



Ace  
*of*  
Hearts

TEDDY GUTIERREZ



Ace of  
Hearts  
Teddy Gutierrez

*Also, by Teddy Gutierrez*

*The Orcas Series*

Tobias

Family Ties\*

*The Dehumanisation Series*

~Just Another Number

~I Will Find You

*Other Works*

~Ace of Hearts\*\*

~My Mate

~The Little Ones

Trans Turmoil\*\*

~Creatures of Hyfern\*

~Available for Free from [www.T3ddyTalk.com](http://www.T3ddyTalk.com)

\*Work in Progress

\*\*Yet to be Rereleased/ Yet to be Released

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For the seven million Aces  
around the world: you're  
valid, your love is real, and  
fuck anyone who says  
otherwise.

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## Chapter One

*Another week, another day, another bus journey that is going to greatly piss me off.*

Getting on the bus, Katrina swipes her card and sits down, close to the front to avoid any unwanted interactions with the teenagers sitting in the back. *Ignore me. Ignore me. Ignore me.*

“Hey, purp! I didn’t think you could get any more emo!” A kid in the back of the bus shouts, referring to Katrina by *purp* due to her newly dyed purple hair.

She sighs, rolling her eyes, looking down at her New Rock boots on her feet and thinking about how easily she’d be able to crush the little cunt’s skull under her heavy heels. *Stay*

*cool. Just calm down. Don't do anything you'll regret.*

The kids continue laughing as if finding their rudeness amusing.

Thinking back to her years in high school, Katrina questions how being Emo has changed so much. When she was in high school, Emo meant black clothing, emo haircuts, black hair, studded wristbands, and tartan skinny jeans. Now, it somehow means black boots and dyed hair - no matter how brightly coloured or plain she dresses, she gets the same comment every time... *Ignore them; they're just kids... Rude kids, but they're kids.* After a few minutes, the bus arrives at the bus station, allowing Katrina to escape the children.

“Bye, shorty!” The kid shouts, the entire group beginning to laugh again. Katrina stops, turning on the spot to look at the boys.

“How old are you?” She asks, today being the final straw.

“Seventeen,” the lead boy scoffs.

“And how tall are you?”

“5’5”,” he sniggers.

Katrina bobs her head. “Well, good luck. Because you’re not going to grow much more now, and if you think I’m short - you need to look in the mirror, buddy. Because you’re an inch shorter than me. So, if anyone’s short - that’s you.” Katrina pauses, the boys all going silent. She turns around and heads for the front of the bus. As she steps off the bus, she shouts, “bye, shorty!”

Stepping out of the bus station, heading to the office for a new week at her new job, the sun shining but the rain falling faster - a rainbow showing in the sky. *Week seven, let’s hope Red Zone have accepted last week’s changes...*

Arriving at the office, a glum look on her face, Katrina makes her way over to her computer - sitting down at her desk and letting out a long, frustrated sigh as she sinks into her seat - hoping that the day will be calm and quiet but knowing that she has no such luck. She's only been working at Nobel Grafix for a couple of months and her current clients are arseholes.

"Why do you always come into work unhappy? I don't understand..." Derek comments, sitting down at the desk next to Katrina.

"Why wouldn't I be unhappy? Are you happy to be at work?" She questions, raising her left eyebrow as she looks at him; a sarcastic expression on her face.

"Well, no. But you get happier the more time you spend here," he chuckles, leaning back in his chair as he waits for his applications to open.

Katrina shrugs, opening the task rota for the day. "I'm always happy to be working. How

can I not be? I'm basically a workaholic. I need to be here to be happy. I hate being at home..." Katrina mumbles, pressing her lips together as she pouts.

"But don't you like to relax? Get away from all the stress? After all, we've had thirty-two rejections from Red Zone in two weeks... So, shouldn't you want to go home?"

"I don't relax well on my own, and I live alone. So, when I'm at home, I don't relax. Therefore, there is no point of me trying to relax at home, when in reality, I relax better at work," Katrina comments, leaning forward as she looks at the rota. "And it's happened again. Red Zone has once again rejected the work... For no reason. This time, they apparently don't like the colour scheme."

Derek turns to Katrina, a confused expression on his face. "What part of the colour scheme?"

"The red..." Katrina mumbles.

“No... What? It’s on their logo!” Derek groans, his hands covering his face as he leans forward resting his forehead on the edge of his desk. “I’m so happy our Art Director is back in today... Even if he’s not the greatest person alive.”

“Why? What’s wrong with him?” Katrina questions, her eyebrows pulling together and creasing the bridge of her nose.

“He’s a tad arrogant and sarcastic,” Derek explains sitting up in his chair and staring, deadly, at the computer screen. He looks over at Katrina from the corner of his eye and smiles. “I’m joking, he’s alright. He can be sarcastic, but he’s a good guy.”

“Well, as long as he can find a way of getting rid of these buffoons, I’m fine. Because I really don’t want to be on this project anymore! Why can’t they pass it to someone else?” Katrina growls, showing her irritation as she clenches her teeth.

“Because you’re the best we have,” a man says from behind her. “Apparently.”

Katrina turns around in her chair to see the commenter; finding a tall, blond haired man standing behind her. “Who the hell are you?” She questions, her eyebrows pulling together again.

“Lincoln Osbourne.” He pauses, his arms crossed over his chest. “I’m your boss.”

She raises an eyebrow, his cocky yet satirical tone intriguing her. “Oh, really? Then why have I never met you before?”

“I’ve been on holiday,” he chuckles. “You’re Katrina Nembhard, and I’m your Art Director. Now, I’d like to see the work they keep rejecting due to its unskilled and amateur creation,” he says as he presses his lips together, raising his eyebrows.

Katrina sighs, turning back to her computer and getting the work on the screen. Standing

up, she gestures to her seat, telling him to sit down. She crosses her arms over her chest as she watches him sit down and beginning to look through the designs.

“Why on earth are they sending this back?” Lincoln mutters to himself, frowning at the screen as he flicks through her designs.

“That’s what I want to know...” Katrina mumbles.

Lincoln leans back in the chair, slouching as he looks over to Derek, his elbows on the armrests, entwining his fingers together and twiddling his thumbs. “Derek - as a Liaison for this project, I would like you to call a meeting with the organisation so that we can find out what the issue is.

Derek nods, beginning to type on his computer. “I’ll get it done and see how quickly they can come in,” he says, his focus fixed to the screen.

Lincoln looks up at her; his lips pressed together. "It's great to finally meet you, by the way."

Katrina bobs her head, a blank expression on her face. "Thank you."

He smiles up at her before jumping up from his seat. "I'll let you sit down," he says. "Also, if you want to get on with some other commissions or help another project while we wait for the meeting - go ahead."

"Thanks." Katrina bobs her head again, sitting down at her computer and beginning to work.

Sitting down at his desk, next to hers, he turns to her. "By the way, I was joking when I said I was your boss - I just have a different job title," he chuckles, feeling slightly awkward due to Katrina's blank expression.

"It's fine."

He nods, turning to his computer and turning it on. "Okay, then."

Two days after Derek asked Red Zone for a meeting, the day has finally arrived. Katrina is in a high mood, working with people who don't make her want to die.

“Oh, look at you! Smiling and shit,” Derek laughs, sitting down at his desk, seeing Katrina enjoying her job for the first time.

“Meh, I need to enjoy it while it lasts. I'm really not looking forward to Red Zone coming in,” she mumbles, continuing to focus on her work.

He bobs his head. “Yeah, even I'm not looking forward to that, and I'm the liaison...” He pauses. “On the plus side, we have Lincoln back now - who is usually good at this kind of thing.”

“What do you mean?” Katrina asks, her brows narrowing as she peers over at him.

Derek smiles. “There’s a reason he’s on this project with you; you’re the best designer; he’s the best director.”

Katrina bobs her head, turning back to her screen. “Fair enough.”

Red Zone arrives and gets escorted into the conference room. Derek comes out, an exhausted expression on his face. “Katrina, Lincoln - they’re here,” Derek tells the pair, gesturing for them to follow him. Katrina looks to Lincoln, finding him stood up - adjusting his novelty bow tie, before following Derek toward the conference room.

She clambers to her feet, speed walking behind the two men to catch up.

Entering the room, Derek announces the pair: “Team Red Zone, this is our Art Director, Mr Osbourne, and our Graphic Designer, Mx Nembhard.”

“So, that’s the idiot that’s been sending us these horrible designs?” A man growls, gesturing to Katrina.

“Idiot? Not only is that harsh, but it’s also uncalled for. Mx Nembhard is hardly an idiot. She’s one of our best designers. How you think they’re horrible, I have no idea. But we will have to get something done about this - because so far, it doesn’t really make any sense. However, I’m back now; and we’re going to figure something out. But you’re all going to have to be very civil. Okay?” Lincoln asks, a touch of sarcasm in his voice as he begins to walk around the table. “After all, you call yourself Red Zone - yet you didn’t like it when Mx Nembhard made the red and white theme because you didn’t like the red. Which the shade, just so you know, came from your logo, it wasn’t her choice. So, who’s being the real idiot here? Because it’s not her.”

The room erupts into screams, the Red Zone group fighting amongst themselves. Lincoln makes his way back to Katrina, standing next to her as she begins to shake. Seeing her distress from the noise, he places a hand on her shoulder, guiding her out of the room and closing the door behind them. “Are you okay?”

“They’re so loud...” She mumbles, still somewhat shuck from the noise of the people.

“I know, don’t worry. You’ll get used to the noise. But, if you don’t - we’ll figure something out, okay?” He says, rubbing her biceps to try and calm her.

She bobs her head, blinking rapidly. “Thank you.”

He smiles down at her. “Nice hair, by the way,” he comments, noticing that her dark purple hair had been pulled back into a ponytail with a U-shaped fringe, framing her face. “It’s pretty, and really suits you,” he tells her

before going back into the room, holding the door open for her.

Her cheeks feeling hot and butterflies in her stomach, she smiles back; following him into the room and standing next to him - the comments seemingly giving her the confidence to re-enter the lion's lair.

The room goes quiet as they close the door. "Lincoln, what do you suggest?" One of the women asks, leaning forward in her seat - her breasts somewhat presented through the cleavage slit.

*Is she really doing that?* Katrina raises her left eyebrow. The woman seemingly knowing Lincoln personally.

"Well, Ms French - what we're going to do is take every suggestion from each and every one of you, and work on it while you're here. And hopefully, with great luck, we're going to create a design that all of you like," Lincoln announces, crossing his arms over his chest.

The man, who had called Katrina an idiot, nods. “Fair enough... Let’s get it done.”

Katrina stepped forward, sitting at the computer built into the end of the conference table. Turning on the projector behind her so that everyone can see what she’s doing. She gets her previous work on the screen before looking up at the room of people. “Who wants to give me the first suggestion?”

Three hours went by as Katrina took suggestions and incorporated them into the website. The Red Zone team decide that what Katrina had done was enough for the day, allowing her, Lincoln, and Derek to go back to their desks.

“How did you know that I was having issues with the noise level?” Katrina asks as the pair of them begin to walk back to their workstations.

“I was similar when I first started. No matter how many companies you work for before, if you don’t deal with difficult ones like them - when it does happen - you’ll end up freaked. So, I get it. Don’t worry,” Link explains, following her.

“How did that woman know your first name?” Katrina blurts, not being able to stop herself.

“I’ve had to work with her before. I was a graphic designer at a different firm. I worked for Red Zone. That logo was my design. When they needed my services again, I suppose they found out about me moving here. Because you’re on my team, you then got stuck with them,” Lincoln says, sitting down at his desk.

“She likes you,” Katrina comments, sitting at her desk, pressing her lips together.

He sighs, leaning back in his seat, his brows pulling together and creasing his forehead slightly. “No, she doesn’t.”

Katrina leans back in her chair, her left eyebrow raising as she questions his reasoning for her not liking him. “How do you get that? She was flirting with you the entire time.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “There’s a difference between liking someone and flirting with them. I know she likes me in that regard. But she’s not interested in me. And I don’t go for that sorta thing.”

A confused expression appears on Katrina’s face as she tries to figure him out. “So, you’d rather be with someone who likes you, than someone who wants sex with you?”

He shrugs, twiddling his thumbs in his usual position. “I suppose so. Is that a problem?”

“Why would it be a problem?” Katrina babbles.

Leaning on one armrest, his chin placed in the palm of his hand. “I don’t know, some people just find me strange for it.”

Katrina shakes her head, biting on the inside edge of her bottom lip. “It’s not strange, it’s reasonable...”

“I’m glad you think so - people keep telling me to *get fixed*,” Lincoln chuckles awkwardly, pressing his lips together.

Katrina frowns, clenching her jaw. “Fuck those people.”

The end of their shift arrives swiftly, Katrina begins to walk out of the office when Lincoln overtakes her and opens the door for her.

“Need a lift home?” He asks, holding the door open, following her out.

“No, I’m fine. Thanks for the offer, though.”

She bobs her head, heading down the stairs and out the front door of the building.

Getting outside, the sun shining. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” He smiles, walking past

her and heading to a car waiting in the taxi bay for him.

She watches as he climbs in the back of the car before it drives away, just as the sun begins to hide behind the clouds and the rain, once again, starts to pour.

Katrina quickly makes her way to the bus station, wanting to get on her bus as soon as possible. But, upon entering the station, she sees her bus pulling away from the station doors, leaving her soaking wet and having to wait another hour for the next bus. *Fucking typical...*



## Chapter Two

*We did it! Oh, yeah, we did it!* Katrina sits back in her chair, slumping as she reads the confirmation email of the finalisation of the project.

“Is it a happy day?” Lincoln asks, grinning as he stands behind Katrina. Leaning down to look at the screen, the tall man towering over her.

“Very,” she comments, looking up - finding the tip of his chin hanging above her head.

He looks down, their faces inches apart.

“Hopefully we’ll get a better project this time.”

He smiles, his soft looking skin pinching at the cheeks as his smile shows his dimples.

“Let’s hope so,” Katrina mumbles, looking back to her computer, her eyes wide as she tries to get the thought of his cologne out of her head. *So sweet...*

“So,” he says as he straightens up and heads over to his desk. “Shall we go for a drink to celebrate?”

“Of course,” Derek laughs, as he walks over. “It’s a tradition of ours.”

Lincoln’s face goes from happy to confused. His smile still on his face, but his eyebrows telling a different tale. “I was asking Katrina if she wanted to go, I know I don’t have to ask you...”

Derek’s happiness fades from his face as he crosses his arms over his chest, stood at his desk - the two men having a staring competition over Katrina’s head. “Oh, so I don’t get an invite anymore?”

Squinting, Lincoln's smile fades away. "You haven't had an *invitation* to a celebration drink for three years... Why would I start asking again now?"

"Well, I could have a date for all you know," Derek grunts, sitting down at his desk.

Lincoln gets up from his seat, walking around Katrina and crouching in between his two colleagues, keeping himself steady by holding onto the back of both Katrina's and Derek's chairs. "Derek, do you have a date?"

Hesitating to answer, Derek sighs, "No..."

Lincoln smiles, turning back to Katrina. "I didn't think so," he chuckles. As he gets up, another wave of Lincoln's cologne drifts over to Katrina - smelling the sweet scent of cocoa.

"Why do you smell like chocolate?" Derek probes, clearly getting the same smell off Lincoln as Katrina.

“Because Cocoa and Hazelnut body spray is a thing and I love it?” Lincoln laughs as he sits down in his chair, pulling himself closer to his desk.

“Oh lord...” Derek mumbles, shaking his head as he begins to work.

Lincoln’s brows pull together, a confused expression on his face once again. Leaning toward Katrina, he questions, “is it really that bad?”

Katrina shakes her head frantically. “No,” she blurts. She turns her head to look at him. “It’s actually quite nice.”

A smile returns to his face. “Thank you.”

She gulps, smiling. “No problem.”

As another day at work ends, the trio begin to walk down the streets of their city - heading to Lincoln and Derek’s favourite watering hole.

“So, where do you guys go to drink?” Katrina asks as she follows the two men down the cobbled street of the city, heading towards a row of pubs and clubs.

“We go in that one,” Derek says, pointing to the only pub with a *pride* flag hung outside.

“A gay pub?” Katrina questions.

Lincoln stops in the middle of the path, spinning on the spot to look at her. “No. It’s an LGBT pub. Anyone can go in, but flirting with strangers is only allowed in half the pub.”

“But why this pub in particular?” Katrina probes, her brows narrowing and causing a small crease to appear on the bridge of her nose.

“Because, if you *haven’t noticed*, Lincoln is somewhat of a desirable guy - if we go in any other bar, we will constantly be interrupted... Plus, I’m gay,” Derek comments, turning back to the pub and head in.

Katrina's eyes widen as her mouth hangs open slightly. "I had no idea..."

Lincoln shrugs. "He's not all that fussed about *making it known*. If anything, he likes to keep it to himself. Not out of shame of being gay, but out of pity - he doesn't want people thinking we're dating."

"Why would people think you're dating?"

Katrina questions, a sarcastic tone seeping into her voice by accident.

"Because I haven't had a girlfriend since meeting him," Lincoln chuckles, overlooking Katrina's sarcasm.

"Do they think Derek has no standards?" She asks, trying to play it off.

Lincoln's face goes from smug and happy to surprise instantly, his mouth gaping open.

"Mx Nembhard, you cheeky young lady!"

Katrina blushes as she rushes past him, entering the bar behind Derek. "I didn't know

you were gay,” she tells him, standing next to him at the bar.

Derek shrugs, leaning against the bar. “I know, that’s sort of the point. But, I am in some form of relationship, and Lincoln doesn’t like flirting in bars.”

Squinting, Katrina frowns. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t go in for people who are just interested in sex. Like I said yesterday, I’m more interested in people who like me than people who want to have sex with me. Flirting is usually more sexual than anything, and that’s not what I go for,” Lincoln explains, smiling as he reaches the bar, standing on the other side of Katrina.

Katrina bobs her head. “Okay.” She turns to the bar, finding a bartender waiting to take her order. “Sorry, I’ll have a mixed fruit cider,” she says.

“No problem,” he says, turning away and getting her drink. Putting all three bottles on the bar, he looks at Lincoln - as if knowing he was going to be paying.

Lincoln presents his card to the card reader, paying for the three drinks. “Hey, I was going to pay for mine,” Katrina comments in protest.

Lincoln looks down at Katrina, his left eyebrow slightly raised as a grin appears on his face. “I guess you’ll just owe me one, then,” he says, winking at her before picking his drink up and heading over to his usual table.

As they sit down, Derek turns to Katrina. “I know you’re called Katrina and you’re okay with being called a girl, woman, and a lady - but why do you use the Mx title? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Let’s just say; I wasn’t entirely assigned female at birth. So, I use Mx to acknowledge that,” Katrina explains, crossing her legs and taking a drink.

“Oh, that’s cool,” Derek comments before taking a long drink of his beer, the alcohol rushing to his head. Derek turns to Lincoln. “Link, I forgot to ask - what’s happening between you and Kira?”

“Ms French and I are simply friends, nothing more... But I wish it was much less,” he mumbles, raising his bottle to his lips, sighing deeply before taking a quick swig of his drink.

“You really don’t like her, do you?” Katrina chuckles. Pausing, she thinks about what Derek had said. “Why don’t you go by Link more often?”

He shrugs. “I don’t care whether anyone calls me Link or Lincoln. Most people don’t like Link, so I stuck with Lincoln. Derek’s got alcohol in his system now, so he’s starting to relax.” Link smirks.

“Well, Link. Please call me Nina. I’ve not been called Katrina so much outside of my house for around ten years now...” Nina laughs,

leaning back in her chair and taking another sip of her drink.

“Okay, *Nina*.”

Two hours into drinking and Derek is already pissed. Nina and Link are tipsy but holding steady as they laugh and cry.

“One time, I was listening to a song while writing an essay and I got it stuck in my head, right? So, I started singing this song; then I handed in the essay - as you do. The teacher decided to use my essay as an example for why people should listen to non-lyrical music while writing because, I shit you not, I had written out every lyric of the song *Miami* by *Will Smith*, which has some questionable lyrics... Like *Ladies half-dressed, fully equipped* - like seriously, I probably shouldn't have been listening to that song at the age of thirteen,” she explains.

Link bursts out laughing, putting his hand over his mouth as he attempts to hold back. “Oh, that must have been glorious...”

Nina shrugs. “I got detention for an hour after school, every day for a week.”

His eyes widen. “Wow. Nina, I didn’t have you down as a rebel,” Link says sarcastically.

Rolling her eyes, Nina shakes her head. “I’m going to kill you someday.”

He bobs his head, pressing his lips together. “I hope so; I don’t think I’d be able to die at anyone else’s hand.”

*Okay then...*

“Now, I think we should start heading home. We have to be up for work tomorrow,” Link comments, standing up after four drinks, swaying a bit. “Are we sharing a taxi?” Link asks the pair.

Derek nods, his slightly drunken-self wobbling as he stands up. “As always.”

“Nina?” Link says, turning to look at her.

“I’ll be able to make my own way home,” she comments as she stands up. But, upon making her first step - she wobbles and falls forward. However, before face planting the floor, Link catches her, pulling her back from the brink and straightening her up.

“I think not.”

Nina sighs, pouting. “Fine... But can I be dropped off last?”

“Nope - I get dropped off last, I’m the one that pays.” Link smirks, his hands still on her shoulders.

She rolls her eyes. “Can you drop me off near but not *at* my house, then?”

“Why?” Link probes, his brows pulling together and leaving small creases on his forehead.

“No particular reason, just don’t?” She says, her eyes wide.

Link bobs his head, moving his hands up and down her upper arms in a way of providing comfort. “Okay.”

Staggering through the streets, the three musketeers finally arrive at the Taxi bay, finding Link’s usual driver awaiting their arrival. “Hey, Lincoln. How are you tonight?” The driver asks as the three of them pile into the back seat - Nina in between the two men.

*Shame Derek’s gay...* Nina chuckles to herself, her inner dialogue seemingly as drunk as herself.

Link looks down at Nina; a curious expression on his face as if he tries to figure out why

she's cackling. "I'm fine..." He mumbles to the driver. He exchanges a glance with Derek before turning to the front of the car and putting his seatbelt on. "You okay, Neil?"

"Of course, I get off work after dropping you lot off," the man chuckles, turning his engine on and setting off.

First stop: Derek's house. Not too far out of town, the taxi pulls up outside a block of flats. Derek bids his farewells before stumbling out of the car and into the tall tower.

Next, Nina's stop. "Can you just drop me off here, please?" She asks as Neil turns into her estate.

"It's a bit of a rough area around here, though," he says, slowing down.

She shakes her head as the car comes to a stop. "I'll be fine." She pauses, getting out of the car. "See you tomorrow, Link." She says,

slamming the car door shut and heading down the street before ducking left.

“Can you drive down the street a little? I want to make sure she gets to her house,” Link comments.

Neil nods, driving forward - stopping at the end of the street. But, instead of finding her going into a house, they see her going into a small hostel at the end of the road.

“Fuck...” Link mumbles, his mouth gaping open.

Neil sighs in the front seat, slouching slightly. “Desperate times, maybe...”

Link frowns, an expression of sorrow on his face. “Maybe.”

The next day, Link walks into the office as he usually does, head high and a smile on his face. “Good morning!” Link says, announcing

himself, the usual bounce in his step. As he approaches his desk, he finds Nina looking at an email. He bends over, his face next to hers - inches apart. "Have we been given a new project?"

"Yeah - we're going to be working with Safia Bound," she explains.

"*Bound* as in how I keep people in my basement?" He asks.

The sexual undertone of the comment startling Nina slightly as her head whips around as she looks at him, finding a perfectly innocent expression on his face.

"I'm kidding - I don't keep *people* in my basement. I just keep one person on my bed at all times instead," he comments. He stands up straight and sits down at his desk as Nina's cheeks flush.

"Nina, are you okay?" Derek asks as he walks over.

Quickly looking back at her computer, she bobs her head. "I'm fine..."

"Safia Bound - multi-millionaire and owner of Hazy's," Link announces, leaning back in his chair. "Interesting."

"How so?" Nina questions.

Derek chuckles, sitting down at his desk.

"She's wondering if she's Bound by nature or by marriage."

"What's with all the sexual stuff today?" Nina asks, looking between the two men.

Link shrugs. "It's funny."

Nina shakes her head, getting the notes open that their new client had sent her. "She wants a Magenta and Green theme... Is this woman mad?"

"We'll see about that because she's coming in today," Derek mumbles, staring at his screen.

Link sighs. "I suppose we'll see..."

An hour has gone by while the three of them look research their new client, finding her to be successfully, and reportedly beautiful.

The receptionist if Noble Grafix approaches the three of them. “Lincoln, your new client is here,” she announces, gesturing to the small conference room nearby.

He nods, standing up and gesturing for both Derek and Nina to follow him - heading down the corridor of the office and into the conference room. Entering the room, the three of them find a tall, slim framed woman with long blonde hair pacing by the window - looking out onto the city’s skyline. “Ms Bound,” Link says, grabbing the woman’s attention. “My name is Lincoln Osbourne; this is Mx Nembhard and Mr Willow. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he announces, introducing the three of them. “How are you today?”

“Better now that you’re here,” Safia says sweetly.

“So, how can we help?” Derek asks, sitting down at the end of the table, gesturing for Safia and Link to sit down, too. Nina sits down next to Derek, feeling like some form of a third wheel with how cutesy Safia and Link are being.

“Well, I need a web design done, it’s for my food brand: Hazey’s. I was referred here by a friend, who’s worked with Mx Nembhard in the past,” the woman explains, smiling at Nina.

“Oh, great,” Link says, smiling like a Cheshire cat. “Well, let’s get started on some notes and we’ll see what we can do for you.”

A painfully long time later, Nina is wanting to rip her hair out and rip Safia’s head off, while Derek is wanting to watch gay porn after the

straight-talking Link has been doing with Safia...

“Thank you for all your help; I look forward to working with you in the future, Link,” Safia says, batting her eyelashes at him.

*I think I'm going to puke...* Nina walks past the two of them, heading back to her desk, Derek following close behind.

“I think he may actually like her,” Derek comments, sitting down at his desk next to Nina, not noticing Nina’s discomfort or anger at the situation.

“Seems like it,” she mumbles.

Link walks over, a wide grin on his face. “Well, that went well, don’t you think?”

“Suppose,” Nina mumbles, staring at her screen.

“Hey, you okay?” Link questions, putting his hand on her shoulder.

She turns around in her chair, looking up at him. "I'm fine."



## Chapter Three

*Another week, another day, another meeting that is going to greatly piss me off.* Two weeks since Safia Bound entered their lives, two weeks since Nina has wanted to get rid of her for good.

“Ms Bound, how are you today?” Link asks as he enters the conference room, twenty minutes late.

“Please, Link - call me Safia. I’m fine, how are you?” She smiles, the tone of her voice making Nina feel queasy.

“I’m fine,” he tells her as he sits down next to Nina. Looking at Nina’s laptop screen, he sees her work on the project for the first time in a week, his mouth gaping slightly. “That’s looking amazing,” he whispers to her.

Nina stays silent, continuing to work.

“Right. The design is almost done, but we do have some legal stuff to deal with. For example, payment - are you paying in full or are we setting up a monthly direct debit for the total of six thousand to be paid?” Derek asks, typing on his computer as he talks to Safia.

“I’ll pay in full,” she says.

Derek bobs his head in acknowledgement.

“Great. And would you like to take out a maintenance plan with us for a minimum term of three years, with the monthly cost being two hundred?”

*Please say no. Please say no. Please say no...*

“Yes, please,” Safia smiles.

*Fuck...*

“Okay, no problem. And that’s about it. You’ve already signed the general contract, so I’ll get

this one printed and sent over to you as soon as possible so that we can proceed.” Derek pauses. “Is the website finished?” He asks Nina.

“Done,” she comments, putting the design on the presentation board - allowing Safia, Derek, and Link to see her work.

“It’s amazing,” Safia gasps. “Thank you so much, Link,” she says, smiling.

*Are you fucking kidding me?*

“It had nothing to do with me, Safia. It was all this one,” Link laughs, patting Nina on the back.

The contact makes Nina move forward in her seat as if she’s trying to escape his touch.

“We’ll go sort the upload out and get the invoice sent,” Derek tells Safia, standing up and gesturing for Nina to follow him.

Picking up her laptop, she follows Derek out of the conference room and toward their desks - but before going back to the office, Derek ducks into a smaller conference room, pulling Nina in with him. “Are you okay?” He questions.

She shrugs, frowning slightly as she does. “Yeah?”

“You seem a little put off by Link at the moment...” Derek mumbles, a worried expression on his face.

Nina shakes her head, closing her eyes as she tries to calm down. “Honestly, I’m fine.”

“Promise?”

She opens her eyes to look at him. “I promise.”

It’s finally Friday, which means it’s time for the watering hole again; at the Merry-Go-Round pub, Link, Derek, and Nina sit at their

usual table. “Guys, we’ve done a great job. And I’d like to say well done to the pair of you for all your hard work,” Link says, smiling at the two of them.

“Thanks, Link,” Derek comments, taking another sip of his cider before finishing off his bottle.

“I’ll go get another round,” Nina tells the pair before getting up and heading to the bar.

“Link, now that we’re alone...” Derek pauses, waiting for Nina to be out of earshot. “I need you to do something for me, you find it a tad uncomfortable, but I need you to talk with Nina.”

“Why? What’s wrong?” Link asks, sitting forward.

Derek looks over at Nina, making sure she was still at the bar. “She’s having some self-esteem issues. According to Nina’s friend, Ana, Nina’s been having some issues with people

not taking much notice of her. And, I would do something myself, but I'm not straight... *at all...*"

"Why would you being gay matter?" He pauses. "Why is she having confidence issues? How?" Link probes, his brows narrowing and creasing his forehead, his mouth hanging open slightly in shock.

"She's in the hostel after a failed relationship and no one's been paying much attention to her - compliment her, maybe?" Derek mutters, seeming unsure about the situation.

Link sighs, looking over at Nina stood at the bar, a sorrow-filled expression on his face. "She did seem to like it when I commented on her hair a few weeks ago..."

"You did what?" Derek blurts.

Link smiles softly, remembering back to the day she got frightened by the Red Zone team. "I said I liked her hair..." He hesitates before

standing up, slowly making his way over to Nina, standing behind her. “Nina?”

She turns around, his proximity making her step closer to the bar. “Yes?”

“I just want to say, I’m pleased that you’re a part of our team. I don’t know how we functioned without you... You’ve brought a whole new perspective to the firm, and I really appreciate all your hard work,” he tells her, sincerity in his voice.

She bobs her head, pressing her lips together as she pouts. “Thank you.”

He smiles down at her, an awkward feeling in the atmosphere. The pair nods at each other before turning away from each other, Nina going back to looking at the bar while Link goes back to his seat. “What the fuck was that?” Derek groans, an embarrassed expression on his face.

“I didn’t know what to say,” Link growls.

Derek turns to him, swivelling in his chair to look at him. “Lincoln, you don’t like flirts, yet you are one of the best flirts I know. And the best *compliment* you could come up with was *Thank you for being a part of our team?* Fucking really?”

“I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t know what to say...”  
He mutters, leaning back in his seat and covering his mouth.

“Maybe that you like her because that’s fucking apparent at this point...” Derek mumbles.

Link’s eyes widen. “Excuse me?”

“What? Is it not true? You seem perfectly able to flirt with women you’re not interested in.”

“What’s happening?” Nina asks as she sets the three drinks down on the table.

“Ah, nothing. It’s fine,” Derek mutters, sitting back in his chair, taking a long drink of his cider.

Nina sits down, taking her drink and quickly downing it.

“Nina, I think you need to stop...” Link comments, her drinking causing him to worry.

“Nah, I’m fine...” She pauses. “Think I could pick up a hot girl?”

“Pick up, as in the action or as in a sexual manner?” Link probes, his eyes widening.

“Take your pick,” she says, heading over to the other side of the bar - entering the flirting zone.

After a few minutes, the two men staring in awe as a woman approaches Nina - holding Nina’s hand in a cutesy manner as they talk, before giving her a sweet peck on the lips. “I don’t think I’m comfortable with this... For too many reasons,” Derek says, staring. As if

unable to tear his eyes away from the scene that's unfolding before them.

"Neither am I..." Link mumbles, a pained look on his face.

"Stop her... Please..." Derek suggestions.

Link stands up, downing his drink causing him to feel a tad dizzy as he wanders across the room, approaching her. "Hey," he says. "We're heading out, are you coming?" He asks, looking between the two girls.

The girl with Nina gives Nina her phone back after putting her number in her contact. "I'll call you," Nina tells the girl, giving her a wink before following Link and Derek out of the bar. "Buzzkill much?"

"We're on the Saturday shift tomorrow," Link reminds her, keeping his eyes on the floor.

"Or maybe you were just jealous because you weren't getting any action," she growls,

stumbling beside Derek as Link walks off in front of them.

Link chuckles, stopping to turn around and look at her. “Yeah - she was hot.”

The comment, made in sarcastic jest, woke Nina up from her drunken state. She clenches her teeth, the small amount of happiness inside her fizzling out like yesterday’s campfire.

Link turns back around, heading up the hill toward the taxi bay. “He didn’t mean it...”  
Derek says as if he’d just seen a train wreck.

She shakes her head. “No... He did.”

Derek stops, holding Nina back with him.  
“Then, show him what he’s missing.”

Nina frowns, her brows narrowing and creasing the bridge of her nose. “I don’t understand.”

“Nina, you’re a stunning woman. You have perfect curves, a great overall figure, and a fantastic personality. Show some of it off, tease the cunt a little,” he encourages, tugging on her overly sized shirt, pulling at it to show off her hourglass figure.

“But he’s not interested...” She mumbles, drunkenly - slurring her words.

Derek pulls her as he starts walking again. As they begin to catch up with Link, Derek takes a pen out of his pocket and takes her hand, writing on her palm: wear something you *actually* like, *make* him interested.

“Are you two coming?” Link shouts, as he gets into Neil’s taxi.

The pair continue walking, Nina getting in before Derek. “Let’s go,” Nina slurs, leaning on Derek as she begins to get drowsy.

“Nina, remember what I said. If anything, just remember that,” Derek whispers, holding her hand, hiding the writing.

“I will...”

*Fuck sake...* Nina groans as her alarm clock wakes her up, the constant beeping irritating her and making her ears ring. Getting up, silencing her alarm clock, her head pounding. She pulls out her bag from under her bed, picking clothes for the day. *A Warm Saturday...* Looking down at her hand, she finds Derek’s message - slightly rubbed off, but still there. She frowns, trying to remember the night before. *I don’t know what happened, but I’ll try it.*

Searching through her clothes, she finds a black and white skull and crossbones dress. *I suppose this will do.* She gets up, taking the clothes to the bathroom with her - giving her a chance to get dressed.

“Mx Nembhard,” the hostel owner says, seeing Nina duck out of the sleeping room and into the bathroom.

Nina pops her head out of the bathroom door, looking at the old woman. “Yes, Ms Aldridge.”

“You are aware that it’s rent day tomorrow, yes?” The old woman asks, crossing her arms over her chest as she smiles at the young lady.

Nina bobs her head. “I’ve set up a direct debit to you - it’ll be going out today, and it should hit your bank tomorrow,” she tells the woman.

Ms Aldridge nods in acknowledgement. “Thank you, Nina. It’s a pleasure to have such a level-headed person in my hostel.”

“It’s a pleasure being here, Ms Aldridge.”

Thirty minutes later, ready to leave for work, waiting for Ana to pick her up, available for their 10am start. *What am I doing? I look like a*

*sexy woman...* Nina stares at herself in the full-length mirror, the dress hugging her curves. *Why is my stomach such a barrel?!* She frowns, her eyes drawn to her *problem area* as she looks at herself. *Time to get out of here before I decide to call in sick.*

“Nina, you look gorgeous...” Ana gasps, entering the room.

Nina smiles softly, her hands on her hips. “Do I actually look okay?”

Ana walks forward, cupping Nina’s face in her hands. “Babe, if I weren’t married - I’d ravish you...”

Nina gulps, a shocked expression on her face.

“Now, let’s get going.”

Twenty minutes later, arriving at work ten minutes before the beginning of their shift,

Nina starts to slow down, having second thoughts about the whole idea.

“I’m not sure if I’m going to be able to do this, there’s a reason I wear baggy clothes... I’ve always been a barrel,” Nina stutters, not wanting to enter the office.

Ana turns to her as she opens the door, holding it open for her. “You’re not a barrel. You’re barely plus size in my eyes. You’re in size sixteen dresses... I’d love to have your figure.”

“Why? You’re thinner than me...” Nina mumbles.

Ana shakes her head, letting go of the door and grabbing Nina’s hands. “Listen to me when I say this - you’re perfect. I don’t have any curves, you do - now rock them.” She lets go, turning back to the door and opening it for Nina.

The pair of them walk in, Ana going to her desk while Nina slowly approaches her own. Upon Nina's approach, Link looks up - his eyes bulging a little in shock. Her wiggle dress showing her body off more than anything he'd seen her in before. *Nina...* "Nina, you look amazing," he stutters as Nina sits down.

"Thank you," she says as she pulls herself closer to her desk.

Derek leans over, a broad grin on his face. "You look hot as hell..."

Nina rolls her eyes as she blushes. "Shut the fuck up... I don't know what happened last night, you need to tell me, so I get what's happening."

Derek leans in, his lips close to her ear to keep his whisper quiet. "Link got jealous of you and a girl last night, then he tried to make you jealous - so, here we are."

Derek leans back, going back to work. Nina looks at her computer, beginning to type. *Let's see how this goes...*

Sitting with Derek, Link, and Ana in the canteen, Nina is playing with her food while texting on her phone.

“Who are you talking to?” Link asks.

Ana frowns. “Mind your own business...”

Nina shrugs. “Nah, it’s fine. I’m talking to Bianca - the girl I met last night.”

“Oh,” Link mumbles.

Derek leans forward. “Is she Lesbian, Bi, or Pan?”

Nina looks up from her phone. “I don’t know, but she’s clearly into girls. Does it matter?”

“I’ve never asked, but what do you identify as?” Ana probes.

Nina pouts, pressing her lips together as she thinks. "I'm not sure. Pan, maybe?"

"Why do you think that?" Link questions, his brows pulling together. His usually soft blue-eyed gaze hardening in a stern look.

"I like women, men, and everything in between and outside of the boundaries. So, Pansexual fits," Nina says, looking back at her phone.

"Are you *actually* into this girl?" He blurts.

Derek and Ana exchange shocked glances.

"Why not? She's attractive, nice, and funny. She's everything I want in a partner..." Nina mumbles.

Link's jaw clenches, his stern expression turning angry. "Fine, enjoy," he says, getting up from the table and walking away.

"What the fuck..." Derek mumbles, his mouth gaping open. "Now I am confused, does he like

you or does he actually like her?” He asks Nina.

Ana sighs, “or is he just a prick?”

Nina shakes her head, rubbing her forehead as she bites her bottom lip. “Or is he just a protective person in a bad mood?”

Ana pouts, sitting back in her chair. “I suppose we’ll find out eventually...”

Their shift comes to an end, and Link hasn’t spoken to Nina for over two hours. “Are you ever going to speak to her again?” Derek asks, walking out of the office with him, Nina further in front with Ana.

“Maybe; maybe not. Does it matter?”

“Well, yeah, it sort of does...” Derek mutters.

“Now, you need to tell me why you’re being such a baby about this whole situation? Is it because you like Nina? Or Bianca? Or are you

really just an obnoxious asshole who wants every woman to fancy him?” Derek growls, stopping in his tracks - crossing his arms over his chest, demanding answers.

Link stops, looking at Derek, shaking his head. “Listen to me when I say this, okay? I’m not interested.”

Derek scoffs, “yeah, we’ll see about that.”



## Chapter Four

It's been four weeks since Nina has been dating Bianca, four weeks since her communications with Link broke down, four weeks since they started working separately.

Sitting at her desk, Nina is being deafened by Derek's poor singing of Happy Birthday.

"Happy Birthday!" Ana shouts, clapping.

Link walks over, holding a birthday cake with a twenty-six-number candle. "Happy birthday," he says, leaning down allowing her to blow out the candle.

"Thank you," she mumbles, going back to work seconds later.

"Are we going to Merry-Go-Round tonight?" Derek asks as everyone goes to sit down.

Nina shrugs. "I don't know. Bianca said she was going, but that was before she knew it was my birthday and she was going alone..."

"Trouble in paradise?" Link says, sitting at his desk - a worried expression on his face. This question being the first he'd asked her in the past month.

Nina sighs, an emotionless expression on her face - on the one day that she should be happy. "Suppose."

"More reason to go out then," Derek comments.

"I guess."

As lunchtime approaches, Derek is pestering Nina again. "Come sit with us," Derek says, gesturing for Nina to follow them - Link, Derek, and Ana wanting to go eat in the cafeteria.

“I don’t feel like it,” Nina grumbles, her stomach roaring as it tries to tell her to join them.

“C’mon, you need something to eat before we go drinking...” Ana crosses her arms over her chest, waiting for Nina to follow them.

Nina sighs, standing up from her desk. Showing the three of them her black mini skirt, black stockings, and suspenders matching with her red bow tie, dark red and black wedge heeled boots, and white shirt.

“Dapper,” Derek comments before turning around and heading downstairs, the rest of them following behind him.

Nina sighs, pressing her lips together as she follows. *Fuck my life.*

Sitting down in the cafeteria, they all open their sandwiches. “So...” Ana mumbles.

“What’s happening with Bianca?”

Nina shrugs. "I don't want to talk about it."

Ana bobs her head. "Fair enough."

"I was wondering," Link comments, pausing as he swallows the food in his mouth. "When we go to Merry-Go-Round tonight, why don't we book a dance floor near the bar? It might be a bit of fun having space to dance..."

Derek raises an eyebrow, a questioning look on his face. "Does that mean you're going to be dancing?"

Link shrugs, sitting back in his seat. "Maybe, if it will make the birthday girl happy - why not?"

A small smile seeps its way onto Nina's face. After such a long silence, she just can't stay mad at him. *God damn him.*

The shift ends as the four of them begin to walk down the street, Link and Derek tail

behind Ana and Nina. “I’ve booked a dance floor, so we should have a swell time,” Link comments.

“Liking her more, I see.” Derek smiles, referring to Nina’s current appearance and possible split from Bianca.

Link rolls his eyes, the comment infuriating him. “Ya know, I don’t really think that way... I can admire how she looks without getting sexual, ya know?”

Derek scoffs. “I don’t believe it.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t...”

Ana stops and turns to the two men. “Are you two finished with your mothers’ meeting?”

Derek nods, the four of them enter the bar - knowing that the rest of their work colleagues had set off half an hour earlier to get the area ready for the small get together.

“I don’t see Bianca in our area...” Link mumbles to Ana, frowning as he searches the crowd for her face. *I may not like Nina’s relationship, but I don’t want to see her hurt...*

Ana sighs, pressing her lips together and crossing her arms over her chest. “I don’t think this is going to go well...”

“What do you want?” Nina says as she goes over to the pair.

Link shrugs. “Usual.”

“I’ll have a vodka,” Ana says, smiling.

Nina nods, heading over to the bar.

“Happy birthday, Nina,” the bartender says.

“What can I get you?”

Nina smiles. “Thank you.” She pauses. “I’ll have two bottles of mixed fruit cider, and a vodka, please,” she tells him. As he turns away, getting Nina her drinks, Nina looks around - trying to spot Bianca in the crowd.

“See her yet?” Link asks, standing next to Nina at the bar. His height giving him some viewing advantages when looking for Bianca.

“Not yet,” she mutters, frowning. “Have you seen her?”

“I would have told you if I had...” He pauses. “Maybe she’s running late?” He suggests – trying to give her some hope that her girlfriend isn’t a piece of shit.

“Her last message says she’s here...” She gulps, her eyes wandering the field of faces until she finally finds Bianca... In the flirting zone, in the arms of another person. “I don’t think I’m in a relationship anymore...”

Link follows Nina’s gaze to a corner of the flirting zone, finding Bianca with another girl - having sexual relations. He inhales deeply, his anger boiling. “Nina... I’m sorry.”

Nina turns back to the bar, tears running down her cheeks. As the bartender puts the

drinks on the counter, Link presents his card to the card reader - paying for the drinks.

“Nina, what’s wrong?” The bartender questions, a sombre expression on his face.

“Bianca.” She takes her drink, downing a significant amount of it.

Standing behind her, being four inches taller than usual, Link puts his hands on her shoulders. “Stay here,” he whispers in her ear, keeping eye contact with her through the mirror behind the bar.

She nods in response to him.

He lets go of her, heading over to Bianca, who is groping a woman while a guy grinds against her from behind. “Bianca, we need to talk.”

She stops kissing the woman, turning to Link. “What is it, sweetie? Want to join in?”

Link scoffs, “definitely not. No, I want to know whether or not your relationship is over with Katrina.”

Bianca frowns. “Why? I’ve given her everything she wants...”

“I don’t think she wants herpes...” Link mutters, gesturing to the girl Bianca had been kissing.

“What are you talking about?” She groans.

Link frowns, his brows narrowing. “So, you think she’s going to be okay with you kissing Patient Zero and being dry-humped by Viagra boy?”

“Oh, did she not tell you? We’re in an open relationship!” Bianca says, trying to play off the sex act.

Link shakes his head. “Nah, that’s not true. And you know it. Nina is monogamous.” He pauses. “Oh, another tell-tale sign of you speaking BS is that she now believes that her relationship with you is over. On account of you being more interested in a dick rubbing and tongue tackling with someone else on *her*

birthday... So, I suppose this is Nina's Goodbye. Please don't approach her tonight, or in future." He stops, a broad grin on his face. "Have a lovely evening!" He turns around, quickly walking back over to the bar where Nina is stood - watching the entire argument from a distance. "Block her."

"What?" She blurts, a pained expression on her face.

He cups her face, his face inches away from hers. "Block her. She's not worth your pain, she's certainly not worth crying over. You deserve better." He hesitates, a sincere expression on his face. "Block her."

He lets go of her as she looks down at her phone, clicking on Bianca's messages and blocking her profile. She looks back up at him, tears in her eyes. "What did she say?"

Link frowns. Trying to hide his anger, he shakes his head. "Let's just say, she tried to

spin lies to make me think everything was okay...”

“Thank you,” she mumbles.

“For what?”

“Ending it.”

Link sighs, taking her hands and pulling her to him, embracing her in a hug. His cheek resting against the top of her head as her arms snake their way around his waist. “It’s what I’m here for, to make life easier for you.”

“Hey, is everything okay?” Ana asks as she approaches the pair of them.

Nina steps back, out of the hug, leaving Link looming over her. “It’s fine. I’m single again...”

Ana wraps her arms around Nina’s shoulders. “Babe, I’m so sorry...”

Nina shakes her head. “Don’t be. It’s what needed to happen.”

“Fuck that bitch,” Ana blurts, taking her vodka and downing it as Nina does the same with the rest of her cider.

“Fuck her,” Nina says, slamming her bottle back down on the bar top. “Can I have another cider, Frankie?”

The bartender turns around, handing her a bottle. Before she could put her card on the card reader, he shakes his head. “On the house.”

She smiles. “Thank you.”

Link puts his hand on the small of Nina’s back, directing her through the crowd to the area cordoned off for their little party. “Happy birthday,” he tells her before going to a corner of the party zone and sitting down at a table while Nina goes to mingle with her friends.

*Oh, Nina... I’m sorry for the shitty birthday.*

As it approaches 2 AM, the club is slowly emptying while the party continues. Link sits in the corner, only on his third drink while Nina is on the dance floor, acting erratically and out of character after having nine.

“I have no idea how she’s still going...” Derek comments, sitting down next to Link - panting after a half an hour dance with Nina.

“I don’t know how she’s dancing in those heels...” Link mumbles.

Ana wanders over, sweat drops on her forehead. “Can someone please ravish her before I cheat on my husband? She’s too sexy to exist... Those suspenders... her thighs,” Ava blurts, her mouth gaping open as if about to drool.

“I’m taken, it’s down to Link - and it doesn’t seem like she’s his type,” Derek says.

Link rolls his eyes. *Kill me.* “That’s not the case, at all...”

Ava is suddenly dragged back onto the dancefloor by Nina, the pair laughing as they dance, even though Ava looks exhausted.

“I’m not trying to pry, I just like joking about you - but, is there a reason you don’t want to get with her?” Derek questions, looking at Link.

“Not a reason that I’m currently willing to share,” Link mumbles.

Derek nods, pressing his lips together. “Fair enough, mate. Fair enough.”

4 AM came around quickly, a lot quicker than Nina had anticipated. In the taxi, on their way home, Nina is sleeping against Link’s arm as Neil drives them to the hostel. But, upon arriving, they find the doors locked. “Oh lord...” Link mumbles. “Nina?” He says, nudging her. “Nina.”

“Hmm?” She moans.

“What time does the hostel close for the night?” He enquires.

“2 AM... Why?” She asks, covering her mouth as she yawns, sitting up.

“It’s 4 AM...”

Facepalming hard, she curses, “shit.”

“What’s the plan now?” He questions, looking down at her as he tries to think of a plan.

“I don’t know...” She mutters, her voice breaking as if she’s about to start crying.

“I know it’s not ideal, but I have a spare room at mine if you want to camp out in there. You could borrow some of my sister’s clothes for tomorrow,” he suggests.

She looks up at him, her eyes wide. “You’d do that for me?” She asks drunkenly.

Link smiles, her happiness filling his chest with a warm feeling. “Of course. I’m not letting

you wait outside of this dump until whatever time it opens on a Saturday morning.”

She smiles, leaning up and kissing his cheek before snuggling down next to him again.

“Thank you.”

Link nods to Neil, gesturing for him to restart the car, before he whispers to her, “you’re welcome.”

After eight hours of sleeping, Nina rolls over in the spacious double bed, feeling like she’s in heaven. As her eyes begin to open, she takes in the details of the room, but as she does - she forgets where she is and how she got there.

She pulls the quilt away from herself, finding herself only wearing her underwear. She gulps, moving to the side of the bed, getting her clothes from the floor beside the bed and putting them on.

Heading over to the bedroom door, she opens the door, peeking out, finding an open plan living room and kitchen with Link sat on the sofa with a girl.

“Psst,” she whispers, attempting to grab Link’s attention. “Psst.” She sighs, shaking her head, looking back in the bedroom - finding a small pillow and throwing it out the door, hitting Link on the back of the head.

He turns around, seeing the bedroom door slightly ajar, and gets up to investigate.

“Nina?” He says, poking his head around the door, finding her stood in her crookedly buttoned blouse and pencil skirt. “Are you okay?”

“Why am I here?” Nina asks, crossing her arms over her chest to hide her breasts as best as she could - knowing that a button had popped off, causing there to be a gaping view hole in her shirt.

“I went to take you home, the hostel was closed because we’d stayed out too late, so I offered for you to stay in my spare room...” He pauses. “I’ll go get you some new clothes,” he says, turning around and going back to the living area. “Hey, can my friend borrow some clothes?”

The girl gets up, going into another bedroom, coming out with a pile of clothes and giving them to Link. “If she needs a different size, let me know - Hayley may be a better fit,” the girl tells him.

“No problem. Thanks, Gabby,” Link says before going back to the spare room, entering and putting the clothes on the bed. “Hopefully you’ll find something you can wear in these. If not, let me know - Gabby says Hayley may have something that could fit if need be.”

“Who are they?” Nina mutters.

“Gabby, Gabriella, is my sister. Hayley is Gabby’s wife,” he explains, keeping his eyes off

her. "I'll let you change." He turns around, leaving the room.

Nina starts looking through the clothes, finding a cute black and white mini dress. Replacing her skirt and blouse with the mini dress, she puts her stockings and suspenders on, puts her shoes on and stuffs her clothes in her bag after making up the bed. Leaving the room, she finds Link and Gabby back on the sofa. She approaches them, feeling awkward. "Hey," she mumbles. "Thanks for letting me borrow your dress."

Gabby smiles up at her, her eyes wandering over Nina. "No problem, keep it if you like. It suits you more than it suits me," she chuckles.

Nina bobs her head. "Thanks."

"Do you want anything to eat or drink?" Link asks, gesturing for Nina to sit down.

"Nah, I'm fine. I need to get going," Nina says.

Link gets up from his seat. “You don’t have to go...”

“No, I need to. I’ve got some stuff to do... Sorry,” she mutters, pressing her lips together as she awkwardly plays with her bag.

“Okay,” Link stutters. Walking around the sofa and heading to the front door. “Are you okay?” He asks her, frowning.

“I’m fine, honestly. Thank you for looking after me.” She smiles softly.

He bobs his head, opening the front door.

Nina reaches up, kissing him on the cheek before stepping out of the apartment. “I’ll see you on Monday,” she tells him before leaving, waving goodbye as she goes.

Link closes the door before going back to sit next to his sister. “Kill me.”





## Chapter Five

With Monday morning swinging around quicker than anticipated, Nina, Derek, and Link are sat at their desks, working as they try to catch up with the work they'd missed over the previous week.

“So, how was your hangover on Saturday?”

Derek asks Nina, chuckling.

Nina sighs, frowning as she continues to type.

“It was surprising, but fine.”

Derek looks over at Nina, a confused expression on his face. He swivels his chair around to face her. “How was it surprising?”

Nina shrugs. “I didn't exactly wake up where I thought I would,” she mumbles.

Derek raises an eyebrow, questioning Nina's comment. "Pardon?"

Nina tears her eyes away from her screen to look at him. "By the time I got back home, the doors were locked. So, I slept over at a friend's house."

As his eyes widen, Derek turns back to his computer. His mouth gaping open as his usually chatty-self becomes speechless.

Link hangs his head, feeling as if the world is gawking at him. *Please let this day end quickly...*

As the new week begins, the team have a new client to work with. "Mr Ian Gibson, please meet Katrina Nembhard," Derek announces them as she enters the room.

"Nembhard, interesting name," Ian chuckles, his eyes wandering over Nina - becoming more comfortable with her body image, she's

continued wearing tight-fitting dresses, her current one is a red, blue, and white spotted black swing dress.

“It’s Germanic,” she comments, sitting in between Derek and Link.

“Nemb has a sexual undertone to it, doesn’t it?” Ian grins, a sinister smirk on his face.

“Somewhat, if you go by modern slang that is,” Nina says.

“Do you often make Nemb’s hard, Katrina?” Ian questions, his smirk widening to a smile.

She grits her teeth, keeping a straight look on her face. *Don’t vomit. Please, do not vomit.*

“I imagine she probably does, Mr Gibson. However, that’s none of your business,” Link interrupts.

Link’s comment makes Nina’s anxious self unknot in her core as she calms down.

“Oh, Mr Osbourne... You’re a spoilsport,” Ian groans.

“Am I? Or am I just a professional person?”

Link scoffs. He stands up from his seat, gesturing for Nina to follow him out of the room. Outside, Link closes the door behind them. “I need you to wear this,” he says, taking an engagement ring out of his pocket.

“Excuse me?” She blurts.

Link rolls his eyes. “I’m not proposing.” He pauses. *Yet.* “I’ve worked with Ian before, when Ana was still on my team. When she was single, he harassed her; after getting engaged, he left her alone. Wear it, he doesn’t know whether you’re single yet. If we make him think you’re not, he should leave you alone...” He mumbles. As she takes the ring, he shakes his head - feeling ashamed of having to hide a woman behind an engagement ring just to make the old bastard leave her alone. “I fucking hate this...”

Nina's eyes widen, hearing Link curse being an unfamiliar experience for her. "Okay..." She mutters, putting it on her ring finger.

"If he says anything, asks anything about your partner, make sure to tell lies that work together. He will grill you on it if he thinks you're lying," he explains.

"Did he do all this to Ana?" She questions. Gulping, Link bobs his head. "Is that why she moved teams?"

Link sighs, rubbing his chin. "She left because of him being a cunt... I won't deny it. I'd refuse to work with the guy if I could..."

"Why can't we?" Nina frowns.

"Because every time I complain, we lose our woman colleague to a different team... They won't let us just not work with him. They just take out the *issue*..." He says, pressing his lips together, closing his eyes as he crosses his

arms over his chest. “And I don’t want you to move to another team...”

Nina sighs, looking up at him. She touches his elbow, prompting him to open his eyes. “Can I at least get a fake proposal?”

He grins, chuckling slightly at her comment as she smiles up at him. “Sweetheart, if you can get rid of him by the end of the week, I’ll give you a real proposal.”

Pouting as she tries to hide her smile, her cheeks blushing bright red. “Deal.”

Lunchtime comes around, too slowly for Nina’s liking, but quick enough to get rid of him for the day.

“I hope the old fuck dies,” Ana scoffs, taking another bite of her sandwich.

“You should have heard his opening phrase with Nina: Do you often make Nemb’s hard,

Katrina?” Link growls, shaking his head and taking a drink. “I wanted to kill the fucker.”

“I’ve never heard you swear so much in the entire time of knowing you...” Nina mumbles before putting a fork of pasta in her mouth.

He shrugs. “The guy angers me.”

“We can see that,” Derek chuckles.

“Also, Link needs to get a girlfriend in the next four days,” Nina comments.

“Why?” Ana questions.

Nina displays the ring on her ring finger before pointing to Link. “He said if I got rid of Ian by the end of the week, he’d give me a real proposal.”

Ana and Derek’s mouths hang open. “Please tell me you’re getting married for more than just wanting Ian to go away,” Ana gasps.

Link grins, shaking his head. “Of course, it’s more than just getting rid of him... Have you seen her body?”

“Lincoln!” Derek tries to catch his breath, his heart pounding.

Nina smirks, the situation pleasing her more than she’d anticipated - even if it is all a charade.

Licking his lips as he looks at Nina, Link winks - sending Ana and Derek into heat. “Oh my, God. Can I watch you have sex?” Ana blurts.

Link’s eyes bulge out, his beautiful expression vanishing as he looks at Ana - his face like stone, full of shock.

“I think not...” Nina says, looking between Link and Ana, the pair of them staring at each other.

“Okay, I think we need to go back to work...”  
Derek mutters, helping Link get up, the two men stumbling out of the cafeteria.

Ana turns to Nina. “Please tell me I didn’t say that aloud...”

Nina sighs, smiling, shaking her head as she stands up. “I cannot deny such truths.”

Tuesday, it’s time for their second round with Ian.

“Nina will be working on the project all week to make sure the website is perfect,” Derek tells Ian as Nina and Link enters the conference room.

The middle-aged, balding man grins in an unsettling way. “Miss Nembhard... How are you today?”

“Mx. And I’m fine,” she says, sitting down between Link and Derek.

“Yes, you are...” He groans.

Link’s hand grasps Nina’s under the table, a gesture of comfort but benefiting him more than her.

“Now, Mr Gibson. I’d like to know what sort of colour scheme you’d like for your website,” Nina says, picking her pen up with her left hand, ready to take notes.

“Well, I’d like red and black to be the main colours. Are you aware of what I do for business, Miss Nembhard?” Ian asks, his voice croaky as he leans forward.

“Mx. No, I don’t know. It’s not too relevant for my job. I’m a designer, not a marketer,” she tells him, writing on the piece of paper. Her left hand is a little messier than her right when writing.

“How are you doing that?” Link whispers, watching her write with her left hand.

“Ambidextrous,” she whispers, softly. “Now, what sort of style do you like? Side sweeping, constant scrolling? Pages?”

“I don’t know, Miss Nembhard. Maybe you need to test one of my products and see what you’d want from my site when buying in future,” Ian chortles, the fat around his neck jiggling as he laughs.

“Mx. But, what makes you think I’d be in your target audience for your products?” She asks, raising her left eyebrow.

“You’re a woman, aren’t you?” Ian sniggers, slumping back in his chair.

A sickening feel lands in the pit of Nina’s stomach. “Women aren’t all the same, Mr Gibson. I’d think you of all people would know that,” she tells him.

He frowns. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I can imagine that some women take your sexual harassment as compliments.

Others see it for what it is. But, there's also the women who are probably willing to treat you nice to get money out of you. However, as I said, not all women are the same, because I will not be doing such a thing with you. Now, if you can stop being a sexual pig, we can continue working and hopefully get you out of this building quickly so that we can sterilise the place after your visit," Nina blurts.

Her comments leave Link and Derek holding in their laughter, the faces turning bright red as they try to keep themselves composed while a red with embarrassment expression appears on Ian's face. Link's hand tightening on Nina's as he tries to hold in the laughter.

"Now." Nina pauses, trying to continue as usual. "What type of scroll mechanism would you like?"

A long week later, Nina arrives in the office Friday morning to find Link and Derek laughing and relaxing at their desks.

“What’s happening?” Nina asks, sitting in her chair and turning her computer on.

Link looks at her left hand, finding the engagement ring on her finger. “It looks like you need to keep that ring on.” Link smiles.

Nina’s eyes widen as she works on getting her emails open, finding an acceptance email from Ian. *Wait... I did it? But... Link’s not being serious, right?*

“Why don’t you look happy?” Link questions, his brows narrowing and creasing his forehead.

“Well, I am...” She mumbles. “I just thought you were joking about the whole engagement thing...”

Link makes an o with his mouth. “Well, of course, it was... We’re not even in a

relationship...” He laughs awkwardly, turning back to his computer.

Nina looks down at her hand, playing with the ring before taking it off and placing it on his desk. “Ya know, it wasn’t so bad being engaged to you,” she mumbles.

He looks up at her, a soft smile on his face as he attempts to hide his sorrowful expression. “Thanks.”

As it gets to lunchtime, the three of them join Ana at their usual table in the canteen. “So, when’s the wedding?” Ana squeals.

“You do know we were joking, right?” Nina comments, sitting down next to her with her salad.

Ana’s smile soon fades as she looks up at Link. “Damn it...”

“You actually thought we were going to get married? We’ve not known each other long enough, and we’ve not been in a relationship. It wouldn’t be logical,” Link scoffs, trying to act cool about the situation.

“Okay...” Derek mumbles, trying to move onto a new topic. “Nina, I know it’s a personal question, but why do you live in a hostel, anyway? You get the same wage as me, why not move into a flat?”

She shrugs. “I don’t really need to right now. I will be buying a flat eventually, but I want to get some savings behind me first. I don’t want to end up in a hostel again...”

The three of them bob their heads in acknowledgement of Nina’s predicament. “Well, in future, if you need a place to stay because we keep you out too late, you can always bunk at mine. I’m sure Sal won’t mind you staying at ours,” Ana says, putting some pasta on her fork.

Nina smiles. "Thanks, Ana."

Back to their usual waterhole, Ana is praising the riddance of Ian. "Well done to my best friends - Nina, Derek, and Link - for getting rid of Ian indefinitely!" Ana cheers, raising her drink to the three of them.

They all raise their drinks, taking a few sips. "We couldn't have done it without Nina," Derek says, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

Nina shrugs, taking another drink. "It was a team effort."

Ana leans toward Nina, her lips close to Nina's ear. "It's like you had some form of encouragement to get rid of him quickly..."

She whispers, grinning. Nina kicks Ana's shin, making Ana back away as she giggles. "Shall we go for a dance?" Ana asks, rubbing her leg.

Nina sighs. "Why not?"

As the lights begin to flash, disco night at the Merry-Go-Round beginning, Nina starts to twirl uncontrollably after having six pints of cider in two hours.

Ana heads over to Link, and Derek sat at the bar. "Hey, I think we need to take Nina home..." Ana slurs.

Link gets up from his seat, heading over to the main dance floor, finding Nina in the crowd. Taking her hand, he stops her and pulls her to him. "Hey," he says. "Are you okay?" He asks.

She grins up at him, raising her hand to his face - tracing his jawline with her fingertips. "I'm perfect..." She mutters. "I'm with you..."

Link smiles, captivated by her face - her plump, red-painted lips seeming so soft. "Nina..." He pauses, cupping her face in his hands, his thumbs tracing the edge of her bottom lip. "Can I-"

She stands on her tiptoes, interrupting his sentence, pressing her lips to his. He doesn't hesitate, reciprocating the kiss, his tongue tasting her lips - her cherry lipstick making his taste buds go crazy.

The pair break for air, staring into each other's eyes as they try to catch their breaths. "I'd invite you back to mine but it ain't too great for privacy..." Nina stutters.

Link chuckles, "it's okay. We don't need to do any of that."

She nudges his nose with hers, their lips grazing against each other. "I think I need to stop drinking before I do something stupid," she giggles, her eyes half open as she looks up at him in a daze.

"Hometime, I think," Link says, wrapping his arms around her waist, slowly guiding her away from the dance floor.

Ana's eyes widen. "I think someone's going to have to carry her..." She stutters, looking at the state Nina's in.

Still cradling her in his arms, Link nods. "I will - don't worry." Stepping back slightly before picking her up in a bridal fashion.

"Ooo," Nina sniggers, relaxing in Link's arms.

Link sighs, walking toward the exit. "Let's get you home..."

## Chapter Six

Monday morning arrives, and Nina had been so obliterated on Friday night that her memories of the evening were utterly blank...

Coming to work, she finds Link stood outside of the front doors of the building wearing one of his usual suits and matching bowtie, cigarette in hand. "I didn't know you smoked," she says as she approaches him.

"I didn't know you were a cherry lady, I guess we all have secrets," he chuckles, giving her a wink as he takes another puff. A confused expression appears on her face. *She can't remember...* "We swapped drinks by accident - some of your lipstick had been left on the bottle, I ended up tasting it," he jokes. *If this*

*were a video game, I'd be getting a level up on renegade.*

Nina makes an o shape with her mouth. “I getcha now...” She mumbles, bobbing her head. “I’ll leave you to your cig,” she says, smiles, and heads into the building.

Link nods to her, taking another puff as she goes in, tears welling in his eyes as she goes out of sight. *Of course, she fucking forgot...*

As their shift starts, the three of them begin typing away on their computers, Link and Nina sit in silence - getting their paperwork up to date while they’re project and Derek free.

“Did you do anything good over the weekend?” Link asks, his eyes glued to his monitor as he attempts to make small talk.

“I went for a meal with a few friends... Anything interesting for you?” Nina says, staring at her screens.

Link shrugs. “I met a girl and spent some time with Gabby.”

Nina stops typing, still looking at her screen. “Who’s the girl?”

“You met her on Friday night, I suppose you don’t remember,” Link chuckles lazily as he tries to leave her hints.

“Was she nice?” She questions, going back to typing.

Link bobs his head, pressing his lips together. “She was glorious...”

Nina stops, turns to him and smiles. The smile feeling fake to Nina and looking false to Link. “She must have been really nice. I hope I get the chance to see her again.”

A broken smile appears on Link’s face as he turns to look at her, holding her gaze. “I hope I get to see her again, too.”

The following day, lunchtime, both Ana and Derek are back in work. “Have you told her yet?” Derek asks as he sits next to Link at their usual table in the cafeteria.

Link frowns. “What do you mean?”

Derek rolls his eyes. “You thought I didn’t know about the kiss? Mate... I saw every second of it. I’m not blind.” He pauses. “Ana, on the other hand, was completely oblivious. So, she won’t be able to tell Nina anything.”

Link swallows a chunk of chicken, his brows pulling together as he stares down at his food. “I’m not telling her...”

Derek groans. “Why? Are you only going to be happy when she gets drunk enough to kiss you? She’s never going to remember anything, and you’re going to be left heartbroken every time.”

“I can’t tell her,” Link growls, balling his fists as he tries to stay calm.

Nina and Ana finally join the pair of them, Nina sitting opposite Link. “What’s happening?” She probes.

“Nothing,” Link says calmly, looking up at her.

“Link kissed someone on Friday night,” Derek blurts.

Nina and Ana’s mouths fall open, an expression of shock on their faces. Ana shocked by the fact Link got intimate with another person. “Was it the girl you met?” Nina probes, her eyes wide as she stares at him.

Before Link could say anything, Derek interrupts. “And it’s someone at this table,” he babbles. Like a reflex, Link’s left-hand swings and hits Derek in the gut. “Ow...”

“Link!” Ana gasps, an angered look on her face. “Is it true?”

Link sighs, sitting back in his chair. “Yes...” He mumbles. “Sorry, Derek.”

Derek shakes his head. “It was for a good cause.” He pauses. “Remember me as a martyr,” he says, before letting his head fall back – his tongue falling out of his mouth as he fake dies.

“Well, it wasn’t me. So, who was it?” Ana stutters, looking between Nina and Derek.

*We kissed?* Nina stares off into the distance, trying to remember Friday night.

“Nina,” Link mutters, staring straight at her. “Nina?”

She snaps out of her trance, looking around the table. “What?”

“Did you hear what he just said?” Ana asks.

“Me...” Nina mutters, standing up and heading out of the cafeteria.

Following her out, Link finds her standing outside the front door to the building leaning

against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest. “Are you okay?”

“You lied to me. You didn’t meet a girl, you didn’t accidentally taste my lipstick by drinking from my bottle...” She pauses, keeping her gaze from him.

“I didn’t know what to tell you...” He mumbles.

“The truth would have been useful... It would have saved the awkwardness that we’ve had over the past twenty-four hours.” She pauses, shaking her head. “For fuck sake, Link, you could have told me... Instead, you made me look like an idiot.”

Link laughs sarcastically. “So, you think it would have gone down better if you knew that you were so wasted that you can’t even remember our first kiss?”

His comment stuns her, her mouth gaping open as she looks up at the tall man. His cheeks flushed. “Our first?”

He closes his eyes, bowing his head as he pinches the bridge of his nose. “Like I said yesterday,” he says, looking back to her. “I hope I get to see you again...”

Inhaling deeply, Nina presses her lips together before taking a packet of cigarettes out of her back pocket, offering him one. They both take one, putting them in their mouths. Nina gets her lighter, sparking it. The pair get closer together, putting the ends of the cigs in the large petrol flame. Taking a long puff, they both exhale. “We’ll see...”

Link frowns. “I didn’t know you smoked.”

Nina shrugs. “I smoke when I’m stressed. I haven’t been a smoker for four years.”

Link’s brows pull together, creasing his forehead as a curious expression appears on his face. “What made you stressed enough to have a cig now?”

She takes another, long drag - letting the smoke out in a long exhale. "You."

Wednesday morning, sitting at their desks - the three of them sit in complete silence. Link sagged in his seat as he stares, groggily eyed at his computer screen. *You're an idiot.* He sighs, having a conversation in his own head. *I know I am, but hey - we were going to get hurt again, eventually...* His desk phone rings. He slumps forward, picking up the phone and holding it to his ear. "Hello, Lincoln speaking."

"Link, hey!" A chirpy sounding woman says. "How are you?" The woman quizzes.

With his lips set in a grim line, Link tries to remember the voice. *Who?* He stares at his screen before looking down at the phone, recognising the number. *Bound.* "I'm fine, Safia. How are you?" He questions.

“Oh, I’m great! I just wanted to see if you were doing anything on Saturday. I know this isn’t a work conversation, but I don’t have another number for you,” she chirps.

Peering up at Nina, his pupils dilating. *Should I?* He looks back to his computer. “Sorry, I can’t,” Link hesitates. “I’m busy on Saturday.”

“Oh,” she says glumly. “Never mind, we’ll just have to arrange to meet up another time, I suppose.”

“Yeah, I suppose so,” he proclaims, sinking in his seat. “Goodbye, Safia.” Before bidding her farewell, Safia hangs up.

Link closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose again. *Another woman disappointed by my existence.*

“Why was Safia calling?” Nina coaxes, trying to get information out of him without seeming too interested.

Link hunches over, crossing his arms and leaning against the desk. “She wanted to know if I was available on Saturday.” A lament expression on his face as he stares down at his keyboard.

“What are you doing on Saturday night? Other than spending time with your sister?” Nina challenges, a hint of satire in her voice as she continues to type.

Link inhales shapely, gritting his teeth as he tries to calm himself. “Nothing.”

“Then why not go out with her?” Nina mumbles.

Link slowly shakes his head, a look of disbelief on his face. “Maybe because I’m not interested.”

Nina’s eyes glance away from her screen, peeking in Link’s direction. “I don’t know why you wouldn’t be...”

“Can we just acknowledge that I don’t want her and get on with our lives?” Link snaps, clenching his jaw.

The sudden anger in the room makes both Nina and Derek stop working, looking at Link - shocked and confused expressions on their faces. “Link... I’m sorry,” Nina blurts.

With a lacklustre smile on his face, he sighs, “no, you’re not.”

“Good Morning!” Gabby sings, entering her brother’s room as she does every Saturday morning. Stopping at the foot of his bed, squinting as she attempts to figure out what’s happened. “Link, why are you cuddling a whiskey bottle?”

“Because it’s my one true love...” He announces, drunkenly slurring his words before kissing the bottle. “Are you ashamed?” He gasps, looking up at his sister.

With an eyebrow raised and her hands on her hips, she rolls her eyes. “Give me the bottle,” she says, holding her hand out to take the beverage, knowing he’d had more than enough and clearly not slept.

He sits up, handing her the bottle. Staring at her as she puts the bottle on the dresser behind her, she turns back to look at him. His face featuring nothing but sadness, she crawls onto the bed, lying down next to him as he lies down, too. “I’m sorry,” he whines.

“I know,” she tells him. “It’s okay, but you need to tell me what’s wrong so I can help...”

He sighs, squeezing his eyes shut as he rubs them. “Katrina...”

“What about her?” Gabby pleads, hoping to get the issue out of him. Knowing how difficult he can be with his problems.

“I like her.” He hesitates. “And I don’t think she likes me...”

Gabby sighs, staring up at the ceiling, her lips pulling to one side as she pouts. “You know, she may not...”

Link scoffs. “Thanks, Gabriella.”

“However.” Gabby pauses, turning onto her side to look at her brother. “She might really like you but just not know how to interact with you.”

He looks at her frowning, his brows pulling together. “What do you mean?”

“Sweetie, I don’t know if you’ve noticed - but most people flirt with someone before they decide to get into a relationship with them. You may not like flirts, but that’s generally how it works. She may not understand how to interact with you because of that,” she explains.

Link exhales. “What should I do?” He slurs, his mind still in a drunken state.

Gabby smiles. "It's straightforward..." She hesitates. "Talk to her."

"Have you finished hibernating yet?" Gabby asks, sitting on the end of Link's bed, waking him up on the early Monday morning, after taking four weeks of annual leave in a row.

"I have to be - I've run out of leave..." He groans, sitting up in his bed, rubbing his eyes as he tries to wake up. "Is it summer yet?"

"I cannot confirm nor deny the current existence of summer," Gabby chuckles. "It's almost your birthday..."

Link frowns as he sighs, "so, what you're saying is that I'm getting old."

Gabby rolls her eyes. "That's not what I meant, and you know it."

"But I don't want to think about getting old," he bickers, falling back into his bed.

“I know you’re older than me, but can I comment on the fact that I look ten years older than you look? You look like you’re twenty-two... I look like I’m thirty-two,” she hisses, his youthful glow irritating her.

“Oh, shush,” he chuckles, once again rubbing his eyes. “You look glorious.”

“And you don’t?” Gabby exclaims, raising her left eyebrow as she looks down at her brother.

“Babe, trust me when I say this - four of my girlfriends wouldn’t have left me to try and get with you if you weren’t as glorious.”

“Sorry,” he sighs, pressing his lips together.

She shrugs. “It’s fine, if it weren’t for you distracting them from me, I would probably never have met Hayley,” she chirps, standing up from the bed. “Now, stop moaning and groaning - it’s time to face your daemons, Lincoln.”

He gawks as she leaves the room. “Bollocks...”



## Chapter Seven

Turning up at work, wearing a maroon suit and white shirt, Link enters the office.

Colleagues smiling and waving in his direction as he walks past while they continue working.

“Link!” Derek beams, watching as Link approaches.

“Hey,” Link chuckles, sitting down at his desk.

“Where’s Katrina?” Link questions.

Derek shrugs. “Late again, I suppose. She’s having some living accommodation issues at the moment, so we’ll see,” he explains, cocking his head to one side as he stares at his computer screen. “I’m sure she’ll figure it out, though.”

With a lacklustre smile on his face, Link bobs his head in acknowledgement. “I suspect so...”

An hour into their shift, Nina finally turns up. “Hey, fellas,” Nina says to the pair as she settles down at her desk.

“Hey,” Derek sings as he smiles. “How are you, dear?”

She sags into her chair, covering her mouth with her hands as she yawns. “I’m fine, tired, but fine. How are you two?” She asks, looking from Derek to Link and back.

“I’m okay. But, how is Link...?” Derek mumbles.

A happy smile on Link’s face for the first time in weeks. “Link is fine. Link will be happier once Link knows why Link is being referred to as if Link isn’t here,” he chortles, a satirical tone to his voice.

“Maybe because Link hasn’t been here in a month,” Nina giggles, grinning as she looks at

him, the time away seemingly calming the situation.

“Does Link need a spanking?” Derek says suggestively, giving Link a wink from across the desk.

With an arched eyebrow, Nina smirks.

“Maybe.”

*Am I in the right office?* Link eyes dart from one to the other. “Excuse me?”

Nina stands up, walking around to the back of Link’s chair - leaning forward, her breasts touching the back of his left shoulder as she bends down - her lips close to his ear. “We’re just messing with you.”

He lets out a chuckle of relief, blinking owlishly as he turns his head to look at her. “If I need to be punished...” He mutters.

With a cocky wink and a confident smile, Nina heads back to her desk. “Maybe later.”

*Yes, Ma'am.*

An hour later and Kira French - the new CEO of Red Zone - has arrived to speak with the Noble Grafix squad.

“Where’s Link?” Kira asks, looking around the office - making both Derek and Nina feel somewhat invisible.

“He’s busy,” Nina huffs, holding her head high as she tries to stay professional.

Kira rolls her eyes. “But I don’t want to deal with *you*,” Kira hisses, turning away from the two of them and heading to the conference room.

“Can I kill her?” Nina growls.

Entering the office, approaching the pair from behind, Link overhears Nina’s comment. “Kill who?”

“Kira,” Derek grumbles.

Shaking his head as he runs his fingers through his thick, blond hair. "I'd be more than willing to watch you kill her..." He mumbles, pressing his lips together.

Nina looks up at him, wearing flat boots for the first time in years, the height difference astounding her. "Shall we go then?"

Derek nods toward the conference room, Nina and Link following close behind. As Derek goes in, Link stops at the door - out of sight of Kira.

Nina pauses, turning to Link, seeing him frozen in place. "Are you okay?"

"I'm not a fan of her..." He says, fretting as he looks into the room through the small window in the door.

"Neither am I..." Nina sighs. "For different reasons, though, I imagine."

Link crosses his arms in a defensive, secluding stance, looking down. After a minute, his eyes glance at her left hand -

finding an engagement-like ring on her ring finger. “You’re engaged?” He asks, gesturing to the ring on her hand.

Putting her hands in her pockets, her cheeks reddening. “Not exactly...”

His left eyebrow arches as he looks at her. A confident smile on his face for the first time in over a month. “Oh? So, what’s happening?”

“I like wearing a ring - it puts people off.” She cringes, an awkward tone in the air as she tries to ignore the cockiness of his smile.

He steps closer to her, taking hold of her arm. Pulling her hand out of her pocket and looking down at the ring. “It’s pretty.”

She looks away, avoiding eye contact as she bites her bottom lip.

“I have a favour to ask,” he mutters, running his thumb over the jewels.

“And what’s that?” She questions, looking up at him - the soft expression on his face shocking her.

“Do it for me...” He hesitates. “Pretend you’re my fiancée...”

Nina’s eyes widen. “What does this involve?”

“Hand-holding?” He questions, his brows pulling together.

She pouts. “That may not be realistic enough.”

Link’s eyebrows raise as an expression of shock surfaces on his face. “What are you suggesting?”

Nina shrugs, stepping closer - the distance between them only centimetres now. Standing on her tiptoes, her lips close to his ear. “We’ll see.” Taking his hand, she turns away - entering the conference room with him.

“Link!” Kira smiles. But, her smile soon fades as she sees Link holding Nina’s hand. “What’s that all about?” She scoffs arrogantly.

“You’ve been intimate with enough people to know, Ms French,” Link jokes, sitting down with Nina.

Kira rolls her eyes, sitting back in her seat.

“So, Ms French. You came in for something today, what do you need from us?” Derek asks.

Kira smirks. “I need Link to be the main person on maintenance, it seems like *she* has some issues with upholding the site...”

“Oh? I’ve not been told of any issues,” Nina says, raising her eyebrow.

“Well,” Kira stutters. “There hasn’t been *yet*.”

Link eyes close as he sighs. “Why have you really come here, Ms French?”

She pouts. “I heard my friend Miss Bound made an advance on you, I wanted to know why you turned her down...” She hesitates. “I thought it could have been me...”

Nina giggles uncontrollably, like a teenage schoolgirl.

Kira grits her teeth, standing up and leaning forward, practically presenting her chest to him. “So you’re actually with this freak?”

“I feel like this could have been more of a social visit than a business venture. Maybe you should leave,” Derek chuckles, covering his eyes as he attempts to shield himself from the unwanted *boobage*.

“I can prove it, if you like. After all, you’ve known Link long enough to know he’s not intimate with just *anyone*.” Nina smirks. Kira’s eyes widen, watching as Nina uses her index finger to turn Link’s head before pressing her lips to his, their nose nudging each other as the kiss heats up slightly, Link’s hands on her

waist as Nina's hands hold onto the base of his neck. Derek turns to look, his mouth gaping open.

With a foul expression on her face, Kira straightens up and promptly heads for the door. Opening the door. "I hope you know what you're doing, Lincoln," she growls, slamming the door behind her.

Nina promptly pulls away, licking her lips - the taste of him on her tongue. "I think she believed it."

Link sits there, in a state of surprise, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open slightly. "Yeah, I think so..." *So did I...*





## Chapter Eight

*Another week, another day, another year of growing old...* Link steps off the bus, seeing the rain pouring outside. *Fuck life...* Heading toward the exit of the bus station, Link walks into a young woman with maroon hair, a small tartan mini skirt, striped tights and a white blouse underneath a long, black trench coat. He catches her. "Sorry, Miss," he tells her. The woman turns around, looking up at Link, his eyes widening. "Nina."

She smiles as she uses him to steady herself. "Hey. You okay?" She asks; her large, brown eyes peering up at him.

"I'm good..." He mutters. "You've dyed your hair again," he chuckles, looking at the long maroon coloured locks.

She shrugs, a cheeky and playful grin on her petite, pale, round face. Her usual red-painted lips being a matte lilac. “It’s apparently called Pohutukawa - if I’m pronouncing that correctly,” she giggles, the action showing her dimples on each side of her face, in the centre of her cheeks displaying small diamonds.

“Are your cheeks pierced?” Link asks, raising his left eyebrow as he toothy smile surfacing on his face.

She scrunches her nose, her smirk growing. “They’ve been pierced since I was around twelve.”

A dumbfounded expression jumps on Link’s face as he steps back a little. “How did you get them done so early? Isn’t that, technically, illegal?”

“If I’d gone to a piercer, yes,” she tells him, turning around and walking - Link following close behind. “I didn’t use a piercer, a friend did them for me.”

Link inhales sharply. “You had an unlicensed friend pierce your cheeks?”

Nina bobs her head, looking at him over her shoulder. “Yeah, why not? In hindsight, I wouldn’t do it now. But it was the only way of having them done back then.”

“Why did you get them done?” He questions, his brows pulling together.

She pauses, turning to her side to look at him. “I wasn’t *cute* enough, so I had them done.”

Link’s once happy expression turns cold as he frowns. “Who the fuck told you that?”

With his anger amusing her, Nina shakes her head as she looks up at him. “My mother.” She turns back to the door of the bus station, walking out into the pouring rain. The sudden temperature change making her shiver, her mouth gaping open as the rain runs down her face.

Following her out, Link puts his hand on her shoulder, halting her and pulling her back to him. "Your mother was a fool," he barks in the cold; raindrops settling on his face - clusters of water droplets beading his brow.

Without thinking, Nina steps forward - wrapping her arms around his neck and embracing him. His arms snake their way around her waist, pulling her close and holding her tight. "Thank you."

In the moment, Link kisses her forehead, his nose buried in her hair - the sweet smell of cherries filling his nostrils. They separate, stepping back from one another. "I think we need to get to work," he comments, pressing his lips together - the rain dripping down his face.

With a somewhat sad expression on her face, she bobs her head, turning around and heading across the busy junction toward their office. *Another time...*

Arriving in the building, the pair of them soaking wet, the room quieter than usual as Link sits down at his desk - finding Derek away from his desk. *This is too quiet.*

Seconds of silence goes to waste as the room springs to life. “Happy birthday to you; happy birthday to you; happy birthday, dearest Lincoln! Happy birthday to you!”

*Oh no...* Link turns around in his seat, finding everyone behind him - confetti poppers going off overhead, letting pieces of coloured strips in Link’s hair. “Thanks, everyone...” He looks at the cake as it approaches, being carried by Ana, the small candles threatening the sprinklers. *Better get those out soon...* He inhales deeply before blowing out the candles and quickly wafting away the smoke. “Thanks, guys. I appreciate it.”

“Anything for our favourite blond,” Ana says, giving him a wink as she smiles, turning

around and taking the cake to the table in the middle of the room, ready for people to take a slice.

Turning back to his desk, Link begins to pull out strands of confetti out of his hair, getting back to work. "It's your birthday..." Nina comments, her voice quiet and uneven as she approaches him, standing at her desk next to him.

"It seems that way - I actually forgot," he jokes calmly, sitting back in his chair as he looks up at her - her hair still holding some raindrops.

"How old are you today?" She questions, sitting down at her desk - refraining from making eye contact.

Pressing his lips together, he looks over at her - his soft eyes searching her face. "I'm twenty-nine."

She bobs her head, turning slightly - still abstaining from making eye contact. “Happy birthday.”

The blank expression on her face makes him curious but mainly makes him worry. “Thank you, Katrina.”

As the workday ends, the office begins to empty - leaving Nina, Link, and Derek on the late shift - finishing at 8 pm. “The one day we need to finish early, and of course we’re on lates...” Derek groans, craving a hearty glass of alcohol after a long week.

Link chuckles, finishing up on some text formatting for their current client. “We’re fine. It will take us five minutes at max to get down to the Merry-Go-Round, then five minutes to get drinks. Just be thankful that it’s Friday and we’re not working tomorrow,” he laughs, sitting back in his chair - slouching as he types.

“Any plans for the weekend? I’m assuming you’ll be doing something with your sister for your birthday this weekend, right?” Nina mutters, keeping her focus on her work - wanting to finish as soon as possible.

Link shrugs, tearing his eyes from his screen and peering over at Nina. “I suppose... We had breakfast together this morning, I doubt I’ll be doing much else. If anything, we’ll probably do our usual thing.”

“Which would be?” Nina mumbles.

“If I decided to go do something and Gabby would tag along. The common case is that I say I’m going to the cinema, and she arrives there before me... Of course, I then have to pay for her ticket - because unlike me, who uses the bus - she wastes all her money on taxi fares,” he chuckles, letting out a long sigh as he turns back to his screen. “I love her, but God is she annoying... I think I prefer Hayley to my own sister.”

“I think everyone’s the same with every sibling. We love them, but we secretly hate them,”  
Derek laughs, a broad grin on his face.

Nina exhales, slumping into her chair - wanting to sink into a pool of nothingness. “I can’t entirely agree... I just hate them.”

The comment stuns Link, sending a chill down his spine. With his relationship with his sister, although he can hate her on occasion - he knows that he will *always* love her, and to be someone unable to love their sibling astounds him. “Why?” He blurts, the question echoing in his head.

She shrugs. “If they can’t love me... I can’t love them,” as she speaks, her voice cracks - a sense of pain ringing in her words.

Derek sighs, trying to break the depressing tension - not understanding the situation. “I’m going to get a drink before I get depressed,” he mumbles, standing up and heading over to the

centre of the room - making himself a cup of coffee before picking up a piece of cake.

While Derek is away from his desk, Link leans over, placing his hand on Nina's forearm.

"What happened?"

She turns to him, a sorrowful flicker in her eyes. "They couldn't accept me... So, they disowned me."

A soft frown surfaces on Link's face, a look of anger with a touch of sadness, not a look of pity but a look of empathy. "I'm so sorry, Nina."

She exhales as if a weight being taken off her shoulders - finally getting the pain out, letting someone in, letting someone know. "Thank you."

As their workday ends, the celebrations begin. The trio heading down to Merry-Go-Round for a night of alcohol and music. As the three of

them enter the bar, a group of their colleague's cheer before offering them drinks.

Five gifted drinks later, Derek is down for the count and heading home while Link is watching Ana, Nina, and a few other friends dancing - the childish dancing making him giggle as he sits at the bar.

"Why don't you join them?" Frankie, the bartender, asks - getting Link another drink.

"One, I don't possess the ability to dance; two, I prefer watching..." He laughs, taking a sip of his new drink.

"One, *they* don't possess the ability to dance; two, you're just scared of Katrina," Frankie announces, having to shout over the loud music.

Still smiling, Link shakes his head, turning to face Frankie. "What do you mean? Why would I be scared of Nina?"

Frankie rolls his eyes. “Just because you’re not here every night, doesn’t mean she’s not. She drinks a lot, ya know? We’re friends.”

Link’s brows pull together, his mouth gaping open. “She talks about me?”

“Of course... She’s worried about you,” Frankie exclaims – his Scottish accent cutting through the air like a knife. “She fucking cares about you, ya sausage!”

“I doubt that...” Link mumbles under his breath, looking down at his drink.

“I suppose you’d be surprised.” Frankie smirks before wandering off to serve another customer.

Link sighs, looking back to the dance floor - finding Nina dancing alone while Ana and her friends take a break. Picking up his drink, downing the rest of the glass and standing up from his seat. *I can do this... This is a thing I can do.* He begins to walk forward, his

nervousness sobering him up as he walks over. Nina's spinning around, on her final spin she collides with Link - the impact shocking Nina. "Hey," he mutters, his hands on her arms - holding her steady.

"Hi."

Link gulps, pulling her closer to him, her hands resting on her chest as she stares up at him, wonder in her eyes. "I need to talk to you."

She bobs her head in acknowledgement before Link begins to walk her off the dance floor and outside. "What do you want to talk about?" She asks, slurring her words slightly.

"We need to talk about *us*," he mutters, leaning against the exterior wall of the bar, crossing his arms over his chest - Nina mimicking him.

"*Us*?"

He closes his eyes, breathing deeply. The smell of cherries surrounding him. "I care about you, a lot, and I just need to know if there's any chance of anything happening..."

Nina smiles as she looks up at him, taking one hand and cupping his cheek - caressing his face. "I don't think you really need to worry about that..." She mumbles, stepping closer, leaning up and kissing him softly on the lips.

Breaking the kiss, Link opens his eyes - peering down at her, a smile on her face - mirroring his own expression. "Thank you."

She grins up at him, stepping back, holding his hand. "Now, let's go get another drink."

Four more drinks later, the pair are in the back of their usual taxi, Nina straddling him as they kiss - the couple in a frenzy. Nina's hands on the back of his neck, pulling him close. His hands wander over her - down her

hips, up her thighs, and caressing the small of her back.

Neil looks through his middle mirror - seeing the two advancing in their adventure before slowly putting the blacked-out shutter between the front and back cab - giving them privacy as he drives them home.

After the half an hour drive, the cab comes to a halt. Nina giggles as she climbs out of the car as Link slides the shutter, offering his card to Neil.

“Seems like you’re in for it tonight,” Neil chuckles, taking the card - giving it a quick scan and handing it back.

A shocked yet happy expression seeps onto Link’s face, the realisation of the situation hits him hard. He smirks, taking the card and climbing out the car, giving Neil one last look. “I sort of hope so.” He turns back to Nina, who is stood by the door to his apartment building - grinning like a Cheshire cat. He unlocks the

door for her, letting her go in first before swiftly following her up the stairs.

She stops in front of his door, leaning against it, wrapping her arms around his neck as she pulls him down to her, kissing him again. He bites her bottom lip, receiving a moan in response. As the kiss continues, Link lifts Nina - her legs wrapping around his waist as he opens the door, closing it behind him and carrying her into his bedroom. Laying her down on his bed, he tears himself away from her for a few seconds to lock his bedroom door behind him - not wanting Gabby walking in the following morning. Nina looks around the room, joining the dots together. "Wait... This is your spare room," she mumbles.

He smiles, shaking his head as he approaches her - her legs wrapping around his waist again as he leans down, holding himself up by his forearms on either side of her head. "We don't have a spare room."

Her eyes widen as she looks up at him, a look of shock on her face. “You gave up your bed for me...”

He presses his lips to hers, a tender kiss, before trailing kisses down her jawline and pausing just under her ear. “Of course, I did... I didn’t want you waiting in the cold, I can barely handle you living in that hostel...” He mumbles, pulling up and resting his head against hers.

She nudges his nose with hers, grinning up at him. “I like this protective Link,” she giggles.

He smiles, showing off his white, pearl-like teeth. “Thank you.”

She begins to move from underneath him, smirking as she pushes back, kicking her boots off and lying down, propping herself up on her elbows as she looks at him. “Are you going to join me?”

Crawling up the bed, a broad grin on his face,  
he climbs between her legs. *Finally.*





## Chapter Nine

As sunlight pours into the room, Nina smiles, licking her lips as she stretches the ruffling of warm, clean, soft sheets acting like music to her ears. Her eyes begin to open as she rolls over, facing away from the window. Opening her eyes, she sees a figure in the bed next to her, looking up to their face. *Link?* She jumps back, falling off the bed, hitting the floor with a great thud.

“Nina, are you okay?” Link worries, getting out of bed and rushing around to her side, finding her on the floor - pulling the quilt around her naked form.

“I forgot what happened...” She mumbles, rubbing her eyes.

He sighs, pulling her close, holding her in his arms. “You forgot completely?”

She shrugs, looking up at him. “I forgot some of it... I thought I was dreaming for a good portion of last night. I was expecting to wake up in an alleyway, if I'm honest.”

Link lets out a small chuckle, cradling her and rocking her. “I understand... But it wasn't a dream.”

“If we had sex, then why are you wearing boxers?” She mumbles, looking over his body.

“I needed the bathroom - and I don't want to traumatise the two lesbians I live with...” He jokes, kissing her forehead.

“So... you saw me naked...” She mutters, looking down at herself.

Link's brows pull together as a curious expression appears on his face. “Well, yeah - that's usually how sex works... Why?”

“So, you know...”

His forehead creases, frowning as he looks down at her; brushing her hair over her ear.

“Know what?”

She peers up at him, her left eyebrow arches.

“You’re telling me you didn’t notice?”

“Notice what?” He pauses. “What was I supposed to notice?”

She covers her face with her hands, seemingly cowering in shame. “I told you the first time we went out for drinks...”

Hesitating, Link smiles. “You weren’t *assigned female*? Is that supposed to bother me?”

Peering up at him, squinting. “You’re not worried?”

“What have I to be worried about, exactly?”

Looking out the window, Nina frowns.

“Nothing, I suppose... I just thought you would have seen the scars.”

Lifting his hand to her face, he pinches her chin with his thumb and index finger, tilting her face so he can look at her. “Whatever you needed to do, there aren’t any scars now... Trust me, I did a thorough inspection,” he says, a cocky smile on his face as he gives her a wink.

Nina’s eyes widen, a look of surprise on her face. “Wait... So...” She mumbles. “Oh.”

“Yeah...” He chuckles. “Want to get laid back down?”

She bobs her head, pressing her lips together. Link helps her up, keeping the quilt wrapped around her. She climbs onto the bed as he goes to the other side, lying down next to her. “To be honest, I have a confession myself...”

She rolls onto her side, resting her head against his chest as she looks up at him. “What kind of confession?”

“When I tell you, I want you to avoid freaking out, okay?” He says, looking up at the ceiling.

She frowns, a curious look on her face.

“Okay...”

“So, technically... I don’t find you sexually attractive...” He mumbles, pressing his lips together as he looks down at her.

Keeping eye contact, she arches one eyebrow.

“Wait... Are you asexual?”

He smiles, showing his pearly teeth. “Yeah,” he says, wrapping his arms around her and holding her close.

“You don’t have sexual attraction, but we had sex...” She mumbles, her frown vanishing as she becomes confused. “Can you please explain?”

He laughs, “I don’t have sexual attractions, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want intimacy. I can love, laugh, and care the same way as everyone else.”

“Why did you decide to have sex with me?”

She questions, kissing his chest.

“I didn’t *decide* to. I care about you, and you kissed me... That’s all I needed,” he chuckles, kissing her forehead.

“So, what you’re telling me is - is that you don’t get aroused from someone’s appearance, but you do by kissing?” She questions.

“Sort of... Any sort of intimate touching is good for me,” he says, watching as she lowers her hand from his chest to the waistband of his boxers.

“Oh.” She smirks. “Well, then...” She says, kissing his chest again but withdrawing her hand. “Okay.”

He presses his lips together as he looks down at her. “Are you okay with it?”

Her smile softens as her brows pull together, putting a small crease on the bridge of her nose. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“So... A relationship is possible?”

She shakes her head as she gets up, straddling him, sitting on his lower stomach before lowering herself down, her face just inches away from his. “Sweetie, I think we’re already past that now... After all, we are engaged,” she says with a confident smile and a cocky wink, gesturing to the fake engagement ring on her finger which had been used to fool Kira.

“Oh, yeah... A lot of people do think we’re engaged,” he mumbles, his hands making their way up her outer thighs as she sits, naked, on top of him. “Well, I suppose we can just make the relationship official, then. As long as that’s okay with you, Mx Nembhard.”

She grins, lowering herself on him, grinding against his crotch as she does; a groan escaping his lips. “I’m more than okay with *that*.”

After a few more hours in bed, there's a knock at the bedroom door before the handle turns.

"Oh..." A voice says from the other side.

"Link?" Gabby shouts from the other side of the door, waiting for the door to be opened.

While Nina covers herself up with the quilt, Link puts some jeans on and head to the door, opening it and finding his sister stood outside. "Morning." He smiles.

A happy but curious expression wanders across Gabby's face. "Good morning, my dearest brother... Who've you got in there with you?" She questions before giving him a wink.

"None of your business. I don't fancy losing my girlfriend to my married sister," he laughs, trying to close the door but failing as Gabby makes her way in the room before he had a chance to get it closed entirely.

"Oh," Gabby stutters. "Nina... Hi."

“Why do you sound so surprised? Who else would it be?” Link questions, his smile fading.

Gabby turns back to him, shrugging. “I don’t know, I just didn’t think it would be her...”

“Is there some sort of problem?” Nina chuckles awkwardly.

“No!” Gabby blurts. “Sorry, I just didn’t realise that my brother had moved on so quickly.”

“*So quickly?* I don’t understand,” Nina mutters, sharing the same confused expression as Link.

“I think she’s referring to my ex...” He pauses.

“Gabby, it’s been three years. How much longer did you think I was going to wait before trying new relationships?”

“Well, longer than this... You don’t know how relationships work,” she scoffs.

“He does...” Nina dismisses. “What’s the problem? Everything’s fine.”

“Have you had sex yet?” Gabby barks, crossing her arms over her chest.

“No, I’m just naked in his bed because I thought it would be nice to have a slumber party,” Nina says sarcastically.

Gabby’s eyes bulge out, a shocked expression on her face. “You two... Had sex?”

“Yes, dearest sister. I had sex with my girlfriend. Seriously, what’s the problem? I didn’t end it with my last partner because I didn’t know how to have a relationship, Gabby,” Link growls, heading back to his bed, lying back down next to Nina and resting his head on her lap.

“I’m sorry,” Gabby mutters before leaving the room.

“What was that all about?” Nina questions.

Link shrugs. “I think she believes I’m incapable of having a relationship, but she

doesn't know I'm Ace... Even if she did, her viewpoint probably wouldn't change."

She looks down at him, running her fingers through his thick, blond hair. "That's not the case... Ace's can have relationships. It's just less of the sexual aspect."

"Do you mind the sexual activity aspect being less than normal relationships?" He probes, looking up for her, seemingly seeking validation after the incident.

"Sweetie, I couldn't care less whether we had sex once a year or not. I've never been the most sexually active person to begin with. Masturbation is where it's at for me," she giggles.

Link looks up at her, a cocky grin on his face. "Nice to know."

"I need to go," Nina says as she gets dressed.

“Why?” Link asks, sitting on the edge of the bed, watching her as she pulls her tights up.

“I’m supposed to be looking at a flat this afternoon.” She pauses, standing upright as she buttons up her blouse, approaches Link before straddling him, perching herself on his knees. “Unless you want to come with me...” She mumbles.

He smiles, his hands stroking the outer sides of her thighs, her tights giving her legs a stripy texture. “I would love to go with you,” he says, nudging her nose with his before giving her a quick peck on the lips. “Let’s get going.”

She nods, getting up and picking up her skirt. “I’m doing the walk of shame today,” she giggles.

“Is it shameful, though?” Link asks, arching his left eyebrow as he watches her bend over to put her skirt on.

She turns to him, crossing her arms over her chest as he stands up. “I suppose not, people will just have to think that my standards have dropped,” she jokes.

He bites his bottom lip as his arms wrap around her waist. “You cheeky young lady!” Picking her up in his arms and carrying her to the door.

“I need my shoes!” She giggles.

He puts her down, turning around and grabbing her shoes, passing them to her, as well as pulling his on. “Let’s get going, then,” he chuckles, unlocking the door and the pair of them heading out.

“It’s a one-bedroom flat, with an en-suite, separate bathroom, and a living room, dining room, and open-plan kitchen space,” the real estate's man says, unlocking the front door and allowing the pair to enter the apartment.

The pair walk into the vast, open space. A window wall at the far end of the room, where the living room would be. "I like it," Link comments, looking at the white surface tops of the kitchen.

Nina shrugs. "It's a bit... Bright." Walking over to the window, looking at the skyline of the city - seeing their office in the distance. "But it's *much* closer to work."

Link walks over, standing behind her and wrapping his arms around her waist. "And it's a one-way window..." He whispers in her ear.

"The windows are all one way. Hence the building is called *The Mirror Tower*." The agent walks over, standing next to the pair. "Now, if you'd like to take a look at the bedroom," he says, gesturing to the door beside them. The man walks behind the pair, going into the bedroom. Following him in, the room is as open as the main area - with two of the walls being one-way windows, one of the walls

having a door that leads out onto a balcony. “I suppose this would be the best reasons to buy a corner apartment. You may have a little less floor space in total, but you get a full window and a balcony,” the man explains, crossing his arms over his chest as he looks out the window.

“*Buy?*” Link stutters, his eyes darting back and forth between the man and Nina.

She shrugs. “In the long run, it’s cheaper than renting. Plus, I’ve got most of the money, I just need a small loan from the bank to pay the rest of it off,” she tells him as she stares out of the window.

“Talk about level-headed...” Link mumbles as he watches Nina. “How much is this place?” He asks, his eyes staying on Nina but his question being directed at the real estate agent.

“A hundred and ninety thousand pounds. These are the pricier apartments in the

building - after all, it is a corner flat, on the twentieth floor, and the kitchen and bathroom have just been re-done,” the man explains. “Oh, and the walk-in-wardrobe, leading to the bathroom, is through that door.” He gestures to the white, slat door.

Nina walks behind the man, heading to the door - going into the large dressing room, storage on both walls. Link scooches past Nina, taking a look at the bathroom - white tiles, glass-encased shower, and a hot tub bath in the corner. “Nice,” he chuckles as Nina joins him.

“What do you think then? How stupid am I for buying a one-bedroom apartment in my late twenties?” She questions, crossing her arms over her chest as she leans against the door frame of the bathroom door.

He turns to look at her, his left eyebrow arched. “I don’t think you’re stupid. Some people may question it, but it’s a nice

apartment, a good investment, and overall - if it's what you want... Why not?"

"Ana thinks I should spend my money on a cheaper apartment with more rooms," she mumbles, biting her bottom lip.

"Why?"

Nina sighs, pressing her lips together.

"Because she thinks it's pointless buying a one-bedroom and then upsize in a few years."

Link's mouth falls open a little, his brows pulling together and creasing his forehead as he walks over to her, his hands taking their usual place on her hips. "She doesn't know much about you, does she?"

She steps forward, her arms wrapping around his waist as his arms begin to snake around her. "I have no idea... All I know is that it's never going to happen."

Link sighs, kissing her forehead as he squeezes her. "You know, babies aren't

everything. You certainly don't have to give birth to it for it to be yours," he chuckles.

She pulls back slightly, looking up at him. "So, you think adoption is okay?"

"I hope so... Otherwise, Gabby wouldn't be my sister." He smiles, bringing one hand up to her face, stroking a piece of hair over her ear.

"Wait... She's adopted?" She whispers, her eyes wide and her face flushing.

"No. Just me," he tells her. "Now, let's get back to the suit before he thinks we've moved in without paying," Link jokes, winking at her before taking her hand and leading her back into the bedroom. "So, how much of the money do you already have for this place?" He questions as he follows the real estate agent onto the balcony.

"I have just over a hundred and fifty thousand. I only need another forty, at max. I will need to buy furniture, but, I have the

money for that on one side,” Nina explains, looking over the skyline from the balcony as she stands next to Link, holding his hand.

After several moments of silence, the suit interrupts. “So, have you come to a decision? The apartment has only been on the market for five days, and I’ve had to show it off to over twelve couples already...” The man says, leaning against the railing as he looks at her.

“Can we have a moment alone?” She asks. The man nods, turning around and heading inside - going into the main living space. Nina turns to Link, looking up at him. “What do you think?”

He takes in a deep breath, smiling down at her. “I think it’s a great place, it’s closer to work and closer to me. It also means we can get some privacy between work and the rest of the world.” He beams, his smile showing off his dimples.

Pressing her lips together as she smiles up at him, nodding before heading inside, approaching the real estate agent in the vast, empty main room. “Sir,” she says. He looks up from his phone, looking at the pair of them. “I’ll take it. I’ll put an offer in for the asking price.”

Both Link and the man staring at Nina in shock. “The asking price? You’re not just going to make an offer?” Link blurts.

She shrugs. “There’s no point. I know there’s a lot of interest in these places because I tried to buy another apartment on this floor two months ago. It went in a week, for the asking price. If I put in for the asking price, they have to take it.”

The agent takes his tablet out of his bag, beginning to fill in forms to put the offer in for the apartment. “So, you’re willing to put an offer in for the asking price, which is a

hundred and ninety thousand?” The agent asks, tapping away on his tablet.

“Yes,” she chirps, walking over to him.

He bobs his head in acknowledgement, filling in the details. “Now, if you can read through this and sign where you need to, that would be great,” he tells her, handing Nina the tablet.

Nina starts flicking through the pages on the device, signing where necessary. “Done.”

“Great,” the agent says, taking the tablet and submitting the form. A few moments later, he gets a call. “I’ll be right back,” he tells them, heading into the hallway.

“How does it feel to be on the verge of owning your own home?” Link asks her, standing behind her, his arms around her waist.

She looks to her right, looking out the long glass wall. “Pretty good.”





## Chapter Ten

Nina's offer on the apartment was accepted, but until payment is finalised and all her furniture arrives, she needs to wait before moving in.

It's a week before the day she's moving in, and it's time for work. "I hate all of this..." She mumbles, walking out the bus station with Link - heading to work - knowing that they must keep their relationship under wraps until Ana cools down about Nina's decision to buy a one-bedroom flat.

"I know, but as soon as you move in, you won't need to rely on Ana's spare room anymore. As soon as that becomes the reality, we'll be fine," he tells her, his right hand on her lower back as he guides her over the road.

“I miss you...” She mumbles, pouting. With everything that happened with Gabby and colleagues being everywhere - their intimacy time has shrunk to their time travelling to work.

He pulls her to one side, cupping her face in his hands as he looks down at her. “I know. I miss you, too. But we’re so close... There’s not much longer to wait,” he whispers to her, his voice husky and low as he tries to stay quiet.

She bobs her head in acknowledgement, taking a deep breath. “Thank you.”

He smiles sweetly, brushing a few stray strands of hair over her right ear. “You’re more than welcome.”

Nina has a cig while Link goes into the office, making it look as if they’ve arrived separately. Going upstairs and walking to her desk, Nina gets dirty looks from a couple of people in the

office - mainly Ana. "Morning," Ana says as Nina walks past.

"Morning," she mumbles, getting to her seat and sitting down. "Morning, fellas," she says to Derek and Link, the acting exhausting her already.

"You know what you need, Nina?" Ana asks, walking over, leaning against the table in between Nina and Derek.

"What?"

"A baby. A little bundle of joy that will fill your life with purpose!" She chirps, a wide grin on her face.

"I'm not having a baby," Nina objects, looking at her computer - taking a deep breath as she closes her eyes and counts to ten, hoping that Ana goes away.

"Oh, C'mon! Why not?" Ana questions playfully.

But, after over two weeks of having the same conversation every morning, Nina's anger bubbles and spills out. "I'm infertile." She growls, her eyes springing open as she looks up at the woman.

Ana rolls her eyes, as if knowing everything. "Sweetie, there's treatment for that," she laughs, smiling.

"Not when you're trans," Nina barks, looking back to her computer as she tries to calm down. *Don't cause a scene... Please, don't cause a scene...*

Ana walks around Nina, approaching Link.

"You got lucky there," Ana whispers to Link.

He stands up, towering over the little woman.

"Oh, fuck yourself. When did I get *lucky*? How

about you take your twisted little head and fuck off back to your own team?" Link roars.

The entire office turns to look at him, Ana's face turning red as tears begin to well in her eyes.

She turns away from him and runs out of the office.

Link to kneel next to Nina, taking her hands in his, turning her chair to face him. Kissing her hands, trying to calm her down as she cries.

Derek gets out of his chair, walking around, standing next to the pair of them. “Nina, are you okay?”

Nina pulls away from Link, looking up at Derek as she sniffles. “I’m fine,” she says, her voice uneven.

He crouches down next to her. “Ignore her - she’s not worth it,” he tells her, smiles as he raises his hand to rub away a few tears before getting up and sitting back at his desk.

Nina turns back to Link, a sombre expression on her face. “Lucky there’s only a week left before I move into the flat,” she chuckles.

Link sighs, standing up, pulling Nina up with him. “That’s true. And the best thing, we can do this now,” he smiles, leaning down and pressing his lips to hers; enveloping her bottom lip, tugging on it slightly. Pulling away, finding her stood in his arms, eyes still shut. He smiles and chuckles before whispering in her ear, “I think people are staring at us... It seems like they’re surprised.”

She grins as she opens her eyes, her lips grazing his ear. “This is probably the sexiest thing they’ve seen you do...”

He pulls back, his left eyebrow arched. “Well, they should see what we’re going to be doing when we get on that new bed of yours,” he tells her, giving her a cocky wink before stepping away and sitting back down at his desk.

Nina sinks into her seat, her eyes bulging out.

Derek leans over, a Cheshire Cat smile on his face. “Looks like someone's getting laid when

they move into their new apartment,” he sings after hearing Link’s comment.

Nina gasps, swinging for him as if a reflex had made her do it. “I hate you, Derek Willow.”

He leans back in his chair, relaxing. “I know, dear. I know.”

Before their shift ends, Nina has already been kicked out of Ana’s house. Sal, Ana’s husband, arrives at lunchtime to deliver Nina’s stuff. “I’m sorry about this whole thing...” He mumbles, handing the box of clothes to Link as Nina smokes her cig.

She shrugs. “So much for your wife being Trans positive...” Nina mutters.

“She was completely out of line, and it makes no sense what she did... I’m sorry...” Sal groans, shaking his head, his slightly grey locks swishing as he does.

Nina chuckles, finding his anger somewhat amusing. Shrugging off the irritation, having

dealt with this sort of situation before. “It’s fine.”

Sal sighs, pressing his lips together as he frowns. Gritting his teeth as his face toughens. “You’re so much more chilled than I would be in this situation.”

Nina takes another long drag of her cigarette, blowing the smoke to the side. “You get used to it after a while...” She mutters.

“You better get going, Sal. Before your wife files for divorce...” Link comments.

Sal nods. “Yeah...” He pauses. “See you later.”

The day ends swiftly, leaving Link and Nina stood outside in the rain, holding hands as they wait for Hayley to arrive, so they don’t have to carry the box of clothes on the bus.

As she pulls up, she unlocks the doors and climbs out into the rain. “Nina, it’s nice to

finally meet you!” Hayley squeals before going to the back of the car, opening the boot allowing Link to put the box in the car.

“C’mon, get in,” she tells the pair of them.

They both climb into the back seat, Nina wringing out her hair like a damp rag. “How’s Gabby?” Link asks, buckling in before holding Nina’s hand.

Hayley shrugs. “Honestly, I don’t have a fucking clue... She’s going mental, and she’s still mad about you being with Nina - for whatever reason she has... She’s making me question why I’m even with her at this point,” Hayley explains as she starts to drive, keeping her eyes on the road.

“So, we don’t know why she’s mad?” Nina questions.

Link shakes his head. “Nope. Though, if I had to say - I’d guess that it’s got something to do with my ex...”

Hayley's mouth hangs open as she looks at Link through the middle mirror. "She was one of Gabby's friends, right?" Link nods in acknowledgement of Hayley's question. "Fuck."

"What's wrong?" Nina probes, looking between the two, not entirely understanding the issue.

"I was with Gabby's friend for around four years, we were engaged. I broke up with her a few months before the wedding," Link mumbles, his eyes keeping to the windows, seemingly not wanting to make eye contact with Nina at this point.

"Why did you break up?" She asks.

He turns to her slightly, still attempting to avoid eye contact, pulling her hand up to his mouth - kissing it. "I'm not prepared to say right now, I haven't even told Gabby... We'll talk about it later."

“We will?” Nina pushes, wanting to make sure that she was going to be told the truth - knowing how he likes to hide things from the world to try and protect people.

“We will.”

*Later* arrives and the pair is in bed, eating while watching TV. “So...” She mumbles. “Can you tell me now?”

Taking a bite of pizza, Link keeps his attention on the screen. “Promise not to laugh?”

Nina frowns as she looks up at him, a confused yet curious expression on her face. “I promise...”

He turns to look at her, putting his pizza back on the plate. “I came out while in my last relationship. It didn’t end well,” he mutters.

“What kind of didn’t end well?” Nina asks, an uneven tone to her voice.

He sighs, closing his eyes. “She became violent... *I* left when she broke my collarbone. She almost killed me...” He mumbles.

Nina’s mouth hangs open, a look of utter shock and sombre on her face as tears begin to well in her eyes and stream down her face. “That’s the scar that you have on your chest...”

He opens his eyes, looking into hers as he rests his forehead against hers. “Most of the scars I have are because of her.”

“Why did you tell Hayley but not Gabby?” She questions.

“Hayley is a doctor... The last *fight* we had, my neighbour called the police. They carried me out and put me in an ambulance... I ended up being treated by my sister’s fiancé.” He pauses, a grim smile on his face. “I made her promise not to tell Gabby. So, she didn’t.”

“Why did you make her promise?” Nina asks, pulling back a little.

“My ex is Gabby’s best friend... Gabby put us together. I didn’t want to hurt my baby sister,” he proclaims, looking down as he takes her hand. “She got put in prison for what she did to me. I got justice.”

“How long did she get?” Nina probes, an uneven tone to her voice.

“Six years,” he tells her.

“That’s why Gabby’s not happy with us - she doesn’t know why she got put away, and she thought you were going to wait for her...” Nina exhales. Her whole body shaking, a combination of fear and rage rushing through her. “I won’t let her hurt you again,” she whispers.

Link’s head flies up, his eyes wide. “Nina, you’re never going to meet her...”

Nina shrugs. “Let’s hope so.”

“Nina, if you end up seeing her - for whatever reason - don’t fight... Just run. Please. Promise me,” Link frets, cupping her face with his hands.

“How can I? What if she tries to hurt you again? You honestly think I’m just going to run?” She barks, keeping her voice quiet.

“Yes, because I’m asking you to and you care about me.”

“Emotional blackmail?” She scoffs.

He shakes his head before leaning down, kissing her, taking her bottom lip between his teeth, tugging on it. He pulls away, sitting back as he picks up his slice of pizza again, taking another bite. “I’m not emotionally blackmailing you. I’m just asking you to do this one thing for me. I don’t want you to turn into her. I can’t be around violence.”

Nina moves her plate to one side, kneeling next to him, facing him. “I’m not violent, but if

she tries anything and there's no way of running - I'll defend myself and you, whether you like it or not... But, I can promise - if there is a way out, I will run."

His right arm reaches over, snaking around her waist and grabbing her ass, pulling over to him as he moves his plate. Sitting her on his lap, her arms around his neck and his arms around her. "You have no idea how much you mean to me..."

She shakes her head, leaning in close, nudging his nose with hers; their lips grazing against each other. "You'll be surprised."

The next morning, the pair are awoken by shouting between Hayley and Gabby. "Those two never argue, I wonder what's happening," Link mumbles, climbing out of bed, pulling on a pair of jeans and heading over to the door, unlocking it and looking out, just in time to see his sister hit her wife. "Oi!" He screams,

swinging the door open, causing it to bang against his TV unit. “I don’t care what you’re fucking arguing about, but you *don’t* hit her, do you understand?” He bellows.

Gabby scoffs. “Oh, you want this one, too?” She growls.

Nina grabs a pair of shorts, putting them on quickly, forgetting the fact she’s only wearing a bra - running out to Hayley’s aid. “Are you okay?” She whispers, brushing Hayley’s hair back to check her face.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

Link roars.

“Well, you’ve dated enough of my exes, maybe you just want my wife now, too!”

Link smiles, shaking his head at Gabby’s comment. “You’re an idiot... She’s just as much my sister as you are. And when have I ever dated one of your exes? I’ve dated two people in my life, and one of them is currently

taking care of *your* wife, because *you* fucking hit her,” Link yells, before turning away from his sister and turning to Hayley and Nina.

“Hayley, are you okay?” He asks, crossing his arms over his chest.

Smiling through the tears, she nods. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

“What were you even arguing about?” Nina stutters, looking at the bright red handprint on the side of Hayley’s face.

“You,” Hayley whimpers.

“Me?” Nina’s eyes bulge out as her mouth hangs open. *Why were they arguing about me?*

“All of this is your fault, do you understand, Katrina?” Gabby growls.

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense... So, you abusing your wife, that’s my fault,” Nina scoffs. “You know, maybe I’m overstepping here, but maybe you’re just a shitty human

who doesn't want anyone to be happy other than yourself."

Gabby sits down on the sofa, her head in her hands. "What have I done..." She whispers to herself.

"You've ruined your brother's life, and you're ruining your wife's life. Maybe you should rethink your plan on love - because so far, you're just causing everyone more pain than you're worth," Nina growls. She looks up at Link, who has his back to his sister. "Can I talk to you?"

He nods, walking around the sofa and into his room - holding the door for Nina, locking it behind her. "What're you thinking?"

"Move in with me," she blurts.

His brows pull together as he looks down at her. "You're aware we've only been together for a few weeks, right?"

She shrugs, stepping closer to him, biting her bottom lip as she cups his face in her hands, standing on her tiptoes - their faces centimetres apart. "What can I say? I feel a little spontaneous..."

Pushing her back, he pins her against the wall, his hands on her hips. "Are you sure you can handle me full time?"

"What? A sexless relationship full of horror films and video games? Of course, I can... That's basically what being single is..." She mumbles. His smile fades, taking her comment as a negative. "There's a reason I stayed single... I'm not *that* sex orientated..."

Her comment renews his grin. "Fine, I'll move in. If you let me help pay the bills and some of your mortgage off," he tells her.

"It's only forty thousand, I don't need help," she chuckles, her nose nudging his.

“Fine then, I’ll just pay it off completely,” he comments.

“What?” She says, her eyes widening, her cheeks dipping inward where her clear piercings are.

“I lived with my ex; I owned the house. I sold it,” he tells her.

“Why didn’t you buy another place for yourself?” She questions.

He smiles, stepping back from her before embracing her in a hug, kissing her forehead. “I don’t like living alone.”

Nina leans up on her tiptoes, giving him a quick peck on the cheek before wrapping her arms around his neck and leaving a trail of kisses over the scar on his collarbone, his already pale skin much paler where the tissue had ripped. “Neither do I...”





## Chapter Eleven

With Nina and Hayley sat in the living room, Link is packing in his room while Gabby tries to convince him not to go. “Why do you want to go? You’ve not known her long enough.”

“I want to go because I *like* her. She’s everything I want and need, she understands me, and she’s not *you*.” He pauses, looking over to her as she stands in the doorway; a distraught expression on her face. “You don’t understand me. You don’t know what I’ve gone through or what I’m going through, and you will never understand. She does.”

“You’re writing me out of your life...” She mumbles.

He shakes his head, getting irritated at her tone but staying calm. “No, I’m relieving

tension. I've lived with you and Hayley for three years now. You deserve your privacy. I'm not saying I'll never come over. I may come and stay a night or two occasionally, to spend time with you, but I can't live with you forever. You're my baby sister... If anyone is supposed to live with anyone, it should be you living with me, not the other way around."

"I'm not ready for you to go..." She cries, her hands covering her face.

Link stops what he's doing, approaching her and taking her into his arms. "You lived without me for so long, you can do it again. We're not going to be too far away."

"Promise?"

He nods, looking down at her. "Promise. We're only at the Mirror Tower."

Her eyebrows raise in surprise. "How can she afford that?"

He shrugs. “She does what I do. She’s saved up a lot...”

“I also have money left over from my last relationship. I sold my house,” Nina says from the sofa.

“You sold a house to get an apartment?”

Hayley chuckles.

“On the twentieth of the Mirror Tower... Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t I?” Nina giggles.

Gabby looks back to Link, frowning. “Why did she sell her house? Why did her relationship end?”

“Because he wanted something I couldn’t give him,” Nina tells her, hearing Gabby’s *whispers*.

“Which was what?”

Nina turns around, kneeling on the sofa as she looks over at the pair of them. “Children - I couldn’t give him children.”

“So, you’re damning my brother to have a childless life?” Gabby scorns.

“My ex wouldn’t allow me to adopt because he thought it wasn’t *natural*. Your brother, on the other hand, is fine with adoption.” Nina frowns.

“I’m sorry,” Gabby mumbles to Link.

“It’s not me you should be apologising to,” he tells her before going back to packing.

She frowns, turning away from him, stepping out of his room and closing the door, heading over to the two women. “I’m sorry, Nina.”

Nina sits back down, watching TV again. “It’s fine. I’m used to it.”

“Why can’t you have kids?” Hayley questions.

“I wasn’t born with ovaries,” Nina says - the comment wasn’t correct, but it was a more straightforward explanation. In reality, she

was born with ovaries, but due to complications in surgery, she lost them.

“Sorry,” Hayley mumbles.

“Honestly, it’s fine. I wasn’t all that keen on popping a baby out of my fanny anyway,” Nina laughs.

“Oh lord, that’s such a British thing to say,” Hayley chuckles. “If an American were here right now, they’d be thinking that you were going to pop a baby out of your arsehole!”

At that precise moment, Link steps out of his bedroom, wide-eyed. “Popping babies out of where?”

Nina and Hayley begin to giggle.

Link shakes his head as he walks around the couch to sit next to Nina while Gabby sits in the armchair.

“So, you’re really leaving...” Gabby mumbles.

Wrapping his right arm around Nina's shoulders, pulling her close as he looks over at his baby sister. "Yeah, I'm really leaving."

"Can we have a leaving party?" Gabby questions, looking at Hayley.

Hayley nods. "Yeah, why not."

"How many people know you're an item?" Gabby asks, looking at Link and Nina.

"Not many people," Nina says.

"Well..." Link mumbles.

Nina peers up at him, his eyes glued to the floor like a naughty dog. "What have you done?"

"Nothing!" He blurts, seemingly unable to keep his cool. Nina's eyes continue burning holes in his soul. After a few minutes, he breaks.

"Okay, so I may have put it on some social media platforms that I'm not single anymore, and now the whole office knows, and my

friends, and your friends, and our families, and a few of our clients...”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Nina mumbles.

“What’s wrong? Embarrassed to be with my brother?” Gabby scoffs.

Completely ignoring Gabby, Nina probes, “which social media platforms?”

“The ones you have me on, why?” Link queries.

Nina gets up, heading into Link’s bedroom, getting her phone and going back to sitting between Link and Hayley. “This is why,” she mutters, showing him her phone - over one hundred missed calls from three people.

“What the fuck is happening?” Hayley gasps, looking at the missed calls and the hundreds of messages cluttering her phone.

“Bianca found a way to get back on my public account; so, did my ex; and Ana’s started again, too,” Nina sighs. “Oh, and then there’s my family, who are completely non-supportive but keep stalking me,” she adds.

“I have an idea,” Link jabbars, getting up and heading to the kitchen - going into the junk drawer and getting out a spare sim card. “Are you on a contract?” He questions.

Nina shakes her head in response. “Why?”

“New number,” he says.

“You think I haven’t already tried that?” Nina frowns.

“For the Bianca and Ana problem? I doubt it. We’ll deal with the rest of the fuckwits later, but we can eliminate the Bianca and Ana issue now,” he tells her.

“True,” she mumbles, unlocking her phone - finding a text from Ana. “Wait...” She frowns.

As she opens the message, Link looks from over her shoulder, looming over her.

*From: Ana*

*To: Katrina*

*Nina, I'm sorry. Please reply to me, I just want to say sorry. I know what I did was cruel and wrong, but I want to make it up to you. Please! I should never have done this to you! X*

“Do you think she means it?” Nina questions. *She was my best friend...*

“Maybe that’s one person that you may be able to make amends with? Your family may not accept you, but she may come around,” Link rambles.

Nina sighs, looking over her shoulder at him. “Invite her and Sal, and we’ll see...”

The party wasn’t meant to be big, but it just kept growing... Derek arrived with Ana and

Sal, and Link's friends came. It went from eight people to twenty-five quickly. Link gets dragged away from Nina by a few of his friends, leaving Nina alone on the sofa.

"Katrina, I assume," a woman says, sitting next to Nina.

"Yeah..." Nina mumbles.

The woman smiles. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Jeanne."

"You're from France?" Nina questions, picking up on the subtle remnants of a French accent in the woman's voice.

"What gave it away? The name or the voice?" Jeanne giggles.

"Both, I suppose. I'm assuming you're one of Link's friends?" Nina probes.

Jeanne shrugs. "Sort of. We were close for a while."

*How close...*

“Oh, Jeanne, hey!” Hayley says as she approaches the pair. “You’ve found our Nina, then.”

“Indeed, I have.” Jeanne grins.

Hayley looks at Nina. “Jeanne was basically Link’s best friend in high school.”

Nina makes an o with her mouth. “What changed?”

Jeanne sighs, her perfect form straightening out her back; her long blonde hair draped over her shoulders. “He didn’t want me.”

Nina’s eyes widen. *She was romantically interested in him... And he didn’t want her?*  
“Oh...”

“He seems to have a thing for dark-haired girls,” Jeanne comments, reaching out and feeling a strand of Nina’s dark red hair. But, suddenly she pulls it - their faces inches apart. “But, if you hurt him. I will kill you, okay?”

Hayley severs Jeanne's connection, pushing her back and pulling Nina away from her, getting her up and taking her into the kitchen. "I fucking hate her," Hayley growls.

"What's her problem?" Nina scoffs, rubbing the side of her head where the strands had pulled on her scalp.

Hayley rolls her eyes. "She doesn't like the fact Link wasn't interested. He's had two relationships, including yours. And honestly, I feel like he may have had more if it wasn't for her and the other groupies..."

"There's more like her?" Nina mutters, her mouth hanging open and her eyes widening.

Hayley nods. "Unfortunately, so... I don't see why myself. But that's because I'm not sexually attracted to him. I suppose it's because he's everything most girls want? Thin, tall, blond, blue-eyed, intelligent, caring, funny? But, hey - I have no idea."

“He’s sexually attractive, I guess...” Nina mumbles.

Hayley frowns. “You guess? Are you getting cold feet?”

Nina lets out an awkward laugh, shaking her head. “No...” She hesitates. “I’m Demisexual. I didn’t find him sexually attractive until I got to know him...”

Hayley smiles, her mouth hanging open a little, exposing her white, slightly crooked teeth. “You’re perfect for him.”

Nina blushes, pressing her lips together. “I hope that’s true.”

Stepping forward, cupping Nina’s face in her hands. “It’s true... I know it.”

Ana and Sal kept their distance, seemingly not knowing how to approach Nina. “Hey!” Derek

cheers, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “How are you?” He asks.

Nina shrugs, taking a sip of her cider. “I’m fine. How are you?”

“Great...” He mumbles. “So, a lot happened last night. I went over to Ana’s, and it seems like something went down between her and Sal.”

“What sort of thing?” Nina questions.

“Well...” He pauses, looking at Ana and Sal in the distance. “It seems like Sal used to be Sally.”

Nina’s eyes bulge out, utter shock taking over her. *I basically told him that he wouldn’t get it because... Oh fuck.* She walks past Derek, heading over to the pair, mainly looking at Sal. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugs. “I’ve been like this so long, it didn’t seem relevant anymore...”

Nina turns her attention to Ana. “You were transphobic to me because you thought I was a man in a dress,” Nina stutters.

“I’m sorry...” Ana whimpers.

“You’re sorry? For what? Reinforcing what every straight, cisgender twat sees me as or being a fucking hypocrite?” Nina roars, tears welling in her eyes. After knowing Ana for so many years, the pain of her betrayal slowly ripping a part of Nina’s heart out.

The music cuts out as everyone turns to watch the commotion. Link looks over, finding Nina in her trembling state. He walks over, standing behind her - his arms wrapping around her waist as he leaves soft, sweet kisses on the edge of her ear and down her neck. “Stay cool, sweetheart. You’re better than this,” he whispers.

“I’m sorry for everything,” Ana bleats, her mascara washing away with her tears. “I’m sorry for being transphobic, I’m sorry for being

a hypocrite. I'm sorry for hurting you..." She pauses. "Please, I don't want to lose my sister."

As if a rock lifts from Nina's shoulders, she's able to breathe again. "You see me as a sister?"

"Of course, I do!" She cries. "You're my baby sister, Nina. Nothing is going to change that..."

Without thinking, Nina lunges forward, wrapping her arms around Ana - crying heavily. Link lets go, smiling as he watches them make up.

Sal walks around them, standing next to Link. "Were you actually called Sally?" Link probes.

Sal shakes his head. "Nope, I was called Mollie. But, I like the name Sally. So, if anyone wants to try to deadname me... I get a nice name," he chuckles.

Link smiles at him. "I'll erase the real one from my memory," he tells him, winking.

Sal pats Link's back. "Cheers, pal."

As the party dies down, people begin to leave as Nina and Link cuddle up on the sofa. "Why didn't you date Jeanne?"

Link frowns, looking down at Nina. "Why would I? All she ever used to do was try to touch people up... You know that's not my *cup of tea*."

"Oh..." Nina mumbles. *That makes sense now.*

"Why did you ask?" He questions.

"She talked to me... Apparently, you were close with her in high school," Nina says, sighing as she closes her eyes, resting against Link.

"We were close until we both hit puberty... She went from innocent and nice to sex-driven... And I was still not interested," he chuckles, kissing her forehead.

“So, it’s not because she’s blonde?” Nina mutters.

Link rolls his eyes. “No. If I don’t find people sexually attractive, why would someone’s hair colour change my view of them?”

Her hand flies up to her face, hitting her palm against her forehead. “Stupid, stupid, stupid,” she whispers to herself.

Before she can swing again, Link grabs her hand. “Nope, not allowed.”

She turns around to look at him, her eyes wandering over his face. “Why?”

“Because I don’t want you hurting yourself...”

He mumbles before quickly sitting forward, licking the side of her face, and sitting back in his seat again.

“What the fuck?” Nina blurts.

Link frowns. “What? The advert said to taste the rainbow...”

Nina cups his face in her hands, grinning.

“Have I ever told you how much I care about you?”

“No, but you’ve shown me.” He smiles, pulling her close and stealing a kiss. “You’re mine, Mx Nembhard. Is that okay?”

Resting her forehead against his, grinning as she wraps her arms around his neck. “It’s more than okay. It’s perfect.”

Sunday morning comes, and the sky is grey.

“Typical British weather... The sun shines one minute, the next we’re in hell,” Link chuckles, lying in bed with Nina resting on his chest as he draws circles on her skin with his index finger.

“What do you expect from this island?” She giggles, kissing his stomach before going back to her past position.

“Well, between wanting the island to have a bit more sun and wanting the people not to be complete arseholes... I suppose I do have my hopes up a little high,” he mumbles, staring up at the ceiling.

“A little? I think you have your hopes up a little higher than that,” Nina chuckles.

Link begins to sit up, causing Nina to lean back and lie beside him. “Hey - someone’s got to have faith in the British...” He looks down at her, crossing his arms as he brings his knees up to his chest, clutching them.

“I suppose...” Nina sighs, sitting up next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. “But, on the plus side, you’ll forever be an optimist; and I think that’s pretty swell.” She smiles as she peers up at him.

“We can only hope that I remain that way...”  
He stutters.

Nina sighs, pouting. "I'm sure you will... After all, optimism is contagious," she giggles, kneeling beside him and kissing his cheek. "I'll keep you optimistic."

His glum face lightens up. "You better." A confident smile on his face as he gives her a cocky wink, letting go of his knees - wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her back into the sheets of warmth. "Stay with me in my kingdom of white linen, Princess," he says, putting on a posh accent.

"Yes, my lord," she chuckles, her lips grazing his as he hangs over her, her right leg wrapping around his waist.

He gives her a quick kiss, tugging on her bottom lip, nudging her nose with his. "I shall devour you," he chuckles before ducking and nibbling at her neck, making her giggle.

Cackling like a witch, Nina laughs as Link begins to tickle her sides.

As she begins to shake, her stomach tightening due to her laughter, Link slows down and starts to kiss her neck. “Are you okay?” He asks, pulling back, grinning down at her.

She beams up at him as she tries to catch her breath. “Amazing.”

The pair stay in bed for most of the day, avoiding Gabby like the plague. After midday, with Gabby sulking in the living room, Hayley goes in to check on them. “Hey, you two okay?”

Link sits up properly, Nina following suit, both now wearing pyjamas as they binge *Netflix*.

“We’re fine. You good?” Link asks, his brows pulling together, his forehead creasing slightly.

Hayley shrugs, as if not knowing herself. She closes the door behind her and approaches the two of them, standing next to Link’s side of the

bed. “It’s weird, ya know? She’s never been much of an angry person, I just don’t understand why she can’t just... let go.”

Link looks down at Nina, gesturing for her to shuffle over, before looking up at his sister-in-law. “Want to join us?” He asks, patting the bed next to him.

Hayley grins down at the pair of them, a mischievous expression on her face. “Only if I get to sit next to Nina.”

Link raises his left eyebrow with a questioning look. “Only if you’ll go back outside and get me my bag of sweet and salty popcorn...”

Hayley’s smile widens. “Deal,” she giggles, leaving the room as Link and Nina shuffle over to Link’s side of the bed. She reappears with a large bag of sweet and salty popcorn, coloured in blue and pink.

“Do you think people realise that the popcorn company have gendered popcorn flavours?”

Nina probes as Hayley sits down, opening the top of the bag.

“Wait, what?” Hayley questions, her eyes widening.

“And there’s your answer,” Link chuckles. “No, people probably haven’t noticed, but to be honest - why would they? Most people have forgotten all that bullshit about girls being sweet and boys being salty...” He hesitates. “Talking from experience, I think we’re all salty. And I’m sure Hayley can confirm.”

“Wait, I don’t understand...” Nina mumbles while Hayley spits out the popcorn, she’d put in her mouth, in surprise.

“Lincoln Osbourne!” Hayley chortles, her mouth hanging open as she looks over at him. “For someone in your position, I’m *shocked* at that comment.”

He shrugs as he grins. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says, as he takes a handful of popcorn out of the bag.

“You’re aware of how dirty that is of you, right?” Hayley giggles. The conversation still leaving Nina completely clueless. Hayley smiles, leaning close to Nina, her lips close her ear as she whispers. “We’re talking about cum.”

“Ew!” Nina screams, cringing wildly. “That’s disgusting...”

“Hey, you’ll probably know more about this than anyone - we’ve only been with women, you’ve been with other genders,” Link teases, smirking.

“Salty, so salty...” Nina chuckles, shaking her head as she takes some popcorn, glueing her eyes to the screen to try and avoid the conversation.

Link shakes his head, running his tongue over his teeth. Wrapping his arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer. “My little comedian.”





## Chapter Twelve

Monday is here, and the pair is on their way to their new home, heading over on their planned day off. “Are you sure you want to go?” Gabby asks as Link sighs, not wanting to be on the phone to his sister any longer.

“I am more than sure... I’ve not existed for three years. I deserve this,” he tells her, watching as Nina starts putting her clothes in the walk-in wardrobe as he sits on their king-size bed.

“I just think she’s wrong for you...” Gabby mumbles.

Link clenches his teeth as he growls, “she can’t be any worse than Rita.” He hangs up the phone, slumping back and lying down on

the bed, staring at the ceiling as he throws his phone to the other side of the bed.

“She really thinks you’d be better with Rita than you would with me?” Nina mumbles as she frowns, picking up another set of clothes from the bed - ready to put it away.

“She doesn’t know about her, and she just doesn’t understand *us*. She’ll understand, eventually...” Link explains, looking up at her as he presses his lips together. “Ignore her... She doesn’t matter.”

Nina scoffs, shaking her head, putting the clothes back down before walking over to him, straddling him and sitting on his lap. “She does matter; she’s your sister.”

He shrugs, his hands on her thighs as he looks up at her. “She doesn’t matter; if she cared for me, she wouldn’t second guess our relationship. I’ve always had this sort of problem with her. Between her forcing me to date her friend, then having to cope with

constantly pressuring me... So, honestly, if she can't understand that's not what I want, then she doesn't need to be in my life."

"You may need her one day," Nina mumbles, cupping his face in her hands before leaning down and kissing his forehead.

Link scoffs, smiling up at her. "Maybe; maybe not. Either way, I don't care."

"We'll see about that." She backs away, getting off him, grabbing the pile of clothes and heading back into the walk-in wardrobe.

"Should we have a housewarming party on Friday?" Link asks, getting off the bed and following her, leaning against the doorframe.

"I suppose we can, even if it is just to flaunt the view," Nina chuckles, putting one of her skirts on a hanger before putting it on the railing.

"Who do you want to come?" Link asks, taking his phone out of his pocket and getting the

notes open beginning to type out a list of people - knowing that she will want Derek and Sal there.

“Derek, Sal, Ana - now that we’ve made amends. Maybe Frankie, too.” Nina hesitates, thinking about who else to invite. “I think we should ask Hayley and Gabby,” she tells him.

He sighs as he stops typing. “Can’t we just invite Hayley?”

“Link!” Nina chortles. “Would you *just* invite your sister’s wife?”

Link smiles, thinking of the annoyance it would cause Gabby if he just invited Hayley. “Well, I know I shouldn’t; but I totally would...”

Nina shakes her head as she crosses her arms, standing in front of him. “*You* will invite *your* sister, or you will be sleeping on the sofa the first night living here.”

He sighs, pouting. “Fine. I’ll invite her, but if she brings one of her wackjobs, I will not be held responsible.”

The pair were settled in by the end of the day. They finish up their takeaway, putting the rubbish in the bin before heading into the bedroom to watch the sun go down. “Weren’t we supposed to christen this bed?” Nina giggles, jumping onto the bed and lying in the middle of it, looking up at him.

He chuckles, crawling onto the bed, kissing her knees. “We were supposed to...” He hesitates. “But can we wait? For when I’m not...”

Nina bites her bottom lip, realising that the fluctuation has begun. “Repulsed?”

He bobs his head as he kneels at the bottom of the bed in front of her.

She smiles, sitting up and cupping his face. “We can always christen it with cuddles,” she tells him.

Link feels a heavy weight lift from his shoulders. Although he already knew she understood, he’d been scared for the past few days - not knowing whether she’d let it pass. “Thank you.” He pauses, his grin returning to his face. “You’re the best girlfriend an Ace could have,” he announces, leaning down and kissing her, pushing her back as his arms wrap around her waist.

She wraps her legs around him as they kiss. Breaking for air, she’s unable to stop beaming. “I try my best.”

“Back to work we go...” Nina mumbles, walking with Link up to their office building.

“Yeah...” Link hesitates. “On the plus side, we don’t have to get up at five to get here for

eight, anymore. We also don't have to pay bus fare anymore because we can walk to work. And we can do this," he says, taking her hand in his.

Smiling like a teenager girl, she shakes her head. "I knew you'd have something positive to say," she chuckles, clinging onto his arm and resting her head on his shoulder as they walk.

"Of course... Someone has to be optimistic, right?" He beams down at her, using his free hand to move a strand of her hair.

"I suppose so," she tells him, stopping at the entrance for their office building, letting the automatic doors open. "So, what project do you think we'll be put on?"

Link shrugs as they walk through the white, open, well-lit reception to the staircase to their floor. "Maybe they'll put us on a project with someone we like?" He says sarcastically.

“You’ve now jinxed us to end up working with one of your fangirls.” She rolls her eyes.

“Watch us get someone like Red Zone again...” She mumbles.

“Nah, we can’t have anyone that bad again,” Link chuckles.

“Stop jinxing things. We don’t say things *can’t* happen, because when we do, they do happen,” Nina cackles, pulling him along as they make their way to their office. “Wait for it, we’ll have one of your fangirls, and it will be someone worse than Red Zone - I swear it.”

As they approach their desk, they hear Derek yell, “for fuck sake!”

“We’re screwed...” Nina mumbles. Link goes to sit down while Nina stands behind Derek.

“What’s happening?”

“We have a visit from Miss Bound today...”

Derek says, spinning around in his chair.

“Please, kill me.”

“Kill you? We have to work with *my* boyfriend’s stalker...” Nina mutters before making the gun sign, and pointing her finger gun at her head, faking a shot and sticking her tongue out to resemble her being dead.

Link walks over, quickly licking Nina’s tongue.

“Ew! Dude!” Derek howls, laughing uncontrollably.

Link shrugs. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He pauses. “Now, shall we see if we can get the project shifted on personal grounds of the three of us?” Nina and Derek nod furiously, agreeing with him. Link rolls his eyes. “I’ll go have a word with Martin,” he says as he heads over to Martin’s desk at the other side of the room.

“Do you think he’ll take us off it?” Nina questions. Although she’s been a part of the

firm for a while, it's not been a year yet - and she's not had to talk to Martin before... Or even seen anyone speak to him.

"No!" Martin roars.

"I think we're still working the project..."

Derek groans, letting his head fall back as he slouches in his chair.

Link walks over, arms crossed over his chest, acting cool. Even though his heart is pounding. "For some reason, I don't think he'll let us change projects."

Nina sighs, sitting down at her desk, opening her emails and looking at the project information. "Apparently she wants the entire site re-worked," Nina moans, letting her head fall forward, hitting the edge of her desk as she slumps. "If she hadn't gone for that horrible green and magenta theme, we wouldn't be having this issue..."

Link stands behind the two of them, shaking his head in disapproval. “You know, you don’t both have to be negative nellies... We know what we need to do, and with that being said.” He pauses, leaning over and taking Derek’s mouse, opening a new email. “Get an email sent to her for someone to come and talk to us about what they want now, and we’ll get it done before the week is out.”

“Easy for you to say,” Derek growls.

“Hey, you’re not the one that’s going to have to smile your partner’s fangirl,” Nina groans.

Derek pouts, pressing his lips together as he keeps typing, staring at his computer screen.

“Well, not at this precise moment, but I’ve done it before.”

“Wait, what?” Link blurts, his eyes widening and his mouth hanging open. “What do you mean you had to smile at your boyfriend’s stalker?”

Derek pauses, stopping what he was doing at spinning around in his chair to look at Link. “I’ve been in a relationship with my boyfriend for three years... We don’t do much socially, because he’s not all that out yet. His ex-girlfriend stalked him to my house, and because he’s not out, I had to smile and nod, let her into my home and watch her grovelled to my boyfriend to get back with her...”

Nina’s mouth drops open, her shocked facial expression mimicking Link’s. “I didn’t know there was that kind of fucked up shit in the world...”

Link and Derek both look at Nina. “Are you sure about that, because Friday was pretty shitty...” Derek mumbles, referring to the incident with Ana.

Nina sighs, her hands on her lap as she looks down, twiddling her thumbs. “I suppose I’ve gained some optimism over the weekend.”

Link smiles softly, placing his hand on the top of her head, stroking her hair in a caring way. “I’m happy you’ve gained some optimism.”

She reaches up, taking his hand from her head, bringing it down to her mouth and kissing the centre of his palm. “How could I not? You’re adorable.”

He scoffs, leaning down and kissing the top of her head before taking a seat in his chair at his desk. “Now, what are we going to do about Miss Bound?”

Nina and Derek shrug in sync. But, as if a light bulb had lit up above her head, Nina raises her hand. “I have an idea. If I look at her products, I’ll be able to design a website based on the designs of the products and... hope for the best?”

Link chuckles, pinching his bottom lip between his thumb and index finger. “Yeah, why not? You lead it, tell me what to do, and

I'll help. The quicker we get this done and approved, the sooner we get rid of her.”

Nina nods, grinning - the idea of having Link working with her, and not just monitoring, making her happy. “Let’s get started!”

After three full days of work, the website was finally done, and the dreaded meeting had arrived. “I don’t want to be in there...” Nina mumbles, walking alongside Link and Derek.

“You’ll be fine. Just stay calm, keep your answers short, and speak naturally,” Derek tells her, patting her on the back before heading into the room, relieving the Receptionist of her hospitality duties.

“You’ve got your ring on - be dominant. She doesn’t know that we’re not actually engaged,” Link tells her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders, squeezing her, kissing her forehead

then letting go - entering the room after the receptionist leaves.

Leaving only Nina not in the room yet. *I can do this... I can.* She takes a deep breath, mentally prepares herself to walk into the room.

“Good morning, Nina,” Safia says, smiling widely. Her thin, red lips making her face look round.

“Good morning,” Nina greets her, taking her seat between Link and Derek as usual. She straightens her shirt, making sure it doesn’t bulge and show off her bra underneath through the buttoned-up front.

“How can we help, Safia?” Derek asks, leaning forward, perching on his arms.

Her smile takes a sinister turn as her eyes dart back and forth between the three of them.

“I want my website to be completely different. Miss Nembhard, just isn't cut out for this line of business. Everyone hates her design.”

“Mx,” Link snarls, correcting her seemingly intentional mistake.

“Including me, because it was horrible, but it was what you asked for.” Nina gawks, the threat of her job sinking in, making her ignore the blatant genderphobia.

“Well, it’s not your fault that you’re a bad designer, Miss Nembhard,” Safia chirps, a mocking tone in her voice.

“Miss Bound, if you keep misgendering my graphic designer, I will need to discontinue this meeting. I will not have my colleague being invalidated by a client,” Derek growls as he sees Link become tense.

“Fine, *Mx* Nembhard... Not like it changes much, she’s still a woman,” Safia laughs, sitting back in her chair and slouching - her charming exterior persona crumbling as she begins to look like a cartoon supervillain.

Nina lets out a little giggle after the genderphobe accidentally validates her identity.

“We made you a new site, which we believe will improve your sales, and it’s ready to go. All we need to know is if you like it,” Derek comments, using the remote to turn on the board, showing the new design.

Safia smiles. “I can see Link has done this,” she says, looking at the combinations of purples and reds, making the site look peaceful and sensual.

“Actually...” Link mumbles. “This is all courtesy of Mx Nembhard.”

Safia rolls her eyes. “I’ll take it, as long as I don’t have to work with her again.”

“I have an idea for you.” Link pauses. “How about you take the design, pay us, and cancel your maintenance plan. Then, you can get

whoever you want to take care of it for you.  
But it won't be us."

Safia sighs, seeing her chances with Link dwindling. "Fine, cancel it. I'll take the new design. I'm done here." She abruptly stands up, leaving the room.

The three of them sitting there, shocked.  
"Well, that was easier than I initially anticipated." Link grins.

"And we didn't even have to use the ring,"  
Nina giggles, raising her hand and gesturing to the fake engagement ring.

"True." Link pauses. "I think that could make this all a little easier for us, to be honest."

"Why do you say that?" Derek probes, frowning as if offended for her.

He shrugs, leaning back in his chair. "I've had enough of having to use each other to get away with existing."

“I’m okay with this – I don’t particularly like having to fake a relationship, while having said relationship, to prompt people not to pry...” Nina mumbles, biting her bottom lip as she stands up from her seat. “Anyway, let’s get all of this sorted. I don’t want to deal with her again.”

Friday afternoon is the thing of dreams – the signifier that the weekend is about to begin and that work can fuck itself for a good sixty-three hours until the ripe time of 8 AM Monday morning.

“Freedom!” Link yells, like a battle cry, as he leaves the office. Nina and Derek following behind – confused expressions on their faces.

“You are aware we’re not in North Korea, right?” Derek questions.

Link spins on the spot, his lips pressed together as he squints, leaning down, so his

face is level with Derek's – emphasising the height of the small man. “Just because you have some freedom, doesn't mean you're free...”

“Am I missing something? Because I'm incredibly confused...” Derek mutters.

Nina rolls her eyes, grinning as she chuckles, “he's referring to the issues that were in Northern Ireland.”

Derek frowns. “What issues?”

Nina stumbles forward, standing next to Link as they pause – turning around to look at him. “Are you being serious?” Link blurts.

“I don't understand...” Derek says, his eyes darting between the two of them.

Nina steps forward. “If you were living in Northern Ireland, you wouldn't be allowed to marry your boyfriend because Equal Marriage Rights haven't been legalised.

And people who need to have an

abortion would need to go to a backstreet physician because abortion is illegal unless the mother is going to die,” Nina explains – a straight, blank expression on her face.

“Christ...” Derek witters, his eyebrows drawing together as he scowls. “They’re trying to fix this, right?”

Link nods. “It’s already being set in motion for both Marriage Equality and the right to an abortion.”

Derek smiles. “Awesome.”



## Chapter Thirteen

Finally home after a long walk with Derek toddling along at a snail's pace, the pair go into their bedroom to get changed while Derek relaxes on the sofa.

“The question that I now have to ask is, who did you send the invites to for tonight?” Link asks, taking off his white shirt and grey trousers, swapping them for a crisp black shirt and a pair of skinny red jeans – looking like the emo he’s dating.

Nina shrugs. “Just some people...”

Link pauses, watching her as she stares out into the night sky – watching the nightlife light up the city as the sun begins to set over the vast skyline of skyscrapers. “You invited my sister, didn’t you?”

She looks over her shoulder, peering up at him. “She wanted to know if you’d settled in. I didn’t want her thinking I wasn’t taking care of you... She hates me enough as it is.”

“I’d rather her hate you than know where we live,” he comments – the statement sounding, and feeling, harsh to Nina; but his intentions were pure. “I don’t trust her. I don’t want her telling people where we live...”

Nina scoffs sarcastically. “Why would she tell people where we live? We’ve got security here; there’s no chance of people robbing the place. What are you worried about?”

Link looks down at his hands as he begins to button his shirt, hiding his slightly scarred torso. “Never mind,” he mumbles.

She walks over to him, pressing her lips together as she looks up at him – his action of looking down, making him seem disappointed and unhappy. “What are you scared of? Don’t hide this from me.”

He huffs, gritting his teeth as he looks up, their eyes meeting. “I know my sister, I know she’s obsessed with bringing *her* into our family. I just don’t know at what point she’ll stop...”

“What are you suggesting? Your Ex is in prison...”

Link sighs, knowing the truth about *her*... “Not anymore.” He pauses. “She got out around a month ago.”

“And you think that your sister is going to bring her here?” Nina questions, her eyes widening as she stares up at him.

He shakes his head in disbelief. “I don’t want to think about it, but I believe so.”

Nina takes a deep breath, her hands running through her hair as she tries to calm herself. “If she brings her here, we’ll be prepared. We’ll handle it. But if she turns up, you need to tell me, okay?”

He bobs his head, pressing his lips together as a watery grin appears on his face, a few tears dripping down his cheeks. “Thank you, Katrina.”

She steps closer, wrapping her arms around him as she stands on her tiptoes – her heels giving her a slight height advantage this time. “You’re most welcome, Lincoln.”

As they finish up getting changed, they’re disturbed by Derek knocking on the door. “Hey, guys – people have arrived!” He shouts.

Nina rolls her eyes, heading over to the door while Link finishes putting his shoes on. Opening it, she finds Derek smiling with a small crowd of people standing behind him in the living room. “C’mon, then,” she chuckles, following him out.

Ana, Sal, Derek, Neil, Frankie, and Hayley are stood by the breakfast bar, pouring drinks.

“Hey!” Ana squeals. “This place is amazing!”  
She picks up one of the poured drinks,  
offering it to Nina.

“Thanks,” Nina giggles, taking the glass. “Hey,  
Hayley – where’s Gabby?”

Hayley sighs. “She’s outside being a pain. I  
decided to just leave her to her loathing...”

Hearing the news of his sister as he walks into  
the room, Link rolls his eyes. “You know, one  
of these days – she will be happy for me.”

Hayley presses her lips together, a sombre  
look on her face, not hidden by her smile.  
“Let’s hope so.”

“Why is your sister such a cunt?” Derek  
blurts, his words shocking the group – his  
choice of curse being perfect for Gabby at this  
precise moment in time.

Taking a glass from the breakfast bar, taking a  
sip of the concoction. “That’s a long story...”

An hour passes, Link's friends begin to flood in. Jeanne not being invited.

"Why is Gabby stood outside of the building? I asked her, but she told me to mind my own business..." One of Link's friends, Oskar, asks him.

Link rolls his eyes, the seemingly new, automatic reaction to his sister.

"Let's say, she's on strike," Nina mutters, smiling as she takes another sip of her drink.

Oskar grins down at Nina, his first impressions of her being much more positive than he initially anticipated. "I like her," he says to Link, gesturing to her. "Don't let her go."

Soon after all those invited arrived, there was a buzz on the door monitor... Gabby asking to

enter the building. “What? You’ve finally decided not to be an idiot?” Link questions.

“Just let me in, will ya? It’s fucking freezing out here!” She groans.

Rolling his eyes for the third time this night, he presses the button – letting his sister in. As she walks past, a shadow seems to follow her into the building. Link scoffs, shaking his head. *It was just a flicker of the screen...*

He walks back over to his girlfriend and sister-in-law, standing next to them. A knock at the door prompts Derek to wander over, opening the door and letting Gabby in... And another woman. The shadow wasn’t a flicker after all.

“No.” Hayley barks, repositioning herself – acting as a shield to Link.

Link looks toward the door, finding his sister and Rita. His mouth drops open, his eyes widening as he takes a step back – flabbergasted, he freezes in shock.

“Rita?” Nina whispers to Hayley.

She nods in response.

Nina’s fists clench, anger rising within her.

*How dare she bring that bitch into my home.*

“I thought I’d bring your girlfriend to your little get together,” Gabby announces, gesturing to Rita – the tale, brunette stood there as if deserving to be there.

“She’s not his girlfriend, I am. Last time I checked, girlfriends aren’t supposed to abuse their partners,” Nina blurts, her hate-filled eyes focused on Rita’s face. She looks up at Link, she nods – gesturing to the door of the bedroom.

Not looking at her, he takes a deep breath and nods.

Rita doesn’t react to Nina’s comment – there was nothing to respond to. It wasn’t a lie, and it certainly wasn’t something she was disgusted by. Gabby, on the other hand,

clearly knew nothing about the reason her *best friend* went to prison. She turned to her friend, her mouth hanging open, her eyes watering. “What did you do to my brother?” She mutters.

Rita doesn’t answer the question; she keeps staring forward – staring at Link. Their eyes fixed, Link not blinking out of terror – Rita not blinking out of fixation. “You’re mine, Lincoln. It’s time to go home.”

Shaking, Link blurts: “I am home!” He turns and runs into the bedroom, closing the door and sitting behind it.

As Rita begins to walk toward the door, Nina lunges forward, grasping her wrist. “Are you sure you want to do that? I’ve spoken to the police about you... I needed to know what I was up against... I know there is a restraining order. I can call the police right now... How quickly would you get put back in prison? After all, you are on probation,” Nina

chuckles, gesturing to Rita's ungraceful anklet – the black box of shame.

“I've heard about you... You're biologically a man. Dirty perv...” Rita spews, her Transphobia being misguided.

“Oh, how cute! You think I was a man... No, dear... You've got your information all wrong. But that's okay! We can't all be a grade-A Terf like you!” Nina laughs sarcastically, letting go of the woman and taking her phone out of her pocket – the phone showing that she'd already dialled 999.

Rita's eyes bulge out before she turns around and runs for the door. As she opens it, she finds two police officers outside with the building's security guard.

“Ms Rita Chakma, you're under arrest for the breach of probation, breach of a restraining order, hate speech, and trespassing.

You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court.

Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?” One of the officers asks, giving her the arrest statement confidently.

Rita sighs, looking over her shoulder to Nina. “Why would he go for a Tranny like you?”

Nina crosses her arms over her chest, smiling. “Because unlike you, I treat him and his sexuality with respect.”

The officer that made the arrest statement turns Rita around, cuffing her before escorting her out with the other officer and the security guard. They close the door behind them, leaving the large group of people in the apartment.

Nina looks around, everyone looking at her – including Gabby and Hayley – the pair being

incredibly shocked by the new knowledge of Nina not being Cisgender, while everyone else is mulling over the fact Link was abused because of his sexuality.

“But...” Derek comments, frowning. “What is he?”

Nina smiles, shrugging. “That’s not my story to tell.” She turns around, heading over to the bedroom, she knocks on the door. “Sweetie, she’s gone. Can I come in?” She asks, she hears him move, the door opens slightly for her. She slips in, finding him on the end of the bed, his head in his hands. She closes the door, locking it behind her. She takes his big, black jumper out from the top drawer. “Take that off,” she says softly, smiling down at him. He takes his shirt off, taking the comforting jumper and pulling it on. Sitting down next to him, he turns to her, cuddling her as he sobs. “I’m sorry this happened,” she tells him.

“Thank you for preparing for it,” he cries, knowing that her focusing on Rita’s return paid off.

She kisses his forehead, pulling him close. “I told you – I won’t let anyone hurt you ever again.” She pauses. “I love you.”

His grip tightens, his face against her chest as he wails, “thank you!”



## Chapter Fourteen

The few days following, it was time to come clean about a lot of things to the few people that mattered. With Derek, Ana, Sal, Gabby, and Hayley sat at the breakfast bar, and Link and Nina stood in the kitchen, they told them everything.

About how Nina was born intersex with ambiguous genitalia that lead to *correction* surgery, which then left Nina with the wrong genitalia for what her body did to her.

About how Link has no sexual attraction toward anyone, and is often sex-repulsed, which lead to the abuse he got from Rita – simply because she refused to believe someone could be sex-repulsed. She didn't believe Asexuality really existed.

And how the pair are delighted to be together because they understand each other and the needs they have.

After a couple of hours of explaining, Gabby finally realises what she's done to him over the years. The pressure to be *normal* – the same pressure their parents put on her to marry a man. "I'm sorry."

He crosses his arms, sitting on top of a kitchen counter as he peers over at her. "I know you are, and that's why I needed to tell you. But it was never the right time... You were too focused on yourself and your friends, rather than me."

"I knew you were a part of the LGBT!" Derek chimes in, smiling like a clown.

"Link isn't a part of the LGBT," Ana scoffs. Her bigoted Allie side showing.

“Of course, he is. What do you think the A in LGBTQIA stands for?” Sal groans, frowning at his wife.

“Fuck if I know,” she mumbles.

“Which suggests that you need to shut the fuck up, ain’t that right?” Sal smiles, a satirical tone to his voice and a look of sarcasm on his face.

She frowns, pressing her pink lips together as she looks away from them.

“So, what do we do next?” Derek questions.

Nina shrugs. “I think we should have food.” She gets off the counter, opening the fridge to see what they have in. “I could cook, or we could go to a restaurant.”

“Have we got stuff to make pizza?” Link asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Nope. We don’t have any flour, tomato puree, cheese, or toppings,” Nina mumbles, frowning

as she looks in the fridge. “Fuck it, let’s go out for food.”

They finish up their pizzas, sitting back in their seats. “I feel like my stomach is about to explode,” Link mumbles, rubbing his belly as he fights with his eyes – feeling groggy and sleepy.

“I wish I could say the same, but I’m fat. I can just keep eating,” Nina giggles, smiling up at him as she sits opposite him.

Ana scoffs, “hey, I’m not fat, but I could keep eating.”

Nina shrugs. “You have room for it. I have no room, I’d just get bigger.”

“I hope you know that your size isn’t something that matters. You know that, right?” Link questions, the body comments making him curious.

She nods. “I know, I just wish I was a bit thinner.”

“Why?” Link asks, his brows pulling together as he squints.

“Because I’d look nicer...” Nina mutters, crossing her arms under her chest, hiding her stomach, trying not to look down in fear of her double chin being visible.

“Nicer? I don’t think that’s possible. You’re perfect the way you are. If you want to lose weight, go ahead, if you want to eat food, go for it. But be you, because that’s who I love,” Link says, leaning forward and resting against the table. “Now, would you like dessert?”

After weeks of not knowing the outcome of Rita’s arrest, the verdict is shared: “Rita Chakma was found guilty of trespassing, discrimination and hate speech, as well as breaching her probation period and

restraining order. For this, she will fulfil her original sentence of six years, and will now be given a four-year extension.”

For the first time in weeks, Link and Nina can finally relax, getting into bed, cuddling as they mull over the fact that they’ll most likely never see Rita again. “What are we going to do now?” She questions, her head resting on his chest as she listens to his heartbeat.

He scoffs, a gleeful tone to his voice, a smile on his face as he stares at the ceiling.

“Honestly, I have no idea. I feel like we need to go back to work, get some bills paid, maybe go on holiday at some point... We can live a normal life now,” he tells her.

“Can we go to Scotland for a week during October or November?” She questions, drawing circles on his chest with her index finger.

“For Samhain, I assume?” He asks, grinning.  
“Of course, we can. We have the money for it.

We can go there, and maybe Spain, so you get to use the Spanish you've been learning. Then I'll take you to Japan, so I can use some of the Japanese I learnt on my training course in Tokyo."

"Wait a second; you know Japanese?" She says, her eyes wide as she looks up at him.

He chuckles, "oh, did you not know that?" He reaches under her arms, tickling her ribs.

She squirms a little, trying to pull away from him. "I didn't know, because you didn't tell me."

He chortles, kissing her forehead, holding her close. "I don't like to boast, you know this."

Nina rolls her eyes before snuggling down – slinging her left leg over him. "Well, I know it now," she giggles sleepily.

"Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Goodnight..."

A week has gone by, the pair have gone back to work, and it's been announced that they have a new client. "The organisation you're going to be doing a campaign for is called *Sans Seriph*. It's a company that we've worked with before. They're an art company that provide us with custom fonts, backgrounds, and photography. While they've provided us with material in the past, now that they want to branch out to other companies, they need marketing. So, that means posters, banners, and websites." Martin tells the three of them – Derek, Link, and Nina being given the new client straight off the bat. "They're going to be difficult to please, but the stuff they've said they like are those done by Nina, so I thought I may as well get you in on it straight away."

"Who will we be talking to from this company?" Derek asks, taking notes of the

company details so that he can do as much research as possible.

“Patrick Kavanagh, the CEO’s son-in-law, will be handling the whole thing.”

Nina’s eyes fill with horror. “Are you sure I need to be a part of this?”

“Yes, Katrina. You don’t have a choice,” Martin growls. “Right, I’ll leave you to it,” he tells them before going back to his desk at the other end of the office.

“Nina, what’s wrong?” Link asks, reaching over and taking her hand.

“Patrick is my ex...”



## Chapter Fifteen

“Your ex is our new client?” Link blurts, his mouth gaping open as he stares at her.

“Seems that way...” Derek comments, gulping as he looks at his computer screen.

“What are we going to do?” She asks, a look of sheer terror on her face.

“We’ll deal with him. Don’t worry, we can handle it,” Link says, trying to reassure her while attempting to also reassure himself.

“When is he coming?” Nina questions.

“According to the email Martin just forwarded to me, it supposed to be tomorrow afternoon,” Derek comments, frowning at his screen as he reads through the details.

“Nina, are you okay?” Link probes, his brows pulling together as he watches her.

She inhales deeply, as if to calm her nerves.

“I’m fine,” she mutters. “I’ll be fine.”

Link gets out of his chair and kneels down next to her. His long arms snaking their way around her waist as he rests his head on her shoulder. “We’ll get through this together, okay?”

She nods, turning and kissing the top of his head. “I hope so.”

The next day came by so quickly that it felt like a blur. The three of them are sat in the conference room, waiting for their new client to arrive. “Fashionably late, as always,” Nina mumbles, typing away on her laptop as they wait for him to arrive.

“Do you think he’ll recognise you?” Derek questions, relaxing back in his chair, resting his hands on his stomach.

“I hope not... But I haven’t changed much, so he might,” she sighs. *Please don’t recognise me.*

“We’ll see shortly, because I think that’s the receptionist bringing him up now,” Link comments, seeing the receptionist through the glass wall.

Nina inhales deeply, resting her hands on her lap as she clenches her fists. Seconds later, the door swings open and Patrick strides in wearing a black suit, crisp white shirt with red inner linings, and red suede shoes.

“Sorry for the wait, traffic was horrendous.” He smiles, showing off his white, but crooked teeth. He looks at the three of them as he sits down opposite, his eyes lingering on Nina. “Mx Nembhard, Mr Osbourne, and Mr Willow – it’s lovely to see you all.”

Nina looks up at him, blinking slowly – in a form of shock. *He never used Mx when we were together.*

“So.” Link pauses, seeing the lack of tension as a bonus and the ability to move forward with the job. “We’ve been told that you want a marketing campaign, is that right?”

“That is right, indeed. We need to branch out further – we’ve had a lot of commercial interest in the past few months, so we want to try and cash in on it, as you would,” he chuckles, his eyes shifting between the three of them but he continues to look at Nina in prolonged glances.

“So, what sort of theme would you like us to go with?” Derek questions, his eyes wandering over the man sat in front of them – his tanned skin, manicured nails, sleek hair black hair... The opposite of Link with his blond, slightly messy hair, trimmed but poorly shaped nails, and pale skin.

“Well, because there is a wedding and about to happen within the high ranks of the organisation, we thought to go for a romance side of things,” Patrick says, putting both hands on the table, intertwining his fingers.

“What kind of campaign is it going to be? Digital, Traditional, or both?” Nina questions, furiously typing as she takes notes on her computer.

The sound of her voice startles Patrick, he blinks a few times before answering the question. “We’re going for digital mainly – as we want more commercial entities to find us.”

She nods, taking note of his statement. After four hours of working in the room together, the team finally have enough detail to get the website and campaign done.

“So, you’re working here now,” Patrick comments, following Nina out the room, Link and Derek following close behind.

“Yeah, I started in January,” she tells him, leading the way downstairs to the reception – escorting him out.

“You’ve done well for yourself,” he remarks, his hands in his pockets. “Are you engaged?” He questions, referring to the ring on her finger.

*What do I say?* She pauses in her thinking.

“She is, to me – actually,” Link says, walking beside Nina now – his arm snakes around her waist and his hand resting on her hip.

“I’m happy for you.” Patrick smiles, his sincerity shocking Nina slightly, but putting her at ease. “I heard you bought quite a lavish place in the Mirror Tower; you must get some magnificent views from up there,” he chuckles.

The pair nods in response. “We get a good view, it’s nice being able to see the life of the city without having to be a part of it.” Link

beams, hiding his uncertainty behind his smile.

Derek follows behind them, watching as the ex and the *fiancé* share decencies, with Nina walking between them.

Arriving in the reception area, Patrick offers his hand to Nina to shake. “It was great seeing you again, and it was fantastic meeting you.” Extending his hand to Link, the pair shake hands before Patrick exits the building – leaving the three of them questioning life.

“My ex is now a successful man, who isn’t a complete dick anymore,” Nina mutters.

“Your ex is much nicer than mine,” Link chuckles.

“Your ex is a stud, and I don’t know why you would want Link over him,” Derek blurts out. His hands quickly fly up to cover his mouth, as if in shock due to his own comment.

Nina rolls her eyes, grinning as she walks past him, whispering, “I like girth, which Patrick really didn’t have.”

The comment made the blood in Derek’s face drain away – his face turning extremely white.

As Derek stays there, as if stuck, Link follows Nina. “That’s not why you like me, right?” He questions.

Nina rolls her eyes, her grin growing. “No, I want you because you’re a nicer person, and you have an amazing personality. We like the same things, and we both enjoy food. There’s no real reason to want him.”

Link pauses, stopping and pulling her close to him. His arms snaked around her waist as he kisses her forehead. “You’re amazing.”

She smiles up at him, giving him a confident wink. “I know.”

The project involving Patrick came and went swiftly. He was much pleasanter to work with than he was to live with, in Nina's opinion. It made her think of how much her life has improved since then – she lost the person she thought was her soulmate, she met many people along that way who she thought could be her soulmate, then settled down with the best human she'd ever met.

Lying on the bench beside him, her head on his lap, they soak in the summer sun on their day off – drinking cola and eating candy – not a care in the world.

“I was wondering – we've been officially together for three months now; we live together, and we have more in common than most people...” Link mutters, stroking Nina's cheek as he stares forward – watching as the wind blows through the branches of the trees. “Will you actually be engaged to me?”

Nina rolls onto her back, looking up at him.

“Are you asking me to marry you?”

His blank expression quickly changes to one of joy, his smile appearing on his face and widening rapidly. “Yeah, I suppose I am.”

She sits up, shuffling close to him, resting her head on his shoulder as she wraps her arms around his waist. “I have a few conditions...”

“Oh, yeah?” He chuckles.

She grins. “I want a popcorn and chocolate sundae every Sunday.”

His smile widens, showing off his white teeth.

“Done – why wouldn’t I want that?”

“I also want a movie night/date night every Friday!” She squeals.

“Done and done!” He laughs.

She pulls away slightly, allowing him to wrap his arm around her shoulder, pulling her close

and kissing her crown. “I want you to love me,” she whimpers.

He inhales deeply, smelling her cherry hair shampoo. “Who said I didn’t?”

Biting her bottom lip, Nina hangs her head – looking down at her lap. “Well...”

“Do I really need to say it? Because if you want me to, I will,” he tells her, using his free hand to pull a few strands of loose hair back and hook it around her ear.

“Please?” She mutters.

He sighs, his lips grazing her ear as he leans in close. “I love you, don’t ever question that.” He kisses her ear, before sitting back, grinning at the world as the sun shines down on them.

She looks up, grinning as much as he is as she sits back, her head back against his shoulder. “I love you, too.”