

Lilly picked up the dress hanging from the back of her cubicle and headed to the ladies' room to change, slipping the sheath over her head. The fitted, ruched fabric clung to her body, a lover in the form of a little black dress. It hugged her shoulders and stretched out along her collarbone, the hem licking above her knees.

The dress reminded her of what it was like to feel sexy and strong. Confident.

It had been a splurge—a reward for procuring the summer associate position at Damien's firm. She'd worn it the night he and her colleagues took her out for drinks to celebrate. Later that night, it was in a ball on his bedroom floor.

The sharp tang of memory made Lilly cringe. She could've worn something else tonight, but the dress fit the event, and she wanted to wear it. Maybe if she did, she'd be able to find that confident version of herself again.

Downstairs, Lilly flagged a cab. She texted Cassie that she was on her way during the ride over to Newbury Street and the row of brownstones where Nick's gallery opening was, but didn't get a reply. When the driver pulled up to the curb, Lilly eyed the line of people going in and out of the building. She could hear a trance beat vibrating all the way from here.

She paid for her trip and went inside. The narrow space was lit with hot track lights, dozens of people standing around in clusters of excited conversation and clinking glasses. Lilly checked her coat slipped her black wristlet purse over her arm and searched for a familiar face among the crowd.

She wasn't looking for Jack. She wasn't.

A server passed by and offered her a glass from a tray of decadent-looking beverages. She took one and sipped slowly, relishing the sweet burn. Glass in hand, she concentrated on getting lost in the art hanging on the whitewashed walls. She paused by one of an elderly couple holding hands as they reclined on a park bench, completely absorbed in the contented looks on their faces when someone tapped her shoulder. She whirled around to see Nick's smile, the tips of his hair turned to a shining halo by the bright lights.

"Hey," he said. "I thought I'd never find you."

"I'm not surprised. This place is packed." She beamed at him. "The turnout is incredible."

"Did you see my photos?"

"Not yet."

Nick took her hand, drawing her to where his work was displayed, and stepped back to let her take it in.

His work was exquisite, each shot offering only a snippet of the moment he'd captured: a man's hand tenderly cupping a stubbled cheek, two masculine fingers curled around one another, a baby girl being kissed on each cheek by two pairs of fatherly lips. They were intimate, quiet, the emotions reflective of the kind of love she'd always been proud to watch him celebrate.

"They're amazing," she said.

"You're biased."

"I'm right."

"I've already sold six pieces. And *Framed* wants an interview with me."

"Congratulations! I told you this would be great."

“Yeah, yeah. You’re a genius.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Enjoy the show. Gabe and the others are around here somewhere. I’ll find you later.”

Lilly watched him disappear into the crowd. She was so proud of him, but a tiny part of her was jealous. She wished she’d done something by now that he could be proud of too.

A server passed by, and she handed him her empty glass, hesitating before plucking another one from the tray. What the hell. It was Valentine’s Day, she was single and her career was dead-on-arrival. Drinking under those circumstances was a moral imperative.

After wandering through the rest of the gallery, she ran into Brady at the bottom of a staircase. A striking redhead she recognized as his wife stood by his side.

“Hey, Lilly. I don’t know if you’ve ever met my wife, Samantha. Sam, this is Nick’s sister, Lilly.”

Samantha’s smile was even more stunning than her hair. “It’s nice to finally meet you,” she said.

“You too.” Lilly tilted her head to look toward the second floor, where heady music pulsed. “What’s up there?”

Brady winked at her. “The sexy pictures. You coming?”

She glanced up again. The music thumped and echoed, the bass deep and intoxicating. She took another swill of her drink, then downed the rest of it and placed the empty glass on a tray.

“Sure. Why not?”

She followed them up the steps and stopped on the balcony, held up by a line of people streaming in and out of a room guarded by maroon velvet drapes. Cassie hurried out from behind them, lines scored into her forehead, lips pursed with tension.

The alarm on her face was quickly replaced with a smile when she saw Lilly. “There you are. Come downstairs with me?”

“Now? But I want to see what’s in there.”

Cassie looked from Lilly to Brady and back. “I don’t think those photos are to everybody’s liking.”

“Why not?” he asked. “I heard they’re hot.”

The curtain rippled and Gabe wandered out, grinning. “Damn straight they are.”

Emboldened by alcohol and curiosity, Lilly stepped toward the entryway, turning around once to smile at her friend. . “They’re only pictures, Cass. How bad can they be?”

She pulled the curtain open, and her eyes adjusted to a room that was darker than she expected. Red and white lights hung from the ceiling, setting a feverish hue to the photographs spread out on black walls. As soon as she saw them, she understood why Cassie tried to stop her. They were frozen reflections of wrists held roughly down, of faces drowning in ecstatic pleasure, exuding the delicate balance of control and abandon found in dominance and submission.

It was everything she’d learned to crave and ran away from.

*“Spread your legs. Show me what’s mine.”*

She drifted toward a snapshot of a finger on an upturned chin, the owner’s other hand holding the chain to a studded choker. Lilly ran a finger along her neck, feeling the absence of the exquisite pressure of a collar.

Held down. Chained up. Fingers on her throat. Tongue against her clit.

Another photo, filled with the ravenous expression of a submissive on her knees, looking up at her Master with both desire and fear. Lilly had kneeled like that under the heavy command of Damien's stare.

*"I know how badly you want to come, but not yet. Not yet."*

She moved on, each picture tiptoeing through her memories and dragging them into the light. Hands locked in cuffs. A fistful of hair being grabbed by masculine fingers. Her scalp tingled, her wrists longing for the splintering pleasure of that leather embrace. A palm print painted onto someone's backside, and ghostly sensation whispered across Lilly's flesh, reminding her how long it had been since she felt the delectable pain of a spanking.

*He gripped her hair, and she hated how much she loved it.*

*God, she loved it.*

A dam collapsed. There was no denying that she ached to feel this again. Even in the face of Damien's lies and deceit, Lilly remembered how, within the blinding release of his restraints, she actually felt whole.

Her trance gave way when Brady called out, "Jack, where've you been?"

She felt him before she saw him. The sensation of being watched drew her eyes to where Jack was standing in the corner. His gaze traveled down the length of her dress and back up again, his body taut and motionless.

"Here," Jack replied, his eyes focused on hers.

"Uh, guys?" Gabe said. Lilly turned, and the effort it took for her to break from Jack's stare was almost painful. "We should go downstairs. They're going to toast the artists now."

"Be right there," she said, but didn't move as the room began emptying out.

"You coming, Jack?" Brady called over his shoulder.

"In a minute."

Brady shrugged and walked through the curtains. Cassie gestured to Lilly, but she waved her on, promising she'd follow. She didn't want to leave yet. She wanted to stay a little longer and drink in the imagery around her.

She *wanted* Jack.

Turning to face one wall of photos, she felt his gaze on her. He stalked closer, until he was right behind her.

"Joining the others?" he asked softly.

She felt out of control, her body flying apart where she stood. "Not yet."

"Still looking?"

"Yes, Sir."

The instant the word slipped free, Lilly winced and bowed her head. It came so naturally—she couldn't help it. But through the haze of humiliation, she heard Jack's breath catch.

"What did you say?" His voice was gravelly. Husky. She didn't answer—she couldn't—and he stepped around to face her. "Lilly."

He captured her chin with his forefinger and thumb, lifting it gently. There was a question in his eyes as they searched hers, and then his expression shifted into something else.

Something she recognized.

“I want to take you someplace quiet,” he said.

It wasn't a question. It was a command.

It suddenly became clear what had drawn her to him. Why he'd stepped in and taken over her thoughts.

Jack was a Dominant.