

## NOBODY DOES IT BETTER EXCERPT

~VANESSA~

I have this fantasy.

The details vary a little. Sometimes I'm in the town diner, other times I'm walking across the square. Most of the time, I'm right here at the one-stop check-in and shoe counter at my bowling alley.

The rest of it goes like this: This guy strides up to me. A rush of tingles spreads down my chest at the sight of his dark hair, his five-o'clock shadow, and his big, burly frame. He drums his fingers on the Formica, lifts a brow, then smiles.

I mean one of those world-class, panty-melting grins that make you swoon.

But the real swoon is what comes next.

He'll say, "Level with me, Vanessa. I've had it bad for you for most of the last two decades, and I'll wager it's the same for you. If you feel even one ounce of what I feel, let's shed this whole ruse and make it official. Go out with me. Go out with me tonight."

The rest? It's a montage of *oh yeses*; hot, wet kisses; and messy lipstick.

That's the fantasy. My *reality* on a Wednesday evening in February?

The door opens and a familiar figure strolls in. Even from a distance, he catches my gaze then tips his chin and mouths *hey*.

My stomach flips, and then it somersaults again when he reaches my post, winks, and asks for a pair of shoes. I know his size, so I hand him the fourteens.

"You know what they say about big shoes?" His deep, raspy voice makes my chest flutter.

I quirk up my lips. "That they're perfect for clowns?"

And that smile? Oh boy. It spreads into the sexiest grin. "Vanessa Maria Marquez, are you saying I'm a clown?"

I shrug, a little playfully, looking at the shoes in his hands. "If the shoe fits..."

He leans closer. "The other thing they say about big shoes is that it's *hard*..."

I wait for him to make a dirty joke, to lob an innuendo. Breath held, I wait for him to say *Let's do this*, because hope never dies. And then I wait for the abject guilt of keeping a secret from Perri to subside. Perri, one of my two best friends in the universe, the girl who's been there for me through every up and down, who attended the theatrical productions I worked on in high school, the friend who rushed to my side in the hospital room when I broke my leg

skiing in college, even though she was two hours away, the woman I gave the kick in the pants to last year with her guy when she needed it.

Shaw's hazel eyes flicker, and I know he's waiting for me to set up his dirty joke.

My guilt hardens—and my hope deepens, too. The longing for this man beats on.

I return to his “hard” comment. “Hard for what?”

“Hard to find socks.”

I laugh, shake my head, and shoo him off. “Go bowl some strikes, Shaw.”

He gives me a tip of the imaginary hat and heads off to lane twenty, joining a few fellow firemen. I do my damndest not to stare at his sexy butt, or admire his big frame, or, honestly, even think about him like that.

It's something I've been trying to do for years.

When a group of older ladies—twice my age and totally fabulous—comes in, I shift my focus, setting them up at one of the lanes and serving them wine.

For the next thirty minutes, I don't even look at lane twenty.

Well, maybe I peek once or twice.