



IF I TIE U DOWN

From Novelist
Stephanie Van Orman

Love me like
it will last
forever

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If I Tie U Down

Stephanie Van Orman

Dedicated to my priceless girl, Kaitlynn. You are so very priceless.

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Ch. 1 Seven Hundred Dollar Handcuffs - Shannon

“Hey! Are you okay?”

His voice filtered up through my senses. Pain thundered through my skull and rang in my ears so that he sounded like he was calling to me across a distance. He wasn't though. He was right beside me.

Actually, we were handcuffed together.

I stuffed my free hand into my hair. There was blood. Head injuries always looked so much worse than they were. I was probably lying in a pool of blood. Squinting, I looked around. The light was gray and my vision blurred.

“Is there a lot of blood?” I whispered.

“Not really.”

“Is there a bad bump?”

“Probably.”

I glared at him. “But...”

As my vision cleared I saw his expression was amused, but he had looked pleased by everything that had happened that night. He had a smile on his lips and a chuckle in his throat. It had been infuriating. He even smiled at me over his shoulder when I held a gun to his back.

He grinned like that as he rattled our handcuffs. “Feeling sorry you didn't put up more of a fight?”

“How did you know?” I said, my voice garbled as I coughed.

“I'm Fletch.”

He was so loathsome. The whole time he had been insisting that he was Fletch Litman when both Natalie and I knew he was Carver Criche... the biggest loser/liar/weasel I had ever even heard about.

“What did you do to land yourself here, stuck together with me?”

I sighed. “It's not important.” I needed to talk as little as possible. “Can you think of a way out of here?”

“No. The last thing I tried,” he said, picking up a brick, “didn't go so well for me.”

Ironically, it was a brick just like the one that had made the crater in the side of my head. The last thing Natalie said was that she was on her way to the police station to tell them all about the kidnapping. After hitting me over the head, she had obviously handcuffed me to the loser/liar to make sure I didn't bolt. If I actually believed her story about going to the cops, I would have been terrified. If I was a betting woman (and sometimes I was), I bet that Natalie drove to town and got a hamburger at a twenty-four-hour drive-thru. After raising her blood sugar, I believed she'd change her mind about going to the police. Hopefully, she would come back to the campground we had brought the liar/loser to and try to make a deal with the aforementioned weasel/rascal that didn't involve the police.

The way I saw things, even with my banged-in head, the solution was quite simple. I couldn't wait for Natalie to come back. I needed to get the rascal/weasel and me out of the camp kitchen. Breaking the handcuffs shouldn't be too hard, considering where I bought them. Once we were separated, I could conveniently 'lose' him somewhere on the road back to Edmonton.

I looked at the brick he was bouncing in his palm.

In the camp kitchen, there was a stove with a chimney, intended for cooking. It was a million years old, and the weasel/liar had his hand in a hole in the bricks. The other end of the handcuffs was hooked around an even older grill. Natalie and I had done what we could to make sure he couldn't dislodge it. Unlucky for me, I had quarreled with Natalie and now my hand was on the other side of the grill so that I

was practically sitting in the fireplace, handcuffed to the most loathsome man. What could I say? I didn't gamble on her being spunky enough to hit me in the head with a brick.

"So, you reeved on your handcuff and brought some of the loose chimney blocks down on you?"

"Yup," he said pleasantly.

I must have missed that when I was outside arguing with Natalie. I didn't know he'd made the slightest attempt to escape. It made me like him better because it made him seem more like a prisoner. This whole time he'd acted so... happy about being with us... like being kidnapped by Natalie and me was his idea of a party.

I was just about to crawl into the fireplace to see if I could get us uncuffed when I noticed the loser/weasel smiling at me again. It was hilarious for him because he knew that I was the girl in the ski mask with the horrible British accent who had ordered him around with a gun. Now the tables had turned and I was also a prisoner. He grinned wickedly at me.

"What?" I groaned.

"I'm sorry if I'm staring," he said, attempting to conceal his amusement. "I just can't figure out why you're here."

"Hmm?"

"Well, when we got here, you two asked me all sorts of questions like why wouldn't I sign the contract and why I was such a douchebag. All questions that make no sense to me because I'm not Carver Criche. You went out. I didn't hear your fight in detail, but then your accomplice attacked you. She dragged you in here, handcuffed you to me and we're done? The chubby one left us here?"

"The chubby one?" I repeated. Was that what he thought of Natalie? She wasn't fat. She was just really strong, hence she had been able to knock me out with a brick. I'd never call her chubby. Talk like that was why he was a loser/rascal. "Someone asked you why you were a douchebag and you wondered why?"

He chuckled. "Do you think she's coming back?"

I shrugged noisily.

"Why does that tick you off so much? That I called that woman chubby? She kidnapped me! I could call her a lot worse things, but chubby ticks you off? All things said and done, you have more reason to hate her than me. I didn't make you bleed."

I huffed angrily. "Yeah, well, I might not be very fond of her, but I'm really not fond of a man who only thinks about a woman's sexual appeal."

"And your boyfriend never thought about any of that stuff when he got together with you?"

That did it. I turned myself so my face was out of the fireplace and I could see his horrible, smug expression. "I don't have a boyfriend."

He smiled. "You're more beautiful than your voice under the ski mask hints at, even with the fake accent. Did you know?"

My blush went crazy red. I turned away from him, but he kept talking.

"I'm not Carver. He is the producer for the band, Stark Mad? The band I was playing with tonight is called City of Vines and they were opening for Stark Mad, which is why I was on board their tour bus. I was just saying hi, and when I stepped off the bus, you two grabbed me. You got the wrong guy. I was a replacement drummer. I'm not even a member of City of Vines. When you were out cold, I showed your friend my social media profile and convinced her that although I bear a slight resemblance to Carver Criche, I'm not him. Then I gave her my money clip to handcuff the two of us together and leave. Lovely, isn't it? Sorry that she won't be back."

I swallowed hard. “How much cash did you give her?”

“Seven hundred.”

“You had that much on hand? What is wrong with you?”

“It was my pay for the impromptu drumming. They paid me in cash twenty minutes before you picked me up.”

I felt like screaming. Natalie owed money everywhere. “You promised her you wouldn’t go to the police?”

“Yes, and I won’t. Not on her and not on you.”

Natalie probably would have done what he asked as long as he promised not to go to the police. The money had been a nice bonus.

“So, Fletch,” I said, steaming and feeling like I’d caught an even bigger weasel/creep than I’d originally guessed. “Why do you want to be handcuffed to me in a camp kitchen?”

“This might sound weird,” he said, his face out of my view, “but I’ve heard about you. The famous Shannon Bilx. That’s why it’s so confusing that you kidnapped me tonight. Why would Simon Crew’s ex want to kidnap me?”

“How do you know Simon?” I snapped.

“I’m his cousin.”

I refrained from making the tiniest sound. I knew Simon. He was what I would have called a lifer, meaning that he had pursued me off and on for two and a half years. I called all the guys who chased me for over a year, without concrete encouragement from me, lifers. No one ever lasted longer than three years. Simon reached his limit and said goodbye a few months ago, which was fine by me. I didn’t keep him around to flatter my ego, even though he did. Regardless of my non-interest, he had been a decent guy.

The thought gave me the sudden, unhappy idea that Fletch was telling the truth about not being Carver and that he might be a good guy if he was close to Simon.

“So, what do you want?” I asked coldly.

“I want to see what Simon found so loveable.”

I stuck my head around the corner of the stove and poked my tongue out at him. “Are you finding it?”

A slow satisfied smile spread across his face. He had me exactly where he wanted me.

I continued lashing out. “Or are you going to tell me how awful I am and how no man could ever love me? Don’t hold back. I’ve heard it all before. I’m not even pretty. You should start your tirade by insulting my butt. That’s where they always start.”

“I didn’t spend seven hundred dollars to badmouth you to your face. I’m here to correct you.”

I nearly died. “Correct me?”

“Yeah. Do you think it’s okay to treat people like that? Simon loved you. Why treat his heart like your personal dishrag?”

“Look,” I said, preparing to defend myself. “I was not as bad to him as he’s let on. Let me tell you the system.”

“The system?” he asked with disbelief.

“Yes. The system. You’re going to hate me when you hear it, but you might as well get the whole story from my perspective. Everywhere I go, it seems like every guy I meet likes me.”

Fletch didn’t snort. He looked at me evenly, which helped me like him better.

I continued. “But doesn’t that seem arrogant? To naturally assume that every guy who meets me is instantly infatuated? I *am* full of myself, but even so, that seems crazy. Some guys are just flirty. They

probably treat every woman they meet like that, right? So no matter what overtures of affection a man might put on for me, I always assume it's nothing until he says something serious."

"Like what?"

"Like, 'I'm in love with you', or 'will you be my girlfriend?'"

"So how do you treat a guy before he says those things?"

"Like nothing. I don't hold hands with him or kiss him on the doorstep, or anything. Usually, I have a collection of guys I classify this way. Everything they do seems to indicate that they like me, but until they say so, I wait."

"Then what happens once he does say something?"

"Usually, I say what I think, which is that I'm not interested. All the time that he's been hanging out, I've been figuring out whether or not I think we'd make a good couple. Almost every time, he isn't what I want."

"So, what happened with Simon, exactly?"

"Exactly?"

"Yeah." Fletch's face was set.

"Same thing. He came around. I thought it was nothing until one night we were watching TV. It was time for him to head home and he started talking."

"Saying what?"

"You know, that I was so beautiful I took his breath away."

"Wait. That sounds like an okay line to me."

"It is," I conceded. "It just would have been better coming from a different man. He was a little different than the other guys though, as in he didn't demand a monogamous relationship with me. If he had, I would have thrown him out the door. He didn't say he loved me. He didn't say he wanted anything. He merely expressed an appreciation for my appearance and that he wished our relationship was something more. I don't deal in that kind of ambiguous crap, so I let him go home without acknowledging a confession of any kind."

"Did you ever kiss him?"

"No."

Fletch looked surprised. "I owe you an apology. All this time, whenever he spoke about you, it sounded like you two were dating, and you were blowing hot and cold. Were you dating him?"

"I went on dates with him, but there was never any kind of commitment. And I resent the accusation that I blow hot and cold. I only blow cold."

"Were you aware that he was deeply in love with you?"

I rolled my eyes. "It may seem snotty to you, but I can hardly keep track of all the guys who are *deeply in love with me*. Sometimes, men, I would barely call acquaintances, have confessed that they love me. I have other things to occupy my mind. I can't be bothered with what a man *might* be thinking when he can't be bothered to open his mouth."

"If I'm understanding you properly, Simon never had a chance with you and all along his feelings have just been a sad, unrequited love?"

I nodded. Then I examined Fletch's ponderous face, hoping our conversation had reached its conclusion. "Does that mean we're done? Look, I'm sorry we picked you up if you were the wrong guy."

"Does that mean you're going to go kidnap the right guy if I let you go?"

"No. That was something I was helping Natalie with, but let's be clear, if there was such a thing as the 'right' guy for me, I'd kidnap him if I wanted to." I winked.

He paused.

I put my head back in the fireplace to see if I could figure out how to unchain us when he suddenly said, “We’re not quite finished. You have to tell me exactly what is wrong with Simon.”

“Doesn’t that seem a bit grueling to you? I mean, would you honestly want to hear every detail as to why a woman didn’t want you?”

“Yes.”

“You’re sick. Simon is a great guy, but his being a great guy isn’t a good enough reason for me to date him or fly to the moon with him. It is a matter of compatibility. Unfortunately, loads of men just see something pretty and they think that’s the woman for them. They don’t know what they want.” I grabbed the grate and started yanking on it. “I hate watching sports on TV. The sound of it rankles my nerves and Simon liked to watch football. I hate football the most. I used to kick him out when he would turn it on. I could never live with someone who liked watching sports on TV, and why should he turn me into Lady Macbeth by making him watch his favorite thing on the tiny screen of his phone with his earbuds in? We’re incompatible. He should be with someone who enjoys the same things he does.”

“Well, what do you enjoy?”

I made a face at him. “I never tell.”

He laughed. “You never tell people what you like?”

“No. I never do. If I do, I know men who would turn themselves inside out to be whatever I want. Though I do think that telling Simon to turn off the TV before my ears started bleeding should have been enough of a hint.”

“Wait. Are you telling me that you and he hung out for years and he never knew what you like?”

“Of course. Did you know that the word ‘romance,’ the word ‘seduction,’ and the word ‘mystery’ all mean the same thing? Once someone knows all about you, the romance will be over. Not the love, the romance.”

“You’re scared to let go of the romance because if someone really knew you, they couldn’t possibly love you?”

It was in that second that I realized I had laid myself bare in front of someone I shouldn’t have. My theories about dating weren’t exactly top secret, but I didn’t realize they could be used to dissect me. I had always thought my taste in books, my hobbies, my passions, and my ambitions were the things to keep quiet about. He had seen through me. It was a particularly distasteful experience.

I withdrew from him.

“I’m sorry. You’re not wrong... about Simon,” Fletch’s mellow voice sounded from the other side of the chimney. “If you’re not compatible with him then he didn’t do anything wrong and neither did you. Also, it sounds like he wasn’t very daring in love. If he had been, you would have rejected him and he would have started to heal much sooner. You don’t have anything to be ashamed of.”

I didn’t dare look at him.

“You see, he mentioned you almost every time I saw him. After I heard you’d dumped him, I wanted to get you alone, so I could set you straight. This conversation has been a revelation. I thought you were the kind of girl who dumped guys for kicks. You’re just looking for the right man and he hasn’t shown up. Am I right?”

“I guess,” I mumbled. I got on my knees in the fireplace and started looking at the grate more carefully. It looked like I might be able to get my handcuffs unhooked if I bent one of the bars. It was pretty tough iron and the nosy man wasn’t at an angle where he could help. I messed with it for a few

minutes without success when I heard him say something. It was a muffle. “What was that?” I asked, coming out for a break. My hands were sweating.

“Want to try something with me?”

“Are you going to try pulling on the handcuffs instead of letting me do all the work?”

He chuckled. “Why would I do that? They’re still doing what I want them to.”

“You haven’t got what you want out of me yet? What’s left?” I exclaimed.

“A date.”

“A date? With Simon? I’ve been on tons of dates with Simon. He’s had his chance. Leave me alone.”

“You’ve got the wrong idea,” Fletch corrected. “Obviously a date with Simon is ridiculous. I’m talking about a date with me.”

I groaned. “Now you’ve got romantic ideas about me? Forget them. I’m not for you.”

“Do you already have someone in mind?”

I shook my hand like I was shaking off the idea. “No. It’s just that you’re a drummer. I already told you that noise bothers me. The only thing I can think of that would be worse than dating a guy who likes watching football is a drummer. The idea makes the inside of my ears hurt like someone just shoved a needle in each one.”

He blinked. “You get more intriguing by the moment. I don’t think my drumming should be a barrier between us.”

“I do.”

“I’m actually a xylophone player with the city orchestra. I was just doing the drumming as a side thing. It was a favor for a friend. Trust me, if you were my girlfriend, you wouldn’t be touring sleazy bars and packing drum kits.”

I paused and let my breath out slowly. Why hadn’t I thought of it before? “You have the keys to the handcuffs, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

It was an impossible situation.

“Do you have a phone?” I asked, thinking of how my phone was still in Natalie’s car. I felt so powerless without it. If I had my phone, I wouldn’t have tolerated Fletch’s interrogation. I would have called for help immediately. I had a head injury! The first person I would have thought to call would have been Natalie, except now that she thought blunt force trauma was a part of our friendship, I doubted I would ever call her again.

“Yup.”

“Good,” I said, realizing that ‘losing’ him on the way back to the city was no longer an option. Instead, I’d have to work with him to get home. “Why don’t you hurry up and unlock us while I explain to you why a date with me isn’t a good idea.”

“I can’t wait to hear your reasoning.” He chuckled, produced the keys from his pocket, reached up to unlock the handcuffs, and accidentally let them slip from his fingers. I couldn’t see where they landed. I only heard the sound of them clattering on the cement floor.

Natalie and I were right the first time. He was the worst.

I didn’t say anything while he fumbled around trying to retrieve the keys.

“You know what I think?” I said, after pondering.

“What?”

“I think the only reason you want to date me is to show Simon, and anyone else, that you can. I’m a trophy and you want to win me, just so you can show that you’re better than them. You don’t know me. I

didn't enchant you. You only know me by reputation, and that reputation is what you want to date and not me. You're confused though."

He didn't reply. He was embarrassed about dropping the keys and was still wriggling the toe of his boot to try to pull the keys within reach.

"You're confused..." I continued when he didn't respond, "because you don't recognize that getting together with me would not be winning anything. I'm not actually fun. I'm like a cat that looks adorable in the shelter. You take it home expecting it to give you love and cuddles and it only scratches the hell out of your furniture. You said it, if anyone really knew me, they couldn't love me."

"Your argument is interesting, but it won't make me change my mind," he said triumphantly as he swept the keys up in his palm. "I didn't ask you to marry me. I just want to see you in all your glory. I want to see what you're like when you pour on the charm. Is that too much to ask?"

"Oh!" I exclaimed. "That sounds amazing!"

"It does?" he asked curiously as he successfully unlocked the handcuffs.

"Yes, it does!" I turned to face him. He looked a bit battered. We had just spent the night in a deserted camp kitchen, and he looked less sleek than he did when we kidnapped him, but he had some appeal: a touch of attractiveness at his lips, in his smile.

"Why?"

"Because, I'm always worried about taking things too far, being too charming, looking too good, being all that a man wants so completely that if I leave him, he'll never get over me. I'm always holding back, but if you just want to see what I'm like out on a date, I can be all those things I never get to be... and you'll know. You'll know I'm putting on a show and that will be it. It sounds really fun."

"So you'll go on a date with me?"

"Yes! It's only one date." I got up and looked around. "Although, you do have to get me home first."

"I'll be honest, I don't even know where we are."

"We'll work it out. Is Friday night good for you? It's good for me."

Ch. 2 Little Black Dress - Fletch

I did not expect much as I waited in the atrium of the theater. Shannon said she wanted a date on Friday night. Well, that Friday night was a ballet I would be accompanying as part of the orchestra. I didn't know if Shannon liked ballet. I asked her, but she replied that she didn't tell her dates what she liked.

"You want the *whole* experience, don't you?" she said when I asked her.

I waited in my orchestra togs by the front door. I shouldn't have been there, but I wanted to make sure she made it to her seat before I deserted her for the pit.

Nothing could have prepared me for when she came in the door. I had seen a lot of finely dressed people in theater atriums. They didn't turn my head, but Shannon turned everyone's head collectively.

She wore a black dress that made all other black dresses look like hopeless imitations because the woman in the dress had to be Shannon if it was going to look good. It was almost sleeveless but covered the curve of her shoulder. The neckline hit a sweet spot on her chest. The spot showed she was a fine woman under the dress without making her look cheap. As my eyes traveled downward, I suddenly knew why she said men attacked her butt when they insulted her. It was her hips they were going to miss when she was gone.

Reaching up to take her hand, I noticed she wore three thin bangles on her wrist, the only jewelry she wore. Her hair was styled in voluminous curls that looked soft and touchable. Otherwise, it seemed like she was shining, either from her mood or some glitter she'd artfully brushed herself with.

I welcomed her, handed her a program, and rushed her through the ticket area down to the seat I'd managed to find for her.

"I'll take you out for something to eat afterward," I said as I left her to join the rest of the orchestra.

From the pit, I tried to see what she was doing as the performance commenced. Half the time, her head was bent down over her program. At least *Cinderella* wasn't a downer, I thought as I lifted my triangle. I felt like a bit of a juggler as I moved from instrument to instrument. At one point, I was thwacking a wooden block. It was not a very glamorous job, but at least I wasn't shouting at a referee through a TV screen.

Afterward, I met Shannon in the atrium. I expected to see her looking frazzled and tired. The ballet had been three hours long, but she looked just as radiant as she had when she stepped through the doors.

"I guess you don't hate ballet?" I remarked.

"I don't?" she asked innocently.

"Of course, you don't. If you were willing to throw Simon out for turning on a football game, you'd certainly discard me for making you watch a ballet if you didn't want to."

"I've never been to the ballet before," she said.

"Did you like it?"

She smiled and evaded the question. "I made you a present," she said as she returned the program I had given her.

"You *made* it?" I asked skeptically.

"Yes."

I took it from her and was about to open it when several members of the orchestra suddenly appeared. They waved at us and were about to walk by when one of them realized that Shannon was with me. He turned back, "Fletch, is this your date?"

The guy that had stopped was a world-class violinist. His name was Rodderick, and I disliked him, but suddenly less than usual. He would never have stopped to speak to me if Shannon hadn't been standing next to me. Her claims that she attracted all men seemed valid. Rodderick and I had nothing in common, except perhaps that both of us wanted to be near her.

All at once, I knew exactly why my cousin, Simon, had wanted Shannon and why it had bothered him so much that she had not wanted him back. This was her in her element. The way she greeted my band-mates, tossed her curls, and practically made eyes at them was completely loveable. She even showed she was with me by slipping her arm through mine and rubbing my tricep in a show of intimacy. I didn't know if I'd ever been with a woman who actively promoted me in public.

"How did you two meet?" Rodderick asked her.

She smiled wickedly. "I put a gun to his back and told him if he didn't come with me, I'd shoot him."

I stared. How had she delivered that line so well? She didn't sound crazy, merely playful.

Rodderick looked like he was having a malfunction with the saliva in his mouth. She was mouthwatering. "Was it a real gun?" he finally asked.

"Not the kind that would have hurt anyone. That's why I had to jab it into his back, so he wouldn't recognize it was only a pellet gun."

"Very inventive, but that can't have been your first meeting."

I was about to elaborate when I suddenly realized I was more interested in hearing how Shannon would describe the event.

She turned and gazed at me longingly before turning her attention back to Rodderick. "It was just a little trick to get his attention, and to see what kind of man he was."

"Huh?"

She leaned forward conspiratorially. "I took a bit of a chance. He could have turned around, disarmed me in the blink of an eye, or he could have gotten scared and whiny."

"What did Fletch do?"

She smiled her hundred-watt smile. It was the first time she'd done that in front of me and I felt my heart lurch in my chest. "It was better than either one of those things. He threw a smile at me over his shoulder. That's his reaction to having the barrel of a gun shoved in his back. That's why getting together with a percussionist is the best. They know how to strike a girl just right."

I couldn't believe she had actually said that. It was completely embarrassing, corny, and terrible, but very funny.

I laughed.

It was the first time she heard me do that. Most of the time, I laugh with my eyes or chuckle in my throat, but I don't laugh outright.

At that second, Rodderick figured out why the two of us were together. He backed off a step. "You're just joking about the gun," he said because he realized that kind of joke was our sense of humor as a couple, and he didn't like it because it was a joke meant only for the two of us.

It was funny how she had done that. It was like she had drawn a line that included everyone and then suddenly contracted it, so it only included us.

We said goodbye, wishing everyone a pleasant evening.

When we were out of earshot, she said, "You don't like that man, do you?"

"He's very arrogant," I replied.

She nodded.

I had my overcoat hanging from my free hand the whole time we'd been talking and now I threw it over her shoulders.

"I have a table reserved at a Greek restaurant down the street. It might be cold out. You know, there's a reason why women wear furs to the theater. It gets cold."

She looked at me. "I would never get cold when I'm with you."

I looked back at her. My mouth had filled with saliva the same way Rodderick's had. I swallowed and commented patiently, "That's the sort of comment I would consider to be blowing hot."

"That little thing?" she said, diminishing her compliment. "Walk with your arm around my waist. If we cuddle, I won't feel bad for taking your coat."

We walked. She entertained me with prattle so charming, I was disappointed when we got to the restaurant. Once inside, I was suddenly aware of how the building seemed to be crumbling around us and wished I had sprung for a better place. After all, I was probably never getting another date with Shannon, but she loved it. She walked in and told me how interesting it was. She pointed out spots of decor around the room I had never noticed and praised them.

I helped her ease out of my coat and saw the three bracelets on her wrist. She put her hand to her hip briefly and the metal clacked against itself in a sound that was almost musical.

"I get it," I said, suddenly.

She turned to face me, letting her hand bounce up and then return to her hip. "You get what?"

"I get one of your tricks." I pulled her chair out for her and let her sit down.

"Tricks?"

I sat down across from her. "Yes. Your best feature is your hips. You know that, so instead of wearing a necklace intended to draw attention to your breasts or dangling earrings intended to draw attention to your throat, you wear bracelets to draw the eye down to your perfect, shapely, hips."

She laughed, less guarded than before. "No. You're wrong."

"Am I?" I asked, my eyes level.

"Yes. All my features are my best feature. I do wear necklaces and earrings for exactly the reasons you mentioned, but I also wear belts to accentuate my waist. I wore the bracelets tonight especially for you because I thought they would make little tinkling sounds, almost like a bell, and you would like that."

I stopped and considered how much thought had been put into such a small detail. Again, I didn't know if any of the women I had ever dated had noticed something like that about me or tried to please me. It was a little exciting that she had.

She picked up her menu. "Though I do have to say, even though all my features are my best feature, I don't get as many compliments on my hips as my other parts. Maybe people think it's vulgar to tell a woman she has nice hips or something."

"Before, you said that's how unsuccessful lovers attack you?"

She nodded.

"Well, they can be polite until they're rejected. *I* can be honest. Your beautiful hips are probably causing you more problems in the men department than you realize. They're stunning."

She looked at me, clearly reacting to what I said, but I didn't think she would tell me how she felt. Either she was annoyed or moved. It was hard to say from the expression on her face.

I guessed she was moved, because she suddenly asked me, "Do you mind if I order for both of us?"

"I suppose not," I said. It was my favorite restaurant to eat at after a performance, so I'd eaten everything on the menu.

Shannon waved over a waitress and ordered drinks and five different appetizers for us to share. When the food came, she dipped a torn piece of pita bread in hummus and motioned for me to open my mouth.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “I can feed myself.”

“You wanted the whole experience,” she reminded me with a light in her eyes.

I chewed. When my mouth was clear, I asked, “Do you always feed your dates?”

“Sometimes I sit on their laps,” she replied. “You can eat the wings by yourself.”

At the end of the meal, I popped into the bathroom to check my teeth. When I came back, I went to the till to pay, and the server informed me that Shannon had already paid the entire bill. I’d never had a woman pay the whole bill before.

I returned to the table.

“Where’s your car?” I asked.

“I don’t have one.”

“I’ll drive you home then,” I offered.

She picked up the program I’d left on the table and slipped it into my hand. “Don’t forget this. I don’t need a ride.”

“You’ll freeze.”

“I live close to here.”

“You do? I’m always down here. How come I haven’t seen you before?”

“It’s a big city, but I really do live just six blocks from here. Want to walk me home?”

I did. I covered her in my coat and we stepped back onto the city streets.

As soon as we were outside, she turned to me and said, “Now the date is over and you may tell me your impressions.”

“You’re poison,” I replied. “Which direction are we walking?”

She pointed, and we started moving.

“Did you feed Simon?”

“Often. Usually just popcorn, but yes.”

“Did you pay for his meals?”

“Sometimes. Mostly because he paid for mine sometimes. I just tried to keep it fair. Tonight I paid for yours as a bit of an apology for the inconvenience of last weekend.”

I didn’t respond to that, but asked, “Did you dress up like this for Simon?”

“This is how I look on a Friday night,” she replied.

“Of course, it is. You’re charming, but I have to ask you. What is your goal when you go on a date? Is it just to make the man weak in the knees? You want him to think you’re spectacular when you’re with him and hurting him afterward is just an unfortunate side effect of this whole show you like putting on?”

She smiled. “I put in so much more effort tonight. You got all the good stuff. I told you, I wanted to go on a date where I got to be myself instead of worrying about whether or not I would hurt you. You already know I’m a rat.”

“That doesn’t make it any easier.”

“No?” she gasped in surprise.

“No. I want you so much my insides have turned to liquid and knowing you won’t have me is a bit much. I’d leave you here if I didn’t want my coat back.”

“Flech,” she said with a click of her tongue. My name on her lips felt like she’d broken a bone. “I’m taking you home.”

“And what does that mean exactly?” I asked suspiciously.

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