few moments before he continues his snotty monologue.

"I... couldn't stop myself. I'm pure trash – I don't d-deserve to be forgiven. I'm so s-sorry about everything."

My heart aches for him, and despite what he's done to me, I can't help but want to comfort him. How could I be cruel to someone who's crying in front of me?

I place my hand on his shoulder, and with my other hand I wipe away his tears. His eyes are so watery, but he looks genuinely in pain as well as in shock that I haven't run far, far away from him yet.

"Shh," I soothe him. "I don't think you're trash."

That's my honest to god opinion; I don't think Caine is trash.

"I think you're a person who made some bad decisions."

Caine acted out in ways similar to his own abusers; making bad decisions one after another. He really is like Chelsey in that regard.

"Owning up to those mistakes is probably the hardest thing you can do," I say and give him a slight smile.

I brush away his red hair out of his eyes, then softly stroke his cheek with my finger.

Caine tears his eyes away from me and hiccups.

"Why are you saying that...?" he asks, confused. "Don't think that just because I'm a sobbing mess right now you should take pity on me."

There's that spark again. That little piece of Caine.

"Yeah, I pity you a little," I admit. "But I'm also still angry at you, and hurt, and sad, and yet I still deeply care for you. Those feelings don't just go away in an instant."

"Look, Caine – what you did to me was awful, but I do want to forgive you."

"Forgive?" he echoes.

"Yes, forgive – because I want to forgive you Caine. I want to, but it will take some time."

Caine rubs his eyes with his sleeve again, he looks conflicted.

"What can I do...?"

I really don't know; I can't answer that question.

"Nothing, for now." It's all on me.

I need time to feel okay with this. After all, it's a betrayal of my trust. Only time can heal those wounds.

"I understand..." he says solemnly.

"I know I screwed up, but... I'll make it right," he says more confidently.

"Do you still want me to come to your show?"

"Of course. I gave you a ticket."

"Alright, I'll be there then."

Caine gets up from the couch, standing tall.

"I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Yeah..."

Things still feel really awkward between us. But Caine doesn't linger around and leaves my home.

It's time to focus on my show instead.

Chapter [026 Passionate]
-- living room

In a few hours the show will start. I'm ready to go out and attend the event.

I check my cell phone for any notifications.

When I turn it on it buzzes a bunch of times; I've received a lot of messages since I turned it off yesterday.

Of course they're from Caine. My heart twists into a painful mess. I take in a deep sigh; I still can't face or talk to him. The pain in my heart won't be so easily removed.

Even if there's a part of me that misses him and wants to call him.

But no, today is my day. It will go flawlessly. I will win that contest – I'll get first place.

-- Fashion Show backstage

This is the first time I'm entering any kind of event with a cat walk.

Never did I imagine it would be such chaos behind the scenes.

There are naked models running around, make-up artists powdering their models, technicians messing around with the lighting equipment, and the designers themselves quickly make any last-minute alterations.

There's a huge black curtain dividing the backstage with the catwalk, there's no actual physical wall.

I bump into a technician.

"Oh, sorry," I apologize.

"Please be careful ma'am, we're fixing up the lighting."

I put up my collection on the rack and start looking for my models. Where are they?

"Joselina \n[2]?" a tall woman calls out.

There's a group of other models behind her, they're the ones I hired. Thank god it seems all of them are present.

"Yes, that's me!"

"Cool. What should I wear?"

"Right this way!"

I appoint every model a piece of clothing, making sure they're fitted in right.

Sadly, I can already tell not everyone fits in them perfectly, so I end up sewing them in the dresses. There's no way I've got any time to get behind a sewing machine! I'll have to take shortcuts.

When I'm helping one of the models get inside of the jellyfish dress, I notice she's wearing these atrocious neon green panties. It's blinding me.

"No, no, no," I say loudly, shaking my head.

Confused, she flips her hair out of her face.

"What? Something wrong?"

"Yes, your panties! The green will show through the design! Why aren't you wearing any flesh coloured underwear?"

She huffs. "No one told me to pay attention to the colour of my underwear."

Another model laughs. "Rookie mistake."

I sigh; this is what I get for hiring amateurs.

"Okay, off with them. You can't wear those."

She puts her hand in front of her crotch.

"No way – I'm not walking down naked!"

1. "If I tell you to walk down butt naked – you *will* walk down butt naked!"
2. "Alright, we can try and find a replacement instead."

"If I tell you to walk down butt naked – you *will* walk down butt naked!"

"I don't care. You can find another model if I have to walk down that stage with my crotch hanging out!"

Argh, this is infuriating! I take a step back to calm myself down.

"Alright, fine, we'll find you another pair that's closer to your skintone."

The model crosses her arms.

"Until then, these are staying on," she says, pointing at the neon green underwear.

"Alright, we can try and find a replacement instead," I say begrudgingly.

Better to keep the model happy and prevent them from walking out on me. I can't have that, not right before the show is about to start.

"That's a much better option than walking down the catwalk naked."

I sigh loudly. Time to find another pair.

Where can I find spare underwear?

A pair of hands tap my shoulders and I jump in surprise.

"Boo!"

I whirl around and see Sarah with a huge grin on her face. There's a camera hanging around her neck.

"How's it going back here?"

"Oh you've come just at the right time – I need your help, I'm in a little bit of a crisis."

"What's up?" Sarah narrows her eyes, looking all serious.

"I need a pair of flesh coloured panties."

Sarah blinks at me.

"Not what I expected – but okay. Can't you buy me dinner first?" she jokes.

"Sarah!"

"Okay, fine, fine. I'll ask around!"

Sarah disappears into the crowd. I start moving around asking others if they've got some underwear to spare. I never should have gone with amateurs...

I ask some of the models if they've got any spares, but no one seems to have brought anything. Even the other designers aren't all too happy to help me out.

I then run into someone I didn't expect; Chelsey.

Wait, what's she doing backstage?

"Hey, Chelsey, what are you doing here?"

She gives me a quizzical look.

"Oh, well the ticket you gave me had backstage access, I figured I'd check it out." She shows the pass around her neck.

Oh huh, I guess I did.

"You seem busy though, I guess I should just find my seat and stay there."

"No, it's okay, you can be back here, I'm just a little preoccupied getting my models ready."

Sarah suddenly comes butting in.

"Joselina, I found your underwear!" She swings around a flesh coloured thong like a lasso.

I feel my cheeks start changing colour from embarrassment.

"N-not *my* underwear!" I stress, hoping Chelsey doesn't get any weird ideas.

I take the thong off Sarah's hands.

"Thanks. By the way, this is Chelsey. Chelsey, this is my friend Sarah, she's a photographer."

Chelsey smiles at Sarah. "Hello."

"Nice to meet you! Please don't cause any trouble for our Joselina here."

Sarah slaps my back. "Now go get your model dressed and let me see those designs on the runway!"

"I'm just thankful no one I know heard you yelling about my underwear like this..."

"Oh, actually – I think I saw Caine?"

My eyes bulge out.

"What, he's here!?"

"Well, you gave him a ticket... He's with the audience though."

"I didn't expect him to still come!" I exhale sharply.

"Is Caine being here a problem...?" asks Chelsey, feeling out of the loop.

"Yes and no?" I can't quite formulate my thoughts. "Argh, as long as he doesn't come backstage so I don't have to see him."

"Can't keep avoiding the little redhead forever," Sarah points out.

"I can right now! I've gotta give this underwear to my model and get them to hair and make-up!"

There's no time to be dealing with Caine.

"Alright, I'm going back to Kevin, I'm excited to see your collection!" Sarah waves at me and finally walks through the curtains.

Chelsey stays behind.

"If you need any help, I don't mind helping some of your models get dressed. I know a thing or two about fashion," she offers.

That's very sweet of her, and actually not such a bad idea since I'm strapped for time.

"Alright, you can help."

I direct Chelsey towards my rack of clothes and the other models.

"Here, wear this, get rid of that ugly thing you're wearing right now," I say as I hand the model the new underwear.

She grumbles under her breath, but thankfully changes out of the neon green underwear, slipping on the skin coloured one.

Someone knocks over a rack of clothes, causing everyone backstage to look up. There's a commotion near the entrance.

"I know she's here!" I hear a deep voice yell. "I saw her go inside!"

"Sir, please, you do not have a backstage pass."

I crane my head to look who's causing such a ruckus. I draw a sharp breath when I see who it is.

Thomas. He's here! Why in the world is he here!?

"Chelsey!" he yells loudly.

Chelsey suddenly freezes up when she sees Thomas at the entrance.

Oh no – he's followed her here!

"T-Thomas?" she squeaks out.

Thomas pushes past the security person, shoving them aside. He's spotted Chelsey.

Unable to move from the spot, Chelsey looks like a deer caught in the headlights. Thomas storms towards her like a runaway train.

"Chelsey, you bitch, I knew it. You *are* selling your body!"

1. Push Thomas away.

2. Jump between them.

Before Thomas can reach Chelsey, I quickly shove him aside.

"Don't go near her!" I shriek loudly.

He glares at me; he looks even angrier than before.

I jump in between them before Thomas can reach Chelsey. He halts his movement and snarls at me.

"You can't be here. Leave!" I say loudly.

"The hell are you doing here? Get the fuck out of my face."

"Thomas, were you... were you stalking me!?" Chelsey's voice is unnaturally high pitched.

"No babe, you see, you weren't answering your calls, and you weren't opening your door. In fact, you weren't even at home this entire time." Thomas sounds way too casual for the words that are coming out of his mouth.

"Wait, were you spying on Chelsey outside of her home?" I inquire.

"What's it to you, huh?" he huffs at me.

"How'd you know I wasn't home?" Chelsey asks, her lip trembling.

"Come on – just talk to me, we can work this out. I told you I was sorry. But you were pissing me off, you know?"

Thomas takes a step closer, Chelsey and I take one step back.

Seeing our reactions, Thomas' eyebrows lower.

"So what are you doing here, huh? Strutting around naked, getting guys to pay you for it?"

"No!" Chelsey cries out.

"Thomas, you have to leave. Now." I warn him.

"The hell I am – get out of the way."

Thomas lurches at me, he's too fast for me to dodge. He grabs a hold of my hair and pulls me away from Chelsey. The force of his grip is too strong – I can't break free!

"Don't you fucking touch her!" someone else yells out loud.

Suddenly Thomas releases his grip when he gets a blow to his face, staggering backwards. He crashes against a pair of lights, causing them to fall over against the black curtains.

In front of me is the last person I expected; Caine.

I can barely process that he's here.

"Caine! What are you doing here!?" I cry out.

"I saw him go in! The coward's been stalking Chelsey." Caine points an angry finger at Thomas.

Someone else in the background calls for security.

"Why are you here, you little dweeb!?" Thomas demands, rubbing his chin.

"I'll pay you back for hitting me." Thomas gets ready to pull back a punch.

Caine shoves me out of the way, dodging Thomas's punch.

"L-leave," Chelsey chokes out quietly. "Please leave..."

"Seriously you are so fucking annoying!" Thomas sounds even more agitated.

He nonchalantly strides up to Chelsey as if he owns the place.

"Chelsey, babe, I didn't mean what I said. If you come back to me right now, I'll forgive you for being a whore."

Chelsey, still unable to walk away from fear, doesn't move.

"Run!" I tell Chelsey, giving her a small shove so she starts to move.

Chelsey takes a step backwards, then another, before she sprints away. That's when I notice the lights that were knocked over earlier have started smoking against the black curtain.

Oh no, it's going to turn into a fire hazard like this! An accident waiting to happen!

Thomas whirls around, angry everyone seems to be foiling his plans.

"Sir – you cannot be back here!" yells security.

"Fuck! It's your fault!" he growls at me.

I try to run towards the lights to prevent a fire from happening, but Thomas grabs my arm, holding me in place. He squeezes hard and I cry out in pain.

But Caine swoops in like a heroic knight, ripping my arm free from the brute.



His fingers snatch the collar of Thomas' shirt, gripping it tightly. In a perfectly calculated angle, Caine manages to swiftly trip Thomas using his foot, causing him to stumble forwards.

Directing the force of Thomas' momentum, Caine tosses the brute over himself. Thomas goes flying through the air!

The floor trembles as Thomas' large body falls down. Everyone in the room is quiet for second.

That's... that's a judo throw!

Caine quickly grapples Thomas, wrapping his arms around Thomas' arm, leaving him immobilized and at the mercy of the smaller young man.

"I told you not to touch her, you dick!"

"Argh – let me go!" Thomas whines.

Two beefy security guys walk up to Thomas and Caine.

But then the worst happens; a fire sparks alive from the fallen lights. The blaze catches everyone off guard. It sizzles and crackles as it climbs up the curtains.

The fire travels all the way towards the top in record speed. The curtains are highly flammable!

I gasp out loud in horror and so do many others around me.

I see a couple of models grab some of the clothes from a nearby rack and start swinging it at the fire, trying to put it out.

"No!" I yell. "That's cotton, it's going to fuel the fire!"

Within seconds, the clothing they were holding lights up in flames. They drop it in fear and start running away.

Security apprehend Thomas and start yelling out orders.

"Everyone, remain calm and stay back, we will deal with the fire!"

They lift Thomas up from the floor and take him away from the area.

Another person comes running in with a fire extinguisher, cooling down the bottom of the curtain. But it's too late; the fire has spread across all of the drapes, it's a literal wall of fire.

It's too big to control with the fire extinguisher at this point. The warmth of the fire whirls around on the premises, making everyone start panicking.

I'm too shocked to do anything but stare.

The fire extinguisher runs out – yet the rest of the curtains are still burning up. We can hear the audience behind murmur and cry out.

It's getting too hot, and too dangerous. No, no... why is this happening?

This was supposed to be my day, where I'd show my collection I worked so hard on and get the name recognition I so badly crave.

Instead, Thomas crashed the party and now it's literally going up in flames.

"Everyone, please evacuate the premises," says the other security officer.

"Remain calm, don't run."

Except people aren't calm. Most models sprint away in their dresses, including all of mine.

Caine suddenly tugs my wrist, calling for my attention.

"Joselina, come on, we need to go!"

"But, but..."

I can't process this.

Smoke starts filling up the room. It's getting harder to breathe.

A rack of clothes standing near the curtains catches on fire as well. It is unforgiving and fast; one by one the dresses start smoking and burning.

People start screaming and scatter away like flies.

No way – my rack is next to it!

"My clothes!" I yell out. My collection can't burst up into flames!

The models wearing some of my designs have already ran away, but there are still some designs on the rack! I can't let the galactic jellyfish burn up!

I quickly run over to my corner, digging my arms into the clothes and taking them from the rack, as many as I can.

"Joselina, what are you doing!? Leave it!" Caine pleads.

"No – I worked too hard on this collection just to let it go up in flames!" I protest.

"Shit, now's not the time to be thinking about fashion!"

"Ma'am, drop the clothes, come with me!" says one of the security officers.

He roughly grabs my arm, causing me to drop my clothes to the floor. No! I need to save them!

"No, let go of me!"

I yank my arm back and quickly run back to the rack to grab even more. My mind just doesn't want to leave them behind.

Caine cuts me off, his eyes fierce and wide. He's blocking me from running back.

"Don't be stupid, there's a fire, let's go! You can always remake these!"

I know it's stupid and silly, and I should care for my own safety more. But I worked so damn hard on this collection!

"No please, I have to take these with me, they're too valuable!"

Ignoring my protests, Caine's hand shoots out to grab hold of my wrist. He forcefully tugs me along and shoves me towards the security officer.

"Please take her outside!"

"What – no!"

But I have no say, the security officer simply grabs me and pulls me along. This time, I can't break free.

"Caine!" I yell after him. He's not coming with me.

He stands there with a blaze of fire behind him.

"Wait – Caine what are you doing!? Get out!"

But then I'm finally pushed through the emergency exit and we're outside.

-- Outside fashion show

Sirens can be heard in the distance; the firetruck is going to be here soon. A bunch of people are gathered around the premises. Models are all huddled together in extravagant clothes.

Black smoke escaped from the exit.

However, Caine isn't here. My stomach lurches unpleasantly.

He was right behind me, where is he?

1. Walk back into the building.

2. Call for Caine.

I walk up towards the emergency exit, but the same officer yanks me back.

"No, let me go – Caine is still in there!"

"Ma'am, for your own safety, do not go back in the building!"

"But he's in there – and my friends, too!"

"Caine!" I shout for his name.

More people leave the building, but Caine isn't among them. The uncertainty is driving me crazy.

Once more, I yell for him, my voice traced with desperation. "Caine!"

My feet are about to walk towards the building, when I hear someone call out my own name.

"Joselina!" Chelsey calls for me.

She looks frightened, her legs shaking.

"What's going on? I hear there's a fire. Where's Thomas?"

"I don't know. But Caine is still in there and the fire was spreading fast."

My heart is thrumming, the adrenaline pumping through my veins.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I see Sarah and Kevin exit the building as well. They're unharmed.

"Sarah!" I cry out.

Sarah wraps her arms around me in a hug.

"Joselina – what's going on? I saw the curtains go up in flames!" She lets go and looks at me all worried.

"Thomas was backstage, he found out Chelsey was here. He... he knocked over a pair of lights and I think that ignited the curtains," I quickly explain, stumbling over my words.

"We saw Caine rush backstage, where is he?" asks Kevin.

"He's still inside!"

There's a dark expression on everyone's face.

No, no, why isn't Caine coming out!? He was right behind me!

Finally, the firetrucks arrive. A bunch of firemen roll out the hoses and bust inside. Another sets up a barricade and forces people to stay away from the building.

A sense of dread washes over me as I see more people pouring out of the building, but I can't spot that familiar red hair of Caine's.

What is taking him so long!?

"I'm sure he's alright, the firemen are going in right now, they'll get him out," Kevin assures me.

"I can't believe Thomas followed me here..." Chelsey mutters.

"Oh look, that's him right there! He's in handcuffs," Sarah points out.

There, a little ways off on the street, is a police car with a police officer detaining a struggling Thomas. He's in handcuffs alright.

"Chelsey, I think you should probably speak to the police officer and explain what happened," I tell her.

"But... but..."

"Sarah, Kevin, can you go with her?"

Sarah, Kevin and Chelsey walk off towards the police officer.

No sign of Caine still. I'm worried out of my mind. I'm so scared he tripped over my clothes on the floor and got tangled in it, with no escape.

I anxiously wring my hands together.

Oh god – what if it's my fault Caine got stuck? What if he can't get out? What if the flames have already...

A large cloud of black smoke drifts out from the emergency exit. It's getting worse by the second...

Fear of losing him entangles my entire being. Not knowing if he's alright or if he's coming out. It takes everything I have to not run back inside and look for him.

"Joselina!" Sarah interrupts my fearful thoughts.

"They want your statement!"

But... Caine isn't out yet. How can I focus on giving out a statement when Caine is inside a burning building!?

"But!" I protest.

Sarah tugs me away from the crowd. "Come on, I'm sure Caine's fine, the firefighters seem to have the fire under control."

The both of us walk to the police car where Thomas is being held. He's inside the car, fuming in his seat. He glares daggers at me when I appear in his view.

Chelsey looks awfully pale as the police officer questions her.

"Yes, he's apparently been stalking me. Blowing up my phone with threats that he'll hurt me," Chelsey explains.

She shows her cell phone to the officer.

But I'm unable to focus on what's going on. My heart is still running mad – I can't stop worrying about Caine. Why is everyone so nonchalant!?

He's not here with me, where he should be! Safe and sound!

In the background, the building continues to smoke.

The next couple of minutes feel like a blur. We give our statements on what happened, why Thomas tried to attack Chelsey, how the fire started, how Caine courageously swooped in and knocked him down...

Caine...

"I-I can't," I stammer.

"Caine is still in there!"

I tear myself away from the police officer and run back to the entrance of the building.

Fear fills up my entire body. Anxiety propels it forwards.

Can't stop running. Must find Caine.

A firefighter holds me back as I desperately try and go back through the entrance.

The drumming of my adrenaline is too loud for me to understand what he's saying. My mind is only focused on one thing.

Please, I need to see him!

Why isn't he out yet!?

"Ma'am, calm down!"

Then a fluff of red exits the doorway. My eyes spot him like a hawk and all the muscles in my body tense up.

Caine runs away from the black smoke. My heart just about bursts out of my chest with joy. Relief.

He's coughing as he exists, a fireman escorting him. He's holding a bunch of fabric. Wait, no – those are my dresses!

I rush after him as quick as my feet can carry me. I feel like I'm flying through the air.

"Caine!"

1. Tackle hug Caine.

2. "I was so worried!"

I fling myself towards Caine, arms wrapping around him and squeezing him hard against my body, holding onto him like he's my life line. He drops all of the clothes in the process.

"C-can't breathe," he mutters.

I quickly release him from my death grip. I inspect his face, but he seems unharmed.

"Are you okay!?"

"Y-yeah, fine." He coughs.

"Why didn't you follow me right away!? It took you so long to get out!"

"Why are you upset? You really wanted to bring your dresses with you, so I grabbed them for you."

"You idiot – it's okay for me to risk *my* life, but I'll be damned if you risk yours to save a bunch of clothes!"

"You... you make no sense, you hypocrite! Why would you risk your life but then yell at me for doing the same thing!?" he growls back.

"I was so worried!" I admit, my voice all tense and shaky from the whirlwind of emotions I feel right now.

"Why did you go back and grab my clothes!?" I demand to know.

Caine shrugs. "Isn't that what you tried to do? I thought these must be really important to want to risk your life for."

"Just because I'm stupid doesn't mean you have to be stupid, too!"

"What!? Don't be difficult! I got your dresses!"

I feel tears well up in my eyes.

Seeing the tearful look on me, Caine drops the clothes in his arms, walking up to me.

"Hey, look, I'm sorry – see? I'm alright."

He softly pulls me into an embrace.

I crash my head against his chest, taking in his scent with a deep breath. It's a mixture of Caine's natural scent, along with the smoke from the fire.

"You're so stupid. Why'd you do that. Could have just ran out with me."

My body starts to shake. My pulse is so quick and loud that I can't hear the sirens anymore. The world seems to be spinning out of control.

"God, I don't want to lose you," I mumble.

Caine puts an arm around my back, resting his chin on top of my shoulder as he embraces me.

I can feel his warm body press up against mine and my bones turn to liquid in his arms. The thought of losing Caine... it's too much. It's overwhelming.

"I'm right here," he whispers against my ear.

I hiccup weakly into his chest.

Caine's beating heart thrums against my ear. It's fast, but he's alive. He's here. He's fine.

Everything that's happened before, it doesn't matter. What matters is that Caine is alright.

We stay like this for what seems to be an eternity, holding each other. It's calming me down.

Then I reluctantly separate from him, giving him some space. My eyes migrate down towards the dresses on the ground.

What was I so worried about? These stupid dresses? I can't believe I really tried to get them out.

"Where are the others?" asks Caine.

"They're talking to a police officer over there." I point in the direction of the street.

"I thought I was just seeing things, but when I saw Chelsey go backstage and Thomas following along, I knew he wouldn't be up to any good."

"Why are you here anyway?" I ask weakly.

"Why?" He looks down at me, blinking curiously.

"Yeah. Why?"

If this stupid idiot didn't come, he wouldn't be worrying the hell out of me, making me think something bad happened to him in the fire.

"Obviously because I wanted to be here and see your work. I promised I'd come."

Caine shuffles his feet around, eyes cast downwards.

"...And I wanted to see you," he admits quietly.

"You've been ignoring my calls, my texts, I didn't know what else to do..." he sighs deeply.

"Doesn't mean you have to walk through literal fire for me," I point out.

Caine snickers in response, shooting me a cocky smirk. That stupid look on his face hits all the right buttons.

"You make me sound like too much of a badass."

"I'm not, I thought it was reckless." Even though I was the most reckless of us all; Risking my life for my work.

A sheepish smile appears on his face. "Shh, let me have this moment."

I glare at him.

"I still haven't forgiven you. And I'm not talking about the stunt you pulled just now."

A shadow is cast over Caine's face, he immediately retreats from me, his demeanor turning shy all of a sudden.

"I know," he admits.

My foot gets hooked around one of the straps from the dresses on the ground. I look down, seeing them all bunched together.

It's stupid, I should have left them, But Caine stayed back to grab them for me anyway. I bend down to pick them up, throwing them over my shoulder.

"I guess I should thank you anyway," I say reluctantly. "But you're still stupid."

Caine rolls his eyes at me.

"I didn't die, did I? Come on, let's go find the rest."

Effortlessly, Caine takes my hand in his and begins to pull me away from the crowd.

We meet up with the rest of the group. Caine explains what happened to the police officer, that he's the one who got into a scuffle with Thomas and why the lights fell over.

There's a news crew in the background conducting interviews about the disaster. It's safe to say, Fashion Week has been canceled for now.

Firemen have subdued the fire, the building is intact, though I'm not sure what it looks like from the inside. All of my models have escaped unharmed. In fact, there were no casualties or injuries, unless Thomas getting his ass kicked counts as one.

Chelsey conveys her side of the story, getting stalked by Thomas and receiving threatening messages from him. I didn't think he was still contacting her after the last time he got arrested.

The police officer drives away with Thomas in the back. Since this is his second arrest, they're not going to be lenient with him anymore.

The crowd begins to disperse. I don't see much of a reason to hang around either, so we head to my place.

Chapter [027 Passionate]
-- boutique

Sunshine Boutique was closed for today, so it feels weird with this many people inside. Chelsey tagged along as well.

"Did you get all of your clothes out of there?" asks Kevin.

I shake my head. "Some of my models were wearing them, but I couldn't find them after the fire."

"Do you think they'll return the dress?" Sarah looks hopeful.

"I'm not sure, I'll give them a call tomorrow."

"I'm sorry Joselina, it's all my fault it ended this way." Chelsey looks really guilty.

I scoff. "No it's not – it's Thomas' fault. Don't blame yourself for someone else's actions."

"Yeah but... they canceled the entire thing, I heard," she says in this sad voice.

It's true; Fashion Week has been officially canceled. The venue had suffered too much damage to continue operations, so officials thought it was best to cancel the rest of the week.

"Don't feel bad, no one expected this to happen," Sarah butts in.

"I definitely didn't. And Caine even threw him down?" Kevin looks impressed.

Caine who's been quiet this entire time raises his eyebrows.

"Huh?"

"Yeah – he used some kind of judo move and slammed him down!" I sound way too excited.

"You mean you *weren't* lying about taking judo?" Sarah raises her eyebrows, genuinely taken aback.

Kevin chuckles. "Wish I could have seen it, to be honest."

"It... it wasn't anything special," Caine mutters, toeing his foot against my counter.

"Way to go Caine, you've got some moves." Sarah slaps him on his back.

"Ow – watch it with that bear strength!" he growls at her, feigning hurt.

"Yeah, thank you Caine, for standing your ground and protecting me from Thomas," Chelsey says quietly.

Everyone turns to look at her.

"That was very brave of you."

Awkwardly, Caine diverts his eyes and turns away from the rest of us.

"I told you, it's nothing special."

He really doesn't do well with compliments.

Sarah stands up straight, as if she's suddenly remembered something.

"Hey Kevin, let's get out of here. We can take Chelsey home, right?"

Confused, Kevin stumbles over his words. "Y-yeah, we can?"

"It's fine, I can get home by myself. I appreciate the offer though," Chelsey declines politely.

She walks up to the front door, standing still as she presses down on the handle.

"Really, thanks everyone."

She disappears from the boutique, the bells chiming melancholy as the door closes.

"Ok – well, we've got stuff to do!" Sarah claims.

"We do?" Kevin doesn't seem to understand what Sarah is talking about.

She elbows him in his side. "Yep, I seem to recall you owing me a favour from last ti–"

"–Ahhhh, you don't need to say that out loud!" Kevin quickly shuts her up, his face gradually turning crimson.

Do I even want to know what Sarah is referring to here?

No, no I do not.

Sarah pulls Kevin along with her towards the front door.

"Let me know when you get those clothes back from the models!"

She and Kevin quickly disappear from the boutique.

I sigh out loud; she wanted me to be alone with Caine.

No matter how much I tried to ignore it, this conversation between us needs to happen. It's got the worst timing in the world, but I can't keep running away.

"Crazy day, huh?" Caine shrugs at me.

I lean against the counter, looking down as I contemplate what happened today.

It's hard to focus; my body is still suffering the after effects of the adrenaline from before. Not to mention the fear I felt from thinking I'd possibly lost Caine in a fire.

"I never want to see you do something so stupid again," I sigh as I cross my arms.

"...I make no promises," he replies nonchalantly.

I tap my foot hard against the floor.

"Caine!" I lecture him. "I'm serious."

Seeing my expression, Caine simply stares at me in return, his mouth tightly shut.

"Fine," he grumbles.

I run my fingers through my hair, taking in a deep breath.

There's no escaping my emotional turmoil. How to address the elephant in the room?

I need to drink something.

"Let's go upstairs," I motion towards him.

"Oh?"

I walk towards the backroom and Caine scrambles to follow.

-- living room

He really does stand out like a sore thumb.

Huddled near the door, holding a glass of water. Looking as if he'd rather be part of the scenery, like the rest of my decorations.

I'm sitting on the couch, my fingers wrapped around a warm cup of tea.

"Come sit. Stop being weird."

"I'm not being weird," he huffs.

Caine fluffs up a pillow before he sits down next to me.

"It's the first time I've been here."

"No it's not. Remember the reunion?"

"That doesn't count – I saw your tiny bathroom, but not the rest."

I roll my eyes at him and this pointless conversation.

Taking a sip of my tea, I wonder how to start. How to formulate all of my wandering thoughts into words. It's hard to express myself.

It's difficult to convey to Caine that he has really hurt me with what he's done.

And yet, I'm still absolutely crazy about him. There's no denying that. Stupid heart of mine, couldn't you have fallen for someone who's less of a dick?

Caine impatiently taps his finger against the glass. He's practically squirming in his seat, not able to withstand the silence between us.

"You know..." I place my cup down on the coffee table. "For someone who kept trying to reach out to me, you sure don't have a whole lot to say now that you have the chance."

Caine's eyes flicker towards me, a worried expression befalling him. He's scared.

Just like me.

"I..." he starts softly, but his sentence fizzles out.

The sounds of our breathing fills up the room. It's so quiet.

He puts his glass away as well and clasps his hands together, head bowing down so that hair covers his eyes. It's clear he doesn't know how to start.

Not that I do, either, but someone needs to bite the bullet.

"I read your post," I mention.

Caine brushes the hair away from his forehead, his piercing eyes briefly making contact with mine.

"Oh, I didn't think you did..."

We return to being quiet. It's suffocating.

He used to be unable to shut up, conversations between us were effortless. Yet, look at us now – unable to form a coherent sentence.

He leans forward, as if to speak, but then halts, remaining still.

Caine clenches his hands on top of his knees, taking in a deep breath, slowly exhaling the air from his lungs. Clearly, he is too nervous to start speaking, afraid of how I might respond.

This is stupid.

Unable to endure this painstaking silence – I grab the pillow from the couch and fling it at Caine's head.

He's caught off guard as it hits him in the face. It silently falls into his lap.

"What the!?" he cries out indignantly.

Irritated, he grabs the pillow, perhaps intending to strike me back with it. But he doesn't. He just glares at me.

"That's what you get for being a jerk," I explain myself.

I grab the other one off the couch and toss it at him again.

This time Caine deflects it with an annoyed grunt.

"Do you really want to start a pillow fight!? Because I can give one to yah!"

Caine throws the first pillow back at me. I dodge it by standing up from the couch.

"You're lucky they're just pillows," I stress. "You deserve so much worse."

Shock briefly flashes across his face; he knows it's true. But then he grits his teeth, eyebrows lowering down to a glare.

"Then give me all you got," he bites out, preparing himself for an onslaught of hurt.

I raise my right hand high in the air, causing Caine to turn the other cheek and close his eyes.

There's this tiny part of me that wants to hurt Caine for hurting me, but it's silly and hypocritical. I can't stoop down to that level of pettiness.

So I lower my arm.

"No," I state simply.

Caine cracks an eye open, wondering why I haven't slapped him.

"No?" he repeats, confused.

"I'm not going to hit you."

"You make no fucking sense, you know that?" he huffs.

"Says the guy who's been trolling people online," I fire back.

Not knowing how to reply to that, he simple glares at me, the fire returning in his eyes.

"So, how long did you know it was me?" I tap my foot against the floor.

Caine looks down. "The day you came over."

"Am I supposed to believe that? You may as well have been fooling me this entire time."

"I wasn't!" Caine gets up from the couch, this time at eye-level with me.

"It might be hard for you to believe, but I didn't do it because I knew it was you." Caine shakes his head. "Fuck, if I knew it was you, I'd have never—"

"—*But you did it*. Doesn't matter if it was me or not, you wrote those words. You, Caine. Not anyone else. Not Thomas, not Chelsey — *you* wrote those nasty messages."

That's when his expression falters. Guilt consumes his face.

"I know," he admits, his eyes softening.

A deep breath. Then a pause. Caine's eyes glance over and meet mine, but he doesn't hold our gaze for too long.

"I was... in a really bad place before I met you," he says with a sigh. Caine plops down onto the couch again.

"As you know, I was a friendless loser in high school. Chelsey and Thomas made sure to make my life a living hell."

He hangs his head down. "I was really damn lonely."

I slowly sit down next to him, keeping my silence. It's time to let him speak.

"The only place I could be myself was online," he chuckles painfully. "But even there I got rejected."

He's talking about that time when I told him to post in the right place, no?

"I was pissed, lonely, and angry — and I took it out on the last person to piss me off."

Caine's eyes make contact with mine.

"You," he admits.

"I became a nasty version of myself, falling deeper into this shithole called depression." His voice is dripping with self loathing.

"Chelsey was right. I did anything so I could feel in control again. I'm *exactly* like the ones I despised."

His eyes glance over to mine, softened and weak.

"I ended up hurting the only person I cared for."

I can't deny the surge of emotions I feel bubbling towards the surface, begging to be let out. No matter how hurt I am, every cell in my body is begging me to forgive him.

To lean in, stroke his head and say; it's okay.

"You entering my life is probably the best thing that's ever happened to me," he says with a boisterous laugh.

"You weird, stubborn girl, who wasn't afraid to call me out on my bullshit."

"Okay, I resent that, I'm not weird!" I interject.

"You made me realize I could be better. That I could be... happy." A slight and defeatist smile tugs at his lips.

"I'm always so fucking afraid of everything. Anything. That I'm going to mess it up. That everyone's going to hate me. I didn't *want* to get close to you, I didn't *want* to be friends with Kevin or Sarah."

"But you are so. Damn. Stubborn!"

"Argh – I am not!" I protest.

"And I love that you are."

Wait, what?

My mouth hangs open in shock.

"Before I knew it, I was... always thinking of you. What's Joselina doing now? Is she working? Is she sleeping? Who's she talking to?"

Then, a more restrained and bashful expression.

"...Does she think about me, too?"

Chills reverberate through my body. My pulse quickens like a fast-flowing river during a storm.

"Am I allowed to feel this way? I'm just some loser, and you're this awesome person with friends, a career, and talent – the total opposite of me."

"It took me a while to realize I'd stopped posting stuff online. I was just browsing. I... I wasn't angry anymore. Instead, my mind was filled with you," he admits, blushing slightly.

"What are you trying to say..." My heart is thumping loudly.

"Uhm, I'm trying to say that... I think you're really cool and pretty and... stuff." He blocks his glowing red face with his hand.

Caine telling me he thinks I'm pretty and cool while hiding his blushing face is turning me into mush.

"And I royally fucked up, and I don't deserve your forgiveness." He's pouting this time.

"But... I promise, I've changed. *You* changed me. I'm not that asshole anymore. I'm so, so sorry for saying those things. I regret it so much. I regret who I was before."

"I'd like you to give me a second chance, if you don't absolutely hate my guts by now. Because... because..."

Caine's eyes get all twitchy and panicky, unable to look at me any longer. His cheeks gradually turning a darker shade of red.

Eventually Caine picks up one of the couch pillows and holds it up in front of his face, hiding away from me.

"...Hmprhhh woo." His voice is muffled against the pillow.

"Sorry, didn't quite catch that," I say, leaning in closer.

"I said, because I love you," he repeats, but it's still hard to understand.

"Seriously, just stop mumbling into the pillow!" I snatch it away from him.

Caine stares at me in shock, his expression raw and honest. He doesn't have anywhere to hide anymore.

"Well?" I press him.

"Uhh..."

Again, he's lost the ability to speak. This is getting tiring.

1. Hit him with the pillow again.

2. Wait for him to talk.

I hit him over the head with the pillow, fluffing up his hair.

"Hey!" he cries out crossly. "Can it with the pillows!"

"And I don't have all day until you finally learn to speak again!"

"Really – you can't wait two seconds!? God, you're impossible."

"Just come out with it!"

"Fine!"

"Well!?"

"Shut up – I said it's because I'm in love with you!"

As much as I want to smother him with a pillow right now, I should be patient. Calm. Relaxed. Zen.

I am zen.

Caine is still struggling to find the right words, pulling the weirdest facial expressions.

"So.... because...?" I urge him on, trying to guide him.

Caine gulps.

"Because..."

He locks eyes with me. A sudden rush goes right through my body.

"Guess I just have to come out with it." He sighs.

"Because I'm in love with you."

I blink at him.

"Wait, what?" I ask, bewildered.

He turns his red face away from me. "D-don't make me repeat it!"

He then snatches the other pillow and squishes his face into it, muffling whatever incoherent mess he's rambling at the moment.

It takes me a few seconds to register. But then his words sink in and my face – no my *body* – is ablaze with a heat rivaling the sun.

I'm sure Caine could make a great space pun out of that one.

A cyan coloured eye pops up from behind the pillow. He's still using it to mostly cover his face.

"Now's a great time to say you hate me and don't want to talk to me again," he mumbles sadly.

"Hold on, you can't just drop these bombs on me and expect me to immediately roll along with them." My mind is spinning.

Caine just confessed to me! Whilst asking for forgiveness.

I'm actually so happy right now, but... I still have things to say!

"Just reject me already and so I can move on with my life," he grumbles as he pulls his legs up to his chest, hugging them for comfort.

He looks so sad and dejected like this.

And why is he already deciding I'm going to reject him? That's a little infuriating to be honest – I can make up my own damn mind.

"Okay, first of all – *rude*. Don't put your feet on my couch!"

I tap his legs, making him put his feet down onto the floor.

"Seriously? I poured my heart out and you're thinking about your *couch*?"

I hold a finger up to his mouth and shush him.

"Second of all, I can make my own decisions, thank you very much. Don't presume to know what I'll say."

This time, it's Caine that's impatient.

"Well?" he asks. "Then what *are* you going to say?"

"What you said to me, as Meninimi, it hurt," I start in a serious tone. "I posted my work and immediately I get these awful comments from some stranger."

"Of course your comments escalated into being downright hateful, but I have to admit... I have such a hard time accepting any kind of comment on my work that isn't down right praise. While you were being a jerk about it, your first post was actually kind of right."

Caine bites down on his lips, surprised I would admit such a thing.

"And that time, when you said it to my face, I got all stupidly defensive about it and even turned it into a childish fight."

I shrink into myself.

"Sometimes I can be childish and stubborn, but I like to think I can improve... To admit I've made mistakes and move on."

I flash a smile at him. "But I'd be a pretty big hypocrite if I didn't grant you the same courtesy."

"Wait – are you saying you'll forgive me?" Caine's eyes are wide. He doesn't believe it.

I cock my head to the side. "Ehhhh, I mean, I still feel like you need to earn my forgiveness."

Suddenly he's up on his feet, bold and without fear, standing in front of me.

"Anything, I'll do anything!" he claims.

"Anything?" I repeat, a smirk progressively creeping onto my face.

"Yes," he confirms.

"Maybe some more groveling would help..."

Caine falls down on one knee, bowing his head towards my legs.

"Please, Joselina. I know I've been stupid, vapid, an idiot, and just an asshole in general – but I don't want you to hate me."

1. "Hmm, I'm not feeling your sincerity. Beg some more."

2. Forgive him.

I fake scoff at his groveling. "Hmm, I'm not feeling your sincerity. Beg some more."

For a split second, I can see Caine flash an irritable snarl, but immediately he closes his eyes with an exasperated sigh.

Taking my hand in his, he kisses the back of it, like a prince.

"I, Caine Prins, am asking for your forgiveness," he mumbles.

My heart flutters rapidly. I can't help but giggle.

"Wait, your last name is really Prins?" I honestly had no idea.

He pouts at me. "What of it?"

"In that case." I stick out my foot. "Kiss my feet instead."

Caine drops my hand like a hot potato and gets up with a flustered face.

"Fuck off – no way!"

I laugh maniacally. It's fun to bully him around a little before I let him know I have forgiven him. Sort of.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he snaps at me.

"Of course I am! It's payback!"

Caine growls at me, but knows he's got no leg to stand on. I'm allowed to enjoy this a little bit more.

"You're impossible to please, you're smug, and you *love* to torment me. I have no idea why I like you."

My eyebrows raise as I get up from the couch. "Are you taking back your confession?"

"Maybe I am!" he defends his position.

I take a step closer to him and can see him visually gulp.

"Really? When you don't even know my reply?" I say in a sultry voice.

His eyes flicker away, powerless to meet my gaze head-on.

"...Then what is your reply?" There's an adorable pout on his lips.

"Stop toying around with me."

I take in a deep breath, preparing myself.

"Alright, I'll forgive you."

He blinks at me a bunch of times.

"Uhh," he drawls out with this idiotic expression.

"Wait – really?"

"What, don't believe me?"

"It's just. Uhm. Yeah? I didn't expect it to be this easy," he admits.

I cross my arms over my chest.

"Are you saying my forgiveness is easy? I can make it hard for you, if you want."

He quickly gets up from his kneeling position and shakes his head.

"No, no! That's not what I meant. I'm just... I didn't think this far." Caine rubs the back of his neck. "I just thought you'd hate me forever, to be honest."

"Like I said, I'd be a hypocrite if I expected people to believe I can change, while not accepting your apology..."

"I promise, I *am* different! I'm no longer that jerk that goes around flaming people online."

"Or steals," I point out.

"Or steals," he repeats while rolling his eyes.

"And no, I don't hate you, Caine. You can drive me crazy sometimes, and you have many irritating qualities—"

"—Hey!" Caine cuts in.

"But you've also got many good sides." I pause. "I think."

"...Ya think?"

"Yeah now that I stop to think about it..." I pretend to be deep in thought. "It's hard to really name any of your good qualities."

"I see how it is. I bashed you online and now you're looking for payback, aren't you," he huffs.

I stand up from the couch and face him with a smile. Innocently I shrug my shoulders at him.

"Can you blame me for wanting to mess with you a little?"

He looks away, biting down on his bottom lip.

"No..." He rubs his nose, bashfully pouting at me. "Am I really a good for nothing in your eyes?"

"Listen, if we ignore your little online adventures for a second here, then I can safely admit that..."

I swallow.

"That I'm smitten with you. You drive me nuts, in a good kind of way."

I reach out to that fluffy hair of his, plunging my fingers inside his mane. Caine's frozen on the spot, eyes wide and mouth open.

"I think even though you can be a jerk sometimes, you can be rather cute and sweet when you want to be."

"...And you're really brave. For some reason, when it comes to yourself, you're unable to speak up. But when it comes to your friends, you turn into this lion."

I giggle. "Fierce and protective."

"But also stupid for getting my collection out of a damn fire," I sigh.

"Excuse me for being stupid," he grumbles defiantly.

I push some hair behind his ear and I give him a soft smile when I notice the tips of his ears have gone red. My own heart won't quiet down either.

"I love the way you blush," I admit.

Caine flinches away from me, his entire face now flooding with blood.

"D-don't say that straight to my face!" he stutters.

"I thought you wanted me to be honest?"

"It just feels like you're taking the piss out of me." He fiercely tries to hide his blushing face away from me.

"It's no fair I'm the only one being affected like this," he grumbles.

I cup both his cheeks with my hands, forcing him to look at me.

"Caine, does it look like you're the only one here?" I search those gorgeous eyes of him.

It's not like I haven't been blushing either. I sound composed, but am anything but. I'm running on a high dose of sugar rush.

He stares at me, afraid and at the same time, also curious.

"Do you think I just kiss people without having feelings for them?" I question, still keeping his face in between my hands.

"I don't know... You're my first everything."

"Well, I don't, okay? I only kiss people I really care about."

"And you are mine."

He shifts his eyes to the left. "So, what are you saying...?"

"I'm saying, I'm in love with you too."

And before I can give Caine the time to process this, I cover his mouth with mine with a quick and dirty kiss.

I silence his protests and muffled yelp, pressing my lips hard against his. I'm savouring this brief moment where our lips are finally touching.

Then I finally let go of his face and retreat. For some reason, I can't look at him to see his reaction. I feel exposed, vulnerable.

Awkwardly, I wipe my mouth and hope it isn't possible for my heart to spontaneously combust into flames. I've had enough fires for today.

"You're... not just saying that, right?" His voice is quiet and soft, almost a murmur.

It's tinged with uncertainty. He can't tell whether I'm honest.

"Don't make me kiss you again," I mumble shyly.

Caine slips his hand into mine and takes a step towards me to close the gap between us. His hair touches my forehead as he leans in. His fingers graze the inside of my palm, a little bit nervous and a little bit brave.

My skin prickles with static, as if I've entered a small field of electricity. Perhaps Caine is generating it.

"No," he speaks slowly. "Don't stop."

My breath catches in my throat as Caine boldly captures my lips, gently pushing me down onto the couch. There are no more traces of uncertainty in his actions, though I can certainly tell his body is shaking.

Or maybe that's me. I can't keep up anymore with Caine's smoldering hot lips begging for my attention.

I lean back against the couch as he straddles me, our lips never breaking apart. There's an intensity between us that's rapidly spinning out of control.

A strong and pleasurable emotion steadily gains momentum inside of me the longer I kiss Caine.

I have to swallow my own gasp when Caine pulls my bottom lip down with his thumb and enters my mouth with his tongue.

I eagerly greet him, our tongues twirling around each other, leaving me breathless. But I can't take a break, the urge to continue kissing him is too strong.

I feel so lightheaded.

Our teeth clink against each other when Caine puts a little too much enthusiasm in kissing me.

We break apart for only a moment, and I put my hand against his chest, grabbing a fistful of his sweater.

Don't stop, don't leave – please let this continue.

"Don't look at me like that..." he murmurs.

I boldly gaze into his eyes and tighten my hold on his sweater. I refuse to break eye contact.

"Then how should I look at you?" I fire back.

"You have no idea what kind of effect you have on me," he says breathlessly.

He buries his face into my neck, kissing me there.

"You're so cute," he whispers before barraging me with kisses.

Butterflies swarm inside me, bouncing around like they're high on drugs.

He sucks right below my ear and I squirm beneath him. My heart throbs almost painfully, and I pull Caine closer to me by tugging on his sweater. I can't get enough of this feeling.

Can't get enough of *Caine*.

Then his lips leave my neck and I feel naked. I stare at him, incapable of hiding my disappointment.

But seeing Caine like this, untethered and open towards me, for the very first time... A look like that should be illegal.

"I love you. I'm madly fucking in love with you." His words are out of breath.

I want to curl up and scream.

He cups the side of my cheek, it feels so warm and safe.

"Joselina..."

His voice is like heaven raining down upon me.

"I want you. Everything. Can you forgive me?"

Of course I can.

"I already have," I say out loud.

Then Caine wraps his arms around me, pulling me in for a very intense hug. It's bone-crushing.

"T-thank you," he chokes out.

I cling onto his back as well, nuzzling my nose against his collarbone. Everywhere he's touching me feels like I'm still back at the fashion show; too hot to handle.

"I don't deserve this kind of happiness," he admits in a shaky voice. "I'm the luckiest guy on earth."

His sweet words have me yearning for more. I definitely love him as well. I'm so glad it's out in the open.

I forgive him for his past mistakes, because right now – *this* is the real Caine. The one who's hugging me, declaring he's the luckiest guy on earth, all the while trembling and blushing.

"Caine," I call for his attention. "I need to breathe."

He relaxes his arms and sheepishly pulls back.

"Right. Sorry."

He looks so adorable right now. I can't take it anymore.

"Caine... on the condition that from now on you'll be a better man – do you want to be my boyfriend?"

His mouth falls open.

"...Yes!"

Then he laughs out loud. It's such a magical sound. I want to hear him like this every single day.

"Fuck yeah I do!"

Before I know it, he kisses me out of joy. Soft and gentle. His happiness is pouring into me.

He pulls back just a tiny bit, showing nothing but this overjoyed expression on his face.

I smile up at him, then kiss him back.

This has been such a turbulent day. Thomas showing up, Caine throwing him down – a literal fire breaking out, and now this... Caine asking for forgiveness and telling me he loves me.

And I guess, now he's my boyfriend.

Funny how things work out.

I'm not even mad I can't participate in Fashion Week, or that my models ran off with some of my clothes.

I'm right where I want to be.

INNOCENT ROUTE HERE

Chapter [026 Innocent] -- boutique workroom

I feel like there's so much to do.

It's finally time to show off my collection. Nerves are threatening to take a hold of me, but I push through it. No time for cold feet; I have to show everyone what I'm made of.

All of the clothes are neatly wrapped up; I just need to load them into the taxi that's arriving soon. Of course, I'm also taking my sewing kit with me, as you'll never know what can go wrong.

I hope all of my models will be on time...

I hear a car honk outside. The taxi is here. It's time to go.

I swallow my nerves and grab my collection.

-- Outside fashion show

The taxi drops me off in front of the building. There's not a lot of people walking around outside; it's not time for the show just yet, after all.

"Joselina!" someone calls out my name.

"Oh, Sarah!" I beam at her. "Kevin, hi. Thanks for coming."

Seeing the amount of bags draped over my arms, Kevin takes some away without a word, lessening my load.

"Let's get you settled in. We've got backstage passes after all," she grins at me.

"People won't find it weird if I'm there, right?" Kevin asks, unsure.

"No, it's okay. Besides, it'll be a good experience for you, too. After all, this could be you in the future."

Kevin cracks a smile at. "Alright."

"Ahh, your first show. I can't wait to take pictures!" She taps the camera bag around her shoulder.

-- Backstage fashion show

It wasn't obvious on the outside, but once you stepped backstage, a whole new world opened up.

A large black curtain partitions the backstage area from the catwalk and the audience.

There are lots of people running about. Technicians fixing lights, models pulling on underwear, make-up artists applying foundation to them – and then a section for the hairstylists.

It's a lot more hectic than I thought it would be. Even Sarah and Kevin look a little lost.

"Over here. Let's hang up the dresses," I say, beckoning them over as I spot my name on a clothing rack.

I smile at the handwritten note on the rack; it means I'm really entering this competition.

We unzip the bags and take out all of the dresses I worked so hard on. Ten in total. The jellyfish dress will be my ending piece. It'll be a banger.

"We'll be going to our seats now. I need to snap some pictures of the event." Sarah looks delighted, as if she can't wait to use her camera.

"The show won't start for another hour though. Grab yourselves something to drink first," I point out.

"Sure! Anyways, give 'em hell, Joselina. You better win this thing." Sarah throws her fist in the air.

Sarah struts off but Kevin remains behind. A little awkward, he hesitates before speaking.

"Do you think Caine will come?" His eyes look down into mine. He seems worried.

"I told him to."

Kevin looks surprised. "Oh, did you talk to him after all?"

"Yes, last night. We... discussed the situation a bit," I admit.

This is not exactly what I want to be talking about when I need to go find my models.

Kevin chuckles nervously. "Good – I didn't want you two to be fighting still."

"I haven't quite forgiven him though," I mutter quietly.

Then I tap Kevin's arm. "But you should be with Sarah! I need to get my models ready." I direct Kevin towards the exit.

"Okay, good luck! I hope you win!"

Kevin disappears as well. Finally, it's time to work.

Firstly; I have to find my models.

Walking around, I manage to collect six of them. Turns out they were loitering near the entrance.

"Does anyone else know where the rest are?" I ask, sighing.

One of the taller ones shrugs.

"I think they're just late."

"Fine, I guess we'll just have to start without them for now. Let's get you into these dresses."

I hand out each outfit to the model most suited for it. A lot of them need help fitting into the garment and I need to make some last-minute adjustments as well.

I'm sitting down on my knees, holding a thread between my teeth and a needle in my hands, as I stitch the skirt around the model's hips. Turns out my measurements were off and I made it too tight.

When one model is all dressed, I send them to hair and make-up. This is going to be a long process. The room is filling up with even more people and extravagant outfits.

I can't help but check out some of my competition and see the gorgeous dresses they've designed. A part of me is envious of their talent.

On the other hand, there's a designer who's making their models walk around in literal diapers, and that makes me feel a little better.

One of the black-haired models got dressed on her own, but I spy something out of place; a bra strap.

I circle around her. The black bra is clearly visible through the clothing, with the straps popping out.

"What are you doing...?" I confront her.

"Wearing your dress?" she answers in an uncertain tone.

I point at her bra. "That won't do, please take it off."

"But then you'll see my nipples," she complains.

"I'll be deciding what you're wearing when you walk down that runway," I say in a stern tone.

"Whether that's completely naked or not is up to me, not you."

The model shoots me a glare.

"But I don't want people to see my nipples!"

1. "Then you should have thought about that *before* you decided you wanted to be a model!"

2. "I'm sure we can find you some nipple covers."

"Then you should have thought about that *before* you decided you wanted to be a model!" I snap at her.

All of the other models snicker out loud.

"Come on, you can borrow my nipple covers," says another model. "I brought them with me just in case."

"I'm sure we can find you some nipple covers," I sigh. I've got to compromise.

This seems to satiate her and she nods.

"Does anyone have any nipple covers with them?"

One of the models raises her hand.

"Good, please share them."

She offers them to the black-haired model. Crisis averted.

"You should be glad – at least we're not running around in diapers," she laughs.

The black-haired model huffs. "Just give me those. I'm changing."

"Has anyone seen the other four models?" I ask, my eyes scanning the crowd.

"Oh, over there!" says someone, pointing at the entrance.

Three models walk in; they're the ones I hired. I breathe a sigh of relief. Good. Now I just need to find the last one. I hope she'll come soon, because hair and make-up takes forever.

I wave at the models.

"Over here! Let's get you dressed."

One by one they come over and I give each of them the dresses. When they hoist themselves into the garments, I send them off to hair and make-up. The jellyfish dress is the last one to be hanging on the rack.

"Hey, do you know where Marissa is?" I ask one of the models. Marissa is the final model who hasn't shown up yet.

She raises an eyebrow at me. "You mean you don't know?"

"Know what?"

"Marissa told me she's sick and can't make it."

My heart comes to a standstill. *She what now?*

"Why am I only hearing about this now...?" I say breathlessly.

"She did say she tried calling you, left you a voice message I think."

I was... ignoring my calls. Caine was trying to reach me after all. Did I happen to ignore one of my models as well?

Wait, I did miss two calls from an unknown number. I gasp; was that my model cancelling on me!?

No! I... I don't have a back-up model!

"So anyways, should I go to make-up now or what?" she says, disinterested in my dilemma.

"Y-yeah, just go over there, the stylist knows what to do..."

Think Joselina, think. Marissa isn't coming. I need a model for my closing piece, my most beautiful dress.

I need a replacement model, and fast.

Hurriedly, I walk around, frantically looking around at the other designers.

"Hey, do you have a model I can use?" I ask, the fear and desperation seeping out of me.

They shake their head. "Sorry, I need them all."

The next one has the same answer.

"I can't, sorry."

I'm starting to hyperventilate by now. The show is already starting! I'm not the first in line, but I'm the third designer to show up on stage.

I need to find someone ASAP!

"Hey, you, can I borrow a model of yours? I mean, she can still walk in your collection and wear the same hair and make-up, but please, one of my models cancelled on me and—"

"Not my problem. Did you forget this was a competition? Get out of here," she sneers at me.

My heart sinks into the bottom of my stomach. I'm filled up with dread as anxiety spreads through me like poison.

Is there really no one that can fill in...?

Can I ask Sarah...?

No, I can't. Sarah is too short and busty; the dress isn't made with her measurements in mind. It wouldn't look right on her.

Can I do it myself? I'm shorter than the average model as well, but maybe I can pull it off. But ugh, I need to be there at the end!

I start biting my fingernails, frantically coming up with a plan to replace my lost model. Should I just show only 9 pieces instead of 10?

"Hey, you listening?"

I stop biting my fingernails, looking at the person next to me.

"Huh?"

Oh, it's Caine. I forgot he's got backstage access as well.

"You're so spaced out you didn't even hear me calling out for you."

He cocks his head to the side. "You look like you've seen a ghost, are you okay?"

I shake my head. "No, that's not it..."

"You don't look well."

"One of my models cancelled on me last minute," I explain.

"Oh... Can you replace her?" He looks sympathetic.

"I tried, but no one is willing to loan me their model."

Defeated, I look up at Caine. "What am I going to do...?"

"Can't you ask Sarah or something to fill in? She's a girl."

"I thought of that, too, but her measurements are way off. I need someone slender and at least 170cm (5'7)."

My head is spinning, trying to come up with ideas on how to pull this off.

"I am... slender?" he says this in a way as if he isn't sure of it himself.

My eyebrows raise up high on my forehead, causing deep wrinkles.

"Wait, are you offering...?" I ask, confused.

"Well... you seem to be in a pickle."

"But you're..." I sigh. "No, don't be silly."

"I'm also the correct height."

My eyes strain on his shirt as the cogs in my mind start turning. I recall seeing him at the beach; Caine *is* slender.

I snatch the rim of his shirt and lift it up, exposing his bare stomach. Caine flinches in surprise.

"Whoa!"

No hips, no curves, thin *and* the right height.

"This..." I say slowly as I release his shirt. "Might work."

"Caine, will you be my model?" I plead.

"As long as you don't breathe a word of this to either Kevin or Sarah," he threatens weakly.

"Yeah, no problem – strip please!" I grab his arm and pull him towards my clothing rack.

"Here!?" he asks, flustered.

"What colour is your underwear?" I ask, unabashed.

He starts turning red. "S-seriously?"

I hook my finger around his belt, pulling it away from his body so I can inspect his underwear. Any bright colours will show through the clothing, I can't have that.

Caine hastily retreats, rubbing his arms.

"Okay, chill, this is embarrassing you know," he mutters awkwardly.

"Caine, I'm freaking out right now because there are already people preparing to go out on the catwalk! Please, I don't want this to go wrong."

He grits his teeth. "They're white..."

Shit.

The skirt is blue. It's going to show. It's going to look ugly and ruin the design.

"If you even so much as *entertain* the idea of me going commando, I'm going to fuck right off, okay?" he says gruffly.

"No, no, like I said when we first met; no one wants to see your dangly bits—"

"—Dangly bits!?" he cuts in with a sharp voice.

"But we *can* get you some flesh coloured underwear."

"Hey!" I yell out loud to my flock of models. "Anyone got some spare flesh coloured panties?"

"As always, I come prepared!" says the model who previously had the nipple covers.

"You are a lifesaver!" I quickly grab the undergarment from her, before giving it to Caine.

"Okay, please wear this instead."

Caine holds the small piece of fabric up close to his face.

"This?"

"Yes."

"This is a *thong*. It's certified butt-floss!" His face is full of terror.

"Please, Caine," I beg. "I need this to go right. It's the one thing I ask of you!"

He stares at me, grinding down on his teeth. Then he tears his gaze away, conceding to my demands.

"Fuck. Fine. Where do I change?"

I gesture around the room. "Right here."

"Wait, what?"

"You haven't noticed the ample bosoms walking around in this room?"

Caine's head whips around left and right to examine his surroundings. There are all sorts of models getting undressed and being in various states of nudity.

He quickly becomes embarrassed.

"N-no! I was too focused on you!"

Aww, Caine, I'm touched. He didn't notice the literal super models walking around naked because he was looking for me.

"Isn't there a changing room or something?"

1. "It's not like I haven't seen you naked before."
2. "You can change behind a rack of clothing."

"It's not like I haven't see you naked before," I mention casually.

There's no time for Caine to feel embarrassed if he wants to help me out. He was the one that promised to make it right, to earn my forgiveness.

"And as far as I know... you owe me. Big time."

Knowing I'm right, Caine maintains eye contact with me as the corners of his lips lift up in a snarl.

He kicks off his shoes. "Fine," he spits out as he lifts up his shirt. "*Fine*," he repeats as he unzips his fly.

One by one, his clothes come off. He's standing in nothing but his briefs, glaring at me like a skittish chihuahua.

It doesn't have much of an impact with how red he is in his face.

"Quick, put it on so I can help you get inside this dress." I've already grabbed the jellyfish dress, holding it in my arms.

Then he takes off his underwear. The fabric falls down and settles at his ankles. Unlike the first time I saw him naked, I don't turn away my gaze.

But Caine is fast and nimble with those hands, quickly pulling on the thong and then snatching the dress from my hands, stepping inside. He pulls it up across his body until he's finally wearing it.

"You can change behind a rack of clothing," I offer, pointing at one in the back.

Caine follows my line of sight and lets out a small sigh. It seems he accepts his conditions.

"Alright, guess that'll do."

We walk towards the rack, though Caine is surprised to see I'm right on his heels.

"How about a little privacy?"

"I'll turn around, no worries. But I need to help you get inside that dress. I don't want you to tear it open."

"Are you calling me fat?" he questions indignantly.

"I'm calling you a *man*," I correct him. "With different proportions than I had in mind when I designed this dress. Now hurry up!"

Caine disappears behind the rack of clothing, and true to my word, I turn around, standing guard. I hear him getting undressed and before I know it, the jellyfish dress in my arms is yanked away.

Surprised, I whirl around to see Caine stepping inside of the dress and pulling it over his body.

Not saying a word, I help him with the collar and make sure to zip up the backside. I fluff out the skirt and circle around him to make sure everything fits.

"I can't believe it... you really do fit in this," I say in awe.

I guess Caine's proportions are very similar to the average model. He is bulkier at the top, but considering it's an off-shoulder neckline, it doesn't hinder the design. It doesn't look too tight on him.

Caine gathers a bunch of fabric from the skirt to lift it up and stick his hand underneath. He pulls a weird face and I hear a small snap.

"It's riding up my ass!" he complains.

"Please stop touching yourself in public like that," I sigh.

"What if it gets stuck there when walking, huh?"

"You better not do the same thing you did now! You will walk with elegance and grace, don't you *dare* stick your hand underneath your skirt like a Neanderthal."

Caine grumbles something under his breath.

"Now what do I do?" He awkwardly quirks an eyebrow at me.

"Let's get you to a stylist, stat!"

I guide Caine to the hair and make-up section and instruct the stylist what kind of hairstyle to give to Caine. He sits still in the chair, unsure of what to do with himself.

"Why don't we try a nice wig?" the stylist suggests.

"You have one on hand?"

"Of course, darling. *Always* be prepared."

I feel like everyone's prepared except for me.

"Actually, I'm totally for the wig idea. The less I look like myself, the better," Caine quips.

"Splendid!" The stylist sounds happy as they pull off a cyan coloured wig from a small stand.

"This will go great with your eyes," they chuckle.

It's true, the colour of the wig matches Caine's eyes.

A make-up artist joins in and starts dabbing foundation onto Caine's face.

"Okay Caine, when you're done, meet me at the curtain! I gotta go check up on my other models."

"Wait!" he protests. "Don't leave me here!"

I ignore his requests and quickly gather all of my models in one place.

I scan them over, correcting any flaws that stand out. Snipping away any loose threads, or adjusting any zippers or simply fixing their collars. Everything has to be perfect. I can't fail.

I'm glad Caine is here to substitute for my missing model, but I'm unsure how well this will translate on the runway. If he falls...

Glancing down at the set of high heels that I got for this collection, I'm starting to second guess them now. Maybe they should all go barefoot, because I doubt Caine is able to walk straight in these high heels.

But some of the dresses were made with heels in mind. The models would otherwise step on the fabric and trip up. Grr, this is becoming more of a hassle than it needs to be!

My heart starts racing when I see the 2nd designer send their models onto the runway. Oh no, I need to be ready, now! It's almost time!

All the models form a line next to the curtain. The only one missing is Caine.

"Joselina \n[2], you're up next, please get ready," someone blares into the crowd.

I gulp loudly. A microphone is handed to me, making this feel all the more real.

And finally, before my heart's about to burst with anxiety – Caine appears on the scene.

Dressed in my jellyfish dress, cyan waves fall down from his pretty made-up face. While it was a hastily done job, it still looks amazing. I can barely recognize Caine himself.

"I'm here," he announces nervously.

I know it's not Marissa, but Caine looks gorgeous.

"Alright Caine, wear these." I hand over the smallest pair of heels I have.

"I can't walk in heels," he whines. "I'm going to fall on my face."

"Listen, Caine. Even if you fall, it's okay, you just get right back up." I place my hands on top of his shoulders, flashing a crooked grin.

"Before we fly, we have to fall," I share my wisdom.

"That makes no fucking sense," Caine fires back.

"You're the last one to appear. Follow the models' pace. Strike a pose at the end of the runway, then walk back off."

Caine is trying his best to slip his feet into the heels, it looks like he's only half following along with what I'm saying.

"Then we make one more round all together, okay?"

"We what now?"

"Joselina \n[2], are you ready?" asks the planner.

"Yes!" I holler.

I swallow my nerves and walk through the curtain.

-- Fashion show stage

The stage lights are blinding as I step forwards. Camera flashes fire off as well. The audience has become a blur. It's packed.

I stand on the runway, clutching the microphone close to my chest.

It's a good thing I can barely see due to the lights, I'm super nervous having to speak to the audience! But I have to say my opening piece. I rehearsed this.

I take a deep breath. "Hello," I start slowly. "My name is Joselina \n[2]."

Clearing my throat, I continue. "One night, I shared a special moment underneath the Milky Way out on the beach with someone very close to me."

"It's hard to see the stars here in Claner, but out there, you can see it stretch across the ocean. It's such a beautiful sight to behold. I wanted to capture that essence, and the feelings I felt."

My eyes flutter down towards the runway.

"Those precious feelings gave way to my collection; Ocean Stars."

I take a small step backwards.

"This collection is dedicated to my grandma, who made all of this possible. Thank you."

I bow out of the runway, disappearing behind the curtain. I can only follow what's happening on the small TV near the entrance of the runway.

The music kicks in, the lights turn blue. My heartbeat is racing as the first model finally walks on stage.

Countless flashes fire off as the first design walks down the runway. And then the next, followed by a third. There is no time for a breather.

The first model walks off the stage, walking around the curtain until she's back in the line again, behind Caine.

Anxiously I continue to watch as each model walks down without any accidents. No boob flashing, no falling, no bumping into other models, they seem to be doing their thing rather well.

The line becomes shorter – the sixth design is about to walk.

Out they go; it's the black and white design that caused a little fight between me and Caine.

I hope people will like it...

Then finally, Caine is up. He gapes at me with these wide eyes. I'm surprised by how tall he seems, now that he's wearing heels. Time seems to stop for a split second in this hectic moment.

"Good luck," I tell him.

He clenches his hands into fists, his expression turning serious.

A simple nod, and off he goes, wobbling on the high heels as he stumbles upon the runway.

I hold my breath as I watch the TV. I clasp my hands together. *Please don't fall. Please don't fall.*

Caine sways like an inexperienced duckling on the heels, but he marches onward as if he owns the place. Nothing out of the ordinary just yet.

He passes another model on the runway without problems. Almost there...

Then at the end, Caine puts a hand on his waist and juts out his hip, turning his face to the side to strike a pose. Camera flashes nearly blind him.

I snort out loud; it's ridiculous!

Unaware of what's going on behind the scenes, Caine struts off the rest of the runway.

"Ok, good job!" I tell him when he dives in behind the curtain.

"Everyone line up, one more time!"

All the models start walking down the runway again, following each other in a straight line.

The audience starts to clap as they appear.

I stand next to Caine, taking in a deep breath.

"Again?" he asks.

"Yeah. At the end, please bow with me."

I step out onto the runway with Caine next to my side.

The lights are as terrifying as the first time. It's hard to keep my heart rate normal.

Caine strides alongside me, the fabric of the dress brushing against my legs.

Then for a split second, Caine's heel slips on the runway. His ankle twists and flails around. There're a few gasps in the audience as they see it going down.

He reaches out to grab my hand and I help him stabilize himself.

"You ok?" I ask, leaning in close. He's still upright.

"Y-yeah."

"I told you, you have to fall before you fly," I chuckle.

"Don't remind me," he grumbles.



For a brief second, I close my eyes. Then I open them and tighten my grip on Caine's hand, marching forwards.

We stand at the end of the runway together, listening to the applause being given to me. I smile at the audience, trying to ignore the fact that my legs feel like jelly.

This time, it's me hanging onto Caine so I can remain upright.

Then we bow, slowly, our hands still locked. The cheers grow louder.



All of a sudden, Caine raises our hands in the air together. My eyes widen in surprise. Cameras snap and capture this moment forever.

As if he's guiding me, Caine gives me a slight tug, and the both of us walk away.

When we reach the curtains, I feel like I can breathe again.

That was terrifying, but also very exhilarating!

"For the love of god I need to scratch my balls!" Caine groans out loud when we're backstage again.

Classic Caine.

Chapter [027 Innocent]

-- Fashion Show Backstage

Adrenaline is still freely flowing through my body. I can't take a breather; the hard part has passed, but now I have to wait until they announce the results.

There are a few judges in the audience who will rank the collections. The winner gets a nice sum of prize money as well...

"Joselina." Caine calls for my attention, tugging on my arm.

I look away from the TV screen. "Yes?"

"Can I change... or?"

I smile sympathetically. "No, you might have to show up on the stage again."

Caine sighs. "I'm kicking off these heels though, they *hurt*. How do you walk around in these things?"

"Hey Caine?"

He's in the middle of removing the heels from his feet when his eyes meet mine.

"What?"

1. "You look really pretty."
2. "You did a good job out there."

"You look really pretty."

Caine closes his mouth, eyebrows lowering.

"You may not be able to see it through the layers of paint on my face, but I'm blushing right now," he says sarcastically.

I can't help but giggle, feeling a little relieved that I can still joke around with Caine.

"You did a good job out there," I praise him.

The pose he struck was a tad silly, but honestly, Caine looked great in my dress on the runway.

"You think so...?" There's confusion etched onto his face, as if he can't believe I'm genuinely complimenting him.

"I mean, you didn't fall at least," I say with a small giggle.

"Figures." He rolls his eyes at me.

Caine finally removes both of the heels and an immediate sigh of relief escapes from his lips.

"Back on earth again."

"I admit, it was a little weird to see you that tall."

He narrows his eyes.

"It's nice to look you in the eye again."

And just like that, Caine shyly brushes the back of his neck, staring at the floor.

But my focus is back on the TV, watching the other contestants show their collection.

Caine's conversation distracted me, but only for a little while. Now I'm back in fretting mode, unable to sit still or pay attention to anything else. The anticipation is almost suffocating, it's making my mind feel all cloudy.

Eventually all of the other designs have been on the runway. It's time for the judges to deliberate.

All of my models are grouped together, chatting about everything and nothing. We're waiting on the results.

Caine sits next to me on a chair.

"Hey, what you said before," he starts softly.

"Said what?" I repeat.

"On that stupid catwalk. About someone... close to you." He looks away from me.

"Were you talking about me?"

1. "No, Kevin."

2. "Yes I was."

"No, Kevin," I say, deadpan.

Caine tilts his head to the side, giving me a strange look.

"I'm joking," I stress.

"Ah."

"Yes I was," I reply honestly.

"Oh." Caine appears to be pleased, biting back a goofy grin.

"Didn't think you'd mention me here..."

Eyes flare open as he looks at me, a hopeful impression gleaming on his face.

"Does that mean—"

"Welcome back everybody! Sorry to keep you waiting!" blares the announcer.

I'm up on my feet, ears perked and ready to listen. Everyone huddles around close to the TV.

"First, thank you all for a wonderful performance. We saw some real talent out there."

"And now, every day of the week there will be a winner among the newcomers. Let's announce the top four designers for today."

I cross my fingers. Please let me be in the top four!

"Elizabeth Rose." There's a lot of applause.

I gulp.

"Sofia Hendermans." Another round of applause.

Two left...

I'm chewing on my lips by now.

"Cindy Muse."

A hand suddenly engulfs my own. It's Caine, trying to steady my shaking hands.

"Joselina \n[2]."

I squeeze the living daylights out of Caine's hand.

"Ow – ow – Joselina, *Joselina!*" he cries out.

"I-I'm in the top four!" I say breathlessly.

"Congrats!" one of the models cheers on me.

But it's not over yet – they are going to announce the winner now. That's all that really matters. The rest is lip service.

"And the winner of today's Fashion Week is..."

...

"Cindy Muse!" The crowd erupts into a roar.

The models backstage all congratulate the designer on the set, currently crying out her eyes.

I feel my soul leave my body, like I'm having an out of body experience.

I nod and grin at the designer, congratulating her for winning.

...The winner isn't me.

Finally, I loosen my grip on Caine's hand, freeing him from my grasp.

He tries to say something, but ends up swallowing his words. The look on his face says enough.

"A-alright, time to pack up everyone," I manage to say after gathering all of my strength.

Losers get to go home, after all.

-- **boutique**

"Honestly – she was up against literal diaper wearing models. How was this in *any* way a legitimate contest!?" Sarah huffs indignantly.

"It is what it is. We can't change the results," Kevin tries to appease her.

"Guys, I mean, thanks so much for complaining, but I'd rather just wallow in my own misery right now," I sigh dejectedly.

"There will be no wallowing! You did great, Joselina."

Kevin nods. "Yeah Joselina, your collection looked so stunning on stage."

"You even made Caine look easy on the eyes!" Sarah points out.

"What's that supposed to mean!?" he gripes back.

Sarah has the eyes of a hawk; as soon as Caine came down the runway, she could tell it was him.

"I can't believe you recognized me in the first place," he huffs.

"Hello? I'm shooting the models walking down, so I *have* to look at them closely. How can I not see it's you? I'm not faceblind!"

Caine rolls his eyes at her. So much for keeping it a secret from the both of them.

"Thanks everyone," I say shyly. "I did my best and got to show my collection to a bunch of people. That's more than I can ask for."

"Very mature of you to say. It's the experience that counts!" Kevin cheers for me.

Not that it doesn't hurt like a knife cutting through my heart, but I'll keep that to myself.

Worry flashes across Sarah's face.

"Want us to stay?"

"Actually, I'd rather just chill out here alone, if you don't mind."

"...Okay. We'll leave you be. Come on Kevin, I'll take you home."

"Uhh – I mean, I can take you home, too."

"Ugh, stop flirting and fuck off already," Caine groans.

Sarah huffs, but she turns around and walks towards the exit along with Kevin.

The bell chimes and off they go. Caine looks at the door, standing still.

He throws his head back at me. "Joselina, I want to stay."

"I'm not in the mood for a pep talk or anything..." I kind of want to scream inside of a pillow or something to vent my frustrations.

"Who said anything about a pep talk?"

I blink emotionlessly at him. Just when I thought Caine had some shred of decency in his bones, he goes ahead and proves me wrong.

"Look, I thought you were going to win," he starts.

"That makes two of us," I mention offhandedly.

"And I was going to talk to you after you got your award."

"We're talking right now," I point out.

He grits his teeth at me, not liking my pedantic comments.

"But now it's..."

"I lost."

"Yep."

"Okay, you can go ahead and let me turn into a potato now." I sprawl out across the counter.

With a frustrated groan, Caine closes the gap between us, trapping me against the counter. He bares his fangs at me.

"I didn't walk down that runway just to see you end up like this!"

I shrink into myself at his outburst.

"I was so sure you'd win. You worked so hard and your stuff is amazing. *You're* amazing."

Cyan eyes search for \v[36] ones, but I'm unable to meet his gaze. I stay quiet.

"And... and... I think you really did capture that moment at the beach with your collection..."

"You don't have to try so hard to cheer me up," I say weakly.

"It's not that – this means something to me, too, you know."

"Huh, what do you mean...?"

"You started sketching out these starry themed designs, you called it Ocean Stars... You said it was a special moment."

Caine takes a step back, clutching his hand over his heart.

"I don't think you realize just how much that moment meant for me, too."

That time under the stars with Caine... It inspired everything. The kiss was a catalyst, and it propelled me forward.

I felt like I was on cloud nine the entire time.

He closes his eyes. "My first real k-kiss," he admits softly.

Then they blink open, meeting mine.

"With the girl I love."

Uhh...

Like an idiot, I point a finger at myself, raising my eyebrows.

"Yes *you*, you dumbass," he grumbles.

In 0.3 seconds flat, my face erupts into a blazing fire.

I feel exposed. Naked. In the spotlight. My brain can't process information this fast!

I end up hiding my extremely red face with my hands.

"Wha – hey! Why are you looking away!? I'm confessing to you right now!"

"I know – it's embarrassing!" I say sheepishly.

Caine tears my hands away from my face, peering into my eyes.

"Stop. I want you to look at me."

No! My heart's flowing down a rapidly changing current and it's unable to find a place to stop! Is it even normal to have heart palpitations like this!?

How am I supposed to face him when he says something cheesy like that!?

"Joselina." His voice is sultry and low, like a small purr that pulls me in.

"I wanted to tell you after you won, but... I can't keep hiding anymore."

A sigh, long and drawn out, like he's been rehearsing this.

"I've been a real dick. I know. Before I met you, I was in a dark, dark place."

"Friendless, lonely, and tormented daily." He releases my hands. "I'm not asking for pity. I just want you to understand that everything just kind of, well – *sucked*."

"I forced myself to go to some college party where I didn't know anyone. Too awkward to talk to anyone, I ended up drowning myself with alcohol. It's the first time in my life I got drunk."

Oh, he's talking about the night we met; the party I went to with Sarah. Caine doesn't remember meeting me there.

"I was at a low point in my life. I know it's not an excuse... I acted out. I was a shithead. Trolling people. I'm... not proud of it." There's genuine remorse in his voice.

Caine points an accusing finger at me. "Then *you* came along."

"W-what, don't say it like I invited you to be a dick to me..."

"For some reason you just glued yourself to me. Like a cockroach I couldn't get rid of."

"Well that's an unsanitary comparison," I quip.

"Ugh – can you shut up for a moment?" He sounds irritated.

I giggle inappropriately, because I don't know how else to act. I'm so extremely embarrassed right now. I've never had to sit through a confession before!

Caine clenches his fist, his eyes clouding over with the pain he went through. The anguish of being alone – it's all written on his face.

"You gave me a chance when no one else would. Saw something in me that... I didn't even realize was there in the first place."

A hand runs through his hair as he contemplates his next set of words.

"You're so stubborn and persistent," he says in this exhausted voice.

"But you're also fun and cute and—"

The more he says the more blood roams across my face. I can't believe I'm hearing all of this.

Caine leans in closer, eyes half open. "—Even now, it should be a crime to look this cute."

My heart is thrumming along, when is it going to stop? Until it bursts, perhaps? Can that be an actual medical emergency?

"Your expressions, your actions – everything. You make my heart race."

I make his heart race, too? Geez, he should hear mine. It's an unstoppable force right about now.

"I didn't have time to think about stealing or trolling anymore. I was too busy thinking about you."

Caine thinks about me? My face is turning into a literal radiator; it's burning up. Oh boy. I'm weak to this.

Caine bites on his bottom lip, his face gradually turning a shade of crimson, reminding me I'm not the only one who feels embarrassed.

"I can't stop – what am I supposed to do?" he whines. "You drive me crazy."

"O-oh," I mutter intelligently. Part of my brain refuses to cooperate with me.

"...You think about me?" I ask quietly.

Bashfully he looks away. "I do way more than that."

I gape at him – what's that supposed to mean!?

"Joselina, that night at the beach, that's when I realized."

He flashes a mischievous grin as he lets out a hearty chuckle.

"I love you."

The grin on his face is quickly replaced by a pensive look.

"Fuck. I really wanted you to win today."

I exhale some air and relax my shoulders. My heart is having a massive fit in my chest cavity. I am so tremendously happy.

"Well, I mean, I didn't win, but someone else did," I say nervously.

"They don't deserve that award," he huffs.

"I'm not talking about the show."

"Huh?"

Oh god I'm going to say something super embarrassing, but my mouth isn't listening to me.

"You. You won."

Caine clearly doesn't realize what I'm getting at here.

I awkwardly shift my gaze away. "...You won me over."

It takes him a second to understand what I mean, and then his eyes grow wide.

"Huh!?" he croaks loudly.

Ahhh I want to hide my face! That was so cheesy!

"What do you mean? Are you saying you forgive me?"

I sheepishly nod my head. "I do, but- I mean..." Why is being articulate suddenly such an insurmountable task?

"What I'm trying to say is... me too."

Caine isn't the same boy he was when I first met him. It's not hard to see how he went from someone standoffish to someone who'd wear a dress and walk in a fashion show, all because...

He loves me.

Oh god, it feels real now.

"Wait – for real? No, please say it to my face, otherwise my brain won't believe it." Caine stares at me intensely.

I'm losing my nerve. My entire body feels weak. I need to sit down and gather my emotions, because they're all over the place.

"Are you implying there's... there's hope?" His voice cracks.

"I-I mean, I fully planned on getting rejected. I just uhm, wanted you to know. And stuff." Caine's words are suddenly getting all scrambled.

He rubs his flushed neck. "Shit. Now I've got my hopes up."

Honestly, how could I not? It's not like I go around kissing people I don't have any feelings for. Not to mention the things we did to each other that night in the cabin...

"Joselina." My name leaves his lips, startling me from my thoughts.

"Talk. Please. I'm so fucking nervous right now. Look at my hands." He hovers a hand above the counter; it's trembling.

1. "It's not just you. I love you too."
2. Show your own trembling hand.

I gather all my courage to be able to speak.

"It's not just you. I love you too."

"I..." he gapes, unable to finish. Caine appears too stunned to talk.

"I realized it a while ago... but then I found out you were that troll."

Caine gulps in response.

"I screwed up, didn't I?"

"Yes," is my simple response.

"I'm—"

Quickly I press my finger against his lips, shushing him. I remove it when I see Caine blinking at me, not talking.

"I know you're not perfect. I mean, I didn't expect the trolling behind my back... but I can tell you've genuinely improved."

"You've changed." I tilt my head to the side, letting out a jumpy giggle. "For the better, I think."

"You *think*?" he repeats, feigning hurt.

"I can never be too sure. Not until you show me," I say slyly.

"How would you like me to show you?" Caine leans into my body, his fingers touching mine, all the while staring into my eyes.

It feels so good to be this close to him again.

"Because I'll do anything." Caine bonks his forehead against mine.

I sheepishly smile at him. "How about a kiss, to start?"

Caine's lips spread into an impish grin as he cups my cheek with his hand, angling my face towards him.

"Gladly."

Without a word, I show him my own hand. Our fingers touch briefly as I stretch it out in front of me. It's shaking from all the nerves.

Caine's eyes shoot up to meet mine. He realizes what it means without having to hear it out loud. Or at least, I sure hope so, because my vocal cords don't seem to be working at the moment.

Our gaze falls down to our hands. Caine's pinky twitches, touching the side of my hand. Then he reaches out for me, his fingers moving across the top of my hand in a rather deliberate way.

My heart beats loudly in my ears. My breathing is quickening. I expand out my fingers and slowly interlace them with Caine's.

It's such an innocent gesture, but it feels like the weight of the world is in the palm of our hands. We're holding onto each other, not saying anything at all.

Those icy orbs look into mine, searching for answers.

His lips purse. "Do you love me?" His voice brings chills down my spine.

I bat my eyelashes at him. "Yes," I admit.

He brings up his other hand to my face, his fingertips fluttering my blazing red cheek. I lean into his touch; it feels good. I missed it.

"How?" he breathes out, as if he can't believe it.

"I guess you can say, I see the good in you."

Caine's reaction baffles me; he laughs. Then he leans into me, his forehead touching mine.

"That's all thanks to you." His voice is so jittery, as is his breathing.

Before I know it, his lips are pressed against mine. Softly, like the stroke of a brush. It's so sweet and pure.

All the bad thoughts leave my body. My loss for today, my anger and pain towards the 'troll'. Something else takes hold of me. Something that shakes me to my core.

It's my love for Caine, blossoming until I'm consumed by it.

Caine's lips pull away from mine, just very briefly, but he stays close to me. His breath feels like the warm glow of an afternoon sun.

"Joselina, you have no idea how happy I am right now," Caine chuckles nervously.

"I'm happy, too," I reply.

"I've always been burned by people – but not you. You're just... *amazing*."

All of a sudden Caine throws his arms around me and pulls me into his chest, crushing me with his arms. His entire body is trembling, but it feels so warm.

"Thank you... for not hating me, for giving me a second chance," he murmurs as he buries his face into my \v[37] hair.

I wrap my arms around his waist, getting more comfortable against his chest. The sound of his heartbeat ricochets against my ear.

Then I hear a sniff.

"Are- are you crying right now?" I ask, concerned.

"No," he denies weakly.

Another sniff. There's a grin on my face.

"Some leftover mascara got into my eye, 'tis all..."

My giggle gets muffled by his shirt. I want to see it – his expression. Dying to, really.

I want to break apart our embrace, but Caine holds me even tighter.

"No," he says sternly. "Don't look at me, I look like shit."

I concede to his demands, allowing him to hide away. I continue to rub his back until the sniffing stops.

Finally, he pulls away from me. His eyes look a little red.

"Hey, Caine," I start.

"What?" he asks, rubbing his nose.

"Let's be honest from now on. Okay?"

"I'll... I'll try," he mumbles shyly.

He takes in a deep breath.

"Okay, then let me start by asking you an honest question."

"Sure."

"Would you like to be my girlfriend...?" He asks it in such a sheepish way, as if he's still afraid of rejection.

My cheeks practically glow as I beam at him with a smile.

"Of course!"

Caine releases a jittery breath. "Haa..."

"Can't believe it. You're my first girlfriend."

"And you're my first boyfriend," I giggle shyly.

This seems to put a smile on his face, looking more confident.

"That makes me the luckiest man in the world."

"I'll do my best to be an amazing girlfriend," I say suggestively.

Caine ends up smirking at me.

"I'll hold you to that."

Then he places another kiss on my lips. It's bittersweet from his tears.

But I won't tell him that. It's my little secret.

Caine grasps the sides of my cheeks, pressing harder against my mouth. I can feel the intensity of his feelings for me transfer over. It's like we're on the same wavelength.

He takes in small breaths as he leaves my lips alone for a split second, but then comes back for more, like he's addicted.

Or maybe it's just me that's addicted? I can't get enough of Caine. I love this man so much, I can't help but respond to every move he makes, to the way his supple lips brush against mine.

Then he retreats, his eyes glazed over as he looks down at me with this gentle expression. He's studying me, it's almost unnerving.

"So pretty," he mutters.

I feel butterflies swirl around in my stomach. The way he says these things so shamelessly, I don't know how to respond to it!

He presses a small kiss on my forehead.

"You don't realize how much I love those eyes of yours," he admits.

"My eyes?" I didn't realize he was referring to my eyes.

"They're like gems. Such a lovely shade of \v[36]. I get lost in them."

He clears his throat. "Sorry for being corny."

I flash a smile at him.

"Corny is good. Tell me more."

He tilts his head to the side, raising a single eyebrow, but then grins at me.

"Your hair has always looked so soft. I want to touch it."

I recall running my fingers through Caine's hair a couple of days ago, and how nice that felt.

"Well, you can now, if you want," I suggest.

And just like that, Caine traces a lock of my hair with his fingers, tucking it behind my ear.

He emits a cute chuckle. It makes me melt.

"I've always wanted to do that."

"But it's so mundane!" I giggle.

Caine shrugs bashfully. "Sometimes I like the small things."

"I really like touching your hair, too," I confess. "It's so fluffy and soft!"

"Feel free to mess up my hair as much as you want," he boasts proudly. "Those are the special privileges you get as my girlfriend."

I laugh out loud. "I already did that before!"

"Well—" He pauses. "This time, I can admit that..."

Caine gets closer to me, hovering his lips right near my ear. My body involuntarily shivers.

"Having your fingers rake across my head is kind of a turn-on."

A sexy chuckle tickles my ears.

And just like that, my face is on fire again. That's... that's cheating!

Caine pulls back, laughing without a care in the world. He looks so happy right now.

This has been such a hectic day. First, I had to deal with a missing model, but then Caine swooped in to help me out.

In the end, I didn't win, but that doesn't matter to me anymore. I definitely feel like I've won.

[Passionate ending]

-- Boutique

"You are something fierce!"

The camera whirs and the flash goes off.

"Look at that exquisite detail!"

Multiple flashes fire off in a rapid fashion.

I oversee my creations walking down the improvised runway. A sense of accomplishment wells up.

A few photographers are standing at the end, shooting pictures. There's a lot of onlookers who came by to stop and watch the show as well.

Fashion Week was cancelled due to the fire, but I already paid for my models so I might as well use them at my own boutique! Sarah and Kevin are outside at the end of the runway, taking pictures. They helped me set this entire thing up, I'm so grateful for them.

"Okay, the blogger I contacted, MCK, came to see you as well!" says Chelsey cheerfully. She checks off a name on her list.

"She's huge among women in their twenties, you know."

Chelsey, being a fashion blogger with a surprising number of followers, managed to invite some high-profile bloggers to come watch the show.

"I believe only one didn't show up," she thinks out loud. "Oh well, look at the turn out!"

She's right; there are so many people gathered around to watch the models walking down the small red carpet.

"Thanks a lot for this, Chelsey," I thank her.

"Don't mention it... I mean, it's my fault that everything got out of hand. It's not fair to you."

I shake my head. "You couldn't have known Thomas was going to be there, much less that it would cause a fire. Don't beat yourself up over it. What's done is done."

She flashes me a small smile.

"I can't believe you threw him down. I guess I underestimated you a little," she says, turning towards Caine.

He's wearing my jellyfish dress, styled in a cyan wig as well. One of the models bailed out on me so I had to improvise. And considering Caine really owes me; I asked him to fill in. After all, he's the perfect height for a model and skinny to boot as well.

"Call me little one more time," he threatens defiantly.

"She didn't call you little. She said she just underestimated you! Anyways, you ready Caine? You're my star piece." I say, turning towards Caine.

"...We are even after this, yeah?" Caine grumbles.

"Don't worry so much Caine, you look fabulous," reassures Chelsey.

"Are you mocking me? It sounds like you're mocking me!"

"Relax, Caine. You look pretty. Now, go strut your stuff down that carpet and show me how much you love me!"

Caine turns bright red.

"I-I will not! That's stupid!"

I place a hand over my heart, feigning hurt.

"Ah, Mr. Menenimi, you hurt me so much! How will I ever manage to cope!?"

Caine flips the wig out of his face.

"Argh – fine! Stop being dramatic!"

"Good luck!" I cheer for him.

--Outside boutique

Caine drags his feet over to the carpet, huffing in annoyance.

I know he's being a pain, but I can tell he'd do anything for me. The thought alone makes me feel super happy.

"Okay Caine, it's your turn, go!" says Chelsey, as she pushes him onto the runway.

Caine stumbles around on his high heels, but starts walking down the carpet. Once the audience spots him, they all gasp in response.

"Wow – magnificent!"

"Look at those strings! Are they made out of fiber optics?"

"Looking good!" Sarah cheers, snapping a picture. "You're making everyone jelly!"

Caine is too focused on walking in a straight line to get annoyed by Sarah's comments. All the other models walk back inside, leaving Caine alone on the runway.

He strikes a pose at the end, closing his eyes as everyone snaps pictures.

Then he turns around and walks off the carpet without tripping over his own feet.

I hurriedly grab his hand.

"One more round," I say, as he's looking at me all confused.

All the models line up and start walking down the carpet one last time. Caine and I are at the end, walking hand in hand.

Like this, I feel like the world is mine to take.

Cheers and applause erupt as every single one of my designs appear. It's a sight to behold. It may not be Fashion Week, but I'm having a lot of fun with all my friends around me.

I wave at Sarah, who smiles at me and shoots a picture. Kevin gives me a thumbs up, holding his phone horizontally as he's shooting the entire thing on video.

Chelsey makes sure to herd all the models back inside. I couldn't have done this without her help either.

And then there's Caine next to me, wearing my dress and a wig, because that's just the kind of person he is. What he was once before... that's ancient history.

It's funny how things work out.

We stand at the end and I bow in front of my audience.

"Thank you all for coming to see my collection, Ocean Stars!"

1. Kiss Caine's cheek.

2. "I want to thank all of my friends for their hard work today. I love you all."

I stand on my toes and lift myself up until I can plant a kiss on Caine's cheek.

His eyes widen slightly, but then he chuckles at me. He releases my hand, instead wrapping his arm around my waist and pushing me up against the dress.

"Please give a round of applause to Joselina \n[2]!" he yells out loud.

"I want to thank all of my friends for their hard work today. I love you all."

Caine grins at me, squeezing my hand tightly.

The audience claps loud and hard; I feel myself blush at their adoration. I feel humble in front of them.

But I'm also very proud of myself. I may not have joined Fashion Week, but I still got to show off my collection. Not to mention drum up a ton of press for Sunshine Boutique!

There's something powerful about turning around and walking back inside with Caine next to me and my friends cheering me from the back.

Yeah, I got this!

-- Boutique

It's buzzing inside as the models are getting undressed.

Caine is the first to wobble away – complaining about one of the strings being stuck between his buttocks – and I stay behind with the rest.

I'm handing out business cards left and right. People are congratulating me on my show. Fashion bloggers and influencers are sticking around, chatting with others.

Chelsey assures me that they'll be leaving reviews on their blogs, which should hopefully get me more recognition in the fashion world.

"I think that went great! I've got a lot of good pictures of your models." Sarah nods at me.

"I have it all recorded as well. I'll be posting it on social media! Everyone loves to see an underdog still going through with the show, despite the fire." Kevin seems excited.

"I'm glad you helped me out. I don't know how I could have pulled this off on my own."

A sense of accomplishment and pride wells up inside me. Fashion Week may have ended in disaster, but I've got great support from friends.

"So, Caine. Should we be giving you a stage name...?" Sarah jokes.

Caine who has quickly undressed and gotten rid of the wig and make-up, glares at Sarah. He doesn't seem amused.

"How about *Sparkle*?" she chuckles.

"Great idea! I'll go with 'I'll Punch You In The Face' instead, how's that?"

"Regardless, I think you did great for a first-time model, Caine," says Kevin earnestly.

"I don't want to be complimented on that," Caine grumbles.

"It's nice to see you did it for me anyway," I say.

"Of course," he stammers, looking slightly embarrassed.

"Anything for his girlfriend, right?" snorts Sarah. She and Kevin already know that Caine and I are together.

Caine balls his fist at her and Sarah stares him down with a smug smirk.

"I don't want to hear that coming from you who has *him* literally whipped!" Caine angrily points at Kevin.

Sarah leans into Kevin, roaring with laughter. "Ahaha, but at least Kevin admits it!"

Kevin says nothing at all; his red face speaks a thousand words.

"...M-maybe," he admits quietly.

I end up laughing at their antics. To think that Sarah used to fall for bad boys like Kyle, and now she's done a 180 by going for Kevin, who is so pure of heart. I'm happy for them, too.

Everyone sticks around for a long time, sharing stories, laughter, until one by one, they leave the premises. Soon enough, I'll be seeing blog posts and other reviews popping up about my Ocean Stars collection.

No one could have predicted the way things would turn out this week. Caine revealed to be my online tormentor, Thomas showing up at Fashion Week and starting a fire, my friends helping me stage a fashion show... Caine confessing his love for me.

Yep, didn't expect that at all.

[Innocent ending]

-- Boutique

To say this is not what I expected is putting it mildly.

The very next Monday, when I went to open my boutique, there were a bunch of people already waiting to enter the store.

And now... more and more people have come in to check out my work. I've already sold a ton of clothes.

"I loved your work! That jellyfish dress was amazing. How did you make it?" asks an eager customer.

I feel stupid; of course it's due to press from Fashion Week. I may not have won, but it was still televised and whatnot.

"I actually used fiber optics to create the strings and make them seem like they change colour," I explain.

"Oh, no wonder! It looked so gorgeous on the runway."

They resume browsing the store again. There are a bunch of people inside, it's gotten all lively.

I take out my phone and end up texting everyone about the current state of affairs.

However, what surprises me the most is Chelsey's reply.

Chelsey:

"You have no idea. I wrote a blogpost about your collection and it's gone viral. It's being shared all over. The pictures of that jellyfish dress are everywhere. People love it!"

Joselina:

"Wait, are you serious? Is that why there's so many people in my store?"

Chelsey:

"Yes! You got a ton of people interested, even if you didn't win. It doesn't matter to them! You're the designer who created Ocean Stars and they're eating it up!"

My collection went viral? I can't contain the grin on my face; it's spreading like wildfire. My work is being recognized! People are visiting Sunshine Boutique because of it!

My phone buzzes and I get another message, this time from Sarah.

Sarah:

"Hold the fucking phone – I'm coming over!"

And another message, this time from Caine.

Caine:

"What, really? There's a bunch of people?"

Joselina:

"It seems Chelsey blogged about my work and it went viral! There's so many people in here right now, I don't think I can handle this amount."

Caine:

"Shit I'm at college – but whatever! Stay put, I'll be over in ten minutes."

Anxiously, I place my phone down, directing my attention to the customers in my store.

So many of them congratulate me on my work, laying on the compliments really thick. A lot of them even ask if they can hire me to design a dress for them – I can't believe how smooth everything is going!

The bell chimes and Caine comes running in, out of breath.

"Hahh, ah, got here as fast as I could," he pants, leaning against my counter.

"Fuck, that's a lot of people."

"I know!"

"All because of some viral post?"

"Apparently." Even I can't seem to accept what's happening.

"Oh look – you're that model for the Ocean Stars collection, right?" asks one of the women in the store.

Caine looks flustered, pointing a finger at himself.

"Y-you recognize me?"

"I'm very good with faces," she says with a grin.

The crowd bursts into whispers once Caine is outed as the temporary model.

"I think it's great you hired a male model, it's very progressive!" she compliments me.

Oh, that's not really what I was trying to do, but sure!

A tall woman walks up and hands Caine her business card.

"I'm always scouting for talent – have you signed up to any agency yet?"

"Errr – agency?" Caine looks at a loss of words, staring at the business card.

"I think she means a modeling agency," I explain, finding it a little funny.

"Great! Then you don't mind coming over to Cornier Enterprises, right? We *love* having androgynous models."

My eyes bulge out; Cornier Enterprises is a huge company! And they're scouting Caine right now!?

"Uhh..." Caine starts to blush, not knowing how to react. "Androgynous?"

"I mean with your fragile build and pretty face, even those freckles have their charms. That dress you wore looked fabulous on you. It'd be a shame not to capitalize on that."

I quickly tear the business card out of her hands.

"He'd love to consider you!" I say cheerfully. "Right Caine?"

"Sure? I guess?" He has no idea what's going on; he's like a fish out of water.

"Great to hear! Lovely work on the collection by the way. Exquisite. Out of this world."

"Thank you so much!"

The woman walks away and Caine gapes at me.

"The hell just happened?"

"You got scouted by a top tier modeling agency!"

"Who says I want to be scouted!? That was a one-time only gig!"

I poke his blushing cheek. "Oh come on, she even complimented your freckles."

Caine rubs his cheek and backs away from me with a growl.

"I usually hear insults about them."

1. "Then it's time to fix that then; I think your freckles are super cute!"

2. "People are just jealous. Your freckles are a part of you."

"Then it's time to fix that then; I think your freckles are super cute!"

Caine looks partially embarrassed, and partially annoyed. It's an adorable combination.

"S-shut up, don't give me platitudes."

"Say what you want, but I think they make you look *very* handsome." I smile brightly at him.

Caine just blushes harder.

"People are just jealous. Your freckles are a part of you," I say with a smile.

Caine huffs. "Comes with the territory of being a redhead."

"And that's what makes them so attractive, too."

Caine's face turns bright red.

"God, how can you say these things without dying on the inside..."

"Joselina!" I hear Sarah's voice rise above the crowd.

"Sarah! You came!" I spread my arms around to gesture towards the entire room. "Look!"

"I know!" she gasps in awe. "It's packed! What in the world happened?"

I quickly explain to Sarah that a post had gone viral due to Chelsey.

"Wow, never thought I'd see the day I'd know someone who'd gone viral online..."

"Caine got scouted by an agency, too," I say with a snicker.

"Oh shut up – you don't need to tell her that!" he complains.

"Is that so?" Sarah sounds amused. "I mean, to be fair, you did wear that dress rather well. You're the right height, skinny and lean, which is usually what they look for."

"Are you calling me small? It feels like you're calling me small."

"Come on, don't be annoyed. You did a great job Caine! You should definitely consider a modeling career."

"Oh, for crying out loud – I'm not going to become a model! No amount of compliments will make me reconsider!"

"Just imagine – I'll be the designer, and my boyfriend will model everything I create!"

Sarah's eyebrows quirk up. "Boyfriend?"

For some reason, that makes Caine start blushing again.

"Right, yeah. That happened."

Sarah rolls her eyes. "About time. You two were eye fucking each other all the damn time. Get a room."

"Eye fucking!?" Caine bursts out loud.

"W-we were not!" I screech in protest.

Sarah sighs. "And I heard you two in the cabin, you know, you weren't exactly—"

Caine cuts her off by literally placing his hand against her mouth.

"Don't you dare finish that sentence!"

I fan my very red face. Oh boy. Nope. I don't want to think about that. Nope. No one heard us. Nope, nope. Let me live in this fantasy where everyone was none the wiser.

Sarah backs away from Caine.

"Sheesh – control your guy, Joselina."

I cough into my hand, willing my blush away. "Then stop provoking him."

"Well... anyways. I'm glad, it seems you struck gold with publicity. Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Thanks, Sarah."

"I've got to get back to work though, I took a short break, haha... My clients are waiting."

Sarah leaves the boutique.

Caine looks at me in horror.

"*She heard us?*"

"Caine, can we agree to never speak about that?" I plead him.

"Yeah, okay. Deal."

Caine sticks his hands into his pockets, looking around.

"Uhm, do you need help with all these customers?"

"You know what, I would definitely appreciate someone behind the counter as well. Do you think you can fold and bag the items?"

"As long as I don't have to actually wear anything anymore, then yeah, sure, I can do that." He grins at me.

I smile back at him, appreciating his eagerness to help me out. I can't believe he's my boyfriend.

Caine walks behind the counter and stands next to me.

Then I feel his hand slip into mine, out of sight from everyone else, like a secret only we share. My heartbeat quickens; it's filling up with so much joy from today.

I'm sure together, we can face anything, including the small mob inside of Sunshine Boutique right now. I'm glad he came over for me.

-- Routes converge here

When everyone's left, Caine has stayed behind to help me clean up.

As I reach out to grab a piece of trash from the floor, I brush my hand against Caine who had the same idea.

We stare at each other for a couple of seconds.

I pull away my hand, but he grabs it, keeping me in place.

"Hey," he starts in this low murmur.

"What?"

"I know dressing up doesn't atone for the things I've said to you before, but I hope you can see... I'm serious about you."

His hand stretches across my face, lifting up my chin so I look him in the eye.

"I'd do *anything* for you."

My heart thrums; I love the way he looks at me like that.

"I know. I *have* forgiven you, Caine."

Then I close the distance between us and capture his lips with mine. The sweet essence that is Caine pours right into me. Like a drug that I'm now addicted to – that I could never part with.

Caine kisses me back in a gentle manner, like he's showing me how much he cares through his actions. He's usually rough around the edges, but he's got a surprising amount of delicacy hidden within him.

I want to explore all sides of Caine. The good and the bad. I'm here for it all.

-- Bedroom night

After a busy day at the boutique, I'm in bed after midnight.

My eyes glaze over my phone, feeling this need to read that blogpost Chelsey has written about my collection.

However, my thoughts wander over to Caine and naturally, I end up sending him a message first. I don't expect a reply; he's probably asleep by now.

Except I get an immediate reply! I open the message and my eyes zoom in like a hawk.

Caine:

"Do you ever go to bed early?"

Joselina:

"No, not really. There's always a lot of work involved. What about you, why are you up?"

Caine:

"I wanted to watch the meteor shower but it's gotten too cloudy right now."

Joselina:

"Meteor shower? We have those here?"

Caine:

"Yeah it's called the Perseid Meteor Shower – it's an annual thing in August. You never noticed? You can see a bunch of them in the sky at night."

Caine really is very knowledgeable about astronomy. I can't say I've ever heard of it before.

Joselina:

"I had no idea. Sounds cool. I guess I missed watching it :{"

Caine:

"Nah, you can see it for the rest of the week still. Do you want to watch it with me? ^^"

Joselina:

"Oh, I'd love to! It would have to be over the weekend though, Sunshine Boutique is booming, I don't have much time for anything during the week."

Caine:

"Not even time for me? :{"

Joselina:

"Hey, I'm talking to you right now!"

Caine:

"That doesn't count, I'm not there with you. Take a pic."

Joselina:

"Of?"

Caine:

"You. I want to see you."

Joselina:

"Demanding, aren't you? Miss me that much?"

Caine:

"Yes."

His willingness to confess so easily about wanting to see me has my heart racing. Caine has definitely gotten more open with me. It makes me so happy.

I look down at the negligee I'm wearing. It's made out of black lace, very feminine, but also so very revealing. It doesn't even cover my nipples.

I take a quick selfie of just my face, smiling at the camera.

Caine:

"Cute."

Caine:

"You're in bed?"

Joselina:

"Yes, aren't you?"

Caine has sent you a picture!

I click to open it and see Caine lying on the bed, looking at the camera. It's dark and hard to see, but I can still make out his naked torso. That expression of his... it's nearly seductive.

Ugh, he can be so hot sometimes.

Joselina:

"Wish I could save these... they always get deleted after."

Caine:

"Yeah... I'd like a picture of you to look at. Send me one more? I didn't see what you were wearing."

Feeling my heart beat just the tiniest bit faster, I lift the phone above my head, angling it down to show my negligee. I take the picture – quickly making sure I look alright, of course. Then I send it.

Caine:

"What the hell, this is what you wear in bed?"

Joselina:

"Why, what's wrong with it?"

Caine:

"It's even sexier than the one you had in the cabin that night. You look great."

A heat spreads across my cheeks; what a super direct compliment! I've never seen Caine be so free and candid, it's usually a struggle to get something nice out of him. But now?

Oh gosh, he's making me blush. Maybe now that we're officially together, he's more forward about this sort of stuff.

To be honest... I want to hear more of it.

Joselina:

"Are you saying I didn't look great when we went to the beach? :("

Caine:

"What, no. Are you crazy?"

Caine:

"Seeing you in your bikini... you're fucking hot -_-;;"

Joselina:

"I liked seeing you shirtless as well."

Caine:

"I... have a confession to make."

Joselina:

"What's that? Got another troll persona I don't know about?"

Caine:

"...No, of course not."

Caine:

"On the beach. I was teasing you about paying for the ice cream and you tackled me like a damn gorilla."

Joselina:

"Oh right, I did."

Joselina:

"Wait – what do you mean gorilla!?"

Caine:

"Yeah. So."

Caine:

"I already liked you at that point..."

I squeal with delight. I know it makes sense; we fooled around with each other that night. But hearing it stated like that, I can't help but feel giddy.

Joselina:

"Well here's my confession... so did I."

Caine:

"Yeah but at least you don't get random boners you have to hide -_-;;"

Joselina:

"Excuse me? What?"

Caine:

"Look – you were practically naked and on top of me. You're hot. I have a crush on you."

Caine:

"Do you think my body listens to reason? No."

Joselina:

"Wait, so when you flipped me over..."

Caine:

"Yes."

Joselina:

"But you acted so nonchalant and cool! I didn't even notice anything at all."

Caine:

"Thank god. I was shaking, you know. Had to hide it."

Caine:

"I was on edge all day..."

Joselina:

"I didn't realize. But to be fair, I was nervous too, especially when we went to see the stars."

Caine:

"I don't even remember the stars..."

Caine:

"Was too busy freaking out about when to kiss you."

Joselina:

"You were you planning to?"

Caine:

"...Yeah, kinda? I mean, I definitely wanted to and you weren't grossed out if I touched you, so..."

Joselina:

"Did you also plan the bed situation?"

Caine:

"No! That's Sarah's fault! I just wanted to kiss you, not get you into bed!"

Joselina:

"You don't want me in bed? :("

Caine:

"..."

Caine:

"Are you kidding me? I'd want you right now if I could."

Caine:

"Just being near you is enough to drive me crazy... And texting you late at night, in bed? Admitting how attracted I am to you?"

Caine:

"I'm worried you'd think I'm a pervert."

Joselina:

"I don't... I'm actually really glad you're telling me all this."

Joselina:

"I'm attracted to you too, you know."

Caine:

"...This is so unfair -_-"

Joselina:

"What is?"

Caine:

"That I can't touch you right now. God, I want to. I want to put my mouth on yours, I want to taste you. I want to hold you close against me."

Caine:

"I want to run my hands along your sides and take off your ridiculously sexy nightgown."

Caine:

"Show it to me... again."

There's something so commanding about Caine, that I can't help but oblige. The things that Caine is telling me, it's turning me on. My face is all red, but I want him to keep texting me.

I want to hear more about how I'm affecting him... because he is affecting me, too.

So I take one more picture of myself, this time in a very flattering angle so he can see everything.

Caine:

"Perfect. Ugh, I want to touch you so bad."

Joselina:

"It's not fair if I'm the only one taking selfies."

Caine:

"You sure you want to see me? Because I'm typing with one hand, you know."

My eyes widen in response. One-handed!? So that means...

Joselina:

"...What's your other hand doing?"

Caine:

"Wanna see?"

My fingers fly across the screen, typing out a resounding *yes*.

My heart beats in anticipation, waiting for that notification that Caine's sent me a picture. I immediately open it when I receive it.

The first thing I see is Caine's face, looking into the camera with half open eyes. He's sitting up straight this time, propped against the pillow.

My eyes glide down his naked torso... to find out he's not wearing any underwear. There is a hand wrapped around a large shadowy penis.

My face burns with a blush so fierce, it actually starts to sting.

The picture closes itself and I'm already wanting more.

Joselina:

"That was hot."

Caine:

"Yeah? Not as hot as you are."

Caine:

"You turn me on so much."

Joselina:

"How much?"

Caine:

"I jerk off while thinking of you and that night in the cabin."

Caine:

"Multiple times a day."

Caine:

"That expression on your face. I can't get it out of my mind. It's so fucking hot."

Joselina:

"When did you start fantasizing about me?"

Caine:

"...When I kissed you the first time? Probably. It's my first kiss, you know, and you're really gorgeous."

Joselina:

"Wow, you *are* a pervert."

Caine:

".{"

Joselina:

"Tell me more."

Caine:

"When you did my hair before the reunion. Your hands are so soft, it felt really good to have them in my hair. It was turning me on."

Caine:

"Doesn't help I saw your tits right before."

Caine:

"And the entire night you were just..."

Joselina:

"Right, you kept looking at my breasts."

Caine:

"I want to put my hands on them and I want to suck your nipples until they're hard."

Our entire conversation has turned me on. Knowing Caine is touching himself as well, I can't help but slip my hand underneath my panties. Ah, I got really wet. I didn't expect that.

I imagine Caine running his hands over my breasts and sucking on my nipples. Hmm yes, that's good.

Joselina:

"I'd like that."

Caine:

"I spend a lot of nights fapping to that. Just you in that sexy ass dress. Grinding up against me."

Caine:

"I know I sound like some kind of horndog, but it's just... You make me so happy."

Joselina:

"You're allowed to feel that way ;) you make me happy, too."

Joselina:

"Definitely blushing at the thought of you masturbating to me, though."

Caine:

"Do you ever fantasize about me?"

Joselina:

"...Well."

1. "I think about having sex with you."

2. "Just kissing."

Joselina:

"I think about having sex with you."

Caine:

"Go on."

Joselina:

"And I wonder about what could make you moan..."

Caine:

"Anything you do makes me riled up enough to moan."

Caine:

"But I'd rather hear you. I want to make you mine. I want to hear you say my name again."

Joselina:

"Don't remind me, that was really embarrassing now that I think back on it!"

Caine:

"Are you kidding me? It was fucking hot! Next time I see you, I'm going to make sure you are screaming my name."

Joselina:

"Just kissing."

Caine:

"Really? Nothing more than that? ;)"

Caine:

"I'll make sure to ravish you next time. Kiss you all over."

Caine:

"I'm going to make you beg for more."

Joselina:

"..."

Joselina:

"For being a virgin, you are definitely... forward."

Caine:

"Sorry, I'm really hard right now and all this texting is making me even hornier."

Caine:

"Should I stop? :("

Joselina:

"No. I like it."

Caine:

"Can I... Can I have one more picture? I'm so on edge right now..."

Joselina:

"How much do you want it?"

Caine:

"Please."

1. "If you're going to come, then I want you to record it."

2. Send another selfie.

Joselina:

"If you're going to come, then I want you to record it."

Caine:

"Of course. Anything. So please send me a selfie... I'll record myself, just for you."

Daringly, I take a picture of myself, clearly showing Caine that I'm touching myself as well. That has to do him in.

I can't wait for the video.

I see that Caine has opened my picture, but hasn't replied.

The screen's lighting shines into my eyes as I await his reply. Seconds trickle by. My hand is pleasuring myself as I wait.

The anticipation is killing me.

Then the notification has popped up.

Caine has sent you a video!

I tap the screen and the video starts playing.

It's very dark and grainy, but I suddenly hear Caine's ragged breathing. He's holding his phone right in front of him so I can see his face as well as his hand pumping his penis.

He's going so fast! Wow, I didn't realize he was that thick.

I stare at his face; he's biting down on his lips, eyes open and staring into the camera. He's letting out small moans. The rest of the silence is filled up by the sounds getting released from the friction of his skin.

"Joselina..." he chokes out.

Then I see him stroke down hard and his penis convulses until it shoots out a string of sperm onto his stomach. Caine continues to jerk himself off erratically, squeezing out all of his juices until he's covered himself.

He takes in a deep breath as he leans back against the bed. The video cuts off and starts playing again from the beginning. Oh, it seems he's set the video to repeat itself indefinitely.

I'm definitely going to make use of that...

With my eyes strained on the video; I time his orgasm with mine the second time around.

Caine:

"Enjoyed it?"

Joselina:

"Very much so. I have one hot boyfriend."

Unable to resist Caine's begging, I take another selfie for him. This time, I angle it down enough so that he can see where my hand is.

Caine:

"Are you touching yourself right now?"

Joselina:

"...Yes."

Caine:

"That's hot. Are you as wet as you were back then?"

Joselina:

"Probably..."

Caine:

"Ahh, I want to do it again. I want to finger you. I want to lick you, actually."

Caine:

"Hmm I'm sure you'd taste great."

Caine:

"I want you to be my first everything."

Joselina:

"I want that, too. I like it when you take control... It makes me feel wanted."

Caine:

"You better believe I want you. I'm almost there, what about you?"

Joselina:

"Close."

Caine:

"I'm going to pull you on top of me so I can pleasure you until you're screaming out my name."

Caine:

"And then I'm going to make you mine. I'm going to flip you over and take you from behind."

The more Caine talks about how he's going to have sex with me, the faster my fingers work. My head is filled with these fantasies of Caine pinning me down onto my bed.

Kissing me all over, and telling me to say his name as he enters me.

I close my eyes and squeeze my legs together as I finally orgasm. Hah...

Caine:

"But I also want you to take me in your mouth... Shit, that's hot, too."

Caine:

"Ah... I just came."

Caine:

"I'm sorry, I couldn't hold on any longer, thinking about having sex with you..."

Joselina:

"It's okay, so did I."

Caine:

"Wait until we're alone together. The things I want to do to you..."

Joselina:

"Can't wait until it's the weekend then ;)"

Caine:

"I'm going to clean up now."

Caine:

"Joselina, you're the best."

Joselina:

"Huh, why's that?"

Caine:

"I don't know. You're amazing. Awesome. First time I sexted with someone."

Joselina:

"It won't be the last time, I hope."

Caine:

"...Nope, it won't be ^^"

Caine:

"But seriously, I'm covered in cum, imma clean up."

Caine:

"So, sweet dreams Joselina."

Joselina:

"Sleep well!"

-- Outside walkway night

It's night, but it feels like it hasn't really cooled down. I'm on my way to meet up with Caine after such a long week.

When I look up at the sky, I spot a trail of light shoot across the heavens. Oh, a shooting star! I didn't think I'd get to see them!

Immediately afterwards, another shooting star flickers across the sky. It's so pretty. I had no idea this was an annual thing, or that you could see them without a telescope.

-- Park night

I arrive at our meeting place; the city's park. It seems abandoned, with not a single person in sight.

Except for a certain redhead waving at me in the distance. Caine's sitting on a bench, having picked the only spot around where he's surrounded in darkness.

With a spring in my step, I stride up towards him.

"Hey," he greets me casually.

I feel like I'm hit with a truck full of butterflies. I haven't seen him for a few days and it's making me feel very emotional right now.

"Why are you sitting here in the dark?" I notice the streetlight right next to us is turned off.

"Easier to see the stars when a light isn't shining right in your face, you know?"

Actually, that makes perfect sense.

"Come sit." Caine pats on the bench next to him.

As I sit down, another white flash catches my eye. Wow – one more! I had no idea they would be this frequent.

"Did you see that one?" asks Caine, looking up at the sky with this goofy smile on his face. He seems excited, like a little kid.

"Yes, I saw two on my way over here as well. That's the first time I've seen a shooting star."

"Be prepared to see a whole lot more then." Caine flashes me a grin.

"Oh right, I got you a drink." Caine bends down to grab something from his bag on the floor.

"Did you bring your camera with you?" I ask, peeking into his bag.

Caine hands me a bottle of orange juice.

"Nah – I already took pictures on peak night, which was a couple of days ago."

A slight hesitation, before he places his hand on top of my knee. His eyelashes flutter at me.

"...And I just wanted to enjoy this night with you without any distractions."

He's being so cute! Ever since his confession, Caine's gone all sappy on me *and I love it*.

Secretly very happy, I take a glug from the juice, trying to not appear overly giddy.

Caine awkwardly removes the hand from my knee and runs it through his hair. He then stretches out with an exaggerated yawn.

Like he got it from a Dating 101 book, Caine places his arm around my shoulders. He tries his best to appear nonchalant.

I'm trying so very hard to keep myself from grinning. This is so adorable! To imagine this was the same Caine that had no qualms about sexting with me or sending me pictures of his hard-on a few days ago.

Then, it's raining shooting stars. The sky flashes bright several times and I see streaks all over the place, shooting in the same direction.

"Wow!" I gasp out loud.

It's so beautiful! It's not stopping either – one after the other they fall.

"It's so pretty!" I exclaim.

I snuggle up against Caine, my eyes unable to stop looking up above, waiting for the next star to fall.

And suddenly, Caine's lips are on mine, leaving a soft and sweet kiss behind.

I stare at him, caught off guard.

Immediately he pulls away from me and coughs into his hand.

"Sorry, you're so cute... I couldn't help it," he mumbles.

My cheeks sting with a warm glow. He really is adorable...

"Don't be sorry," I start slowly. I smile up at him. "After all... you're my boyfriend. You're allowed to kiss me."

He tilts his head down to sneak a peek at me, a vulnerable look gracing his features.

"Yeah?"

His head bumps against mine and he takes in a deep breath.

"I'm not used to this... I don't want to mess up."

"No one gets it right the first time, Caine," I reassure him. "It's alright to mess up."

"You are way too forgiving of me."

Caine's lips are suddenly near my ears, his voice a dangerous whisper.

"I want to mess *you* up."

"This is all new to me as well... So forgive me if I do something weird."

"How could you ever do anything weird..." Caine grumbles in a low voice.

"Everything you do is okay with me." His eyes look straight at me, causing my cheeks to heat up.

The sound of something dropping to the ground disturbs us both. I notice something had fallen in between the cracks of the bench.

I bend down to pick it up.

It's a plastic square... a wrapper. To be perfectly clear, it's a condom.

I stare at Caine, who is sweating bullets at this point.

"...Is this yours?" I hold it in between my fingers like a playing card.

"No. I mean. It must have been left behind by someone else. It's *definitely* not mine."

1. "Then why is it a Boon Mart brand?"

2. "Don't lie."

"Then why is it a Boon Mart brand?" I say, reading the logo from the condom.

Caine chews on his bottom lip, looking worse off than before. Literal sweat starts trickling down his forehead.

"Uhh," he stammers, unable to come up with a good excuse.

"It's yours, isn't it?" I press on. He's got to stop lying and admit it already.

Caine buries his face into his hands, growling loudly at his incompetence.

"Yes! Fine! It's mine! You can go ahead and call me a sick pervert now."

"Don't lie," I warn him. I don't like it when he lies straight to my face.

Caine presses his lips into a thin line, refusing to respond to me, or acknowledge the condom in my hand.

Eventually, Caine groans out loud and quickly turns away from me.

"Fine! Yes. It's mine. I bought it. I know I'm just a stupid pervert."

I gently place the condom back into Caine's hands.

"I don't think so, it's nice that you've thought this far ahead and **want** to be safe."

Caine gapes at me. "...So you don't think I'm a pervert?"

"Oh no, I definitely do."

He huffs.

"But being safe is what matters! *However...*"

I lean closer to him. "I don't think it's necessary, I'm on the pill, after all."

"Besides, I got myself checked out and I have no STDs. And you're a virgin – **so** unless you're lying, you don't have any either. So yeah, we're good."

"And since we're both virgins, it's not like we have any STDs..."

"You want to do it without!?" he shrieks.

"Don't just yell it out loud!" I hiss at him, feeling embarrassed we're even discussing this in public.

The shooting stars illuminate our surroundings every now and then, as Caine continues to stare at me with an incredulous expression. It's making *me* feel self-conscious as well.

Caine actually went and bought a condom. It shouldn't surprise me; after all, we already fooled around in the cabin and even sexted each other... There's always been an undercurrent of sexual energy between us and, to be honest, yes, I'd like to explore this with him.

"I-I just wanted to be prepared, and stuff. I didn't want us to be fooling around only to find out we didn't have one on hand," Caine explains.

"Yeah, I get it."

He tucks it away into the pocket of his pants, looking up at the sky.

"I didn't realize you were already on the pill."

I give him a tiny smile. "Many girls are, you know. It helps regulate our periods *and* it combats acne!"

Caine looks genuinely clueless. "You mean it's not just for not getting pregnant?"

"Yep, it's got more uses. I mean, why else would I take it if I wasn't having any... sex." I feel a little embarrassed saying it out loud.

Caine cocks an eyebrow at me.

"I don't know – are you sure you're not doing anything behind my back?"

"Caine!"

He chuckles. "I'm joking!"

"But really – you better not be fooling around with anyone else. I'll punish you."

"Punish me!? I didn't even do anything!" I huff childishly.

Caine leans in closer, brushing my hair away from my neck. He gazes at me longingly.

"I'll make sure I'm the only one on your mind."

A chill runs down my back, the feeling pooling around in my stomach like an electric tingle.

"And how are you going to do that?" I fire back at him. I want to know what he's got planned.

I spy a flash of his cocky grin on his lips before he captures me with them, pressing them against mine so I can't speak. My words die on his lips and soon enough, my head is filled with nothing but Caine.

He's demanding, aggressive – it's like he wants to steal me away. Our mouths move out of sync, a little inexperienced, but filled with a lot of desire.

His hand cups my cheek, until he drags it down onto my neck, pulling me in closer. I feel like I've fully surrendered to him. My pulse drums against his fingertips.

We break our kiss apart and my mind is still reeling. I want to kiss him *more*; it's like I'm cultivating an addiction to his lips.

Caine's eyes are wide, looking into my own. They reflect the falling stars in the background. I could get lost in them for ages.

"I want to kiss you everywhere," he admits.

To support his claim, Caine presses a kiss against the side of my neck. The spot where his lips are pressed starts to tingle and burn. But it's a pleasant burn. Like when you first dip your feet into a hot bath. Then he kisses me again, a little lower this time. His mouth starts migrating towards my chest and I have to hold his face to get him to stop.

"Caine," I pant, feeling a little out of breath. "We're out in public."

Caine doesn't look too happy that I stopped him.

"So? There's no one around; it's midnight. We're the only ones here."

Caine attacks my neck again, pressing even fiercer kisses against my skin. I can't help but gasp out loud – my body definitely wants more.

My eyes are wandering all over the place, afraid someone might see us like this. But there's no one in the vicinity, it's just me and Caine, alone on a bench, his lips planted firmly on my neck, sucking the life out of me.

I sigh loudly, my body trembling the longer Caine's kiss lasts.

Then he releases me and raises his head, his gorgeous eyes staring at me for a single second. My heart pounds faster when he presses his mouth against mine again. His tongue begs for entrance, trailing my lips ever so slowly. I open my mouth, feeling his hot muscle slip inside. This is so addicting.

Caine snakes an arm around my waist and suddenly pulls me into his lap. I yelp out loud, but my cries are swallowed by Caine's mouth, refusing to leave me alone. His tongue demands all my attention. I have to wrap my arms around his neck to prevent myself from slipping away.

I take in fast breaths, like there's not enough oxygen despite being out in the open. Everything seems to be spinning. The blur of falling stars emphasizes my free fall into desire.

Caine drags his lips over my mouth and upwards to my eyes, resting near my ear where he kisses the tip of it. I squeeze my eyes shut, shivering at his touch.

"...I want you," he breathes out in a raspy voice.

Caine keeps me cradled in his lap. The hard lump pressing against my thighs is unmistakable; Caine is turned on. The thought alone, that I could inspire such lust in him, is enough to make all reason abandon my mind.

We're out in the open, but who cares? Caine's making me lose my mind.

He wants me – he wants me.

Caine slowly trails his tongue along the cartilage of my ear, and it's making me bite my lips to prevent myself from moaning. His tongue continues to tease me, until he takes my earlobe between his teeth to nibble on it.

"Hah..." I can't prevent the sounds I make anymore.

I can feel his lips curl up into a smirk against my ear.

"Heh, I love those sounds you make."

Ugh – don't be smug.

"Shut up," I growl at him, and then grind my butt into his lap, making Caine groan out loud.

"Perhaps... we should leave," he hisses in a low voice.

"You think?" I fire back. We're practically dry humping each other at the park.

"My place is closer."

I stare at him for a little bit. This is going to happen, isn't it?

"...You'd better not have a messy room," I warn him in jest.

Caine pushes his lips against mine, electricity firing in my brain as he devours me whole.

"Let's go."

So much for watching the stars outside. But I have no regrets as I remove myself from Caine's lap.

-- Caine's apartment

Our way over to Caine's apartment was wrought with tension so thick, it was hard to concentrate on anything else. Whenever there was no one in sight, Caine would be all over me, his mouth hot and demanding. I can't keep my hands to myself either.

His apartment, as always, looks messy. I give him a disapproving look.

"What?" he grunts as he kicks away a shirt on the floor.

1. "You're a slob."

2. "I expected something a little more romantic."

"You're a slob," I state honestly.

Caine rolls his eyes. "Deal with it."

"I expected something a little more romantic."

"Well, *sorry* for not leaving rose petals around the place," he says sarcastically.

I'm about to say something in return, but my protest dies on my lips as Caine pushes his mouth against mine, silencing me. I back away as he gets closer, steering me towards the bed. Feeling more in command, Caine pins me down onto the mattress.

The weight of his body is strangely alluring, keeping me in place. He looms over me, giving my lips a break. Last time we were in this position, he was sick and had a fever.

Despite his red cheeks this time, he's hot for a different reason. His gaze is directed upon me and I feel like he's silently undressing me in his mind.

"Like what you see?" I tease him.

"Always," he answers in a blunt manner.

Heat rises to my cheeks and I turn my face away from him, feeling a little self-conscious he's staring at me.

"Heh, you're so cute," he says with a smirk.

Caine lowers his head and suddenly nips the skin on the side of my neck. I gasp and squirm beneath him as the sensation prickles all the way down to my toes.

A hand crawls up my shirt, his fingertips dragging along my bare skin, leaving a heat trail. He touches my bra and pauses, taking a moment to think.

"Off with it," he says in no uncertain terms, removing his hand.

It feels like I'm in a trance as my hands reach down to the hem of my shirt and I pull it over my head. Lying there with my top off in front of him, it's a little imbalanced. I want Caine naked, too.

My hands shoot towards his pants, fumbling around with the button. As I unzip his fly, Caine is busy removing his shirt. He throws the fabric behind his back, and eventually takes off his pants as well, kicking them away.

And then he's on top of me once more, wearing nothing but white boxer shorts. A hard lump is pressed against my stomach, it's hard to mistake it for anything else besides his growing erection.

To think, Caine is this desperate for me... I like it.

Caine doesn't let me stare much longer, as he's busy trying to take my skirt off as well, which slips off without any resistance. Now I'm only wearing underwear as well.

The less fabric between us, the better. I want to feel him everywhere.

Suddenly Caine's hands are shaking as he tenderly touches my stomach. He reaches for my bra straps and visibly gulps.

"Nervous?" I ask.

His eyes flutter downwards. "...Can you blame me?"

1. "It's okay, I'll tell you what to do."
2. "I'll let you know if I don't like it."

"It's okay, I'll tell you what to do."

"What if I don't want to listen?" Caine huffs, but there's a playful smirk on his face.

"Too bad," I giggle. "Just start with stroking. Keep your hands on me."

"That won't be a problem, I have a hard time keeping my hands to myself, seeing you like this..." Caine licks his lips.

"I'll let you know if I don't like it," I say.

"Hmpf, that sounds like you're expecting me to screw up."

I shake my head. "Of course not, I just want you to know not everything has to go perfect. I'm already enjoying myself. No pressure."

"I'm going to make sure you're enjoying yourself. You won't ever have to stop me," he grunts.

--

It's the first time I'm practically naked in front of someone, but I'm glad it's with Caine. Still, it's making me blush at being examined like this.

My hands automatically try and cover my face, but Caine stops me.

"No, I want to see your face," he tells me.

"I'm just a little nervous," I admit softly.

"I'll go slow, okay?" Caine presses his hand on my bare stomach, inching it up towards my bra. "I'm... I'm nervous, too," he whispers, a slight tremble in his voice.

Yes, it's Caine's first time, too. I wouldn't want it any other way.

Caine wedges his finger underneath my bra, looking at me like he wants to take it off. I lean forward so that he can unclasp the hook in the back. My heart beats faster knowing I'll be opening myself up to him any second now.

His eyes light up when my bra slides off, revealing my breasts. Tenderly, almost adoringly, he cups both of them with his hands. The rough texture of his hands feels unfamiliar. This is all new to me.

I feel exposed in front of him. Caine takes his time to let his eyes wander over my chest.

"Finally... I can touch you." Caine lowers his head and kisses my right breast. "Seeing you in that bikini, all I could think about was taking it off and kissing you..." He places another kiss. "And tasting you..." He flicks his tongue against my nipple.

A jolt charges through me and my body arches in response, my hands clawing at Caine's back. Caine takes notice and he smirks at me, his tongue swirling around my nipple. The way he's looking at me, like I'm some kind of treat... it's a look that's making my heart beat faster.

Caine's fingers trail the shape of my breasts. A light touch on the underside is enough to make me shiver. His hot tongue explores the surface, toying with my nipple. I writhe against his body, my hands digging into his fluffy hair.

"Hmpf – keep doing that," he grunts, his head rolling against my hands.

Caine looks up at me, eyes full of lust. "You know it turns me on to feel your fingers in my hair."

At his command, my fingers rake through his hair, dragging on his scalp, making Caine close his eyes as he places light kisses on my breasts.

He takes my nipple between his teeth and I wince.

"Ouch," I say. "Be gentle please."

Caine looks apologetic, and to make up for it, he licks my nipple as if I were wounded. Slowly and carefully. His deliberate movements are a lot more pleasurable.

His lips envelop my nipple, and he sucks – sucks until they're erect and perky. I feel like my breath is being sucked away as well. My body shudders in response; everything is starting to feel hypersensitive.

He moves to my other breast, giving it the attention it needs. His touch is very light and slow, but it's enjoyable nonetheless. It gets me in the mood.

Caine starts planting kisses everywhere on my chest, moving towards my neck, until he firmly kisses me there, too.

I gasp loudly when he starts to suck. His plump lips move to another spot to torture me with, each place more sensitive than the last. I wrap my arms around his back, my fingers trailing down his spine, touching the muscles that flex as he moves to attack my neck.

He does it faster, with more force – wet open kisses as if he isn't afraid to explore. His lips are everywhere on my neck, his tongue swirling around, mapping my skin like a chart. His breath is so close to my ear, it's titillating.

Feeling raw and sensitive, Caine finally pulls back, gazing at me with an intense look in his eyes. He surveys the damage he's done to me; my neck is throbbing and red.

He wipes his own mouth, looking satisfied. "The sounds you make are really fucking hot, you know?"

I wasn't aware I was making sounds.

"What sounds?" I ask.

Caine kisses me on a very sensitive spot, I can feel my body jerk upwards, until the feeling fades out into a shiver. I let out a jaded breath.

"*Those*." He gives me a wicked smile, then leaves another kiss, lighter this time.

Hmpf, well – I can't be the only one squirming beneath him and making embarrassing noises.

I lift my head so I can reach Caine's chest, and kiss him right above his collarbone. I pull him closer to me so I can kiss him more, exploring his fair skin.

"Ah..." Caine releases a gasp when I suck the nape of his neck. "Nghh, I'm so fucking hard right now."

Oh yes, I can definitely tell. I grind my hips into him, sliding across his hard bump, making Caine quiver in response. Knowing he likes it, I scratch the back of his head, making Caine hum in delight. He's panting slightly as I release his skin.

He's all flushed in his face – the redness spreading down to his neck.

I smile up at him, happy to see him like this.

As if it were a reflex, a smile spreads across Caine's lips as well. He then rushes to wrap his arms around me and hugs me, our bare chests connecting.

It's so warm in his embrace, everything feels right. Like the stars have aligned.

Our hands start roaming everywhere, the pace accelerating. Caine's palm glides across my back, my arms, my stomach, my inner thighs...

His lips caress mine, surprisingly gentle for how urgent he's being with his hands. He spreads my legs, running along his hand until I can feel a finger pressed against my panties.

"Ah!" I gasp, breaking his kiss. I've been soaked since the park.

Caine's finger traces the outline, pushing his finger in between my folds. The pressure makes me buck my hips against his hand.

"Hmm," I breathe out.

"Ngh, if you keep moaning like that I won't last much longer," Caine mutters darkly.

1. "That won't be a problem. I'll just make you come twice."

2. "I can't help it, it feels nice."

"That won't be a problem. I'll just make you come twice," I say with a smirk.

Caine cocks his head at me, looking impressed.

"Not if I can't make you come first."

"I'd like to see you try," I shoot back confidently.

"I can't help it," I say weakly. "It feels nice."

"Ahh don't say that, you're making me harder." Caine squeezes his eyes shut. He must be aching in his underwear.

I look down his chest, my eyes falling upon the prominent bulge. Whoa, it looks huge. And uncomfortable.

I want to reach out for it, but Caine blocks my arm.

"You first," he whispers.

And just like that, his hand pushes aside my panties and his fingers make contact with my vagina. I cling onto his shoulders as my body responds positively to the pressure he's applying.

He brushes over me, silently watching me for a reaction. It's a hot yet chilling feeling, almost like a fever, as his index finger deftly strokes my lips. His thumb rubs around my clitoris, sending jolts of desire down my entire body. I want more and more from Caine.

I bite my bottom lip, focusing entirely on the pleasure he's giving me.

But then his mouth is nipping away at my lips, his tongue entering my mouth. As our slippery tongues collide, Caine massages my clitoris and finally, slowly dips a finger into my entrance.

I crave it so much, my entire lower body bucks upwards, forcing his finger to go deeper.

Not wanting to leave him dry, I move my hand in between our bodies and reach for the lump in his underwear.

Caine jerks away for a split second once I cup his bulge.

"You're sensitive," I point out.

"No fucking shit," he grunts.

"Geez, so vulgar." I start to massage him through the fabric. It pulsates against my hand.

"You're the one driving me nuts," he breathes out, then enters my mouth again with his tongue.

I want to moan, but his tongue is forceful and keeping me in place. The only option I have is to suck on his tongue, drawing out a throaty moan from Caine himself.

My hand trails the shape of his erect penis up and down. I can feel it grow harder and harder with each passing second. Caine's entire body feels hot to the touch.

His tongue exits my mouth, instead leaving kisses on my neck. Caine's fingers circle around my most sensitive areas, while two of them slip inside of me. It's driving me mad. I throw my head back so that I can finally breathe.

"Hahh..." I moan as his fingers stroke up and down. My body is squirming against his.

"Caine," I groan.

I slip my hand underneath the hem of his boxer shorts, finally making skin to skin contact with the glans of his penis.

Caine suddenly freezes up. "Wait be care—"

I grind my hips into his body and wrap my fingers around the entire shaft of his penis.

"Argh!" Caine squeezes his eyes shut and grunts loudly, his entire body trembling. A warm liquid splatters onto my hand. Hot puffs of air touch my ear as Caine tries to catch his breath.

"Ahhh... hah... *Fuck*," he curses.

Oh... My hand is covered in sperm. I slowly pull it out of his underwear – wiping some of it on the fabric.

Caine removes himself from me, standing straight. My eyes immediately catch the stain I made just now. It appears the slightest touch has set him off and he orgasmed.

Embarrassed, Caine looks away, his hands shielding his crotch.

"Sorry, I was really on edge, I couldn't hold it back..."

"Don't be sorry. Just take them off and let's continue," I say with a wink.

Caine looks a little bemused as he starts to remove his boxer shorts.

"You don't care?"

I grin at him. "It just means you'll last longer the second time around."

When Caine has finally removed his boxer shorts, I see his half hard penis just hanging there. I lick my lips, then take hold of his hand and pull him back onto my body, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"Now, continue where you left off," I say as I kiss him.

"It's okay," I reassure him. I'm sure this happens to many guys.

"I wanted to last longer," he murmurs bashfully, awkwardly cupping his crotch.

"Just take them off, we can still continue."

"You don't mind?" Caine looks surprised.

"Of course not, it's kind of... like a compliment," I say with a shy smile.

Caine tugs down his underwear, kicking them away with his feet. He stands in front of me with his erection slowly losing stiffness. It's the first time I've seen a penis like this.

But Caine doesn't let me stare for too long, as he crawls back on top of me, leaving a small kiss on my neck.

Caine kisses my lips softly, as if to apologize for his 'accident'. Honestly, I don't mind at all. It's actually very flattering that he's so turned on that only a slight touch was enough to set him off.

"Lie down," he whispers as he pulls back once more. "It's time I get you off."

I want to ask him what he's got in mind, but Caine hoists me closer until my legs are dangling off the edge of the bed. He moves down, resting his knees on the floor, his hands gliding across my stomach.

Caine grabs my panties and tugs at it.

"Off," he says. The way his voice sounds so raspy and low makes me shiver.

He can make me do anything with that voice.

I lift up my behind and allow him to take them off. Slowly, the fabric slides down my legs until it pools at my ankles.

Caine's gaze is so intense, it's almost unbearable. I feel so vulnerable in front of him, showing everything I have, for his eyes only.

"Last time, I used my fingers..." he murmurs as he moves his face closer in between my legs.

His hands touch the inside of my thighs, I can feel it burning up.

"This time, I want to taste you." Caine looks eager to start.

I run my hand on top of his head, smiling down at him.

"Use that silver tongue of yours," I tease.

Caine simply smirks before he presses his mouth against my vagina.

Everything he says and does is so embarrassing. I feel so shy like this, it's hard to look at him, so I squeeze my eyes shut.

It was different in the cabin; we were doing things beneath a sheet. This time everything is out in the open and Caine can just see my fluids leaking out.

I jerk involuntarily when Caine gives me an experimental lick. I knew it was coming, but that didn't prepare me for Caine's tongue!

His tongue is hot and full of energy. A little too eager, even, as he's licking me up and down.

"S-slow down," I breathe out.

He immediately slows down his pace, making me feel more at ease.

I run my fingers through his hair and push his face closer to me.

"Go slow and add pressure, I like that," I tell him. "Make circles."

A certain pressure point jolts me awake and I swallow back a moan, my hands flying into his hair to have *something* to hold onto. Caine however, has noticed how I reacted.

I can just *feel* him smirking against me, but Caine closes his eyes and focuses on licking me. As it's his first time, Caine tries different speeds and techniques.

When he hits a particular good spot, my muscles contract and my body twitches. It's like he's ignited me with his scorching and majestic tongue. My breathing gets heavier and faster the more I feel Caine.

My pleasure keeps building up – he's got a good rhythm going on. He licks my clitoris, trailing it all the way down to the entrance, dipping in ever so slightly, then starting from the top again. It's driving me wild.

My fingers dig deep into his hair, almost scratching his scalp. But Caine doesn't seem to mind, it's only making him more eager to please. To want to lick me.

Caine briefly pulls away and I whine in response; why did he stop?

I'm about to ask until I feel two fingers plunge inside of me.

"I want to see you come," he says, his voice shaky.

He slips them in and out, I can barely keep up. That was just what I needed. My body keeps contorting into weird positions as I feel myself burning up.

"I want you to ask for it."

Caine shakes his head.

"No. *Beg* for it." A smirk, such a confident, wicked grin. His fingers finally leave me alone and I'm aching for more.

He wants me to beg for it? He's so conceited, but that's totally hot. Except, right now I just want *more*. I forcefully push him down between my legs again, grinding myself into his face.

Caine's tongue commands all my focus as he starts using it so deftly again.

"Hmm," I moan as the pleasure returns.

He goes up and down, back into the pace I liked. This time however, he keeps his tongue swirling around my clitoris, while he uses his fingers to spread apart my lips and tease me at the entrance.

It's almost infuriating the way he's not entering me. He's only darting around it, which feels divine, but I want him inside.

Caine takes a small moment to look up at me.

"Do you want it?"

I nod my head, my hands finding a fistful of red hair. I don't dare to let him go.

"Didn't I say... you had to beg for it?" His voice, so damn alluring, and his fingers, such a tease.

Caine licks me again, his eyebrows raised in a playful manner. This is driving me nuts – I want him to continue!

1. Refuse to give into his demands.

2. Beg for it.

"Just say the magic word." Caine looks like he's having the time of his life, keeping me hostage like this.

Well, I refuse! I clamp down my mouth shut.

A fleeting lick, lighter than before.

"You won't do it?" Caine gives me these puppy dog eyes. Which is quite a contrast with what he's actually doing to me, something extremely lewd.

His index finger trails my inner lips, toying around with my clitoris. Ah yes – just like that. But it's not enough. I want to feel full, but Caine is waiting for me to beg and grovel.

"Just put it in me already," I nearly bark at him.

Caine surprisingly listens, and he enters me once more with his fingers, filling me up inside.

"...Not gonna lie, you being bossy is also kinda hot," he says with a slight chuckle.

"What's it gonna be?" he teases.

"Hmpf..." I look away. "Please," I say quietly.

"Please what?"

"Please... finger me."

Caine positions his finger right at my entrance, slightly pushing them inside. My body trembles at his touch.

"See, that wasn't so hard, now was it?"

Caine finally pushes his fingers inside. I moan out loud. It's like my body is craving it at this point.

"I'm going to make you come, and then I'm going to fuck you," he says in an almost sinister voice.

I don't have much time to respond, as Caine starts to move his finger in and out. Using his tongue, he massages my clitoris. It's almost overwhelming. Everything's coming together for me.

My fingers keep pulling at Caine's hair, my body writhing against his face. It's his first time, but who knew he had a knack for it? It's so good, I'm about to orgasm...

"Say it," he says in between the licking.

Say what? My mind can barely keep up.

"My name," he answers, as if he heard what I was thinking. "I want to hear you say it as you come."

He presses two fingers inside, in and out, licking and pressing. He's staring at me in anticipation, looking at me like I'm a beautiful painting. Waiting for me to do it.

I try and catch my breath.

"C-c..." It's hard to speak. My ears start to ring.

"Say it," he commands.

He then presses his face against my vagina, in turn with his fingers going deep inside, curling around my G-spot.

I pull onto his hair so hard that my knuckles turn white. My muscles contract together and the lid is finally blown off.

"Caine!" I breathe out as I feel my orgasm course through me.

My legs shudder and tremble as I pant for air. Caine is still licking me, in a much slower pace. It feels nice like this, like he's riding out my orgasm.

He straightens his back to look up at me.

"Did you...?" he asks, a little unsure.

"Yes." I nod my head with a slight giggle. For it being his first time, it sure felt amazing.

This lights up Caine's entire face and he clambers on top of me, his chest crashing against mine. His hands card through my long hair as he buries his face into the nook of my neck, humming softly.

I can feel his penis touch my stomach; it's gotten hard again. It seems Caine's refractory period isn't all that long. He is still however, entirely flushed red.

I'm still reeling from my orgasm, but my thirst isn't satiated at all.

I want Caine inside of me and I want him *now*.

I wrap my arms around him and start kissing him, enthusiastically bucking my hips into Caine's body. His penis twitches immediately. It's already so hard.

"Hn," Caine whimpers slightly against my lips. Slowly, he starts to grind into me, his kiss leaving me a little breathless.

We move together like we're creating a wave between us; push and pull. His hands leave my hair alone and roam my body, gliding across my breasts, caressing them, then slowly making his way down to his crotch.

"I want to feel you so bad," he practically moans in desperation.

I bite down on his bottom lip seductively. "Then put it in," I tell him.

Caine wraps his hand around his penis, shakily trying to find his way in between my thighs. I distract him as much as possible, kissing his lips, his neck, scratching at the back of his head.

"Argh, Joselina," he groans loudly. "Stay still. You're making me—"

Not heeding his words, I press my hips against his crotch, finally making contact with his penis.

Caine shivers. "Ahh..." He rolls back his head, using one hand pressed into the mattress next to my head to keep himself upright.

I lower my body down the bed, my legs dangling off the edge, until I position myself in front of the head of his aching penis. If he won't put it in, I'll do it.

"Oh!" Caine yelps when my inner lips make contact with the glans.

This time, he doesn't try to keep me still, instead he rotates his hips, gently touching my labia with the head of his penis. It feels sticky – or maybe I'm the one who's leaking all over the place.

"Me too," I admit.

"Can I?" he asks my permission.

Shyly, I nod my head. "Just be careful."

He kisses me sweetly on the lips. "Always."

Caine moves away from my body, sitting up right with his feet planted on the ground. He grabs my hips and pulls me towards him until our crotches are aligned with each other.

He takes one hard long look at me, until he wraps his hand around his penis, and gently pushes it forwards, touching my labia.

A shock runs through me – I'm aching to have him. He slides his penis against me, up and down, getting himself nice and wet.

Whatever it is, it's amazing and warm. But Caine is taking too long.

"*Caine*," I warn him as my back arches when he hits a nice spot.

Caine does nothing but shoot me an unapologetic smirk.

"I recall myself saying you have to beg me for it."

Caine teases me with the head, massaging my clitoris in slow circles. It's enough to drive me mad. How come he can be so composed right now?

He slides his penis up and down my folds, stopping right at the entrance of my vagina, but never entering. God – he really wants me to beg again.

"I'm the one on top now, calling the shots." He chuckles sexily. "Come on, out with it."

"Please," I whine, craning my neck to the side as my entire body contracts with a spasm.

"Please..." Caine presses his penis against my entrance, ready to plunge inside, "...what?"

My fingers dig deep into the covers, my hips meeting his, trying to find whatever friction I can.

"Please!" I yell. "Take me!"

Almost instantly, Caine's penis pushes through my entrance and thrusts inside. I find my sweet salvation as I finally get filled up by his pulsating erection.

"Ahh," I moan, loving the way he stretches me out. He feels so much thicker now that he's in. My walls are clinging onto him, pulling him along.

Spurred on by my words, Caine slowly pushes himself inside of me. Almost expecting it to hurt, but finding out it feels amazing instead, I can't help but release a throaty moan.

This is a totally different sensation than his fingers or tongue! This is... warmer, fuller. It's... It's *Caine*.

"G-god," Caine groans. "Ahh...hah... hm." He's having a hard time keeping his breathing in check. Even he's losing it.

Caine pushes all the way in until he can go no further, pausing to catch his breath.

"S-so good," he breathes out, eyes squeezed shut.

I wrap my legs around him, trapping him and preventing him from leaving me. His thighs are quivering – it's like he's barely holding on.

"Are you... Are you okay?" he asks, checking in on me.

I'm still adjusting to his size, a strange sensation I've never felt before. I can feel him pulsating inside of me, which creates a shockwave that carries throughout my entire body.

"Y-yes," I breathe out.

After a long second has passed, Caine finally moves, pulling back his hips and his penis slowly slides out. The friction entices me even more and my heart starts hammering in my chest.

"Fuck – you feel so amazing. Hnngg...!" Caine starts to thrust into me.

I throw my head back, mouth wide open as I gasp for air, moving my hips in tune with his thrusts. I'm so lightheaded right now.

Caine looks so sexy, thrusting in me like this. His facial expression is so forbidden and undeniably arousing. I never want him to stop staring at me like I'm the last person on earth.

When I buck my hips into him again, Caine almost collapses.

"Ah!" he groans, halting his movement.

I can feel his penis pulsating inside of me – he's getting ready to burst.

Caine hisses under his breath and slowly pulls himself out. All his warmth and girth get taken away and I feel empty.

All of a sudden, his hands are on my side and Caine flips me over onto the bed, making me lie down on my stomach, my face smothered against the covers.

"Wha-what are you doing?" I ask, bewildered.

I gasp when Caine enters me from behind without warning. It's a closer fit than before, my inner walls making it so much tighter.



He bends down, licking the side of my neck.

"Your face is too sexy," Caine grunts as he thrusts into me. "I want to..." he catches his breath, "to last a bit longer than a few seconds this time."

Caine intertwines his fingers with mine, pressing my hand into the mattress as he rocks into me. His lips brushing over my ear, letting me hear his sexy moans.

"Ahh, Joselina." Caine bites the tip of my ear.

"Hng!" I yelp.

I writhe underneath him, all the blood rushing to my face. Everything is tingling. His penis is throbbing and thick, building up the pressure inside of me. Everything intensifies, stronger and faster.

My entire world is being rocked upside down by Caine.

He gets more confident in his movements, but there's also a certain lack of control. Like he's becoming more primal, unable to hold himself back.

His hips crash into my butt, the shockwave created by his slam runs through my body until I can't help but moan out loud.

"Yes – yes, let me hear you more," he breathes next to my ear.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I want to respond and say I want to hear him too. But right now, my mouth has stopped working, and I surrender myself completely to Caine.

Caine squeezes his hand underneath me, his fingers deftly reaching my clitoris, flicking at it as if he owns me entirely.



"Ah!" I nearly scream. The combined pleasure of his finger and him pounding me from behind is exhilarating!

Caine thrusts into me as he toys around with my clit. His penis feels even thicker than a second ago.

Our bodies feel like they're moulding together the more Caine plunges into me. I sink deeper into the mattress, my moans getting muffled by the covers.

I'm getting dangerously close to another orgasm like this. I can feel it building up, my toes are curling, my breath is uneven. Nearly... there!

Spurred on by my own needs, I lift my ass up to greet his thrusts and Caine suddenly groans in a loud voice.

"Whoa!" he yelps, not prepared for me to pound into him.

He tries to steady me, but I don't care, moving against him and riding him as much as I want.



"F-fuck, that's so..." Caine grunts in a nearly animalistic voice as I slam into him.

"I'm gonna – I'm gonna...!" Caine whines in an unhinged voice.

"Yes, come for me," I coax him, thrusting back into him.

I can feel Caine shaking more and more, barely hanging on as he drives into me. His panting grows deeper and faster, in tune with my own breathing.



"You are so tight... argh," he grunts loudly.

He pushes down on me, pounding me from behind, taking me however he wants. I had no idea it felt so good to be the source of his pleasure.

He adjusts my body, lifting up my behind for a better angle, forcing me to meet his thrusts. I cry out as he enters even deeper.

"Ahhh," he moans once more, desperation tinging his voice. "I'm about to...!"



"Ahh..!" Caine suddenly withdraws from my vagina. "Ugh! Hah... hah..."

Warm liquid splatters onto my back. Another pulse makes droplets land instead.

Caine pants heavily as he leaks his sperm onto my body. His entire body is quivering from his orgasm. He can barely keep himself upright.

Then he quickly enters his penis into me once more, feeling even more slick this time.

"You're going to come as well," he grunts lowly. It's not even a question. It's a statement.

Massaging my clitoris with his hand and plunging into me with his penis, I can't help but start rocking into him as well, finding my momentum once more.

Caine nips at my ear again, his panting overwhelming my sense of hearing. My thighs are clenching and my back is arching as I feel it all building up.

He presses his fingers just right against my clit, and in sync with his penis entering me I let out a loud moan as my second orgasm washes over me.

My body twitches and shivers as I bite into the covers.

Caine finally slows down, noticing I've climaxed. Then he exits me one last time, his penis having already lost a lot of his hardness.

He stands up straight, leaving me to catch my breath. I can hear him walk away, but I don't have the energy in me to ask what he's doing.

Then I feel a soft tissue press against my back. It seems Caine fetched the roll of toilet paper on his desk to clean me up.

"Sorry about that," he apologizes as he trails the tissue on my skin, wiping up all of the sperm.

"Hmm," I hum softly, liking the way he takes care of me. "Nothing to apologize for."

He tosses the dirty tissues away then cleans himself before plopping down next to me on the bed.

Caine stares at me, his face a little less flushed this time. I can't believe his face matches his hair during sex, but I'll keep that a secret for now.

"Hey, you're officially not a virgin anymore," I say jokingly.

Caine snorts loudly, showing a playful grin.

"Does it feel good taking my virginity?"

I smirk at him. "It does, yes."

"Are you okay?" he asks me. "Did it... hurt?"

I giggle. "No, it didn't. I liked it."

He stares at me in such a loving way, I feel myself almost getting embarrassed.

"Good. If you enjoyed it, I enjoyed it."

Caine leans in closer, planting a chaste kiss on my lips. A stark contrast of what transpired between us just minutes ago – something much rougher and passionate.

He then grins at me.

"Sex feels *amazing*," he admits.

"Haha," I chuckle at him.

Then, another kiss, this time on my forehead.

"You're amazing."

"Hmm, you're not so bad yourself."

I snuggle up against him and he pulls me into his chest. I lean into him, listening to his rapid heartbeat finally calming down. The afterglow is all too real. I feel so safe and warm in his embrace.

"...By the way – what's up with that roll of toilet paper you always have as your desk?" I ask, my mind suddenly focusing on some random detail.

"...Do you really wanna know the truth?" he asks with a sigh.

"Does it have anything to do with shark porn?" I joke.

"Argh – I've never watched anything even remotely fishy!" he complains.

I laugh into his chest. Caine's reactions will always be entertaining to me.

I love this guy so much, and before I know it, the words are out of my mouth.

"I love you, Caine."

He stops and stares, clearly thinking it's a weird moment to confess my love to him once more. But then he kisses the top of my head and rubs my bare back with his hand.

"Yeah, me too," he murmurs.

"Me too..."

And just like that, I close my eyes and we end up falling asleep together on his bed.

--

My blissful state is disturbed when someone sneezes directly into my face.

Confused, I open up my eyes. The room is bright; it's daylight. Caine is staring straight at me, his arms wrapped around my waist. We've slept like this the whole night.

"I totally didn't mean to do that," he says quickly. "Shit."

I wipe my face with the covers, feeling a little icky.

"Is this how you'll be greeting me every morning?" I ask.

Caine pouts at me, slightly. "No..."

It's a little new still. Waking up to him after we've had sex for the first time. But I could get used to this...

"When did you get up?" I ask, rubbing my eyes.

"A while ago."

So he's just been lying here, looking at me?

"I woke up thinking I was dreaming..." he says with a shake of his head. "Is that stupid? Sometimes it's still hard to believe this is real."

"It does feel a little unreal," I agree. "But I feel more... content and blissful."

Caine makes this weird happy noise as he pulls me closer into his chest.

"You're so damn cute," he says.

His hips grind into me, making me acutely aware of the hard-on he has.

"Caine!" I gasp. "Are you always this horny?"

Caine buries his face into the nook of my neck, hiding his embarrassed face.

"...Maybe," he admits. "I mean, waking up next to my naked girlfriend, who *wouldn't* get excited?"

"That... and just regular morning wood," he mumbles.

I giggle at him and then snuggle against his chest. Caine is definitely a very hormonal guy, but it feels good to have this kind of effect on him.

"What about breakfast?" I ask.

"I'll have you for breakfast – does that count?"

I press a finger to my lips, thinking. "Hmm..."

"Maybe you can convince me?" I smirk at him.

Caine lifts his head to look down at me. A mischievous grin on his lips. Seeing him like this, I feel like nothing can go wrong. Everything is at peace with the world. With me, with Caine – my boyfriend.

He has stolen my heart and I don't want it back.

Safe to say, he definitely ended up convincing me.

*Thank you for
playing!*

Celianna
♡

