

# 1. Fine, so I'm not a ninja

It was hotter than balls tonight at the club. I could feel a bead of sweat slowly trailing down the center of my back.

Ugh.

I had a little fan hooked up to my booth that kept me from completely imploding. It was perfect when I was working but I couldn't untether it and take it with me when I needed a break. Like right now.

As was our tradition Mike, the bar manager, was waiting to give me a hand so I could carefully totter down the steps by the booth. As soon as my heels touched the dance floor, he led me with a hand at the small of my back through the writhing masses. I happily let him move people out of our way as we went to a side exit and disappeared through the door. It gave us access to the employee hallway and my real destination—the ladies' room. Being hot meant I was drinking more water, so of course I had to pee.

"You're playing a good set tonight," Mike said as soon as he shut the hall door behind us. The frenzy of the pulsating music and talking people of the club was hushed to a hollow thump. Without the wall-to-wall heat of so many dancing bodies, the employee hallway was chilly in comparison. I grinned at Mike and bumped him with my shoulder.

"Um, I play an awesome set *every* night," I reminded him. "I'm keeping people hyped so they'll stay longer, dance harder and buy more drinks."

Mike was the boss, so as long as he was happy, I got to keep my regular gig at the club. He paid me well because I was a killer DJ but it didn't hurt to remind him of my worth. I wasn't ashamed to keep selling my merits to him. One of the only good things my father had taught me is that every day was an interview, so I wasn't about to let down my guard.

"That's one of the reasons I keep you around," Mike said. He eyed the tops of my boobs that peeked out of my shirt and grinned at me wolfishly. Tonight was School of Rock night. In addition to \$5-you-call-its, everyone who came to party tonight also were treated to bartenders wearing school gear and skimpy clothing. I fit right in. My thigh-highs and Mary Janes were the tame part. I was also wearing a barely-there pleated miniskirt and a black, shredded tank top. Mike reached out and tugged at my long pigtails.

"How do you get your shoulders so shiny?" he asked.

"Baby oil," I said.

I ignored the look of lust he was giving me and brushed past him.

“Gotta pee,” I announced. I pushed open the door to the women’s employee restroom and disappeared inside before he tried to hit on me again. Keeping him on my side was a precarious game of being a cocktease, and I wasn’t in the mood tonight. I could do worse than Mike. He was still handsome at forty in a George Clooney way. But he went through women like the bar went through beer. It wasn’t even worth considering.

“You’re killing me, Tavi,” Mike called out before the door shut in his face.

I called out thanks.

When I was done, I washed my hands and peered at myself in the mirror. My dark cherry lipstick still looked nice and glossy but my eyeliner had melted a little. I smudged it with a paper towel and then stepped back to make sure my skanky outfit was still covering everything I needed it to. I pulled out my cell phone to snap a quick mirror selfie so I could post it on my social. *#lets go #meetyouatcielo*

A thud suddenly sounded against the door. I jumped and whirled to face it. I was going to yell out to whoever it was that someone was in here, but I remembered that the bathroom had two stalls. If someone was knocking, they could just come in.

There was a yell and another scuffle outside the door that quickly moved away. No one came in.

I rolled my eyes. If Mike was out there trying to mess with me, I was going to demand free drinks for him annoying me. Actually, he always gives me drinks. I needed to think of a new perk. Maybe I could talk him into lowering the air at the club so I didn’t have to sweat so much.

When I peeked into the hallway, I was surprised to see it was empty. I looked both ways but no one was there. It was just me and the sounds from the club.

I stepped out and started walking along the hallway, intending to meet up with Mike at the bar. I didn’t have a long time until I needed to be back on the mic, and I needed something cold to down before I went back into the sweat factory. Just as I was about to cross from the employee hallway and make a right to the main bar, I heard a shout and the sound of something hitting the back exit door with a splintering force. I looked left at the back door and stared at it for a second, expecting someone to come in again, but again they didn’t.

I considered turning around and going into the bar to get Mike. I mean, that would be the smart thing to do. It’s just – to be honest, Mike would probably make things worse.

I pushed forward instead and opened the exit door wide. The back lot behind the bar is one of my least favorite places. It was supposed to be where employees parked, and only had one streetlight, which pretty much lit up nothing back there. It was just a big old patch of dirt where some of us parked our cars, and where the bouncers would go to smoke cigarettes on their breaks. I hated it because it wasn’t well lit and the dirt clung to

my shoes. It was annoying, especially when my shoes were cute.

As I looked out, I could see four or five men just a few feet away, and it was obvious they were fighting. I didn't recognize any of them, so they weren't employees. The longer I watched, the more obvious it became that four of them were actually ganging up on one guy, who was fighting them alone. The odd man out looked like your typical frat boy. He probably was a student at my university and had done something stupid to catch the wrong kind of attention. The men trying to beat him down looked like they were juicehead gym monkeys. It kind of reminded of Spiderman facing a group of thugs, except Spiderman had superpowers in his veins, and the dude in the parking lot was probably just some dummy.

It wasn't a fair fight.

"Hey," I shouted. "Stop!"

My voice made a couple of the thugs pause and turn to glance at me. I don't know if it was my outfit that gave me away but I must not have looked very intimidating. As quickly as they saw me, the men dismissed me and turned back to the frat boy. He stared at me a little longer than the others. He looked dismayed, I think, from what I could tell in the darkness. Obviously he didn't think he was going to get help from me. I wondered what he'd done, or whose girlfriend he'd stolen. Where were his frat friends to get his back? His hair was too pretty and perfect to get jacked up.

I couldn't just watch as they beat him to a pulp, I had to stop them. Yes, I was wearing the exact wrong thing for a fight. I didn't think too much about it; I acted. I leapt forward and ran across the gravel to join the fray. I was shouting for them to stop as I reached the first man and got a good grip on his torso. I dug in my feet and yanked him backward, managing to trip him and make him fall to the ground. He was already rolling back to his feet when I got to the second guy and ran straight for him, tackling him with my shoulder to the midsection and taking him down to the ground with me. When my knees hit the gravel, I said a bad word because it hurt like hell. But I was getting amped as I looked around to see who was next.

The frat guy was actually still alive, I realized. One guy was holding onto his arms in a half nelson while the other was throwing punches, but frat guy was using his legs to kick and block the blows.

The guy I'd just tackled was trying to untangle himself from me. I pushed him away and tried to get to my feet faster than he did. He glared at me.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"It's not a fair fight," I said. "Stay away from him."

"It's none of your business, dumb bitch!"

I glared at him. Oh, he thought I was a bitch for tackling him? I gave him the finger. With both hands. Instead of going back after frat guy, I had his full attention now.

“Do you want me to tackle you again?” I threatened, squaring off against him. I was pretty impressed with myself for the first tackle. I had only practiced it on my brother, and had never had the chance to actually use it on someone before tonight. Like, full force use it.

He glared at me but didn't move my way. Most guys wouldn't hurt a girl, but you couldn't count on that. I didn't realize it right away, but I'd made a rookie mistake. I felt arms go around my waist from behind and I was hauled off my feet. I'd turned my back on the first guy I'd knocked down, and now he had me in his grip. I saw the guy in front of me grin in satisfaction as I was lifted up. I wasn't about to let him toss me away. I kicked the heels of both my feet backward, aiming for shins, and felt the jolt of impact. The guy holding me howled in pain and immediately dropped me. I stumbled and almost biffed the landing but managed to stay on my feet. I turned and saw the guy behind me had fallen to the ground and was gripping his shins in a death clutch. I debated kicking him in the face, but that seemed mean. There's a saying about kicking idiots when they're on the ground after you already kicked them, I think.

When I turned to see how frat guy was doing in the fight, I jumped. He was standing in front of me somehow and we were nose-to-nose. He did not look happy.

“What in the fuck are you doing?” he growled at me. I could feel his hot breath on my face and pulled away.

I frowned at him and didn't answer at first. I stepped to the side to look behind him and, yup, counted one, two, three men lying in the dirt. I tried to keep my jaw from falling open, but I couldn't help how wide my eyes were when I looked at frat guy again.

“Huh, you're still alive,” I said in disbelief.

Frat guy slowly reached out and grabbed my arms, then shook me. The light from the street lamp shone through his blonde hair.

“Are you insane?” he demanded. His pale eyes glittered at me. “What in the hell do you think you're doing?”

I shoved him away with my free hand and glared.

“I'm helping you, you asshat,” I said.

He let me go when I pushed him, probably because he wasn't expecting it. I crossed my arms as he gave me the most condescending onceover I'd ever received.

“In that,” he said sarcastically, motioning toward my clothes. “Really?”

“Yeah, really,” I answered. “You’re welcome by the way.”

I shoved past him, purposely bumping into him roughly as I went. I stormed back into the club and slammed the exit door behind me.

“Tavi, what the hell?” Mike said. He was coming from the bar with a drink and a bottle of water in his hands. He took one look at how disheveled I was and looked like he was going to have a heart attack. His eyes practically popped out of his head. “Your knees are all busted up!”

“Mikey, there was a fight back there,” I said, jerking my thumb behind me. “You should send some boys to do clean up. I’m gonna go wash the blood off my knees.”

He nodded and darted back into the bar to call his security team. I made a right and went down the hall and straight back to the women’s restroom. It took me ten minutes to clean myself up from all the stupid dust that was all over me now, and I had to redo my pigtails. The worst part was the blood on my knees and my torn thigh-high stockings. My right knee was starting to sting and definitely ruined the school-girl look I was going for. Pissed again, I kicked off my shoes and pulled off my stockings so I could toss them in the trash.

A few minutes later, Mike knocked at the bathroom door and pushed it open when I called for him to come in.

“You okay?” he asked, standing half in and half out of the doorway. I saw one of his security guys, Tony, standing behind him.

“I’m good,” I said. “Just trying to get cute again.”

“You always look cute,” Mike assured me. He watched in concern as I toed my shoes back on.

“Tavi, that guy out there said you tried to join his fight,” Tony grumbled. “Are you crazy?”

I shrugged, eyeing my hair in the mirror. Thank goodness I’d used a lot of glitter hairspray tonight. It looked like nothing had happened. I turned toward the guys and threw my arms out.

“Do I look okay?” I asked. “Seriously. Other than my ugly knees. Don’t lie to me.”

“Turn around,” Mike said, eyeing me critically.

I complied, turning in a slow circle for him. When I was facing forward again, I met his gaze and waited for his verdict. That’s when I realized he was grinning at me stupidly.

I rolled my eyes.

“Tony?” I tried.

Tony was grinning too.

“Sorry,” he said. “I was doing what Mike was doing.”

I sighed.

“We gotta get more girls working here,” I grumbled. “You two are worthless.”

Tony and Mike laughed as I brushed past them. Mike walked me back to my post in the DJ stand and left me with a couple drinks to tide me over. As soon as they saw me, the club cheered and gave me high-fives as I went back to the box. Obviously I’d been gone too long.

The rest of the night passed in a blur. At closing, Tony and the other bouncers had to flip the lights on once I shut down my laptop so they could shoo people out of the club. A group of guys obviously didn’t care because they were swarmed around my booth, talking each other up and trying to get my number. I laughed them off and made eyes at Tony, who came over and made them leave.

“Come here, Tavi,” Mike called out from the bar. I grabbed my stuff and crossed the now-empty dance floor to see what he wanted. He showed me his first-aid kit and insisted on taking my legs in his hand and bandaging me up. I saw him eyeing the skin at my thighs where my skirt was hiking up.

“Cops came and took some of those guys to the station,” Mike said. “I don’t know what happened to the guy they were fighting. Must have run off. Do you want another drink before you go?”

I thought about it and sighed. I was too tired to keep drinking and I just wanted to go home to crawl under the covers.

“No thanks,” I said. “My bed is calling my name.”

“Your bed is calling my name too,” he said with a big grin. “Let’s go.”

“Ha ha,” I said sarcastically. “Tony, get this guy out of here.”

Tony came over and took my bags. I smiled at him as he lifted them to his shoulder and then took my hand. I said good night to Mike and the other guys and then let Tony lead me out the back exit.

“Tavi,” Mike called before I was out the door. “Don’t jump into any more fistfights!”

I groaned. His laughter followed us outside.