

CHAPTER ONE

Nathan Stark drew the covers over the naked woman lying beside him before slipping out of bed. What a monumental screw up. Sleeping with her was a big mistake, but fuck if it wasn't the best sex he'd ever had. Shit. He pulled on his jeans and walked barefoot across the room. He carefully opened the door and silently closed it behind him.

Making his way to the kitchen, he stared at Lucy's laptop sitting on the dining table, the ridiculous screensaver mocking him from across the room. He glanced behind him and listened for any movement coming from the bedroom. Satisfied that she was still asleep, he retrieved his backpack from the chair and took out a jump drive. Settling in front of Lucy's computer, he entered the password to unlock it and proceeded to poke around.

Fifteen minutes later, he got up and stowed his backpack on the sofa and returned to the bedroom. He stared at Lucy Cortez's sleeping form. She was on her side, the delicate arch of her hips clearly outlined by the thin sheet that shielded the rest of her body from his hungry eyes. He should just leave her alone and disappear, not make matters worse. It would be easier this way—for him and for her. But rational thought was not in control tonight. And it was certainly more than lust.

Exhaling deeply, he took off his jeans and crawled back into bed with Lucy. She stirred, turning to him, her heavy-lashed eyes opening briefly, her whiskey-colored orbs almost black in the darkness. A sleepy smile curved her lips. His chest clenched.

"You're leaving?" she murmured.

"No, I just had to make a call," he lied. He leaned forward and nuzzled the elegant curve of her neck.

“Hmm, that’s nice…” her husky voice brought his cock to attention. His mind tried to reject the desire of his loins, but it was a losing battle. And as her arms circled his neck and she maneuvered her luscious self underneath him, he knew he had to have her again.

She nipped his ear, causing him to shudder with uncontrolled lust. “Make it good, Nathan.”

His mind emptied. He lips crashed down on hers, their tongues dueling fervently and urgently. He quickly ripped a condom packet open and rolled it on. She spread her thighs and cradled him, his hand drifting between them to find her drenched and ready for him. The hot sleekness of her core coated his fingers, causing him to groan into her mouth. He thrust inside her roughly, her back arching in response as she cried out. He was lost in her once again.

“So, how is lacrosse guy?” Eva Rodriguez asked her friend. They were sitting on a grassy expanse of Georgetown University in Washington, DC. Lucy Cortez glanced at her best friend since childhood. The girls decided to attend the same University after they had escaped that “life.” Eva was a third-year nursing student, Lucy, a political economics major, also in her junior year. They had been through tough times together, and were setting up to embroil themselves in more.

“Nathan?”

Eva rolled her eyes. “Is there anyone else?”

“We finally slept together,” Lucy grinned, a bit sheepishly.

“Get out!” Eva exclaimed and then she said more seriously, “Are you sure it’s a good idea right now?”

Lucy sighed. “I know the timing is so bad. I should have known better.”

“This thing may go down in two weeks, Lucy,” Eva reminded her.

“Don’t you think I know that?” she responded irritably.

“Now is not the time to get yourself a boyfriend.”

“Shut up, Eva. It’s not even serious. I mean, I’ve known the guy what? Three weeks?”

“Three weeks where you spent almost every freaking free time together. We’re running out of time to get the plans sorted out.”

“I’m here now, aren’t I?” Lucy’s voice lost its irritation. Her friend was right. Nathan had become a distraction. The new midfielder of the university’s lacrosse team was too hard to resist. At 6’2” with thick black hair and a lean-muscled frame, his sapphire blue eyes penetrated straight to her soul. And as she had found out last night, he could put that body to excellent use in bed.

“You’re blushing,” Eva said dryly.

Lucy’s annoyance resurfaced. “Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

Her friend gave her a cheeky smile and angled her laptop toward her. A map of Mexico was on her screen.

“We confirmed last week that the girls are being kept in a mansion in Tampico. They’ve been there for two months now. Judging from the MO of the Braga Cartel, those girls have another two or three weeks before they’ll be flown to Saudi Arabia to be auctioned off. Any news from your brother?”

“I got an email from him last night. He said they’re moving in two weeks. The women are kept in electronically locked chambers, but he could spring them out easily.”

“No locks can stop him,” Eva said.

“That’s my Leo,” Lucy replied proudly. “I still want to head down there to help him.”

“We’ve discussed this honey, it’s too dangerous.”

“You know I have the skill to drive the getaway car,” Lucy said. “No one can touch me.”

“Well, hell girl, if you go down there, I’m coming with you.”

“No way!”

“I’m a nurse. I can be indispensable... uh, in case anyone gets shot.”

“You’re not a nurse yet,” Lucy retorted.

“That’s the deal Lucy, you go, I go,” Eva declared firmly. “The question is, what will Leo say?”

“Well, he doesn’t know.”

“So you’re just going to show up?”

“Ah-huh.”

“He’s going to go ballistic.”

“He can go ballistic on my ass all he wants, but he knows I can be useful.”

“Any news from Leo’s hacker friend?”

“I was able to get into a chatroom with him this morning,” Lucy said. “He’s covered our tracks well. He’s also traced all communications between Papa and his contact in Saudi Arabia, an Akheel Faheed.”

Her father, Francisco Cortez, was a pleasure slave trader and the head of the Braga Cartel whose main business was illegal narcotics. The pedestal she had put her father on collapsed like a house of cards eight years ago when her mother, Diana Lancaster, revealed the true nature of her father’s business. Lucy thought the divorce made her mother bitter and refused to believe her in the beginning. But when Eva’s father, Carlos Rodriguez, attempted to quit the cartel to start an honest life with his family, he was gunned down in a drive by on the streets of Tijuana sending the message that no one left the Braga Cartel. So Diana Lancaster helped Eva and her mother escape to the United States. Lucy’s brother Leo, in some twisted notion that he could get their father to abandon the pleasure slave business, remained behind in Mexico. He stayed out of cartel business, but remained close enough to keep his finger on the pulse of its activities. They were able to foil a slave trade drop a year ago. They intercepted the van carrying the girls, freed them and returned them to their families.

Things were getting more dangerous. Leo’s hacker friend, ryker569, revealed that the FBI had taken an interest in the Braga Cartel’s pleasure slave trade—something about a senator’s illegitimate daughter being nabbed.

“My dad has done it now,” Lucy told her friend. “FBI is sniffing him out. Leo and I were hoping when we disrupted his pleasure slave operations the first time, he

would abandon it.”

“I’m sorry Lucy,” Eva said.

Lucy sighed in resignation. “All right, I’ve got the list of the girls’ families. The cartel had been targeting mostly blonde and blue-eyed teenage girls. Most of them were taken from US towns close to the Mexican border with heavy concentration in San Diego. We need to verify addresses and figure out the logistics to reunite them in the US. We have to make certain our contact at the Mexican border is on duty the day we cross over. Otherwise we’ll have to hole up in motels. And if Papa’s men are on our trail, we’ll be in deep shit.”

“Last time went pretty smoothly,” Eva said.

“A van intercept in Chihuahua is different from a break-in of a well-guarded mansion in Tampico. It’s going to be a long drive back to the border.”

“Crap.”

They stared at each other. This was not going to be as easy as they thought.

Nathan waited by the university library steps for Lucy. She had a study group this evening that was running late and she had suggested that they meet some other day instead. They just had sex last night for the first time. It was mind-blowing. And for some reason, her not wanting to see him today hit him like a brush-off and that had annoyed him. So he texted her that he was going to wait for her and just let him know what time to show up.

It was 8:00 p.m. and he was hungry. He was hungry and he was pissed off. And then he saw her exit the library’s revolving doors. Her black hair was swept back in a high pony-tail, revealing the delicate line of her neck. She was wearing a tight sweater with a low neckline and tight-fitting jeans. According to her she was a *mestiza*—her father was Mexican, her mother was American. Well that combination certainly gave her the best genetic structure. She was strikingly beautiful in face and

figure. Her eyes were the color of expensive scotch, multilayered depths he couldn't seem to pull his gaze away from. And his hands ached to skim the sides of her body, especially the dip at her waist before flaring at her hips. He had to fight the urge to just dig his hands into her ass and haul her against him... every... single... time.

She was walking in a group and laughing with some guy and he didn't like it one bit. Because all that beauty was directed at someone else and not him.

He had never been overly jealous... or possessive, but something primal had changed last night.

"Hey, Lucy babe," he said, walking up to her and giving her a quick kiss. Hanging out together these past three weeks, he had never been overtly demonstrative.

Lucy was obviously startled. "Uh... hi Nathan. Were you waiting long?"

"Nah, just a few minutes. How did the study group go?"

Lucy mumbled some inane remark that it went well before making the quick introductions, presenting him as a friend—which at this point was true, but somehow being introduced as a "friend" did not go down well with him. The other guy's name was Tom.

"Uh... see you around, Lucy," Tom mumbled, casting a wary glance at Nathan as the study group dispersed.

"I'm hungry. Let's go eat," Nathan said shortly, grasping her hand and pulling her beside him toward his Triumph motorbike. All the while, he was troubled by his unusual reaction seeing Lucy chumming it up with another guy. Why now? But he realized it had been a slow burn for weeks, and the sex only sealed his fate. The game had definitely changed.

"Is something wrong, Nathan?" Lucy asked as she tried to keep up with his long strides. "You seem annoyed."

Wrong time to ask him such a question. And Nathan, couldn't filter the words that came out of his mouth. He stopped and bent his head close to her face.

"Let me see," Nathan said sarcastically. "You tried to blow me off today. Then when I do see you, you're smiling and laughing with some jerk—"

“Tom is not a jerk!” Lucy replied vehemently. “He’s in my study group.” She paused and narrowed her eyes at him like he had sprung two heads. “Know what? If sleeping with you means you’re going to turn into this possessive jerk. Yes. You. Are the jerk.” She tugged her hand free, backing away from him and shaking her head with distaste. “I don’t need this.” And then she turned around and stormed off.

Her dismissal of him was like throwing water on the fire of his jealousy. Nathan thought all of two seconds before jogging after her. Damn, what was wrong with him?

“Lucy, wait!” He fell into step beside her. She continued walking, her jaw jutting out stubbornly. “I’m sorry, babe. Please.” When she still ignored him, he stepped in front of her and gripped her shoulders, physically stopping her.

“Get your hands off me!” Lucy said furiously.

“No.”

“I’ll scream.”

“Go ahead. I’ll kiss you.”

“You’re impossible!” Lucy yelled.

“I agree.” Nathan grinned down at her. He knew she had a temper. All that Latina blood coursing through her veins. “Come on, Lucy babe, give me another chance.”

“A chance for what? You know, I don’t even know what we are,” Lucy said uncertainly.

He didn’t either and it was scaring the shit out of him.

“Let’s grab something to eat. And then we’ll talk,” Nathan murmured.

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