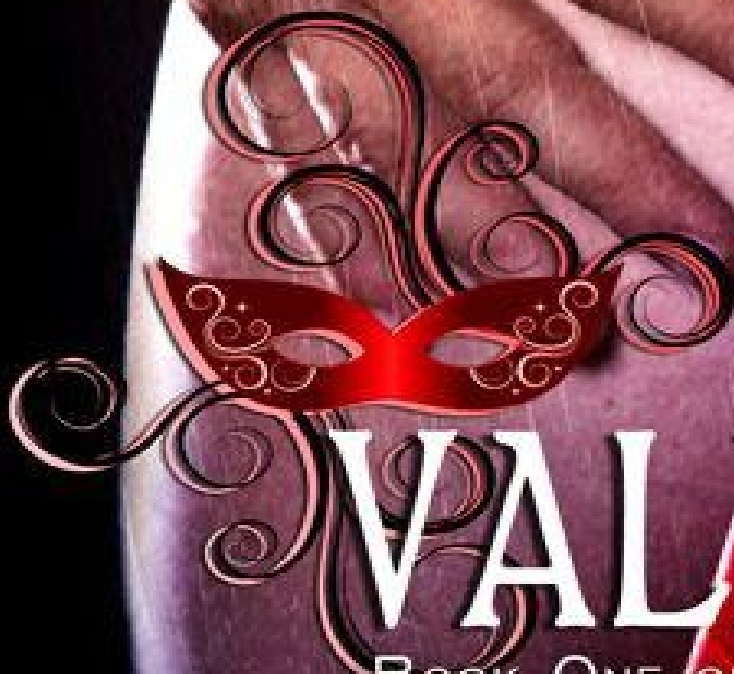


ANN MAYBURN



MY
WICKED
VALENTINE

BOOK ONE OF THE CLUB WICKED SERIES

Loose Id

Club Wicked 1:
MY WICKED VALENTINE

Ann Mayburn



www.loose-id.com

Club Wicked 1: My Wicked Valentine

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Dedication

A flower cannot bloom without sunshine, and a man cannot live without love.
—Max Muller

Acknowledgments

To my beloved readers, it is for you that I created this world, so that in it, you can lose yourself in the arms of a man worthy of the priceless gift of your submission.

To my fabulous beta-fish goddesses: Annette Stone, Dawn, Cari Quinn, Catharine J., Kerry Vail, and Dawn Marie. You have my eternal thanks for helping me bring *Wicked* to life. *J*

Chapter One

Lucia Roa jabbed the illuminated button for the twelfth floor with a shaking finger. As the doors slowly slid shut, she tried to take in a calming breath but only succeeded in gasping for air like a drowning swimmer. The floor beneath her cut royal-blue heels shifted as the elevator began its upward climb, and her heartbeat increased with every floor.

Why had she let her mentor, Mrs. Florentine, talk her into this? At the time it had seemed like a great idea. Mrs. Florentine had an inside scoop on one of Washington, DC's private and influential clubs needing a new party planner, and she just knew Lucia would be perfect for the job. Of course Lucia had never planned a party for anything bigger than a two-hundred person bar mitzvah, and she had only recently graduated with an associate's degree from the local community college.

She was also the daughter of Mexican immigrants and still worked twenty hours a week at her family's restaurant to make ends meet—which was a blessing because last month she'd had to choose between groceries and having her lights on—but sure she was totally the best pick for throwing a party for some of the most influential people in DC. Oh, and Mrs. Florentine wouldn't say what kind of private club this was or what kinds of parties they expected.

Lucia was so going to nail this job.

Sure.

"Dress sexy," Mrs. Florentine had said. "Wear something that shows off your lovely curves. Own your femininity." So now not only was she going into a business meeting woefully unprepared, she also felt like a tart. Instead of the usual class gray suit she wore to meetings, she was dressed in a tight-fitting white pencil skirt that more than showed off her ample curves. She paired the skirt with a royal blue jacket that flattered her caramel-colored skin while hiding her overdeveloped chest. The last thing she wanted was to spend a business meeting with a man staring at her boobs instead of her face. The men riding the Metro with her that morning had certainly appreciated her outfit, if the catcalls and suggestive comments meant anything.

The elevator binged as it reached her floor, and she almost dropped her briefcase. The doors slid open to reveal an elegant reception room brightly lit by the sunlight streaming in the big windows. A white circular receptionist's desk dominated the center of the room, and the impeccably dressed receptionist gave her a warm smile as she stepped out of the elevator. Two other women sat in the white leather chairs flanking the desk, and they both turned to face her.

The receptionist spoke into the phone at her desk before looking over at Lucia. "Welcome to O'Keefe Industries. How may I help you?"

Lucia plastered what she hoped was a pleasant smile on her face and walked past the two waiting women to the desk. "Hello. My name is Lucia Roa, and I have

an appointment with Mr. O'Keefe."

The receptionist looked down at her computer screen and nodded. "You're tad early, and Mr. O'Keefe is running a bit late. Please have a seat. Can I get you anything to drink while you wait?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you." While she would have loved some coffee, she could just see herself spilling it all over her clothes.

She took a seat across from the other two women, conscious of how close they watched her. Lucia recognized the woman on the left, a lovely and perky blonde in a cream suit, from the society pages of the newspaper and the local magazines. Her heart sank as she stole a glance at the woman on the right. Mary Wellington, descendant of the Wellington oil family and prominent fixture in Washington, DC, society. Also one of the premier party planners with more connections than Lucia could ever dream of having.

She almost slumped back into her chair but caught herself. No, she wasn't going to give up before she even met with Mr. O'Keefe. So maybe she had a much of a chance at landing this job as she had of being recruited for the Tijuana soccer team, but darn it, with the right resources, she could throw as good of a party as any of these women. After all, her family's Tex-Mex restaurant catered many of the top events in Washington, and she'd probably been to more corporate balls and gatherings than both women combined. True, she'd attended them as a waitress, but she paid attention to the small details.

The perky blonde got called in next, and Lucia crossed her legs, resisting the urge to dig through her briefcase and double-check her proposal. Well, actually proposals. She really had no idea what kind of event they needed a planner for, but she had proposals for everything from a ball to a polo match to a wine tasting.

Mary Wellington looked down her patrician nose and said in a nasally voice, "Pardon me, you look familiar. Have we met before?"

Lucia flushed and shrank back into her seat. They'd run into each other dozens of times over the years, but always while Lucia was working for her family's restaurant and catering business as a waitress. "I'm not sure. You seem familiar too."

Mary tapped her lips with a pale pink manicured nail. "Oh, I know what it is. She gave Lucia a smile that would have looked right at home on a shark. "You're one of the Roa girls. Are you here for the catering position?"

Lucia gave an equally insincere smile. "No, I'm here for the event planning job."

The corners of Mary's thin lips turned up. "Really?"

"Yes." The word came out in a soft whisper, and Lucia cleared her throat. "I recently started my own event planning company."

"How...charming."

Clutching her briefcase on her lap with both hands, Lucia barely resisted the urge to smack that smug smile off the other woman's face. "Thank you."

Mary opened her mouth to say something else, but the perky blonde stormed

through the reception area. She paused and gave both of them a heated look. ~~“Good luck dealing with that asshole.”~~ She turned on her heel and marched to the waiting elevator.

Both Mary and Lucia gaped at the blonde’s back as she stalked into the elevator’s cab while the receptionist shook her head. The phone on her desk rang, and she picked it up with a forced smile. “Ms. Roa, he’s ready for you. His office is at the end of the hall.”

Lucia ignored Mary’s sniff of disdain as she stood and smoothed her tight skirt. “Thank you.”

She went down the quiet hallway, passing beautiful works of art hanging on the walls next to brass name plates on closed office doors. Her heels sank into the thick cream carpeting, and she paused before the door at the end of the hallway, wiping her sweaty palms on her jacket. The brass plate next to this door simply read Isaac O’Keefe, CEO.

Okay, this was it, the meeting that would either put her event planning company on the map or be another waste of Metro fare. She knocked on the door and opened it after a muffled “The door’s open” came from the other side.

All the breath left her body in a soft whoosh as the most handsome man she’d ever seen sat at his desk. She had a brief impression of a large, well-lit corner office with a view of the Capitol, but all she could really focus on was him. A lock of his thick black hair fell over his forehead, and she had the inane urge to brush it away. He didn’t look up as she entered or say anything, so she paused in the doorway, unsure of what to do. A slight shadow of scruff darkened his square jawline.

Then he glanced up, and her world became suffused with burning cold. Ice-blue eyes, so pale they were almost white, stared at her. She felt stripped to the bottom of her soul. Heat immersed her, and when he licked his lower lip, her nipples puckered to stiff peaks beneath her suit jacket, and she was afraid she might spontaneously combust from desire.

She was in so much trouble.

* * * *

Isaac leaned back in his chair and tried to keep his lust under control. An unusually beautiful woman stood in the doorway, framed by a ray of sunlight. She wasn’t perfect, like the stunning and plastic society women he was used to, but there was something about her that called to him. She was all softness, heat, and if the warm look she was giving him was any indication, his attraction wasn’t one-sided.

Her expression turned questioning, and he realized she was waiting to be invited into his office. He brushed his hair off his forehead and smiled. “Welcome, Ms. Roa. Please have a seat.”

When she turned to shut the door behind her, his cock twitched in interest. He’d always been an ass man. She had an amazingly round ass, high and tight. The kind of ass he could grab with both hands. The kind of ass that would cushion

the hard fucking he wanted to give her while she was tied to his bedpost.

Whoa, where did those thoughts come from?

What the hell was wrong with him? This was a potential employee, not a delicious woman he'd love to do wicked things with. He mentally tried to shut the door on his libido, but when she crossed the room, she reminded him of the way a cat walked, all sensual grace. He wondered if she was new in town, because he surely would have remembered a submissive like this at the club.

They shook hands, and she sat down across from him. After she cleared her throat, she looked around for where to place her briefcase. Young, not more than twenty-five, but with soft baby cheeks that made her seem younger. Her dark brown eyes had a slight tilt to them, and she had that lovely golden-brown skin color he adored on women. When his gaze reached her lips, he shifted at how full they looked beneath her light coating of lip gloss. The things he could do to those lips.

Her shoulders tensed, and he returned his attention to her eyes. A bit of fire sparked there; that intrigued him even more. The smooth roll of her light accented voice washed over him. "Nice to meet you, Mr. O'Keefe. I'm here about the Valentine's Day party."

"A pleasure to meet you, Ms. Roa."

She reached into her briefcase and pulled out an elegant black portfolio and placed it on his desk. "Thank you for meeting with me."

He picked up her folder and looked through it, buying himself some time to gather his wits. Her list of past experience was good, but it mostly consisted of children's parties. He didn't expect her to have her more adult parties listed in her portfolio and appreciated her discretion, but he couldn't judge her ability to throw a party for Club Wicked on how many bar mitzvahs she'd planned.

"Ms. Roa, do you have any experience with adult parties?"

She flushed, and her gaze darted over his shoulder. "Not a great deal, but I can assure you the events I have orchestrated have all been well received." She gestured toward the portfolio. "If you look in the back, you will see my list of references."

Confused, he flipped to the last page and scanned it. How did she hear about the job if she had no experience in the field? He scanned the last few pages, hoping for some indication as to how she'd ended up on the other side of his desk. The event planner position hadn't been listed on any public sources, so someone must have told her about it. A list of glowing accolades from her past clients made up the end part of her portfolio. On the last page was a letter of recommendation from Mrs. Sara Florentine.

Shit.

He groaned and closed the portfolio. "I'm sorry, but I have to make a quick call. I think you've been sent here by mistake."

Hurt flashed through her eyes, but she stood and started to reach for the portfolio. "I see, but if you would just look—"

He placed his hand over it and shook his head. "I'm not asking you to leave. I just want to talk to Mrs. Florentine. She's a personal friend of mine."

Lucia's relief was palpable as she sank back into her chair with a smile. "Of course, well, of course."

He took his cell phone from his pocket and scrolled through his list of contacts, finding one Mrs. Florentine, who had a great deal to answer for. What was the woman thinking, sending an innocent young thing like that to him for the Valentine's Day event? If Ms. Roa even knew what kind of club Wicked was, he'd eat his tie.

The phone rang once, and then the voice of the chairman of the board's wife and co-owner of Wicked came over the line. "Isaac! What a pleasure to hear from you."

He turned to the side and replied in Sara's native French to keep the conversation private. "What are you up to?"

"Why, whatever do you mean?" The amusement in her tone was evident, and it raised his hackles. Sara viewed herself as Wicked's resident matchmaker and seemed to be particularly offended by his adamant refusal to settle down.

He thought she'd given up on finding him anyone to fit his rather prickly personality, but evidently she'd been biding her time. He glanced over at Lucia who was gazing out the window, obviously trying to give him some semblance of privacy. "You know exactly what I mean. What are you doing sending this innocent to me for the Valentine's Day party? I need a person who is familiar with our lifestyle, not someone who has a clown that makes balloon animals on speed dial."

"Oh, pishposh. She is extremely intelligent, very hardworking, and has a brilliant imagination. I mentored her myself as part of my work through the college. If you don't hire her, you are being a complete idiot. Besides, you could always mentor her and teach her everything she needs to know about Wicked and the dark pleasures we offer."

That thought was very appealing, but he pushed it away and tried to focus on reality. "This isn't a Sweet Sixteen party, Sara. This is a very adult function—"

Lucia's husky voice interrupted him. "Actually, the Sweet Sixteen party was more for the mother than the teenager, so that could count as an adult party."

After all he'd seen, all he'd done, he rarely felt embarrassed anymore, but sure enough that old feeling came flooding back. "Sara, I have to go." He hung up on the sound of her laughing and rubbed his face before facing a rather irate Lucia. "Forgive me. I didn't realize you spoke French."

"I took it in high school and college." She gave him a level look. "So you understood you believe I'm too innocent to help you throw a successful party?"

"I'm sorry. You don't quite understand what is going on here, and I really don't think you're the right person for this job."

She stood, but instead of leaving, she placed both of her hands on his desk and leaned over, the sheaf of her dark hair falling over her shoulder in a tempting

tangle of curls. "Look, I may be young, but I'm far from innocent. Whatever kind of party you need, I can do it, and I can do it better than anyone else you've seen today."

He found her ire adorable, though he was pretty sure he didn't want to see her really angry. Exasperated at trying to tiptoe around it, he decided to tell her the truth. "In all honesty, Ms. Roa, this Valentine's Day party is for a private and very exclusive BDSM club. Something I'm pretty sure you have no clue about."

"That doesn't mean I can't do a party! I'm a very quick learner, and I always research the background needs for whoever my client is. So I don't know what BDSM is. I can learn."

The thought of her bound, bent over a spanking bench, ready to be fucked filled his mind. Clearing his throat, he sat forward, hoping she couldn't see how hard she'd made him. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at how cute she looked when she was pissed. So much fire in her gaze.

"It stands for Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism."

"What?" She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Like whips and chains and stuff?"

"Not really, but for the purpose of this discussion, yes."

Her jaw dropped, and she sat back in her chair. "Are you for real?"

He covered his eyes and fought to keep from laughing. Here she was, his walking wet dream, and she couldn't be more wrong for him. "Yes, we are very for real."

The silence stretched out between them. When he looked up, he found her studying him. "I can still do your party."

"Ms. Roa, you have to be reasonable. You can't fake knowing what the lifestyle is like. I'll be honest with you. I have a great deal riding on the success of this Valentine's Day bash. If I do a good job, my place on the board of directors at Wicked is pretty much guaranteed. I want that spot. I need this party to be a success, and while I truly do admire what you've done with your company in the year you've been open, I really need someone familiar with the lifestyle."

"What's Wicked?"

He couldn't help but feel a little bit of pride as he said, "Wicked was founded in 1916 and is the oldest and most influential BDSM club in DC. We've had everyone from presidents to movie stars as members."

She blinked rapidly as she digested that information. "I still say I can do it if you would just give me a chance. Anything you want, I can do, and if I can't do it, I can find someone who will."

Frustrated at her stubbornness, turned on by her insistence that she could do what he wanted while being plagued by what he wanted to do to her, he tried to get himself under control. He folded his hands on the desk and decided to be a little more direct. "Reading books and watching videos will not help you truly understand how Wicked and its members think and react. You have to understand the mind of a submissive and Dominant, to immerse yourself in the lifestyle." He

took a deep breath and blew it out, trying to banish the thought of her kneeling before him, her head tipped back, and her eyes closed as she awaited his command or his touch. "Ms. Roa, I need an event planner who can work with me more as a partnership than anything else. The only way I could do that with you is to introduce you to the world of BDSM as my submissive."

She gave him a suspicious glare and crossed her arms over her chest. "What does that mean?"

"It means I would be responsible for you in the club. I would also be in charge of educating you on BDSM. I would also, temporarily, be your Master." As soon as he said those words, he realized he really did want to be her Master, however briefly. The thought of being the first to introduce her to his world made everything in his body catch fire. More than that, the idea of her wearing his collar seemed right.

Her big brown eyes grew wide, and her breath came out in a gasp before she said, "Oh hell no!" She stood and stuffed her portfolio into her briefcase. "I am not going to sleep with you for a job."

"I never said that." He tried to keep his voice under control, but some of his anger seeped through. "I would never, ever force a woman to have sex with me in exchange for a job. I'm rather insulted that you would think that."

She stood and clutched her briefcase with both hands. "You said you want to be my Master. To me that sounds like some kind of kinky sex thing."

He sighed and rubbed his face. Normally he could sweet-talk a woman into anything he wanted, but it looked like Lucia was going to be a hard sell. Odd enough that thought aroused him, the additional edge of wanting something he couldn't have. There wasn't a man alive who didn't like a bit of a chase. "Look when you get home, call Mrs. Florentine. Talk to her and let her know I offered to mentor you as your Master and what you think that means."

A dark pink blush stained her cheeks. "I most certainly will not talk about my sex life with Mrs. Florentine!"

The more she protested, the more he wanted to show her how wrong she was about not wanting anything to do with BDSM. She had no idea of the pleasure he could give her. "Do you really want to throw away an opportunity like this because of your fear of the unknown?"

She clenched her jaw, and her lips tightened. "I'm not afraid. You're creeping me out."

He stared at her in disbelief. No woman had ever found him creepy before. Ever. Her opinion actually hurt his ego, something he didn't think was possible. Good God, when had he become so jaded that he misread a woman this badly? More importantly, why did he care what this woman who'd known him for less than twenty minutes thought of him? He didn't give a flying fuck what anyone thought; that was one of the things that defined his life. But it did matter what she thought of him, and he found himself defending his character yet again.

"Ms. Roa, let me assure you if I'm ever in need of female company, I have

never lacked a partner.”

That made her pause. “Then why don’t you call one of them for a good time?”

The urge to laugh stuck in his throat, and he swallowed hard. He had a feeling that laughing at Ms. Roa would be the wrong thing to do. “Because they don’t have your talent for design. Your portfolio shows me you have a new, fresh vision for entertaining, and I like it. The last woman who came in wanted to do cake shaped like giant penises that would spray frosting out of the tip.”

Her lips quirked. “That is rather tacky.”

“Indeed. More importantly, I believe the members would like whatever you come up with. I wasn’t lying when I said I admire what you’ve done. You have good taste, and that is something money can’t buy.” He didn’t add that Mrs. Florentine would be offended by his inability to get along with a woman she was obviously attempting to set him up with. “Please, give it some thought. I’ll keep the position open until Monday. If you change your mind, please give me a call.”

She hesitated, then squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “I’m not promising anything.”

“I know, but I’m asking you to at least consider the position. Remember, I’m offering you a partnership with equal say on the planning.”

She snorted and cocked her hip. “That’s not all you’re offering me.”

“No, it isn’t, but do you really think Mrs. Florentine went to the efforts of securing you an interview with me only to get me laid?” He pulled out his wallet and handed her his personal card. “Here. This has my cell number and e-mail on it. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me.”

She took the card from him, and he made sure not to touch her even though he would love to see if her skin was as soft as it looked.

“I’ll call Mrs. Florentine and talk with her, but that’s it.”

“Thank you, Ms. Roa.”

He stood to walk her to the door, but she quickly moved across the room and opened it herself as if she were afraid he’d pounce on her. “Have a good day, Mr. O’Keefe.”

Before he could respond, she shut the door and left him staring at the wooden surface with a mixture of emotions swirling through his mind. Amusement filled him that she obviously thought he was some type of pervert. No, what did she call him? Oh yes, a creep. After having submissives literally throwing themselves at his feet, it was refreshing, if a bit disconcerting, to find a woman who didn’t instantly give in to his every wish.

He chuckled and sat back down at his desk, humming as he sent an e-mail to his security staff to make sure Ms. Roa would pass a background check. With the high-level CEOs and political dignitaries who frequented Wicked, they could never be too careful about who they let into their club. The checks took a bit of time, and he wanted the paperwork pushed through as quickly as possible for when Ms. Roa agreed to his terms.

And there wasn't a doubt she would agree, eventually—at least he hoped she would.

He worked hard for everything he had and would do everything he could to sway her decision in his favor. What he'd told her had been true; he saw a great deal of potential in her work, but more than that she intrigued him. Being born into and raised around immense amounts of money, he was used to women trying to make themselves into what they thought he wanted. With Ms. Roa, he didn't think that was going to be a problem. She obviously had no problem telling him exactly what she thought, and he had a feeling she didn't take shit from anyone. Hell, she'd put him in his place without batting a lash once she felt he'd insulted her. It was refreshing to have someone speak their mind instead of automatically saying whatever they thought he wanted to hear. The world was filled with ass-kissers, but honest people were rare.

Too bad he could only introduce her to the world of BDSM and not keep her as his own submissive. That thought made him pause. No, he didn't want a commitment like that. He'd promised himself years ago he would never fall in love again, and so far he'd managed to keep that promise. He was happy with his bachelor lifestyle and didn't want to change it.

An image of Ms. Roa—Lucia—waiting for him in his bedroom, spread out like decadent chocolate and honey dessert came unbidden to his mind. She'd be anticipating his arrival home after a hard day of work, eager to submit to his desires, to be completely his. Suddenly the idea of going home to an empty house didn't seem so appealing.

An hour later he was still unable to concentrate on his work, so he called Sara Florentine to see if Ms. Roa had contacted her yet.

"Hello, Isaac," Sara said in her cultured purr. "How did your meeting with Ms. Roa go?"

"I'm afraid I might have scared her off." He sighed and spun his chair to face the windows looking out over the Capitol in the distance. "Has she called you yet?"

"No, she hasn't. What did you do to frighten her?"

"Well, I offered to be her Master, and she immediately assumed I wanted to have sex with her in exchange for the job."

"Oh dear. That is a rather big mess-up. Did you try to explain to her what you meant?"

"I did, but she wasn't really listening to me. I asked her to call you when she gets home."

"And you want me to smooth things over." She sighed. "Isaac, darling, you need to take things slow with Lucia. She isn't like the women you normally cat around with."

He took offense to that. "I don't cat around."

"Yes, you do. I've never seen you with any woman for more than three weeks. In the past six months, you've gone through ten submissives at Wicked."

He snorted. "Keeping tabs on me?"

"No, but I'm the shoulder they come to cry on when you break up with them."

A twinge of guilt tightened his gut. "Before I play with anyone, I always let them know, as politely as possible, that I'm not looking for anything long-term or a relationship. It's not like I go out, grab some innocent submissive, and rob her of her chastity, then break her heart. My submissives always agree to my terms."

"Why are men so foolish about love?" He started to protest, but she cut him off. "Here is what I suggest. Back off on the request to be her temporary Master. Tell her instead that wearing your collar at Wicked is for her protection, that if the Doms there believe she belongs to you, they will leave her alone. Make it about protection, not possession."

"That makes sense." He stood from his chair and cracked his neck. "I have a meeting to go to, Sara. If Ms. Roa contacts you, could you put in a good word for me?"

"I will. Don't worry, Isaac. I think she'll come around."

"I'm not worried," he said with a grumble.

"Sure you aren't, dear. I'll stop by your office and call Lucia from there. That way I don't have to do any back-and-forth between you two."

"Sounds good, Sara."

He hung up and walked over to the window, watching the world beyond with unseeing eyes. The only image his mind would let him see was Lucia, poised in the doorway to his office, a warm breeze in an otherwise cold and sterile day.

He was in so much trouble.

Chapter Two

Lucia kicked the door to her apartment closed with a muttered oath. She tossed her briefcase onto the counter separating her tiny kitchen from her miniscule living room and removed her heels before chucking them through the bedroom door. On the subway ride home she'd been propositioned for sex three times and groped once. The groper soon regretted his action when she stomped on his foot with her heel.

Her head pounded, her feet ached, and she wanted to call her madre to complain about her day, but explaining to her very Catholic mother the situation she found herself in just wasn't going to happen. She tried calling her best friend Chloe, while she took off her jacket, but there was no answer. A quick glance at the clock above the long ago bricked-up fireplace showed it was still early afternoon.

Too many thoughts and emotions were whirling around in her head, and she couldn't focus on any of them. After rooting around in her almost empty refrigerator, she found her last emergency beer stashed behind a gallon of milk. After twisting the top of her bottle of Tecate with a practiced motion, she sipped at the smooth beer with a sigh. She wandered toward the door leading to her balcony, the main reason she rented this small, cramped third-floor apartment.

Before opening the sliding glass door, she put on the knee-length sweater and warm boots she kept next to the door. She slid the glass door open and stepped out onto her terrace, then took a deep breath of the chilly air. A wrought-iron chair sat next to a mismatched table that looked all too bare in the late winter months. During the summer she decorated her porch until it almost exploded with floral colors. And for Christmas she wound lights through the white-painted iron bars of the porch railing along with some greenery. Most of the people living in the apartment building were elderly, so they appreciated her efforts to brighten the place up. Unfortunately, at the beginning of January, she really didn't have anything to decorate for.

Unless she decorated for Valentine's Day, which in her present mood was not going to happen.

She took a deep drink of her beer, trying to ignore the cold wind blowing under the edge of her sweater. Her anger still burned in her chest, and she could practically hear her brothers teasing her about her hot temper. Regret mixed with irritation, and she took another drink, trying to ignore the little voice telling her she just messed up, big-time.

I work my ass off in the hopes of getting one big break. Now I finally got that break, and I act like an immature girl who's never had sex. So those people like that kind of thing, no big deal. It's not like I'm scared or anything. Just because the thought of Isaac tying me up and doing wicked things with me has my panties soaked only proves my terrible taste in men.

The wind blew a drift of snow off the porch above her, and it fell like glittering sand through the air, swirling on the currents of breeze reaching between the buildings. Okay, so maybe she should have heard him out, but she'd been so sure he'd been propositioning her that her temper had slipped its leash, and he had gotten a taste of who her brothers liked to call "Loco Lucy."

She closed her eyes and leaned back against the brick wall next to her patio door, the coldness slowly leeching through her sweater and stealing her warmth. Dammit, she needed this job, desperately, and more importantly, she needed to pay her workers. The guys who did all of the organizing and maintenance of her supplies down at her warehouse worked hard, and they deserved more than she had to give. It was only because of the recession that she could find skilled workers at an affordable price, way less than they were worth.

The seamstress, the baker, and the liquor company were all getting impatient for her to settle up her debts. She did not want to gain a reputation as a planner who didn't pay on time. The job with Mr. O'Keefe paid an advance of one hundred thousand dollars cash for party supplies; that amounted to nine times as much as she'd ever made on an event. It was a staggering amount of money to her, a life-changing amount of money. If she took this job, she could write all her vendor checks tonight, but at what personal cost?

It wasn't like she wasn't trying to raise enough money on her own. She labored all night at her parents' restaurant as a waitress. Then early in the morning, she'd wake up, head to her warehouse and begin working the phone and Internet, trying to get word out there about her company. Then there was the bill on her office in a seedy warehouse across town for the quarterly payment for rent and utilities. The only way she could cover it would be to sell the solid gold cross her parents had given her for her fifteenth birthday, something that would break her dad's heart.

When she went to take another drink of the beer, she sighed as nothing more than a few drops hit her tongue.

Out of beer, out of money, and out of luck.

The faint sound of her phone ringing came through the glass, and she quickly ran back inside, hoping it was a new client. When she saw Mrs. Florentine's cell phone number, she snatched it up, eager to find out what the hell her mentor had been thinking. "Hello, Mrs. Florentine."

"Lucia, I'm glad I caught you. How did your meeting go?"

"It went great. Other than the part where Mr. O'Keefe said that he wanted me to be his party planning sex slave."

Mrs. Florentine laughed, and Lucia gritted her teeth. "Did he really say that? Those exact words?"

"Did you really send me on a job interview to throw a Valentine's Day party for a BDSM club?"

"Yes, I did. And I thought you would handle it better than this."

"He wants me to be his slave!"

“Did he say slave?”

She leaned her hip against her kitchen counter. “No, not those exact words. He wants me to be his subservient.”

“Submissive?”

“Yeah, that.”

“Darling, he is hardly asking you to be a sex slave. He is extending his protection to you within the club.”

Her spine stiffened. “I don’t need anyone to protect me. I know how to handle myself.”

“I’m explaining this badly. Lucia, Isaac called me after you left. He is very upset that you went away with the wrong impression and would like to clarify a few things with you. Would you be so kind as to give him a chance to explain?”

Part of her wanted to give this a go, to see how far she could take it. The other part said if she went around these people, she’d be labeled a slut and someone who would have sex for a contract. Then again, when she really thought about it, she didn’t give a fuck what other people thought. They didn’t pay her bills, they didn’t live her life, and they didn’t have the right to judge her.

“Lucia?”

“Yes, I’m here. Did Mr. O’Keefe clarify things to you?”

“Yes, he did, but this is not high school. If you want to know what a man has to say, you need to talk to him yourself.”

Chagrined, Lucia sat in the faded mauve chair next to the bricked-over fireplace and curled her feet beneath her. “Oh God, no, don’t put him on the line!”

“Lucia, just talk to the man.” Just the way Mrs. Florentine said her name made her feel silly, like she was a flighty girl.

“Okay, fine. I’ll talk to him.”

“Good, here he is.”

“Wait. What?” No, no, Mrs. Florentine couldn’t have called her from his office. Oh God.

“Hello, Ms. Roa. Sara, Mrs. Florentine, has left the room, so our conversation is strictly between us. Please feel free to speak your mind.”

Isaac’s smooth voice made her whole body tighten with a delicious wave of desire even as embarrassment burned her face. “Hello, Mr. O’Keefe, and thank you, I will.”

“I’m so sorry about the misunderstanding earlier. To tell you the truth, you caught me off guard, something that doesn’t normally happen to me.”

“I’m ready to listen to what you have to say now.” Pride filled her at how steady her voice was when inside she was in the middle of a panic attack.

“Excellent.”

His voice warmed considerably, and she almost giggled. What the hell was wrong with her? Even talking to the man on the phone was making her into

simpleton. "Before you start, can I tell you something?"

"Of course."

"Let me be honest with you, Mr. O'Keefe. If this is going to work, we need to be honest with each other, correct?"

"Yes, I agree."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Okay. I'm going to be on the same level with you. I know that if I can land this party, I will be able to finally pay my employees what they are worth instead of what I can afford to pay them. Learning about something kinky is what I have to do, well, shoot, I'm glad I'm the boss and can't get fired for inappropriate behavior." Her heart hammered, and her palms slicked with sweat, but she pushed on. "I never feel more alive or happier than when I'm making someone else happy. I love looking out into the crowd and knowing they are having a good time because of me, because of what I did. Party planning is more than a job for me, Mr. O'Keefe. This is my dream."

There was silence on his end except for the faint sound of his breath.

"Mr. O'Keefe?"

"You'd better start calling me Isaac."

"Pardon me?"

"If I'm going to teach you about BDSM in six weeks, we'd better get started tonight."

"Tonight? What are we starting tonight?"

"I agree to your terms."

"My terms?"

"Yes. You said you are willing to learn, and I am willing to teach you. I want you to think of this more as a partnership than a boss and employee relationship. Please feel free to speak your mind around me. I value your opinion, Lucia. If I didn't, I wouldn't be hiring you, no matter what Mrs. Florentine wants."

"Okay, I can do that." A small amount of tension left her body, and she leaned farther into the chair. She frowned and sat up straighter. "I'm still not having sex with you, partners or not."

He chuckled. "I never said you were. I won't do anything to you that you don't ask me for, and no matter how much you beg, I'm not going to fuck you." His deep laugh made her libido perk up. "By the way, around my friends and partners I have a rather foul mouth. Please forgive me."

"No fucking problem." She let out a giggle that sounded a bit hysterical. "Oh God, what had she just agreed to?"

"Just so you know, your time at the club will be as a bartender instead of a guest."

She felt strangely disappointed. Not that she'd really wanted him to whisk her off into the night and do bad things with her, but bartending seemed so normal.

"Oh, okay."

"It's only because you have to pass a background check before you can go

into the private areas of the club. Plus I thought it might be better to take things slowly to give you time to adjust to the water before I threw you into the deep end.”

“I feel like I’m already in the deep end, and it’s filled with sharks.”

He laughed, and the knot in her stomach loosened a bit. “Don’t worry. I don’t bite.”

She flushed and tapped her foot against the floor. “I appreciate that. If I may ask, now that we’re working together, why are you going to all this effort to get me to work for you? Surely there is someone who does both event planning and knows BDSM.”

He sighed. “Mrs. Florentine, your business mentor and co-owner of Wicked fancies herself a bit of a matchmaker. I fear her intentions on sending you to me weren’t only professional but personal as well. It wouldn’t hurt my chances of becoming a member of Wicked’s board of directors if the wife of the chairman of the board is happy with me.”

She groaned and covered her face with her hands. “Matchmaking? I should have known something was up. Mrs. Florentine is always harping on me to balance work with pleasure and get a boyfriend.” She pulled her hands away with a horrified expression. “Oh God, Mrs. Florentine belongs to your club! Please tell me I won’t have to watch her have sex.”

He busted out laughing. “Oh hell no. While we do have some exhibitionists and voyeur members, most of our members prefer to keep their sexual escapades confined to our private theme rooms. For which I am very thankful.” His voice lowered, and her panties got wet—well, wetter. “The most I will do in public is kiss my submissive. All of her charms, all of her beauty belongs to me.”

She nervously licked her lips and became distracted by thoughts of kissing him. “When do we start?”

“Are you free all night? It takes a bit to get to the club, and I want to spend enough time with you there that you get a good feel for it.”

“Yes.” She’d have to bribe her sister to take her shift at the restaurant, but it would be well worth it to see Isaac again. No, wait, not see Isaac. She was excited to see the club where she’d finally get her big break.

That excuse sounded as flimsy as public restroom toilet paper even to her.

“This will of course be paid training to compensate you for your time. I’m going to e-mail over a bunch of forms. Do you think you can get them filled out by five p.m.?”

“What type of forms?”

“Standard nondisclosure forms. You don’t really think the most powerful people in DC would attend a BDSM club without some type of protection? The last thing a senator wants to see is a video of his naked ass being flogged by a dominatrix on YouTube. It might hurt his reelection chances.”

She grinned. “That makes sense. Yeah, I’ll fill them out as soon as I get off the phone with you.”

"I've sent my personal assistant instructions on what to get for an outfit for you. Will you be around later today to accept a delivery?"

"What kind of outfit? And how do you know where I live?" Visions of cheerleader leather strap outfits with her ass hanging out came to mind, and she winced.

"Don't worry. You'll be covered from neck to ankle, and you will look amazing. I know where you live because I have your application with your address on it. Will you be at your home tonight?"

She felt silly for being so defensive, but this whole conversation had thrown her off-kilter. "Why?"

"Because I'm going to pick you up tonight, and it would be helpful if you were home when I arrive."

Heat rushed to her cheeks. She thumped her head against the back of the chair. "That sounds lovely. I mean, yes, I'll see you then. At my house, where I live." Maybe all the blushing had caused brain damage. That's why she was babbling.

He coughed, and it sounded suspiciously like a muffled laugh. "Excellent. How does eight sound to you?"

"That's fine." There, she was proud of herself for sounding once again like the mature professional woman that she was.

"I'll see you then."

"Oh, yes. That would be wonderful." She inwardly groaned at how breathy and flaky she sounded. Striving to regain her footing, she made sure her words were calm and even as she said, "Thank you again for this opportunity, Mr. O'Keefe."

"Isaac."

She smiled, and his name rolled off her tongue like honey. "Isaac."

Chapter Three

Lucia's best friend, Chloe, grabbed the end of the black bra dangling from Lucia's grip and tried to pull it away. "You can't wear underwear with that outfit."

With a growl Lucia tugged the bra back. "I'm not going out in public without bra on!"

Chloe jerked the lingerie hard enough so Lucia had to let go or lose a finger. "You're right, you're not going out in public. You're going to super awesome sex club, and you get to wear this super awesome—"

"You mean super slutty," Lucia muttered.

"Outfit," Chloe finished with a wide smile.

They both looked at the outfit in question lying spread out on Lucia's queen size bed. True to Isaac's word, he'd sent her a getup that would cover her from neck to ankle. He hadn't mentioned it would be a catsuit made out of skintight black latex.

"How am I even supposed to put this thing on? I'll need a bottle of baby oil to slide into it."

"Actually you need to dust yourself down with baby powder first." Chloe tossed back her short blonde hair with an exaggerated movement. "I do happen to know a bit about BDSM."

Lucia snorted. "I'm sure all the kindergarten teachers at your school like rough."

Chloe flopped back onto Lucia's mattress. "One of my old boyfriends decided to be a condom for Halloween one year. His outfit was made up of the same stuff as your catsuit, and we had to cover him in baby powder before he put it on."

Lucia picked up the sparkly silver waist corset and shook it at Chloe. "How am I supposed to be able to breathe in this thing?"

"Oh, stop your bitching and put it on already. Your date will be here soon."

She shot Chloe a murderous glare and grabbed the catsuit off the bed. "He's not my date. He's my business partner."

"Sure he is. I Googled him while you were in the shower. He is panty-melting hot and worth like a bazillion dollars."

"I'm not—" She gritted her teeth as she almost said dating. "I'm not working with him because of how hot he is or how many steel mills his family owns or how many times he's been on Washington, DC's most-eligible-bachelor list."

"Six times," Chloe chirped, then giggled. "So he's rich, hot, kinky, and loaded. Girl, if you don't go after him, you must not have one working estrogen cell in your body."

While crossing the length of her small bedroom to her master bath, Lucia ignored Chloe's snickers. What could she really say? That Isaac turned her o

more than anyone had in a long time, and the only thing he'd done was shake her hand? That the idea of going anywhere with him put her hormones on a low simmer, but the thought of going to a sex club with him lit her libido on fire?

With a little more effort than necessary, she slammed the door to the bathroom behind her and tossed the clothing onto her sink. She dug around the medicine cabinet and found an old bottle of lavender-scented body powder. After dousing herself in the mixture, she slipped on the smallest G-string she owned and muttered threats against Chloe when she noticed the bra was missing.

After some pulling, stretching, and bending, she finally managed to tug the tight latex suit on all the way and zip up the front. Thankfully it was lined with a layer of ultrathin fabric on the inside, so it didn't pull her skin off as she wiggled everything into place. She actually liked the way it clung to her, almost making her feel like she was being hugged all over her body. Taking a deep breath, she turned to look at herself in the mirror and gaped.

She looked amazing. Well, super slutty, but still amazing. The catsuit stuck to her body like it was painted on, and she could make out the slight bumps of her nipples beneath the black latex. On either side a row of tiny silver rivets ran up her body from her ankle to the inside of her wrist. The only thing she didn't like was how the rounded bump of her belly became more pronounced, but then she remembered the corset. Running a hand down her slick curves, she opened the door and struck a pose.

"Ta-da!"

Chloe sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Holy moly. You look like a high-class porn star."

"Can you help me get into this corset thing, please?"

They both giggled as Chloe helped her cinch her waist into the corset. "Can you breathe?"

She wheezed in reply.

Her best friend loosened a few laces and stepped back with her hands on her hips. "You know, this might be a good look for you. With your waist cinched like that, you have a very 1950s Marilyn Monroe thing going on. You know, if Marilyn was Hispanic and had a bigger butt."

She wiggled her butt at Chloe, then looked in the mirror above her dresser and smiled. "Hair up or down?"

"Up. Let's give you an I Dream of Jeannie ponytail."

Chloe pulled her over to the bed and sat her down before brushing her hair. "You have your cell phone, right? And you'll call me at any time to come get you if you're in trouble?"

"Yes, Mom."

Chloe jerked her hair up with more force than necessary. "You never know these days who is going to turn out to be some kind of psycho killer."

"Weren't you the one just listing off his attributes?"

“True. ” Chloe yawned and stretched. “Do you think he likes to smack some ass or have his ass smacked?”

Lucia snorted and grabbed her black stiletto high heels off the end table. The five-inch spikes were dangerous territory for most women, but at five feet three she'd always worn tall heels to be in the normal height range for women. “I think he's the spanker, not the spankee.”

The intercom to her small apartment buzzed, and both women exchanged an excited look. With Lucia still fumbling with securing the ankle strap of her shoe, Chloe beat her to the intercom. With a grin she pressed the Talk button and said in a singsong voice, “Who is it?”

“Isaac O'Keefe.”

Lucia elbowed Chloe away from the intercom. “Come on up. I'm on the second floor, and my apartment is the last one on the left. There's a floral wreath on the door.”

She tried to push Chloe into the guest bathroom, but her friend managed to wiggle away with a laugh. “Hey! I promise I'll behave.”

“Just sit on the couch and don't say a word.”

Chloe bounced onto her small lilac-gray sectional and pantomimed zipping her lips. After giving her friend one final glare, Lucia turned to the door and tried to slow down her suddenly hammering heart. Good Lord, she hadn't been this worked up about a guy in forever. Maybe it had been so long since she'd had sex that her body was going to make her have it by sending out nymphomaniac rushes of hormones.

A knock sounded on the door, and she opened it so quick she caught Isaac on the other side with his hand still raised. He stared at her from the top of her head all the way down to her toes and back up again. Then he smiled, and her nipples hardened into very visible rock-hard buds. Dressed in another impeccable black suit, this time with a pale silver tie, he looked like he'd stepped off of some French runway.

“Hey!” Chloe yelled from over her shoulder. “Why isn't he in latex? Or better yet, leather pants. Seems only fair if you have to dress up like BDSM Barbie, he should be your Kinky Ken.”

Lucia gave Isaac a weak smile. “Let me grab my purse and jacket, and we will be off.”

Isaac's lips twitched, but he nodded. “Of course.”

Chloe came up behind her and dodged the not so subtle elbow Lucia threw her way. “Hmm, you are a nice tall drink of water. Love your eyes. They remind me of a Siberian husky.”

“I'm so sorry about this.” Lucia grabbed her purse from the table next to the door and jerked her crimson trench coat out of the closet. “Chloe was dropped on her head at birth, and she used to eat paint chips.”

To Isaac's credit he didn't crack a smile. “Poor girl.”

“Indeed. Say good night to the nice gentleman, Chloe.”

Chloe grinned and waved. “Have fun, and remember, if you’re a psycho and you hurt my friend, I’ll spend the rest of my life hunting you down.”

With a smile he held his hand out to Chloe, and she placed her palm in his with a hot blush. Isaac bent and raised Chloe’s hand to his mouth. He briefly brushed his lips across her skin, and Lucia’s best friend’s blush went from pink to stop-sign red. “It has been a pleasure meeting you, Chloe. Lucia is lucky to have a friend who cares so much.”

He released her hand, and Chloe dragged in a deep breath. “Holy crap, Lucia. I hope you’re on birth control, because this guy is lethal.”

Mortified, Lucia closed the door on a stunned Chloe and sighed. “Once again, please let me apologize. You know that filter people have in their head that tells them not to say something? Well, Chloe’s is broken, and she is way more honest than most people are comfortable with. It makes her a great kindergarten teacher because she can relate so well to the way kids think, but it throws most people over four feet tall for a loop.”

“I find her honesty refreshing. The business world is littered with kiss asses and backstabbers, so hearing someone say what they think instead of what they think you want them to say is nice.”

They made their way down the hall of her second-floor apartment to the front door. She kept her coat clutched tight in the hopes none of her elderly neighbors would be looking out their windows. On Thursday afternoons she usually had tea with the old lady across the hall and her friends. If they saw her tonight, she knew they’d ask about it during tea, then tease her mercilessly with stories of the naughty things they did when they were young. The old women were like her adopted, perverted aunts.

“Let’s take the stairs. It’s quicker.”

He glanced down at her feet. “You can climb stairs in those?”

“Honey, I can do a lot of things in these shoes.” She realized how utterly dirty that sounded and flushed when he gave her a wicked grin. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

His laughter echoed as they entered the stairwell. “I’m sure you didn’t.”

She wanted to glare at him, but if she turned around, she might bust her ass on these stairs.

When they reached the front door, she inwardly groaned at the sight of the black limousine parked in front of her apartment complex. He held the door open for her, and she stepped out into the chilly late-winter air, her breath puffing white in the glare of the sodium security lights. A quick glance behind her confirmed a great deal of the windows facing the parking circle were filled with curious faces watching them. Mrs. Goldbitz on the second floor actually waved when she noticed Lucia looking.

Lucia waved back, then made a shooing gesture, which everyone pretty much ignored.

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