

KEEP ME

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Nina woke up to the sound of Ian's alarm going off and wiggled deeper into the covers.

"It can't already be Monday," Ian groaned, rolling over and pulling her into his chest.

"Afraid so, cowboy," she laughed, rising up to kiss his lips, then his stubbled cheek. "I told you you'd regret it in the morning."

With one smooth motion he pulled her on top of him. "Did I say I regretted it? I'd choose sex with you over sleep any day."

"You can't be ready for more," she said, sliding over the erection that proved otherwise. "We've been going at it all weekend."

"Some parts are more ready than others," he said, his voice low and rusty from sleep. "But ready or not, I really need to get up. I have an early conference call with some people in London."

"Ooh, I love it when you talk like that," she said, kissing her way along his perfect jawline. "So worldly and sophisticated," she went on, making her voice Marilyn Monroe breathless as she rubbed herself along his length.

The next second she was flat on her back and looking into his aroused, determined face. "You shouldn't tease the beast," he whispered, his mouth coming down to take hers.

She opened for him immediately, already primed and ready. A gasp escaped her at the feel of his mouth at her breast, his teeth gently scraping as if to teach her a lesson.

He grabbed a condom from the nightstand and ripped it open, positioning himself at her entrance before entering her in one deep thrust.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked, his breath hot on her neck, color high on his cheeks.

She arched into him and dug her heels into his back. "God, yes."

Usually he was patient, stoking her until she burned hot enough to torch the building. But this was quick and dirty, every thrust stroking deep, filling her until she could hardly breathe. The full force of his desire crashed into her, his athlete's strength and endurance fueling her own need until she was clinging to him, pleading for release.

With deft fingers he reached between them and stroked into her folds. His expression was almost grim in its fierceness, full of primitive satisfaction as he watched her come apart beneath him. Then he surged over her, calling her name as he came.

They lay there for several minutes, just breathing, before Nina finally spoke.

“You’re going to miss your London call,” she reminded him, her fingers skimming over the muscles in his back.

His low groan vibrated against her neck.

“I’ll get up, too,” she said. “I want to enjoy the first day of the rest of my life.”

He lifted up on his elbows and smiled a sweet, lopsided grin. “I like the sound of that.”

“Me, too.”

Nina got the coffee going while Ian showered and dressed. When he came out she had a muffin wrapped up and his to-go cup filled with coffee.

“You’re the best,” he said, pulling her in for a long kiss. “You okay with me going to the gym after work? Maybe we can grab dinner somewhere afterwards.”

“Sounds perfect.”

He grabbed his coat and briefcase and headed for the door. His hand was on the knob when he turned back. “You have no idea how much I want to call in sick.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll be right here.”

“I love you.”

Her heart stuttered, then started up again, even stronger. “I love you, too.”

One more smile for her and he was gone.

She floated around the apartment the rest of the morning, thinking about Ian and feeling dreamy as she made breakfast, straightened the bed, and brushed her teeth.

Then her mother called.

She almost ignored it, but she was going to have to talk to her sometime. Might as well get it over with.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Nina, what’s going on? When are you coming home?”

“What do you mean? I told you before my plans had changed.”

“You have to go somewhere, don’t you? You don’t have a job and you can’t stay with that man forever.”

“Actually, I am.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ian asked me to move in with him, permanently. We’re…well, we’re in love.”

The line went dead, or that’s what it sounded like, because her mother didn’t say a word.

“Hello? Are you still there?”

“Yes. I’m just having trouble believing what you’re telling me. You’ve known this person three weeks and you think you’re in love? That’s nonsense.”

This was her mother’s specialty. She liked to talk as though she were concerned with what was best for Nina, when all the time she was undermining her in every possible way.

“And you wonder why I haven’t called you.”

“There’s no need to take that tone with me. I have the right to say what I think.”

“Is it so hard to believe someone could care about me?”

“I never said that—”

“This is the best guy I’ve ever met, and he completely supports me.”

“I see. Does that mean you’ll be continuing your arrangement, or will you be getting a job?”

Now it was Nina’s turn to go quiet. It took her several long moments before she could make herself say it. “For now I’m just painting.”

“You’ll have only yourself to blame when it doesn’t work out.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Mom.”

Of course her mother objected to that. She launched into a new lecture, but Nina was done listening. She stood up and looked at the view of the city out the window.

“You know what, I need to go now. I’ll email you my address. If you get any mail for me, I’d appreciate if you’d forward it on. Tell Dad I say hi.”

She hung up before her mother could say another word, then sat and stared out the window, willing herself not to feel what she was feeling. It wasn’t worth it. She was happy, and she wasn’t going to let her mother ruin it.

Restless, she wandered into the dining room, set up now to function as her studio, and looked over the work she’d completed so far. The past three weeks she’d felt under the gun to get as much done as possible, but she didn’t have to worry anymore about packing up and moving, disrupting her life and work routine. For the first time ever she was free to think about her work without anything getting in the way. Including her mother’s disapproval. She’d always had that, so what difference did it make?