

ONE

After a long night of shaking her ass in Sizzle, Nya Yorke was ready to go home. Wiping down her workstation behind the bar, she was the most conscientious of the employees because she was the manager. Responsibility for cashing out and locking the takings in the safe was hers, meaning she had to keep her head on straight until the last second of her shift, even when exhaustion had other ideas.

The muted blue lighting of the vast nightclub space was perfect for shady dealings and intimate encounters. Drugs and loud music accompanied the partiers in this place where nothing was off-limits. No one batted an eye at the amorous, the lines of white powder cut on the booth tables, or the concealed weapons some customers carried.

The night was over. The strobes and the music were off. She and Jamie were the only two bar staff left. Three security men were doing a last sweep, and once the place was confirmed secure they'd lock up and get out of there.

"Anything else you need me to do?" Jamie asked, flopping her arms on the bar from the patrons' side.

The cute blonde with the pixie cut drew plenty of attention with her bubbly personality. Most of the people who worked, or frequented, this establishment were jaded, cynical, and in need of oblivion. Jamie was none of those things. The youth smiled with ease, she laughed, and could turn anything into a positive. Men loved her because she exuded innocence that they wanted to corrupt. Nya had nothing against her colleague, there were times her optimism was grating, but she got her work done without complaining.

If they were in a better neighborhood, she'd have sent Jamie home by this time. Except at three thirty in the morning, no one was safe on the streets around here. After herding the customers out, the rest of the staff were sent home in couples and groups. No one was confident about leaving alone. Policy didn't exist to protect them; there was no staff policy around here except to show up on time.

Jamie stayed draped over the bar, awaiting instructions. Nya had none. "No, I'm finished," she said. "Tell the guys we're done."

Turning toward the main floor, Jamie began to walk away. Nya guessed she'd head for the break room that was accessible on the opposite wall by a door marked, "Employees Only." Containing a few couches and a stained beanbag, none of the lockers were functional, but it gave the others a place to stash their things while they were on shift. Not Nya; she didn't leave anything of hers in a place she couldn't see at all times.

Nya ducked down to get her purse from the lowest shelf underneath the bar where she kept it in a secret corner. She didn't have anything valuable in her long-strap, leather slouch bag, and there were no more than a few bucks in her wallet. Defending her privacy was the only thing she strove for every day, and her purse was sort of a symbol of that.

Instead of going to the breakroom, Jamie went toward the corridor that bottlenecked the entrance, either to shout what Nya had said to the bouncers or to make her way out. Before she got there, a shout and a scuffle reverberated down the hallway and echoed into the cavernous club.

Nya surged to her feet in time to see five masked men burst in. The first grabbed a screaming Jamie and pulled her to his chest, trapping her wrists in his hand between her breasts. Shuffling forward, to allow his cohorts to swarm in behind him, the assailant raised the mass of a silenced gun barrel to Jamie's temple.

Her colleague's screaming drowned out the specifics of the men's shouted conversation. The one with ahold of Jamie was trying to give out instructions and wasn't being heard, so he clamped a hand over Jamie's mouth to stifle her panicked shrieks.

Being the only other one there, all spare guns were pointed at Nya, and she raised her hands on instinct. Her duties around here didn't extend into giving up her life to tweekers. "In there, go!" the man holding Jamie ordered Nya into the breakroom.

With weapons waving at her, Nya kept her hands up and came out from behind the bar to do as directed. Sizzle wasn't the type of place to die for; she worked there, but didn't benefit from the takings beyond her wage. If these guys wanted a windfall, she'd open the safe, but they'd regret it. The club owner wouldn't take kindly to being robbed by disorganized chancers like these guys.

They were wearing ski masks and carrying guns, but their movements were frantic, proving that they were ill-at-ease. She was swept into the circle of men and squeezed through the breakroom door, with two in front of her and three behind.

Before the door closed, one of the men grabbed her. Struggling to get loose, she was rushed to the furthest wall and thrown against it to be pinned by two men. The lump of her purse, shielded her from his hips when the one in front tried to grind closer. That action suggested a different ballgame and one she would fight against.

Giving up the company cash would be easy. Relinquishing her body to them? No. She'd rather die. Trying her hardest to lash out, Nya pushed and kicked, but these guys were bigger than she was and her might didn't match their capabilities.

Being so petite, she'd learned fast that she didn't physically trump many people, and although she'd taken self-defense classes, her strength was feeble. Her body just wasn't built to carry muscle.

Jamie was screaming again. The gut-wrenching sound of terror was unsettling, but at least it told Nya that the woman was alive. Shaking her hair away from her face, she stopped fighting to look beyond the men pressing her to the wall. Their tight hands bruised her limbs and their body weight restricted her breathing, but she tried to ignore the implication of their intrusive conduct.

Checking on Jamie was meant to reassure her, to give her a distraction that would help to focus her own mind. Instead what she saw was Jamie being thrust onto the couch and felt up by two of the other men. The last man was at her ankles, pulling them apart, rubbing his way up her legs and giving his friend access to wrench up Jamie's skirt.

"Hey! Leave her alone!" Nya exclaimed, forgetting for a second that she had her own problems.

A quick reminder was unwelcome; she tried to push away from the wall, but was quickly shoved against it again. The impact knocked the wind from her lungs and her shoulders were grabbed to pull her forward and slam her back once more.

Any lingering illusion that this was a simple robbery was erased when the assailant spoke with purpose. "You'll get yours once you tell me where he is," one of the grotesque molesters snarled in her face.

Hands on her breasts had to belong to the second man, because the first still grasped her shoulders. But she closed her mind to the assault, switching into a survival mode she'd used before.

"Who?" Nya asked. "Who are you talking about?"

Jamie kept screaming. Nya's wavering view allowed her to see her co-worker being wrestled onto the floor after she'd kicked out at the man on top of her. Pleased to see the youngster fighting back, Nya smiled, maybe that girl wasn't so innocent after all.

Payback came quickly when another of the men knelt over Jamie to punch her face and chest while another grasped his groin and swore in pain. Good for Jamie, she'd hurt the bastard; from his watering eyes and red face, Nya would say she'd got him good. The third wasn't amused and wasn't put off either, he scrambled up the floor between Jamie's legs and began to thrust his arm in a stabbing motion at the apex of Jamie's thighs. His fingers at least would be inside her and his manic movements would be agonizing for the kid.

The screaming stopped and the puncher climbed off Jamie to stand up and wipe sweat from his upper lip. When he noticed the blood on his knuckles, he bent down and ripped Jamie's top from her body, exposing her to use her apparel to wipe the blood from his hands and face.

Concern iced Nya's organs, Jamie's head flopped one way and then the other. God, Nya hoped there was still life in the woman. The groin-clutcher snatched his friend from between Jamie's thighs and tossed him aside, leaving him to clamber onto his feet. He kicked Jamie between her open legs and yanked open his jeans, pulling his dick out before dropping to the floor to lie over the unconscious Jamie.

Each of his violent thrusts into the junior pushed bile from Nya's stomach. Ominous red bubbles popped from Jamie's mouth in a foam. They could be breaths, Nya hoped they were because there were no other signs of life. Jamie wasn't conscious or moving, she couldn't be, not after the assault of blows to the head rained upon her by the other.

The other two men jeered as the third raped the lifeless woman on the floor, and Nya had to come to terms with the knowledge that she was next.

"Like the show?" the man holding her asked, slapping her back to her own predicament.

Propping an elbow on the wall over her shoulder, he seemed to want to watch what was going on with Jamie, which had to be what caused the delay in his interrogation. But he couldn't suspend it all night, so got into her face again. "Tell us where he is!"

“Who!” Nya screamed, tormented by the torture of her friend and the prospect of her own fate. “Who do you want!”

“Taggert!” he demanded, spittle and halitosis cascaded over her face until she wretched. “You know! You know where he is! Tell me!”

The one answer she couldn’t give. Wouldn’t give. Jamie was enduring a second man on top of her, and when she began to whimper, got a kick to the head and went quiet again.

“I don’t,” Nya said, knowing she was going to anger these men more. “I don’t know where he is!”

Two more masked men burst in, drawing the concerned attention of everyone except the man on top of Jamie who was pumping hard and fast, grunting with each forward invasion. “He’s not here,” one of the new men said without blinking an eye at the ongoing rape.

The man with a hold of her was in charge because the two new entrants were awaiting instruction from him. His distraction gave Nya a chance to assess Jamie’s chances. While being fucked by one man, the second waited his turn. The other, who’d been the first to take his turn on top, spat in Jamie’s mouth then knelt over her to force his dick between her lips.

Jamie wasn’t moving, her face was a bloody mess, her eyes swollen, but when he pushed in hard, Jamie’s body expanded and lifted in a gag reflex. She was still alive, for now, though after enduring this at the hands of these leches, she may wish that she wasn’t.

The one standing, waiting for a chance to have his fun, unbuckled his belt in anticipation, like he was excited about the prospect of his turn to assault the defenseless woman who was only a fraction more responsive than a corpse.

Nya’s chin was grabbed and her assaulter forced her to look at him. “Look at me, you’ll get your fun time, soon as you tell me where he is.”

Anticipation wasn’t what made her watch, and if the point of this exercise was to scare her with the show then it was working. But it wasn’t just fear burning inside her, it was anger too. “When he finds you, he’ll kill you,” Nya snarled. “Do you have any idea who you’re dealing with?”

“We know it and we want him. He doesn’t scare us.”

Either this guy was ignorant or had an army larger than the one present. If he wanted to take on Taggert, he’d need one. “He should scare you,” Nya said. “He’ll torture you and your men for weeks. He’s going to make you suffer before he kills you. No one crosses Taggert.”

“A lot of spunk for such a little thing,” he said, pulling his gun from his waistband to step back and press the cool circle of the barrel tip to the center of her forehead, rendering her immobile.

Closing her eyes, she waited for the shot. Fear receded to an odd peace that was shattered when a fresh pair of hands, probably belonging to his partner, grabbed her shirt to pull it open. Flattening her hands on the wall on either side of her, she could do nothing but let him fondle as much as he liked. The weight of the gun was heating as it dug deeper into her, pinning her head between it and the wall.

Opening her eyes, Nya burned her fury into the eyes of the man with the gun whose perverse smile sickened her further. Two men closed in behind him and after feeling her up, one crouched to pull up her skirt.

These were the two men who’d just come in, and she guessed the other three were still with Jamie; because she couldn’t shift her skull an inch, the barrel was bruising her forehead. “Pretty girl like you could show my boys a good time; would that persuade you?” the gun-bearer asked.

Narrowing her gaze in defiance of the invading hands roaming her body, Nya didn’t want to show them how their violation curdled her blood because it would only goad them on.

“Tell us what we want to know and we’ll leave you alone.”

She didn’t believe him, but she wouldn’t answer his question even if she did. The door opened, though Nya couldn’t see through the mass of men, so she didn’t know what was happening. Holding her breath, she waited to find out what would happen next.

“You fuck everything up, Jonno.”

The hands left her body when the men whipped around. The gun at her head fell away too as the man holding it twisted to look toward the door on the opposite side of the room.

Just inside was a dark-haired, scruffy-faced thug. Whoever he was, he didn’t wear a mask like the others, his hands hung loose at his sides, carrying no weapons, no care in the world. The three men on Jamie hadn’t been disturbed by anything until this; in her peripheral vision she saw no movement, and the noise of their jeering and grunting had ceased.

“Fuck off, Archer, we got this.”

The gun was pushed into her ribs until the pressure became an uncomfortable pain and she winced.

“That her?” the new guy, who she now knew was called Archer, asked.

Glancing past the gunman, she watched Archer swagger up to them. One slow step followed another, like he was a guy sauntering over to a bar for a drink and not one who’d just walked in on a despicable crime taking place. He kept on coming until he was hanging over Jonno, the one holding the gun.

Archer was much taller than the man who threatened her with his weapon; she’d guess he stood at six-four. His broad shoulders weren’t bulky, but there was a strength in them, a tension that made her insides recoil.

Tapered brown eyes met hers for half a second, then dropped to her exposed breasts. “Copping a feel more important than getting the job done, Jonno?”

Lunging past Jonno, Archer grabbed her forearm and hauled her forward, through the other men. The pain of his grip didn’t decrease when he pulled her along, but he didn’t get far. Jonno grabbed her other arm to halt her and the other men closed in.

“You’re not taking her,” Jonno snapped. “Not until we know.”

Jonno and his buddies had manhandled her, hanging threats of violence and rape over her head to scare her and they’d worked, though she did her best to conceal her terror. Without physical strength, she’d learned to project confidence. Being fearless, and facing adversity head on was the only way she got through life.

But the guy trying to steal her from the crime scene was better than her at remaining aloof, he didn’t bat an eye at Jonno’s fierce attitude. “Has she told you yet?” Archer asked.

The two men were growling at each other, sneering and annoyed, but they didn’t make any direct threats of physical confrontation, suggesting this was the proverbial circling of the prey. Being right in the middle, if one chose to attack, she’d be caught in the crossfire.

Some of Jonno’s bluster deflated. “We were getting there.”

“Sure you were,” Archer said. While she fixated on Jonno to judge his reaction to Archer’s nonchalance, her nipple was flicked through her bra by Archer’s rigid fingertip. Gasping at the unexpected action, she tugged her body back, but neither man let her go. “You had your chance, Jonno, now it’s my turn.”

He pulled again, Jonno pulled back. Archer’s chin moved forward and his eyes went up like he was pissed off that this guy was testing his patience. “She stays with us,” Jonno asserted.

Archer strode in close to Jonno, keeping her between them as the meat in the distressing sandwich. “You left those fucking bodies lying in the street,” Archer snarled. “Tick, tock, little man, how long you got ‘til the cops show up?” As if on cue, sirens sounded and all of the men in the room tensed. All except Archer. Nya’s back was to Jamie and her assailants, but she heard them scramble. “This bitch is our one link, our one lead, who’ll get what we need? You or me?”

That was enough of a prompt. For some reason, Archer’s question clinched Jonno’s decision. The men shared another brief glare, then Jonno released her and stepped back with his hands up. The others backed off too and the sirens got louder.

Without waiting, Archer hauled her toward the door and she pulled back, trying to delay him as long as she could in hopes that the cops would arrive before he could get her out of here. But he wasn’t slowed down.

Picking her up with one swoop of his arm, he tossed her over his shoulder and clamped a hand on her ass. The other pinned her legs to his torso to prevent her from kicking.

Resorting to using her core, she tried to buck away and punched at his back. But he didn’t slow down, didn’t flinch, he just kept shrugging her back up with the powerful shoulders she’d done well not to underestimate.

His athletic body had strength from the tips of his hair to the depth of his bones. He carried her out of Sizzle’s front entrance, over the bodies of the security guards that were dead in the street just as he’d described.

“Stop! Please! Help!” she called out at the top of her lungs.

“Hush,” Archer said and paused.

Just when she thought he might put her down and give her the chance to run, she heard a click then she was tossed onto her ass. The hard landing made her bounce and she hit the back of her head on

something cold and solid. Blinking through a daze, she clocked that she was in the trunk of a car, just as he covered her mouth with a length of tough duct tape.

Hooking his hands on the edge of the trunk, he leaned down, the sirens were blaring now, but she saw no lights. “Don’t be naughty, Squirm. Obey and we’ll get along great.”

Chucking her chin with the swipe of a knuckle, he winked, stepped back, and slammed the lid on her.

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