

IT STARTS WITH A HOOKUP

Manhattan's ~~Not-So~~ Eligible Billionaires

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Chapter 1: Xena St. James

Wednesday Evening

I cannot believe what just happened.

That's why I'm pacing in front of the stacked washer/dryer unit in my cousin Lilly's tiny laundry space. I'm like a pinball ball bouncing between two pegs, mortified by what came out of my mouth. Even if it was true, I still shouldn't have said it. Everything a girl is thinking or feeling doesn't have to be articulated.

I push a hard sigh out of my mouth, the air forced from the back of my throat. My head feels like it wants to burst as I picture myself blurting out to our unexpected dinner guest that his mere presence has made me wet down there. That's what came out of my usually serious and sagacious mouth. I mean, sure, I can be a little cynical sometimes. But crass? Never.

"Ugh..." I groan.

I know why my inhibitions are so lowered this evening.

Today was one of those days when after a crappy eleven hours at the job, a girl brings two bottles of red wine and one bottle of rum to her cousin Lilly's apartment in Chelsea since it's ten times better than her own pad, mixes the spirits in a glass pitcher, and commences to get hammered. I had drunk three glasses of my concoction before he crashed a dinner which was just supposed to be Lilly and me complaining about our exes, our jobs, and before the night was over, my mom. Our guest had no idea my tongue was looser than usual. He must think I'm a floozy and an idiot.

Suddenly, I'm struck by a realization that makes me stop in my tracks. *I would, though.* I would do him in a nanosecond. Our unexpected guest's name is Lynx Grove—yes, he's *the* Lynx Grove, one in a family of prominent tech billionaires. When he crossed the threshold carrying Lily's grocery bag, I was instantly struck by how exceptionally good-looking he is in real life. No man's bone structure should be so perfect. And his lips.... They're like succulent rose petals. I want to kiss them.

I take a deep breath to control my long-burning arousal toward the man who's still in Lilly's kitchen peeling and deveining shrimp, which seems like a mediocre task for a person of his stature. The worst part of my blurt is that I wasn't lying about my panties. While preparing dinner, Lynx and I had been reaching around each other to grab this or rinse that. Although Lilly's kitchen is a lot larger than mine, it's still too tiny to fit a man of Lynx's height and athletic build. He's like a statue carved by the hands and imagination of Michelangelo. One of his arms even brushed against mine—twice! It was solid—like granite. And he's wearing navy blue track pants made of a generous satiny material. He's all lean muscular legs and a firm bubble butt. Ooh, and the way his tan T-shirt extends across the hard ridges of his chest is so sexy. His tapered waist is the icing on the cake. Or is the icing his citrusy, sandalwood, and vanilla-scented cologne that makes me want to eat him up? Any red-blooded woman would react to him the way I had. It's unavoidable. Lynx Grove is objectively a solid ten out of ten. So, basically, there was no chance of my panties escaping him unscathed.

Lilly only discovered Lynx's true identity recently. But before we knew his name, whenever she gushed about him, we referred to him as Mr. Eleventh Floor since Lilly used to only see him whenever he entered the elevator from the eleventh floor. Now, they're friends, and she said something about him recently that might help resolve my lust.

"Lynx Grove is in love with someone," I whisper and then pinch my nostrils as I groan with dread.

But my next thought makes me chuckle. *I bet he's awful in bed.* He's probably never had to work hard to please anyone, let alone the woman he's having sex with.

I look down at my crotch. "So get it together, Girlie. He won't be able to satisfy you." My ex-boyfriend's face comes to mind. "Haven't you had enough bad sex?"

"Oh," a man's voice roars from the front of the apartment. "Really?"

My ears perk up as I try to identify the speaker. That was definitely not Lynx.

"Don't get your panties in a bunch, Orion. We're just having dinner!" That was Lynx.

I slap my fingers against my lips and gasp. *Orion!*

My insides shout, “SOS!” Lilly’s ex-boyfriend and boss, Mr. Poisonous Apple, has made a surprise appearance. I drop my folded T-shirt and race to the living room. Lynx can stay, but Orion has to go.

I call Orion’s name as I storm off to remind Lilly that she’s better without that selfish prick. Life feels like it’s unfolding in slow motion as the front door closes behind Lilly. And now, they’re both in the hallway. I shake my head as if I’ve just been slapped.

“So...” Lynx says.

I go rigid, hating how his voice makes my insides flutter. I steady my breathing and tell myself to smile, look unfazed by his gloriousness, and hope Lilly gets back in here sooner rather than later.

Finally, I face him, and I couldn’t top my eyebrows from floating high. *Damn it. He’s still too gorgeous for his own good.*

Lynx shows me his palms and wiggles his manly fingers. “What next?”

It takes a moment to figure out what he’s referring to. “Oh. Dinner. Right.” I check nervously over my shoulder. *What is taking her so long?*

I didn’t think his smile could get yummier until now. “Yeah, dinner.”

“Um...” I say, stalling. “I don’t know. It’s Lilly’s recipe, so...” I check over my shoulder again. “We should wait until she comes back.”

We stand in silence, looking at each other. I’m mesmerized by watching his slow sideways smile blossom. *Oh my, that was magnificent.*

“All cleaned up?” he asks.

I frown, confused. “What?”

“You went to...” His raised eyebrows finish the sentence.

I go completely still, unable to speak or close my mouth. This is like a bad dream. However, it’s not a dream. It’s real life, and by the looks of it, I’m more embarrassed about the admission I made earlier than he is.

Finally, I cough to clear my throat. “Um... That was...” I shake my head. How do I explain that I hadn’t changed my panties, and they’re still slightly damp, well, more than slightly, but I shouldn’t have voiced my predicament?

Lynx doesn’t take his eyes off me. One of his eyebrows quirks up curiously. He’s not going to let this drop.

I glance nervously over my other shoulder. *Where the hell is Lilly?*

“Excuse me,” I say. I might pass out at any moment as I hightail it to the front door, open and... I gasp.

She’s gone, and so is Orion.

* * *

10 Minutes Later

Lynx has washed his hands, and now he’s watching me with an unceasing crooked grin as I make my third call to Lilly. At least she hasn’t turned her cell phone off.

I turn my back on Lynx. How could she do this to me? Lilly isn’t generally this selfish. To leave me alone with her guest—that’s not like her at all. She’s changed since her trip to Vegas with Orion. I tried to warn her about going. I really did. But she gobbled that poisonous apple named Orion Lord down to the core, and since then, she’s been unrecognizable.

“What is that sound?” Lynx asks.

I whip around, ears open but we keep our attention pasted on each other. Then Lynx looks away, and I follow his line of sight.

“Oh no,” I painfully whisper. I raise a finger. “I’ll be right back.”

I rush to Lilly’s bedroom. Everything’s in place—her perfectly made bed and dusted nightstands. Lilly will never leave things messy. My attention shifts to the sitting bench she somehow managed to make fit with room to spare. And then I slap a hand on my chest when I see her cellphone on the console against the wall.

“Damn it,” I whisper. She is gone, and I have no means of contacting her.

I peer toward the living room. I can’t be left alone with him. He’s Lilly’s friend, not mine. Plus, there’s something about this guy that’s affecting me differently than usual. I’m not boy-crazy, and I came across extraordinarily good-looking men every day. Maybe it’s his eyes—the way he looks at me, even when taking a casual glance. It’s the way I feel as if I can see deep inside him. That’s crazy, though. That has to be all in my head.

I force my rationality to take the wheel. I’ll make myself see Lynx as if he’s another gorgeous man who showed up for a casting call. Unfortunately, Lynx Grove

didn't get the part. Firstly, he's in love with another woman. Secondly, he had brief connection with my cousin Lilly, and we never pass each other or sloppy seconds. So now, I'll never have to see him again.

I straighten my posture and keep walking until Lynx, and I am standing not that far from each other. It's time to say something, and come hell or high water, I'm determined to sound like someone who has her shit together.

"Sorry, Lynx, but we're canceling dinner tonight." I must look like Creepy-Stepford-Wife Barbie to him. There's a mirror on the wall to my right. I want to check my expression so I can correct it, but I can't because I don't want to appear too practiced.

I wonder what he's thinking as he stares into my eyes. I feel like I'm breathing him in as his gaze dips down my body and then quickly back up to my face. Something just changed with him. It happened so fast that I would've missed it if I had blinked. Lynx Grove has just checked me out again. Suddenly I'm aware I'm wearing athletic spandex pants and a V-neck Nike T-shirt. I made myself comfortable when I first arrived at Lilly's. I look like I'm either going to bed or to the gym. I wish I had kept on the little black tank dress I wore to work today. I think if he saw me in it, he might've...

I don't know what he might've done. Maybe I'm wishful thinking.

"I understand." His voice is tighter.

A fiery sensation spreads through my core as an unidentified energy weaves through us, binding us together. The seconds won't stop ticking by as his eyes roam my entire being. My hair, my face, my breasts. They dip lower and lower, and...

Lynx's cell phone rings in his pocket, and his eyes stop undressing me as he takes his device out and squints at the screen. "I have to take this." He laps me up with another penetrating gaze as his cellphone keeps chiming. "It was nice meeting you, Xena."

I swallow to moisten my dry throat. Is this actually happening? Is Lynx Grove attracted to me? Or am I seeing what I want to see? "Nice meeting you too." I'm happy those words came out clearly.

Lynx's right eye narrows slightly. It's like he wants to say something else but decides against it. My insides feel like they're dissolving into fluttering butterflies.

It's like he has to tear his eyes away from me as he puts his phone to his ear. "Hello, Leo?"

My feet are glued to the carpet. My heartbeat thumps in my ear, and desire consumes me as I can't take my eyes off him until he tosses me one last smile before he's gone for good.

* * *

30 Minutes Later

As I clean the kitchen, I sing Sam Smith's, *Too Good At Goodbyes*, loud and passionately. Objectively, I have a great voice. I inherited it from my father, jazz musician and singer, Hollis St. James. I have no idea why that song is stuck in my head. I also have no idea why I feel so melancholy. But I'm sure Lynx Grove has inspired my mood. My voice is at its best when I'm feeling deeply emotional. It's a strange phenomenon.

My head floats back, and I focus on the ceiling. "That's it," I whisper. No more rum punch for me. I blame the heightened response I had for Lynx Grove on the booze. The sooner I sleep this night off, the better.

Finally, the counters have been cleaned, dishes washed, the shrimp are in a plastic bag and put in the freezer, and the chopped green onions and garlic are in the fridge. Instead of ordering an Uber for a ride to my depressing apartment, I strip out of my clothes and rifle through Lilly's closet until I find her fluffy white robe. The soft fibers feel rejuvenating against my skin. I plan to sleep in it tonight.

The doorbell rings, and I tense up. A deep sense of relief surges through me. It must be Lilly. She left earlier without shoes on her feet. I'm sure she didn't have her keys either. I run-walk out of the bedroom, ready to give my cousin a piece of my mind. How dare she leave me with her guest, especially after I said what I said about my panties. I needed her to take the edge off and help foster enough rational conversation between him and me to make him forget about my momentary lapse of judgment.

I swing the door open with fire in my eyes and a lashing on the tip of my tongue.

But it's not Lilly standing in front of me. A tall, strapping figure impedes the light flowing in from the hallway. My eyes expand beyond a comfortable limit, and I'm infused with shock. "Hey," I barely say past my tight throat.

"Hey," Lynx Grove replies. His voice sounds just as tight as mine had.

I'm waiting for him to say more as his Adam's apple bobs when he swallows hard. "Did you forget something?" I ask breathlessly.

Finally, Lynx puts his arm against the door frame and leans forward, coming closer. "I was wondering," he says and then clears his throat. "What you said earlier about your panties." His eyebrows raise suggestively.

My breaths catch in my throat as our eye contact deepens. "Sorry about that," I'm finally able to say.

"Don't be."

"Okay," I reply unthinkingly.

"I thought we, you know...." Lynx moistens his sensual lower lip. "We could take care of your little problem properly."

Holy shit. What is happening? My body feels jerky as I look over my shoulder, into the dim living room, and then back at Lynx to ensure this is actually happening. This moment *is* real. I'm not dreaming it. Lynx Grove has returned to have sex with me, which also validates all those intense feelings of sexual attraction I had for him earlier. I wasn't alone. He felt them too.

"My little problem?" I say as we gaze into each other's eyes.

He's so close that I feel his minty breath spread across my face. "Yes."