



DARK & NIGHTS DISCOVERY

Collection II

10 Stories by

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1001 Dark Nights

Discovery Authors Bundle 2

Introducing:
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Melanie Harlow
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and Lili Valente

1001 Dark Nights



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1001 Dark Nights Discover Authors Bundle 2

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One Thousand and One Dark Nights

Once upon a time, in the future...

I was a student fascinated with stories and learning. I studied philosophy, poetry, history, the occult, and the art and science of love and magic. I had a vast library at my father's home and collected thousands of volumes of fantastic tales.

I learned all about ancient races and bygone times. About myths and legends and dreams of all people through the millennium. And the more I read the stronger my imagination grew until I discovered that I was able to travel into the stories... to actually become part of them.

I wish I could say that I listened to my teacher and respected my gift, as I ought to have. If I had, I would not be telling you this tale now. But I was foolhardy and confused, showing off with bravery.

One afternoon, curious about the myth of the Arabian Nights, I traveled back to ancient Persia to see for myself if it was true that every day Shahryar (Persian: شـهـريـار, "king") married a new virgin, and then sent yesterday's wife to be beheaded. It was written and I had read, that by the time he met Scheherazade, the vizier's daughter, he'd killed one thousand women.

Something went wrong with my efforts. I arrived in the midst of the story and somehow exchanged places with Scheherazade – a phenomena that had never occurred before and that still to this day, I cannot explain.

Now I am trapped in that ancient past. I have taken on Scheherazade's life and the only way I can protect myself and stay alive is to do what she did to protect herself and stay alive.

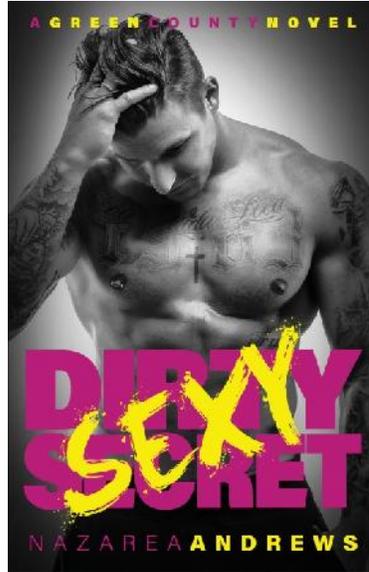
Every night the King calls for me and listens as I spin tales.

*And when the evening ends and dawn breaks, I stop at a
point that leaves him breathless and yearning for more.
And so the King spares my life for one more day, so that
he might hear the rest of my dark tale.*

*As soon as I finish a story... I begin a new
one... like the one that you, dear reader, have before
you now.*

Dirty Sexy Secret

By Nazarea Andrews



Dedication

For Jessica, who heard the original idea and wouldn't let me forget it.
And for Tiffany, who cheered me on and said the right thing at the right time. Thanks, girls.

Prologue

Three killers, two cops, and a journalist walk into a bar.
Sounds like a bad joke, right? It's not.
It's the end--dear god I hope it's the end--of the worst day of my life.
I just hope we all walk out alive.

Chapter 1

Some people say you can't go home again. And *that* is a complete pile of bullshit. You can. It just won't be home.

I should know. I did it.

Green County doesn't change. It's been four years since I bolted. Six months since I sucked up all my pride and ego and came back. And it still struck me as strange. Green Co. is exactly the same. Same ridiculous festivals. Same leafy boulevards and parks filled with yoga moms and shrieking children. The same gossips fill the coffee shop and eye me when I step in.

They'll chatter my every move to Eli later, cooing over him while warning that I was too skinny, too wild, too rude, too, too, too.

They did the same thing in high school.

Nothing changed in Green Co. If you want change you go somewhere else and you let it wrap you up tight and fight like hell to keep from being dragged back.

Eli gets pissy when I say shit like that. But Eli never left Green Co. Never felt the need to get out, to see and shape the world. He's always been more than happy to see and shape the County.

And you know, he was right. He was good at it. I loved that he cared so much about Green Co. That he wanted to save the little Kansas county from itself.

Someone had to.

I flash the ladies a smile as I order two extra large iced coffees. Cindy grins at me, punching in the order and adding a slice of banana bread and her boxed lunch.

"Long day, Hazel?"

I grin, a half quirk of my lips that passes as a grin these days. "It's a day ending in Y, Cins. Those are always long."

She gives me a smirk that tips toward worry. "You need a day off, sugar."

I make a face, and drop a twenty on the counter as I take my order. "I don't even know what I'd do with that much free time."

She arches an eyebrow at me and I grin at her.

"Hazel, my love," Gabe says, sailing through the door of the coffee shop as I turn away from the counter.

I swallow the grin before it twists into a smirk. "Gabriel," I say, almost frosty and he laughs.

Smug bastard.

"We should carpool, love, if we're going to keep meeting like this. Save the planet and all."

"Because you care so much about the damn planet," I scoff, and he makes a face, all wounded dignity.

The problem with that face is that I know Gabe. I've known him my whole life.

Gabe is everything I ran away from when I left Green Co. Everything I wanted to forget. The tiny smile that means trouble and the too sharp eyes that see right through my quick easy lies and watches with concern when I isolate.

Fucking bastard is my neighbor. He's too damn close for comfort and too damn nosy for his own good.

And coming from an investigative journalist, that's pretty fucking nosy.

"I've got work, Gabe. So as much as I'd love to spar," I shift my boxes and nod at the door.

"Hazy," he says, and it draws me up. Because once, we were friends. We were impossibly close. He was my rock, and I threw him away. Because I was so fucking determined. To be more. To get out. I fucked up and I ran, and I left Gabe behind with all my other mistakes.

I always regretted that. Hurting Gabe.

"Wine night?" he asks, and I flinch, falling back a step.

It's still too soon for that shit. And he sees it in my eyes.

His smile dips, just a little. Just enough that I notice. Because I know him better than he knows himself, and I can read his sadness in the line of his shoulders.

"Maybe next week," I offer, shuffle stepping closer to the door. Aware of all the church ladies watching, and Cin, standing at the counter, her lips pulled down in a frown, and worry.

And Gabe shrugs it off. Beams at me like a fucking lunatic, and nods. Gives me the out.

I flash him a quick smile and move toward the door, and he steps to the side, giving me a sardonic smile.

Because he's Gabe.

And this is Green County.

And nothing here changes. Not really.

The door opens and Brandon Archer steps through, all long legs and wide shoulders and a face that's so fucking pretty it's almost painful. His green eyes, so expressive and alive, find me and go blank. And I almost drop my bags.

Because if there was ever a mistake I made, it was him. Eli comes in a half-step behind, and a half-foot taller. His eyes warm as he pushes past Archer to wrap me in a hug.

It's been about twelve hours since I saw my foster brother, so of course he's tackle hugging me in CinSations. While Archer watches, those moss-green eyes probing me. I squeak and Elijah relinquishes me reluctantly. I drive an elbow in his gut. "Dumbass. You spill my coffee, you replace it."

He doesn't even blink. He just shoots a quick look at Archer, an eyebrow quirked in question.

Because of course they don't talk. How silly. Why would they?

See—this right here? This is why I left. Because I can't handle seeing the epic fucking bromance that is Elijah Beasley and Brandon fucking Archer.

I shift, and Archer smiles, a slow curling thing that I want to smack off his face. "Hazel, sugar, you need a hand?"

My smile feels more feral than sweet, and his eyes are sparkling, that fucking, amused *she's so cute* light I've seen for so long. "Thanks, but Gabe is helping me. Right?" I side eye my friend who gives me this extravagant bow that doesn't say, you just blew me off. Thank Christ for Gabe.

I twist. "Have a good day, Officer."

Gabe snorts at that as he takes my bag and one of my coffees. I think I'm in the clear. That I'm safe, and out of the danger zone that is *Archer*.

And then his hand closes around my arm, and it pulls me to a stop.

He's always been ridiculously able to pull me to a complete stop with almost nothing.

"You can't hide in that farmhouse forever, Hazel," he murmurs, and I flush.

Damn fair skin. A blush is too fucking easy to see and he's always been too fascinated with pulling them from me. I can almost feel the low chuckle he gives as he lets me go, and I fall back a step.

It's a retreat, and that's just another reason I scowl at him. "Tell Eli I'm making dinner on

Sunday. Mom is coming over.” I push past him and Gabe slips an arm around my shoulder, ignoring Archer’s tension. “You aren’t invited,” I add, all sugar sweet. And then I’m gone.

Outside and Gabe is steering me to my truck.

“Tension between you and Green Co’s finest, love?”

“I don’t want to do this, Gabe,” I murmur, and he pushes a blond curl out of my eyes, watching me with those strange honey-warm eyes of his. And then he nods.

“Ok. Not now. But we will talk. Soon. I just painted a target on my back and Archer’s never liked me to begin with. You owe me.”

I huff out a breath, and let my gaze dart up to him. Gabe gives me a patient, waiting look and I nod.

Because apparently things do change.

Gabe can grow up, even just a little.

“Ok. Tomorrow.” I say, and he nods. Brushes a kiss over my hair and hands me my bags as I slide into my truck.

And then he stands there, watching, braced between me and CinSations as I drive away.

He was my best friend a lifetime ago, before I fucked up everything.

I wonder if maybe he could be again.

Chapter 2

Eli is still charming Cindy, and I'm still listening to the gossipy bitches who like to fill me and him in on everything that might be even the slightest bit interesting in the County. For the past six months, that's been almost exclusively Hazel.

Which would be great, if I cared the way I'm supposed to. If I could push Hazel back into the box she's supposed to be in, the one that she hasn't been in since I came back from my one tour overseas and she greeted me with a fist to the face. She broke my nose and shattered the protective little box that I'd always stuck her in.

"She's looking pretty, but she has to be lonely." Prudence McCann is telling her sister-in-law, but her eyes are on me, like I should be doing something about Hazel being lonely.

Because that's appropriate.

Fuck, Nora would eviscerate me and let Eli strangle me with my guts if I made a move toward Hazel. And I'd probably provide the knife.

Doesn't mean I want someone else anywhere near her.

Pru doesn't really relent until I offer a smile, tight and awkward and pull away. Gabe reenters the shop and I catch his eye.

There's a lot of anger there, and I swallow a curse. Gabriel Delvin on a warpath is the very last thing I want to deal with now. If there's anyone besides Eli whose been protective of Hazel it's Gabe, the short, snarky best friend who attached to her in middle school and never quite let go.

And I always liked him as much as I loathed him. Even when I was pretty sure he was fucking her, I liked him, because it was better him than me, even if I wanted to punch his too white teeth down his throat.

"Officer, may I have a word?" he asks, and even phrased as a question, that's a summons. And we all know it.

Gabe isn't Green County royalty, but he's old blood. That's why his befriending Hazel was so strange. Military brats, especially ones like us, didn't mix with the County's founding lines. The Moats and the McCanns and the Jacksons. The Delvins are less of a power in the County, especially now that they're fading and most have left.

But that doesn't mean Gabe is someone I can ignore. So I follow him away from the ladies who are still prattling about Hazel, catch Elijah's eye and he gives me an irritated look, like he's annoyed he has to deal with them while I deal with fucking Gabe Delvin.

Gabe drops two boxes on the café table outside CinSations, and glares at me.

"What the fuck are you doing with Hazel?"

I stare at him, trying to process. Frankly, I'm still trying to catch up. It's early and I haven't had a lot of coffee yet, and Eli is the morning person in this equation, so, "What?"

Gabe snaps his fingers, his green eyes furious as he stares at me. "She was grumpy but fine, until you showed up with the puppy. She likes him. So tell me what the hell you did that sent her running, Archer?"

I cock my head at him.

Because I know. Of course I fucking know. I'm just surprised Gabe doesn't. "She's your best friend, Gabe. Doesn't that mean she tells you this shit?"

A spasm of pain flares across his face. Shakes the mischievous, smiling jackass that the

town knows and loves.

For a second, I see Gabriel. The last Devlin to stay in the County, the one who said fuck it when his family said he should go into politics and law. The one who stayed when his family, even his favorite brother, left.

Everyone left Gabe. Even Hazel. And he's not as immune to that as he'd like the rest of Green Co. to think.

So I sigh, and shrug. "Hazel doesn't talk to me. She hasn't for a long time, man. I have no idea what's going on in that pretty little head of hers."

Gabe watches me, all narrowed eyed contemplation, and I struggle to keep my face blank.

Until, finally, he snorts.

"Get a donut, Archer. I hear they're to fucking die for," he says, and then he's snatching up his boxes and shoving back into CinSations.

Eli, coming out of the shop, gives him that tight smile he only ever fishes out for Gabe, and it reminds me I need to ask about what the hell is happening there, but I don't.

I haven't since I came home from Afghanistan and Eli graduated and we both joined the force. I remember it, clear as day. I was sitting at Mom's house while Hazel prowled around, nursing a bottle of beer and giving these reserved little smiles. Eli was graduating and she was two years from it herself, and her eyes skipped over me like I wasn't even there. Gabe alternated between clinging to her like a burr in fur, and spinning away like a falling star. But he avoided Eli, and I would say it was unconscious, except that I had watched my brother and Hazel and Gabe for too many years to see it as anything but what it was.

They were avoiding each other.

And because I was so wrapped up in my own shit, I let them. I didn't push. That was six years ago.

Sometimes, when shit drags too long, you don't get to bring it back up. After Hazel left, we didn't see much of Gabe. Mom said he came by, sometimes, but it was never when we were there.

Green County was small, but if he wanted to hide, he could and without Hazel as the glue to bring him into our inner circle, there was no real reason for us to see him.

Bury something long enough, it's hard to bring it back up.

"What did Gabe want?"

I hesitate, and then, "He wanted to know if Hazel and I were fighting."

Eli's eyebrows go up and he frowns. "You have to see someone to fight with them, and you've seen her what, three times since she came home?"

There's an accusation in his voice, and I ignore it. I don't need to defend myself to Eli. He's never pushed me for an explanation. He just accepted it. I think if it were just me, he'd push. If it were just Hazel he'd push. But with both of us playing the same game—avoidance and refusal to talk—he let it slide.

I know he wants an explanation. But for now—"Here," he says, handing me a cup of coffee and a slice of carrot cake. Thank god for Eli. Kid knows me way too well. "Pratt wants to talk to us. Eat in the car."

I huff at that, but follow him back to where I parked.

Being detectives means we get drive an unmarked car. Being Brandon Archer means I'm driving *my* unmarked car, a sleek 74 Roadrunner, fully restored, and painted a blue so deep it borders on black. Eli laughs and says it's not practical because people know it's mine. But we aren't undercover so fuck that noise.

I hate driving anything but my girl.

Eli turns down the radio and I glance at him as he thumbs through emails on his phone.

“Why didn’t you tell me about family dinner?” I ask casually.

Guilt in those big puppy eyes before he shrugs quickly.

“Because you wouldn’t come. Nora’s been inviting you since Hazel came home and you’ve blown her off every single time.”

“Does it occur to you I might have had plans?”

“Not if those plans include a girl you don’t call again, or the bar,” Eli deadpans, and I grin, sipping my coffee as I head toward the courthouse.

“It’s Green Co, man. I’ll see them again.”

“Archer, you’ve been avoiding Nora since Hazel blew back into town. And she gets it. I get it. Even if I’m not asking—I know there’s some shit you won’t talk about. But, fuck, man.

She misses her kids. That’s all.”

And that makes me feel like shit, because Nora did her best with us. When we could have ended up in the county home, we ended up with Nora. And she fought like hell to give us the best she could.

“I’ll do better,” I say and he flicks another glance at me. It’s not much, as far as promises go, but it’ll do for now. It’s enough for Eli for now.

Maybe it’s time to put aside my shit with Hazel and make peace. I glance at the clock on the dash and sigh. I’ll go, after our shift.

The morning after talk is about four fucking years overdue, and Hazel might be pissed, but I’m done playing this by her rules.

If it’s effecting Nora and Eli it’s gone on far too fucking long.

Chapter 3

The thing about small towns is that they're small. Nothing really happens here. It's the beauty of the place, the whole reason I fell so fucking hard for Green County when I moved here. Dad's latest duty station. Another military brat in a town full of them.

On the surface, Green County looks perfect. Idyllic. Fucking Mayberry in the middle of corn-fed Kansas.

But the more I look around, the more I think we've got a problem. It's something they don't show the outside world. And I am the outside world, to some degree, even after Green Co rallied around us.

Do you remember that day? So many people don't. It's easy to forget.

October 28th. 1996. Most of the country thought we were moving out of Bosnia. We were. It was a quiet time for the military.

For a military brat, there's nothing quite like peace. Nothing that's quite as comforting.

It wasn't supposed to happen—that's the tragedy of it. But a plane crash is a plane crash.

Green County is home to Sanders Army base and it lost twenty-seven soldiers in one morning. The entire country paid attention, descended on the County like a fucking horde, demanding to know what went wrong.

Here's the thing, though. Most of the people left behind were families. Kids and their surviving parent.

There were four, who weren't.

Four kids who were orphans. One—Anna Winters--got out clean, got picked up by an aunt and whisked away as soon as legally possible.

The other three. Well. The military and Green Co had no idea what the hell to do with them.

Nora stepped in. She was lifelong Army, retired, and living a quiet sort of life. She owned a diner on the edge of town that the boys from base swore by and truckers liked to stay in. She kept it clean, kept a few cabins out back to let truckers and drunk soldiers crash in, and made a decent living.

And she took those three orphans in. Raised them as her own, gave them everything she could, and if Green Co and the Marine Corp kicked some money her way for publicity and survivor benefits, she tucked that in a little fund for each of them.

Sometimes family is the blood your born to.

And sometimes. It's the woman who steps up and takes you in when the world is falling apart. It's the gentle giant who becomes your best friend and brother, even if he was born in Germany and you were born in California. It's the quiet green eyed young man who's so eaten up with grief and unspent anger that you creep around him for months before you find him, broken down in the basement, and crawl into his lap, because you get it.

Fuck, you get it.

Family isn't just the people you're born to.

It's the ones who chose to love you.

Nora taught me that. So did Eli, the brother of my heart. And so did Archer. Although he stopped being my brother, a long fucking time ago.

I sit back and rub my eyes.

Stare at that last line.

Fuck.

This isn't what I'm supposed to be writing. I'm supposed to be doing an expose on the criminal underworking's of the County—and there *were* underworking's, even if the entire County looked the other way—and instead I was rambling on about family.

This is why I got dismissed from the paper in Boston.

Ok, no it's not but fuck it probably had *something* to do with it.

A knock on my front door jerks my head up and I frown. Coffee. I need more coffee. I glance at the corner of my desktop and mutter a curse. No wonder my back hurts. I've been working almost nonstop since I got home from CinSations, ten hours ago.

At my feet, Smith growls, a low, furious note that rumbles through his chest.

Antisocial mutt is more like me than is probably healthy. If I gave a fuck, I might even do something about it.

"Stay," I order, half-hearted, and stand, making my way to the door. He follows me, a half-formed noise in his throat.

Brandon Archer stares at me through the thin glass, his expression tense.

Six months. I had a damn good run before he pinned me down. Not as good as I wanted—if I had my way, we'd never do this, spend our lives in our respective corners.

I pull open the door and stare at him.

"Our shit is effecting Mama, Hazy. Time to be adults about it."

"Don't wanna," I say, sticking my lip out in a pout and he breathes a laugh that rubs against my skin.

The problem with Archer is that he's too much. He was too close growing up, too angry and too mean, and then he was too sweet, too gentle.

And then he was too fucking hot, and any idea that he was my *brother*, something I'd always struggled with, vanished in *want*.

Here's the way it worked.

They died. And we lived. Nora did what she didn't have to do, picked us up to keep us out of the group home, and gave us a family. A broken family, but Nora reasoned that no one would understand our collective loss, and individual hell, quite like each other.

It was a twisted sort of logic, but it also made all the sense in the world, and it fell, so fucking easy, into place.

In a time when *breathing* was hard, *we* were easy.

But Archer had never been easy. He didn't know how—he was the oldest, older than Eli by four years and me by five. He felt the loss more than we did, and he was angry. God, he was angry. That's what I remember about that first year.

The crushing grief, and Archer's furious anger.

It gave way. Even Archer couldn't maintain fury in the face of Nora's calm practicality and Eli's wild, infectious enthusiasm. They coaxed him out of his fury. And he coaxed me out of my grief.

And then I fell for him, so hard that it stunned even me, and I ruined everything.

"We've been doing things we don't want to do for years, Hazel," he says, and I shiver as his voice wraps around my name. "We both fucked up. Time to pay the piper and talk shit out, because Nora is gonna kick my ass if I miss another family dinner, and if she doesn't, Eli will.

Dude's my partner. I can't avoid his sulking."

I laugh a little at that and sigh. Let him in. "Come on. You talk while I cook."

Archer's eyebrow hitches up at that, and I shrug, turning away. "I'm starving."

I feel him following me into the little farmhouse. It's not nearly as nice or as spacious as Gabe's down the road, five acres and a line of trees over, but it's mine.

Once upon a time, my parents wanted a house. And then Mom died, killed by a drunk driver. Dad couldn't give me stability or even a mother, hell—he couldn't even give me him, thanks to the Corp. But he bought a house, and hoped that would be enough for a kid reeling from the loss of her mother.

After he died in the Green Co Crash, as the national media dubbed it, Nora rented the place out and put the profits in my account.

When I graduated and went off to school, I had more padding than I had any right to, and a house, if I wanted it.

It made everything falling apart a little easier to bear, if only just because I didn't worry that I'd end up homeless or on Nora's couch.

I mean, Mama Nora would take me in. She was pretty fucking fantastic and would love for me to come home, even for a weekend. Nora missed us. Even if she kept it to herself, she missed us like crazy.

It was a mutual feeling though.

"Isn't that your lunch?"

I glance at Archer and where he's frowning at a box lunch from CinSations. *Shit.*

"Uh. Yeah."

His green eyes go flinty and he frowns at me. "What the fuck, Hazel?"

"I was working. I didn't get hungry," I say, defensive, and his scowl deepens. He grabs my arm and pushes me onto a stool at the bar. "Sit the fuck down before your blood sugar crashes."

"Jesus, Archer, I haven't fainted since high school."

He ignores me, rummaging through my cabinets before he makes a satisfied noise and emerges with a sleeve of saltines and a jar of peanut butter. He leans against the counter across from me and makes me peanut butter cracker sandwiches, and I'm thrown.

Not by his actions, but into the past.

When I was a little girl, I was the one that was easily forgotten. Not Nora's fault. I *wanted* to be forgotten. I wanted her to focus on Archer. He was older than me, when that October storm destroyed our world. Sixteen, and all this bottled rage. For the first six months, everyone was wrapped up in keeping Archer from self-destructing. He fought too much, raided Nora's bar, and stowed away in a five different trucker's cabs. He made it all the way to the Canadian border once, before Nora caught up with him and dragged him home.

Eli pulled him out of his rage.

Eli with his easy smiles, and his nightmares. With his bright days and black nights. Eli was, of the three of us, the one who handled shit. He smiled and answered the questions directed at us in public, kept me tucked close so I wasn't dealing with too many questioning stares.

He kept seeing his friends, stayed on the basketball team, and drank himself stupid to keep the nightmares at bay.

Archer quit running, because Eli needed him. Because when Eli crawled into Archer's bed, the nightmares didn't come. When Archer was in the other bed, Eli didn't need to drink. Because when Archer joked with him and insulted him, when Archer dragged him to the garage, and made him learn basic car maintenance before he banished him to the stool and fetching tools, he made the fake smile Eli gave the world *real*.

Nora was right. She knew we'd need each other to heal. As the six-month mark passed, and

Green County was infested with reporters looking for soundbites and the photos of the Airplane Orphans, it didn't sting as much as it should have. Because Archer and Eli were on their way to healthy.

"Hey," Archer says, jerking me out of my memories and nudging the plate of crackers at me, with a glass of chocolate milk. "Eat."

I wrinkle my nose at him. "Archer, I'm not thirteen. I can have real food."

"Real food takes time to cook, and you aren't playing with knives or fire when you're tired and about to have a sugar crash. Eat your snack like a good girl."

I snarl, and he crosses his arms, his face impassive and unimpressed.

"If I eat this, will you leave me alone?"

He doesn't blink, but I grab a cracker and bite into.

Bite down on the moan that wants to spill out because, fuck, I was hungry. I chew and swallow thickly, and take another bite, and ignore the way Brandon fucking Archer is staring at me, his expression too damn smug.

"What the hell do you want, Archer?" I demand.

"Wanna know why you came home, for one," he says easily, reaching out and swiping one of my crackers. I growl and he bares his teeth at me in a parody of a smile.

Bastard.

"You answered your own question. It's home," I say, smiling tightly. It's not the truth, but it's as close as I'm willing to go with him.

"You remember that time when you were, I dunno, maybe thirteen. The summer Nora paid me to babysit you and Eli?"

I frown at him, but give a slow nod. It was, in the privacy of my own mind, what I called our Golden Summer. It was when everything was safe and we were happy, before—everything that came after.

"Why?"

"Remember that first week, when Eli and I would go swim in the lake for hours, and you would hide in your room with stacks of books. You told me so many fucking lies to get out swimming. Because you didn't want to admit the truth."

I flush and he grins. "You didn't know how."

"I don't understand the point of this."

His eyes darken, going from grass green to the shade of a deep forest, flecked through with gold. "You didn't have to lie to me, then, Hazel. You've never needed to lie to me." That softly, calling me out on my lie.

And I still can't force the words out. I nibble at my snack and watch as Archer pries the cracker he stole apart, and slowly licks it clean.

And holy shit, I can't watch that. It's almost pornographic, the neat, quick little licks that catch the peanut butter until the cracker is clean and his lips are shining, and the tip of his tongue is caught between his teeth.

His smirk is slow and sexy.

"I'm coming to family dinner, Sunday. You think you can fake it for a few hours, for Mama?" he asks, and I nod, my throat too dry to do anything else.

He grins at me like he knows what I'm thinking and then turns away and digs in the pantry again. That gets my attention because what the hell is he doing?

"What the hell are you doing?" I demand.

"Looking for food. What the fuck do you keep in this place?"

I shift uncomfortably on my chair. I hate when he calls me out on things. It makes me feel like a little girl again and I've never really liked that from him.

"I haven't gone shopping recently," I say defensively.

Archer sends me an arch eyebrow look. "Clearly. Get dressed." He grins when I hesitate and it's coaxing and warm. "Come on, Hazy-eyes. We're going shopping and then I'm going to cook for you."

Panic flares as hot as desire, and I shove them down where I can ignore them for a few minutes longer. "What? No. I have to work and you have to leave."

He grins at me and moves around the counter to come stand next to me. Too close. I want to back up, want to give him space. Want to run to another room. Stubbornness keeps me in my seat.

The smile is pure Archer, all smug and knowing and older brother and I *hate* that look on his face. He can look at Eli that way but I *hate* when he looks at me like that.

"Do you know how long it's been?" he says slowly "Since we hung out just me and you and Eli."

"I dunno."

Since before he left, before I left, before everything that came between.

"Too long."

"Archer, I can't," I say softly.

"Hazy, there's nothing you can't do." The stubborn gleam slides away, and he touches my cheek gently and every inch of me wants to lean into that touch.

Every inch of me wants to slap him away.

That's always been my relationship with Archer.

Pull him close, push him away—all of the dichotomy that is us.

"Are you going to call your brother or am I?" I say pushing out of my chair and scurrying away. I throw over my shoulder, "I've got to get dressed." And even though he knows I'm running, he lets me.

Chapter 4

I'm used to not being comfortable. I'm used to feeling out of place even here in Green County where I've always been home. But this feels right. This has always felt right: me behind the wheel, Eli in the passenger seat, and Hazel leaning up between us, fooling with the radio and fighting with my brother. I don't think I realized how much I missed it—how much I missed *her*—until she's back, a laughing, sniping presence in the backseat that rubs against my skin.

It makes me wish for more and the thing is I know that we need to fix what's going on between us.

I *know* I need to apologize for that night and try to make her understand but for right now? For tonight, she's here and not running. Eli is here and laughing and it's like my family has come back together.

After the accident, I fell apart.

I was self-destructive and drank too much and caused all kinds of hell for Nora. I was a little shithead, wrapped up in my own grief. Everyone looked at our little family and they saw the orphans. They saw people who had lost everything.

Even Nora had lost something, although we don't talk about it much. But her son died in that accident too. Not just our fathers.

She pulled us together and we were held there by the shared strength of our grief and I hated them for it.

I hated Nora for shoving me with people who meant I couldn't forget.

I hated them because they understood and I didn't want anyone to understand.

But then. They needed me. And that made all the difference. That is what pulled me out of my grief.

Eli and Hazel belong to Nora—they needed her. They needed that mother who cared, who was a little bit too cold and a little bit too warm and a little bit too *everything*.

I never needed her, not the way that they did.

She was a friend. She's *still* is a friend and I love the woman more than life. I owe her everything—she kept me on track and she pushed me to be better than I was.

But she wasn't mine.

Eli and Hazel—they were mine.

When Nora left and worked all night at the truck-stop, Eli still had nightmares and I was the one who took care of him.

When Hazel fell apart, this skittish, cold creature hiding behind her books and social anxiety and her quiet, I'm the one who pulled her out of it. The one who made her put her books down and the one who made her laugh.

I'm the one who made her come back to life.

It wasn't that I didn't like Nora. Because I adore her.

It's that I needed to be needed and Eli and Hazel gave me that.

So being here with them, like this, is right in a way that hasn't been right in too many years. I know that most of the reason it's been wrong is my fault which makes this bittersweet and all the more special.

That's probably why when I pulled up, Eli just hopped in the car and didn't argue with me. Probably why when I said *let's do dinner with Eli*, Hazel didn't put up more than a token

argument before she retreated and got dressed.

I know she's still uncomfortable with me and having Eli as a buffer helps. I like having my brother around—there's a reason he's my partner even if GCPD hates it.

“What are you going to cook?” Hazel asks.

I slide a glance at her from the corner of my eye.

“Shouldn't you cook?” I ask, and Eli laughs. Bastard.

Hazel smirks and I can hear the smile in her voice. “This was your idea. You're cooking and I'm going to drink.”

That stirs need in my gut. Drunk Hazel seems like a really bad idea. But. I have Eli as a buffer. Everything will be fine.

I swallow my concern and the desire punching up my throat and say hoarsely, “I'm going to make baked chicken and potatoes.”

Like I know what I'm doing. Hell, I'm making it up as I go along. Hazel giggles in the backseat, “Can you make chicken?”

“Eli, do you remember that time that Hazel burnt water?” I drawl and in the backseat she huffs in displeasure “I was twelve!” she protests.

I grin at her in the rearview as she sulks.

“I'm going to prove you wrong,” she says “I'm going to make a fucking cake and you're going to love it.”

Eli's laughing at both of us but the girl is talking about baked goods.

Of course, I'm going to love it.

I ignore her claim and pull into the parking lot of the local grocery store parking my baby carefully and killing the engine.

“Eli,” I say “you get some chicken for dinner. The girl doesn't have anything in her fucking pantry, so I'm going to make sure she gets some groceries and then we'll meet back at the register.”

Hazel protests, “I don't need you to take me shopping.”

“You need someone to, Hazy. You've got nothing in the damn house. I could barely find peanut butter.”

Eli gives me a quirked eyebrow. “Why were you looking for peanut butter?”

“Because she skipped lunch and I didn't want her to pass out.”

“You bastard,” she hisses. “You told me that you'd keep that to yourself! Now he's going to lecture me too!”

I grin, “That might have been the point, baby girl.”

Hazel stiffens at the pet name, and I bite the inside of my cheek. Dammit. It's too easy when I'm with her to forget that we have these boundaries now. Fucking boundaries. I hate them.

“Hazel, why the fuck are you skipping meals? You know you can't do that shit.” Eli bitches, twisting to nail her with a frustrated stare.

“Oh for Christ's sake,” she snaps. “Give it a rest. I am an adult, remember—I grew up with you guys. We all grew up and I lived in Boston for four *years* without you there to manage my dietary habits. And look—I didn't die. I'm just fine.”

Eli and I both give her a long look, and then flick a look at each other, heavy with meaning. She hisses, “Fuck both of you.” She shoves out of the car and stomps away, and, like the bastards we are, we follow her laughing.

Inside, I nod at Eli, and he grabs a basket, heading off to get the stuff for me to cook dinner. Then I grab Hazel's arm and tug her toward the carts. “Come on, Hazy. A girl can't live on

word alone.”

She tugs against me and I pause, looking at her. The smile has fallen off her face, with Eli gone, and tension ripples between us. “What are we doing?” she asks, serious.

“I’m taking you shopping. Because when you see your sister, and she’s got no food in her freaking house, you take her shopping.”

Rage flits across her face. “I’m *not* your sister, Archer.”

She snatches the cart from me and storms away, all furious lines and swaying ass and *fuck*.

She’s whimpering, and her body is a perfect arch of sweet skin, and god, I’m going to hell— Shit. *Nope*. I’ve kept that box locked for four fucking years. I’m not opening the lid on it tonight, not when I’ve finally got her smiling at me and acting like we’re friends, and Eli is a warm, comfortable buffer between us.

“No, Hazy, you aren’t. You never have been.”

Her head twitches toward me, and I know she heard my softly spoken admission, but she doesn’t acknowledge it. Instead she grabs some chips and I grumble under my breath. Crazy girl will happily eat junk for every meal.

Not that I can judge too much—but Eli will if I don’t put something in her cart that looks vaguely healthy. So I grab some fruit and green shit and toss it in, ignoring her dirty look. That’s how we make our way through the store. She grabs junk, I counter with something that looks vaguely healthy, until we’ve got enough that I’m not worried she’s going to starve, and she has the basics to make simple meals, and Eli finds us eyeing ice cream. He stares at the cart for a minute, and then gives us an exasperated look.

“Letting you two shop together is like letting a toddler loose in a toy store,” he grumbles, and Hazel pouts.

“Archer wouldn’t stop grabbing snacks.”

“Dirty liar,” I growl, snagging her around the waist and tickling her sides. And she giggles, like I’ve spent the past four years doing this, like we’re still kids, and me touching her, shopping with her, is normal and easy.

“Behave, you two,” Eli says, absently, pushing our cart into a line and giving the cashier a smirk. She’s staring at us, that wide-eyed uncomfortable look that reminds me—everyone knows us.

Of course, everyone knows us. It’s Green County and we’re the Airplane Orphans. Even now, sixteen years after the damn thing, it’s what people remember when they see us together.

It eases the smile from my lips, but I don’t pull away from Hazel.

“Hazel Campton?” the voice is low and male, and Hazel twists, leaning around me to stare.

Michael McGrey is staring at Hazel like he hasn’t seen her in years, like she’s a ghost, but there’s something else to it. Something hungry and wanting and that disturbs me. My grip on her hips—when the fuck did I grip her hips—turns hard and she stops in the half-formed attempt to pull away from me and greet the other man.

Michael’s twin comes up behind him, and I stiffen even more.

Michael and John McGrey were younger than me and Eli. They graduated the same year as Hazel and we had never bothered to get to know them. But Gabriel didn’t like them, and that said a lot, because as much as the flamboyant baker annoyed me at times, he had killer instincts and he took Hazel’s safety almost as serious as Eli and I did.

Hazel said we should relax because they were harmless. But they bothered me.

“Michael, John, oh my god! How the hell are you?” She almost squeals.

And I want to punch both of them because for fucks sake. She shouldn’t sound that damn

excited to see anyone but me.

Right. Because that's a completely normal reaction. I release her slowly and Hazel gives me a quick, indecipherable look as I step away.

I can't hold her like I've got some kind of claim on her. I don't. She didn't want me to. She fucking ran and stayed away for four goddamn years. If that isn't a clue that the girl doesn't want me, nothing ever will be.

So I turn away and ignore Eli's curious stare as I help him unload the cart and ignore the conversation happening behind me.

"No, I've been staying out of sight," she's saying. Like these clowns have any right to her explanation.

"Archer," Eli nudges me. "You ok?"

I blink at my brother. "Why the fuck would I not be?"

"You should call Gabe. He's been bugging me to get out so he'd love someone to plan a welcome home thing with," she says, but there's something about her voice. I nudge Eli. Hazel isn't being friendly now, she's got that, *fuck rescue me*, voice going on that tells me we need to pull her out.

And since I'm more likely to kiss her until they go the fuck away, and she doesn't want that—I think I'll let Eli handle it while I buy this shit and get us home.

"It's nice to see you three together," the sales clerk says, her voice shy, and I blink at her.

I know what she's saying.

It's been four years since the Airplane Orphans were seen in public together. Green County likes to see us together, likes to see us happy.

It's why the girls at CinSations still tell me about Hazel in the mornings and why Nora's face falls every time me and Eli show up at Mama's without Hazel in tow.

"Good to be together," I say stiffly, and push the cart. "Yo!" I yell, "We're leaving."

Distantly, I hear Eli making excuses to Michael and John, and pulling Hazel into motion behind me, but I ignore it as I push the cart out of the store, until she's sandwiched between me and him, the place where she's always belonged.

At my side. With Eli to complete us.

Fucking hell, I didn't realize, until now, when she's here, and we're together again, how much I've missed this.

Missed *us*.

I've known since I woke up alone in her bed that I missed Hazel. That there was a hole the shape of her in my heart, that only she could fill.

I just didn't realize that it was more than that.

And I'm not entirely sure what to do with that new knowledge.

Chapter 5

Archer kicks me out of the kitchen, and Eli—*bastard*—helps. He grabs a beer and tugs me from the kitchen and onto the deck that leads to my backyard. It's cool but not cold, the winter chill giving way to spring, but I shiver as Eli lights a small fire in the fire pit.

That was his idea. Eli has always had a weird fascination with fire.

"You good, Hazel?" he asks, softly. I roll the bottle between my palms as the music from the kitchen drifts into the dark.

"It's weird, being home. That—at the grocery store. I didn't think I'd ever have to do that again."

Face the world not as Hazel Campton, but as a third of the Airplane Orphans.

There's a heavy pause, and then, "Is that why you ran to Boston?" *Yes*. And no.

"I needed to go, Eli."

"Explain it to me, Hazy," he whispers, and I flinch. Because even though it's said softly, it's a command, and I can hear the pain in my brother's voice.

How the fuck do I explain this, though? That Green County didn't see me. That they only saw Hazel and Archer and Eli, the tragic orphans, Nora's wayward children. And even then, it was easy to forget *me*.

"I needed to see who I was when I wasn't defined by what had happened to me," I say, softly.

There's a beat of silence and then, behind me, Archer drawls, "And who are you, Hazy-Eyes?"

I stare at him, and I shake my head. Helpless. Because I don't know.

Boston didn't teach me who I was. It only showed me who I wasn't. But that's too much, too deep to share here, when it's supposed to be all light and laughter so I swallow down the confession and let a plea that I'm ashamed of slip into my eyes.

"Brutal Honest?" Archer murmurs, and I nod once, aware of Eli shifting behind me. "I did the same thing, when I joined the Corps."

Eli lets out a breath, and I know it's not a new confession for him.

It's the unspoken thing that's hung over us since Archer joined up. But to hear it spelled out. Stings a little.

Even if I did the same damn thing, Archer running away hurts.

"Eli?" He says, moving away from the door, and picking me up. I don't protest as he sits and pulls me against him.

It feels...good. Right. Being without those fucking boundaries that I pushed up after that one night.

"I always knew who I was, when I was with you two."

My breath catches and I feel the tension ripple through Archer. Because fuck.

"Lijah," Archer starts, and my brother shakes his head. Swallows the rest of his beer. "Don't, Archer. I get it. I never really resented you—either of you—for leaving. I just never needed to do the same thing. I was happy here, because I had a family."

"You still do," I whisper, hating the past tense in his voice. Eli's head comes up and he grins at me, but there are shadows there that I haven't seen in my brother since that first year after the crash.

“I hated who I was, in Boston,” I say, and it feels so. *Fucking*. Good. To say it. To admit that Boston, and everything that happened there was my version of hell.

Archer’s hands, wrapped around my waist, tightens, tugging me against him for a heartbeat, and I want to stay there.

Which has always been the problem.

Both of them are silent, waiting for me to say something. Anything else. I don’t. I snuggle into Archer’s shoulder, and his head comes down, resting against my hair in the dark, and I soak up the bliss that is being around the men who have always held me together.

I creep through the house silently, stepping over Eli, long limbs sprawled like a sleeping puppy on my rug and a nest of pillows. He snores softly, and I smile, leaning over to tug the empty beer bottle from his hand. Archer is stretched out on the couch, pressed against the cushions.

I had been nestled against him.

After the moment of Brutal Honest on the porch, Archer had decided we were all getting drunk. He fed us chicken and roasted potatoes and smirked when I was startled that he knew what the hell he was doing in the kitchen.

Which, in hindsight, makes sense. He worked in the kitchens at Nora’s diner before he joined the Corps.

But he hadn’t gloated. He’d grabbed some beers and tugged me against him, Eli sprawled on the floor next to us as we watched Monty Python, and I fell through time to those sun-soaked summers when this was our normal, and it wasn’t about sex or desire or control. Him holding me was only to ground me, in the moment, with my family.

For one night, all our damage was gone, and I was Hazy and he was my Archer, and it was good.

Until I woke up to a silent living room, and him, all around me, and I rolled into him, instinctive, my head tilting up to find bare skin with my lips and he groaned, a low hungry note that jolted me out of my dreams and back the fuck into reality.

I almost fell on Eli in my haste to get the fuck away.

The kitchen is spotless—Eli insisted on cleaning while Archer selected a movie for us.

My brother is always going to be taking care of me. They both, will. In their ways.

“Hazy-Eyes,” a low voice splits the dark and I almost drop the beer bottle. I do make a noise, a startled little squeak that I already hate myself for.

Archer makes a noise that’s almost a laugh as he steps into the kitchen. His voice is sleep deep and rumbling, a rough caress against my skin and I want more.

God fucking help me, I want more.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting ready for bed,” I answer, turning away to dump the empties in the sink.

“You were sleeping, sweetheart. And keeping me warm. I don’t like waking up to find you missing.”

It’s said so simply, a bald statement of fact that brings me instantly to that moment.

He’s stretched out in bed, tattooed skin sprawled against slate blue sheets, his hand fisted under one pillow, an arm stretched across the bed. Sleeping, he looks almost young.

Almost carefree.

Almost.

I can still taste him.

I whisper softly into the dark room, and then slip out. My suitcase is in the closet by the door, and I grab it silently, ignoring the tears burning in my eyes as I slip out and into my little car.

“Hazel?” he asks, soft and serious, and I blink out of the memories. He’s watching me, with that curious, waiting patience that tells me he’ll wait forever.

Wait for me to come back to him, or tell him to fuck off or god only knows what.

“Archer, I—”

He prowls closer to me and his hands find my waist, clenching there and rubbing tight little circles into my skin through the thick cotton of my tank top.

“Come back to sleep, Hazy-Eyes.”

I want to. God. I want it so fucking bad. Almost as much as I want to go on my tiptoes and kiss him.

I still can remember exactly how he tastes and the sweet burn of stubble on my neck when he nuzzles into me.

“Why did you leave?”

“Because you were going to push me off the couch,” I say, immediately and his eyes go dark and hungry.

“Then get closer to me,” he murmurs, and it rubs against my skin, a sweet caress.

“Can’t,” I whimper, and he huffs softly, and then he’s kissing me. And god. *God.*

I thought I remembered. I’d spent so many nights, hand between my thighs, remembering. So many second dates, comparing some sweet stranger to what I wasn’t allowed to have.

And I was wrong.

God I was wrong. Because this is *real*, all sweet sugar and tart mint and *Archer* and even my memories, as good as they were, pale in comparison.

To the flex of his fingers on my hips, digging in with this delicious pressure.

To the heavy weight of him, pressing me into the counter, his hand braced against the small of my back, keeping it from digging in.

To the sweeping pressure of his lips, rubbing against mine, until he nips at my lower lip, catches it between his own and *tugs* and I gasp.

And it’s all over. Everything.

Archer sweeps in, like he did when we were kids and I needed to be saved, like he did when we were teens and a boyfriend made me cry, like he’s done every fucking time in my life.

His hands come up and frame my face, angles me just the way he wants, and he drinks me down.

Fucking devours me, his lips a goddamn tsunami force above me, knocking me out to sea, drowning me, ripping me apart and then.

Oh god, and then.

His tongue, soft and gentle, stroking along like a whisper, like a promise, his thumbs smoothing over my cheekbones, sweeping down to press against my throat.

Tethering me as I moan, soft and hungry, into him, putting me back together as I shudder in his grasp.

Make a tiny noise in the back of my throat, and he growls, a low rumble that hits me like a fucking fist, and shifts, lifting me until I’m on the counter, my legs wrapped around him, and *fuck.*

Jesus.

Better. This is better. I nip at his lips and he groans, jerking away from me to trail kisses down my throat, a hot path that has my head falling back and a low keen working its way up my throat.

“Shh, sweetheart,” he murmurs against my skin, and I can hear the smile in his voice, can feel it pressing against my skin, “Don’t wake up Elijah.” Shit.

Eli.

I shove at him, hard and Archer laughs, a low rumble, before he kisses my throat again, scraping teeth against my skin, and sucking hard, until my hands are scrambling against him, holding him to me as I arch into the touch, and it’s not enough.

“Archer,” I grit out, and his head comes up.

His lips are bright red and wet, and I want them everywhere. I want everything.

Maybe. Maybe because of the alcohol, or maybe because tonight has felt like something stolen—a secret we’re still keeping.

But I reach for him, pull him to me instead of pushing him away. His breath shudders against my skin, and then he’s kissing me again and I’m wiggling closer, because *fuck* it’s been *four years*.

“Missed you,” he pants between kisses and I swallow down the sob that’s threatening.

More.

I need more.

“I *need more*.” I hiss, and his mouth drops, skating over my skin. Yanks my tank top down and his mouth covers me, sucks me deep. Twists around my nipple as his hands clench on my hips, yanking me forward and grinding against me and I can feel the scream, building and building, with every twist of his tongue around me and every hard draw on me and “*Archer*,” I groan.

His hand slaps over my lips and I bite down as he draws on my tit, hard, and something deep inside clenches and twists.

“Shh, baby,” he soothes, pulling back. “Shh.”

He tugs until I’m on the edge of the counter, and then drops to his knees.

And I almost fall off the damn counter because there is nothing in this world as unrelentingly erotic as Brandon Archer on his knees.

Then he shifts me, yanks my shorts to one side, and thank Christ that I wore shorts, and his lips whisper over me and I swallow my scream.

Let my head fall back as I fight to breathe. My hand is in his hair—when did *that* happen?—and his nose is nudging my clit and he whispers against me, something soft and secret and lost. I have a heartbeat to wonder what, before he licks, and my entire body lights up like a damn Christmas tree, tension and pleasure and *want* arcing through me.

I’m a wire, and he’s the current, and he’s playing me like a goddamn fiddle. I’m rocking into him, into the tiny whispers and nudging caress, the gentle strokes of his tongue as his big hands come up, holding me open, and rubbing, and I do make a noise then, a low moan that sounds like sex and he laughs, the bastard laughs, making a shushing noise against my wet cunt like it’s a game, and I snarl.

So fucking close, and he’s teasing.

I yank, *pull* at his hair until he obliges, rising to his feet, all grace and sex poured over muscles and wrapped up with a smile so fucking sinful it would make a nun fall.

It made me fall.

Head over heels, the first time it twisted into a wry grin.

I fall into it now, kiss him as his fingers slide into me and he groans at the feel. Hisses against my throat, “Tight, baby. God, you’re so fucking tight.”

I roll my hips, fucking myself slow on his fingers as I lick into his mouth and it’s different—he tastes like himself, like Archer, but also me, all sex and safety wrapped up in one, and his fingers are crooking, rubbing, his thumb pressing sweet slow circles that are driving me crazy, until— There.

One hand on my neck, sweet and soothing, his thumb rubbing under my ear as he kisses me and I scream, into his lips.

Come, shuddering around his fingers.

And he takes it.

Swallows down my scream like it’s nothing, his fingers slow and soothing in me, a gentle pet as I shudder and quake and he holds me through, coaxes me through.

I’m sweaty and sleepy when he pulls away and his lips brush my forehead before he picks me up.

Carries me back to the couch and tucks me against him, one arm a band around my waist, the other hand tucking my head to the crook of his shoulder where I’ve always fit.

“Go to sleep, Hazy-Eyes,” he whispers.

So I do.

Chapter 6

When I wake up, I'm alone on the couch.

And, "Fucking hell, I'm tired of this shit," I mutter, shifting on the couch and the too cold cushions.

The thing is it's not a surprise.

When I first moved in with Nora, I was a wreck. A fucking disaster walking, doing more damage than I did good.

But then, Nora did what she does and I looked around. Like actually looked around, and saw what was happening.

And it woke me up. Eli was easy. We got into a fight, I let him beat the hell outta me and I tugged him from his nightmares. Easy. A brother for life, almost faster than I could anticipate.

The thing about Eli was that he reminded me that I needed someone else. That I wasn't an island.

I take care of people—it's who I was. No real surprise that I went into the Corps and then later the force. It let me do the thing I did best--take care of people.

And usually it was easy. As easy as breathing. People want to be taken care of.

But Hazel.

Hazel was an uphill battle from day one.

The kid is like a ghost. A blonde, big eyed, vaguely violent ghost.

Everyone thought I was too fucked to pay attention to anything but my own damage but everyone was fucking idiotic.

She didn't buy that. I know because she watched me. She was almost fiercely protective of Eli, even if she was a year younger. She watches me with him, and I've seen the way she relaxes by slow degrees.

After Eli punches me and we both have a black eye and a fist full of busted knuckles, she actually smiles.

And holy fuck. I was lost, in that moment. Because when Hazel Campton smiles, which she never does, it's like a fucking revelation.

Sunshine and laughter and this intoxicating flash of fuck-the-world bite to those big baby blues.

I want to make her smile. Every day.

I want to chase that ever present sadness away until all I ever see in her is sunlight and danger.

And she? Wants absolutely nothing to do with me.

Nora and Eli bought my self-destructive shit. And it was real. I was spiraling hard. But they also bought her fake smile and quiet ok.

And that was bullshit.

I watched her, when I was with Eli. When she was doing homework and reading and sometimes when she thought she was alone.

I saw the way she held herself, too still and tight, like the wrong word would shatter her.

I saw the way she dug her nails into her palms, and held knives a little too long and sat in

the dim light of her room alone.

Nora and Eli didn't see it.

Whatever else she was, Hazel was very careful.

Which made this hard. I couldn't pick a fight with her to win her trust. I couldn't do the dishes and stay out of the liquor, or hold the door for a few teachers. This was Hazel.

It took me six months. Six months of sitting in near silence, bickering with Eli. Finding books for her and helping her clean after dinner. Handing her her lunch in silence as I herded her and Eli out the door. Putting up with ice cold feet shoved under my leg on the couch while she shouted abuse at the basketball game.

Six. Fucking. Months of showing up when she went quiet and moody, sitting near her without pushing past my initial, "you good?" And her standard, "fine." Six goddamn months.

Longest months of my life.

But some of the best, when I looked back. Hazel, when she gave someone her love and loyalty, did it completely and utterly.

Eli was easy. He's impossible to not love and so fucking broken by the accident that she fell into him without thought.

I earned it.

Made it different. Special. I wasn't her brother and I was ok with that.

I was ok with all of it until the night it changed. Six months and two weeks after I started the slow campaign to win Hazel over.

She broke.

Hard.

Came completely and utterly apart, so shattered that I couldn't see my girl, my lost Hazy girl with her broken heart.

It was her birthday. She hadn't told Nora, hadn't told anyone. Spent the week leading up to it quieter than normal, sinking deeper into herself.

Hazel and I had an agreement. She wouldn't tell Nora when I was spiraling if I didn't fight or drink.

I didn't tell Nora when she was lost in her own grief if she didn't cut herself.

It was unspoken but it worked and we kept each other--not healthy, but not toxic.

Sometimes I think that's all either of us could ask for. We were keeping each other's secrets, even when neither of us had any real clue what that meant.

That day, I found her in her room.

She was in her room, wearing an oversized t-shirt and scrunched up socks on her skinny ankles and blood trickled down the inside of her thighs.

She stared at me, all wide eyed fear and choking grief, and whispered one plea.

"Don't tell Nora."

"What the hell, Hazel," I whispered and she flinched. Stared at me with tears in her big blue eyes.

"He never missed my birthday."

And it slayed me. I hate seeing the people I love cry. So I pulled her into me, cradling her and she sobbed, these silent, heartbroken shaking things that left me so desperate to fix this, to fix her, that I'd have promised anything.

I'd have walked through fire, to stop her tears and put a smile on her face. And she didn't want that. She just wanted my silence.

Easy enough to give her.

Secrets. Those were the things that bound us, me and Hazel. Not the grief or the accident. It was our fucking secrets.

She wept in my arms until she fell asleep, and I tucked her in bed, stealing away with her knife and her tears soaking my shoulder.

I thought it would be what brought her to me. What finally made her trust me.

The next day, she looked at me over the breakfast table, and her eyes were as cold as the winter sky.

It's not surprising, to wake up alone. What surprised me was that she caved long enough to come back to the couch, to let me finger her in the kitchen.

Another secret in a long line of them, another retreat in an endless series of retreats.

Hazel Campton was the girl I could never quite shake, and not just because she's the one I've always cared about.

A low groan from the floor pulls my attention from my thoughts and to the sleeping giant slowly waking up. He groans again and shoves up off the ground, all long lanky limbs and shaggy hair flying a million directions.

"Dude, why the fuck'd you let me sleep on the floor?" he grits out, giving me a frown. I shrug. "You passed out, Eli. And I wasn't dragging your drunk ass to your room."

Because of course Eli had a room in Hazel's house. He was her brother, the one she loved with a wild kind of reckless, the one she turned to when shit got rough.

She liked me, even trusted me with her secrets and loved to get off against my fingers and lips, but I wasn't the one she turned to.

If it were anyone but Eli that she chose, I'd probably have shot them a long, fucking time. As it is, I swallow down the bitter pill and shift to stand. "Come on, brother. We've got to report in still."

"Breakfast first!" a sharp voice calls from the kitchen and Eli groans, rolling to his back, letting his head thump against the rug.

Hazel appears in the doorway, a mug of coffee roughly the size of her head already cupped between curved fingers. Her hair is a mess of curls pulled to the top of her head, and she's wearing one of Eli's old college t-shirts and a pair of yoga pants.

I swallow down my annoyance that she's wearing another man's clothes—he's her brother, our brother—and cock an eyebrow.

"Mama's?" I ask, watching her carefully.

Ah. There it is. Her expression goes flat and blank, the smile flickering for a heartbeat before she blinks, and it's back, bright blinding, with just enough sarcasm to make me grin.

"Fine," she says grumpily. "But you're buying and when she wants one of us to do the dishes, you two can flip for it."

She doesn't wait for us to argue or take her up on the offer. She spins on her heel and whistles for Smith, yelling over her shoulder as she hits the stairs that she's leaving in ten minutes.

For a long minute, Eli and I stare after her and then he slides a curious look at me. "Take it y'all sorted out your shit?" he says, too casual.

I give him a grumpy face. "Dude."

"She's avoided you for months and then you pass out on her couch after she decides to let us act like a family again. What the hell am I supposed to think?"

“You aren’t,” I say, flat. “You’re supposed to let me and Hazel work our shit out the way we always have, and back off in the meantime.”

Eli glares but he doesn’t say anything as I rub a hand through my hair. Sigh a little.

“Come on, Eli. Don’t analyze this shit. You know she runs hot and cold with me. So let’s just enjoy it until she decides it’s not working for her anymore, and pulls back. Ok?” I offer him a small smile, and because it’s Eli he falls for it. Nods along and stands, shoving his big fucking feet into shoes and petting Smith who wandered back downstairs without his mistress.

That’s an annoying kick in the gut. Even Hazel’s damn dog likes Eli more than me.

Then Hazel is jogging down the stairs, golden hair a trailing mess behind her, and I forget to care.

Eli doesn’t get to fuck her on the counter.

Gabe doesn’t get to keep her fucking secrets.

I’m the only one who she looks at like that. Considering and cautious and nervously hopeful.

And I’ll fucking take that. Just like all those damn years ago, when I was coaxing out her trust. I’ll take it now, until she finally realizes that it’s safe.

That I’m safe.

Chapter 7

I expect things to be awkward. Maybe because I ran last time, before they could get awkward, I expect some kind of—pressure?—from Archer.

I forget that this is *Archer* and he's made a fucking art form of waiting for me.

So there's a flicker in his eyes, a lazy heat that is intoxicating before it's banked and shut down, and he's offering me a quick grin and that brusque once over that is how Archer shows care—checking me to make I'm meeting his standards of okay.

He did that shit when we were in school, for me and Eli and he does it now.

Spilling into Mama's is like falling through time, the boys pushing and shoving and me a half-step ahead, rolling my eyes and flushing a little as the truckers eye us like we're overgrown children intruding on their peace and quiet.

Not a completely inaccurate depiction of the morning's happenings, but it's also Mama's, which means it's *ours* and while I might have hidden behind my brother and Archer in school, today I meet those grumpy stares with a cold look that sends interest my way and turns the less curious away.

Eli huffs a laugh as Archer grabs a couple menus—not that any of us need it—and slide us toward an empty booth. We're barely sitting, me scrunched against one side of the booth with Archer's big body boxing me in, Eli across from us, when Hailey Lewis hurries up.

Eli's big eyes get bigger, almost frantic, and Archer snickers at my side. "Hi! Oh my gosh, I didn't expect you today. Um, do you want your usual? I can tell Nora you're here, but coffee, first, right?"

"Hey, Hailey?" I say, sugar sweet, and her wide brown eyes cut to me.

Pretty sure she hadn't even seen me or Archer, she's so damn focused on Eli. She always has been—poor thing has been obsessed with Eli since she first laid eyes on him in high school.

"Hazel!" she almost squeaks, her eyes wide and a little bit unsettled. Like she doesn't want to see me at my brother's side. "I—um. When did you get back to Green County?"

I stare at her, long enough that she flushes and squirms in place, before I let a small smile curl at the edges of my lips. "Tell Nora we're here, would you?"

She flushes and nods once, hurrying away with her head down like a scolded puppy.

"That wasn't nice," Archer says through a smile. I lean against him briefly and shrug, letting him feel the motion roll through me. "Neither is her chasing poor Eli for the past damn decade."

Archer laughs, and I drink down the sound. I want to lick it from his mouth again.

Want to drag that arm on the table around me until I'm pushed up against his side, nestled against him like it's where I belong. It *is* where I belong.

"Well, well. Look what finally decided to roll into their diner," Nora says, her voice a familiar drawl. Her gray eyes are hard as they rake over us, but warm, too.

That's Mama Nora. Hard and warm and home. Archer flashes her a quick grin and Eli slides out of his side to pull her into a hug. She huffs out a breath, and pats his back affectionately as he lets her go, and she grins at us.

"What are y'all doin' here? I heard the mayor and Chief of Police were sitting down with the force, today?"

Archer shrugs. "They are. We'll be heading there after breakfast. But Hazel doesn't keep shit in her house."

I flush and dig an elbow into his side. “You’re a bastard,” I snap. Nora arches an eyebrow at me. “Hazel Beth,”

“I’m eating, Mama,” I protest before she can get started, because if there’s anything that bothers my adoptive mother, it’s her kids neglecting themselves. “Archer is just being an ass.”

She smiles, and nods. “Alright then. You three behave and I’ll get us some food. Eli,” she waits til he focuses on her and frowns, “Be nice to Hailey. I need her to wait tables and she can’t do that if she’s crying in the back.” Eli makes a face, but he nods.

Nora nods, once, a fiercely satisfied smile on her face. And I meet Archer’s eye, quietly questioning. And he nods and squeezes my shoulders.

Archer and I have always worked together, to keep Eli happy and safe. To keep Nora from worrying too much. It’s why we kept each other’s secrets, when Archer was drinking and fucking everything that moved in high school, and when he caught me cutting.

We were never the ones who mattered—Eli and Nora did. An unspoken agreement between us, to keep them happy and unaware of the worst of our dysfunction.

I wonder if that will always work.

If our secrets will shatter under the weight of our new—whatever the fuck it is, him getting me off, and me sleeping in his arms.

I shove that thought down and focus on my family as Nora returns with coffee and a big plate of bacon, Hailey trailing her with the rest of our food.

When the boys leave me, with a quick hug from Eli and a smirk from Archer, I wander to the local library.

Because the truth is, Archer and Eli slamming into my little house and even before that, Gabe at the coffee shop, shook me up. Reminded me that I’m not an island, I’m not a girl bound by deadline in a city where no one knows me or worries about me.

I’m *home*, and people care about me here. People that I care about, even if I’m not ready for all of their questions and concern.

I’ve been hiding for six months, and even longer than that, for four years, since I left Green County and refused to even consider the idea of coming home.

And I’m tired. I’m tired of being alone and having only my dog and my echoing thoughts to keep me company. I’m tired of all the fucking regrets that keep me locked up in my head and away from the people I love.

The people who love me.

Archer.

Shit there is still so much fucking baggage there. Even more, after the sexcapades last night.

I didn’t realize how much I’d missed him though.

Eli came to visit me, twice a year, like clockwork. Nora called once a week, a steady tie to home. Even in the city, lost in my own crazy chase to be something bigger than Green County could offer, they kept me tied to home. Kept me from forgetting that I had something there, waiting for me. People who loved me no matter how big a story I broke or how far back in the paper my byline was.

But it wasn’t the same. Archer and I were different. He was my secret keeper, the one who saw past my shit and stuck around anyway.

And until I was curled up on the back porch with him laughing and teasing, I hadn’t realized how much I missed him.

I still miss him. I miss home. Because I've been back for six months but I've kept myself apart. Hiding from everything that happened in Boston and from everything I left in the first place.

I'm tired of hiding.

So I show up at the library and if Robby seems surprised to see me in his dusty, ridiculously organized little house of knowledge, he doesn't comment. He just offers me an arched eyebrow and a grunt of acknowledgement as I settle myself at the long, uncomfortable research table and get to work.

Every city has a story that they tell the rest of the world. Ours is perfection and the Airplane Orphans, the Honey Bee Fest and family values. The Piedmont resort and an excellent school district. The base and low crime rates.

But every city has a secret too. Ours? Are just as dark as our story is pretty.

I hesitate. Page through my notes.

The problem was it was too big.

Green County looked so perfect and pretty but you scrape away the surface and there was so much shit.

I can't even wrap my head around all of it. This is why it's been six months and I'm still sitting on my fucking hands.

"I heard," a cheerful, crowing voice says, jerking me out of my thoughts until I look up at him. Gabriel sits across from me and I give Robby a disgruntled look. Gabe snaps his fingers and I sigh. "I heard the Airplane Orphans were wandering the city. And I said, well that just can't be true. If that were true, my best friend wouldn't still be avoiding me."

Hurt flickers in his honey gold eyes for a heartbeat and then he adds, too casual, "I would not be getting phone calls from Michael and John asking when we're getting together with you because I know damn well you loathe those two knuckle heads."

I flinch. Because it's true. Shoving them off on Gabe had been dirty.

"I'm sorry."

Gabe is silent, watching me as I squirm, and he finally says, softly, "I am, too." My gaze flips up to him, anxious and demanding and he shrugs. Smiles. "You made it pretty clear what we are, and what we aren't, Hazy. I just need to accept it."

There's a sad smile playing across his lips and he looks. So sad. So fucking lonely.

"Brutal Honest?" I say, softly, and Gabriel goes still.

It's a game. One that we started playing with Eli and Archer when we were kids, and stupid and broken. When I was still raw from the loss of my father and the three of us were awkward and trying to find our way with each other. It was like truth or dare, but without the dare.

It was stripping away all the layers of bullshit until there's nothing left but honesty that can hurt, but that can also bind you up. Push you together.

It can fix all the wrong things, if you let it.

Eli and I used to play it, sitting in the dark corners of Nora's living room while she fought with Archer, learning too much too quickly.

It's easy to confess all the ugly things, in the dark, when someone else is confessing their own.

Sometime, over the years, Gabe and Archer got in on it. They started playing the game with us. It became less a game and more of a confession.

Things said under Brutal Honest were sacred.

They weren't things that could be used to hurt, later. They were, sometimes, a subtle cry for help.

Gabriel watches me, his eyes narrowed in concern as I fidget. Because I have no idea where to start. I've been hiding from Gabriel for four years. Keeping secrets from him. Where do I start being honest?

"I slept with Archer."

Gabe inhales, so sharply I think he's going to choke, and his eyes go almost comically wide.

"What the actual fuck, Hazel!" he hisses, leaning across the table. Behind him, Robby's eyebrows go up, a little bit disapproving and I force a smile as I grit out, "Calm down, dumbass.

And I'll explain it to you."

Gabe's eyes narrow, and he leans back. Grabs my files and starts stacking them.

"What the hell are you doing?" I ask, almost amused.

"We're leaving," he says, shuffling the papers together. "Are we?"

He goes still, his leaning into my space again and says, clearly, "You just told me you slept with Brandon fucking Archer. You don't get to drop that kind of shit on me and then carry on with research like it's a normal day. You're going to lunch with me, we're having a really nice bottle of wine and you're going to tell me what the hell changed in four years that you finally let *that* happen."

I consider protesting. There are more important things to focus on than my lack of love life, or a night of really bad decisions.

But.

I miss home.

And Gabriel is part of that.

So I nod and grab my stuff, tucking it into my bag. Then Gabriel hooks an arm around my shoulder and pulls me out of the library.

We end up at the Salty's, a local pub that has the best fucking pie in town. Which is why we end up here. Gabriel eats desserts when he's stressed, and I know he's doing his best to keep that shit wrapped up where I can't see, and I know that we're different.

We aren't the same people anymore.

That Gabriel is sitting almost still and silent across from me, barely fidgeting as he watches the waitress drop a couple menus on the table with two cups of water before she retreats and his golden eyes swing to me, searching.

That tells me more than anything that we've changed.

"Want to tell me all the dirty details, Hazy?" *No.*

"Do you remember the night before I left? The party?"

Gabriel's eyes go wide, almost impossibly wide, and he comes down hard on the front legs of his chair. All of the amusement is gone, and he's furious—angry energy has filled his face, replaced the smile that was beginning to form.

"Are you fucking serious, Hazel? It's been *that long*?"

I shrug my shoulders.

No.

It's been longer than that. I've never told Gabriel that I love Archer. That I've always loved

him.

Maybe because I spent so fucking long ignoring it myself. It was easier to ignore than to accept the truth—that I wanted something I couldn't have. Some truths are too brutal, even for me.

“Tell me,” Gabriel snaps, and I sigh. Because I owe him this.

Nora doesn't take many opportunities to spoil us. To celebrate the children she always says she was blessed to have. Anyone else would have said getting three broken, grief-riddled kids in their early teens was a nightmare. But Nora. She reveled in it. Didn't expect more than we could give.

She never pushed me to celebrate my birthday, especially after Archer told her how much I hated it.

But every once in a while, she wanted to celebrate.

Me graduating college, that was one of those moments.

Green County loved these things. When she threw open Mama's and we drank and laughed and danced. When Eli spun me like a top and Archer flirted and watched us with that steady green gaze and the County could tuck us in the neat little box they shoved us in.

“You're thinking too much,” Gabriel says, coming up next to me. His arm slips around my waist, his head dropping to my shoulder and I smile as I lean mine against him.

“You always think I'm thinking too hard.”

“You usually are,” he says, an accurate, if annoying, assessment.

I don't argue with that. “How is—”

The question breaks off half-formed. I can see his brother now, watching Remi, his eyes bright.

He seems sad, almost broken, and with Colt missing, it hurts to see.

I want them to be happy together because I'm so tired of no one being happy.

Eli is single. Again.

Archer is flirting with Laura, another girl who will be the latest in a long line of girls who don't last, and who leave a little damaged. But not as damaged as Archer. And I don't give a fuck if they are damaged. I care about him.

And there's me.

So many secrets.

So many things that I haven't told him, or Gabe. Or Eli.

When did I start keeping secrets? When did that become easier for me than telling them the truth?

“Hey, Hazy,” Gabe says, his voice sticky sweet. “You're drifting, baby girl.”

I blink, and twist, looking at him.

“I love you, Gabe,” I whisper, hugging him tight, and he makes a startled noise. Then I pull away from him, and Archer is there, before Gabe can ask me anything. Can press for details and make me spill the secrets that are choking me.

“Dance with me, Hazel,” he says, and I nod, because I've never been able to tell him no.

I certainly won't tell him no tonight.

So he pulls me close as the music dips into something slow, and the city watches as we dance. Eli is dancing with Nora, and she's laughing and it settles some of the fear twisting in my gut.

“Do you ever wish it didn’t have to change?” I ask, and Archer frowns. “This. Us. I’m the last one, and I’m done. I’m out of school. Things—they’ll change now. They won’t be able to stay the same.”

Archer’s eyebrows hitch up, surprise coloring his expression for a moment. “Do you think it’ll change that much? I mean, you’ll move out to your farmhouse, but. We’re still here.

We’ll still be family.”

I nod, leaning into his shoulder. Ignoring the unspoken truth that’s rattled around my head for almost five years.

We haven’t been family in years. Since he left us for the Marines.

And I understood. I did. Better than Eli or Nora, I got why he had to leave, if only for a little while.

Doesn’t mean I liked it.

“Do you think we did okay?” I ask, looking at where Eli and Mama Nora are dancing. Sometimes, I think we did.

Sometimes I think Eli is too broken. That whatever good we did with Nora will be undone when we leave.

“We did,” Archer says, and I crane my head back, because I never hear pride and happiness in his voice, but I do now.

Here’s the secret. Archer and I were always working together. To protect Eli and Nora. She thought she was taking care of us. And she was, in a way.

But we’ve always been taking care of each other, and in this, Archer and I were a team.

We could be damaged—fuck we were. But it was okay.

Because they weren’t.

Which means we can go now. I can go. Because they’re okay. They’re happy.

“Are you happy?” I ask him, and he goes very still.

Stupid. Careless. He’s going to figure it out.

“Hazel,” he murmurs, soft and careful.

“I just. You seem happier, since you came home.” I force a smile, “but we haven’t talked about it.”

We haven’t talked about him joining the force, or working with Eli up the ranks.

“Yeah, sweetheart. I’m happy.”

I grin and I can see the question in his eyes, but I duck back against his chest, and he sighs. Lets me hide there as we finish the dance. It surprises me. Archer doesn’t let me hide from him often.

But I take the reprieve, and when the song is over, Gabriel pulls me away and then it’s Eli’s turn, and the moment is gone. But it was enough.

I’m only a little surprised when Archer taps on my door that night. I’m still at Nora’s, and Eli and Archer crashed here, a kind of last hurrah before I leave for my farmhouse.

Eli passed out almost before we got home, drunk and sweet and cuddly. Nora kissed me and Archer before she retreated, and I couldn’t.

I couldn’t sit there, in our childhood home, with his big green eyes too curious in the dark.

I couldn’t keep this from him if he stared at me like he could read my soul.

But now. He’s here. Nudging into my space and pulling the door closed behind him, and I can’t speak because my mouth is so damn dry.

Nerves make my hands shake, so I clench them tight and turn, "What's up, Archer?" I crawl back onto my bed, and when I face him again, his gaze is lazy and warm, and it chases a shiver down my spine.

I know that look.

I've seen it on his face, a thousand times, directed at cheerleaders and teachers and random girls we only saw leaving his apartment before she left our life for good.

It's the look he gives a woman he wants.

Archer has never looked at me like that. I'd begun to think he never would.

"You're hiding from me," he says, stretching out on my bed like it's normal. It is normal.

"I'm sleeping," I say, intentionally oblivious.

Archer gives me that disbelieving stare he does so well.

And maybe it's the shots we did at Mama's. Maybe it's that tonight feels like a gift and that's too precious to waste.

Maybe it's because it won't matter. After all this time, it won't matter.

"Do you really want to know?" I ask, and he nods.

So I lean forward, faster than he can counter, my breath playing over his lips. I see his eyes go wide.

So green and beautiful and wide.

And then I kiss him.

Chapter 8

Eli is quiet as we ride across town to work, and I can feel the shift in both of us, as we tuck away everything that's been happening over the past few hours. Everything that has to do with Hazel and focus on what makes us work so well.

On the job.

"Do you know what it's about?" I ask, pulling into a spot in front of the courthouse.

It's this big red brick thing that looks like a relic.

A well preserved, very pretty relic, but still—throwback to an era where people gave a fuck what their city looked like, what their municipal buildings looked like.

Hell, we have fire stations that look like fire stations, instead of big blocky buildings that look like overgrown garages. Green County, I'm convinced, is a weird ass little place.

But it's home.

So I ignore its eccentricities. It's been—mostly—kind enough to do the same.

"No. Chief says the Mayor is catching some heat for the girls on Victory." I shoot a quick look at Eli who shrugs.

The prostitutes who work the stretch of road just outside the Sanders Army base aren't a new thing. Every few years, the good people of Green County get all hot and bothered that we have these heathens in our midst and there's a lot of nothing done. We patrol. Write some citations. Toss a few in jail for a couple days.

Not like it fucking matters. The girls are bailed out and back on the streets before we can nail down the bastard who's actually running the shitshow.

But. You know. It makes the good people of the city think we're doing something, makes them sleep better at night thinking that we don't have the same problem as other places.

I'm pretty sure that the good people of Green County are fucking idiots, but.

They're *my* idiots, so it's okay.

Or something like that.

"So you wanna talk about last night?" Eli asks, and I give him a quick look as I check my service piece at the metal detectors. Casey flashes me a quick inviting grin, which I ignore.

The kid has been legal for like, five minutes. I know she's got some puppy love thing, but I'm not touching that shit with a ten-foot pole.

It'd be like sleeping with my fucking sister.

Been there. Want to do that. Again.

I shove the thought down, and give Eli a bland look. "Not really."

The glare I get from him is truly impressive, so I arch an eyebrow and say instead,

"Why don't you tell me what the actual fuck is going on between you and Delvin."

That snaps his spine straight and he snarls at me. Turns away and is almost rude to Casey as he goes through the process of getting into City Hall.

He's a tight, angry giant at my side as we stalk through the building, which matches my own mood so I don't do a damn thing to diffuse him.

We're headed into a meeting that's going to piss me off, and I'm already riding a thin line of want and rage.

As bad ideas go, this one is way the fuck up there.

"Eli," I say, snagging his elbow on the stairs. He jerks away from me and huffs angrily.

Letting me know he's pissed. That I stepped over a line.

Which, you know, I already knew. I know the kid better than I know myself, sure as fuck better than he knows himself. I knew pushing the Gabriel issue would piss him off. It's why I've avoided it for so long.

"Sorry," I offer simply.

He eyes me for a minute and then, "I'm not ready to talk about it." Which of course, kicks my curiosity and concern into overdrive.

Eli is a pretty open book. There's very little he doesn't share with me.

I hesitate, and then, "You good?"

He flashes a smirk, one that isn't as real as I want, but it'll do the trick for the moment.

"Golden, bro. Come on. We're late."

I nod, some of the tension melting away.

It's not a lot. It doesn't push away all the nerves and concern—until I know what the hell is happening with my brother and the blond baker, I don't think anything will. But it's enough because Eli won't ever lie to me. Not when I ask him outright like that. And answers will have to wait until later.

I shove all my shit aside and rap on the door to the Chief's office.

"Come in," a deep voice barks and I take a deep breath. Steadying myself. Catch Eli's concern before I shove the door open and step inside.

"Sir," I say, respectful.

Peter Billings nods at me, and motions to the seat. The Mayor, a lithe redheaded woman named Abbi Emery, watches as we take our seats.

Here's the thing. Green County is a big place. We sprawl over four different townships, almost a hundred-thousand people all told, and the majority of us were here. In the county seat.

We have sheriff departments for the outlying townships, these tiny little hamlets that are barely a blink. But most of the GCPD is focused here.

And we have a very small department of detectives. Eli and I are a third of it. And we're good, very good, at our job. We enjoy it, or enjoy making the County safer. Whatever. Billings trusts us and Emery trusts him.

She doesn't *like* me at all. Maybe because I fucked her a few years ago, when she was a hot shot ADA, working too close the case that would eventually win her the Mayor's office.

At the time, I thought it was fun. No strings. Good release after another shitty day in court. Looking back, though.

Abbi Emery didn't believe in no strings. She never had. She wanted something.

She wanted Brandon Archer in her bed and on her arm.

And that? Yeah. That didn't sit with me. I wasn't arm candy. I wasn't here to make a pretty, ambitious, bitch happy.

Eli said that all the shit with Abbi was my own damn fault because I can't keep my dick in my pants.

He's probably right.

But. You know. Sex.

"We'd like you to look into this," Billings says, sliding a file across his desk. I let Eli pick it up, and watch him skim it. His face tightens.

Eli hates when we investigate the prostitutes. He says it's wrong to target victims and paint them as criminals. Peter says it's hard to call them victims when they're breaking the law.

And I tend to agree with Eli. But. We do our job.

“Sir, we do this every year. Nothing ever comes of it.” Eli says stiffly. “Why are we wasting our time?”

“Because your Mayor told you to,” Abbi says, her voice silky. Shit.

“No offense, Abbi, but we don’t take our orders from you,” I say, leaning back and linking my hands behind my head.

“I don’t want you to just drag in the working girls,” Billings says, cutting in before Abbi can lose her shit completely. “I want you to turn one.” I glance at Eli quickly and see the same curiosity in his eyes.

Because this is new.

“You want us to make a working girl an informant?” I say, carefully. “Chief, the girls—that’s dangerous as fuck.”

He nods at the file. “We had three girls killed in the past year, Archer. We can’t just ignore the problem because it’s dangerous. I want you to bring in a girl who can help us. As high in the trade as we can get to work with us. The new girls aren’t gonna do shit—all they can tell us is who their madam is.”

I arch an eyebrow. “How high are you hunting, Chief?”

He flashes me a smirk, all wolfish intensity. “The top of the food chain, Archer. The fucking top.”

I stare at him for a long moment and then nod. “Okay. But the girl gets clear. We aren’t trying to tie these kids up for doing what they have to do to survive.”

“They’re breaking the law,” Abbi drawls, and I frown over at her. She’s letting Chief lead this little dog and pony show so maybe she isn’t a complete fucking idiot, but I can see her struggling with it. With letting me and Eli run this.

“Why us?” I ask, abruptly.

They both freeze and Eli tenses at my side, sliding a glance at me.

He wants this. My brother has always felt for the girls who work Victory, who fuck their way through the soldiers to keep ahead of their bills or their addictions.

I feel for them, but it’s in a *save the victims* distant sorta way.

Eli *cares*.

He wants this case.

And I want to know why the fuck we got tapped for it.

“Because it’s a hard case and you’re the best to clear it. And because Beasley already has contacts there.”

I slide a quick searching look at Eli, see the fury and the red coloring his cheeks and I nod. Shove to my feet. Because enough of this shit.

“If you don’t mind then, sir, we’ll get to work.”

Billings nods, and Abbi makes a noise, like she wants to argue, wants to hold us up and force more of her damn agenda down our throats, but I don’t give a fuck what the stupid little mayor wants.

I don’t answer to her.

God, I should never have fucked her.

I nod at my brother, and he proceeds me out of the office. Let’s me take the rear until we’re downstairs and collecting our service weapons from Casey and I give the poor kid a quick, fake smile before I’m pushing Eli out the door.

I can still fucking feel Chief’s eyes. Can feel the small, knowing smirk on Abbi’s fucking face, while she watches us and those words drop like tiny explosives in the office.

Beasley already has contacts there.

I wait. Until we're halfway back to the station, the purr of my car, a soft rumble beneath us, and then. When my heartbeat is settling and I don't feel this ridiculous need to *protect*, I let out my breath and say, "Want to explain what the actual fuck just happened, Elijah?"

Chapter 9

Gabriel is still staring at me like I've grown a third head, after the waitress clears our plates and retreats, leaving us in a kind of awkward silence over tea that isn't cold anymore.

"Say something." I say, softly.

"What do I say, Hazy? I thought we trusted each other and I was wrong. Not a lot to say to that, is there." His voice is something I don't hear often, and it makes me shiver, and lean back. Away from him.

Bitter. Angry. A little bit self-loathing.

That last bit doesn't make any fucking sense, and I lean forward, smack Gabe lightly on the arm. "What the hell, Gabe?" I say, sharply.

"Are you going to leave again?" he asks, ignoring my not-so-subtle demand for more information. I grit my teeth and his honey-gold gaze finds mine.

Begging.

I sigh. "I'm not going to leave again. I've done all my leaving.

His lips twist, and he looks away before I can call him on the grief I see pooling in those strange and distinct eyes of his. "I get tired, of people leaving me."

Ah.

So this isn't about me. At least, not all of it. I'd venture a guess and say not even most of it. Most of it is about the brother who left him. The family who left him.

Gabriel Delvin, the sweet, snarky bastard who always acts like he doesn't care, and who cares too much. "I'm not Aidan," I say, softly.

His lips twitch in a grimace. "Aidan has his reasons. I know what the hell those reasons *are*. With you, I don't even get a phone call telling me you're leaving. I get a lame- ass excuse four years after the fucking fact."

"Four years ago, if I had told you that I was in love with Archer, you would have—"

"Supported you," Gabe says, low and furious. "Because I was your best friend, and that's what I've always done. Even when you're making stupid fucking decisions."

I look away. "He was my *brother*, Gabe."

He scoffs. "Archer is a lot of things, but your brother has never been one of them." I hesitate, looking at him. Really looking, my gaze raking over him and I sigh.

"Do you still love him?" he asks, suddenly, and my gaze darts up, wide and a little bit afraid. And he's watching, too close for me to play it off. A tiny smile plays on his lips and he leans back in his chair. Shakes his head, and laughs. "I thought—well. Doesn't matter does it."

"Don't," I say, weakly.

"Don't what? Don't give a fuck that even now you're lying to me, and that I can't do a damn thing about it? Or. I know. How about the fact that I've waited six fucking *months* for you to give a shit about me. To remember that I'm down the street. But you haven't. You're *home* but you're still in Boston, doing whatever the fuck was so damn important all these years."

"It wasn't like that," I say, weakly.

"You came home and you fucked up everything. Eli—"

He cuts off, as abruptly as if I had ripped out his voice box, and I frown.

Shift in my seat. Study him, study the flush that's in his cheeks. No. *Not fucking possible*.

"What about Eli?" I ask, my voice low and sharp.

“Nothing,” Gabriel says, tossing a handful of twenties on the table and leaving.

The bastard just jumps up and fucking walks out, like I’m not sitting here, like we aren’t having a fucking conversation.

Nothing in Green County changes. Not really.

I chase after him like he’s stolen my fucking bio homework and run off. Again.

Except now, the bio homework has something to do with my brother and there’s no way this tricky bastard is gonna get away from without answers first.

I grab his arm and jerk him around, grateful, not for the first time, that Gabe only has a couple inches on my five-four. It makes it an almost even playing field.

“What the actual fuck is happening between you and my brother, Gabriel Delvin?” I snarl and he goes still.

Shrugs, a tiny almost helpless thing and that kills me.

Fucking *kills* me because it’s not Gabriel.

My Gabriel has never been helpless. He doesn’t know *how* to be helpless. Seeing that in his eyes.

It hurts.

“Nothing, Hazy. Nothing is happening. Not anymore,” he says, and it’s bitter. Which tells me. Something. Once. Holy shit.

“Holy *shit*, Gabriel, my *brother*?” I snarl.

“You don’t get to be pissed, Hazel. You don’t get to be angry that Eli and I did whatever it took to survive. You *left* me, you bitch. And you never gave a fuck. So yeah. I used him. I said fuck dignity and I used him to find out whatever I could about you and how you were doing, and I refuse to apologize for that.”

“And that required you to fuck him?” I spit. Gabriel flinches, and he falls back a step.

How the hell did we end up fighting? How the hell did we go from happy and finally finding a place together again, to *this*.

Oh. Right. He took all of Eli’s damage and fucked him. He *used* my brother.

“You know,” I whisper. “All of his shit, all of the girls—you know what that’s done to him. And you used him anyway, because you *missed* me? What the actual fuck, Gabriel.”

He stares at me, and his face is blank. So damn blank. But sad, too. I can see that like a fucking beacon, in his eyes.

“Are we done? Are you done?” he asks, shaking himself and I let go. Because his voice is cutting, mocking, angry.

Gabriel has never used that tone with me. He used it, so often, when we were growing up, slapping the idiots at school into place, jocks who thought I was easy and teachers who just annoyed him. Even Archer, when he was being a dick, which, let’s be fair, was more often than he wasn’t.

But Gabriel never spoke to me like that. I was his favorite, and that showed in every fucking word and smile and joke.

He unwraps a sucker, one of the handful he’s always carrying. Cocks an eyebrow and gives me a testy smirk. “He’s a sweet puppy, Hazel. You left him all alone here and then you want to give me shit, because I took the puppy home. Seems a bit hypocritical, even for you.”

“Fuck you, Gabriel,” I snap, and he smiles, wide and wolfish.

I bolt, before he can say it.

Before he can turn using my *brother* into a joke. I don’t think I’d be able to forgive him, if he did.

So I run, away from him, and down the tree-lined street, toward a park where I can hear kids playing, and mothers gossiping and I can get lost.

The problem is, memories. They slam into me as I slow, stepping into the playground and letting my breath out, finally. Letting my tension unravel in the quiet calm here. For a long time, I sit on the bench and, silently and watch the playground.

How many times had Archer brought me and Eli here, that first year? And then, as the years turned and we got too old to care about swings, he'd bring us here and we'd watch him hook up with girls, flirting and teasing.

Eli used to meet Amy here.

Gabriel and I would get high here, after Archer joined the Marines, and I stopped giving a fuck what people thought about me.

I wonder if Archer realizes how much I spiraled, when he left to serve and protect.

Even though I understood it. The reasons behind it. Better than Nora and Eli, I understood—I still hated it.

I shouldn't have come to the fucking park. There's too much open space, too many memories and regrets.

That's fucking Green County, though. All the memories and regrets.

The kids on the park are giggling and laughing, two little girls being watched and teased by a dark-haired, little boy, but it's sweet. The boy is careful, even as he heckles and pushes the girls, coaxing and gently bullying them until they're at the top of the highest slide.

The youngest slides down with no hesitation, all shrieks and skirts and laughter.

So carefree and innocent it actually hurts, even as it pulls a smile from me.

But the other two.

The little blond girl is watching the slide with these big, wary eyes, like it's a trap she refuses to trust, and the boy is crouched at her side, talking to her patiently. Coaxing but not pushing.

Waiting.

The littlest girl scrambles back to the top, and slides down three times, while they perch there, until the girl finally, *finally* nods, and slides down, her eyes squeezed shut and her voice twisted up in a shriek.

When she lands at the bottom, she's up and dancing, her entire body an exclamation point of excitement as the boy at the top shouts and screams encouragement.

Fucking Green County. It never changes. It's always going to be sugar sweet and childhood and Eli and Archer. Even now—alone and furious—I'm shoved into my memories of them. Of how Archer would coax and wait, so damn patient, for me to come to him.

"Hazel?"

I stiffen. Let a smile twist my lips up, and it looks real, even if it feels fake as fuck. Turn to face the owner of that low gruff voice.

I don't need to see him to know that it's Michael. Don't need to look to know that John is only two steps behind him.

Here's what I know about the twins: they're close. Almost too close, even for a place as dysfunctional and backwards as Green Co. can be. I've known them most of my life, since I was thirteen and we were in high school together.

And I think I've seen them separated twice.

Once was when Michael got himself arrested for beating the shit out of a football player

from the next county over.

And that brings me to my second point: they're volatile.

Michael is all cold ice, and careful judgment. He's the one who will watch with sharp black eyes, waiting for you to fuck yourself up just enough that he can destroy you, all without ever lifting a finger.

John, on the other hand.

He was all brute strength and quick anger. He was action and force, where Michael would wait. John was impatient. He didn't care that waiting meant you'd be even more screwed in the end. He wanted quick and dirty and bloody, and I'd seen the ugly bruises on the kids he beat the hell out of, the men he tore to pieces, often enough that being here, without my brother and Archer, alone in public with the twins—well, I'm a sane girl after all.

But there's something about this that bothers me, and that is the third thing I know about them.

"Where is Hanna?" I ask, softly.

Because if I have rarely seen the twins without the other, I've almost never seen them without their sister, eight months younger, a girl as delicate and lovely as they were cruel and violent.

I liked Hanna even if I did think the too close relationship and the way Michael and John watched her bordered on a creepy that made my stomach turn when I thought too much about it.

"She wasn't feeling well, so she stayed home," Michael says smoothly, a hand touching John's elbow. "But she'd love to see you. You should come by, in a few days."

I study him, and everything in me, everything that makes me a damn good journalist and reporter, no matter what the hell happened in Boston that says otherwise—it's screaming now.

It's telling me that something is very wrong about all of this, and I take a deep breath to force myself to stay still. To not fall back a step, or worse, to bolt away and find my brothers.

Why is it that even now, four years after leaving, I still want Archer and Eli, almost instinctively, when I'm feeling threatened?

Above us the big clock strikes the hour, and John makes a low impatient noise in his throat.

"My brother is impatient, Hazel. We have an appointment. But. You will come and see us."

It's phrased as a statement, not a question. Not something I can ignore, if I don't want to see them.

It's a fucking demand.

But I nod, and I smile, and John falls back a step or two, almost vibrating in his impatience. Michael flicks his twin a cold stare and the other man—younger by twenty minutes, if gossip can be believed—goes still and silent, a frown still etched deep on his face.

"I apologize, Hazel," Michael says, his voice a low hum of noise and I shrug. "John doesn't have the best manners in the city."

I smirk, a tiny thing, "Do you *know* my brother?" I ask, a gentle tease working up, even with my unease.

Michael smiles at that, and then he takes a step away. "It was truly good to see you, Hazel Beth. I'm glad you've come home."

And then he nods at John who flashes me a blank stare before they're walking away, the children and the park ignored, Michael's long black coat flapping like a carrion bird at his ankles.

I watch them walk away, and feel him moving up behind me. He'd been there the whole time.

Gabe would never leave me alone with Michael and John. He leans his head on my shoulder, and that quickly, the tension between us slips away. “Do you think they’ll ever not be creepy?” Gabriel asks, and I shrug.

“Probably not. I mean, they have such a fantastic streak going, why the fuck would they want to end that now?” I ask, and sit next to him.

Gabriel laughs, a low noise that rumbles against my skin and settles me. *Home.*

That’s what this has been about. From the dinner last night, to Mama’s this morning and the boys and Gabe, fuck even the damn park.

I’ve been home for six. Fucking. Months. And it’s the first time I’ve acted like it means something other than just my address changing.

It’s the first time I’ve let myself *be* home.

“I’m sorry, Hazy. I should have told you.”

I slide a glance at him, weighing the words. And then, softly, “You don’t have to apologize to me, Gabriel. He’s an adult and he knows what he’s doing.” I lift a hand as his smirk turns dirty, and his mouth opens and add quickly, “If you make a joke about my brother being good in bed, I swear to god, I’ll break my hand on your fucking face.”

Gabe laughs at that, and slings an arm around my shoulders. We walk back to my car in silence and then, “What did Creeper and McCreeperson want, Hazel?”

“To catch up. You know they were always fascinated with me and the boys in school.”

He makes a noncommittal noise, and I shrug. Slip out of his arms and open the car door. I hesitate and he stares at me. Patient. Waiting.

“No more secrets, okay?”

He nods once and I add, “If you hurt him, Gabriel—”

“I’m not going to hurt him. I swear, Hazy. If anyone ends up hurt in this equation, it’s not gonna be gigantor.”

I nod and we slide into the car as I mull it over, but I don’t press. If. When. Gabe is ready. When he is, he’ll tell me what the fuck is happening and how he managed to go and fall in love with my brother.

Chapter 10

Eli and I don't pretend we're functional. It's something that, once we realized we needed to quit pretending, worked really well for us.

The thing is, everyone is dysfunctional to some degree. And our dysfunction, well—it keeps us whole, keeps us sharp, keeps us from spiraling into shit that neither of us really wants.

Damaged kids grown up into broken adults, and I'm a prime fucking example of that shit.

Good example of our dysfunction: We live together.

It's not as bad as it could be. I mean, it's not like *we* own a house. I do.

A brick and stone thing that I built on the property that I inherited when Dad died.

Kinda a bloody legacy, especially when you consider the money I made while at war built the fucking house.

I'm getting off track again.

Eli and I share the house. He had a place that was just for him and Amy, but it went up in the same apartment fire that snatched her away from Eli and none of us are gonna bring that shit up. He's done well, adjusting to her being gone, and the other girls who followed, over the years. Doesn't mean I'm gonna wave that shit in his face and hope he doesn't have a break down.

Anyway.

I let him move in with me, because that's what you do for family. You help them when shit isn't working out the way they want it too.

That's how I ended up with a spare bedroom turning into Eli's bedroom, and a roommate who eats too many salads and forgets to restock the fridge with beer.

Annoying little shit.

So when we leave the Chief and the Mayor, we head for our place without talking about it. Because we don't have to actually talk about this shit. After a lifetime of each other, we both know what the other wants.

And after a night on Hazel's couch and a morning at Mama's, we both want showers and clean fucking clothes.

Enough that I don't push my brother as we drive across town, as we pour out of the Roadrunner and stumble to the house.

There will be time, after I've showered and changed, to deal with my brother and whatever the fuck is happening that got us a case turning a fucking prostitute into an informant.

Because, yeah. I'm still hung up on why the fuck the mayor thinks Elijah would be any good at that.

As I strip, I catch the faintest hint of strawberry and vanilla and rain.

And just like that, I'm hard. Fuck.

Hazel. Eli and Nora are gonna fucking kill me. And I can't bring myself to give a damn. Because I've waited four fucking years to have her again. To have her hands in my hair, demanding and fierce.

Hazel wasn't soft. Everyone saw her, saw her blonde hair and big blue eyes, that innocent-as-fuck little girl smirk, and they saw sugar-sweet-needs-to-be-protected.

They didn't see my Hazel. A girl fierce enough that she so often slapped me down to size. Fucking *me*.

I grin. All sass and bite, until I got her legs open and slid my fingers in that sweet wet heat.

Then she was putty. Sweet, moaning putty, and god, I wanted her again.

There's a long list of reasons why fucking Hazel Beth Campton is a bad idea. Her brother and mine will likely kill me for it. Not to mention our foster mother. There's her almost disturbing tenacity when it comes to a story, to what she wants—fucking a journalist who has been digging around the County isn't the best idea for a rising detective.

She thinks I don't know about that—she's kept it under wraps, as much as she could.

But this is fucking Green County and nothing here stays buried forever.

Maybe that's her whole angle.

But the real reason—the one thing that keeps tripping me up, is that she's my best friend. My secret keeper and confidant, the girl who helped me keep my family safe, who always had my back when shit got hard.

And it did. More than any of us deserved.

As sweet as her pussy was, as much as I wanted her again, wanted her naked and panting under me—was it fair to her? Was good sex—okay, fantastic fucking sex—worth the risk of fucking up one of the best things that had ever happened to me?

Yes.

There was that thought. The one that said—this was *Hazel*. She wasn't some girl I'd fuck in the back room of the bar before I went home and forgot her, to smile politely when I wrote her a ticket two months later.

It was *Hazel*. Everything would be easier and harder and *more*. How the fuck could it be anything but?

And god. The thought of getting her again. Naked and panting, her lips around my dick.

I groan, and reach for my dick. I can still taste her. I can feel her tight cunt rippling around my fingers and I want that around my dick, want her pretty groans filling up the room as I fill up her body.

I can see her again. Pale skin gilded silver by moonlight, blue eyes shining, all the blonde hair a tangled mess from my hands wrapping up in it.

The smooth arch of her throat as I fucked her, and the wrecked pleasure on her face as she came, shuddering silky sweet around me.

I groan, my body slumping against the wall of the shower as my dick leaps in my hand, my orgasm slamming into me, through me, so fucking hard I almost slip.

Almost hit my ass and I groan, again, the pleasure ripping through me and her laughing eyes. She'd laugh, delighted, knowing she'd nearly knocked me on my ass. I turn into the water, let it wash over my face and groan again.

I am so fucking screwed.

Eli is in the kitchen when I emerge, clean and dressed, with all inappropriate thoughts about Hazel tucked into a neat little box, locked tight and shoved into the back of my mind.

He hands me a cup of coffee at me and I sip it once. Hot as fuck, with a hint of sugar to cut the dark, bitter brew, which is, frankly, the only way to drink coffee.

"Tell me," I say, my voice dipping into the older brother order that got Eli to do his fucking homework and fess up to smoking weed with Jeff.

It's never not worked on Elijah.

His lips tighten and his eyes slide away. "It's not a big deal, man."

"It's a big enough deal that we're being hauled in to handle an informant, and unless your game has seriously gone to hell in the past few years, I'm not sure that makes any fucking

sense.”

He makes a face and brushes past me. “My game is fucking fine, Archer. I—do you remember Scarlett?”

I go very still. The kind of still that I learned in the Corps, when I was still to keep from getting killed, or focused on the bastards I was supposed to kill.

“How the actual fuck do you think I’d forget her?” I ask, my voice low and furious. Eli, the bastard, has the grace to blush.

“I’m looking for her sister,” he says, simply.

And I swallow all my fury. All the anger that’s spilling up and threatening to bubble over. “Because she didn’t do enough fucking damage when she tore through your life, you thought that hunting down her fucking sister was a good idea?” I spit.

Eli flinches. But his voice is a low growl, pitched to keep me from getting too pissed, “Archer,” he starts.

“Why?” I snap. “Why the hell would you do this? Does Nora know?”

He pales.

No. Of fucking course she doesn’t. If I didn’t know, she sure as fuck wouldn’t know. Eli is keeping secrets. Again. Never mind that last time—I shove that thought down and shake my head.

“You are the most selfish bastard I know,” I snap. “This would fucking devastate her.”

“She’s a kid, Archer.” Eli says, his voice exhausted. “She’s a fucking kid, and she got sucked into this shit because of Scarlett. Emmie might have a had a bitch of a sister, but is that really something you want to hold against her?”

“Do you not get it, Eli?” I ask, my voice low and furious. “I don’t give a fuck about her. About anyone that toxic whore had anything to do with. And you—you’re keeping secrets from me? Yeah, isn’t that what got you in trouble in the fucking first place?”

His face is pale. Pale and so full of self-loathing I can actually *see* it, rolling like a goddamned wave across his face, and every part of me that is a big brother wants to pull him into a hug and assure him that I’m not actually pissed. That he’s fine, this is fine, that I know there’s an explanation.

But the truth is—there’s always an explanation, when Eli is involved. And I can’t listen to it, not right now.

The phone rings, the shrill shriek of Billings. I snatch it up and snarl, “What?”

“Get your ass out to County Line. We’ve got a triple fucking homicide.”

My blood runs ice cold, and I stumble a step.

County Line is the country. Way the fuck out, a place that edges where Green County bleeds into the next township over.

It’s all fields and woods and farms, and acres and acres of open space, perfect for getting lost or finding yourself or whatever the fuck other poetic shit Hazel would spin.

She fucking loves County Line. Always has. Always said it reminded her of home. It’s where her farmhouse is.

“Archer. You hear me?” Billings shouts and it narrows my thoughts down to where I can hear, where I’m not drowning in the fear that’s still swimming in my veins.

“Address is incoming. Keep it silent, boys, we’re trying to figure out what the fuck happened before we tell the whole goddamned County. Get over there.”

He hangs up abruptly and I shift, reaching for my gun, discarded on the table.

Eli is watching me, warily, and I remember suddenly we’re in the middle of a fucking fight.

Feels really goddamned distant, all of a sudden.

“Let’s move, Lijah,” I spit. “Triple homicide on County Line.”

I see it. All of the terror and wildness that had filled me, reflected in my brother.

It’s not her. It can’t be *her*. Even knowing that, the fear is like this choking thing, until the text comes through.

3645 County Line.

Oh thank Christ.

“It’s six houses down,” I say, gruffly and Eli almost hits the ground. He does sway and I grab his arm. Steadying him. Steadying myself.

Six. Fucking. Houses.

Sure the farm houses out there had anywhere between half a mile and two between them, but still.

It’s too damn close for comfort. I want to see her, a hungry want that hits like a visceral need, and I can’t.

I can’t fucking see her because I have a fucking job to do. Dammit all to hell and back.

“Let’s go,” I order, and Eli lurches into motion, grabbing his weapon holster and shrugging it over his shoulders. Neither of us are in suits, not anymore, but neither of us really give a fuck either. We’re out the door and I hit the driver seat of my car.

“Gabe,” Eli spits out. There’s a hesitation, and then, sharply, “You can tear me a new one later, Gabriel. Get your ass to my sister’s house and call me when you know she’s safe.”

He hangs up before Gabriel can respond, and I throw him a quick look. “Gabe?”

“Don’t,” Eli spits, and I don’t. I just drive.

I have no fucking clue what we’re walking into.

Chapter 11

I watch Gabriel hang up, his forehead furrowed into a frown as he stares at his phone like it might bite him.

“You okay?” I ask, moving around my kitchen. Gabriel doesn’t respond for a moment, and I let him have his space, pouring tea into mugs for us, pushing his across the counter so his hands can come up and cup it.

I add a bar of Godiva, and he flashes a quick, grateful smile. I know he’d rather have hot chocolate, but I ran out a few weeks ago, and when we raided the damn grocery store, Archer didn’t grab more.

It occurs to me that I should make a note to grab it soon. Especially if Gabe was about to become a fixture at my home again.

“You okay?” I repeat and he nods.

Flashes me a quick smirk. “Your brother has definitely upped the crazy, sweetheart.”

I frown, blow on my tea and ask quickly, “Eli has always been crazy, Gabe. You just like his hair too much to give a fuck.”

He leers. Actually fucking *leers* at me. Who even does that? “It’s not his hair that I like, Hazy.”

I make a face and wave a hand, “Dude, *TMI*. That’s my *brother!*” Gabriel laughs. Sips at his tea and make a face when it’s not chocolate.

“He wants to know you’re safe. You got some kind of stalker you forgot to tell me about?”

I roll my eyes, and he grins. “Pretty sure if I did, you’d notice just because you won’t quit fucking watching me.”

“It gives me something to do while cupcakes bake,” he says, waving a hand.

As if Gabriel Delvin is ever actually bored. He has his fingers in too many things to ever be truly bored.

“Hey, Gabe, speaking of brothers,” I say, gently and he stiffens, all of the easy warmth draining out of him and I remember.

We’re still slipping into the easy place that is *us*. After four years, I can’t expect all of the ease that we had, once. I can’t expect that when I push him, he’ll fold and give me the hard stuff without flinching.

“Sorry,” I murmur.

Because there is, under everything, the loss of a brother.

His favorite brother. Aidan. I shift a little, away from him, but still close.

Giving him space. Gabe doesn’t like caring. Not really. But he also can’t seem to help himself. He cares because he can’t *not*, even when he’s an ass and acting like it’s him against the world.

Which is why he took it so hard, when Aiden ran away from Green County.

It wasn’t really Aidan’s fault. When you’re living an epic love story and one half decides to walk away without any fucking reason, it’s hard to stay and face the fall out.

Gabriel understood that as much as I did. Didn’t make it any easier to accept it.

“He hates it there,” Gabe says, softly.

I go still, watching him and he gives me a small shrug. A little thing that stings.

“Not so different from you, when you think about it, Hazel. He ran away from what he wanted and hates it as much as you did.”

“Who says I hated it?” I ask, my heart pounding.

Gabe scoffs, a smirk on his lips and the moment passes, too quick to hold onto.

“I’m your best friend, Hazy. I know you.”

“What did Eli want?”

Something flickers in his eyes. “Wanted me to make sure you’re safe. He didn’t tell me why.”

And Gabriel would. Because drama between them aside, Gabriel and my brother have always worked to keep me safe and happy.

Archer has always worked with them.

“I need to call him,” I say, softly and Gabe nods once.

Eli doesn’t answer. Jackass.

I growl a curse under my breath and hang up, dialing Archer while Gabe putters around my kitchen. “How long did he say to stay with me?” I ask and Gabriel shrugs.

“Didn’t really put a time stamp on it, sweetheart,” Gabe says. The phone is ringing and ringing and...

“*What, Hazel?*”

“Watch your fucking tone,” I snap. “Why the hell did you sic Gabe on me?”

There’s a breath of hesitation and I know what it is.

It’s got the feel Eli has, when I ask about work and he hesitates before telling me the barest details. But then. Archer spits a curse. “Triple homicide, a few miles away on County Line.”

I feel my gut seize up, flutter in that shift of nerves that I always get when a story is *there* inches away and begging for me to snatch it up.

“Hazel, for once in your fucking life, I need you to do what I say. Lock your fucking doors, stay with Gabriel and wait for me to give you the all clear.”

“Archer,” I say, softly and he huffs a sigh.

“We just got here, Hazy-eyes.” He goes distant for a second, and I can hear him talking to Eli before the door to car slams shut. Then his voice is back and it’s *my* voice. The gruff, low, sexy as sin voice he only ever uses with me, when we’re alone.

“Hazel, please. This—it’s bad. I can’t be worried about you. Gabriel will keep you safe, and you’ll keep him safe, and I’ll give you as much information as I can, as soon as I clear the scene. But, please. For me?” I let out my breath slowly.

“Okay, Archer.” I whisper.

I hear his huff of relief, too real for him to choke it off, and then, “Baby girl, I gotta go. I’ll call soon.”

I nod and he disconnects and I look over at Gabriel. Flash a smile that doesn’t feel even the slightest bit real.

“So, it looks like we’re gonna be spending some time together,” I say, weakly.

Chapter 12

I spent four years in the Marine Corps before I joined the GCPD.

Two of those were spent on deployment, a nightmare of war and blood and death.

I saw people torn to pieces by bombs, girls ripped apart by rape and abuse, men beaten so badly they couldn't breathe, eyeballs hanging from shattered orbital sockets. I saw my own unit torn apart by gunfire and shrapnel. I saw blood splatter and dead dogs being eaten by children, and dead children being eaten by dogs.

I saw every fucking nightmare I could possibly imagine.

War is a beast, a fucking monster. But it's supposed to be. It's like the devil—something you know and expect and can depend on because it's *supposed to be evil*.

That wasn't the world I came back to. It was supposed to be quiet. Bad shit should happen, but not.... Not this.

Because this? This is worse than anything I ever saw in war.

"You need this," the scene tech said, her face pale, lips trembling.

Eli frowned. Pamela was too much of a hardass to be this torn up by a dead body, so what the actual fuck?

I take the masks from her and slip it over my face, sliding my feet into protective booties.

And then I enter the house, my brother following me, and we step into hell.

The first victim

(I had to think of them like that. Had to.)

was found in the foyer. Less than ten feet from the door. Three bullet holes, one to the gut, one through the shoulder. The last was through the back of her head, punched out the front, taking half her face with it.

She was a mess of blood and brain and bone, most of it splattered in a grisly pattern on the beige carpet.

(It was beige. Once. Now it's a deep, deep red, and it squishes under my feet as I crouch next to her.)

Back of the head, splayed limbs, the expression of terror on her face—the unforced entry.

She opened the door. Let the killer in.

She ran, when they pulled the gun.

(Oh, Jesus, they shot an unarmed grandmother in the back of the fucking skull.)

The first victim knew them. Enough that she let them in, on a cool summer evening. It's Green County. Not completely unheard of.

(This is. Holy fuck, this is.)

There are two distinct set of footprints, tracking bloody away from the first victim.

There's vomit, in the middle of the hallway, and bloody hand prints braced on the ground.

(Eli makes a noise that's like a choked sob. I grit my teeth, and give him a sharp look, questioning. My brother looks like he's gonna fall the fuck apart. "I can process-"

"Shut up, Archer.")

The victim's son found her.

He's the one who threw up and smeared blood prints on the ground in the hallway. The

second victim, (*Oh Jesus Oh fuck fuck fuck.*), is found in a closet.

She's bound, with duct tape, at the hands and feet. Two shots to the head, neat and tidy. Close up, and not the gun that killed the first victim.

She looks startled. Not scared.

(*Silencers. They fucking used silencers. And she knew them.*)

It's at the back of the downstairs, well away from the first victim. The door was left open, after they shot her, and blood dried, dripping down the wall where she's slumped with her forever startled expression.

(*What the hell was the last thing she saw, that put that startled look in her eyes?*) There are no tracks in her blood.

(*She was fucking collateral damage. Her and the grandmother. They weren't here for her, but they sure as fuck didn't have any problem killing her.*)

The third victim is upstairs.

(*Eli gags when we reach the top of the staircase, and for a second, as I look, I can't process what I'm seeing. I have to process what I'm seeing. I have to do my job. Stay detached.*) There is blood. Everywhere.

She wasn't restrained.

There are footprints, and they crisscross across the room.

She was running. And one of the killers—there were two, there had to have been two, because of the footprints next to the first victim—was chasing her.

And there's blood, everywhere.

Like they worked her over with a knife.

It sprays, obscenely beautiful patterns against the stark white walls, dried now to a rusty red.

This was the target.

There is a fourth victim here, a girl, maybe nineteen, shot point blank.

(*Who the fuck is she and why did they kill her? I wonder if Pamela has ID'd them.*)

The target. The third victim. They didn't just chase her and torture her with a knife. They beat her to death.

She's almost unrecognizable as a human. She's a red smear of meat and guts and bones. (*Eli throws up. I hear him retch, messy and loud and my stomach almost rebels.*)

This isn't hell. This is so fucking far past that.)

There's a bloody barbell next to the lump of meat and bone and hair, and I crouch next to it and the victim. Faintly, I can see the impressions of the barbell in her skin.

This was personal. Whoever *this* girl was, whoever the hell the killers were. This was the goal. They had a problem with *her*.

The other three dead bodies were incidental, or—

(*Oh fuck, did they kill them, just to torture her? Before they cut her up and beat her to death, did they slaughter her family first?*)

She was the target. And it was personal.

It wasn't a random home invasion by a drug addict looking to score some money or prescription pills.

This was calculated and personal and fucking savagely executed.

And the killers walked out, without ever being seen.

I feel sick, when I step out of the house. Eli is already outside, crouching next to the bushes,

and Pamela is hovering over him, all caustic concern.

I arch an eyebrow at her and she shrugs. Pats my brother on his back and shifts away.

The Chief is approaching and I growl Eli's name. He nods, and pushes to his feet.

Chief eyes my brother for a minute and then, "How bad did you fuck up my crime scene, Eli?"

He flushes.

"You been in there?" I ask, and it pulls Billings' attention to me. He nods, slowly, and I glance back.

I can still see each of them, sprawled out and dead. "You ever seen any shit like that before?" I ask.

And Billings, damn him, shakes his head.

"It was personal," Eli offers and Billings glances at him. Eli squares his shoulders. He might be in the doghouse for fucking up the crime scene, but his instincts are still sound. And he's right.

"There's too much rage and intent for it to be random." "Why do you say that?" Peter says, sharply.

"Because they tortured the girl. The others, they killed. Quick and painless. But she was all kinds of intentional. They wanted her to suffer. No one tortures a girl like that unless they're being pushed by motive."

Chief grunts and hands me a thin file.

"They were found when the old lady's son came home. She lived with them, but it's his house. He worked third shift, and came home to this."

He's the one who threw up in the hallway. Makes sense. He came home to a dead mother, and his daughters in the house.

"The girl upstairs—the third gunshot vic—was a friend. Beth Griffin was visiting Crystal Watson."

Wrong night to get together with the BFF.

"You two have point on this. It's your priority," Peter says, his voice a low growl. "What about the prostitutes?"

The Chief gives us a blank stare. "What the fuck about them? Did you see that house, Archer?"

And that's that.

We spend the day processing the scene. By the time Pamela and her boys have finished cataloguing all of the blood splatter, footprints, bullet casings and wounds, by the time the bodies have been carted away for the medical examiner and proper identification, by the time I finally leave that nightmare house of horrors—my head is pounding, and Eli has descended into utter silence.

I leave him to it. Frankly, I'm not in the mood to sift through my brother's brooding. Not when I'm so fucking deep in it myself.

We were fighting, when I caught the call that shattered the day.

Fuck, it's only been one fucking day. We sat, happy, this morning at Mama's and listened to Hazel banter with Eli and tease Hailey.

I swallow hard.

"Did you call Hazel?"

I glance at my brother who looks at me dully. We're halfway back to the house. To *our* house, but it occurs to me that I don't want to go back to our empty place. And Eli could use more than that too.

So I swing the Roadrunner around sharply, a hard crank of the wheel. Eli mutters a low curse, but rolls with it.

"Where—" he starts blearily, and I shoot him a quick look.

"Oh," he says, instead.

And it fucking settles me. Not all of the anger and worry, not the gnawing fear and outrage that some monster destroyed the peace in *my* town. But some of the edges of nerves settle, and I can take what feels like the first full breath of the fucking day.

Nothing has changed. There's still a fucking monster out there, and tomorrow, Eli and I have to sit down with the parents of a murdered girl, the devastated father who lost his entire fucking family.

But for the moment—all of that drops away because there isn't a goddamned thing I can do until the ME finishes with the bodies.

The one thing I can do is take care of my family. Take care of Eli who doesn't need to be alone. And take care of Hazel who I've been worried about all day, and who is so fucking good at settling me when I'm spinning out.

I want her, here. Not for sex—I'm so fucked up right now, so lost in my head I don't think sex is on the table. But I want my best friend, the one who can sit in my silence and still be so fucking present it doesn't feel like I'm alone.

When she's close to me, I don't feel like I'm alone. And I fucking *need* that, right now.

Chapter 13

Gabe and I spend the day watching shitty movies.

I fuck around on my computer, playing with the idea of working on my article, but my heart isn't really in it. My mind—both of our minds—are a few miles away, where my brother and Archer are dealing with a murder scene.

A triple fucking homicide.

He stress cooks, and steals my computer and bitches when I refuse to let him run to his house. Smith whines and paces and acts like a little bastard, getting under foot, until Gabe finally throws himself on the couch and then the traitor crawls up on him and settles to his absent-minded caress.

“Do you know what happened?” Gabe asks, around three. By now, we've been together for almost four hours by the edict of my brother and we're no longer antsy and snapping at each other. We're just...waiting.

For what, I don't think either of us knows.

“No,” I say, remembering that hesitation in Archer before he said *triple homicide*.

The one that is keeping me glued to my couch and not snatching my computer up to dig up all the fucking information I can, to find out what the hell could possibly be motivating it.

It keeps me glued here because I need Archer to know that I'd never betray his trust.

That's what makes us work, what makes us special. That we trust each other.

Even after everything.

So I shove it all down and I propose a movie marathon and Gabriel jumps on that, making us messy buttery popcorn sprinkled with M&M's while I find the cheesiest horror flick I can think of on Netflix, and queue it up for us.

We're on the third movie, and Gabriel has broken into my whiskey stash when I hear the Roadrunner rumble up. The damn thing could wake the fucking dead. It jars both of us up on the couch, and Gabe's glassy eyes clear as he stares speculatively at the door.

When I try to stand though, he jerks me back, holding me on the couch. “Gabe!” I snap, and he side eyes me, all golden sharp gaze.

“Just wait,” he says, soft and serious.

So I do and then Archer and Eli stumble in. Because of course they both have keys to my house.

And I swallow a scream.

Because they are both fucking *covered* in blood.

“Holy *shit*,” Gabriel breathes, and I choke back the inappropriate laugh.

Eli is swaying, so unsteady on his feet that for a second, I think he might be drunk.

He's not though. He's just so far past the point of dealing, he's almost asleep, dead on his fucking feet. Archer though. Archer is all furious energy, exhaustion etched in long lines on his face, but he's not falling asleep walking—he's furious energy and crashing relief.

He steps forward, and jerks me off the couch and into his arms, a sigh of relief slipping free.

“Dude,” Eli slurs. “Get off Hazel. Your fucking filthy.”

He makes a noise that reminds me, vaguely, of a growl and my arms—when the fuck did I wrap my arms around him—tighten a little, holding him tight when he'd pull away.

I'm not ready to give up his warmth.

Even if he is disgusting right now. He stays where he is, a warm blanket of *home*.

“Someone gonna clue us in on why the hell you’re covered in blood?” Gabriel asks, his voice almost a grin. “Gotta say, boys, you look like you’ve been through a slaughterhouse.”

Archer flinches, a full body thing in my arms and I twist to glare at Gabriel as Eli starts to cackle hysterically. “Dude,” Archer says, grumpy and Eli shakes a hand, helplessly, still laughing as he stumbles out of the room. I pull away from Archer and he shakes his head. “Leave him, Hazel. Let him take a shower and get his shit together.”

I hate it. But I do what he says, and focus on Archer. “You should shower, too. Grab some of Eli’s shit, and go to my bathroom.”

Archer hesitates for a half a heartbeat, and then he nods and stumbles a few steps away, mumbling, “Thanks, Hazy Eyes.”

When we’re alone, I stare at Gabe, and he looks terrified. I’m not used to seeing Gabe so scared. “Make dinner. Sandwiches, maybe some tomato soup—Mama sent some home, it’s in the freezer.”

Gabe jerks a little, and nods, his fear fading. Because he has something to do—and he always functions better when he has something to do.

While he bustles around the kitchen, I retreat to my bedroom and change quickly, out of the now bloody tank top and yoga pants.

Archer really was filthy.

The door to my bathroom opens while I’m gathering up his dirty clothes, discarded haphazardly on the ground of my bedroom, and mine.

And I know I should retreat. I should get the hell out of here, because we’re both too raw today, too on edge from the day.

But I look at him. A tiny stolen glance.

And freeze.

He’s wearing a pair of Eli’s oversized sweat pants, hanging low and precarious on his hips, and water is dripping down his chest.

Broad and tattooed and god, I forgot.

I *forgot* how gorgeous he is.

His hair is wet, and his lips are bright red, like he’s been biting them, and his eyes—oh god, his eyes. He stares at me, so hard and bright and intent that my entire body trembles, because he looked at me like that, when he fucked me.

That one time, a thousand nights ago.

“Hazel,” he growls, and I stumble back a step. I can’t face him right now, not with Gabe and Eli down the hall. So I retreat, and the second I do, he goes still, shock flickering through his eyes.

“Gabe is making dinner,” I babble, and then I almost fall out of my bedroom, and slam the door shut behind me.

Dinner is a silent affair, while Archer watches me sidelong. Eli is almost asleep at the table, and part of me wants to know what the hell happened because, hello, *journalist*. The other part of me—the part that is all sister—wants to know what the actual fuck could knock my strong, unshakable brother on his ass like this.

But I don’t ask. I pick at my grilled cheese and stir my soup and trade glances with Gabe nervously until the food is gone and the silence is stretching too tight and tense and—

“I think that’s my cue. I’m going home.”

Gabe's brisk announcement jerks Eli out of his doze and brings his head up, his hazel eyes wide and startled. "What? Why?"

"Because, Lijah, it's almost midnight, and as lovely as being with Hazel is, I have a home and a life and, you know, a job."

"Gabe," Archer says, his voice a low warning.

"Archer," Gabe mocks, his eyes laughing. "I understand you're worried. I get that you want your little girl protected. But now it's time for me to go home. You're here. *You* keep her safe."

"I'll drive you," Eli says standing. Archer flicks a glance at Eli but he doesn't argue and if Gabe wants to protest, he's keeping it to himself.

Something is playing out between these two and we are content to let it happen.

"Take the Roadrunner," Archer says and Eli catches the keys that he throws over, before the door shut behind them both. Leaving us in silence and tension. I get up too quickly and almost run from the room carrying dirty dishes to the kitchen. Maybe Archer is too tired to chase me or maybe he knows I'll come back. Either way, he stays seated while I busy myself cleaning up Gabriel's mess.

When there's nothing left to do I finally sit across from him and slide a beer across the table, into his waiting hands. "Want to talk about it?" I ask and he shakes his head. I nod. "Okay. Come sit in the living room with me."

It's stupid and dangerous and asking for trouble.

But it's also easy, effortless and so wonderfully relaxing after a long day of tension and worry and wondering where the hell he was and what the hell was happening. I'm with my Archer. My best friend.

He sits too close on the couch and I let myself lean against his warm. And for now, as his arm comes up around me, holding me to him as he falls apart, his big body shaking.

Not crying. Archer doesn't cry.

But shaking.

Like everything that happened, that he saw today, has finally hit him and he can't handle it anymore.

Here's the thing about Brandon Archer. He's the strongest man I've ever known.

Even when he was falling apart, ripped up by grief from losing his father. When he saw that other people needed him, all of that grief was shoved aside and forgotten. And all he cared about was the people around him.

As long as someone needs him to be strong, Archer won't allow himself to be anything but. And maybe that's what makes us work.

Because he never felt the need to be strong around me. He meets me with as much honesty as I meet him. And if I see him falling apart, if I see him weak and shaking and broken. Well.

That's just another one of the secrets that I carry.

I don't know how long we sit there. But eventually his shaking calms, and his lips whisper against the top of my hair.

"Sorry, sweetheart," he says.

"Don't apologize to me," I order fiercely, and he laughs. It's weak and it dies almost as soon as it forms. But it's still there and that settles some of my nerves.

I lean up to look at him, not terribly surprised to find his bright green eyes watching me. Studying. Different now from the way he looked at me when we were growing up.

Now when he's not careful. When he's tired in moments like this, I can see what he doesn't want me to see. Lazy hunger, banked heat. It's the way he looks at someone he wants. It's the

way he's been looking at me for years.

“What are we doing, Hazel?” he whispers. I give a miniscule shrug, something he feels more than you can actually see, lick my lips and he groans watching me.

His eyes go lazy and half-lidded, watching. His thumb curves up over my chin, brushing, whisper soft, against my lips, and I feel his body jerk, a startled motion he tries to hide, when the tip of my tongue swipes over the pad of his thumb.

Then I catch his finger with my teeth, bite down just enough to make his breath catch, and his hands are suddenly *hard*. Demanding. Gripping my hair and yanking me across the tiny space and pulling me to his lips.

I make a tiny noise, a tiny protest or sigh and he shifts, pulling me from where I'm curled against him so that I'm straddling his lap, and my hands are braced against his shoulders as his tongue slips, sugar sweet, past my lips, licking deep and hungry, like I am the last meal of a dying man.

He kisses me like he will die without me, and like I am precious, and I feel it.

Even without his hand stroking over me—they stay, still and chaste, in my hair and at my hip—even without his cock rubbing against me.

I feel *more*. I feel *wanted*. Like, here. This. Is all he's ever wanted, all either of us ever wanted, and I wonder why the hell I ever forgot that. His teeth nip at my lip, catching the low pout and tugging, this perfect blend of pain and pleasure that has me keening and arching against him and Archer groans against me.

The sound of the Roadrunner makes me jerk away from Archer, almost falling on the floor in my haste to get out of his lap. He curses and struggles to his feet, retreating to the bathroom before Eli comes inside. My brother finds me sitting on the couch alone and a little flushed.

If Eli notices, he doesn't say. Just looks at the beer sitting on the table and says, “Do you have anything stronger?”

We drink our way through two bottles of vodka, half-empty before we got our hands on them. Eli falls asleep quickly, while Archer and I keep drinking and slowly he tells me a little about what happened today.

“But that kind of thing doesn't happen here,” I protest.

He nods, “I know, Hazy Eyes.”

“This is why I moved home,” I say, “to get away from shit like this.” His eyebrow goes up.

It's the first time I talked about home and about Boston. Which means I'm either too tired or too drunk to remember that I'm not supposed to be talking about Boston.

Archer isn't telling me everything and I'm not telling him everything. And I kind of hate it.

“Hey, Hazel,” he says. I look at him and he's watching me with that careful stare that has all of the emotions locked away. Blank. I hate that look. “You know this can't happen right?”

“I think it is happening right now,” I say, not bothering to pretend I don't know what he's talking about.

“Nora would kill me and Eli would let her do it.”

“Nora doesn't get to decide how I live my life. And she doesn't get to decide who makes me happy.”

The words linger on the table in silence and I wonder what he'll do with them.

“I make you happy?” he asks at last, and I shrug because, of course he does.

How does he not know that? How does he not know that everything I've done has been

because of him?

I give him this sad smile and stand up. "I'm going to go to bed," I say to myself. "I've had too much to drink and this-" I wave my hand between us vaguely, "this isn't something I want to do drunk."

He watches me walk away. But his voice is soft and soothing caress when he calls, "Sweet dreams, baby."

The boys are gone when I wake up, which I expect.

For a while I wander through the house, feeling a little discontent and then lost. Smith follows me, whining, and I grab his leash. Maybe fresh air will help clear my head.

Maybe it won't but it won't *hurt*.

And I need to get out of the house, even if it's just for a few minutes. Archer didn't leave orders for me to stay inside the house today. So I shove my feet into floppy shoes, and my dog and I step out into the country.

What I forgot that I loved about Kansas when I lived in Boston is the wide open spaces. County Line is farmland on the outskirts of the county, outside of Green County proper. It's all wheat fields waving and corn stalks wrestling in the soft breeze.

Right now the fields are still soft and quiet, but in a few months will be alive with the crops of the heartland and the air will be ripe with the scent of *life*. I wandered down the road, Smith prancing along at my side.

He doesn't like his leash but he knows that until we reach the grove of trees that leads to the river he has to stay on it.

The thing that bothers me about the murders is that things like this *don't* happen here.

I know that there's more to Green County than meets the eye.

I know that the prostitution outside the base is a front for trafficking.

I know that we're not a hotspot for drugs but we are corridor for them and that someone big is behind the scenes, funding a meth operation in the county.

But for all of our problems, and we have them, we don't have brutal murders. And when we do have murder, it's never *this*. The massacre of an entire family.

I can't wrap my head around what happened. And even though I know that Archer wants me to leave it alone, I can't. I dig out my phone and start jotting down notes as Smith splashes through the creek bed.

Archer doesn't have to like it. Hell, he dislikes a lot of things I do. But. I came back to Green County to come home and blow the lid off of all of the corruption that's been sitting underneath the surface of the County since I was a little girl. This seems like the perfect fucking place to start.

We spend almost an hour at the creek, until Smith is exhausted and I have pages of notes and questions that need to be answered. My brain is going in a million directions at once as we walk home.

I love this part, the high of chasing a new story. Digging into the story that I wasn't expecting. Boston almost killed my love for journalism. Being shoved into a tiny box and stories that didn't *matter* almost killed me. And the one time I chased a story that wasn't mine, I lost my job.

That's the dirty ugly secret.

Coming home wasn't a choice, it was a necessity. I investigated the wrong person, exposed the wrong secrets and I lost everything because of it.

And I spent six months grieving, mad, bitter as hell that I was forced to come home. But now that I'm here and Archer and Eli are pulling me back in to the family that we've always had I don't resent it as much.

It almost feels nice.

When he asks later what the hell I was thinking, I'll honestly be able to say *everything*.

I wasn't paying attention because my mind was everywhere but *here*.

Smith, never a good guard dog, was exhausted.

And enough people—Gabriel, Archer, Eli, Mama—had my key that the door being unlocked wasn't anything to be alarmed by.

My alarm came when I saw Michael and John sitting bloody in my kitchen.

“Come inside, Hazel,” Michael says, a bloody smile playing across his lips.

John stands and comes behind me, pushing the door closed and blocking me in. Michael leans back and says, softly, “We have a little story to tell you.”

Chapter 14

I don't like leaving while she's asleep.

But duty calls and four dead bodies means I don't get to pick and choose when I leave. Elijah is miraculously not hungover but he looks like shit. When I say as much, he rolls his eyes and says, "Because you look so much fucking better?" Little bastard has a point.

We swing by our house and dress quickly. And then I head to Calhoun Funeral Home.

The medical examiner is finishing the autopsy. Not that it will tell us anything we don't already know except maybe the order of the kills and if there was sexual assault at play.

Green County is small enough, with a low enough crime rate that we don't have a morgue.

The murdered bodies share space with a naturally dead.

Pamela says that it doesn't matter how they died, they have to either get cut up or dolled up and that can both happen in the same basement. Elijah says she's too lazy to go between two buildings to do her work. I think the mayor doesn't push for a more official space because of budget as much as she's scared of Pam.

Not that I blame her. Pamela knows how to work a scalpel and a bone saw better than anyone I've ever met. She's feisty, horny, and quick to anger. I'm more than a little scared of her myself.

"Tell me what we got, Pam," I say as we enter the room. She gives me a look and even exhausted, Elijah manages to laugh at me. I glare at him before I refocus on Pam.

With four dead bodies in the room, the least I can do is act like a professional.

"Well, there's not much that you don't know," she says, "Gunshot wounds for three of the victims. The grandmother was first and, you know, it played out exactly as the scene said it did. She got shot running away. It's clean through and through. They knew what they were doing. All of this was very well done."

"Really, Pam?" Elijah says, in disbelief.

"Look, just because I don't like the results doesn't mean I can't see good work. I admire professionals and whoever this was they *were* a professional. If they hadn't been, they wouldn't have come in with silencers. They wouldn't have come in and killed methodically. They knew exactly what they wanted." "And what's that?" I ask quietly.

"Her," Pamela points to the girl who was beaten to death. The body—remains?—I've been avoiding looking at because it's hard to see something like this. Even here.

Even in a clinical setting instead of the pale carpet and bright walls of her private home.

"They beat her to death," Pam says, softly. "Before that, they worked her over with a blade. She's got over a dozen wounds that I can say come from a knife and not the barbell. And the beating probably obscured some of them." She takes a breath and then,

"And there was sexual assault." *Fuck.*

They wanted her to suffer, whoever the hell was behind this.

The question is—*why?*

When we leave Pam and the dead bodies, we head back to the station. Elijah is staring at the small file Pam handed us before we left. It lists all of the victims. Ages. Cause of death.

It's very little to go on.

I swallow down my irritation.

“Where to?” Elijah asks.

“We need to check in with the Chief,” I say.

And then the next of kin needed to be interviewed. Fuck. How the hell did I sit down with the parents of a college girl who spent the night studying with her best friend and never left?

How do I explain that, *wrong place, wrong time* stole their living, breathing heart?

This is the part of being a cop that I loathe. That I’ve never been able to shake.

I want, suddenly and fiercely, Hazel. Not sex.

Hazel. The sharp smile and sarcasm that cover her softness and concern. Her, a steady presence that made me steady just because I couldn’t help but want to match her, when she was so calm.

I want to wrap up in the quiet of her house, on her couch, and sleep until the grief and shock and nauseous slips away.

Until Green County goes back to what it should be, something familiar and comforting, and *safe*.

Where my biggest problem is my stupid little brother toeing the line of *off the reservation*.

“Archer?” Elijah says, and I blink out of my thoughts, and realize we’re at the station. The Roadrunner is ticking slightly, the motor cooling—I make a mental note to deal with that when I get some time off—and I’m staring into space.

Blank.

I shiver and shake the feeling and nod. “Right. Let’s go.” I shove out of the car. What I want is not important right now. Not when there are dead bodies to deal with.

Chapter 15

There are a very few moments in my life that are crystalline and clear. So much passes, foggy because everything else passes in a nebulous haze, lost in time and the feelings of home and anger and loss and happiness more than actual things that happened, moments that can be held on to.

But this.

This is one of those memories.

One that will stand sharp and clear and fucking devastating.

John, his hands covered in rusty, flaking blood, with spots of it still on his pants and splattered across his chest, leaning against the door to hold me in.

Michael, poised and perfect at the table, hands crossed and waiting, as patient as the devil himself, splattered with blood and reeking of death, gesturing me to sit across from him.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, and my voice shakes. They shouldn’t be here. My brother and Archer protect me. No one would dare lift a hand against me, because no one wants a pissed off Eli and Archer gunning for them.

They might be the law, but I’m under no delusions about my brothers playing legal when it comes to me and keeping me safe.

So why the hell are there two men covered in blood and vibrating with barely suppressed violence sitting in my kitchen? “Eli and Archer will kill you, if you touch me.” That, at least, comes out steady and strong.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” Michael says, silky smooth and John makes a low noise in his throat behind me. Like *speaking-for-yourself, -brother* and I roll my eyes to Michael, silently demanding.

“No one will hurt you, if you cooperate,” he amends and I tense. “How easy this is, Hazel depends entirely on you.”

I swallow hard and stare. “What do you want?”

Michael smiles and it’s a cruel, cold thing. “I want to tell you a story. And then I want you to tell ours.”

“I don’t understand,” I say, and that’s true. Not playing him at all. I don’t understand what the hell is happening here.

I don’t understand what they want.

Michael smiled then, and it’s tired but it’s not threatening. It’s the boy I went to school with. Bloody and dangerous but still Michael with his quick grin and aloof reserve.

With his unnaturally close relationship to his brother and his sister.

“Did you kill those people?” I ask, softly.

The reaction is instant and explosive. John, almost forgotten, slams into me and I shriek as I fly forward until he jerks me back, against him, a sharp edge digging into my throat, my head yanked back by a too sharp grip on my hair.

Smith is snarling and barking, all fury and concern and Michael.

Michael.

He shifts in his seat, his eyes trained on his twin over my shoulder.

“Let her go, J,” he says, lowly.

“She won’t believe the truth. This is a fucking waste of time.”

Fury flares in his eyes and he slaps the table, hard enough to rattle the coffee cups, “I said, stand the fuck. Down.”

John releases me, muttering a curse under his breath as I stumble a step forward.

Michael refocuses on me, completely ignoring his twin as he stares at me. “I did nothing more than was required of me. How far would you go to protect your brothers? How far would they go to protect you? Is there a line they would not cross if someone hurt you?”

I smile, sharp and threatening, “You’re about to find out, Mikey.”

He shrugs. “Perhaps. That presupposes that I want to hurt you. Or that your brother and Archer will know.”

I stiffen. “Why the hell would they not know?” I demand.

He smiles and I shiver a little. None of the kids I went to school with is in that smile.

“Because if you tell them, what happened at that house will happen to them. And to Nora. And to Gabriel.”

I’m shaking because I know Michael. And I know that tone. John is a furious barely leashed storm of rage but he doesn’t scare me. He doesn’t do anything Michael doesn’t sanction and he is all rage with no thought.

Michael is precise and conniving, manipulative and deadly.

And he terrifies me.

He smiles and says, “Here’s the deal. You listen to my story. And then you tell one. And you don’t involve your brothers. Do that and you walk away from this unharmed. It’s easy, Hazel.”

I don’t have a choice. So I push away from the door and John, and sit across from Michael. Take my coffee and doctor it slowly to a drinkable state.

Sip it as I force my nerves back and slip into the role I wear best. The reporter.

The girl who can tell amazing, unbelievable stories.

“Ok, Mike. Tell me a story.”

Chapter 16

“There’s a car missing.”

I blink up at Eli but he’s staring at the photos and his shoulders are rising, tight and stiff under his button down.

“What car? The old lady’s was in the shop, Crystal’s is in the driveway. All accounted for.”

“Beth. Look.”

Eli slides the photo he’s staring at across the small desk and I glance at it.

Beth Griffin’s purse is emptied out and cataloged here, for later use and I frown at it. We’ve been looking at photos and crime scene analysis for hours. Everything is blurring together. “The hell am I looking at, Eli?” I demand and he huffs a quick sigh. Leans over and taps.

There is, on the bottom, a small key fob with two plain key on the ring, attached to the keyless entry for a Jeep.

“Fuck,” I mutter.

“We need to interview Beth’s parents,” Eli says. And I nod. Because yeah. Shit.

“How the fuck did we miss this?”

“We didn’t look at her. Not the way we looked at Crystal. Wrong place, wrong time.

Why the hell would we look at her?” Eli says, his voice laced with as much as disgust as I’m feeling.

It’s a stupid, careless mistake. I just hope it won’t cost us.

I glance at phone while I shrug into my suit coat and Eli gathers his shit. He catches my frown and pauses. “What’s wrong?”

“Hazel. I text her to check in and I haven’t heard back. Just a little worried.”

Eli frowns and grabs his phone. “I’ll call Gabe,” he says, already moving and even though I know there’s nothing to worry about, some of my worry unravels.

I know she can take care of herself. I do. I know that she’ll be furious that Gabriel is hovering, and that even if he *would* lie to her, she would see through it. She would see the truth behind it, see me.

She’s gonna be pissed.

A smirk tugs at my lips, despite everything.

Beth Griffin lived in a small house on the edge of Green County, with a neatly trimmed yard and shady trees and a silver, four door sedan in the front yard.

There’s a sticker on the back, stick figures of a family, and I stare at it for a long moment, while Eli unfolds himself from the Roadrunner.

Because the stick figure family will be missing someone now.

“I hate this,” I mutter to no one, and join Eli on the front porch.

He looks vaguely ill as we knock and I nudge his arm, just a little. *Get it together, Eli.* He nods, and take a deep breath as the door opens slowly.

The girl is young. Maybe middle school, and her eyes are bloodshot and red.

“Cops,” she says, dully. “More cops.” She pulls the door the rest of way open and gestures weakly at the living room. It’s dark and crowded, with four women sitting in various states of closeness and contact with a blond with dirty hair and a curl of stooped shoulders and hands tight

fists of desperation as they cling to the toddler in her lap.

She stares at us, Beth Griffin's mother, her eyes blank and unseeing.

It's always awkward as hell, intruding on the grief that is too raw, intruding on the scant comfort that family can offer.

I hate this. I fucking hate all of it.

"Mrs. Griffin?" Eli asks, softly. She makes a low noise in her throat, and curls into the baby more, away from us.

"What can I do for you?"

It's a red-haired woman, her eyes sharp and assessing. She's just now entering the room, and puts a cup of coffee down in front of Christie Griffin before scooping the toddler off her lap as well. Tucks the child onto her hip and directs her attention to the girls still sitting around the room. "Go. The kitchen needs cleanin' and there's still the matter of pickin' Bethie's dress. Grace, you do that, please. I'll be up in a few minutes to see how things are going."

"We don't have to listen to you, Chasity," one of them snipes. One, Grace probably, gives the room a wide-eyed stare before darting from the room. Chasity slowly turns to the one who snapped at her.

"I'm sorry, Patience. Have you been takin' care of Christian? Have you been makin' sure the girls are still upright and the baby has been fed and that the funeral is put together? Because I'd love to let someone else do somethin' other than sit in this damn room and hold each other's hands. Right now, Christian needs to talk to these nice cops and *you* need to go do the damn dishes."

They glare at each other for a long minute before Patience jerks up, snarling under her breath and stalks into the kitchen. The remaining two sisters trail her, and then it's just us. Two cops and a still, unseeing mother, and a woman holding a baby and, by all appearances, the household together.

"Sorry about that. My sisters tend to congregate where the most drama is. And they like pretty cops." She flashes a smile with no real interest behind it and sits down next to Christian Griffin. Adjusts the baby and produces a handful of Cheerios.

"So, what do you want to know about Bethie?"

Chapter 17

Once.

There was a little girl.

That's where the story starts. Really. With a little girl. Because everything that came before was forgotten when she arrived. And everything that came after revolved around her.

She was pretty. Long red hair that curled and waved. Crystal clear blue eyes, and a smile, shy but shining.

She was an angel.

And her brothers, twins, older by eight months, adored her. She was frail, sick, even from the first time they brought her home. But they doted on her.

They were happy, even.

The little girl and her brothers grew up in a big city, but they grew up happy, in a high rise apartment where she could watch the sunrise and the moon glitter across the sky, where her brothers could sneak into her bedroom when she cried in the still silence of the night.

Their mother was ambitious and distant.

Their father was long dead and when it came down to it, they were alone more than they weren't.

Which was fine. The twins preferred to be alone to care for each other, and more importantly—their sister.

She was twelve when their mother's job changed. They moved from their penthouse apartment close to the stars to a farmhouse in the middle of nowhere.

The girl hated it there. She hid from her mother and brothers, hid in her room wrapped in blankets and stories, wrapped in paintings and pillows. And when the twins tried to come close to her, they found the way locked.

The little girl was slipping away from her brothers.

And that terrified them.

It was a month after they moved that the twins made their move.

Because the little girl loved the stars, and they could give her that.

The older twin wrapped her up in blankets and carried her through the dark house, out across the wide field to a decrepit barn. The other brother was there, with blankets and pillows and a jug of weak hot chocolate that he made with the very last of the powder.

There was a hole in the roof of the barn, and they positioned their sister there, with hot chocolate in her hand, and braced on either side of her, and then they gave her the stars.

All of the wide Kansas sky, sprawled out like a black velvet and shining diamonds.

They gave her the universe, a gift rolled out at her feet, and even though she hated the new town, and how isolated they were—she was happy.

It didn't last.

She was prone to fits of anger and depression, and as the years slipped by and the girl grew up, she grew prettier and quieter, and it became harder to pull her from her moods.

The twins grew up as well. Angry and cold, and concerned only with each other and their sister.

Their mother was deeper than ever in her work, and some of it spilled into their home.

The first one to touch it, was the girl.

It was one of the nights where even the stars couldn't sooth the panic clawing at her, even her brother's soft presences in her barn couldn't ease the roiling emotions. The twins were drunk, and it was easy. Too easy. To slip out of the barn and into the house, to find a small pill in the stash their mother kept, and pop it. And let the chemicals take it away.

Sooth the pain and anxiety and everything until there was only numbness.

The brothers were furious. And more than furious, they were terrified.

The oldest confronted their mother, about the drugs and the job that never seemed legit, that flirted with danger and the way the cops side-eyed them, and the girl's depression.

She's slipping, he argued.

Then hold her up, the mother ordered, and gave him a supply of drugs to keep her steady.

The twins hated their mother. As much as they adored and doted on their sister, they hated their mother. Hated her callous disregard and the distance in her that left her children alone, with only each other to lean on.

They hated her for letting the girl fight her demons alone, and for giving them the drugs that would numb that fight, and leave her addicted.

But as much as they hated their mother, and the drugs. They would never hate anyone quite as much as they hated each other, for giving those drugs to their sister.

Things changed, after that. After she started medicating. It didn't happen often. First, it was only once a month or so.

Then it was every month.

Twice a month.

Weekly.

Until it was nightly. A routine, that left her numb and staring, into the sky and the stars and smiling, soft.

She was the one who took the next step, too.

The one who pushed then, gently, over the line that none had ever thought to cross.

It was when she was high, and sweet. The twins could never resist her when she was like that. When she was dreamy-eyed and pliant and whispering the myths of the constellations, and the sister they loved more than life.

One of them leaned over her, in the barn. Reaching for a beer. Or a pillow. God only knows what.

He froze when she arched under him, her lips brushing, feather light against his skin, catching salty sweat against the drag of stubble.

It was easy.

To fall into each other, the way they always had found themselves in each other.

Another change. But not the last one.

There was a three-month window, when their mother disappeared. She didn't leave enough product for the girl, and the brothers had to get inventive.

The oldest sold what they had, everything she didn't take. And then he went to see a man.

Morningstar.

And that—that was the change that mattered the most.

Nothing was ever the same after the girl and her brothers met Morningstar and became his

tools.

Chapter 18

It becomes apparent, that Christian Griffin is not going to be any help when it comes to telling us about her daughter. She's not completely catatonic, but it's a damn close thing, and she sits there, placid and quiet as Chasity quiets the baby and looks at us.

"Everything," Eli says. "How long was she friends with Crystal?"

"Most of high school. Crystal was one of the only girls who didn't disappear when Bethie got pregnant."

That makes me and Eli still, and Chasity smiles, a small thin thing. "Yeah, Maryse is Beth's little girl. We'll have a helluva time explaining all of this later in life."

"Who's the father?"

Chasity makes a vague dismissive motion with her hand. "She's ours. The daddy signed away his rights to her when she was two days old. Maryse was Bethie's and she was doin' her damnedest to make somethin' of herself to give her baby a good life. She went to Crystal's because they hadn't seen each other, really, in weeks. She hadn't had a night out since the school year started. So I told her, me and Christie would watch the baby, and she should go hang out with her friend. They were gonna study some. Watch a movie. Bethie just needed a night to be a kid, before she went back to be a mama."

Her lips press tight and her grip on the baby tightens until Maryse makes a low whimper and her aunt loosens her grip.

"What do you think happened?" she asks, and I blink at her.

"We don't know. Not why, anyway. Was Beth or Crystal involved in anything illegal, do you know?"

"No sir. Both those girls walked the straight and narrow pretty good. Bethie smoked a little pot, drank some, back in high school before Maryse came along. And Crystal—well, all she wanted was to get out of the County. She was goin' to school and damned set on making her way into Topeka or farther away. She wouldn't have fucked that up with a little partyin'."

I glance at Eli and see my frustration mirrored in his eyes.

"Do you know if Beth drove to Crystal's house?" he asks and Chasity's eyes narrow.

"Of course she did."

"We need the make and model of the Jeep, and the tag number, if you know it," I say, and Chasity frowns, but writes it down.

Black. Jeep Wrangler with a hardtop. The first four digits of her license plate.

It's a tiny lead. Barely a lead. But it's all we've got.

"You need to talk to Crystal's boyfriend," Chasity says, and it jerks both of our attention to her, hard. She smiles, but it's not warm.

This woman doesn't know how to show warmth, not to anyone but the baby in her arms and her sister sitting, sobbing softly now, at her side.

"Bethie hated him. Partly why she and Crystal drifted apart so much. He was all around bad news. He was working with Morningstar," she adds, "Or that's the rumor I heard."

Eli's head jerks up at that, and his eyes are wide and angry. "*Morningstar?*"

Chasity doesn't seem phased at all that my brother is looking at her like he wants to rip her apart. She just smiles and nods a little.

"Who is Morningstar?" I ask, my voice low.

Chasity laughs, a little brittle and a lot angry.

“Archer,” Eli snaps. “We’re leaving.”

I resist his sharp tug on my arm and glare at her, “Who the fuck is Morningstar?”

“Figure that out, detective, and you’ll know who the hell killed my niece.”

Eli says something, and I can’t hear it over the roar in my head because Eli is hiding things from me. Again.

I’m reminded, suddenly, that we’re supposed to be investigating prostitutes and that Eli had a...something, an *in*...that I didn’t. I twist a little and pin my brother with a heavy glare but he ignores it and thanks Chasity before he leaves. Doesn’t even speak to me or acknowledge the fury I’m radiating.

Chasity gives me a sympathetic look before she walks me to the door. Because this is Green County, after all. And Eli’s temper is a thing that everyone knows, here. Even a girl like Chasity, wrapped up in her grief and family.

“Thank you for talking to us,” I say, finally and she nods.

“Get the bastard who killed my niece, Detective, and keep your thanks.”

With that parting order, she shuts the door on me, shutting the family up with their deep grief and I turn to look at my brother, scowling and pacing next to the Roadrunner as he talks into his phone.

I take my time descending the stairs to flank him.

But when he hangs up and moves to slide into the car, I make a furious noise that stills him.

“We don’t have time for this,” he says sharply.

“We’re gonna make time,” I snap.

Eli snarls, a wordless noise of fury and I grab him by the collar, toss him against the Roadrunner. “Who the fuck is he?”

Eli shakes his head. Shrugs. “I don’t know, Archer. If I did, I’d tell you. But. Scarlett talked about him, sometimes. Not a lot. I got the feeling he’s a big player. But not the big player.”

Scarlett. It always circles back to that fucking whore. I want to reach into our past and rip her out like a tumor.

It’s not a bad description of the bitch.

And I’m too tired to deal with this shit, with Scarlett and the fall out that just keeps coming, right now. So I let my brother go and circle the car, climbing in.

Change the subject completely, “Have you heard from Gabe?”

Eli checks his phone and shakes his head. “She’s probably just writing, Archer. She’s fine.”

And I know that’s true. I do. But I can’t wrap my head around it so I shake myself a little and crank the engine.

And even though I don’t say anything to him, we both know I’m going to Hazel as soon as I can.

At the station, Eli ignores me completely. He throws himself into research while I fill the Chief in on what we learned and he turns it over in his head.

“Have you heard of Morningstar?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nope. That’s a new one for me. Eli has, though?”

I bite my nail, worrying it for a second while I try to sort through everything. There are too many dead bodies. Too many secrets. Too many things hidden.

I can’t figure out what I’m supposed to be chasing right now.

“Why did you think Eli could do something with the prostitutes?”

“Because he’s been working with them for months. He’s looking for someone down there and the girls know it. Knows he won’t trip them up.”

“Crystal was dating a boy who works for Morningstar,” I say. “So maybe whatever is going on with the prostitutes has something to do with what went on in that house.” “It’s a stretch,” Billings says.

“I know but it’s all we’ve got for now.”

He gives me a brisk nod. “Chase it down and see what happens. See what shakes out.”

I nod and shove out my seat and go to where my brother is still bent over his research. His shoulders come up a little when I approach and I know he's braced for my anger and a discussion he doesn't want to have.

Scarlett and everything to do with her is *always* gonna be a discussion he doesn't want to have.

“I’m going to see Hazel,” I say. “You still haven’t heard from Gabe, right?”

Eli shakes his head “No, nothing from him.” Nothing from either of them.

I nod. “Okay, I’ll be back in a little bit.”

We both need space. I know it and so does he.

So Eli doesn't protest as I scoop up the keys to the Roadrunner and head out the door.

He stays behind.

Chapter 19

“Who is he?” I asked my voice shaking.

Michael smiles “That's not for me to tell you, Hazel. I've told you our story now I need you to tell stories that people listen to. I need you to tell *her* story.”

I shake my head, adamant, “You're asking me to aid and abet a felon. You're asking me to go against the law when my brother is the cop investigating you. I can't do that, Michael.”

“You don't understand. I'm *not* asking. I'm telling you that you are going to do this or I'm going to kill everyone you love. You've seen my work. You've seen what we can do.” He pauses, and he smiles coldly, “Are you going to tell the people a story or am I going to let John loose with his knife?”

“Come near my family and I'll fucking kill you,” I spit.

“I don't want to touch your family. Killing people is not what I want to do. It's a bad side of my business but the fact is I *will*. Because I need you and this is the way I'm going to motivate you. The ball's in your court, Hazel. What are you going to do?” It's not a question.

He knows it and so do I. I'm going to do exactly what he's demanding.

Because I'm not willing to risk my family. And because it's a story and I've spent six months chasing one—chasing *this* story. I can't walk away from this even if I know that I should. “I need to talk to your sister,” I say and Michael smiles, quietly triumphant.

“You can come by the house tomorrow,” he says.

Behind me, John stirs the first time since this conversation began and Michael started telling me this story about his family and Hanna and everything that's between them all. A story that I'm still having trouble wrapping my head around.

“Mike,” John snaps, “you can't just leave her here like this. She knows too much. She'll tell the damn cops.”

Michael stares at him for a long minute before he smiles, “No, she won't,” he says. His voice is musing but it turns a little sharper. “I can't touch your brothers or Nora right now. Not without bringing more heat on us than I can handle at the moment. But Gabriel,” his voice trails off into a lilting question and his smile is dark and devilish.

My stomach drops and twists and I'm shaking suddenly.

“What did you do?” I demand.

Even John looks startled as Michael produces a cell phone. And there he is in bright shiny color, blood on his face. Hands bound in front of him and a gag shoved in his mouth. Still, for all that he has a gun to his head and he's on his knees, bloody and beaten, my best friend looks fucking furious.

And that helps some.

Knowing that even though he's in danger, he isn't broken.

“If,” Michael says, “I see a cop anywhere near me or John between now and tomorrow when you talk to my sister, I'll kill him.”

“You know I have to see them. My brother and Archer. They're not going to leave me alone, especially with a murder scene this close to my house.”

Michael nods, “I expect that. They're good brothers, after all.”

And my stomach twists. What did they think was happening between me and Archer and Eli? Does he think—I shake my head. What I have, this fragile blooming thing between us, it's

nothing like Hanna and John and Michael, blood relations and siblings in every sense of the word.

I refuse to compare the two.

“See your brothers,” Michael says casually. “Just lie to them. You can keep a secret, Hazel. It’s only for one day and then you can tell my sister’s story and it will be all over.”

I nod once because I have no choices here and he knows it.

He stands and finish the last sip of his coffee and smiles at me as he shrugs into his bloody coat. “It’s good seeing you again, Hazel,” he says, as if we ran into each other at the park or the grocery store. My stomach twists, as I remember seeing him in the park and what he said there.

“I told you we should catch up. It’s good to talk things out. To tell each other what’s been happening over the years. I’m glad we did this.”

He gives me a smile and behind me John shifts again, anxious and impatient.

“Mike, we’ve got to go,” he says.

Michael nods and steps past me. “Keep your phone on,” he says.

And then the doors open and they step out before it closes again and I am alone.

For a moment I sit still and quiet, waiting for them to come back.

Waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And then I'm shaking and a scream is building in my throat. I slap a hand over my mouth, biting down hard and only a whimper escapes. Tiny broken noises as all of the fear and anger flood out of me in one near silent scream.

I don't know how long I stay like that, curled in my chair at the kitchen table, a cup of cold coffee in front of me and Michael's empty cup across from me. But eventually I realize that I'm filthy. Or maybe I just *feel* filthy.

I stumble to my feet and almost run from the room stripping out of my dirty clothes as I go. Smith paces at my side, whining, and I've pat his ears affectionately, distracted, as I turn on the water to the shower as hot as it will go.

It's only when I'm under the spray, my hair dripping in my face, that the shaking finally stops and I can breathe and think again.

Eventually I emerge from the shower. Mostly because I can't hide there forever.

I get dressed in black yoga pants and a tank top and then I wander through the house, cleaning up.

Pick up the messy blankets the boys left on my couch. Toss aside the beer cans and the empty bottles of whiskey. Pile all the dirty dishes in the sink and set them to soak. Archer and Eli both left bloody clothes in my bathrooms and I gather them up before I dump them in the washing machine with stain remover, detergent, and fabric softener. Of course I'm still doing their laundry. Some thing's I think will never change.

Still it makes me feel useful and right now, I need that.

I'm only a little surprised when I hear the Roadrunner pulling up outside. The heavy rumble that shakes the wood underneath my feet.

I hook my wet hair behind my ears and pad silently to the kitchen. Archer is coming up the stairs by himself. And that alone is enough to make my heart try to jump out of my chest. Never mind that I have had someone threaten me today or that my best friend is being held hostage for

my good behavior.

Never mind that he's a cop and exactly who I shouldn't be seeing right now.

Never mind that everything between us is up in the air and so complicated that I can't breathe.

I see him alone standing on my porch, staring at me with those forest green eyes and I want him.

It's the thing that I haven't really let myself admit.

I want Brandon Archer.

Good, bad, dirty, all of the things in between I want all of it. I want *all* of him.

My mouth goes dry and I can't say anything at all as I push the door open and let him in.

I've spent most of my life keeping secrets. Some are little and some are not. Some are harmless, some would devastate everything.

And then there are other secrets. The ones that wouldn't just devastate—they would destroy.

The thing about secrets is no matter how you deal with them, someone will be hurt when they come to light. And they always do.

That's the other thing I've learned.

I remember the first time someone broke my trust. I was in first grade and my best friend came to my house. I told her about the chocolate that my mother hid in our library and how sometimes when I was really upset with her, I would steal a piece. Later, she got mad at me, my friend, and she ran to my mother and told her that I was stealing chocolate.

Mama didn't so much care as I was upset with my friend.

The nature of secrets is to be told. Spread. Broken. To be spilled over and shared.

To slice into and break apart.

Four years ago, I slept with my best friend. The boy who had kept my secrets and held my heart. And then I ran away. The truth was—the secret that I hid was—I was going to leave before that night ever happened.

It only happened because I was leaving.

Being in Green County with Archer without being *with* Archer hurt too much for me to stay.

Running away was the best and worst decision I've ever made.

But now I'm home again and secrets are spilling over and piling up and begging to be told, begging to be shared.

It is the nature of secrets to not remain. To find their way the truth. And that terrifies me.

Archer steps inside my house and I fall back a step to let him.

"I thought you'd be too busy to come bother me," I say crisply, falling back on snark and sarcasm.

"You weren't answering your phone," he says, glancing at where it's sitting on the kitchen table. His eyes narrow. "Did you have company?"

I blink. His voice a little bit annoyed. I glanced over the table and realize that Michael's coffee cup is still sitting across from mine.

It's the nature of secrets to come to light.

"No, I woke up in the middle of the night, ended up with two cups. I forgot that I had made one. It doesn't matter. What are you doing here?" I ask as I scoop both cups off the table and

dump them in the sink with the rest of the dirty dishes.

Then focus on the way he's frowning at me like he doesn't quite believe me and doesn't know if he should push.

"Do you remember Scarlett?" he asks.

I frown. "No. Who is she?"

He blows out of breath, frustrated, "A couple years ago, while you were gone, Eli got into some trouble. Scarlett had a lot to do with it."

"What kind of trouble?" I demand.

Archer shifts, uneasy. "The kind that included rehab and a six month vacation from the force."

"What the actual *fuck*? Why the hell would you keep this from me?" I shout, jerking away from the dirty dishes, my mind racing.

Eli was on drugs?

"You were happy in Boston." Archer says, patiently. "I wasn't going to fuck that up telling you your brother had a drug addiction and a bitch with her hooks in him. I took care of it. I took care of Eli. Took care of all of them."

"Taking care of Eli includes me," I protest. "It always included *me*. We take care of both of them together."

"Yeah, well. You left. You left so I had to take care of them by myself and I did the best that I could."

"Wow," I say and I give him a fake smile, "Tell me how you really feel, then."

"Why don't you tell me," he snaps, "why the hell you decided that you should sleep with me and then run away for four fucking years?"

I swallow hard. "I don't want to have this conversation," I say.

"And we can we only do things on your timetable," he says, bitter. Frowning, he shakes his head, "Fine. I'll play your game. But I need your help."

"With what?" I ask, nerves in my belly. I'm used to seeing a lot of things, but Archer angry...I don't know what to make of this. Of him.

He's never pushed me. Not when it comes to us. If there is an us.

"I need to know everything you know or can find out about Morningstar. You're a journalist. You can dig deeper than I can, go places that legally, I can't. He's connected to this and I need to know how."

Of course. Of course, he needs to know. Now that I have Michael and John breathing down my neck and Gabriel—. I shake my head. I shut the thought down before it can cross my face and clue Archer in.

"Okay. Give me everything you've got and I'll see what I can find out. I can't make any promises, you know that."

"Yeah. I get it. Just do your best—that's all I need, okay?"

"Hey, where's Eli?" I ask, belated, my voice all fake happy.

"He's at the station doing some research." Archer goes quiet, and then, "Have you heard from Gabe today?"

I nod. "Yes, he was in meetings with clients all day. If you don't hear from him, it's nothing to worry about."

Archer starts to turn away. *It's the nature of secrets to be shared.*

"I left because it hurt too much to stay."

He goes still, the kind of waiting, watchful stillness that makes me nervous. And makes

want burn hot and heavy in my gut. “What did?” he asks quietly.

I shake my head, helpless, because I can't answer that question.

Archer curses sharply under his breath and then crowds me against the kitchen counter.

“Stop hiding from me Hazel,” he snarls.

So I take the leap. I say, “It hurt too much to be around you. I couldn't just stay here and watch you work your way through all the women in the fucking County. While you came to me and told me your secrets. I was the girl who held you together but never the girl that you wanted. I couldn't do it. I had to leave.”

He's staring at me like he's never seen me before. “Hazel,” he says stunned,

“What are you talking about? It was never like that. That's not what we were.”

“That's *always* what we were. We saw each other's worst sides, Archer, and because we did we could show everyone else the best. I got to see both sides of you—the good and the bad. You know all those girls who fell into your bed love you because of every good thing about you. I hated it then. That's my secret, my Brutally Honest. I fucking hate it because they didn't know *you*. They knew the best sides of you but they didn't know *everything*. And I couldn't stay here and watch you with them. So I left.”

“Why haven't you said something? Why did you run away for four years instead of talking to me?” He sounds so hurt and betrayed, it twists my heart up a little.

“What did you want me to say? *Okay, I know we can't be together cuz you know, all the reasons, but I'm in love with you—*” I freeze and he makes a noise like a wounded animal.

“Hazel,” he almost groans and then he's on me, his lips on mine and I am lost, completely drowning.

The thing that's always saved me. I'm drowning in it now.

His hands are in my hair, fingers digging in and holding me where he wants as he kisses me, soft and sweet and slow. Until I snarl against him because it's been fucking four years and we're finally alone, without Eli five feet away sleeping, and I'm tired of wanting when he's so fucking close. I snarl and my hands, on his shoulders, curl into him, nails digging into his broad shoulders and he hisses, breaking away from my lips as he groans.

He likes that, the bite of pain.

“Don't tease,” I murmur against his lips and he groans.

“No teasing, baby girl. Just us.” he kisses me again, these deep long licks that have me clinging to him and my body reeling. I want more. I want everything.

I don't get to keep him. I don't get to keep *this* but I want it anyway.

He kisses me, and I whimper as he does, and he takes my soft noises, swallowing down my little whimpers, his hands closing around my hips, holding me still and close. He holds me like I'm fragile and precious and like he can't get me close enough, like he wants to press me into his body, until we're not Archer and Hazel, and separate.

And with his hands on me like that, his lips eating up every noise I make and the sweet taste of him on my lips, I can almost let myself think this means as much to him as it does to me.

“Hey,” he whispers, pulling away a little. “I'm losing you, pretty girl. Stay with me, huh?”

Tears sting my eyes and I lean into him, pressing open mouth kisses to his throat while I shove my emotions down. I scrape my teeth over his skin and he shivers, just a little.

“Bedroom,” he mutters and I freeze.

The one time we had sex, it was in my bedroom, wrapped in darkness and moonlight and so damn intimate and real it almost broke me.

There is a very real fear that it will, if I take him there again.

So I whisper, “too far,” and jerk away from him. Strip out of my tank top and sprawl across the couch and it’s a dirty trick but it does the job.

Archer forgets completely about my bedroom, and sprawls across me on the couch. His lips suck sweet pressure against my throat, and I groan, my hand in his hair as he slips lower and jerks my bra aside, taking me in his mouth.

And I scream.

Archer groans, his tongue twisting around my nipple, and we’re loud. His mouth on me, his muffled noises, my pleas for *more, please, more, Archer!* Louder and louder, until it eats up the silence around us and it’s just him and his hungry wet mouth, and me, my body writhing under him, riding that delicious line of want and too much, and then he’s pulling away and I snarl.

He kisses me as he yanks my pants down, and I scream again, into his mouth, as his fingers fill me. Fuck into me, hard and perfect because they’re rough, but sweet. I arch as his thumb brushes my clit, swallowing the noise that wants to break free, the one that is more sob than scream, more his name than anything else.

“Hazel,” he murmurs, and I blink. Focus on him.

Fuck. Bad idea. Shouldn’t focus on him. Not when he’s staring at me like that, like I’m the fucking sun and stars and every good thing. Like I’ve *always* wanted him to look at me.

“You’re so perfect, baby,” he says, hoarsely, and his fingers twist, deep inside me and I moan.

The orgasm startles both of us, arches my back off the couch and I’m shaking, my whole body wrapped up in the feel of his fingers on me, *in* me, and the pleasure that’s washing through me. Cresting. He doesn’t stop. His thumb keeps moving, that maddening little circular stroke that has my hips jerking up, into his touch, and my hand wrapped around his wrist, and I don’t know if it’s to drag him closer or push him away and I don’t think it matters anymore.

Nothing matters but this.

The second orgasm is slower. It builds, slow and sweet, while he finger fucks me and whispers dirty promises in my ear and licks a path down to my nipples.

The third orgasm hits as soon as he covers me with his lips, tiny licks and the whisper of a pull on my clit, his fingers holding me open as he licks me, silent finally.

And it’s not enough. I want more.

I want *Archer*

“Fuck me,” I whisper, when he slowly thrusts his fingers into me.

“Please, Archer, fuck me,” I moan, when he licks his fingers clean and goes down on me.

“Dammit, Archer,” I snarl, when he puffs soft against my skin, “*fuck me.*” I scream, when he does.

When he shoves his jeans down, and rips his shirt off, and he’s towering over me, all muscle and tattooed skin and I catch the tiny hoop hanging from his nipple and twist.

His hips punch up, and I laugh, low and pleased, because he *does* like pain.

My nails dig into his back, when he slides into me, and I sob. He breathes my name, like a promise. Like *home*.

Like I am everything he’s ever wanted.

Chapter 20

When Hazel kisses me, it's this quick, sweet press before she jerks back. Away. Eyes wide and worried. Like she's afraid I'll be...what? Mad? Does she think I'll be pissed that she's done what I've wanted her to do for years?

Since I came home from the Corps and she punched me in the nose, and I realized my little blue eyed ghost had grown up and grown some balls.

I fucked girls. They were in and out of my bed regularly, all sweet and willing and easy.

But I didn't get attached, and they fucking knew better than to. Getting attached was stupid—I wasn't looking for long term. I wasn't even looking for the weekend. I'd had too many people in my life disappear for me to want to invite some hot piece of ass into my life long term.

There was one girl. In high school. Hazel fucking loathed her, which, looking back was kind of a tell. She was a sweet girl. Maddie May.

Honest to god, that was the girl's fucking name.

Anyway. I thought I could have something with her. She was sweet. She liked Eli. Even Nora could tolerate her and Nora didn't like anyone Eli or I brought home.

But then she left. Said she wanted more than the County. I was invited, which I guess was some kind consolation prize. Maddie knew I wasn't leaving the County. She knew I wouldn't leave my family.

She said we were codependent and dysfunctional and had a few unappealing theories about me and Eli.

And she was right. Of course she was. Not about me and Eli—that's just fucked up right there, the kid is my brother but about our dysfunction and dependence?

Yeah.

That was us all day.

Maddie reminded me that I can't have this. Not when I have them. And since I know Eli and Hazel and Nora will never leave me, I don't mind too much, giving up the idea of stability with some girl who won't ever really get me. Fuck a girl here and there.

But my family is here. Always will be.

Except.

Hazel.

Hazel was both. She was the girl I could be me with, and she was home. And when I came home and she let me know just how pissed she was that I'd left—it clicked.

I knew she was in this weird place of want and distance. Like she was arguing with herself about what she should want, what she should let herself want.

And I knew all the reasons we shouldn't be together. Nora.

Eli.

She was my best friend, and I ruined every relationship—I didn't want to ruin us.

But then.

She kisses me, and she looks so nervous. Body tense and ready for me to push her away.

"Hazel," I murmur, and crawl up the bed, until I'm leaning into her space. Her eyes are wide and watching me, confused. Until I close that space between us, and her eyes drift closed, a noise like a sigh slipping free.

Like. Yes. And this is right. And Finally.

So I lift her, and she makes this happy noise against my mouth, and I swallow it down, lick it from her lips, tease a whimper from her when I nip at her lip and slide along her tongue, and it's not enough.

It's not enough.

I shift, my knees coming up on either side of her, and she arches into me, all pliant soft heat pushing against my hard dick and—

“Fuck,” I snarl, ripping away from her mouth, and she laughs.

Throaty and low and fucking hell, I love that noise in her mouth. I love that I am the one who pulls it from her, and I'm the one who kisses it from her lips.

She's staring at me, her eyes hooded and glittering with hunger and this breathless excitement that I remember. Her pinky nail is caught in the silver hoop on my nipple, a relic from my years in the Corp and stupid fucking decisions made under the influence of too much alcohol.

She tugs and I gasp, arching against her and she laughs.

That noise hasn't changed, not even a little bit, over the years. She still laughs when she's turned on and desperate, and it still rubs against me like an electric wire of want.

I want to take my time with her. Want to stretch it out until it lasts forever.

I can't go another four years, without feeling her tight and warm around me, her skin silky against mine, her lips sucking bruises against my collar bone.

I don't think I can go four days.

She's begging, and I almost come, when I thrust into her. When her body shudders around me, so close to the edge, that she's almost coming just from that. I freeze, when I'm inside her, fighting the orgasm that's crawling up my throat. Kiss her, slow and soft, and whisper her name like a fucking prayer, until she's smiling, her lips lazy against mine.

She drags a hiss from me when she rolls her hips, this filthy fucking motion that makes me see stars. Breathe a curse against her lips that she licks away and kisses until she breaks off with a low moan, arching into me as I fuck her.

No.

No.

Not fuck.

I fuck girls who don't matter. The endless parade of them who will *never* matter.

But this. As I thrust into her and she rolls up to meet me, her hand on my chest, tugging that fucking ring, her body a wave of motion that keeps tugging me toward climax, her eyes lazy and hungry and so fucking full—this isn't fucking.

I'm not ready to name this.

But I know what it isn't.

She moans, suddenly, and her body freezes, even as she yanks hard on my nipple ring, and rears up, biting me, muffling her cry against my skin as she comes.

Even torn up by orgasm, she's fierce. She's fighting, and demanding my own pleasure. She's *Hazel*. My fierce, stubborn, beautiful ghost.

I thrust into her again, and she whimpers, as I come. As I drop down on her, forgetting for a moment to keep my weight off her, and kiss her, pleasure blanking out everything but the *need* for her.

I come, and she shudders, and if it feels like we're holding each other together. If the way she clings to me, and the way I kiss her, is a little desperate—well.

We both keep that to ourselves.

The room is quiet, and she's breathing, slow and even, against my chest. She's pliant, so soft against me. For a long time, we lay there, in silence.

But I know her. And I feel it, the moment she starts to pull away. The moment something trips in her pretty little head, and says, *no. Dangerous.*

She doesn't pull away from me.

It's worse than that.

She gets closer. Snuggles into me, her grip turning impossibly tight, and her lips brushing against my skin once, as she sighs.

Then.

"Don't you fucking dare," I mutter, tightening my grip and yanking her back to me. She huffs a breath, like she can't believe I did that, and shoves a hand between us, onto the bruises she sucked into my skin, and no.

She's not pushing me away, not after this.

"Why?" I ask simply, giving her the room she's asking for—enough of it, anyway, that I can look into those big blue eyes.

I see the flicker of hesitation; the way she bites her lip.

She used to do that, when Nora was demanding something, some piece of information that Hazel thought wasn't good for her.

She's weighing the consequences of telling me the truth and protecting me.

"C'mon, Hazel," I murmur, sliding my fingers up her bare back and into her hair. I get a grip and use it to pull her head back, gently, so she's looking at me. "You don't protect me, Hazy-eyes. Never did. We protect *them*, but we're *honest* with each other."

"Leaving four years ago was to protect you," she says back, her voice breathy and fuck, I love hearing her like that. All turned on and hating it.

"Leaving was to protect you. Don't lie to yourself." I shake her head a little and her eyes roll up, pleasure chasing across her face.

"I can't be with you," she whispers, eyes closed. *Shit.*

I knew that. Knew that we couldn't be more than *this* and what we already were. But fuck it hurts, hearing her say it out loud.

"I can't be with you because it would kill Nora and infuriate Eli and because you need someone—"

"I swear to fuck, if you say better than you," I say, casually, "I will turn you over my knee and spank your ass."

She smirks, a slow thing and I add, "And it won't be the good kind of spanking, Hazy girl."

She laughs, and rolls away from me. I sit up with her, trace my fingers over her back.

But the levity falls just as quickly as it rises, and she curls inward, slightly.

She's naked and sweat slick, her hair ruffled from my fingers, and her lips red from my kisses.

And she looks, impossibly, like the ghost of a girl I pulled from her shy shell, so many years ago.

"Archer we don't work, like this."

"Why not?" I ask, against her skin.

Her head tilts to the side and she pins me with that sharp blue gaze that sees right through

me. "I can think of two damn good reasons." *Eli. Nora.*

Because this—fuck, this would devastate them. Nora would never understand, even if I could get Eli to. She raised us together.

Hazel had never, not once in the sixteen years since we all ended up on Nora's couch with a few ratty bags and a shit load of grief—she has never called me brother.

I've never been her brother.

I've been her partner, and her friend, and her ally.

But I've never been her brother.

I don't want to be.

That doesn't mean Nora and Eli would agree, if I were to show up at the diner and announce that I was in love with the girl I grew up with.

Fuck. I freeze, going tense. And because I'm pressed against her, she feels it. She twists a little, her gaze finding mine, curious and worried.

"I don't care," I whisper and her mouth falls open, a little. I smile, a little bit of tension easing in my chest and I sit up. Pull her against me and whisper the words against her skin. "We spent our whole life taking care of other people, Hazel. We spent our whole life taking care of *them*. When is it our turn?"

She gives me a tiny smile and kisses me, gentle. "We don't get one."

I growl against her lips, and she huffs a laugh, a small, startled noise. "That's not good enough for me, Hazel."

She stands, shifting away from me. Slips into a pair of shorts that are barely there and pulls a loose tank top on.

Covering herself up and hiding from me.

"I don't want to do this," I say clearly, and she goes very still. Her eyes wide and watching me. "I don't want to fuck you in secret or get you off while Eli is asleep in the next room, muffling your screams because he can't know. I don't want to sit across from you at Mama's and pretend we're nothing more than we always have been." I shake my head and stand up, dressing. "I love you too much to do that shit anymore, Hazel."

Chapter 21

I follow him out of my into my bedroom, and he cleans up while I get dressed, my body still buzzing with remembered pleasure, and reeling from the quietly spoken confession.

I don't know what to do with an Archer who is in love with me. I've spent too many years telling myself that some things aren't possible. Too many years knowing that it didn't matter how I felt or how he felt—there was too much between us to ever be an *us*. Too much from Eli and Nora to let us be more than the other half of the family.

But now he's saying the things I've wanted to hear, and told myself could never happen and it's so damn tempting.

I want it so damn bad, I'm ready to take his hand and drag him to Mama's. To go to the station and kiss him hard and dirty against the wall behind his desk and traumatize Eli in the process.

I can't.

But I want to.

So fucking bad.

He's in the kitchen, pouring tea in glasses, and tossing the stuff to make sandwiches on the table. I slide in beside him and it's easy.

The fact is that being with Archer. Working with him has always been effortless. We never talked about what we did—we never needed to. We understood each other without talking about it.

So it's like breathing, slipping back into that. Handing him cheese while I slather mayo and mustard on the bread, tearing off lettuce while he scoffs and piles both sandwiches high with ham and roast beef. Cutting both sandwiches neatly in half and placing them on plate while he adds a pickle to mine and a bag of chips to the table and pulls his open to salt and pepper it.

It's easy and it stings and it makes everything we could be—a whole future and a life—almost reachable.

"Archer," I say, and my phone buzzes.

His eyebrows climb but I swallow hard and shove the words down and look at the message.

Unknown: Stop playing house. Get to work. She'll see you at the lake.

I swallow my nerves and tuck the phone away before taking a bite of my sandwich. "What was that?" Archer asks.

I shrug and offer up a thin smile. "Story I'm working on. What's going on with your homicide?"

He blows out a breath. "I don't know. I need to talk to Eli, but every time I do and Scarlett comes up, I lose it."

Typical Archer.

"What happened, there?" I ask, gently. Ignoring the fury I'm feeling that my brother was being dicked over by some bitch and Archer didn't think to tell me.

That doesn't matter, and doesn't have a place, not right now.

"She was someone he met at work, if you'd believe that. From a precinct in Topeka. We had a kidnapping—domestic shit, custody didn't shake out the way the dad wanted so he scooped the

kids and beat tracks to here. It was Scarlett's case and she met Eli and that was it.

You know how he can be with the initial fall."

I do know. My brother has always fallen too hard and too fast.

But after Amy and then Lisa, I don't know. I thought he'd back down. "Was there anyone else, after Scarlett?" I ask.

Archer shakes his head. "It happened a few months after you left. He met her and three months later he was moving out and the Chief was furious and—fucking hell, Hazel he was snorting coke like it was going out of style and going to work a fucking case. He's what I would arrest, if I weren't doing everything I could to keep him clean and on the force."

"What happened?"

"Scarlett was dirty. We got that from her department pretty quickly, once I realized something wasn't right and started digging. She'd been stealing from the evidence locker for years and letting some big fish skate out of their arrests without a damn thing sticking. But she's smart. She played it close. Then, with Eli. I dunno, Hazy, it's like she got sloppy. Didn't care if she got caught. Or maybe she was just cocky enough to think it'd be missed. She never had a lot of respect for the GCPD. I don't know. But I talked to Billings, and got Eli clean. He was on probation with the force for almost two years. But he also flushed out Scarlett and Topeka owed us for that, which helped keep Billings happy while we got him back on the straight and narrow."

And he stayed on it.

But it makes sense, now. Why Eli looks so fucking haunted, so much of the time. Why his smile is brittle and not quite as real as my brother has always been. Sometimes he is. But it's different.

Tainted.

God.

"What happened to her?" I ask, and my voice is pure venom, all biting fury that gets Archer's attention.

"She vanished. Left Topeka and the County, and went to hide with whoever the fuck she's been working for."

Bitch. Fuck up my brother's life and then vanish. Bitch deserves to be strung up and skinned slowly—

"Breathe for me, Hazy-eyes. She's gone. Eli is safe. I need you with me, not hell-bent on bringing that whore to her knees."

I snarl and he laughs. Even now, he's more amused by my temper than intimidated by it. Dumbass.

"Eli is fine, now. He is, sweetheart. And we can use this."

"Why? How?"

"Morningstar. Eli thinks Scarlett was working with him."

My blood runs cold, because it's the second time he's mentioned that name. And Michael did, too.

"There's something bigger here," I murmur, and Archer shifts, stealing a sliver of onion that falls from my mostly untouched sandwich. "It's why I came home." Not *strictly* true, but close enough.

"Green County is a corridor. And the prostitutes down on Victory are too well organized—there's something in the background. Fuck, Archer, even Emery is dirty."

He stiffens, and his eyes dart away. I go still. "You fucked Abbi Emery?" I say, slowly.

Because I know him, and I know what the hell he looks like when he's feeling guilty about

shit.

“Don’t judge me,” he mutters, dropping the last bite of his sandwich on his plate.

I laugh, a short, incredulous noise. The girl has been trying to get Archer in her bed for the better part of the past sixteen years, since she realized that an Airplane Orphan would buy a mountain of goodwill in Green County.

Even when she was a senior in high school, Abbi Emery knew exactly what she wanted.

“It was a dumb move, I’m aware. Eli has had a lot of fun reminding me on a regular basis. Now. Moving along. What the fuck are you talking about?”

I blink at him. “Archer. C’mon. You know the County isn’t as Boy-Scout Americana as the fucking tourists would believe.”

He shrugs, a little uncomfortable looking and I huff a sigh. “The County is lousy with corruption. It’s on base, and it’s in the Mayor’s office, and the only reason I tend to think it’s not in the force is because you’re there and you’d kill someone for touching your precious force. But it’s a thing. And I think this—the murders the other day—have to do with that.”

“Why?”

“Because why else would someone go through that much trouble? There was a lot of rage behind her murder, right?” I play it over in my head. What he told me. The blank horror in Eli’s eyes.

And Michael and John, bloody and furious and too fucking calm.

Yeah. This was personal.

“You shouldn’t get involved,” he says suddenly, and I jerk, hard. My eyes wide. He’s got this look, coming over his face that I know too well.

“Archer-”

“It’s dangerous, Hazel. You need to stay out of it and let me do my job. I don’t know what the hell I was thinking.”

“Archer-”

“Just. Forget Morningstar. Forget Scarlett. I’ve got it.”

I stand while he’s still babbling, and he watches me. Watches as I skirt the corner of the table and get a good grip on his hair, and jerk his head up.

I kiss him silent.

His hands find my waist, drag me down, and I whimper as I land against him, his cock hard against me.

Already. Jesus. He could fuck me again, already, and that’s a very tempting thought.

“You’re gonna get yourself hurt,” he whispers.

Probably. With Gabriel being held by crazy killers, the chances of that are a lot more likely than Archer realizes, not that I’m gonna be the one to clue him in.

“Let me help. I’m good at digging up secrets. And I never got hurt doing it, when I lived in Boston.” I nip his earlobe as he traces a hot path down my throat, and his teeth close over the curve of my neck. My hips roll down, into him, without any real permission from me. “You need me.”

He hums against my skin, an acknowledgment of that. Breathes the words against my lips. “I’ve always needed you, Hazy-girl.”

I make a noise that’s like a whimper and he takes it. Takes my lips and gives me back so much more. Holds me close, and together, when his words threaten to shake me apart and his lips curve over mine and coax me open, licking into my mouth with this hunger that’s fucking insane. I want him.

As stupid and dangerous and impossible as it is. I want him.

I think I always will.

I twist in his grip, and until I'm straddling him in the chair, and rocking against him and his hands are in my hair. So easy. It'd be so fucking easy, to slip his jeans down and tug my shorts to one side and ride him, right here.

I groan and he laughs against my lips, arching up into me, his voice a filthy hot promise in my ear. "Wanna ride me, huh, baby? Just fucked you. But you're a greedy girl and you want it again, don't you?"

His hips punch up again, punctuate his statement and I moan.

"What. The. *Fuck. Are you doing?*"

Chapter 22

I was sixteen, when I met Eli for the first time.

It's funny, that someone who became the central figure of my life could be absent from it for sixteen fucking years. Half my life, and he wasn't part of it. That's weird as fuck, when I think about it too hard.

Because if there is anyone who has affected me, it's Eli. Nora and Hazel, they have their places, and they're important. I wouldn't be the man I am, if Nora hadn't kicked my ass back into line, and Hazel hadn't demanded I step up and take care of Eli.

But Eli.

Lijah is what kept me moving. He forced me to be better, and kept me from falling apart, when Hazel left and always needed me. Even when she left and Nora got used to being on her own again, Eli needed me.

I was sixteen, when I met Eli for the first time.

I was furious, all rage and grief and violence balanced on a hair's trigger.

Eli was the same, but he turned all that fury and grief inward, made it his own burden. He was terrified of being abandoned, terrified of being a problem and having Nora turn him out.

The kid was a fucking mess.

But he was *my* mess. And I put him back together, patched up the worst cracks in his self-worth, and he started to heal. Not completely. Some things you never completely heal from—losing your single mother in a fucking plane crash is one of those things. But what Eli needed was a place to belong. Someone to belong to.

And I gave him that. *We* gave him that.

Doesn't mean we didn't fight like fucking savages, when he got pissed, and he did. Often.

I'm pretty sure that this moment, with him standing in Hazel's kitchen, all furious lines and disbelieving eyes, as Hazel sits panting and on the edge of orgasm in my lap—pretty sure this is one of those times we're gonna fight like savages.

"What the hell is happening?" he demands, his voice a tight line of fury. Hazel is tense and still in my lap, and I look at her, quickly. Checking that she's not freaking out too badly.

She totally is.

Shit.

"Up, baby," I murmur, patting her ass and she scrambles out of my lap and away from me.

And *that* isn't happening.

"This's got nothing to do with you, Eli," I say, softly, catching her hand and dragging her close enough to me that I can catch her before she bolts. She throws me a disbelieving look, like she can't quite believe *that's* the argument I'm going with.

"She's our fucking *sister*, Archer!" Eli yells.

Hazel throws up a hand, and glares at Eli. "*She* is right here, and wasn't fucking forced into anything, so if you have a problem with this—" she points between us, "you don't get to be pissed at him. You take that shit out on both of us."

"You've been in love with him since you were fourteen, Hazel," Eli snaps, disgusted. "Of course you'd jump all over him. He's a fucking slut who needs to learn where the fuck his boundaries are."

Hazel freezes, her eyes wide and hurt, and I see the second it clicks with Eli, just how far

over the line he's crossed. "Hazel," he starts, and she skitters back a step.

"Get the fuck outta my house," she orders, her voice low and tight. Eli makes a wounded noise and she snarls, ripping her hand from me, and marching to the door. "You want to treat me like one of his throw away whores, Lijah, I'll treat you the exact same way. Get the fuck *out*."

Eli is pale, and throws me a pleading look. I shake my head. "You fucked this one up, dude. I'd do what she said."

He glares, all furious indignation, but he does. He leaves. She stares at him when he's on the back porch, giving her his pleading puppy eyes. "Hazel, you know I didn't mean that. This— it's fucked up. You *know* it's fucked up."

She stares at him. "I know that I told him no. That I wouldn't do a fucking relationship, because I was worried about you. And you want to tell me I'm one of his whores? Fuck you, Elijah."

She slams the door in his face, before he can protest or attempt to defend himself and I rise, studying her. "You okay?"

Hazel gives me that *are you a fucking idiot?* stare I know so well, and makes a dismissive noise. "Cat's out, now. Get out of here and do some fucking damage control. I'll call when I find out something useful about Morningstar."

She goes on tiptoes to kiss me, and then she's moving, away from me.

I know a Hazel dismissal when I see one, so I don't bother to push for more.

Especially since I can see Eli next to my car, glaring at me.

Fuck.

I take a deep breath, and shove out of the house, buckling my gun belt on and jogging down the stairs of the farmhouse.

"Don't," I warn, before he can even open his mouth. "You don't get to have an opinion about this."

"I don't get to have an opinion about you fucking our sister." I jerk around and shove him, hard.

Hard enough that he stumbles back a step.

Eli never expects me to go on the offensive.

"I've never *fucked* Hazel. And you'll treat her with some fucking respect, or I'll lay you out, Lijah, I swear to god."

His eyes go very wide, and he pales. Sways just a little. "*Archer*," he whispers.

"You don't get an opinion, Lijah. Not on this. What Hazel and I do, that's between us. We'll let you know when and if it affects you. Until then, keep your fucking mouth shut and give her the fucking respect she deserves." I glare at him and he nods, once. Still watching me with that wide, almost scared stare.

I can't deal with that stare. Not yet. So I turn to the Roadrunner and throw over my shoulder, "Let's go. We've got four dead bodies and we're still no closer to answers."

Chapter 23

There is a part of me—a pretty sizable part—that wants to drag Archer back into my room and fuck him senseless, just to shut Eli up after that nonsense.

Another part of me wants to call Nora and tell her not to believe a word Eli says.

Both are throwbacks to when I was in high school and Eli was the annoying big brother who dragged me into more trouble than he managed to drag me out of.

And neither part is something I can indulge in right now. I swallow hard and pull out my phone. It buzzed again, while I was eating with Archer, and I'm not so stupid to think it's anyone but Michael.

I'm right. It's a picture this time, and my fingers creak, too tight, on the casing of the phone.

Gabe is sitting in the same chair. His shirt's been cut away, and there are burns on his chest that weren't there in the last picture.

But he's glaring. His honey gold eyes still bright with fury and indignation. That helps, for some reason.

Unknown: Two hours. The lake.

I glance at the timestamp. Shit.

I've got just enough time to get my shit together and make a phone call before I need to leave. I make the call.

"What'd need, baby girl?" a low drawl answers, and I smirk.

How the hell a redneck tech head ended up in Boston working as a busboy in a dive bar?

God's little mysteries, I suppose.

"Hey Jase. Need you to dig for me," I say. Because it's been almost six months since I vanished from Boston, and I never explained to Jase. I didn't need to. If he was curious, there's very little the hacker couldn't find out. So there's literally no reason for me to waste time with apologies and explanations.

"Personal or for a story?"

I smirk, a little. "Both."

He laughs, and I hear the clatter of keys as he brings his computer to life. Vaguely, I wonder how drunk he is.

A world class hacker and programmer he might be, but the boy spends so much time drunk it's a wonder he can find his way out of a paper bag much less the NSA's database.

"Detective out of Topeka. Scarlett Materson." I spell it out for him, and he whistles.

"How much you want?" He asks.

"Everything." I murmur, and there's a breath of hesitation. A quiet demand for more information. I sigh. "She hurt my family, Jase."

"You'll have it by morning."

"Need it sooner than that. And, I need you to find out what the fuck happened to her when she left the force. Pay attention to whose paying her."

Jase is laughing now. "Damn, Hazel, I've fucking missed you."

I smirk. He always did love a challenge. "Do me a favor? Dig into Morningstar, too. Time's important, ok?"

“Gimme a couple hours,” he says, and hangs up without a goodbye.
My smile fades as I lower the phone and drop it in my purse as I scoop up my keys.
At least someone is happy with me today.

Chapter 24

It occurs to me, as I twist the wheel and turn onto a small, dirt road, that this is one of the stupider things I've done.

I feel like the girl in a horror movie that you yell at as she wanders into the basement alone, like some kind of fucking idiot.

Except, I know there's a killer waiting, and it's not a basement—it's a lake that I used to spend my summers swimming with Archer and Eli. It's where I lost my virginity, the year after Archer ran off to the Marines.

It's where Gabe and I would sit and smoke, while Eli made out with Amy and I dreamed about getting the fuck out of the County.

Later, Aidan and Colt would join us here. Remi brooding nearby like an overgrown emo giant.

And now.

Fuck. I huff out a breath, and stare at the shoreline.

They had to pick a place like this. In the middle of fucking nowhere. No one knew where I was. And so full of memories that it's hard to keep a grip on what I'm doing here.

John is standing on a small pier, where we'd fish and dive off, and lay sprawled out, staring at the stars.

A girl is sitting on the edge, her feet dangling in the water.

Michael is leaning against the rail next to her, ignoring me entirely.

I wonder where the fuck they left Gabe and how they can be so confident that he'll be there, when they return.

Then I remember that Michael and John murdered four people in cold blood less than forty-eight hours ago.

If they want to hold one reclusive, eccentric baker, it wouldn't be terribly difficult.

John shifts, and I let out my breath. Shove the door open and climb out of my truck.

"You're late," he calls, and I glance at my watch.

"I'm not, actually," I say, angry suddenly.

"Your pet cops were at the farmhouse a long time, Hazel. Should we be concerned?" "I'm fucking here. Alone. If anyone gets to be concerned, it's me," I snap.

John snarls, jerking forward and a cool feminine voice splits the air. "Enough, John. Leave her."

It draws both twins to a sudden and abrupt halt. Michael straightens away from the dock and exchanges a glance with his twin as Hanna says, her voice soft and musical, "Come sit with me, Hazel. My brothers promised you a story, and I suppose it's time to deliver."

Chapter 25

The fact that we're in separate cars helps. I need a little distance from Lijah, and if I know anything about the kid—I *do*—he needs the space from me. I'm still refusing to think about that look he gave me in her driveway, just like I'm refusing to think about the way she swayed so fucking sweet on my lap and how close I'd been to sliding into her again, before Eli interrupted. *Shit.*

I wonder, briefly, if he's already told Nora.

The fact that my phone is ridiculously silent says probably not.

Good. We both need to focus, and we have this nice juicy homicide to focus on.

Never thought I'd be glad to have four fucking dead bodies and no leads, but if I can use it to distract Eli from the giant elephant in the room, I'll take just about anything right now.

I'm at my desk, and Billings is on his way toward me, waving a file like it's got some kind of magic eight ball answer when Eli gets back, carrying two cups from CinSations. He offers me one silently, and I eye him.

"Did you two have a lover's spat?" Billings asks and I flip him off as I take the coffee and nod at Eli.

It's not an apology. Not quite. But it's a peace offering and I'll take it.

"We found Beth's car."

That jerks my attention to Billings and Eli whistles. "Where?"

"A strip club on Victory. The Foxy Lady." He glances at the file. "Their surveillance is down, of course, but I sent Harrison and Tucker down to talk to the owner."

I frown and Billings points at me. "Don't get greedy, Archer. You need help with this. Emery is breathing down my fucking neck—no one likes four fucking dead bodies in a house that looks like Manson let his family loose in it."

Fair point. "We got the car being processed?" I ask.

"Yeah. Do we know any more about Crystal's boyfriend?" Billings asks, and I shake my head.

"We're looking at finding him. Crystal didn't leave a lot of clues about who the fuck she was dating."

"Talk to the father. And find out why the fuck the car was at a goddamn strip club."

I nod, and kick Eli's desk. He's staring at his computer, his face a little pale. His eyes jerk to mine and then Billings. "Yes, sir," he says, but it's got no force behind it. I frown at my brother and Billings eyes him for a moment longer than I like.

He might have given Lijah a second chance, but the Chief hasn't forgotten just how close to the edge Eli skated before I yanked him back.

I give him a reassuring nod I don't feel and Billings moves away. I wait until he's safely away and then glare at Eli. "What the fuck, Eli?" I snarl.

"Dude." He's staring at his computer. "Look at this."

The email is from an address I don't recognize.

From: J.drhckxtrme@gmail.com

To: Elijah.Beasley.GC@gmail.com

Subject: In Case She Doesn't Answer.

Yo. She said if she didn't answer her phone to send this shit to you. Attached, find all relevant shit on one Scarlett Materson—that bitch is in some dangerous shit, dirty as fuck.

And also, everything I can dig up on Morningstar operation. It's not much, but I'm still working. She thought it was a person. Not the case. Near as I can tell, she's looking at an organized ring—drugs, prostitutes, trafficking the works. What the actual fuck is she digging into down there? You've got at least three people at the top of Morningstar. It's a BFD. And they're dangerous as fuck.

I don't know what she's digging up or who this story is for, but I know she's got a bad fucking habit of getting into trouble. Do me a favor and make sure she doesn't get herself shot again.

I'll keep digging into Morningstar and Materson. If you need anything else, call the bar. J-

Eli's fingers are shaking as he scrolls over the files, but he stops before he opens them. Forwards the emails to me first. I circle back to my desk and open the files.

File after file after file—I can't keep up as they stream open, all of this information about Scarlett and Morningstar pouring across my fucking computer.

“Archer, this was my personal email,” Eli says, his voice shaking. I nod. Scanning through.

There's bank statements, and arrest records and lists of people and clubs—names I recognize, addresses in and around the county, and routing numbers, and—”Jesus Christ, Lijah,” I whisper.

Scarlett is deep. Deeper than I thought, if she's working this close to fucking Morningstar.

And the bastard found surveillance pictures of her. How the actual fuck did he manage to do that? She's been off the grid for the past three years, since she ran after Eli exposed her for dirty.

And it's not from a lack of looking. I've looked. I *want* this girl.

“Archer.” Eli sounds like he did when we were kids and he was desperate to be reassured.

Desperate to be told that everything was going to be okay. He sounds scared and plaintive and so damn young. It hurts me, a little, to hear my brother sound like that. “Archer, who the fuck is this guy and what the hell is Hazel doing?”

Chapter 26

The brothers told a story that was tragic but had a surreal feel to it. A fairy tale edged in horror and the taboo.

Sitting next to Hanna on the dock, I know that her story is different. There is no fairy tale here, and there sure as fuck is no happy ending. She's sitting still, her bare feet skimming the icy water below and I wonder if she can even feel it.

Spring has hit Green County hard, but it's still cold. "You're gonna freeze," I say, sitting next to her on the dock, my feet curled under me. Above us, Michael makes a triumphant noise, almost *I told you*.

Hanna doesn't respond to that. Or my statement. I glance over at her. And swallow my gasp.

I haven't seen Hanna in almost eight years. Since I graduated high school. I remember her, of course. It's hard to forget the youngest McGrey. She was always quiet and reserved, almost painfully shy and hidden between the shadows of her older brothers.

But I remember her.

A beautiful, almost fey-like creature. Eyes so bright they look like blue shining stars. Blonde hair that is all wisps and fluff, like a cloud around her pale, perfect face and pink rosebud mouth.

She was gorgeous. I remember Eli's fascination with her—hell, most of the boys in our school were.

And she floated through it, completely oblivious, and happy with her brothers.

There was a lot of talk, a lot of bitchy speculation about the nature of their relationship.

Funny, because it's too true. My stomach turns at that.

But the girl sitting next to me. She isn't a fey pretty girl floating through life anymore.

Her hair is a sleek, harsh line around her face, her eyes cold and remote, her lips a sharp line.

Something has gone very wrong, to turn the girl I knew in high school into this cold, hard woman I see today.

"It's good to see you," she murmurs.

"Wish I could say the same. Your brothers are—" I glance back at the twins. "Well, honestly, they're scary motherfuckers, Hanna."

She laughs, a quick sharp noise. Gives them a fond smile. "Yes. But they have good intentions, which helps."

"They killed four people," I say, softly.

Hanna's smile dies, and her eyes go cold. Stares at me like I'm a bug on the bottom of her shoe. "You're here to listen to a story, Hazel. So listen."

The girl was always different. It's something she hated about herself, until she realized how ridiculous the rest of the world could be and then she took some pride in her difference. But as she grew older, and her tempers flexed and changed, she knew that it worried the only two people who mattered.

It was for them that she became desperate for a way to settle the demons that seethed inside her, the restless energy and the fury and the voices that whispered to hurt, to run, to bleed out everything.

Drugs quieted the voices. For a time.

Later a doctor listened to her and her brothers, and pronounced it bipolar disorder.

Personality disorder.

Obsessive compulsive disorder.

All names that said what the girl had always known.

She was broken, in ways that couldn't be fixed.

And maybe that was true. Maybe she would be broken forever. But now that she was broken.

She took what she wanted.

And she wanted her brothers.

And she wanted to punish the mother who was so bent on ambition and power and never once thought of her children.

The girl knew exactly what she was doing. Joining the Morningstar organization was not done by chance or accident, no matter what her brothers believed.

At first it was merely moving drugs. Her brothers were good at it and no one would ever suspect the girl, with her wild moods and dreamy smile.

They would never suspect that she was ruthless behind that smile. That she climbed the ranks quickly in a Morningstar, quickly enough that three heads of the organization sat up and noticed her.

That is when it went to hell. Not because she wasn't good at her job.

Because she was too good at it.

For three years the girl and her brothers fucked and dealt their drugs and climbed through the ranks of Morningstar. The oldest was brilliant and ruthless, and where he faltered, his sister was there, cold and logical, that perfectly broken mind seeing the best way to make corruption play.

And their brother, their wild, impetuous middle brother was the violent shield that made every insane, dangerous idea they had play out.

Together, they were a bright shining star in the criminal organization.

And then.

They were called in by the Board.

Because Morningstar was too vast, too well organized and profitable, and big for it to be one man at the top. There was a network. A group of bosses who ran various illicit trade and vice. The ones who, at the end of the day, the girl and her brothers answered to.

There was debate. The twins thought they'd be given a new territory. The girl had no idea what to think.

But none of them expected to sit down with the Board and find themselves face to face with their absentee mother.

They walked out. She walked out.

I won't work for that bitch, she snapped.

And the twins, who had given her what she wanted her entire life, fell perfectly in line behind her.

You need us. That from the man they had been working under for the past three years.

His eyes flat and unamused as he glared at them.

Lars Browning. A businessman--a salesman--who happened to make his business on the wrong side of the law.

But the girl wanted nothing more to do with him.

It would have been easy. If it had ended there.

I stare at her, at the harsh line of her lips and the tears glittering on the edges of her eyelashes.

“If it didn’t end there, where?” I ask, quietly.

She smiles, then. This bitter edged thing that tells me, *finally*.

I’m finally asking the right questions.

“That, Hazel is the story you need to tell.”

Chapter 27

Eli is trying to get Gabe to answer the phone.

I'm doing the same with Hazel. Neither are actually doing what a normal fucking person does, when they've got a phone.

Like *answer the damn thing*.

Eli curses, and tosses his phone down, and I glare at him. "Let's go," he snaps.

He's got this urgency about him that has my hackles rising and my hand reaching for my gun even without considering what the hell I'm doing.

But I do what he says. I grab my files and phone and he snatches up his computer.

"We're supposed to interview her father," I say as he shoves out of GCPD headquarters.

"That isn't going to give us answer. Hazel is gonna give us an answer. What the fuck, man. She's got the fucking breakdown of a fucking *mafia*. In *Kansas*. Why the hell do we have a fucking mafia in *Kansas*?"

That's actually a good question. The better question is:

"You think she's hiding things from us?"

Eli slides into the car and lets the door slam shut behind him as I turn the engine over with a low rumble.

"I know she's hiding shit, Archer. You do too. If she weren't, we wouldn't have this shit in our inbox."

"Scarlett is tied up in this. You good with that? With what it means?"

He's silent for a long moment, and then, "Scarlett brought this on herself. I don't give a fuck what happens to her. I want my sister and I want to know why the fuck Gabe isn't answering his goddamned phone." I slide a glance at him.

"Dude, what the hell is going on with you and Delvin?"

When did that change? It wasn't noticeable—I mean, I knew there was tension and flirting and teasing. Everyone knew that. But so much of it was just *Gabriel*, who made every fucking thing a joke and damn the consequence. But when did it change to something that Eli gave back.

It was after Eli went to rehab.

After all the shit with Scarlett, and he was clean and trying to put his life together again.

There was a six-month span, that he didn't live with me.

He wanted his space.

Nora said he needed the space to get over fucking up. Said that he couldn't face me and my constant disappointment, and so he retreated. Moved into Hazel's big empty farmhouse.

That's when.

"Eli," I start and he growls.

"You wanna talk about Gabe and me? Why don't you tell me about what the fuck you're doing with Hazel?"

I suck in a breath, because there is a comparison there.

And—

Fuck.

How serious is this thing with Gabe, this thing that I've ignored and pretended not to see?

I shove that thought away. Because it's occurring to me, sudden and undeniable, that I fucked up somewhere.

I made Eli think I don't trust him.

"Remember when I came home from the Corps? And she punched me in the nose?"

Eli freezes, and stares at me, his eyes wide and confused. "Yeah. Wha—"

"That was when. When I fell for her. Before that, she was just my best friend, the third spoke in our wheel. She was just *Hazel*. The girl who helped me keep you and Nora happy and healthy. But then—fuck, Eli. She grew up. Four years is a lot of growing up. She's gorgeous."

"If you want to fuck up our entire family because Hazel is hot, I swear to god—" Eli starts.

"Shut the fuck up and listen to me," I snap. And, surprisingly. He does.

"Hazel—she's always been special. You know, I've always had a different kind of relationship with her."

"I know you and her have always felt this absurd need to take care of me and Nora."

I nod. "Yeah. But what you don't know is that Hazel—she was fucked up man. We both were. A lot more than we let on and for longer. She had nightmares until she was almost sixteen—she was still having them when I left, and the only reason I thought she'd be okay was because Delvin was there, and he knew how bad it could be. But she knew how dark I could get—and I knew how fucked up she was. And it didn't matter. I didn't care. Her baggage? My damage? It wasn't hard to carry, when we were doing it together."

"You love her," Eli whispers.

I can hear the worry and the fear and something else.

Something that sounds, impossibly, hopeful.

I look at him.

And nod. "Yeah, man. I do."

He's quiet after that, and stays that way until we reach Gabe's house.

Because of course, that's where we're going.

"It's gonna take me some time," he says, softly as I pull up behind Gabe's ridiculous sunshine yellow VW bus. "But if you're both happy. Just. Gimme some time to get used to it."

It's better than I could hope for and I nod as he slips out.

He unlocks Gabe's door, while I sit in the Roadrunner, watching, and that alone tells me—whatever the hell is happening between Gabe and Eli, it's serious and I've been blind.

When Eli explodes out of the house, his face his pale and he's running, almost stumbling as he does.

He looks terrified and sick and furious. And I know. I fucking know.

This is all tied back to the slaughterhouse, and Morningstar. To Scarlett and her whores.

And Hazel.

I know, before he says it.

"Gabe's fucking gone, Archer."

Chapter 28

After I leave Michael and John and Hanna, I need the familiar. So I head to Mama's, and if I'm pale and shaky, I have almost thirty minutes to get my shit under control before I'm there and she's demanding to know what the hell is happening. Halfway back to town, I turn on my phone.

The twins parting words are still chasing around, like fucking taunts, in my head.

Tell the rest of the story.

And

Gabe is fine, but what happens next is on you.

And

We don't mind dirty hands. Don't test us.

The thing is that I don't think they wanted to kill anyone else. Hanna, sitting on the edge of the pier, had looked more tired than anything.

My phone lights up, going crazy with messages and I feel my heart drop as I get the gist of them.

Eli and Archer are furious and worried and Jase has clearly sent them more info than I have. The last message stops my breath.

Eli: Where the fuck is Gabriel?

So the cat's out, then. They know Gabe is missing and that I'm keeping secrets. I feel a flash of gratitude, for that.

I should tell them I'm fine. Have them meet me.

But. There is one last person to talk to, before I can tell this story. So I swipe the screen, dumping the messages to be dealt with later, and dial the number Michael sent me before I left. "King," a crisp, whiskey warm voice almost purrs.

"Seamus King," I say and I hear the way he shifts, on the other end of the line. "I'd like to sit down and talk with you."

"And who is this? Why should I give a shit what you want?"

"Because right now, I'm a journalist writing an expose, and all I've heard is the shit the McGreys have to say. I thought I'd give you a chance to defend yourself, first."

"And why should I not kill you and the story?"

I breath a laugh. "King. You aren't that stupid. And you aren't who I want. So meet with me and give me who I want."

There's a moment when I think he'll refuse. But King is a businessman.

"Who are you going after?" he asks, instead of agreeing.

"I want Scarlett Materson."

A low laugh ripples across the line, and I shiver. The twins didn't tell me enough about King to make me comfortable. They told me just enough to know he's dangerous and I need to be very careful.

"I'll meet you in forty-five minutes."

"The Central Green," I interject and he hums an acceptance. And I hang up.

My fingers are shaking when I dial Archer's number. Because I've lied to them. I've hidden

so damn much.

The nature of secrets is to come to light.

“Where the fuck is he, Hazel?” Eli snarls, and I swallow.

“Put me on speaker.”

He spits a curse, but I hear the roar of the engine, and I say, clearly. “Archer, pull over and turn her off.”

There’s silence from both of them, and then the rumble changes, as the Roadrunner slides to side of the road and he kills the engine.

And then there’s silence, so deep and sudden it’s almost an ocean, something I can drown in and I want to.

I want to drown in it, because I don’t want to say this. He will hate this.

They both will.

“Hazel, baby, I need you to talk to me. I need to know you’re okay.” I hiccup a laugh, because of course he’s worried about that.

Of course he’s worried about me being safe.

Archer is always going to be a caregiver. First and forever.

“I know who killed Crystal Watson and her family. And Beth Griffins.”

Beth matters, even if my brother and Archer don’t see how, yet.

Stories and family and betrayal and secrets—all seething along under the surface.

That’s what the County has always been.

What it will always be.

“What are you talking about?” Archer asks, his voice low and tight and angry.

“They want something from me. It’s not illegal, so calm down. But I have to do this. I have to tell their story.”

“Why? They’re *dangerous*, Hazel. Why the fuck wouldn’t you tell me?”

“Because they threatened you. They said that what they did to Crystal, they’d do to you and Eli and Nora.” I take a breath, and then, “And they took Gabriel.”

Eli makes a noise, all broken and *hurt* and I swallow hard. *Oh, Gabriel.*

When this is over, and Gabe is safely home. I’m going to lock the two of them in a room together to sort out whatever is keeping them apart.

“He’s fine, Lijah,” I lie. “They haven’t hurt him. They just need him to leverage against me. And I’m doing what they say—I’m bringing him home.”

“No,” Archer snaps. “You get your ass to the house, and we’ll decide what—”

“I have to go, Archer. Go over the information Jase sent you. I’m—I’ll be home in a few hours. I have to do this. They want their story told. After that, you can arrest whoever you want.

But they want their story told. Let me do my job.”

“Hazel,” Eli says, his voice this choked, desperate thing. “Hazel, please.”

I make a soft shushing sound in my throat. “This isn’t Amy, Eli. Gabriel is going to be fine. We’re bringing him home.”

He cries then, and I hang up.

My brother has Archer and Archer will take care of him.

But. There is another brother who needs—I mutter a curse and scroll through my contacts until I find it.

There is a ring. Two. Three.

Stubborn, reclusive bastard.

“Hello?” The voice rasps across the line like thunder and falling rocks, all deep and

authority and impatience.

Aiden Delvin never did have much patience for anything beyond the Rayburn brothers and Gabriel and his photography.

“Aiden, it’s Hazel Campton.”

There’s a beat of silence and then, “What’s wrong?”

Fair enough. He was also always too damn smart for his own good.

“Gabriel. He—there are some people. They want me to do something for them. And I am.

But they took Gabriel.”

“Is he alive?” Aiden snaps, and I hear a voice in the background, a voice we both ignore.

“Yes.”

“I want to talk to him.”

I hesitate, and Aiden snarls a curse. “You don’t *have* him?” “I’m working on it.”

There’s a furious silence, long and tense and then, “I’ll be there as soon as I can. Tomorrow at the latest.”

“Aiden, you—”

I hesitate. Because as much as I want to say he doesn’t need to come home. I know better.

Gabriel is going through hell. And having his favorite brother by his side when he comes home—that won’t hurt anything.

So I ask the question that is hanging between us, waiting to be acknowledged. “You haven’t been back in eight years, Aidan. Are you okay with this?”

“He’s my brother, Hazel,” he says, his voice very empty. Like that is all that matters.

Which is true enough.

King is a small man with a neatly trimmed beard, an impeccable suit, and a black Rottweiler sitting next to him, watching me approach.

“Ahh. I did wonder. It makes sense, that they would use you.”

“My brothers are cops,” I say, softly.

“You’ve enough of a reputation outside the County that you could be a threat, if you wanted to be. And in the County? Well. You’re a third of the Airplane Orphans. You’re a County favorite, darling.”

“Why are they trying to bring you down?” I demand.

And King laughs. “Do you really think that’s what they’re doing? Those three? What they hell would they do with the vacuum? Michael doesn’t want to run a criminal network like Morningstar. He just wants his sister happy and kept in a steady supply of drugs.”

“Then what *is* this about?”

“It’s about the mother,” King says, easily. “And about that fucking whore, Scarlett.”

I lean forward, staring.

“Tell me.”

King studies me, for a long moment.

And then he tells me everything.

The story. It’s the story that twisted up everything. The story I wanted and didn’t know I was chasing, when I came home.

And as I stare at it, blinking at the submit button.

The County Gazette will publish it, if I send it to them.

So will my old boss, at the e-zine back in Boston. Because the story is fascinating and intriguing and impossibly sensational.

And true.

So true. I hit publish.

Chapter 29

The thing about Green County is that it's home. It's not a small town—but it has that feel to it. Like everyone knows everything about everyone. We know who married who last weekend, and how long they dated before that. We know who fucked before they married.

We know all there is to know. The good—Louise makes the best pie in the County, and has since her great grandma gave her the recipe. The bad—Marks Automotive is where you go to get a cheap car, but you'll pay for it in repairs a week later, and everyone will gossip for months about what an idiot you are. The ugly—well. We don't talk about the ugly. It's abusive husbands and the mamas' who take a little pill to get through playdates and dinner time, and the girls who give blow jobs to pass AP English and the boys who spike their girlfriends' drinks at party.

But that's not all.

Here's the secret.

Green County is no different from any other small town Americana you'll find sprawled across the Heartland. It's kind and generous and frustrating and under it all, there are a thousand secrets that no one will address.

That is the truth of every small town. But ours more than most.

Three days ago, four people were killed. The papers will continue parsing it apart, trying to tease out a reason.

Some will say it was senseless violence.

But some aren't me. And I'm here to tell you a story.

Once upon a time, there was a girl and two brothers and they were happy.

I wish that is where this story ends. A simple fairy tale, as easy as it is short, and utterly unremarkable.

It's not.

Nothing is ever truly without reason.

A girl grows up alone, with only her brothers and their fumbling concern. A girl with demons and a deep need to be loved. To matter.

This isn't to say she was perfect. She wasn't. She was beautiful, but cold and calculating and cruel.

But children become the thing they are shaped into.

Once upon a time, there was a woman. She was smart and hungry, and poor. And she made choices.

She fought her way from a working girl in the streets of Kansas City, to be the favorite of her pimp. But it wasn't enough. She wanted to be the power that moved pawns. She wasn't happy as the pretty face on the arm of a powerful, dangerous man.

She wanted his power. His danger.

Green County is a small place. It's not the kind of place that would seem like a spot for a criminal organization.

Why do two women fight? Why does a place as small as Green County become such a valuable piece of a criminal empire?

Why are four people killed so brutally?

It's like everything else in Green County. It's family.

Want.

Family.

Betrayal.

Once upon a time, Hanna McGrey hated the mother who deserted her. She walked away from dangerous people, and took her brothers with her, and stole the drug trade of a powerful criminal empire, because she hated her mother.

And all things have consequence.

It was on a cold night, almost six months ago. Her brothers were out, dealing with their street dealers, while Hanna worked at home.

She was alone.

Strange in and of itself, because her brothers were almost obsessive in their diligence, keeping her protected.

The attack came quickly, brutally quickly. Two people.

Scarlett Materson. A dirty cop who vanished when her ties to the criminal empire came to light. There was speculation, that she ran the whores in Green County.

What wasn't speculation was that Hanna's mother considered Scarlett a surrogate daughter.

Another oddity—that the surrogate daughter of Hanna's estranged mother would lead the attack on her.

Scarlett took a few boys with her, and they tore into Hanna.

The attack wasn't sexual.

That was the only concession they made for her.

But when it was over, Hanna was barely alive. She had three broken ribs, a shattered wrist, her leg was broken in three places. Her face had been especially brutalized—her jaw shattered. She was concussed and had a ruptured spleen, a collapsed lung.

She was dying.

The message was simple.

Back off.

Scarlett and her boys worked for other people. And that was who Hanna's brothers wanted.

They were patient.

They waited, while Hanna recovered, a slow fucking process—and she wouldn't. Not really. She wouldn't ever be the kind of ethereal untouched lovely she had been, before the attack.

And while they waited, they learned.

Scarlett ran the whores in Green County. But the two people she answered to? Ran everything.

Kathy McGrey. And Rusty Watson.

You know his name, now.

His daughter was in that house. So was her best friend—a young woman with a bright future and a tiny baby who will grow up alone.

It looked, on the surface, like a home invasion. It was supposed to.

It wasn't. Of course it wasn't. Nothing in this town is ever simple, and John and Michael McGrey had never allowed anyone to harm their sister.

Slaughtering Rusty's family. Killing the mother of his illegitimate child. It wasn't random.

It was justice. The kind of fucked up justice that makes sense, in the world of secrets and crime.

I wonder, if Scarlett is still alive. I wonder what hole she's hiding in and if the McGreys will find her before they turn themselves in.

*A tiny part of me hopes that they will.
Secrets and lies and family. That's what makes up this County. What has always made up
this County.
The brutality we saw, this week. It was one family's secrets and rage.
I wonder if that will be the end of it. But I know. It's not.
Because secrets. They're everywhere.
And they'll come to light.*

Chapter 30

I'm waiting for it.

Sitting in a booth at Mama's. My phone is going off, alive with texts and fury from my brother and Archer.

The story is bouncing out, further than just our little County. Jase is doing what he can, making it spread.

The text doesn't surprise me. Not really.

Unkown: Meet us at the Black Prism. Bring the cops.

Some of my tension eases. Mama Nora is standing near the table and I shiver under her hard stare. "You okay, Hazy Girl?"

I remember when she first called me that. I was thirteen, and still closed off. Still refused to get close to anyone but Eli. Still lost in my own mind and my books, more than present here.

She said when I looked at the world, I looked through a haze. Smiled, so full of affection and warmth that it hurt, to see. Called me Hazy Girl, and it stuck.

I smile, and blink away the memory. "Yeah, Mama. I'm okay."

She doesn't push me, just gives me a worried sort of look, and backs away, going to fill coffee for someone else.

I look at the phone again.

Hazel: Meet me at Mama's. Hurry.

They hate it.

Both of them.

In the end, it doesn't matter. We aren't playing by Archer and Eli's rules. Not this time. The strings are still being pulled by Michael and Hanna.

So we go.

All three of us, together, and I will never tell them, but it feels right. Being together, like this, even with the uncertainty and danger. It feels right.

Chapter 31

Three killers, two cops, and a journalist walk into a bar.
Sounds like a bad joke, right? It's not.
It's the end--dear god I hope it's the end--of the worst day of my life.
I just hope we all walk out alive.

Chapter 32

The Black Prism isn't a bar. Not really. It's a club, and it belongs to Seamus King.

Slimy bastard. Eli and I have been watching him for years, but there's never been anything we could actually pin on him.

Somehow I don't think that today will change that. The Prism isn't being offered up so King can bare his neck for the GCPD.

"Eli," I murmur, and he nods, pulling Hazel close. She huffs her displeasure but doesn't argue as I walk deeper into the empty club.

"Drink, gentlemen?"

I suck in a breath as I see King behind the bar. He's got a cocky sort of smile on his lips. Like this is a grand adventure and a big joke.

Like he knows damn well that whatever happens, he's walking out of here.

"Where are they?" Hazel demands, leaning forward.

"Patience, darling. You've done beautifully."

"*King!*"

The voice is like a nightmare. Shrill and taunting and furious, and so fucking familiar. Eli makes a low noise, all rage and hurt and I step toward my brother, catching his eye. King lifts a hand, and I realize something.

We're still in the shadows. Deep in the shadows, where it is too easy for us to be overlooked.

Hazel realizes it too, at the same instance, and her gasp is only just barely muffled.

We aren't here to participate.

We're observers.

Scarlett Materson stalks from a long hall at the back of the bar. She looks the same as she's always looked—small, and beautiful and dark. Dark brown hair pulled up into a tight pony tail. Tight black pants and a red top that highlights all her best features.

And she's furious.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she demands, and King gives her a bland look. "You said you'd control the McGreys. That they wouldn't be a problem for Morningstar."

"I did," King says agreeably.

"Then what the actual *fuck* is this?"

She throws down a tablet, and I feel Hazel give this little twitch, a smirk turning her lips.

"That, Scarlett, looks like an expose."

"How the fuck do you consider this *controlling them?*"

"Calm down," a deep male voice orders, and Hazel shivers. Scarlett stops, abruptly, like a puppet with cut strings.

Rusty Watson looks different than the last time I saw him. Less wrecked. There is grief, in those dark eyes of his. A set of world-weary and defeated to his shoulders that I'd bet was new.

But he doesn't look like he's one strong word away from falling apart.

We *really* should have talked to Crystal's father. "King."

"You expect me to control them when your tortured their fucking *sister?*" King snarls.

"You've met John, haven't you? The boy is an animal. And Michael let him off leash—for what *you* did. Don't blame me if that mess lands on you."

There's a moment of utter silence, and then Rusty snarls and lunges forward. "That was my *family*, you bastard!" he roars.

"Calm down," Scarlett shouts, throwing herself into Rusty and knocking him away from King.

"I told you when you attacked her, that there would be consequences. You should have left them the fuck alone," King spits.

"I'm going to kill them," Rusty says, softly, almost to himself and Scarlett sighs.

"There's no fucking way I'm letting those bastards kill my family like that, and—"

"We didn't kill them all," Michael says.

The reaction is instant. Rusty's pulled a gun and trained it on Michael before the words die. Fury rippling through him.

How the fuck did I think that the grief stricken father was anything other than a threat?

How did I buy into that fucking act?

"You're a stupid bastard, coming here," Rusty breathes.

Michael spreads his hands, and shrugs. "Maybe. Or maybe, if my brother doesn't hear from me in the next fifteen minutes, he kills the kid. Maybe, if my sister doesn't hear from me, she sends every file and document we've ever copied from our mother to the cops." He stills.

"Maybe I am stupid. But I'm not so stupid that you'll shoot me here and not feel the consequences."

"And maybe I don't give a fuck." Rusty spits, stepping forward.

Michael laughs. "You should have left us alone. That's all we wanted."

"You wanted to ruin her," Scarlett snarls and Michael turns his gaze on the girl who destroyed my brother, once.

"No, we didn't. But Hanna does want to take everything from her."

The words stutter. Catch. Rusty's face twitches into confusion and I hear Eli's snarled curse, hear Hazel gasping his name. But it's all distant. So fucking far away.

The only thing that makes sense, that makes it through the haze of confusion, is the gun.

Michael's hand, filled with the black metal of the gun, and Scarlett's eyes, so wide and startled.

The echoing report of it, and she makes a noise. Something like a gasp, all wet and stunned and pained.

Eli howls, a noise that is too full of loss to make any kind of sense.

Nothing makes sense.

Not a fucking thing about this town.

"GCPD!" I shout, yanking out my gun and stepping forward. Michael is smiling, folding to his knees, a content little thing. He's dropped his gun, and his hands are behind his head. He knew. He knew this would be how it ended. That it would always end like this.

Eli is crouched next to Scarlett, and she's gasping for breath, blood pouring from the bullet wound in her chest. Her eyes are wide and cloudy with pain, but she smiles. The bitch touches his face, with bloody fingers, and she *smiles* as she dies.

"Archer," Hazel says, urgently. "Where the fuck is Gabe?"

"I keep my promises, Hazel," Michael. "King made sure we always kept our promises. Go home."

He smiles at her, then, and I want to punch him. Want to drag my brother away from the whore on the ground.

Rusty is gone.

“Thank you,” he murmurs, and then he goes limp and silent. Patient and secretive as I call in the arrest.

Chapter 33

It takes a few weeks, for things to settle. The County is anxious and on edge after the killing spree, and with Rusty Watson still on the loose.

I hear more than most of the public. Having a brother on the case helps.

So I hear, before it hits the papers, that Michael is dead. Poison in his cell.

They find John and Hanna a few days later, on the sprawling farm they grew up in.

It was the plan, from the very beginning. There was no happy ending for them. They were too—everything. Too volatile, too dangerous, too, too, too.

Some of the public distrust and nerves settled, after that.

But it's going to take time. Especially since we know that Morningstar is still out there. Still seething, like a silent secret, under the surface of the County.

It's been two weeks but things are finally settling into a normal. For us, that means this.

Finally.

We're having family dinner, because Nora pitched a fit.

And that is a whole different nervous-making ball of worms.

She's in my kitchen, putting the finishing touches on the side dishes. I can hear Archer and Eli arguing over the chicken Archer is grilling. It strings a smile across my lips, and some of the tension in my chest eases.

"When were you planning on telling me?"

I pause and look at her. She's sprinkling cheese on the pasta salad and I have no clue what she's talking about.

"C'mon, Hazel. You don't think I raised you and him and somehow managed to miss that the two of you have been in love since you were fourteen."

I pale and she laughs. "You knew?"

"Of course I knew. Why the hell do you think I gave you and him so much space? You and Archer are perfect for each other and always have been because you allow yourself to be there for each other. You've been working together like an old married couple since you were old enough to care about boys. I never thought you'd be stupid enough to run away from him." She cocks her head at me, her gaze fierce but loving.

Demanding and understanding. All the things Nora has always been. "You two can destroy each other. Or you can be the best thing that's ever happened to either of you. Don't run from that."

"It scares me," I say, quietly.

"The best things in life do, Hazy girl." she answers, calmly. "Now go get your boys before they burn down the back porch."

My boys. What she's always called them.

Makes sense. If she knew how I felt about Archer, she wouldn't continue to call him my brother.

I leave the cake I've finally finished frosting on the table and head to the back of the house. Eli is headed into the house, and Archer. Well. Archer is being utterly Archer. He's gathering trash from the porch and watching the grill as the fire slowly dies.

He looks so right, there. Like he was never gone.

"Are you happy, sis?" Eli asks.

I nod. "Yeah. Feel a little guilty about it, but. Yeah. I am."

"Why feel guilty?"

I focus on him. He's watching me, those hazel eyes of his puppy sad and sweet.

"Because you lost someone you cared about."

He takes a shuddery breath, and his eyes close. We haven't talked about it, how Eli is dealing with the sudden death of Scarlett. We haven't talked about how withdrawn and moody he's been.

Oh, he's been present. He was at Gabe's when we found him, tied up and unconscious in his bedroom. He was there at the hospital when Gabe woke up and stayed until my grumpy best friend threw him out, and his brother arrived.

But he's been quiet. Archer is worried, even if he isn't talking about it much.

"I'm okay," he says, now, slowly. Quietly.

Impulsively, I hug him and his arms come around me, almost too tight. He's clinging to me, a subtle tremor running through him, and I bury my head in the crook of his neck. Whisper, softly. "You're allowed to miss her, Lijah,"

"She wasn't a good person, Hazel."

"We don't always love good people. Doesn't make losing them easier."

Eli stares at me, turning that over. I lean up and kiss his cheek and Archer makes a low noise in his throat as he enters. "Back off, Lijah. I called dibs."

I give my boyfriend a hard stare. "You called *dibs*."

He grins at me, completely unrepentant and I roll my eyes at him. But all of the annoyance fades away as he tugs me into him. His lips covering mine. And everything fades away.

Archer makes everything fade away, with his big hands on my hips, holding me close, licking into my mouth like I'm the air he needs to live.

Far away, I can hear Eli gagging, and Nora shushing him, her voice soft. I can hear Gabe and Aiden arriving, and my best friend's laughter and mocking.

It's not perfect. There are still so many secrets in the County, and the people I care about are hurting.

But Archer is here, and I'm in his arms. Surrounded by our family.

It doesn't have to be perfect, to be right. And *this* has always been right.

Dirty Stolen Forever

Green County Book 2

By Nazarea Andrews

Click [here](#) to purchase

Colt Rayburn loved Aiden Delvin, once. A lifetime ago. Before duty and the Marines took him a world away, chewed him up and spit him out. Aiden would have waited forever for Colt to come back. But Colt didn't want that, and he's rebuilt his life. Without the man he loves.

When Colt comes home from a deployment that went wrong, Aiden is there. Inexplicably back in Green County and impossible to resist. He swore he'd never go back to that place, never destroy Aiden the way he had when he walked away the first time.

But Aiden grew up and changed too, while Colt played war hero.

Both of them know what they want. After all this time. But can a love story that destroyed them once be rebuilt, when life and duty still hangs over them both...

About the Author

Nazarea Andrews (N to almost everyone) is an avid reader and tends to write the stories she wants to read. Which means she writes everything from zombies and dystopia to contemporary love stories.

When not writing, she can most often be found driving her kids to practice and burning dinner while she reads, or binging watching TV shows on Netflix. N loves chocolate, wine, and coffee almost as much as she loves books, but not quite as much as she loves her kids.

She lives in south Georgia with her husband, daughters, spoiled cat and overgrown dog. She is the author of World Without End series, Neverland Found, Edge of the Falls, The Blood Scion Saga, and The University of Branton Series, as well as Before & After and Fatal Beauty. Stop by her twitter (@NazareaAndrews) and tell her what fantastic book she should read next.

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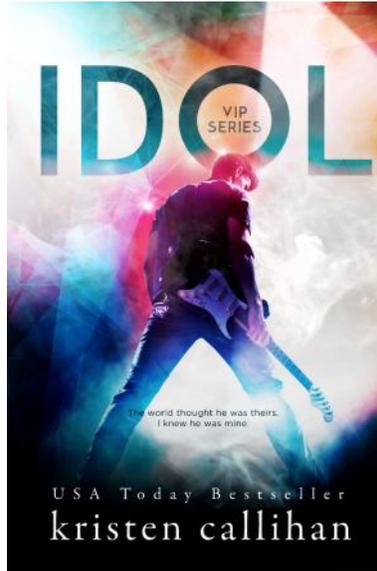
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Idol

By Kristen Callihan



Author Note

To see where you're going sometimes you have to look at where you've been. Killian and his band have their own idols who helped forge their sound. To that end, most of the music mentioned in this book is not of this past decade, but older. Some of you might discover new songs, and some of you—like me—might take a trip down memory lane.

Also, Collar Island, where Libby lives, is a made up location. Mainly because, that way, I could shape the place and the people who live there with impunity. However, if you're curious about how it might look, Bald Head Island, NC is the closest equivalent.

Thank you and happy reading!

Love,
Kristen

Dedication

For Cobain, Bowie, and Prince —rock idols who helped shape the soundtrack of my life.
They were taken from us too soon.

Acknowledgments

Huge thank you to my go-to beta readers Kati, Sahara, Tessa, Elyssa, and Monica. Copy editors Dana Waganer and Jessica Royer Ocken. My awesome cover designer Sarah Hansen. To Dani for her PR excellence and all around hand-holding. And Natasha for...you know what. ;-)

And a special thank you to all the bloggers and readers who help spread the word about my books and for being so supportive.

All my love!

Prologue

Music can be your friend when you have none, your lover when you're needy. Your rage, your sorrow, your joy, your pain. Your voice when you've lost your own. To be a part of that, to be the soundtrack of someone's life, is a beautiful thing.

—Killian James, lead singer and guitarist, Kill John

* * * *

The Past—

Killian

The Animal is a temperamental beast. It can love you one moment, then hate you the next, and you never know what side of it you're going to see until it's upon you. If it hates you, there's nothing to do about it but endure and hope you survive without being completely shredded until you can safely make your escape. But when it loves you?

Damn, but it's the best feeling on Earth. You crave that time with the Animal. Live for each encounter. It becomes life. Your purpose. Your entire world. And because you become so dependent on it, you come to hate it a little bit as well.

Love. Hate. No down time. No middle ground. Just highs and lows.

It's out there now, waiting for me. Growling with a slow, gathering rumble. I feel it in my bones, in the subtle charge that lights the air, and in the tremble beneath my feet.

My heart rate begins to rise, adrenaline already kicking in.

"You ready to dance with the devil?" Whip asks no one in particular. He's chugging a bottle of water, his free hand tapping an agitated rhythm on his knee.

Devil, Animal, Mistress—we all have our name for it. Doesn't matter. It owns us, and for a time, we own it.

The roar grows louder, followed by a *thump, thump, thump*. My name. It's calling for me. *Killian. Killian.*

Panting, I rise. A shiver licks over my skin, my balls drawing tight.

I answer its call, and a wave of sound and sheer energy crashes over me as I walk into the light.

Hot, blinding.

The Animal screams. For me.

And I am the one who controls it. I raise my arms, walk up to the mic. "Hello, New York!"

The answering cry is so loud, I rock back on my heels.

A guitar is placed in my hand, the smooth neck both a familiar comfort and an adrenaline kick. I settle the strap over my head. Whip's drums start up, a pulsing beat, and my body moves with it. Jax and Rye join in, their riffs weaving an intricate pattern. Harmony. Poetry of sound. A scream of defiance.

I begin to strum, my voice rising. Music flows through my veins. It pours out of me like lava, igniting the air, inciting a riot of eager screams.

Power. So much power. The Animal responds, its love so potent that my dick gets rock hard, the hairs on the back of my neck lift. Everything I am, I put into my voice, my playing.

In that instant, I am God. Omnipotent. Endless.

Nothing—*nothing*—on Earth gives a charge like this. Nothing compares. This is life.

But that's the thing about life; it can change in an instant.

All it takes is one instant.

For it
to all...
End.

* * * *

The Future—

Libby

“There's been so much written about your involvement with Killian James. But you and James have been rather closed-mouthed about the topic.” The reporter gives me a slight but encouraging smile, her blue hair slipping over one eye. “Given last night's performance, would you care to offer us a little bite?”

Curled up on a leather-and-chrome hotel room chair, my back to the New York City skyline, I almost smile at the question I've heard about a thousand times now.

But training kicks in. A smile would convey either acquiescence or that I'm being obnoxiously coy. I don't want to give up a “little bite,” and despite what critics say, Killian and I have never been coy. We've just never wanted to let the public in. The Killian I knew was mine, not theirs.

“There isn't much to tell that the world doesn't already know.” Not really true. But true enough.

The reporter's smile has an edge to it now—a barracuda searching for blood in the water. “Oh, now, I'm not so sure about that. After all, we don't know your side of the story.”

I resist the urge to pick at the cuff of my white cashmere tunic. God, the sweater—hell, my underwear—cost more than I would have spent in a year before *he* walked into my life.

I turn my head and catch a glimpse of water bottles nestled in a silver ice bucket: a dark green bottle, one that's gold, another bedazzled with crystals. Earlier an assistant proudly proclaimed that the green one, supposedly from Japan, cost more than four hundred dollars a bottle. For water.

Suddenly, I want to laugh. At the craziness of my life. For going from tap to designer water. For the fact that this penthouse suite is my new normal.

And then I want to cry. Because I would have none of this without him. And not a single fucking bit of it has any meaning without him to share it.

Emptiness threatens to swallow me whole. I'm so alone right now that part of me wants to grab this woman's hand just to feel contact with another human being.

I need to talk. I need to be heard. Just once. And maybe, just maybe, I won't feel like I'm falling apart anymore.

I take a breath and flick my gaze back to the reporter. “What do you want to know?”

Chapter 1

The Present—

Liberty

There's a bum on my lawn. Maybe I should use a better term, something more PC. Homeless person? Vagrant? Nope, I'm going with bum. Because I doubt he's actually homeless or without means. His current state seems more a choice than a situation.

The big black-and-chrome Harley that's smashed into my poor front fence is proof enough of some wealth. Fucker tore the hell out of my lawn on its way down. But it isn't the bike's fault. I glare at the bum. Not that he'd notice.

He's sprawled on his back, arms akimbo and clearly down for the count. I might wonder if he's dead, but his chest lifts and falls in the steady pattern of deep sleep. Maybe I should worry about his health, but I've seen this before. Too many times.

God, he stinks. The cause of his stench is obvious. Sweat soaks his skin. Vomit trails down his black T-shirt.

My lip curls in disgust, and I swallow rapidly to keep from gagging. A snarl of long, dark brown hair covers his face, but I'm guessing the dude is youngish. His body is big but lean, the skin on his arms firm. Which somehow makes him all the more depressing. Prime of his life, and he's fall-down drunk. Lovely.

I pick my way around him, muttering about drunk-driving assholes, and then march back with hose in hand, taking careful aim. Water shoots out at high speed, hitting its target with a satisfying hiss and splatter.

The bum jerks and rears up, sputtering and flailing around, searching for the source of his torment. I don't let up. I want that stench gone.

"Get off my lawn." Because he's filthy all over, I aim lower, drenching his pants and crotch.

"Mother fucker!" He has a deep voice, and it's raw. "Would you fucking stop?"

"Yeah...no. You smell like shit. And I sincerely hope you did not actually shit yourself, bud, because that is a seriously low point to come to."

I draw the jet of water up his lean body to his head. Long, dark hair whips in all directions as he sputters again.

And then he roars. The sound rings my ears, and really ought to put the fear of God in me. But he's too weak to stand. One muscled forearm swings up, though, slapping the wet hanks of hair back from his face.

I get a glimpse of dark eyes blazing with confused rage. Time to wrap this up. Letting go of the spray nozzle, I lower my weapon. "Like I said, get off my lawn."

His jaw ticks. "Are you fucking insane?"

"I'm not the one covered in vomit and laid out on a stranger's property."

My lawn bum glances around like he's just realized he's on the ground. He doesn't spare his clothes notice. Seeing as they're soaked to his skin, he's probably well aware of their state.

"Here's a tip," I say, tossing down my hose. "Don't be such a cliché."

This gives him visible pause, and he blinks up at me, water running in rivulets over his cheeks and into his thick beard. "You don't know me enough to slap a label on me."

I snort. “Literally fall-down drunk, crashing your bike—which I somehow doubt you actually ride other than on weekends. Over-long hair, a face that hasn’t seen the business end of a razor in weeks—again, probably because you want the world to believe you’re a badass.” I glance at his arms. Strong, ropy with muscles. “The only thing I don’t see are tattoos, but maybe you’ve got ‘Mom’ plastered on your butt for color.”

An indignant sound leaves him. Almost a laugh but too full of anger to fully get there. “Who *are* you?”

It’s impressive, the layers of disdain he manages to get into that one question. Especially given the state I found him in. Humility certainly doesn’t stick to this guy. Unlike his smell, unfortunately.

“The person whose land you fucked up. I’d slap you with a bill, but I don’t want to come too close to the stench.” Wiping my wet hands on my jeans, I give him one last glare. “Now go on and get before I call the police.”

It’s safe to say I’m worked up now. I march back up the long drive to my house instead of walking with quiet dignity as I’d planned. But it feels good; my pace is freeing. I’ve been so quiet these past few months. So contained.

So maybe I have something to thank Mr. Arrogant Drunk for.

However, my charity does not extend to him following me. Which he does. I see him rise in my peripheral vision. He wobbles, then steadies before peeling off his shirt and slapping it to the ground.

A strip show. Great.

I pick up my pace, cursing that my driveway is so long—at least two hundred feet from curb to doormat.

Another movement and he’s flung a boot my way. I glance back, slightly alarmed. And there go his pants. Six-feet-something of sinewy, pissed off, naked male starts stalking up behind me. There are the tattoos I’d guessed at. Or rather, one massive one of swooping, intersecting lines that covers his upper left arm and torso.

I concentrate on that instead of the heavy length of his dick hanging between his legs, swaying like a pendulum with each step he takes toward me.

I glare over my shoulder. “You come any farther up my drive and I’ll shoot you.”

“You would have a shotgun, wouldn’t you, Elly May,” he snaps back. “Talk about a cliché. All you need is a pair of overalls and a piece of straw to chew on.”

I can’t help myself, I spin around. “Are you calling me a country bumpkin?”

He halts too. Hands low on his hips, utterly unashamed of his nakedness, my lawn bum stands there, glaring at me like he owns the world. “Are you saying you aren’t, Huckleberry Pie?”

Heat swims over my skin. I stride right up to him—well, not too near; I’m still afraid of the stench. Up close, I can admit that he isn’t bad looking. Past all the scruff, bloodshot onyx eyes, and pasty morning-after complexion, he has blunt but even features, and lashes long enough to make a girl envious. This just makes me angrier.

“Listen, buddy, stalking a woman while naked can be construed as an act of sexual intimidation.”

He snorts. “That speaks volumes for your sex life, Elly May. But don’t you worry. Even if I had the slightest interest in doing you, I have a nice case of whisky dick working, so nothing’s getting up right now.”

“Happens a lot, does it?” I wrinkle my nose, refusing to look down. “And you talk about *my* sexual deficiencies.”

A glint comes into his eyes, and I could swear he wants to laugh. But he smirks instead, his lip curling in annoyance. “Give me an hour and some coffee, and then we can talk about it all you want.”

“Next thing you know, you’ll be demanding breakfast too.”

A cheeky smile lights him up. “Well, now that you mention it...”

“You know what pisses me off the most?” I snap.

His thick, dark brows scrunch up as if he’s confused. “What?”

He actually says it like he hasn’t heard me right, not as a response to my question. But I answer him anyway.

“You could have hurt someone else. You could have hurt me, or some poor soul along the way, with your drunk-ass driving.” Grief sinks its fingers into my heart. “You could have destroyed lives, left people behind to pick up the pieces.”

He blanches, those ridiculous lashes of his sweeping his cheeks as he blinks.

“You want to kill yourself?” I snap. “Do it some other way—”

My voice dies as a snarl leaves him, and he honest-to-God bares his teeth at me. He takes a hard step in my direction as though he might actually come at me, but he halts himself. “Don’t you dare... You have no fucking clue what I’ve...” His face goes gray as he glares down from his great height.

We stare at each other while he kind of just sways there, all pasty and trembling, his anger so near the surface that his eyes shine with it.

It’s that pain-filled rage that snares me, distracts me from the warning signs.

“You don’t know...” He swallows convulsively.

Only then does it occur to me that I’m in trouble. I leap back, but it’s too late. My lawn bum hunches over and hurls. All down my front.

Shock roots me to the spot for an agonizing moment. Then the smell hits me anew. I force myself to look up, face my tormentor. A thousand curses race through my head but only one sentence gets past my clenched teeth.

“I hate you.”

* * * *

Killian

Usually when a woman tells you she hates you with a cold, dead look in her eye, she makes an effort to avoid all further contact.

Not so with Elly May, she of the water hose from hell.

Okay, I did just yack all over her, so she might have reason to hate me. Very good reason.

I haven’t apologized to anyone in years. A small voice in my head is telling me I should do it now. But the whisky still sloshing around in my head is drowning that voice out. Shit, everything is sloshing right now—the ground, my brain, my blood. My ears are ringing.

I’m going down. I know I am. Vague surprise registers as my tormentor steps forward, not away, and wraps her arms around me. Holding me up.

Good luck with that, honey.

I hear her curse, feel her knees buckle under my weight. We fall down together. I think I laugh. Not sure. It's all fading. Exactly what I want.

* * * *

The world is a blur. Water blasts my face. Again. Mother fuck, that's annoying. Sputtering, I try to wipe my face, but my arms aren't working right. Everything is rubbery and heavy.

"Stop flailing, you complete pain in my ass," snarls a girl.

Elly May. I don't care if her voice sounds like vanilla cream over ice, she's the devil. A water devil. Maybe hell doesn't burn. Maybe it's perpetual drowning.

"You're not going to drown," she says, spraying me again.

I sputter, spit out a mouthful of water that tastes of vomit and whisky. I can't see a goddamn thing past the deluge. "What is with you and water?" I manage before another round hits me.

"It has this magical ability to wash away filth," she drawls as her hand rubs over my chest, not in a soothing way, but hard, as if she's trying to remove my skin. Soap bubbles. It smells like grapefruit and vanilla. Girl soap.

"Yes, soap. Water and soap cleans," she continues, as if I'm an infant. "I know. Crazy, right?"

Sarcasm. I'm an expert on it. When I'm not so drunk my eyes refuse to open, that is.

Hard hands move to along my scalp. Fingers snag in my hair.

"Jesus, when's the last time you brushed this mop?"

"Birth. Now lay off. Let me up."

"You have vomit in your hair. I'm getting it out."

I let her wash me, her voice drifting in and out as she bitches. She's never gentle. Doesn't matter. I can't handle gentle anyway.

I am dried off, tugged along. Everything still spins. Dip, sway, spin. No matter what I do to get away from it, I still hear the rhythm of life.

"I don't hear anything but you babbling," she says, her face a fuzzy halo above me.

Below me is soft. Cool sheets. Heavy blankets.

She rolls me on my side, shoves pillows behind my back. "You barf again, you're on your own, buddy."

Always am, honey.

Chapter 2

Killian

The pillow beneath my head is...fucking fantastic. I mean, it really is. Like a squishy cloud or something. Which is weird. Why am I getting a hard-on over a pillow?

This oddball thought wakes me up enough that I open my eyes. Sunlight burns, and I wince, squinting for a second. The room is white. Whitewashed wood-paneled walls, white sheets, white curtains drifting in a soft breeze coming through an open window.

I press my face against the cool pillow that feels like a cloud and take a breath. There's an axe of pain splitting my skull. My mouth is burnt toast.

On the bedside table sits a tall glass of some red drink. It's filled with fresh ice, the glass beaded with condensation as if someone just brought it in. Next to it are four clear, blue pills and a note:

For the criminally stupid.

Despite the fact that movement makes my stomach heave, I snort. Memories of my hostess's sharp tongue and rough hands rush in. I ignore them—because I really don't want to remember how drunk I was—and pick up the glass.

The drink smells vaguely like a Bloody Mary but also of something sharp and citrus. I don't want to taste it, but that axe is driving deeper, and I'm thirsty as fuck.

It goes down hard, me gagging along the way, the pills I take with it almost getting stuck in my throat. The concoction is fizzy, which is a surprise. I'm guessing it's Bloody Mary mixed with ginger soda and lemons—but hell, maybe there's arsenic in it too. By the time I finish, I kind of enjoy the taste and feel like I just might live.

I lie on the white cloud bed, smell the touch of sea brine in the air, and listen to the wind chimes. Until the banging of pots and the slam of a cabinet door snag my attention.

Elly May.

If her name really is Elly May, I'm going to laugh my ass off. But Elly May sounds more like a sexy, hay-riding chick. The kind that will milk you dry then offer up her pie. My Elly May is far from that.

Yesterday was fuzzy, but I remember her all right: Frowning face. Foul mouth.

I hear it again in the form of a muffled "fuck" and another slam of a door.

Grunting, I sit up, taking a few breaths as the room spins. I'm buck-ass naked and have to smile at that. Most interesting shower I've had in a while, and I didn't even get off.

It takes an eternity to stand and even longer to reach my clothes. I find them neatly folded on a chair and smelling of Tide. My grandma used Tide. I shove my clothes on and head for the door.

I've been sleeping in the back room of an old farmhouse, apparently. I don't remember what the outside even looks like, but inside is kind of spare country with plank floors and faded furniture.

There's a nice, well-used Martin acoustic leaning against an entire wall of bookcases filled with old LPs. She must have a couple thousand records. Outside of a few deejays I've met, I haven't seen anyone own actual vinyl records. They give the room a musty smell.

So, I'm dealing with a guitar-playing music lover. Please, God, don't let this chick be some sort of Annie Bates psycho. But then I remember the way she glared at me last night. I doubt she's my number-one fan.

I follow the noise and find her in a kitchen, a big square room with one of those classic farm tables that can seat twelve in the middle of it.

She ignores me as I sit at the table, my moves slow and pained. Fuck this shit. I'm not drinking that much again. Never. Again.

In the silence, I watch her stir something in a pot on the stove like she's trying to beat whatever it is into submission. She is definitely not a hot bumpkin. No Daisy Dukes on this chick. Her plump ass hides under ratty jeans with holes in the knees as she stomps around in heavy black boots better suited for my bike—the bike I'm pretty sure is wrapped around her fence. I don't remember crashing and haven't got a scratch on me. The will of the universe is a strange thing. Why it brought me to her of all people, I don't know.

My hostess moves to turn off the stove, and her profile comes into view. Long, straight hair the color of wet sand, gray eyes, and an oval face that should be all soft angles but somehow looks sharp and hard: Elly May is kind of plain. Until she opens her mouth.

Then it's one long stream of colorful bitch.

It's been years since I've had a female berate me for such an extended period of time. If the dousing of ice-cold water hadn't shocked me yesterday, that tongue lashing surely did the job.

Yeah, she has a mouth on her. Though she isn't using it now. I find that more unsettling.

"Hey." My voice sounds like cracked glass. "I, uh, thanks for...ah..." I swallow. "Well, thanks."

And people call me a poet.

She snorts as if she's thinking the same. I silently will her to fully turn and face me.

And she does, her expression pinched with disgust. "You drink what I left you?"

"Yes, ma'am." I salute, fight a grin.

She just looks at me, then grabs a bowl and fills it. Her boots thud as she stomps over and sets it before me. A blob of lumpy white stuff stares back at me.

"It's grits," she says before I can speak. "I don't want to hear any crap; just eat it."

"You always this sunny?" I ask, taking the spoon she's thrust in my face.

"With you? Yes." She gets her own bowl and sits far away from me.

"And though she be but little, she is fierce." While Elly May might have a juicy ass, she can't be more than five foot three, and is small boned.

Her scowl takes on epic proportions. "Did you just quote Shakespeare?"

"Saw it on a tattoo," I lie, because it's fun to tease her. "There might have been something before that." I scratch my bearded chin. "Something like... 'Oh, when she is angry, she is keen and shrewd!'"

"Never saw that part on a tattoo," she mutters, giving me a dubious look before taking a bite of her grits.

I give her a bland, innocent look, and then we eat in silence. The grits are good, taste-wise. The consistency, however, isn't exactly helping my nausea.

"The drink was helpful," I say to fill the silence. I once thought I'd love silence. Turns out, I fucking hate it.

"My dad's old hangover cure."

A timer dings, and she gets up. I smell the biscuits then, and my mouth waters. Like a hungry dog, I track her movements as she pulls the tray from the oven and puts the golden mounds on a plate.

As soon as she sets the plate on the table, I'm on them, my fingertips burning, my tongue smarting. Don't care. They're too good. Heaven.

She watches me, her lips slanting as if she's stuck between a smile and a scowl. She's got nice lips, I'll give her that. Cupid lips, I think they're called. The kind that, while small, are shaped like a kiss.

"Want butter with that?" she asks.

"Is that a real question?" I manage between bites.

She gets up, grabs a jar that I find out is filled with honey butter—damn, that's good—and gets us each a cup of coffee, adding cream to both without asking if I like it that way. I usually take it black and sweet, but I'm not complaining for shit right now. Not when she might take away the biscuits if I do.

I swallow another bite of heaven. "What's your name?"

I can't keep calling this girl Elly May. Then again, I'm just passing through, so it's not like it really matters. But I want to know just the same. Grumpy or not, she's taken care of me when I'd have called the cops in her position.

She sets down her mug and looks me in the eye. "Liberty Bell."

I'd wonder if she's fucking with me, but the militant expression on her face says she is completely serious.

"That's...patriotic."

She snorts and sips her coffee. "It's ridiculous. But my parents loved it, and I loved my parents so..." She shrugs.

Loved. As in past tense.

"You alone then?" I wince as soon as the words come out, because she tenses, her soft gray eyes going hard again.

Liberty pushes back from the table. "I had your bike towed this morning. I'll take you to town so you can sort it out with the mechanic."

I stand too, fast enough to make the floor tilt. "Hey, wait." When she pauses to look at me, I've got nothing. A first. I run my hand over my tangled hair and remember her washing it. "Don't you want to know my name?"

Hell, it's the last thing I want to give. But it irks that she's already rushing me out the door. And damn if I know why that bothers me.

She looks me over, a slow inspection that makes my skin itch and swell. It isn't a hot look. It's judgment. And I'm clearly found lacking. Another first.

Her hair sways, catching the sunlight as she shakes her head. "No. No, I don't."

And then she leaves me with a cup of cooling coffee and a plate of biscuits.

* * * *

Liberty

I've been alone too long. I don't know how to act around people anymore. Especially not this guy. Yesterday he was disgusting. Drunk and too far gone to function. I should have left him on my porch, called the police, and cleaned myself up while they hauled his ass away.

But I couldn't. Not all drunks are bad. Some are just lost. I have no idea what this guy's issue is. I only know that, when faced with the decision, I hadn't the heart to leave him.

So I dragged him to my bathroom and washed him clean. There was nothing sexual about the act. He stank something awful and was so butt-drunk, it was all I could do not to wring his thick neck for being so reckless.

Not to mention I was pissed to have to give my bed up to the idiot. No way was I going to be able to haul him upstairs to the guest rooms.

But now, in the light of day, I am at sea when it comes to my drunken bum. His presence in my house is immense. As if a mere room could never contain him.

Presence. My mom used to say there were those who just *had* it. I never understood what she meant until today. Because even though he's fumbling his words and clearly hung-over, this guy vibrates with vitality. It permeates the air like a perfume, soaking into my skin and making me want to rub myself all over him just to get a little bit more of that feeling—as if by being near him, I, too, might be something special.

It makes no sense. But then life rarely makes sense to me.

And now that he isn't piss-ass drunk and filthy, I can see the beauty of him. His body is long and tight with a sort of rawboned strength of sinewy muscles and sharp movements. His hair is still a tangled mess, falling down to his shoulders and the color of rich, dark coffee. A thick, unkempt beard covers most of his face, which is...annoying. Because it hides too much.

But what I can see points to an attractive man. His nose is bold, a bump along the high bridge as if he once busted it, but the shape fits his face. Prominent cheekbones and what looks to be a stubborn chin under all that fuzz give him an air of pure masculinity.

His eyes, however, are downright pretty. Framed under the dark slashes of his brows, they shine like obsidian.

How could a person not be swayed? Those eyes tracked my every move around the kitchen earlier. Unnerving me.

I shoved food at him just to make him look away. He hadn't, though. Even as he inhaled my biscuits like a man starved, he watched me. Not in a sexual way, though, more like I was a mess he'd inadvertently walked into. The irony made me want to laugh.

Now, I just want to get away from him. Talking about my parents reminds me why I should hate this guy—this drunk-driving stranger who took not only his life but the lives of everyone he shared the road with into his unsteady hands. My life will never be the same because of a drunk driver, and I have little respect for those who do it. Even if they quote Shakespeare and have cheeky, somewhat cute smiles.

Not looking back, I get my keys. He's not far behind though, his boots clomping just as loudly as mine, echoing in the front hall. He's got a fresh biscuit in hand and is chewing on the remnants of another. I refuse to find that endearing.

"You really don't want to know my name?" he calls.

I grab my sunglasses. "Why is this bothering you? It isn't as though we'll ever see each other again."

His frown grows. "Seems like common courtesy."

"After that shower, I think we're past basic etiquette."

Oddly, this makes him smile, and when he does? Oh boy. It's like the sun breaking through storm clouds, all brightness and open joy. I'm fairly blinded by it and have to blink and look away.

“See, that’s my point.” He gestures toward me with his biscuit before taking a huge, grunting bite. “You’ve seen me naked—”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full. It’s disgusting.”

He keeps chewing. “You’ve washed my cock—”

“Hey, I didn’t get anywhere near your dangly bits, buddy. ”

That grin of his wraps around his food. “In my mind you did. And you washed my hair. You can’t wash a man’s hair and not know his name. That’s just bad juju.”

“Juju?” I try not to laugh as I head for the door. “You’re still drunk.”

“Clear as a crystal, Libby.” He’s right behind me, dogging my steps. “Now ask my name.”

I stop short and turn, and my nose meets the center of his chest. The contact ripples through me like a vibrating wave. I step back and tilt my head.

He gives me a slightly smug, completely antagonistic look. But his voice drops, sweet and cajoling. “Come on, ask.”

God, that voice. I’ve been trying to ignore it because it’s the kind of voice that can pull you under, make you lose your train of thought. Low and deep and powerful. He talks, and it’s a melody.

He’s staring at me now, waiting, his dark gaze expectant. It sets off a slow *thud, thud, thud* in my chest. I haven’t stood this close to anyone in a good, long while.

Swallowing, I find my voice. “All right then, tell me.”

But he doesn’t speak. He freezes as if he’s caught and is suddenly wary.

“You’re kidding me, right?” I laugh, not really amused at all. “You bug the hell out of me to ask, and now you pull a Rumpelstiltskin?”

He blinks as if shaking himself out of a trance and then glares. “Don’t worry, your firstborn is safe from me.” He sucks in a breath and thrusts out his hand. “Killian.”

I eye that hand of his. Big, broad, the fingertips and top edge of his palm are calloused. A musician of some sort. Probably a guitarist. I run a thumb over my own rough fingertips. He’s waiting again, his brows knitting as if I’ve insulted him by not taking his hand.

So I do. It’s warm and firm. He gives me a squeeze strong enough to bend my bones, though I don’t think he knows how hard his grip really is. Definitely a musician.

“Pleased to meet you, Liberty Bell.” His smile is nice, boyish almost, beneath his thick beard. Earlier, I thought he was in his thirties. But now I’m guessing he’s more my age, mid-to-late twenties.

I let his hand go. “I wouldn’t call our meeting a pleasure, exactly.”

“Oh, now, you have to admit I have great aim.” He gives me a nudge as I roll my eyes.

“Let’s never speak of that again.”

“Speak of what?” His tone is light as he follows me outside.

I head toward my truck, but he stops me with a touch to my elbow. He’s focused on Mrs. Cromley’s house across the way. Mrs. Cromley died six months ago, and her nephew, George, took over the place. Haven’t seen him yet, but I know he’s a forty-something with a wife and kids. I doubt he’ll move in; the house sits at the edge of nowhere, and our little island of the tip of the Outer Banks doesn’t even have a school.

Then again, Al’s Grocery van is idling out front, and two big boxes are on the porch. Killian looks around, taking in the rolling grass turning toasted brown as fall sets in, the crest of the hill, and the small sliver of blue where the Atlantic Ocean crashes to the shore.

Killian scratches his jaw as if his beard itches. “That house over there. That George Cromley’s place, do you know?”

A sinking sensation pulls at my gut. “Yeah,” I say slowly.

Killian nods and catches my gaze. His smile is just as slow and smug as usual. “Then I guess I won’t need a ride into town after all, neighbor.”

Chapter 3

Killian

I told her my name, and she didn't recognize me. It's been so long since someone my age looked at me as if I were a total stranger, it's oddly unsettling now. And ain't that fucked up? I've roamed far and wide to get away from fans, from people kissing my ass and wanting something from me. And now that I've crossed paths with a girl who clearly would just like me to go away? I'm irritated.

Snorting, I take a sip of scalding hot coffee and lean back in my old-fashioned rocking chair. From my seat on the porch, I have a good view of Liberty's house. It's a two-story, white clapboard. The type you'd see in an Edward Hopper painting. Driving past, you'd suspect a little old lady was inside rolling out pie dough. I bet Liberty makes awesome pie, but she'd probably brain me with the roller for pissing her off before I even got a taste.

The scar my bike slashed along the grass is an ugly reminder of what I did the other night. Driving drunk. That isn't me. I'd been the one to keep the guys in check. Keep them away from falling victim to the hard stuff—from becoming clichés, as Liberty put it.

Something strong and ugly rolls in my chest. All my efforts hadn't helped Jax. Images of his limp body flash before my eyes in vivid color: graying skin against white tiles, yellow vomit, green eyes staring at nothing.

My teeth clench, my fingers aching from the force of my grip on the mug.

Fucking Jax. Idiot.

Hurt makes it hard to breathe. My body twitches with the need for motion. Go somewhere else. Keep moving until my mind is blank.

A slam of a screen door has me flinching, and hot coffee spills over the rim of my mug.

"Shit." I set it on the floor and suck on my burnt finger.

Across the way, Liberty stomps down her porch steps, heading toward a high-fenced-off vegetable garden. A smile pulls at my lips. The girl never just walks. Wherever she goes, it's like she's embarking on a mission of doom.

She moves through a patch of sunlight, and her hair turns the color of brown butter. I have the urge to capture the moment, write down a lyric. Panic at the thought has me rising and pacing.

I should go into the house. And then what? Lie on the ancient couch covered in ugly blue roses? Drink the day away?

Crates of my stuff have arrived. Including three of my favorite guitars. Scottie, the rat bastard, sent those along even though I never asked for them. Does he think I'm going to compose? Write a song? No fucking way. Shit. I have no idea what I'm doing here. Scottie's grand idea of me hiding out on an island almost nobody has heard of is stupid. That's what I get for listening to him while I was drunk.

Maybe Scottie has psychic abilities, because my cell starts ringing. And only a handful of people have this number. My eyes are on Libby kneeling between rows of green things when I answer the phone. Only it isn't Scottie.

"Hey, man," Whip says.

I haven't heard his voice for nearly a year. The familiar sound is a kick in the head. I sag back into my chair. "Hey." I clear my throat. "What's up?"

Jesus, don't be about Jax. My fingers go cold, blood rushing to my temples. I take a deep breath.

"Is it true you're slumming it somewhere in the wilds of North Carolina?"

I let out a snarl. "Is he okay?"

There's a pause and then Whip curses. "Shit, man, I wasn't thinking. Yeah, he's fine." Whip makes an audible sigh. "He's a lot better. Seeing a counselor."

Good. Great. Nice that Jax has called to tell me as much. I rub my hand over my face, closing my eyes. "So what's going on, then?"

"Just been thinking." Whip's voice goes distant. "We've all been scattered to the four winds. And...hell, just wanted to talk. See where you were at."

Jax is the one who scattered us. He broke us that day, as effectively as if he'd thrown a boulder into a window. And while Jax and I usually played the roles of mom and dad in the group, Whip has always been the anchor, our glue. He'd throat-punch me if I said it to his face, but Whip is also the most sensitive. I know he's hurting.

I glance over at Libby again. Her plump ass sways as she pulls on weeds. The sight almost makes me smile; she'd hate knowing I'm watching her. I find my voice then. "Have you talked to the others?" I ask Whip.

"Been hanging out with Rye. We've come up with some material."

This is new. It's usually Jax and I who write. I sit up a little straighter, trying to focus. I need to be supportive. I know this. But it's hard to muster any enthusiasm. Even so, I say what needs to be said. "You record anything I can hear?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll send it to you." Whip pauses, then causally adds, "Maybe you can fine-tune it. Give us some notes."

I don't know how I feel about this. I'm not pissed. I like that they're composing. But something rolls inside of me: avoidance, the desire to get away, and with it, the need to end the call.

But Whip isn't finished. "Or maybe come back and work with us."

I'm on my feet again, walking to the porch screen. I rest my forehead against its fragile wall. "Not yet. But soon, man."

"Yeah. Sure." Whip sounds about as sincere as I do.

"I'll be in touch," I say. It may or may not be a lie. I haven't picked up my guitar in nearly a year, and have no desire to try now.

"Right."

The silence, when he hangs up, rings in my ears. I don't know how to be myself anymore, don't know how to be part of Kill John. How do we go on? Do we do it without Jax? With him? And all the time looking over our shoulders for fear he'll try it again?

Part of it isn't even about Jax. I'm tired. Uninspired. It makes me feel guilty as hell.

Though I'm on a porch, the walls press in on me, taking my air. I should go inside, do...something. My feet take me the opposite direction, off my porch and straight to Liberty.

She's hunched over a row of herbs and doesn't look up when I lean my wrists against the top of the fence, which is at chin level. I watch her work, not minding the silence. It's amusing the way she ignores me, because she doesn't do a good job of it. Her whole placid, I-don't-give-a-fuck-that-you're-here expression just tells me she very much gives a fuck. Only she doesn't want to.

I grin at the thought. There's something so *normal* about it all. "You know, I've had girls on their knees before me plenty of times. But they usually do it with a smile."

She snorts. "I'd be more impressed if you were the one used to being on your knees. I like givers, not takers."

Jesus. I can just imagine her, plush thighs spread wide, using that bossy tone to tell me what she likes best as I eat her out. I shift my hips, drawing them away from the fence. No need for her to see the growing bulge in my pants; I'm not entirely sure if I'm attracted to her or have suddenly become a masochist. "What about give *and* take? You down with that?"

Even as I joke, a twinge of guilt hits me. When was the last time I gave, anyway? Because she's right; I got lazy, sat around like a king having girls suck me off while I thought up song lyrics or planned the next album. Reached a point where I did not give a ripe grape what those girls did or where they went once I got off.

Liberty glares up at me now. "What exactly are you doing here anyway? Don't you work?"

God, I want to laugh at that. I bite my bottom lip. "Don't you? Isn't it, like, a Tuesday?"

"It's Wednesday, and I work from home, thank you."

"Doing what?"

"If I wanted you to know, I would have said."

"Are you a deejay?"

"A deejay?" She gapes up at me. "Are you serious? Where would I even play? At the church?"

I actually flush. I don't think I've flushed with embarrassment in my entire life. Glancing up at the sky to see if any pigs are flying around, I mutter, "You have all those records."

"Ah." She gives me a tight nod. "Those were my dad's. He was a deejay in college."

"It's an impressive collection."

"It is."

"And the guitar?"

Her shoulders hunch. "Also my dad's."

Now I know how reporters feel when they interview me. I empathize. This girl has me beat on evasive maneuvers.

"You're really not gonna tell me?" I don't know why I'm pushing this. But her determination to shut me down amuses me.

"Guess not." She pulls out a pair of scissors and snips off bunches of sage, thyme, and rosemary. My grandma used to have an herb garden. A small box set up in her kitchen window back in the Bronx. When I was a little kid, I'd beg her to let me cut what she needed, and she'd remind me not to bruise the leaves.

I shake off old memories before they choke me. "Fine. I'll just leave it to my imagination." I scratch my chin, now beard-free and smooth—damn thing itched too much to keep in this heat. "I'm gonna go with phone-sex worker."

Libby tucks her herbs in her basket and leans back on her heels. "That's just ridiculous. Do I sound like a phone-sex worker?"

"Actually? Yeah." I clear my throat because I can practically hear her cream-and-ice voice doling out demands. "Yeah, you do."

She scowls at that, her eyes finally meeting mine again. Whatever she sees in my expression has her frown deepening and her color rising. She quickly turns back to her gardening. "I've got work to do. You gonna stand there watching all day? Or maybe there's a bottle you'll be wanting to find your way to the bottom of."

“Cute. And no. No more binge drinking for me.”

She makes a dubious sound.

I should go. I glance back at my house. It sits like a lump against the land, all forlorn and silent. That ugly itch feeling rises within my chest again. I have to fight not to scratch at it. Libby isn't looking, though; she's yanking weeds. Sighing, I clear my throat. “Can I help?”

* * * *

Libby

He's not leaving. I'm not sure what to do with that. It kills me to be inhospitable to him. With every short word I throw him, I can feel my grandma rolling in her grave. I was raised to be polite above all things. But Killian sets my teeth on edge for a whole host of reasons.

I'd expected to see him again, sure. We're neighbors after all. But I didn't expect him to immediately seek me out and want to remain in my company. And though I haven't been welcoming, that doesn't seem to bother him. He kind of reminds me of those boys in grade school who get a kick out of tugging girls' pigtails.

And the bald truth is guys who look like Killian simply don't bother with me. They never have. So why now? Is he bored? Slumming?

Whatever the case, I'm both unsettled by his presence and annoyingly curious about the guy.

Killian, on his hands and knees, weeding, should be diminished in size. If anything, he seems larger now, his shoulders broader as they move beneath a faded Captain Crunch T-shirt. His coffee-dark hair falls in tangles around those shoulders, and I have the urge to offer him a haircut. I don't mind longer hair, but Killian's is just a hot mess. I swear the man doesn't own a brush.

But he has shaved. The sight initially threw me because I'd been expecting that backwoods beard when I heard his voice earlier. But instead of a fuzzy face, I was greeted by the smooth, clean sweep of his jaw, a stubborn chin, and a big, dimpled smile. How is anyone supposed to resist that?

“How did you learn the difference between weeds and plants?” His black velvet voice envelops me, but he doesn't look up from his task. The little furrow of concentration between his brows is kind of endearing. “Because it all looks the same to me.”

“My grandma taught me.” I clear my throat and rip at a particularly tenacious weed.

“Grandmas are good like that.”

I can't imagine him hanging around a grandmother. Or maybe I can. She'd probably serve him milk and cookies and chastise him about taking better care of himself. I point out another weed. “Eventually it gets easier to spot them.”

“If you say so.” He doesn't sound too happy but keeps working.

We're silent again, going about our business.

“Top-secret spy?”

I jerk my head up at Killian's question. “What?”

He waggles his dark brows. “Your job. Still trying to figure it out. You a spy?”

“You found me out. Now come with me.” I incline my head toward the house. “I have something to show you inside.”

White teeth sink into his plump lower lip. “Unless it involves spanking, I'm not going.”

I snort, despite myself.

“Sex-toy tester?”

“Ah. No.”

“Erotica writer?”

“Why are all the options suddenly sex-related?”

“Because hope springs eternal.”

“Better hope I don’t accidentally, on purpose, nut you.”

“All right, all right. Home shopper?”

“I hate shopping.”

“Yeah, I can see that about you.”

My head jerks up. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugs, completely unrepentant. “A girl who stomps around in worn out Doc Martens isn’t usually the type to squeal over a new sale.”

I sit back on the heels of said Docs. “Okay, I’m not big on fashion. But that doesn’t have to mean I’m not a shopper.”

“You just said you hate shopping. Like, *just* said it.”

“Yeah, but you shouldn’t be able to tell simply by looking at me.”

His nose wrinkles as he scratches the back of his neck. “I’m confused.”

“Maybe I’m addicted to buying dolls. Maybe I have a whole room of them at the back of the house.”

Killian gives a full-body shudder. “Don’t even joke about that. I’ll have Chucky nightmares for months.”

I think about a room of dolls staring at me and shudder too. “You’re right. No dolls. Ever.”

He winks at me. I have no idea how he manages to do it without looking like a smarmy ass, but it’s cute instead. “See?” he says. “Not a shopper.”

“And you are, what? A detective?”

He sits back on his heels too. “If I was, I’d be a pretty shitty one since I can’t figure out what you do.”

We stare at each other, his dark gaze drilling into me, waiting. It’s surprisingly effective, because I swear, I’m starting to sweat.

“Fine,” I blurt out. “I’m a book cover designer.”

He blinks as if surprised. “Really? That’s...well, the last thing I’d have guessed, but totally cool. Can I see your work?”

“Maybe later.” I go back to weeding, though really, I’m hacking the same spot over and over. There isn’t anything left but a dark scar of soil. Smoothing a hand over the cool earth, I eye him. “And what do you do?”

He’s good; he barely flinches before covering it with a wide and easy smile. “I am currently without employment.”

I’m about to ask what he did before, but something brittle and pained lingers in those coffee-colored eyes of his, and I don’t have the heart. Yesterday he was drunk on my lawn. I don’t think life is going his way at the moment, and I have no desire to pick at that wound.

He covers the silence by pointing at a green vine. “Pull this?”

“No. That’s a tomato vine.”

It becomes apparent that Killian isn’t comfortable with long silences. “So was this place ever a working farm?”

I’d think he talks to hear himself, but he looks at me with genuine interest every time he asks a question. I take a moment to look at the land around me. Collar Island is part of the chain

known as the Outer Banks. While the northern end has a town and multiple grand vacation homes, the southern tip—where my grandma’s house is located—is fairly isolated. Nothing but a few scattered houses and waving green and tawny grass, surrounded by sandy beach and vivid blue ocean.

“Back when my grandparents were young,” I say. “They farmed rotating vegetable crops. Same with the owners of the house you’re staying in. Now I just attend to the land nearest the house and let the rest grow free.”

“Beautiful place,” Killian admits. “Kind of lonely, though.”

Can’t say much to that. So I merely nod.

We go back to work. Which is good, fine. Until Killian reaches behind his head and pulls off his shirt to tuck it in his back pocket.

I’ve already seen the man naked. But that was different. I was too pissed and too busy trying to get him clean to fully notice the particulars. Now he’s in the full sun, his tan skin already glistening with a fine sheen of sweat. He’s lean and strong, his muscles a work of art. The massive tattoo that covers his left shoulder and torso is actually a vintage map of the world, like a spread-out globe.

“You looking at my art, Libs?” He sounds amused.

I meet his eyes and find them glinting, those ridiculously long lashes practically touching his cheeks. No fair that a dude has such pretty eyes.

“I am. I figure you put pictures on your body, it’s fair game for anyone to study them.”

His grin is quick, devilish, the little dimples on the sides of his mouth going deep then fading with his smile. “Didn’t say I minded.” He sits back on his heels so I can see it all.

Unfortunately, I find myself wanting to study his lower abdomen, where the muscles are like stepping stones leading the way down to Mr. Happy.

Damn it. I am not attracted to this guy. Nope. I’m just undersexed and need to get me some. Soon. But *not* with Killian. I cannot forget how I met him. Alcohol addiction is my hard line in the sand; it destroyed everything I loved.

Ignoring my inner argument, I take in his tattoo. It’s done in clean, sure lines, more of an impression of the globe instead of being heavy with detail. And it is beautiful.

“Does it have any meaning?” I ask. “Or was it for fun?”

Killian tosses a dark lock of hair back from his face. “Started off as a way to cover up a mistake.”

He leans in, bringing the scent of clean sweat and heady male pheromones with him. Hell. There really isn’t any good way to describe that fragrance other than delicious and addictive. I brace myself as he points to a spot above his nipple where there’s a compass rose. “I wanted to cover a name. Darla.”

“Love gone bad?”

He gives me a wry grin. “That would at least be romantic. But no. It was high school graduation. Me and...” His face goes blank for a second, a haunted look flashing in his eyes. But he blinks, and it’s gone. “My friends and I got wasted and hunted down one of our other friends who was practicing to become a tattoo artist. I was the guinea pig.”

“And he put ‘Darla’ on you?”

“Yep.” Killian sits back and starts to weed again. But he’s still grinning.

“Who was Darla?”

He laughs. “That’s the thing; she was just a name he thought would sound funny. I might have kept it. But, shit, it was ugly—all lopsided and fucking loopy.” Killian shakes his head. “Looked like some third grader did it.”

I can’t help but laugh too. “Nice.”

Killian’s expression goes soft, his gaze running over my face. His smile grows.

“What?” I ask, thrown by the gleam in his eyes. It makes my breath catch.

“You’re pretty.”

He says it so matter of fact, I snort. “You sound surprised.”

Killian leans in just a little. “Truth? I am. You’ve been scowling at me so much… Ah, there it is again. Glaring hate-fire at me.” The calloused tip of his finger traces the top of my cheek, and my lower belly clenches in shock. His voice grows thoughtful. “But when you smile? You kind of glow.”

“Like a light bulb?” I retort, trying not to duck my head.

His brow quirks, his eyes glinting with suppressed humor. “Fine. You’re radiant. That clear enough?”

Words stick in my throat. It hits me that a man has never called me pretty before. Not once. How could that be? I’m not ugly. Objectively speaking, I know I’m pretty, or can be. I’ve had multiple dates, a boyfriend briefly in college. I’ve been hit on before, sure. But I’ve never been complimented in such a simple, honest way. The knowledge sinks into my skin like an itch, and suddenly I don’t want Killian to look at me.

My spade plunges into the earth with enough violence to send soil flying. “So how did this Darla tat go away?”

Killian frowns down at my spade for a second before he eases back to his usual cheekiness. “My mom was so disgusted with it, she gave me the money to get a new one to cover it.”

“I’d have thought she’d want you to get it removed.”

“Naw.” He tugs out a weed. “She didn’t object to a tattoo, just that it was poorly done. And there’d still be a scar. Mom isn’t big on scars. Anyway, I got the compass rose. The map came later.” He glances down at himself. “Kind of like, ‘Hey, Kills, here’s the world. It’s all yours if you don’t fuck it up.’”

The regret in his voice, though he’s clearly trying to hide it, hits something in me. I take a breath, my gaze wandering to the clear blue sky overhead. The world. I’ve seen so little of it. Just this small blue corner of North Carolina and the slightly bigger swath of land when I went down to Savannah for college. Twenty-five years old, and I’m a hermit of my own making.

My chest closes up, and I have to fight to breathe. I have an overwhelming urge to run into the house and curl up in my nice, cool bed where it’s dim and silent.

“This is surprisingly relaxing,” he says.

Killian’s comment catches my attention.

“What? Weeding?”

He glances at me from under the fans of his lashes. “Yep. I like doing something constructive.” Killian stops and rubs the back of his neck. “You got any fences to mend or wood to chop? Something like that?”

“You need hard labor to forge you into a better person?”

“Yeah.” He smiles. “Yeah, I think I do.”

“And you want me to…what? Mr. Miyagi you?”

His laugh is a rolling wave, deep and warm. “Fuck yeah. Paint the fence. Sand the floor.”

“And when you’re done, we can go down to the sea, and you’ll balance on one leg.”

“Shit, that would be epic.” Killian spreads his arms wide, doing a half-assed crane move. It does nice things to his torso, which I promptly ignore.

I stand instead, dusting the loose soil off my knees. I grab my basket of veggies. “Come on, then. You can mow the law if you’re really serious. That’s about as Mr. Miyagi as I can get right now.”

Killian hops up with ease. “Killian-san ready for duty.”

I roll my eyes, pretending that I find him annoying. But I don’t. And that scares me.

Chapter 4

Killian

I'm mowing Libby's lawn. Sadly, that isn't a euphemism for something more pleasurable than pushing an old mower back and forth over her vast and rolling yard. Out here in the hot sun, my muscles moving and sweat trickling down my spine, I realize I haven't had sex in months. Six to be exact. I haven't gone that long without sex since I started having sex. What really freaks me out is that I haven't missed it much.

During my travels, I met plenty of hot women ready and willing to rock my world. *Willing* isn't even the right word. They were desperate to fuck me. It isn't arrogance that makes me say that. It's the truth. They knew who I was and did their best to be the girl who would blow me so away I would take them with me. Same old story for the past eight years. Fame equals dick chasers.

Pushing the mower, I think back on all those women. God, some of them really did rock my world. The things they let me do, that they did to me, were unreal—as close to a high as I could get when not on stage. But it always ended as soon as my dick went limp. Eventually, sex with groupies became almost another form of masturbation. The excitement had long since faded. No matter how good a chick's technique, she never saw me as anything other than a means to an end. And those girls never expressed an opinion that contradicted my needs. I could send in a roadie, tell the groupies he was part of the band, and they'd fuck him raw too.

I used those women just like they used me. Pump, dump, and go. Soulless encounters.

Is that what Jax felt? Soulless? Off kilter?

For the first time in years, I feel like I'm walking on solid ground. And I'm doing nothing more than yardwork. Libby gave me the side-eye when I asked to do more, and I made a joke out of it. But I was completely serious. I feel good. I want more of that—more of knowing I'm as normal and human as the rest of the world.

Pulling my shirt from where it's tucked in my back pocket, I wipe the sweat from my brow and head for the big barn-like garage at the back of the property. The lawn is done. It's not perfect—my lines are slightly askew.

I'm stretching out my shoulders when Libby appears on the back stoop. She's holding two tall, icy glasses of lemonade. She meets me halfway, and I barely get out a heartfelt "thanks" before I'm gulping my drink down. Cold. Fresh. Perfect.

I'm beginning to think this girl will never give me anything that isn't fucking sublime. Then I catch a glimpse inside the shed and nearly choke on my last mouthful of lemonade.

"You have a ride-on mower," I get out while sputtering on my drink and glaring at the John Deere that would have cut my work time to less than an hour.

Liberty, the little she-devil, just shrugs, taking a dainty sip of her lemonade. "Would Mr. Miyagi have let Daniel-san use a power sander? I think not."

She lets out a surprisingly girlish squeal when I launch myself at her, catching her around the middle, and haul her onto my shoulder.

"You spilled my drink, fuck face," she shouts, but she's laughing.

Thank God. Because I really didn't think about the consequences when I acted. I rarely do. But I don't want to piss her off or freak her out. Grinning wildly, I spin her in a circle and give her juicy ass a slap.

She really squeals then, her feet kicking at my thighs, her hands beating my butt. "You will die for that, mister."

"Might as well enjoy myself then," I shout over her protests and slap her ass again. Jesus. I need to stop because now I want to grab her round, firm butt and give it a squeeze. Maybe slip my fingers in between the crack and... *Down, boy.*

I'd blame the heat and my lack of sex life, but I'm not sure. There's something oddly appealing about prickly but oh-so-plush Libby.

Reluctantly, I set her down and brace myself to be nudded. She swats my arm instead, her face red as one of her tomatoes.

"Jerk," she says without heat. "I have a total head rush now."

"Ah, those are the best." Before she can totter, I touch her elbow just enough to steady her. Now that she's not in my arms, I'm oddly hesitant to make contact again. Only yesterday we were at each other's throats. And now I want to touch her as many times as she'll let me.

"You're crazy pants, you know that?" Her scowl is kind of cute.

"I've been told as much on occasion."

"Not surprising." Libby rakes her fingers through her hair, and the sun glints off the strands. "I was going to offer to take you to the beach—"

"We're going." I try to grab her hand but she evades me this time.

"I don't know..."

"Liberty," I warn. "Don't make me toss you over my shoulder and haul your little ass there."

"Yeah, right. I bet you're all bark too, buddy."

I step close, so quick that I neatly pin her to the side of the shed. We're not actually touching but she goes still anyway. I take advantage and lean in until our noses nearly bump. "Oh, I bite, babe. But you'll like it."

It then occurs to me what I'm doing. And that she smells like sunshine and lemons and brown sugar. Alarms start going off in my head, shouting *danger* and *step the fuck back*. But I can't stop myself from looking at her lips. Mistake. Big fucking mistake.

They're pink and soft and parted, as if waiting to be taken. Heat surges to my cock, and I have to physically brace against the urge to thrust my hips forward. What the fuck? I'm losing it.

Proof that this is a bad idea comes by way of Libby pressing those pretty lips together. "I bite back, Kill, and you won't like it."

I give her a big, fake-ass smile. "So you say. Now get your suit on or I'll bug the shit out of you all day."

She rolls her eyes but thankfully turns toward the house. "I'll pack a lunch."

God, she's gonna feed me. I'd like this girl just for that. But I've got to hold myself together. Because she's not the type to fool around with. Any guy with half a brain can see that. She might be hard on the outside, but it feels more like a brittle shell. Christ, she reminds me of Jax in that way. The thought cools me. Maybe I should tell her to forget the whole thing and just go by myself.

But then she pops her head back out the door. "Get in here. I got stuff for you to haul."

Like that, I'm hooked again. There's just something about her I can't ignore. I push off the side of the shed and bound to the stairs. "As long as you don't forget lunch, I'm all yours, Miss Bell."

* * * *

Libby

The swath of beach near the house is narrow, butting up against wild dunes. I set up my blanket, umbrella, and chair while Killian looks on, as if perplexed.

“It’s like you’re getting ready to camp,” he tells me when I take the cooler from his hand and plunk it in the shade behind my beach chair. “You gonna pull out an air mattress next? The kitchen sink?”

“I like my comforts. And I’d rather not crisp in the sun like a tater tot.”

Killian snickers. “I’ll be the tater.”

I pull off my tee and ease out of my jean shorts. “You do that. But don’t come crying to me if you burn. I’m not rubbing aloe on your back.” *Lie*. I’d be far too happy to rub him.

“You will, Libs.” His voice is oddly faint, distracted. “You’re all bark, babe.”

“Babe? That’s no way to get me to...” I glance up to find him watching me. Not leering, but definitely looking.

And I have the urge to pull my top back on. My black bikini is made for comfort rather than sexiness, and it covers as much as my bra and panties would. But I’m not used to a man seeing so much of me. I’m not ashamed of my body—though I wouldn’t cry if I suddenly had a smaller butt and bigger boobs. I’m a B-cup, so I don’t have to wear a bra every day, and I’m not exactly filling it out when I do. Something tells me Killian has seen his fair share of spectacular boobs. It annoys me that I fear I’ll be found lacking.

I catch his gaze, and the air around us seems to take a pause. Killian’s dark eyes narrow, his expression hooded. I wonder what the hell he’s thinking, and my heart starts to pound, little zings of heat going haywire low in my belly.

I don’t know how long we stand there, looking at each other as if we’re strangers who happened upon each other on this beach. It’s probably only a few seconds, but it feels like an eternity. Then he blinks, cutting that cord, and makes a pretense of looking all around the beach. We’re alone here. Though, far in the distance, a few people are walking along the shore.

“I’m going for a swim,” he says. “Want to come?”

“You don’t want your sandwich?” Something in my chest squeezes tight because he’s kind of twitchy now, as though he wants to take off.

Killian eyes the cooler and lets out a breath. “Right. Forgot about that.”

He plops down next to me on the beach blanket, close enough that his thigh nearly brushes mine, and I can feel the heat of his body. He’s got nice legs, muscular and dusted with dark hairs, his skin already deeply tanned.

I shouldn’t be noticing his damn legs. I shouldn’t be fidgeting with plates.

“You come here a lot?” he asks.

“I visit the beach almost daily.”

“With your friends?”

I wipe my hands down my thighs. “No. By myself.”

He takes a bite of his sandwich, his gaze on the sea. “No friends?”

God, the man is like a bloodhound. Or an annoying rat, chewing away at all my weaknesses. With that lovely image floating before my eyes, I set my sandwich down. “Not much of a social life here. Most of my friends are online.” And when was the last time I talked to any of them?

It's a slap to the system to realize I haven't emailed anyone in months. And no one has emailed me either.

I'm not shy. But I am an introvert. Going out has never been my thing. But when did I grow so isolated? Why hadn't I noticed? Or cared?

"Anyway, I like my privacy, doing my own thing..." My neck tightens, and I take long gulps of my lemonade.

I have no idea what Killian is thinking. He just nods and eats his BLT in neat but big bites. A sigh of contentment leaves him before he peers down at the cooler, a little frown between his eyes.

"Here." I pass him another sandwich. "I packed you three."

His grin is quick and wide. "I knew it. All bark."

I won't smile. I won't. "Eat your sandwiches."

"I see that smile, Libs."

"I can take back the food."

He grabs the third sandwich and sets it on his lap, hunching protectively over it as he wolfs down the second one. "You grow up here?" he asks me after swallowing a huge chunk.

"No. I grew up in Wilmington. The house was my grandmama's place. She left it to my parents when she died, and they left it to me." There. I said it. And it only hurts a little. A dull pain, like a boulder crushing down on my ribs. "I was living in Savannah, but after... Well, I just wanted to go home. This was the closest place to it for me."

Killian frowns, but his voice is gentle. "When did they die, Libby?"

I don't want to answer. But silence is worse. "A little over a year ago." I take a breath. "My mom and dad went out to dinner. Dad got drunk but drove anyway."

I can't tell him that my dad was always drunk in those final days, missing a lifestyle he'd vowed to give up when my parents had me. Was I the cause of my father's bad choices? No. But some days, it sure felt like it. I swallow hard. "He crashed into a family van. Killed the mother in that van, himself, and my mom too."

"Fucking hell."

I try to shrug and fail. "It is what it is."

"It's fucked up, honey."

Nodding, I search through the cooler for another lemonade.

"Liberty?" His voice is so soft and tentative that I immediately still and lift my head.

Killian squeezes the back of his neck, his jaw bunched. But he doesn't look away, even though it's clear he wants to. "I... Fuck..." He takes another breath. "I'm sorry. For the way we met. For tearing up your lawn and puking on you." His cheeks redden, which is kind of cute. "But most of all, for forcing you to take care of a drunk driver."

He flicks a few grains of sand off his knee. "It was fucked up. And I'm not that guy." His dark eyes are wide and slightly haunted. "Or I wasn't until recently. I just...had a rough time lately," he finishes with a mumble before frowning at the sea.

"And you turned to the bottle." It isn't my place to criticize. And I try to make my voice gentle. "It never works, you know."

He snorts. "Oh, I know." He glances back at me, and his lips curve on a bitter smile. "I failed spectacularly at that experiment in oblivion."

"If you'd failed," I say softly, "you'd be dead."

Killian blanches. "I guess you're right," he says in a thin voice.

We're quiet for a moment, the crash of waves and the cries of gulls filling the air. Then I hand him his sandwich. "I'm glad you didn't." *I'm glad you're here. With me.* But I don't have the courage to say that.

He shakes his head as if laughing at himself, but when he meets my eyes, there's a lightness in his expression. "I'm glad too, Liberty Bell." Killian leans in and peers at me. "We cool now?"

He sounds so hopeful—and a bit unsure—that the last vestiges of anger toward him leave me. I fear that too. Anger is a wall I've built to protect myself. I know this. What I don't know is how to protect myself from hurt without it. But I want to try.

I find a smile. "We're cool."

Chapter 5

Libby

We're friends. I don't know how it happened. I was all set to hate Killian, but he's wormed his way under my skin with embarrassingly little effort. Maybe because, as the days pass, he never really leaves. Somehow he's around for breakfast the next morning, then ends up hanging out with me all day until it's night again. Or maybe because I've sunk into a pattern of enjoying his company and then waiting until he returns to me. I swear, I seem to be waiting for him even in my sleep, my thoughts consumed with all things Killian—what is he doing? What's he thinking now? When's he coming over again?

The annoying thing is that I was perfectly content before he came. My life had a pattern and was comfortable. Reliable. Now, it's anything but. Everything is driven by this push of anticipation for *him*.

I tell myself it isn't really my fault. I don't think there's a person on Earth capable of resisting the man. Killian is a peacock in a world of sparrows. He catches the eye and holds it. Oddly, it isn't even about looks. Killian's features are bold and strong; he's good looking, sure, but not extraordinary. And yet he is, because whatever makes Killian *Killian* lights him up and draws people in like a candle in the dark.

Proof positive I'm not the only one affected? Grumpy old Mrs. Nellwood is currently beaming at Killian like he's her favorite grandson, even though he's rifling through her store and making a general ruckus.

Killian has dragged me away from work and into town. I hate going to town, but he whined and pouted, then grinned and poked at my ribs until I agreed to give him a ride.

"You're not gonna make me walk all that way, are you, Libby?" he'd said with that lopsided smile of his, the one that causes little crinkles to form at the corners of his dark eyes. "It's got to be, what? At least a mile. Maybe two."

"You're a fit young man. You'll survive."

"I'm new to the area. I could get lost. Next thing you know, I'm half-starved, and in my weakened condition, I could be eaten by wild, rabid bunnies."

"Bunnies?" I hadn't wanted to laugh but did anyway. "Of all the animals, you go with bunnies?"

"Have you ever looked in a bunny's eyes, Libs? They're just waiting for their chance to dominate. Why do you think they're always so twitchy?"

"Because they're freaked something's going to eat them for dinner?"

"Nope. They're plotting. It's just a matter of time before they make their move. Mark my words."

So here we are, in Nellwood's General Store, Killian all but hopping from shelf to shelf, intent, it seems, on touching everything. "Oh, shit," he drawls. "Look at this, Libs."

He picks up a red trucker hat and tries it on. "What do you think?"

Of course he looks good in it. Even with his long, tangled hair. In truth, he's like a hot trucker. It doesn't help that his faded black Star Wars T-shirt clings to his chest and displays his tight biceps with loving care. Disturbed fantasies involving a big rig and a truck stop parking lot fill my head, and I have to give myself a mental slap to focus on the question at hand.

His grin is one of goofy happiness, and I can't help but smile back. "It's totally you. In fact, you really should buy one in every color they have."

Killian points at me. "You're getting one too."

"Yeah, no."

"It'll protect your skin from that sunburn threat you keep going on about."

Behind the counter, Mrs. Nellwood titters. "So sweet, looking out for you. Liberty, dear, who is your young man?"

My man? Gah.

Under the brim of his hat, Killian's dark brows waggle, though he manages to keep a straight face while he does it.

"This is my new neighbor..." I glance at him and realize I have no idea what his last name is. Good God, I've let a virtual stranger into my life. And become way too attached to him at that.

Killian doesn't look at me, so he's oblivious to my panic as he steps to the counter and extends his hand. "Killian, ma'am. I'm renting the Cromley place for a few months."

Mrs. Nellwood preens, her white bun trembling. "Welcome to Collar Island, Mr. Scott."

Killian frowns as if confused. "Mr. Scott?"

Mrs. Nellwood's pale blue eyes are shrewd. "I thought a Mr. Scott was the name on the rental agreement. Was I mistaken?"

Killian's back stiffens in surprise. He clearly hadn't understood the busybody nature of a small town. But he recovers quickly and gives her the full force of his charming smile. "Mr. Scott handled the rental for me. I was traveling at the time."

It's strange. Watching Killian, I get a sense he's telling the truth, and yet he seems oddly unsettled. Maybe he's like me and values his privacy. I don't blame him. I've spent every summer of my life here. Still I'm treated like an outsider and an object of curiosity.

I hide a lot since I moved in permanently. The idea that they're just waiting for me to slip up and spill my innermost secrets sets my teeth on edge. I hate small talk, always have. Hate the awkward, too-tight effect it has on my skin, my throat. I'm better off on my own. Which is why I rarely come to town.

Killian is paying for his things—a mountain of candy, chips, soda, knick-knacks that no one ever needs, and the hat—when the bell over the door rings and a group of girls enter on a wave of giggles.

They look about sixteen, and it occurs to me that I've really been hiding away for a long-ass time, because I don't recognize a one of them. At the counter, Killian shifts his weight so his back is to the girls. I wouldn't have noticed except my attention, apparently, is always somehow on him.

He thanks Mrs. Nellwood with a quick, tight smile then hustles over to me. He doesn't actually move quickly, but each step he takes seems laden with the intent to get the fuck out of here. Fine by me.

The moving mass of teenagers has hit the makeup aisle, and much squealing has ensued. And they've definitely noticed him. The girls keep whispering while glancing at his back, which isn't surprising. Killian is tall and well formed. A hot stranger. He might as well be bait on a hook for the local female population.

I am surprised, however, when Killian takes my hand and tugs me outside. Not surprised that he wants to leave, but that he does it in a way that makes it look like we're a couple. In

silence, we walk down Main Street, and all I can think about is the rough yet warm feel of his hand in mine. His hold on me is secure but easy, his stride slowed to match my shorter steps.

Jesus, I need to get a grip. I can't have a crush on this man. We've already set up a pattern in our relationship. He teases, I sneer. The idea of him finding out I'm attracted to him makes my insides twist. I'd never live it down. Never.

"That was a cool place," he says, breaking me out of my panicked thoughts.

"I don't think I've ever heard Nellwood's described as 'cool.' But if you liked it, that's all that matters."

Glancing down at me, his dark eyes flash with good humor, though the lines around his mouth are still tight. He gives me a little nudge as we walk along. "How very magnanimous of you, Libby."

That's the other thing. Despite his general I'm-a-wayward-bum appearance, Killian has clearly received a fine education. Better than mine, if I had to guess. I want to ask him, but every time we touch on anything remotely personal about him, he withdraws.

"Oh, hey." He stops and faces me while digging around in the bag. "Got you something?"

"Hell, no," I blurt out when he lifts up a matching trucker hat, this one in purple.

"Now, Libby, don't knock it 'till you try it."

Before I can make a run for it, he slips the hat onto my head. He's standing so close it's almost an embrace when he lifts his arms to adjust the brim. Close enough to draw in the faint scent of soap on his skin. Close enough that a soft flush of heat washes over me, and I struggle not to lean in to him.

"There," he says. "You look..."

He falls silent. The sound of my own breathing, and his, grows loud in the quiet. Flustered, I look up. He's biting his lower lip in concentration, those strong, white teeth making little dents in that lush curve.

Eyes the color of hot coffee meet mine, and my heart gives a great *thwump* in response. A tremor goes through my middle, my body heating so swiftly, I'm surprised I haven't broken out in a sweat. I want to look away, but I can't. He stares at me as if confused, his lips parting slightly.

My own lips seem to swell, blood pulsing through them. I want to press them to his and ease this strange ache. I don't move. Desperately, I try to think of what we were saying, where we are.

I clear my throat. "I look what?" My voice is a croak of sound.

Killian blinks, his dark brows knitting. He licks his lower lip, and I almost cave. When he speaks, his deep voice is a rumble. "Cute," he says. "You look cute in that hat."

The gentle touch of his fingertips brushing back a lock of my hair has me shivering.

"I thought your eyes were gray," he says, still not stepping back. No, he's leaning in, his breath a soft caress over my lips. "But they look green now."

The observation gives me the strength to break eye contact. I take a big step back and look away, a kick of pain hitting my heart. "I have my mom's eyes. They change color depending on the light. Gray, green, blue." I don't want to think of Mom's eyes. Or that the only way I can see anything close to them now is to look in the mirror.

Killian touches my elbow. His expression is somber. "They're beautiful." He looks as though he's about to say more, but then the group of girls come out of the hardware store in another wave of giggles.

Killian tenses. I look their way and find them staring at us. No, not us. At him. Heads bent together, the girls peer at Killian and frown.

I'm about to frown back at their rude asses when Killian gives the brim of my cap a playful tap. "Come on, little trucker, we've got snacks to eat."

He takes my hand again, tugging me along. The simple fact that he never looks their way makes me believe he's trying to avoid interaction.

"Do you know one of them or something?" I ask as we hustle toward my truck.

"Who?"

"Don't play stupid. It isn't a good look on you. You're walking away from that group of girls like your balls are on fire."

"Sounds painful." He shudders. "In fact, never ever talk about my balls being on fire again. Add that to our 'Nope' list."

"Killian, those girls. Do you know one of them?"

"I'm twenty-seven. Why would I know a bunch of teenage girls here? Or anywhere? That would make me some sort of creeper."

"I don't know why. But they were looking at you as if they knew you. And you're clearly avoiding them."

"Now who's playing detective."

I stop short by the passenger door to my pickup truck. His hand slips from mine, but he turns to face me. His scowl is dark. I glare right back. "Tell. Me. What's going on?"

He deflates then. "All right. Just...get in the truck, will you?"

I gesture to the door, since I'm the one driving. He growls low in his throat and wrenches it open, tossing his snacks into the cab.

It isn't until we're almost home that he speaks. "Okay. No, I didn't know those girls. But I think they might have recognized me. Or they were trying to place me." He frowns and rubs his chin. "I shouldn't have shaved."

"Who are you that those girls would recognize you?" Jesus, is he some infamous criminal released on a technicality? "Is Killian your real name?"

I sound a touch panicked, and he gives me a measured look. "Yes, it's my real name."

The truck sways as we drive over a divot.

Killian braces his arm against the dash. "Look, can you pull over while we talk about this? I'd rather not end up in a ditch."

"Fine." I ease into the next pull-off that leads to a public beach. The Atlantic stretches out to the right of us, a dark swath glittering with sunlight.

Killian squints into the sun. "My name is Killian James."

I stare at him, trying to place why that sounds so familiar. And then it hits me so hard I think I gasp. I must, because he turns to face me, his eyes wary.

Killian James. Lead singer and guitarist for Kill John. The biggest fucking rock band in the world. Oh, God, I want to laugh. Just lose it right here and now. Of all the men fate has to put in my path. A rocker. And not just any rocker—one of the biggest stars of our generation.

"You have guitarist's hands," I say faintly, as if that matters.

His brows quirk as if he fears for my sanity.

"When you shook my hand, I noticed the callouses," I add, still kind of dazed. Jesus, Killian James is in my car. "And I wondered if you were a musician."

He glances down at his hands, then nods. "Yeah. I am." He barks out a laugh and shakes his head.

Heat invades my cheeks. I feel utterly stupid for not recognizing him. On the heels of that comes resentment of him hiding it from me. Because why the hell would I recognize him? I

barely go on social media. I know his voice, his songs, but his face? Not so much. And no one expects a rock god to drop on their lawn. Drunk and disorderly, at that.

“Why are you here?” I grind out.

He leans back against his headrest. “Jax. I couldn’t deal...” He bites his lips, his cheeks flushing dark.

Jax. The lead singer for Kill John. Now this story I know. Mainly because it was on the actual evening news. Last year, John Blackwood, Jax as the world calls him, tried to commit suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. It was public and ugly. And from the little I heard of it, his attempt had broken up the band.

“Killian...” I reach out, but he edges away, curling in on himself.

“I found him, you know?” He stares at nothing. “My best friend. As close as brothers. I thought he was gone. After that... We were broken. Nothing felt real or solid anymore. And I needed to get out.”

“The drinking?” I ask softly.

Dark eyes meet mine. “It was the anniversary of his attempt. On the way here, I pulled over at a bar.” He shakes his head. “Wasn’t thinking right. Wasn’t thinking at all.”

My heart aches for him. “I’m sorry about your friend. That you’re hurting.”

He nods but still frowns at the road before us. “So now you know.”

Silence fills the car. I want to stare at him. I can’t help it.

Killian Fucking James. In my car.

I’m not one of those fangirl types who learns the stats of her favorite band members and follows their every move. But I love music. It is personal to me, part of my life and my heritage. I have all of Kill John’s albums. It hits me that, aside from seeing shots of Jax on the news, I have no clue what the rest of Kill John’s members look like—they never put their faces on the album covers. I want to ask Killian about that. About a million things.

But I don’t. I turn on the car and pull out onto the road. “Come on, we’ll snack. And later, I’ll make you my grandma’s famous chicken and dumplings.”

I swear I hear him release a breath.

When he talks, he’s his old, charming self. “Sounds like heaven, Liberty Bell.”

* * * *

True to my promise, I cook Killian chicken and dumplings, and I bake a peach pie for dessert. Cooking helps ground me. I need it tonight. Bumblebees have taken residence in my belly, bumping around and fighting for supremacy in that small space. I find myself putting a hand against my abdomen throughout the evening, trying to settle them.

I don’t know how to act anymore. Why on Earth is he here with me? When he could hang out with anyone. Seriously, I’m hard pressed to think of a rich and famous person who’d turn him down. Me? I’m prickly and private and plain. A fairly boring woman who all but hides out in her house. These are facts. It annoys me that I question my worth. But I can’t shake it. I don’t understand him.

For his part, Killian is quiet tonight, as if he’s tired. He doesn’t leave, though. He calmly sits at my kitchen table and watches me with hooded eyes.

It makes me more nervous, and I find myself jumping up more than once to get this or that.

I do it again, and Killian snorts.

“What?” I ask, meeting his glare.

He points an accusatory finger at me. “You’re acting weird.”

I freeze in the act of topping off his already full cup of coffee. “Shit.” I wince and sit down. “I am. I totally am.”

“Well, stop.” His jaw clenches as he tosses down his fork. “It’s pissing me off.

“I’m sorry.” My hands lift in a helpless gesture. “I don’t mean to. It’s just, I keep thinking it.” He’s Killian James. In my kitchen. Mind. Blown.

He stares with eyes that seem to see right through me. Hurt clouds those dark depths too.

“Not you, Liberty,” he says in a low, raw voice. “Okay? Just... Not you.”

My heart pounds in my chest. “W-what do you mean?”

Killian braces his forearms on the table, his expression tired. “You Google me yet?”

“No.” Annoyance colors my tone. Sure, I’d been sliding into this side of ridiculousness, but I’m not that bad. “I figured you’d tell me about yourself if you wanted to.”

He gives me a tight sort of smile-grimace, as if he wants to lighten the mood but can’t. “My mom is kind of famous. She was a top model. Her name is Isabella.” His lips twitch. “She *only* goes by Isabella.”

“That Isabella?” I say, gaping.

He gives me a sidelong look. “Yeah, that one.”

Isabella Villa, famous supermodel and second-generation Cuban American. She is gorgeous: perfect golden skin, high cheekbones, luminous dark eyes, and glossy raven hair. Killian has her eyes, her coloring, her charisma. He must have inherited his bold features from his dad, because Isabella’s are as delicate as a doll’s.

“Her image was everywhere when I was in high school,” I say.

He rubs the back of his neck, his nose wrinkling. “Yeah. Try being a teenager and all the guys have your mom’s picture hanging in their lockers.”

The iconic image of Isabella wearing a diamond bra and panty set with white angel wings fluttering behind her as she struts the catwalk comes to mind. I’m not even into women, and I found those pictures irresistible. “Bet you got into a lot of fights.”

A smile creeps into his eyes. Just barely. “You have no idea.” Laughing darkly, he shakes his head. “Thing is, she’s a good mom. Loving, if a little flighty.”

“And your dad?”

“Killian Alexander James, the second.” He gives me a wry look. “I’m the third. My dad is a hedge fund manager. He met my mom at a Met fundraiser, and that was it for him. They were good parents, Libs. Well, as good as they could be. But they were also busy and traveled a lot. My grandmother took care of me most of the time. She was great, you know? Took no shit, always kept me grounded, made me do chores, learn how to cook, that sort of thing.”

“She sounds lovely.”

Killian nods, but he’s not focused on me. “She died about two years ago. I still miss her. She was the one who encouraged me to start the band. Hell, encouraged all of us to keep at it. We’d practice, and she’d listen. Even when we sounded like shit, she’d praise us.” His gaze draws inward, and a frown pulls at his mouth. “When our album went platinum, she was the first person I went to see.”

He stops talking, just scowls at the scarred kitchen table. And I find myself reaching for him.

At the touch of my fingers to his, Killian looks up. “She fluttered around the apartment she practically raised me in, dusting off the seat for me, running to get me coffee and *pan*. My *abuelita*,” he hisses, leaning in. “Like I was the fucking president or something.”

My fingers twine with his cold ones. “I’m sorry, Kill.”

He holds onto me, but doesn't seem to see me. "I sat there on the old chesterfield sofa I'd peed on when I was two, while she tittered away, and I knew my old life was over. I'd never be the same. That no matter what I wanted, there would be a dividing line between the world and the person I'd become."

"Killian..."

"It's not all bad, Libby. I'm living the dream." His lips pinch. "But it gets fucking lonely sometimes. You start wondering who you are and how you're supposed to be. And I think...shit, I know that's why Jax couldn't handle things."

His eyes meet mine then. "I didn't want to tell you who I was because you looked at me like I was just another guy."

"More like you were a pain in the ass," I correct with a watery smile.

"Yeah," he says softly. "That too."

"Okay, so I got a little...starstruck. But I still think you're a pain in the ass."

"Promise?" The worry in his voice, his eyes, has me squeezing his hand again.

"My dad was a studio guitarist," I tell him. "Played backup in recording sessions for a lot of huge bands in the nineties." Killian jerks up in surprise, but I forge on before he can speak. "My mom was a backup singer. That's how they met."

"Hell, that's awesome."

"Yeah, they thought so." I still do.

The sun rose and set on Mom and Dad. They'd do a duet, and joy would flood me. Music has always been a part of my life. A way to communicate. Silence entered my world when they died.

Emptiness threatens to pull me under. I focus on the present. "Thing is, Dad was always around famous people. He never gave it much thought. It was talent he respected—and a good work ethic. But one day, David Bowie came in for a session, and my dad literally fell off his seat. Couldn't play for shit, he was so overwhelmed. Because Bowie was an idol to him."

Killian chuckles. "I can see that."

"You ever meet anyone you'd been a fan of?" I ask him.

"So many," he admits. "Eddie Vedder was a big one. I think I grinned like an idiot for an hour. He's a cool guy. Down-to-earth."

"Well, there you go. You're my Bowie, my Eddie Vedder."

I start to pull away, but he gives my hand a little tug, and I finally see the twinkle in his eyes. "You like me better than Eddie."

"Whatever you say, hon."

But he's right. I'm beginning to think I like him more than anyone.

* * * *

Killian asks for a second slice of pie as we spread out on the floor and sort through Dad's old records. I'm determined not to act like a nut anymore.

We listen to Django Reinhardt, one of my dad's favorites.

"You know he only had use of three fingers on his left hand," I tell Killian as we bop our heads to "Limehouse Blues."

"One of the greatest guitar players of all time," Killian says, then pulls out another album from the stack I've set on the rug between us. "*Purple Rain*. Now, talk about a fucking brilliant guitarist. Prince was a monster, just so...effortless but with such badass soul."

Resting my head in my hand, I smile up at him. “You ever seen the actual album?”

His dark brow quirks. “No.”

My smile grows as he slips the record out of its sleeve and his eyes go wide. “It’s fucking purple!”

The way his deep voice almost squeaks makes me laugh. “Yeah. I had the same reaction when I was eight and found it. My dad totally yelled at me when he caught me using it as a tea tray for my dolls.”

Carefully, Killian tucks the purple record back into its sleeve. “I think it’s awesome that you grew up with music that way. My family appreciated it, but not with the same consuming love I had.”

I hum an acknowledgement but sorrow holds my tongue. Life has been so silent since my parents died. Too silent. I never really thought about how I turned my back on the simple joy of loving music, and how badly that has affected me.

I’m so distracted by my own thoughts that I don’t see Killian reach for the black file box until he’s already opening it.

“No, don’t—” My words die as he lifts up the battered ream of paper.

His gaze darts over the first page. “What’s this?”

Kill me now. Just take me out back and shoot me. Heat pushes through my flesh with a thick, uncomfortable fist. “Nothing. Just scribbles.”

I make an attempt to grab the stack, but he easily evades me by sticking out one of his freakishly long arms and holding my shoulder with his freakish strength.

“Hold up.” A smile starts pulling at his lips, and he uses a thumb to riffle through a few of the top pages. “These are songs.” Dark eyes flick up to meet mine. A twinkle of surprise lights his expression. “Your songs.”

“How do you know they’re mine—”

“You put your name on the top of each.”

I flop back on the floor and cover my eyes with my forearm. “They *were* private.”

Silence greets me, but I don’t dare look. I’m so exposed now. Worse than being naked. Getting naked with Killian would at least result in pleasure. This? Torture. I swallow hard and grit my teeth.

The floor creaks, and I feel his warmth. His touch is gentle as he lifts my arm from my face and grins down at me. “These are fucking great. Why are you embarrassed?”

“You just read the equivalent of my diary. Why wouldn’t I be embarrassed?”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Funny, you don’t look at all sorry.”

He bites his bottom lip, clearly trying to rein in his glee. “Well, when I stumble across a diary like this?” He holds my stack of songs a little higher. “How could I be? It’s like finding a unicorn.”

“Into unicorns, are you?”

“Ha. Stop deflecting.” Killian crosses his legs before him and keeps flipping through my songs like a geek who’s found a long-lost chapter of *The Lord of The Rings*. “Why didn’t you tell me you wrote songs?”

I lurch up and snatch them from his hands. “It’s something I did when I was younger. A hobby.” Something my parents made quite clear was a dead end.

“The last one is only a few years old.” His expression pinches as he watches me put the songs away and close the file box lid. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Libs.”

With a sigh, I press my hands on the box lid. “I know. Honestly, I haven’t thought about them in a while. Okay, after you told me who you really were, they did enter my mind. But I didn’t want you getting any ideas.”

“Ideas?”

I can’t look at him. “You rightly called me out on getting weird on you. No way was I about to say, ‘Oh, hey, I wrote these songs!’ Like some lame sales pitch. I wouldn’t do that to you, Killian.”

“Libs.” He touches my arm so I’m forced to meet his gaze. “I’d never think you were doing that.”

I nod. “At any rate, it really isn’t a big deal. It was for fun.”

His frown doesn’t ease, as if he still wants to ask a whole host of questions I don’t want to answer.

Panic clutches my chest. “I’m serious. Can we please drop this?”

Killian takes a deep breath. “Okay, Libby.”

He glances around, at a loss. I’m there too. But before it can get any more awkward, he shrugs and returns to picking through the records like nothing happened.

I’m so grateful, my vision blurs before I blink it clear.

“Oh, man, *Nevermind*.” He holds up the Nirvana album and flips it over to read the back. “God, I remember when Jax and I discovered the Seattle Sound. It was like this beautiful rage and perfect disdain. The power behind it, like a fucking wave of sound that crashed into, sent you tumbling.” He grins wide. “We’d listen, study, then make these horrendous attempts to copy it.”

Lying on my stomach, I rest my chin on my palm. Inside, I’m still a bit shaken, but talking about legends is easier. Comforting, almost. “You didn’t copy it. You found your own voice.”

Nirvana had “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” Kill John has “Apathy”—our generation’s battle cry. “Apathy” drives just as hard and fast as “Teen Spirit” but there’s more pain in it, less rage. A question of why we’re here. A song of loneliness and feeling useless.

“When my parents died,” I tell him quietly, “I listened to ‘Apathy’ on a loop for a week straight. It made me feel...I don’t know, better somehow.”

Killian’s lips part in surprise, his gaze darting over my face. “Yeah?” His voice is soft. “I’m glad, Libs.”

He reaches out as if he’s afraid I’ll bite. But he’s a brave one. The tips of his fingers trace my cheek. My lids lower as he speaks, low and rumbly. “Had I been there, I’d have wanted to give you comfort.”

Warmth swells in my belly, spreading outward. I’d have wanted him to give it. I clear my throat and force my eyes open. “So it was just you and Jax at first?”

Killian sets his hand on his thigh. “Yeah. We grew up together and then both went to the same boarding school. We met Whip and Rye there.”

I have to laugh. “I can’t picture you in a boarding school.”

Killian makes a goofy face. “I was a right saint, you know. Good grades. Followed the rules.”

“So how did you become a rock star, then?”

He ducks his head, shaking it a bit. “I don’t consider myself a rock star. I’m a musician. I’ve always loved music, loved making music.”

“If you love to make music,” I ask him, “why are you here? Why not in a studio?”

His expression shuts down. “You don’t want me here?”

I want you any way I can get you.

“Here is the least likely place anyone on Earth would expect you to be.” I peer at him. “Is that why? Are you hiding?”

He snorts. “Jesus, Libs. What’s with the inquisition?”

“It’s not an inquisition,” I say calmly. “It’s a legitimate question. That you’re agitated only means I’m picking at a nerve.”

Killian lurches to his feet, his glare cutting. “Most people would stop picking.”

“Yeah, I’m annoying that way.” I stare at him, unwilling to blink.

He huffs out a breath, his hands linking behind his neck. “I don’t feel it, all right?” His bare feet slap against the floor as he paces. “I don’t want to sing. Don’t want to play. It’s just... a void.”

“When’s the last time you tried?”

He spreads his arms wide in an annoyed appeal. “I don’t want to try right now. I just want to be.” He pauses, glaring at me over his shoulder. “Is that okay with you? Am I allowed to just be for one freaking second?”

I stare at him for a long moment, then slowly rise. “You can be anything you want. It’s whether you’re happy that’s the question.”

“You’re one to talk,” he shoots back, stalking toward me. “Tell me right now that you aren’t hiding from life in this old house. Jesus, you’re a young woman living like an old lady. You won’t even let us talk about your hidden talent. I honestly wouldn’t be surprised if you’d rather I thought you pedaled porn.”

A slow shake starts deep in my belly, cold and hard. “I don’t want to fight with you,” I say quietly. “I just want you to be happy. And I don’t think you are.”

“Yeah, well, right back at you, babe.”

“Okay, now I’m pissed.”

He huffs, his hands on his hips as he glares down at me. “Thanks for the update. I didn’t notice.”

“Fuck you, Killian.”

His jaw pops as he grits his teeth. “You know what? Fuck it. Here’s the truth: I wasn’t happy—until I met you.”

I literally rock back on my heels, nearly blown down by his candor.

His hands fist as he takes a step closer. “I’ve been here for nearly two months. I never stay in one play that long. And why do you think I’m still here? The scenery? No. It’s you I don’t want to leave.”

“I...I don’t. You shouldn’t...” I swallow hard. No, no, no. Never fall for a musician. Isn’t that what Mama always said? They’ll break your heart the way they’re always looking over their shoulder for the next gig.

Killian’s mouth twists. “That too real for you? Shocker.”

I wince at the bitterness in his tone and try to speak calmly. “What you do, how you’ve affected the world, I can only dream of what it must be like.”

He snorts again, but I talk over him.

“I have your albums. I’ve heard you sing. There’s so much life in your music. God, people would kill to have that talent, that power to convey so much emotion. And I...” I shake my head. “Hiding here, or behind our friendship... I can’t pretend that’s right, Killian. I wouldn’t be a friend to you if I did.”

He's silent for a long moment, his expression stony. Then he gives a short nod. "Understood." He looks around as if he's suddenly woken up and doesn't quite know where he is. His gaze slides over me, not holding on. "It's getting late. I'm gonna head out."

Before I can say another word, he leaves. And it takes everything in me not to shout for him to come back.

Chapter 6

Killian

I stay away from Liberty for the next few days. Not sure what to do but keep my distance until I cool down. She hit below the belt when she basically spoke the truth—damn it. The worst was when she claimed she didn't want me using her as an excuse to stay.

Excuse? The last thing I view Libby as is an excuse to hide. I'd been a breath away from kissing her when she'd looked up at me, her eyes wide beneath that ugly trucker hat. Hell, I've wanted to kiss her for days. Every time I look at her. Normally, I wouldn't hold back, but nothing about my relationship with Libby is normal.

I don't spend time with chicks. I don't spend time with anyone. It's writing-composing, practicing, recording, touring, fucking, sleeping. Same old record spinning round and round. I used to hang out with the guys, but that tapered off once we went Platinum. No free time and too much attention on us when we were in public took care of that.

I'm a twenty-seven-year-old, multimillionaire singer-guitarist in the biggest rock band in the world, and I have no earthly clue how to have a relationship with a woman. I could laugh. But I don't find it funny.

Because I want Liberty Bell.

Hell, I knew I was in trouble when she stripped down to that plain, black bikini, and I got instant, demanding wood. I swear she's trying to hide behind the clothes she wears, because her body is banging. She isn't model perfect; I've done model perfect, a lot. And at some point, bodies just become bodies. Attraction is a whole different beast.

Liberty's plump-but-firm ass, narrow waist, and perky little breasts just do it for me. Jesus, her tits. They'd fit the wells of my palms perfectly, those sweet tips pointing up, just begging to be sucked.

That day at the beach I'd wanted to get my hands and mouth on them so badly, I'd almost run off into the ocean so I didn't jump her.

So, yeah, I'm in trouble. She got starstruck over who I am, and while I know she still likes me for me, when I try to see her stepping into my world, I fail. Not because she wouldn't fit. But because everything I know about Libby tells me she wouldn't want to. When she lets her guard down, I see that she's into me too. But she's fighting it, throwing up walls almost desperately. What's a guy supposed to do with that?

So I've put some distance between us in the most literal way I can.

My bike is back from the shop, and I took a long drive along the mainland coast—staying at cheap motels, driving when I get up, eating when I get hungry. It's beautiful, calming. Lonely. I miss her. Which is weird since I only really just met her. But I know her. After weeks of hanging out, I know all sorts of Libby things.

I know that even though she makes the best damn biscuits in the world and perfect peach pie—food that will have me moaning in pleasure—Libby likes to snack on ramen noodles slathered in BBQ sauce and butter, which is some truly disgusting shit. I know that she loves Scooby-Doo cartoon movies and actually gets freaked out during the “spooky” scenes.

And she knows me. She knows that Britney Spears was my first concert, not The Strokes as the public believes—though how I wish that were true. She knows I hate beans, not because of the taste, but because I can't stand biting into the nasty skins surrounding them.

We know each other. We can talk about anything, or nothing. It never gets old or boring. Libby is my resonance; when I'm in her vicinity, I'm suddenly amped up, with everything moving at a different frequency. And I don't care if that's sappy. It's the truth.

I can't stay away any longer. If all I can have of her is friendship, I'll have to take it.

It takes me all day to get back home. When I turn down the long shared road toward our houses, the sky is fading to smoky blue shot with coral pink. My house sits dark in the shadows. Golden light streams from Libby's window, hitting the lawn. Her silhouette moves past the kitchen window, and I imagine she's cooking something awesome.

My bike nears the fork in the road, one way taking me to her, the other to my house. I want to go to Libby so badly it's an actual, physical pain in my chest and gut. I want to sit in her kitchen that smells of comfort food, hear the slam-bang of her pots and pans as she talks about nothing in particular, and watch the efficient way she moves in her space.

I want that.

I turn toward my house instead. And it hurts.

After a shower, I grab a beer and slump in the big rocking chair on my porch. I find my cell sitting on the little side table. I left it behind on purpose. Five missed calls from Scottie, and a text: Jax is ready. Get your ass back to NYC.

Well, for once I'm not ready. I text him back so he'll stop bugging me.

Tour doesn't start for over a month. We have time.

His response is immediate.

Guys want to get back into it. They're asking me to book a few earlier shows.

Fuck. Part of me is annoyed that they didn't call me themselves. But I haven't exactly been communicative. And we all know that the best way to get any of us to do something is to sic Scottie on our asses.

Rubbing my neck, I think of what to do. Libby is right; I can't hide forever. But I'm not ready to leave. Not yet. I send Scottie a final text: I'll call you in a few days. Then I turn off the phone.

The night is muggy, the beer icy. Over the hum of the cicadas comes the sound of a guitar. It's an acoustic version of The Black Keys' "You're The One." It must be a new recording because I haven't heard it before.

Then I realize—it isn't a recording. It's live. Libby is playing that guitar. Of course it's Libby, the girl raised by musicians, who writes songs of poetic beauty and hides them away like a dirty secret. Of course she'd hide this from me too.

I want to be irate, but her sound distracts me. The hairs on my forearms rise as I sit up. She's good. Really good. Her style is easy and smooth, not the hard, tense drive of mine. More folk to my rock. But I appreciate the fuck out of it.

My fingers twitch with the desire to pick up my guitar. For the first time in months, I want to play. Fuck that, I *need* to play, be the rhythm to her lead, or the lead to her rhythm. Find out what she can do.

She eases into Sinead O'Connor's "The Last Day of Our Acquaintance." It's an older song, not heard much anymore. But Rye developed a huge thing for O'Connor after he saw her "Nothing Compares 2 U" video during some '90s rockumentary, and it was all we could do to get him to turn off her music. I'm pretty sure at this point his dream girl has a shaved head.

Memories of Jax chucking a salami sandwich at Rye on our tour bus after the five-hundredth playing of “Mandinka” run through my head, making me smile. And then Liberty begins to sing. The beer bottle slips from my hand. *Holy. Fuck.*

Her voice is melted butter over toast. It’s full of yearning, soft and husky. Need. So much need. And pain.

I’m on my feet before I know it. I go into the house and pull my acoustic Gibson from its crate. The neck is smooth and familiar against my palm. A lump fills my throat. Christ, I’m close to crying.

Get a grip, James.

My fingers tighten on the guitar. From the open door, Liberty sings about loss and separation with a rasping defiance. That voice guides me, sends my heart pounding.

She doesn’t hear me approach or even open the door. Her eyes are closed, her body curling protectively over the guitar. That her voice has so much power in such a restrictive position is impressive. But it’s the expression she wears, lost yet calm, that gets to me.

She feels the music, knows how to phrase it and own it.

I’m hard just being close to her. My balls draw up when she hits the last power refrain, her voice coming down like an anvil, and I swear I can’t breathe. It’s like the first time I sang on a stage and felt the world open up with possibilities.

I think I fall a little in love with Liberty Bell in that instant.

She notices me then and gives a yelp, abruptly killing the last note. “Jesus,” she says when she finds her voice again. “You scared the life out of me.”

You’re bringing me back to life.

The thought runs through my head, clear as glass. But I don’t say that. I can barely find my voice at all. I stand there like an idiot, my chest heaving, gripping my guitar as if it’s a life line.

A flush rises up her neck and over her cheeks. She ducks her head, as if she’s ashamed. No way in hell am I letting her hide.

“Beautiful,” I croak past the lump in my throat. “You’re beautiful.” I know with an eerie calm that I’ll never see anything or anyone more stunning in my life. Everything has changed. Everything.

* * * *

Libby

My heart is still trying to beat its way out of my chest after the scare Killian gave me. But it’s slowly calming, and on the heels of that comes something that feels a lot like mortification. Killian has caught me singing, balls to the wall—or whatever the female equivalent would be.

A few days ago, I heard him take off on his bike, and when he didn’t come back that night, or the next, my heart squeezed and my stomach sank. I might have thought he’d left for good, only Killian tacked a note on my front door before he left: *Gone roaming for a while. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do—at least not without me.*

It simultaneously hurt that I was so easily left behind and pissed me off that he didn’t bother saying goodbye in person. But I’m not his keeper. And I clearly can’t make anyone stay in my life. So I went back to business as usual, trying to ignore the yawning pit in my stomach, only to discover that my “usual” was now empty and quiet, too quiet.

To fill the void, I played my guitar and sang. Every night. Something I hadn't done in months. It made me think of my parents, and that hurt too, like a wound scabbed over that you keep picking despite the pain, or maybe because of it.

And now Killian is back, filling my porch doorway and lighting up the room with his presence. He's here. My own personal magnet. His pull is so strong, I have to fight not getting up and running to him. Fight not grinning like a fool even though I'm still hurt. But I want to grin, so badly. Because He. Is. Here.

It sets everything right again. And yet it puts my world off kilter as well.

The way he's looking at me... Hell, it lights me up, sends sparks and flares along my nerve endings.

Beautiful. He called me beautiful, his dark eyes roaming over me as if I was his reason, the only reason.

I sit frozen under the force of that stare. He isn't wearing his usual playful smile. He looks almost angry, desperate.

His fingers tighten around the neck of the guitar until his knuckles turn white. "Play with me, Liberty."

I should have expected that—he's holding his guitar, after all—but I didn't, and the request is a sucker punch to the throat.

A strangled sound escapes me. I can't perform in front of Killian James. While I'm comfortable with Killian the man, Killian the musician intimidates me. His vocals are the stuff of legend—strong, clean, and powerful with a rawness that hooks into your soul and gives it a tug. He sings, and you feel he's doing it just for you, taking your pain, frustration, joy, rage, sorrow, and love and giving it a voice. And while I know I can sing, I'm an amateur.

Killian's eyes go wide as he takes a step closer. "Please."

He stands in the center of the room, still clutching the neck of his guitar as if it's the only thing holding him together. But it's me he watches, the lines around his eyes tight, his chest lifting and falling with deep, quick breaths.

He wants this. A lot. I suspect he needs this. Whatever his reason, he's been pushing his music away. But he wants to let it back in just now. To deny him feels akin to stomping on a spring bloom fighting its way through the cold winter earth.

I lick my dry lips and force myself to tell him everything. "The first time I tried to perform for someone other than my parents was for the fourth grade talent show. I was set to play 'In My Life' by The Beatles."

Killian starts to smile, but I shake my head. "It was no good. By the time I got on the stage, I was shaking so badly, I thought I'd faint. I just stood there, staring. And then I heard someone snicker. I ran out of there and fucking pissed my pants backstage." A pained grimace pulls at my lips. "They called me Piddy Bell until senior year."

"Fuckers." Killian scowls. "And I have it on good authority that Jax pissed himself during his kindergarten's holiday play. On stage."

My hand caresses the smooth curve of the guitar body. I love this instrument. Love playing it. How can that be when it's also linked to so much fear and humiliation? "Second time I tried to play on stage was in college. Open mic night. Didn't even make it out there. I threw up behind some amps and ran out."

"Babe..."

I hold his sad gaze. “I quit, Killian. Quit trying. Quit dreaming. And part of me is ashamed of that. But part of me is relieved. My parents were happy. They didn’t want that life for me. Said it was too brutal.”

Killian’s jaw works as he grinds his teeth, and when he speaks, it’s almost a growl. “When did they tell you that?”

“From the beginning. I just didn’t want to believe them at first.”

He nods as if I’ve confirmed something for him. “And then they were there to say, ‘We told you so.’ Had you tuck away your songs and focus on other things.”

My fingers clench my guitar neck. “It wasn’t like that.”

But it was. That burns too.

Killian’s gaze doesn’t waver. “You wrote those songs, tried to play for others, because you love music, just as I do. It’s in your blood whether you want it there or not.”

“Yes,” I whisper, because I can’t lie to him when he looks at me like he’s seeing my soul.

Killian takes a step closer. “Play with me. See how good it can be.”

“I don’t…”

“I will never laugh at you,” he promises fiercely. “Ever. I’m your safe place, Libby. You’ve got to know that.”

Some deep tether in me sags a little, giving me room to draw a deeper breath. I swallow my fear. “What do you want to play? One of yours?”

His tension seems to release on a breath, but his nose wrinkles. “Naw. Feels pretentious asking you to sing my songs. Let’s do something classic. But fun.” He bites his bottom lip, his brows knitting, until he lights up. “You know Bon Jovi’s ‘Wanted’?”

I have to grin. Were my dad alive, he’d be moaning over Bon Jovi being called a classic. But I can’t fault Killian’s choice. It’s unexpected, yet I see the possibilities. The song can work well on an acoustic and without drums to back it up. And it’s a duet of sorts.

“‘Dead or Alive’? Yeah, I know that one.” I adjust my strings, fiddling with the tone. And then I pluck the first few notes, the old but familiar twang making me smile.

Killian makes a happy sound as he pulls a chair close and starts to do his own adjustments. Good Lord, just the sight of his big hand and long fingers moving along the frets, his forearms, corded with muscles and flexing, makes my mouth dry. Killian holding a guitar is the stuff of both my dirtiest fantasy and my most girlish daydreams.

My heart is pounding, anticipation and nerves running through my veins. I can’t believe I’m about to play with him. Sing with him.

He glances at me, his dark eyes glinting. “You take the lead.”

“What?” My stomach drops. “No. No way. You’re the lead guitarist.”

He chuckles. “Not tonight. You lead. We’ll harmonize the lyrics, but you take the first verse.”

After a few minutes of working out who will sing what, we agree to start. My hands are so sweaty, I have to rub them on my shorts before I can hold my guitar.

Killian’s voice is a soft purr of encouragement. “This is gonna be fun, Liberty Bell. Just let go, feel it.”

Taking a deep breath I start. And fumble. Blushing, I power through it. *The music. Just feel the music.*

Okay. I got this.

I begin to sing—wobbly at first, but stronger when Killian smiles wide and nods, encouraging. I close my eyes and think of the lyrics. It's about a musician, world-weary and jaded. Lonely. A man who's been reduced to nothing more than entertainment for the masses.

And it hits me. I open my eyes, look at Killian. My heart hurts for him. But he doesn't seem to notice. He's listening to me sing. He comes in with the rhythm, picking up the second verse. Then he sings.

Killian's voice is a wave of sound that sweeps over the room. It's the difference between singing in your shower and finding yourself in a concert hall.

I stumble a chord progression before getting a hold of myself. *Feel the music.*

So I do.

And we sing, just enjoying.

Killian is a generous musician, letting me lead, propping me up when I stumble. Occasionally he changes things up so I'm forced to follow, but he does it with a smile, daring me to step outside my safe box and risk. It's like a dance, playing with him.

And I grow bold, putting more emotion into my voice. I become that lonely but proud musician.

Our gazes clash, and energy licks through me, so strong it prickles my skin, pulls at my nipples. Joy unfiltered surges through me, and I smile even as I sing with all my heart. He grins back, his eyes intense, burning like dark coals. It makes me so hot, I want to toss down my guitar, throw myself in his lap and just take. It makes me want the song to never end.

He picks up singing the refrain, and that deep voice sinks into my bones, runs like liquid heat up my thighs. God, he's beautiful. Perfect.

With fluid grace, he hits a guitar solo, his lids lowering, his strong body rocking. All of his sinewy muscles tense and flex, but he's loose, so loose now, totally into the song. It's like sex, watching him let go. And I throb.

The song ends too soon. I'm left panting, sweat coating my skin.

We stare at each other for a long minute, a dull roar swooshing in my ears as if my body can't quite come down from the high.

"Jesus," I finally rasp.

"Yeah," he says, just as raw. "Yeah."

I'm shaking when I set my guitar down and run a hand through my damp hair. "That was..." I take a hard breath. "How can you give that up?"

The fire in his eyes dies, and he ducks his head, carefully setting his guitar aside as well. "Everyone needs a break now and then."

Fair enough. I'm still shaking. "I feel like I've run a sprint or something."

"It's the adrenaline." His lips quirk. "Happens when you make good music. And, Liberty Bell, we made some fucking good music just then."

Heat invades my cheeks. "It was you."

"No," he says softly. "It was us." He glances at the guitar by my side. "Want to go again?"

Do I? I'm not sure. It feels dangerous in a way, addictive. Once I give in, will I be able to go without?

Killian looks at me with calm eyes, and yet he's leaning in, his body tight. Waiting. I can't resist him. I'm beginning to think I never will.

I pick up my guitar. "Sure. You know Pearl Jam's 'Indifference'?"

Happiness gives his dark eyes light. "Again with Eddie?" He shakes his head, but his dimples are out. "Fight it if you must, Libs, but you know you like me better."

I more than like him. That's the problem. "Any time you want to play one of your songs, just let me know," I tell him blithely. "And then I'll reassess."

The long fall of his hair hides his eyes from me as he strums out a few chords, but there's a smile in his voice. "Maybe someday soon."

Those words sound a lot like hope.

Chapter 7

Killian

It's the middle of the night when three things happen: my room lights up with a flash of lightning, followed by a tremendous crash of thunder, and Libby screams bloody murder. I lurch up from a full sleep as if yanked, my balls crawling halfway up my ass in fright, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest.

For a bright, sharp second, I sit panting, my eyes wildly searching the darkened room, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on. Then I remember the scream. Libby.

Another round of lightning and thunder brings on another scream. The fact that I can actually hear her screaming all the way in my house is enough to stop my heart.

"Jesus." Terror mixed with rage has me leaping out of bed and reaching for the only weapon I have, my Gibson. It's not much, but it's solid, and I will bash the fuck out of anyone who hurts Libby.

I race out of the house and into a storm so violent, I can barely see. Icy rain lashes at my skin as I run, my feet pounding through sandy mud puddles.

I nearly face-plant when another spectacular flash of lightning arcs through the night. But a desperate wail from inside Libby's house has me charging forward.

"Libby!" I don't hesitate kicking her door in. Darkness greets me. Libby is still screaming, and the sound shreds me. My bare feet slap over the floorboards as I run to her room.

I scream too—a fucking beast of a roar, adrenaline and sheer rage lighting me up. I swing the Gibson over my head like a club, ready to caveman-bash someone's head in, only to stop short when I finally enter her room.

Libby is sitting up in bed, her eyes wild, screams pouring from her. Nobody else is there.

For a second I just stand, guitar overhead, my hair dripping, my chest heaving. Then my wits return, and I slowly lower the Gibson.

"Libby?"

I don't know if she can hear me over her cries. They're coming faster now, and she's rocking back and forth. The sound unhinges me, cuts into my heart. All the hairs stand up on my body as if in protest. This isn't natural.

"Libby." I set the guitar down and ease toward her. "Baby, stop."

She doesn't hear me. I don't think she sees me.

Night terrors. It hits me like a brick. Mom told me I used to have them, and she said it was almost impossible to soothe me when they hit. I don't remember them for shit, but she told me it was awful. I fucking believe her now.

Ignoring Libby's frantic shrieks for the moment, I go to close the front door. When I return to her room, she's still going at it, but I head for her window, which she's left cracked open. After closing it and the drapes, I move to the bathroom and turn the light on, leaving the door open just enough to give her bedroom a bit of illumination yet not tear her out of sleep.

Maybe it's the light or the diminished sound of the storm, but Libby suddenly takes a deep breath and then sobs.

"Libby?" I whisper, walking slowly. "Baby doll?"

Her body shudders, and she blinks. Another rasping sob leaves her. “Killian?” Her voice is toast. “What are you doing in my room?”

I approach her like I would a ticking bomb. My heart still hasn’t calmed, and I’m starting to shiver. But I focus on her. “You were screaming, Libs. I thought you were being attacked.”

She puts a trembling hand to her forehead, blocking me out. “I...the storm...” She curls in on herself, clutching her legs to her chest.

I can’t wait any longer. I sit next to her and draw her close. She’s covered in sweat and like a furnace in my arms. “It’s okay, Libs. I’m here.”

“Jesus.” She rests her clammy hand on my arm. “You’re soaked. And freezing.”

I secure my grip on her because she’s warm and soft, and, yes, I’m fucking freezing. But the truth is I need to hold her right now, need to feel the physical proof that she’s safe and solid.

“Don’t know if you noticed,” I say with false lightness, “but it’s raining cows and chickens out there.”

Her snort buffets my skin. “Cows and chickens?”

“This here is farm country, Libs,” I drawl. “Ain’t no cats and dogs filling these skies.”

I can feel her smile against my chest. “We’re more about produce than cows. Did you see any falling tomatoes?”

“I might’ve been slapped upside the head with some flying arugula. It was too windy to tell.”

As if to punctuate my words, a gust of wind slams into the windows, and the whole house seems to rattle.

Libby snuggles closer, and her warm hand smooths over my skin. “And you ran out into this veggie storm without getting dressed?”

“It sounded like you were being murdered,” I grumble. “What was I supposed to do?” Hell, I’m pretty sure I’d walk through fire to get to her if she screamed like that again.

“So you charged into a possible murder attempt armed with a guitar and naked.” She stiffens. “Are you naked? I can’t remember.”

“But you remember the guitar?”

“I thought you were going to brain me with it.”

“Nice. Some thanks I get for my mighty heroics.”

“Let’s focus on the important part here. Please tell me you aren’t naked.”

I grin. “I won’t tell you that.” I have on boxer-briefs, but it’s fun to tease.

Neither of us moves. Me, because I’m pretty much frozen solid. And Libby? Despite her professed fear of my nakedness, she wiggles against my side, like she’s antsy.

“You’re fighting the urge to look down and check, aren’t you?” I say in the dark. My dick stirs, like he knows he’s about to become a conversation piece and wants to look his best.

“I’ve already seen the goods, Kill.” So very deadpan.

I give her shoulder a squeeze. “Which means you know exactly how good they are.”

Well, not exactly. She’s seen me at my worst. My dick twitches again as if to protest this injustice and demand another viewing. I tell him to calm the fuck down; it’s not going to happen.

Already Libby is pulling away, her body stiff. “You should dry off. Your skin is like ice.”

“Yeah.” I run a hand through my wet hair. I’m shaking, which can’t be good. But I don’t want to go. I have to, though. I’m no longer needed. Swallowing back a sigh, I stand, noting the way she turns her head so she can’t see. Adorable. I know she wants to check. I fight a shiver. “I’ll let you get back to sleep then.”

“No,” her voice is almost a shout, and I halt.

She doesn't look up, but her hand lifts, imploring me to stop. "Could you... I mean, you can dry off in my bathroom, maybe? And just..." She makes a choking sound. "I mean, it's raining." A smile pulls at my lips. "You want me to stay, Lib?"

God, please let me stay. I'm so damn cold. And my bed is empty.

"Yeah," she whispers.

I almost dive under the covers right then and there. But I can't. "Libby, babe, I gotta be honest. I'm not naked, but all I have on are boxers. I might wake up with morning wood. Hell, I might get contact wood too." I'm actually in danger of getting hard just being in bed with her. "I don't want you kicking me in the nuts if I do."

The corner of her cheek plumps on a grin. "Killian can't control his dick. So noted."

"Oh, I have excellent control. I am the master of—"

"Your teeth are chattering," she butts in blandly. "Just dry off and get in the damn bed."

She doesn't have to say it twice. I hustle my ass into the bathroom and scrub myself down with a towel. Five seconds later, I'm sliding under the blankets and wrapping myself around warm, sweet Liberty.

* * * *

Libby

Killian is ice cold when he gets into bed with me, and yet it's all I can do not to fling myself against him. The night terror still sits upon my heart, sending tremors through my body. For the first time in years, I didn't wake up and find myself alone in the dark. A lump swells in my throat at the thought of Killian charging into the storm, armed only with his beloved guitar.

At my side, he shivers and burrows under the blankets. I fight a smile as I help him cover up. His feet find mine, and I yelp.

"Crap, you are cold." It's no small thing to help warm the ice blocks his feet have become.

"Didn't know how cold I was until you mentioned it," he mutters, then sighs as I tuck the blanket around his neck.

I should be unnerved that he's lying in bed with me, our noses almost touching. But I'm so glad he's here that I can't think of anything else. The storm is raging outside, each boom or crack making my back tense. But here, with Killian, I feel secure.

"I'm in love with your pillow," he says conversationally. "Have I told you that?"

"No." I fight to relax, but the tremors in my belly won't die down. "Weirdo."

He sighs again. "It's just so fucking comfortable. Why is it so comfortable?"

"It's a memory foam and gel pillow. I paid two hundred dollars for it. Don't judge. My bed is my sanctuary."

His eyes are dark stars in the night. "Why would I judge? I'm all for spending quality time in bed." White teeth flash. "In fact, I'm going to order a case of these babies in the morning."

I start to laugh, and then, to my horror, a sob bursts out.

"Hey," he croons. "Hey, come here."

Killian pulls me close, tucking me under his chin. I feel the shape of him against my belly, but for once I don't think of sex. He's like an anchor, a solid wall between me and emptiness. His arms are strong, and he holds me tight.

It's been so long since I've felt the basic human contact of a hug, I come completely undone.

I can't stop the great, ugly sobs that come out of me. "I'm just so...alone. They're never coming back. And I know, I'm an adult, I shouldn't be freaking out like this. Plenty of people don't have parents. But they were the only ones who knew the real me. And now there's no one else."

"There is," he whispers fiercely. "You have me. You *have* me, Liberty."

But for how long? And in what way? I can't ask. I'm too far gone. The stress of waking up in another dark storm, the loneliness, all the shit I try so hard to ignore crashes over me. I cry until I can't cry any more. It's messy and loud. And he holds me the whole time, stroking my back, murmuring nonsense words in my ear. He is warm and smooth and alive.

I fall asleep at some point, worn out and weak. When I wake up, it's morning, and I'm alone. My throat is sore, and my eyes burn. The bedroom is hot, the air heavy and oppressive. I stumble to the bathroom and wince when I catch sight of my puffy eyes and blotchy skin.

A cool shower does a lot to revive me. I brush my teeth and put on a tank and shorts. My wet hair keeps me fairly comfortable, but it's too hot. And too silent. I realize the power is out and sigh, shuffling my way to the kitchen.

I stop at the sight of Killian's broad back as he stands before my counter. Shirtless and wearing army green shorts that cling to his trim hips and tight butt, he moves with grace. I take a moment to admire the way the muscles on his back bunch and flex beneath taut, tan skin, and how his long bare feet flex when he shifts his weight to grab a couple of forks. Weird that I notice his feet, but seeing them seems intimate somehow.

He must feel my stare because he turns and gives me a soft look. "Hey. Power is out. I made fruit salad—if you can call chopped peaches, oranges, and one banana fruit salad—because that's all there was."

He's adorable. Still, I hover by the kitchen entrance. I think of how I lost my shit last night. No one has seen me that way since I was a kid. Not even my parents. Maybe he gets my embarrassment, because he sets down a big bowl of roughly chopped fruit and holds out a fork.

"Today, we shall eat from the trough. Later we shall play Fun with Water Hoses." His gives me a cheeky smile. "You have no idea how much I'm looking forward to payback."

"Yeah, I bet." I take a bite of sun-ripe peach. "Never mind the fact that I was performing a community service."

"Don't worry, Elly May. I'll be kind. Ish."

We grin at each other like idiots, and then his phone rings, the muffled sound coming from his pocket. His smile fades as he reaches down to turn it off.

"You're not even going to look and see who it is?" I ask.

He shrugs and stabs a peach chunk with his fork. "Don't need to. That's Scottie, my manager's, ringtone."

"And you don't want to talk to him?"

"Not particularly." He spears another piece of fruit like he's hunting game. "He just wants to talk business and..." Killian gives me a large, kind of fake smile. Anger and irritation flicker in his eyes. "I'm on vacation."

"Well, all right then." I try for teasing, but my mouth is stiff.

A lead weight settles in my gut. His manager wants him to go back. That much is clear. No matter how much Killian wants to enjoy his vacation, real life is still waiting for him. And eventually, I'm going to lose him to it.

"Thanks, by the way," I rasp, hating the soreness in my throat.

He shakes his head. "It's a horrible fruit salad, babe. And we both know it."

“No, I mean for being there... Here.”

Killian looks at me for a moment, his brows drawing close; then he rests his hand over mine. It's warm and heavy, his grip gentle but strong. “Thanks for letting me.”

Jesus. I'm in danger of clinging to his hand and blubbering. I need to get a grip. I lift up a slice of mangled orange. “You know, it's ideal to include at least a little of the fruit with the rind.”

His lips twitch. “How about the seeds, Martha Stewart? Are they okay?” He flicks one at me before I can answer.

As I prepare to launch a banana in retaliation, relief eases the tightness in my chest. This, I can handle.

Chapter 8

Libby

Usually after a storm, things cool down; the land gets to breathe a bit. Not so here. Heat settles like a thick blanket, smothering everything in its wake, turning the world humid, heavy, and slow. With the power out, there's not a thing to do but wallow. Even going to the beach is useless. The full summer sun scorches the sand, and as soon as you leave the ocean, you're baking, sandy, and miserable.

I settle for lounging on the porch's sleeping couch, the shades lowered against the sun, and every now and then stealing a lump of the rapidly melting ice I've filled my cooler with. Cotton shorts and a thin tank is all I can manage, and for once, I'm grateful for my small boobs because it means I can comfortably go bra free.

Or maybe not. I'm all too aware of the ribbed fabric clinging to my damp skin, outlining my shape. But what can I do? I'm not willing to suffer this heat any further by putting on more clothes, so if Killian happens to get an eye-full, so be it.

He isn't looking at me anyway. He's sprawled out on the floor, plucking away at his guitar, and taking sips of the lemonade I fixed. The slow twang of his guitar lulls me, and I drift in and out.

"If the power doesn't come back on by tomorrow," Killian says, pulling me from my daze, "we're going to a hotel in Wilmington."

I don't bother opening my eyes. "It'll come back on."

He makes an annoyed noise. "We should have gone this morning."

"Didn't know it would take so long then. Besides, the sun's setting. It will get cooler."

Killian hums, which might mean an agreement or the vocal equivalent of an eye roll. I don't care. I'm too hot.

And the heat is getting to me. I should be listless. But I'm not. I'm restless. The thick, heavy heat has settled on me, too, caressing my skin, drawing my attention to it. I'm aware of the way my chest rises and falls with each breath. Perspiration trickles down my spine, and the ice I'm slowly rubbing over my sternum melts in rivulets that slip between my breasts.

But it's not the weather. Not really. It's Killian sitting across the way, wearing nothing more than a pair of low-slung shorts and a sheen of sweat on his toned chest. It's the deep, rolling sound of his voice, so gorgeous it pulls at my nipples and touches that achy spot between my legs.

I shift, hating the heat that throbs there, luscious and needy. I have to fight the urge to arch my back and thrust my nipples outward, calling attention to them. Begging.

Killian sings a low, soft song I've never heard before. I focus on the lyrics. It's about a man, aimless and jaded, finding solace in a woman's smile. It's about sex—lazy, languid sex—that goes on for days.

I want to tell him to sing something else. And yet I don't want him to stop.

But he does. He stops and starts, and I realize he's composing. Tingles run over my skin.

"New song?" I murmur when he pauses, messing around with a chord progression. He's been writing since he sang with me a few days ago. And it's been a thrill to witness. When a

song hits him, it comes hard and fast. But he needs feedback, someone to work through it with. He'd told me that role had been Jax's. Only Jax isn't here, so the task falls to me.

After the second song he composed, I'd become attuned to this need. And so I sing the refrain now, softly, feeling out the words. "It's good. But maybe 'thirst' instead of 'lust'?" I sing it again, testing the lyrics.

Silence.

And then his voice comes husky, rough. "Beautiful."

I turn my head. His gaze burns into me, those dark eyes glossy with heat. My stomach dips and swirls.

He doesn't look away. "Your voice is so fucking beautiful, Liberty Bell. Like sex on Sunday."

A shuddering breath leaves me.

God, I'm stripped by that dark gaze. And it feels good.

"You should use that," I rasp past the lump in my throat. "'Like sex on Sunday.' It's a good lyric."

Killian huffs. "Take the compliment, baby doll."

"Baby doll?" I glare up at the ceiling. "You're trying to annoy me, aren't you?"

"Honestly? It just slipped out."

Shocked, I look back at him. He doesn't flinch but returns my stare as if daring me to protest any further. Doing a stare-off with Killian isn't easy. His eyes are too expressive. One little quirk of those sweeping dark brows conveys entire sentences. We have a conversation without saying a word:

Go on, tell me how you don't like having a nickname.

I don't.

Liar. You love it.

How would you like to be called baby doll?

It depends. Are we naked in this scenario? Because you can call me anything you want then.

Okay, I probably imagined that last exchange. That's the other problem with staring at Killian; I become too aware of how hot he is. I have no defense against that. His chiseled features, especially that slightly pouty bottom lip, have all my thoughts drifting to sex.

Maybe he knows this because he suddenly chuckles, low and lazy. "I won," he drawls and plucks the B string on his guitar like a victory note.

I roll my eyes and try not to smile. "Go on and write your song, pretty boy."

"Tell me more about how pretty I am, and I will. Use specific details."

He catches the ice cube I throw at him and slips it between his lips, sucking it with a teasing hum of enjoyment. The muscles low in my belly clench in response, and I have to shut out the sight by closing my eyes. God, that mouth. It'd be cold now. And my skin is so hot. I lick my dry lips. "You're procrastinating."

He huffs but then plays a few chords before stopping again. "You were right."

I crack open an eye. "About?"

He's focused on his guitar, idly playing the song he's been composing. "I have been hiding away."

The confession falls like a stone in a pond. The ripples of it wash over me, and I sit up just to gain some footing.

Killian shakes his head slowly. "I see that look, Libs. I didn't mean I was using you as a distraction. But I have been avoiding going back. After I found Jax, everything felt like a lie." His hand smooths over the curve of his guitar. "Playing with you, I remembered. Music is real."

"Always will be," I rasp, then clear my throat. "I'm glad you remembered."

His fingers tighten around the guitar neck, his body leaning forward as if he's about to rise. "You woke me back up, Libby. You have to know that."

I have no idea what to say. I duck my head, the heat and humidity getting to me. "You would've found your way without me. Music is too much a part of you to be denied for long."

"Maybe." He doesn't say anything for a long moment. When he finally talks, his voice sounds pained. "I have to go back."

My fingers dig into the couch cushion. "When?"

"We're going on tour in the fall."

One small sentence, and I'm ripped open. It isn't easy keeping my reply even, but I manage it. "It'll be good for you guys. And your fans will be so happy."

"Happy," he says. "Yeah, I guess they will be." Killian scowls at some distant point and runs a hand through his hair, only to have his fingers snag in the long strands. He mutters a few choice words before leaning back against the chair he's sitting in front of.

"I can cut your hair." *What am I saying?* I'll have to get close to him to do it. Not smart. But the tension between us is all wrong, too thick and awkward. I don't know if we're fighting or about to combust.

Maybe he thinks the same, because he frowns a little. "You know how to cut hair?"

"Cut my dad's. Still have the scissors." *Shut up and get while the getting's good.*

Killian sets down his guitar. "All right. That'd be great."

He sounds as strained as I feel. Such a stupid idea. But I'm stuck in it now.

* * * *

I go to get the scissors while Killian pulls up a kitchen chair to sit on.

His big, lean body is as tense as a guitar string when I return. In the light of the sinking sun, his skin is a deep honey-gold, shadows playing along the dips and valleys of his muscled torso. My steps slow as though I can draw out the inevitable by taking as long as I can to stand before him. But I can't avoid this without saying why I want to. And there's not a chance of me doing that.

I'm all business as I set down my scissors, comb, and a stiff brush for flicking away small, cut hairs. Killian's dark eyes track my moves, his expression far too controlled. Does this bother him too? It appears to. But for the same reasons? Or maybe he's worried I'll make a move on him?

I want to laugh. When did it get so complicated?

"You want to wear this so hair doesn't get all over you?" I ask, holding up a plastic cape I brought with me.

He gives a shake of the head. "I'm too hot already."

True that.

I clear my throat. "What style would you like?"

He looks at me as if I've spoken in Greek. "Style?"

"Ah, yeah. That's kind of important, since it affects how you look."

He shrugs. "Do what you want."

I lift my scissors. “So...mullet.” I nod. “You’ll look hot. Very nineteen-eighty-five. Maybe I can persuade you into a mustache as well.”

“Har.” His nose wrinkles. “Fine. Cut it short.”

Really, it’s like pulling teeth.

“A Channing Tatum maybe?”

One dark brow quirks.

“You know, Magic Mike?”

Killian flashes a grin. “Of all his movies, you pick that one? Shocker.”

“Shut up.” Slapping his shoulder, I move around to the back of his head and try to comb out the tangles. “You totally acted like you didn’t know who he was.”

Killian snorts. “Know him? We’ve hung out a couple of times. Just wanted to find out how *you* saw him.”

“Well, now you know. Half naked and gyrating.”

Though I can only see the crest of his cheek, I know he’s making a face. I find myself grinning. Resting my hand on his warm shoulder, I lean around to catch his eye. “You never answered.”

He stares at me for a beat, then blinks and clears his throat. “Hack it off.”

“Channing it is.”

There it is again, that regal expression of disdain he manages so well when offended, his dark brows lifting just a touch, his nostrils pinching as if he smells something off. “You’re giving me the Killian James cut, babe, and don’t you forget it.”

I go to work on the back of his hair. “Arrogant, aren’t we?”

“A man who names his hairstyle after another man isn’t much of a man.”

Long locks of silky, mahogany hair fall to the floor. “If you say so.”

We fall quiet, which is a mistake. Because now I can’t help but notice how close I’m standing to him, or the feel of my fingers threading through his heavy hair, and my breasts hovering by his temple when I move to his side.

I should be immune to Killian by now. I really should. But aside from last night’s freak-out, I’ve never been this near him for a sustained amount of time. The heat of his skin has a scent—undefinable but luscious. My mouth waters, and I have to swallow hard so I don’t drool on him like some creeper. His breathing has a rhythm and sound that holds my attention.

Agitation. I hear it. I feel it. Agitation surrounds us. It messes with my concentration, and I find myself hacking at his hair, cutting fast and loose. Luckily, he’s asked for a short style, and I can fix what I’ve done. Biting my lip, I focus on my task and ignore him.

Or try to.

The more I cut away, the more his strong bone structure is revealed. Killian looked damn fine with long hair. Short? He’s a work of art. With his high cheekbones, squared-off jaw, and strong nose, he’d almost look too hard if it wasn’t for his pretty eyes.

My mouth twitches as I think about telling him he has pretty eyes. He’d hate that.

“What’s so funny?” His husky voice snares my attention.

“Nothing.” I carefully shape around his ears.

“*Libby...*”

He won’t let this go. He’s like a tick that way.

“I was just thinking that you have pretty eyes,” I mutter, face flaming.

He makes a gurgled sort of sound. “You flirting with me, Libs?”

I don’t meet his gaze. “Stating a fact. And you know they’re pretty.”

Those dark eyes watch me as I finish the basic shape of his haircut. “I know nothing,” he says softly.

Our gazes finally meet. We’re about a foot apart, and the air between us is hot and damp. It’s a struggle to breathe, a struggle not to look away. In the background, evening cicadas hum. Killian swallows hard, searching my gaze for some sign. I don’t know what to say. Every memory of all the awkward, bumbling encounters I’ve had with attractive men surges forward. I’m utter crap at this stuff.

Blinking, I stand straight and run my fingers through his hair. I’ve left it a little longer at the top. “I just have to shape this bit and you’re done.” My voice sounds thick and uneven.

“Okay,” he says in a voice just as rough.

I frown at myself as I trim. This exercise in torture needs to end before I do something stupid. I step between his thighs to finish off the front of his hair. Mistake. He’s now only inches away from my chest.

Killian’s shoulders go stiff. I swear he stops breathing. Or maybe I do. Silence falls over us just as the cicada song ends. Neither of us moves or says a word.

And then everything changes.

It doesn’t matter that it’s barely a graze of his fingers against my shirt, the second he touches me, my body tenses, then vibrates like a tuning fork struck. I pause a beat, breath halting before escaping in a silent rush. The scissors hesitate then snip through his hair with a loud *snick*. The tips of his fingers gently press against the dividing line between my shorts and shirt, holding me steady as I sway a little.

I close my eyes for a second. I could move away, tell him to get off. But I don’t. That small yet significant touch sends heat and need throbbing through me, and it feels so good, I almost whimper. I swallow hard and continue to cut his hair, less steady now but determined to finish the job well.

Neither of us acknowledges the fact that he’s touching me. We don’t say a word when his fingers slowly move up under my shirt, seeking bare skin. But, Jesus, I feel it, and my knees threaten to cave.

Idly he moves, as if he’s simply enjoying the feel of me. As if I’m his to touch.

I can’t pretend anymore. The scissors clink when I set them down.

Killian tilts his head back to stare up at me. There’s something almost defiant in his expression, and I can’t meet his eyes.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, heart pounding.

“Touching you.” Gently he strokes my skin, and he sighs as though in heaven.

“Why?” I croak, because I’ve lost my damn mind, apparently.

Killian’s tone stays soft, almost thoughtful. “It’s all I think about lately, touching you.” A low sound leaves him, as if he’s laughing at himself. “Can’t seem to talk myself out of it any more. Don’t want to.”

My hands shake, my breath growing uneven as he slowly, softly, plays along the curves of my waist. His gaze burns, zeroes in on my breasts that tremble right before his eyes. My nipples harden, wanting more of that attention.

He lets out a soft exhale, barely a sound, but I’m so aware of him now, it’s as loud as a bomb to my ears. “You ever think about it?” he asks, a whisper. “What it would be like? You and me?”

“Yeah.” It’s a breath of sound, because I’ve lost the ability to talk. But he hears it. A gleam lights his eyes, his grip tightens a fraction, and he pulls me forward.

As if I've been waiting for it, I straddle his thighs, coming into contact with a considerable hard bulge. I want to grind myself against it but settle for resting on it now. Killian grunts low in his throat and slides me closer, holding on to my hips as if he's worried I'll run away. Not a chance.

For a second we just breathe, staring at each other as if trying to figure out how we got here. Killian looks me over, his expression relaxed but intent. Then he cups my cheek. His hand is huge, the skin rough. I want to kiss each callus. But I don't move.

He touches my lower lip with the tip of his thumb. His gaze rests there, thoughtful, as he brushes his thumb back and forth. My lips part, my breathing light and agitated. I want him to kiss me so badly it aches. But he doesn't.

His fingers trail down my neck, sending shivers along my skin. And he watches the path his hand takes. When he reaches my collarbone, he stops. His gaze lowers and a sound rumbles in his chest. It's greedy, impatient. He cants his hips, a slow roll as if he's already inside of me.

"You've been teasing me all day with this thin excuse for a top," he murmurs, his voice dark and rough. I whimper, wiggling on his lap, so hot I can barely stand it. He cups my ass and, with little effort, hauls me up higher as he slides farther down in the seat.

The chair creaks in protest. Killian spreads his thighs wide, cradling me in his lap. I hold on to the hard curves of his shoulders.

Dark eyes roam. His breath gusts over my skin, his mouth so close to my aching nipple. "Barely covers those sweet little tits. You gonna show them to me now, Libby?"

God, his voice. It's heated toffee, sticky and rich, coating my skin. It's black magic, taking command of my body. I sway a bit, wanting to press myself against him, fighting for just a little longer because anticipation aches so sweet.

"You like me looking at you, Libby?"

I can only make a strangled sound.

"Yeah, I think you do." His fingers twitch on my side, his gaze hot and needy on my breasts. "Lower your top, baby doll. Show me what I've been dreaming about for weeks."

The sound of my own whimper turns me on. Beneath me, his erection pushes against my ass. I take a shuddering breath and slowly reach for the strap on my shoulder. The thin cotton slides easily down my arm. I shrug off the other side and the top slithers over my chest like a caress.

Killian's breath turns choppy, his lips parting as if he needs more air.

The top reaches my hard nipples and clings, holding there.

We both go still. Heat licks over me, and I arch my back, lifting my breasts high. The top falls away.

Killian groans, long and deep. "Fuck yeah. So fucking gorgeous." Soft lips brush one swollen nipple. "I knew they would be."

He runs his parted lips back and forth, caressing me while I shake. The tip of his tongue flicks out for a quick taste, and my entire body jolts.

A hum of enjoyment rumbles in his chest. "You like that?"

I twitch as he idly peppers my breast with gentle kisses and his big hands run over my back. "Yes," I whisper.

Killian hums again then angles his mouth and sucks me. I groan, arching into it. And there's no more talking. Just Killian paying homage to my nipples. Killian cupping my small breasts in his hands, gentle, and not so gentle.

He stays content there, sucking and licking, pinching and nipping, like it's his favorite thing in the world. And I pant, grind myself against his hard cock, the seam of my jeans digging into my sensitive flesh, and wanting to come so badly I have to grit my teeth.

"Killian." It's a whimper of need.

He hears it and lifts his eyes to mine. I'm so undone, I don't notice his hands moving until they're in my hair, tugging me to him. We meet in the middle, our kiss deep and messy but right to the heart of it, as if we both knew how it would be, as if we've been here before.

And yet every touch of his lips to mine, every slide of his tongue in my mouth is this new, brilliant white and searing hot thing, sending a jolt of feeling straight through me. Every time.

I fall into his kiss, sinking deep, needing more, more, more. I'm hot, sweaty. His body is a furnace, and I only want to get closer, skin to skin, slick and sliding.

My arms twine around his neck, my fingers combing along his newly shorn hair. The press of my aching breasts to his firm chest has us both groaning. He grips my shoulders, holds me tight.

I don't know how long we stay there, making out like teens in the dark. Long enough that I grow dizzy, my body one big throb of want. Long enough that my jaw aches and my lips swell.

When he finally pulls back, it isn't far. His lips brush mine as we breathe light and fast, both of us trembling.

"We should have been doing this all along," he says against my mouth.

"All day long." I touch his jaw, lightly kiss his swollen lips.

His eyes flutter closed, long lashes touching the crest of his cheeks. He turns in to me, running the tip of his nose against mine. "I knew it would be so good. I shouldn't have held back the first time I wanted to kiss you."

"When was that?" Everything feels languid, hot, slow. His touch, mine. I nuzzle his neck, drawing in the scent of his skin.

He smiles, small and smug. "When you threatened to shoot me."

"I hated you then."

A low hum vibrates in his throat. "You found me irresistible. You would have caved."

"I would have bitten you."

"Bite me now."

That husky whisper has me moving, seeking his lips. I nip his lush bottom one, tugging at it gently, and he groans, drawing me in, slipping his slick tongue along mine. "Tell me you want this too, baby doll."

"Want what?" I can't think, my head is heavy, my limbs fumbling.

His dark eyes meet mine. "Everything."

My finger shakes as I trace the dark line of his brow. His lids lower, his head tilting to follow my touch. I lean in, kiss the corner of his eye. "Only with you."

Chapter 9

Killian

Libby weighs next to nothing in my arms, but my knees are weak as I stumble into the bedroom. I barely see where I'm going. I can't stop kissing her. God, she tastes good. I don't ever want to stop.

We tumble onto the bed, me protecting her fall and bracing myself over her.

But she's a greedy girl, tugging me down, wrapping her lush legs around my waist to grind herself against my cock. I love it. Love the way she kisses me like she's starving for it. Love the way she strokes my skin with a strange mix of tenderness and possession.

It is not bullshit or bluster to say I've been adored by millions. I've been pursued by countless women. But I have never felt as wanted as I do now. Being on stage is addictive, but it's nothing compared to this.

My fingers fumble on the snap of her jean shorts. She lifts her sweet butt to help me pull them off. We're both panting. It's too hot to be doing this. I couldn't give a fuck. No way am I stopping. I want her so badly right now, I can barely see straight.

Her shorts fly over my shoulder, and I kiss my way down her slick body, pausing at her tits, because they need to be worshiped just a little bit more. I could spend all night here. But I've caught a glimpse of what waits for me.

I can't get there fast enough, settling down on the bed and gently spreading her legs to make room for me. Heat licks over my skin, and my balls draw tight. "Oh, God, you have such a cute little pussy."

Her head wrenches up, and she glares at me down the length of her body. "Do *not* call it *cute*."

"But it is," I croon, placing a soft kiss on her pink bud, loving the way it jumps under my touch. I hum in satisfaction. "So fucking cute."

She plops back onto the pillow, her voice weak. "Fine. Whatever."

I know she loves it. Every dirty word that comes out of my mouth gets her wetter. I stroke my knuckle along her swollen lips, watching her glisten. My voice is low and rough. "We're going to have to work at getting my cock in here."

She whimpers, her hips canting, trying to follow my touch.

I push my own hips against the bed. "It'll be so tight, this little pussy."

Jesus, I almost come right there. My breath whooshes out, and I'm slightly dizzy. I lower my head. A groan tears out of her as I gently suckle her clit. Hell, I moan too because she tastes like butterscotch, rich and sweet and fucking perfect.

Everything gets hazy, thick and dark. I'm so hot my skin prickles and shivers. There's nothing but me and the feel of her against my tongue, the sounds she makes—little whimpers—and the wet suck and slide of my mouth. My palms grasp her plush thighs, hold them steady as she writhes.

"Killian...God."

I pull back from my feast, loving how hot I've made her, and give her a smile. "For you, I'll answer to both."

A cute growl escapes her. She's quick, grasping the back of my head and tugging me close. "More."

I chuckle, low and pleased. "Yes, ma'am."

And when she comes on my tongue, my fingers pumping deep inside her snug box, it's gorgeous. She puts her whole body into it, arching off the bed, tits pointing skyward, her slim body glowing and damp.

She falls back, weakly grasping the sheets. "Fuck."

"Soon, baby doll." I'm scrambling to get my pants off because I need to be in her.

Libby lies prone, gazing at me down the length of her body. And I pause to take it in. My breath catches in my throat, and I can't help running my palm down her thigh. "Look at you, all open and wet for me. And so fucking beautiful it makes my heart hurt."

Her breasts tremble as she giggles. Giggles. I made my reclusive girl giggle. "Just your heart?" she asks.

"Oh, my dick hurts too." I palm it now. I'm so hard it's weighed down. No give to it at all. "It needs a hug."

Her smile is sunshine, spreading warmth over my skin. "Come here," she says.

And I'm done.

The bed creaks as I shove my shorts down and kick them free. My arms are unsteady, fucking shaking, as I lean over her. My dick pushes against her entrance, and she gazes up at me. When our eyes meet, my throat closes. "Libby."

She touches my cheek but then frowns. "Wait."

I freeze. I think my heart stops cold. I want to beg at this point, but I manage to speak without cracking. "What is it?" *Please don't tell me you've changed your mind.*

She gives me a weak smile. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Something? I have no clue. My dick is doing all the thinking now, and he is pretty much yelling, *let me in!*

Her brow lifts. "Condom?"

Reality is a long crash down. I stare at her blankly before groaning long and pained. "Mother fucker."

* * * *

Libby

Some sick part of me wants to laugh at Killian's agonized expression. But mainly I want to sob. Because it's clear he doesn't have a condom.

His head sinks to my shoulder as he sighs. "Shit. I haven't... I haven't needed them for a while."

Call me a jealous slag, but warmth fills my chest. "Me either."

He gives me a squeeze. "I didn't plan this. I mean, I've fantasized about it constantly, yeah. But I didn't think it would happen tonight."

This endears him to me even more. I wrap my arm around his broad shoulders and kiss his cheek. "I know." If I had any sense, I'd have stocked up on my own.

"I'm clean," he says, almost hopefully. "Never gone without a condom before. Test regularly. I should have said all that before."

“I am too.” I wriggle a little beneath him, because he feels so damn good against me. The tip of his cock is broad and hot. It actually hurts not having him push into me, I want it so badly. “But I’m not on birth control.”

He sighs and, as if he can’t help himself, rocks his hips just a bit. That thick, wide head nudges me. We both make a noise of want. I close my eyes, lick my swollen lips. “Killian...”

“Just the tip, baby,” he whispers, half laughing-half groaning. “I swear, I’ll be good.”

I laugh too. Not much, though, because I’m tempted. But he doesn’t push it.

His body trembles, his muscles locked tight. “I’m going to the store.”

“The power is out. It’ll be closed.”

Killian whimpers, his cheek resting against mine. “I’m going to cry.”

I snort, but I empathize. I want to cry too.

“I’m serious,” he grumbles as his body shakes. “Full-out man-baby bawling.” With a groan, he rolls off me and flops onto his back. Naked and glistening with sweat, he’s so beautiful, I have to grip the sheets to keep from jumping on him.

Breathing deep, he rests his forearm over his eyes. “Just give me a minute. Or sixty. Or kill me. That might be better.”

“Drama llama.” I laugh and then launch myself at him.

He catches me with an *oof*, his arms going around me instantly. I kiss his damp neck, licking a spot—salty, tasty Killian—and he groans. “Libby. You’re really going to kill me.”

“Mmm...” I kiss my way along his jaw. “Just because we can’t fuck doesn’t mean we can’t do other things.”

His hands slide down my back, possessive, hauling me closer. “Don’t say *fuck* in that sexy voice of yours. I might come right here and now.”

I nip his chin. “I wouldn’t mind.”

He scowls, nipping me back. “I would. It would be humiliating.” He smiles a little. “At least before I got you off.”

“You already did. Thoroughly.” I kiss his lips, soft, slow, then pull away, loving that he follows, wanting more. I give him another one. “Let me get you off now.”

His hips nudge against my belly, that thick cock jumping. “It won’t take much.” He nudges again, a little more insistent. “Just put your mouth on it. Give it a little lick. I’ll blow like a fucking canon.”

I smile as I skim my lips down his chest. His hands slide into my hair and cup the back of my head, not pushing, just holding me. His abs twitch, those tight muscles clenching. I could touch him for days.

My tongue dips into his little belly button and he groans, his body stretching taut. But when I move lower, his head jerks up. “Libs, wait—”

He shuts up as I come face to face with his cock. And gape like a frightened fish.

“Uh...” I say. And then I remember a joke I once heard in college. About Killian. One of the girls at a party had called him Don’t Kill-Me-an. Because, as she had laughingly explained, groupies claimed his dick was so thick and long that a girl was in danger of being split in two. I don’t want to think about Killian and other women. At all. But the evidence is staring me right in the face.

He lifts up on his elbows, which does lovely things to his abs. He’s panting faintly, his chest gleaming in the evening light. “Yeah, about that.”

I hold up a shaking hand to silence him. “Just...let me get acquainted.”

Because his dick? It's big enough to need its own name. Maybe its own address. Sure, I've seen it before, but he was hanging limp and cursed with a severe case of whisky dick at the time. Now it's hard as iron and thrusting upward as if begging to be stroked.

I oblige the beast, gently running my hand over its silky, hot length, and it twitches, nudging against me. He has a beautiful dick, tawny colored, well-shaped, and straight, the tip wide and smooth. Beautiful. And on steroids or something. Because it's just...

I wrap my fingers around it, and my sex clenches. I can imagine this meaty girth pushing its way into me. It'd be rude work, filled with raw grunts and deep groans. I clench again, giving him a squeeze. So very firm.

"We'll go slow," he rasps, almost desperate as I slowly trace the wide, round crown of his cock.

"Yeah, we will," I mutter.

"And you don't have to— Oh, fuck, that's good," he groans as I lean over him and suck on the fat tip. It fills my entire mouth, the crown fitting into the curved roof. And I groan too, because it is *so* good sucking on him. Better than anything has a right to be.

Killian mutters rough curses, makes pained, pleading noises as I work him, sucking and stroking—because there is no way to take all of him in. I'm so turned on, I can't be still. Just the sight of him, his strong arms stretched overhead, hands wrapped around my wrought iron headboard, his abs bunching, his hips rocking, sends heat rushing through me. I suck him deep, lick around the weeping head.

His dark brows knit, his lips parting as he whispers my name again and again. His thick thigh slides between mine and pushes hard against my aching sex. I groan against his cock.

We come together, Killian filling my mouth, me riding his thigh with shameless abandon. I stay with him until he softens against my tongue. He's panting hard when I release him and rest my head against his firm stomach.

His hand smooths over my hair. "I'm dead," he whispers, then hauls me up, wrapping me in his arms. His lips find mine. "You've killed me."

I stroke his damp temple. "Good. Then I can have my way with you all night. And you won't be able to protest."

"Do your worst. I'll just lie here and take it."

We might not have the damn condoms, but he keeps me well satisfied for hours, until I fall into a dreamless sleep, Killian's strong body pressed against me. Even as I fall, I want to hold on, stay awake. Because being this happy cannot be real. It can't last. Can it?

Chapter 10

Killian

The pillow beneath my head is...fucking fantastic. I mean, it really is. Like a squishy cloud or something...

I've been here before. In this bed. On this pillow. I fully wake in a rush of memories. Kissing Libby. Touching Libby. Libby making me fall apart and then putting me back together.

Her head is resting on a pillow next to me; her gray-green eyes meet mine.

And my chest floods with warmth. "Hi."

Her voice is soft and slightly rough. "Hi."

We're wrapped up in each other. I hadn't noticed before now. It feels natural, where I'm supposed to be. I touch her cheek and thread my fingers into her hair to pull her closer. I kiss her softly, and she opens to me on a sigh. It would be so easy to roll over her, part her legs, and sink it.

If I had a condom.

"Would I look like a total dog," I ask against her lips, "if I left you here and went to get condoms?"

I feel her smile. "Well, it's Sunday so—"

"Don't," I growl, nipping her lip. "Don't fucking say they're closed on Sundays."

She sighs, kissing me back. "Not saying it won't make it any less true."

"Mother. Fuck." I lean back a little. She's smiling at me, her golden brown hair falling into her eyes. I ease a strand behind her ear. "Fuck that, I'm driving off the island."

"I'll wait right here."

But I don't go. I kiss her some more, run my hands over her curves because she's soft and warm. And mine.

"What's it like?" she murmurs between kisses.

"Being with you?" I nuzzle her neck. "Fucking perfect."

Her chest vibrates with a chuckle. "No. Being on stage. Performing in front of all those people."

Resting my head in my hand, I look down at her. A lot of people have asked the same thing. I've never really cared. But with Libby, a lick of excitement runs down my spine. Because I can see her up there under the hot lights, her voice owning the air. It would be beautiful. "The Animal is like nothing else on Earth."

"The animal?"

"That's what I call the crowd." I run my fingertips over her arm. "It's a living thing, Libby. More than just individuals, a whole entity. You can feel it swelling up around you. It's like..." I bite my lip trying to put the feeling into words. "How do you feel when you sing?"

She blinks in clear surprise, and her cheeks flush pink as she thinks about it. "I don't know... Sometimes it's the only way to get all the pain out of my soul. Other times, it's like I'm flying."

"Exactly," I say, stroking her side. "Now imagine it at full throttle. You're flying at supersonic speed. And all that energy just lights you up, until you're hotter than the sun."

"It must be something." She's gazing up at the ceiling as if picturing it.

“The rush is addicting.” I lean down and kiss the tip of her nose. “Almost as good as sex with you.”

Her pink lips quirk. “We haven’t had sex yet.”

“Don’t remind me.” I find that fragrant spot on her neck that makes her shiver. “Fooling around with you is better than anything I’ve done before.”

It’s the truth. Shocking, and yet it fills me with a strange relief, as if I’ve been wandering forever and finally come home.

Libby cups the back of my head, holding me to her. Idly, her fingers move through my hair. I close my eyes in pleasure, and her voice comes out soft. “I used to…”

“Used to what?” I prompt. That fine blush grows, chasing down her neck. I follow the heat with my fingers. “Libs.”

She takes a quick breath and talks in a rush. “I used to dream about what it’d be like performing at a concert.”

I rise up on my elbows. She tries to avoid my gaze, and I touch her cheek. “You have the talent. Why didn’t you try?” Why is she hiding here? This place is slowly suffocating her. She has to know this.

Libby shrugs a shoulder, her attention focused on my tattoo. “I’m a homebody. Hell, going to class in college was adventurous for me. And my parents…” She shrugs again, turning her head to the side, the pillow cradling her cheek. “Well, what they had to say about the life wasn’t entirely complimentary.”

“Warned you away, didn’t they?” I can understand that. There’s a lot of shit in my world. Still, it pisses me off. They had to know she had talent, that she was curious to see where it could lead. And they stomped it down before she could even try.

She pushes out a self-deprecating breath and glances at me from under her lashes. “They’d flip their shit if they knew I’d taken up with you.”

“Are you with me?” I ask carefully. If I have to fight ghosts, I want to know now.

Warmth floods my chest as she reaches up and traces my eyebrow. “I’m in this bed, aren’t I?”

“Fuck yeah, you are.” I kiss her mouth because I have to taste her again.

She makes a hum of pleasure. “I’m torn between demanding you go get those condoms and keeping you right here.”

My hands roam lower, filling themselves with her plump ass. “If it wasn’t for my blue balls shouting at me, I’d be all for staying right here.”

“Talk to you a lot, do they?”

I grin against her neck. “Yes. Right now, they’re saying, ‘If we don’t get acquainted with Libby’s pretty pussy, we’re going on strike, and we’re taking the dick with us.’”

She laughs. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s a bluff. They’ll cave in a heartbeat. Besides—” I lift my head and grin. “My dick had decided never to leave your side.”

“Goof.”

“Only for you.”

Our peace is broken by a sudden slamming on the front door, followed by a familiar feminine bellow. “Killian James, get your trashy butt out here before I call the baby daddy police on you!”

I freeze, horror prickling my skin, as I stare down at Libby.

She’s gone still beneath me, her eyes wide as saucers.

Then they narrow. “I’m assuming you know the person trying to knock my door down?” I give her a weak smile. “Yes. That’s Brenna James. My cousin and all around pain in the ass.”

Said pain in the ass is still pounding on the door and bellowing my name. If it wouldn’t upset my Aunt Anna, I’d kill the little brat.

Libby glances toward the door and back to me. “You knocked up your cousin?”

“Ha.” I glare at her and reluctantly pull away. “You’re a riot.” Grabbing my shorts off the floor, I haul them on and button them. “I’m letting her in before someone actually does call the cops. It’s happened before.”

When I’m greeted with silence, I turn and find Libby frowning at me. My back stiffens. “You’re not seriously questioning this.” I take a step back toward her. “Because I’m all for getting in that bed and demonstrating, in thorough detail, how you’re the only woman in my life.”

“Kiiiilliaaaaaan!”

I swear Brenna’s screech could raise the dead.

“I think we’d have an audience,” Libby deadpans. She hasn’t moved from her spot. Less than five minutes ago, I was in there with her, warm and content. I’m cold now. I want back in.

“I don’t care.” Libby’s faith in me is more important. I need it.

I move to unbutton my shorts when my cell starts playing “Welcome to the Jungle.” Fucking hell. The pest is calling too.

Libby bites her lip but then bursts out laughing, a low, rolling sound. “Go open the door. I’ve gotta meet this girl.”

My shoulders drop, and I smile. “Your funeral, baby doll.”

“Killian Alejandro James! I just got a bug in my mouth, and it’s all your fault!”

Libby snorts. “Sounds more like yours.”

Shaking my head, I go to let the beast in.

* * * *

Libby

Despite my teasing, I don’t want to go out and meet Killian’s cousin. I’m not even sure why. All I know is dread lies like lead in my stomach. This feels like the end, the happy little bubble that Killian and I lived in burst by the arrival of his relative.

The way his body jolted, his face freezing in horror, when he heard Brenna for the first time, knocked me clear out of Lust Land. For one heart-wrenching moment, the words *baby daddy* hung in the air, depriving me of mine. The pain had been so all-consuming, I’d wanted to vomit.

This doesn’t bode well for me. Do I trust Killian? Yes. He’s too impulsive, forthright to hide another woman from me. I don’t think he’s capable of that level of deceit. I don’t think he’d bother, truth be told. Killian says and does exactly what he wants.

The problem lies with me; I’m half in love with a man who will drift through my life like smoke in the wind.

I hate that my hand shakes as I apply mascara. Scowling in the mirror, I toss the wand down. *Fancying up to impress another woman. New low, Liberty. New low.*

Voices in the living room create a hum in the air, punctuated by the higher-pitched comments of Killian’s cousin. Just how many people are out there?

I turn the corner and stop short.

Killian stands, hands low on his hip, face twisted in a scowl, as he talks to what could arguably be the most handsome man I've ever seen. I mean, wow. Glossy black hair, aqua eyes, tan skin—dude could be David Gandy's twin. Dressed in a pale gray suit, he looks like he stepped off a runway in Milan and jetted over here for a chat. He also appears to be about as pleased as Killian.

"The fact that I am in this backwater burg ought to tell you how serious this is." His British accent is as crisp as his suit. "Playtime is officially over, Killian."

"Funny," Killian drawls, low and irritated. "I don't recall putting you in charge of my life."

One cool brow raises. "It would have been the day you signed a contract allowing me to manage your band. More to the point, it would be when you bid me to get Jax back to work as soon as possible."

Killian winces at that, glancing off, his jaw hard.

"He's ready," the man says. "They all are. Now you want to put that off and threaten the ground I've gained because you're dipping your wick—"

"Don't go there," Killian snaps. Color paints his cheeks. "Not even a little. Understood?"

They glare at each other like it's high noon, and I decide to show my face.

As soon as I enter, the tension snaps. Killian's hard expression gentles. "Hey. I was wondering when you'd get out here."

He holds out a hand, and I walk across the room, too aware of Mr. Stunning and Brenna James watching me. I don't like being on display. Ever. And this feels like some odd test.

Because Mr. Stunning's scrutiny bores into my skin like a laser, I glance at Killian's cousin instead, who had been half hidden by the wing chair she's sitting in.

She's nothing like I imagined. I'd expected some punk girl version of Killian. But I don't see a family resemblance. She's tall and pale, with a smattering of freckles over her snub nose, and has hair the color of amber honey. It's pulled back in a sleek ponytail.

Just like Mr. Stunning, she's impeccably dressed, poured into a navy suit with a pencil skirt. Her sky-high heels are metallic, rainbow-colored snake skin, which ought to look ridiculous, but even I'm envious. I've never seen Louboutins in person, but the red soles make me think that's what they are.

She peers at me from behind red cat-eye glasses. I resist the urge to stand straighter. Wouldn't matter. Good posture isn't going to change the fact that I'm in ratty cutoffs and a ribbed white tank. I'm a country mouse who's walked into a den of lions. In my own damn house.

Killian grasps my hand in his warm one and tugs me to his side. "Libby, this is my manager, Mr. Scott, or Scottie as we all call him."

The handsome man, who is even prettier up close, gives me a short nod. "Miss Bell."

So he already knows my name. He does not appear pleased.

Killian inclines his head toward Brenna. "And you've already heard the pain in the ass."

Brenna rolls her eyes and stands to cross the room. "He's just pissed because I know where he hides the bodies."

"Just be thankful you aren't joining them," Killian says easily. His fingers steal under the edge of my shirt to caress bare skin. Mr. Scott's gaze follows the movement, and his lips thin.

Flushing, I ignore this and smile at Brenna. "Anyone who can make Killian move that fast is okay in my book."

"Ha!" Brenna wrinkles her nose at Killian. "See? I'm useful."

Killian snorts but gazes down at me. “Brenna does our PR.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” I say to both Brenna and Mr. Scott. It isn’t precisely true, but I don’t want to alienate the people in Killian’s life. “Can I get y’all anything?”

“Thank you, but no.” Mr. Scott gives me a smile that could freeze water. “We were just leaving.”

He glances out the window. It’s then I notice a small moving truck and guys packing up Killian’s things. A guy walks out, carrying one of Killian’s guitar cases.

Panic hits me, and Killian holds me closer, as if sensing my fear.

“I’ll meet you over there in a bit,” he tells them.

Mr. Scott nods and, after bidding me a brusque “good day,” leaves. Brenna is slower, giving Killian a kiss on the cheek and me a weak smile.

“We’ll meet again, I’m certain,” she tells me.

My nod is wooden. I mutter some sort of farewell, but I don’t really know what I’m saying. Blood whooshes through my head, muting out sound. My heart is in my throat.

The silence they leave us in is pained and complete.

Killian clears his throat and tries to wrap his arms around me. I draw away.

“You’re leaving.”

Sunlight slants through the windows and over Killian. Bathed in that golden light, he looks surreal. The chiseled planes of his chest and abs, the strong lines of his face, the dark power of his eyes—all of it highlighted in sharp relief. Part of me marvels that I’ve touched every inch of that body, that I’ve kissed his lips, taken him into me.

It doesn’t feel real anymore.

He stares down at me, and I see the pain in his eyes. Do I seem as fleeting to him?

“I don’t want to go,” he says, small, flat, final. “But Scottie has booked a couple of early shows before our fall tour. And the guys all want to do it.” He runs a hand over the bristles of his short hair. “I’m the outlier.”

“This is the first time you all will be together since…” I bite my lip.

“Jax,” he finishes for me. “Yeah.”

He shifts his weight onto one foot and then back to the other, as if his body is warring between staying here and heading out the door. I’m being fanciful, I know, and yet I also know he’s torn. I can see it in his pinched lips and pleading eyes.

“Well then,” I say slowly. “You need to join them.”

He blinks as if I’ve sucker-punched him. I don’t know what else he expected me to say. He has to realize I’d never keep him from his life.

When he speaks, his voice is rough, as though he’s been yelling. “I thought I had more time. I *wanted* more time.”

I’ve suffered no illusions that this summer was anything more than Killian’s escape from reality. It doesn’t stop me from hurting, though. But I don’t let that show. “That’s the thing with endings in real life. You never really know when they’re going to happen.”

“Endings?” His head snaps up. “Is that what you think this is?”

I frown. “Isn’t that what you’re trying to tell me? Goodbye?”

“No!” He tugs me against him and holds on tight. Anger tightens his features. “You want to get rid of me, you’re going to have to try harder, baby doll.”

Unable to resist, I smooth my hands over his chest. Beneath his warm skin, his heart beats hard and fast, matching the pained rhythm of mine. “I don’t want to say goodbye,” I admit quietly.

He kisses me then, as if he's drawing me into him, memorizing my taste. Despite his words, it's a kiss that feels like goodbye. He's breathing hard when he draws away to rest his forehead against mine. "So don't."

I stroke the sides of his neck. It's like trying to ease steel. "You're going on tour. How long is that? Four months? Five?"

He pulls me a little closer. "Counting practice and these pre-tour concerts, I'd say five and a half." He ducks his head to meet my eyes. "So what? Out of sight, out of mind? Is that how it is, Libs?"

My fingers curl. "I'm trying to be realistic. I know what goes on during those tours."

He huffs, his eyes narrowing to obsidian slits. "Do tell."

A flush of anger races over my skin. "Don't be thick. 'Sex, drugs, and rock and roll' is a cliché for a reason."

"Oh, I know better than anyone, honey." He lets me go with a sound of annoyance. "But if you think that's what will happen when I tour, you don't know me at all."

"I'm trying to do the grown-up thing here," I tell him, struggling not to yell, "and let you go without worrying about me."

"Oh, well, thanks for being so helpful. How about instead you give me some sign that what we have means more to you than a summer fling?" He tosses a hand up with a snort. "Fuck, you've got me sounding like a clinger."

I bite my lip. Even when I'm pissed at him, I love him. It scares the hell out of me.

"What do we have, Killian?" I ask softly.

His eyes meet mine. "I don't know. But it's real. It's the only real thing I have right now."

"You have the music—"

He cuts me off with a fierce look. "I don't want to walk out that door feeling like the second it closes it's the end of us. Because I won't do it, Liberty. As far as I'm concerned, we just started. No fucking way will I—"

I wrap my arms around his neck and tug him down to me. His words end in a muffled grunt as I kiss his lips. But he doesn't resist. He leans into me, opening my mouth with his, slipping his tongue in deep for a taste. With a moan, he grabs my butt and hauls me up. I wrap my legs around him and cling as he walks us backward, kissing me as we go.

We end up on the couch, Killian kneading my ass. He breathes into me, his lips sliding down to my neck, and a shudder runs over his big body. "Libby." Soft lips nuzzle that spot behind my ear that makes my body tighten. "This is not how I wanted this to go."

I kiss the crest of his cheek, the corner of his eye. "How did you picture it?"

He rubs my back as he continues to explore my neck and shoulder with his mouth. "I've been thinking about it a lot, actually."

"You have?" I try to pull back to face him, but he won't let me.

His hands drift back to my butt and squeeze. With a sigh, I rest my head on his shoulder, and he gives my cheek a kiss. "Yeah, I have." For a long moment he stills, just cradling me against him as if he's reveling in the act. And I do too. He's strong and warm, his heart a comforting beat in my ear.

Its rhythm picks up as he takes a deep breath. "Libs... Come with me."

"What?" I sit up straight.

Killian's hands fall to my thighs, slowly rubbing them as he meets my gaze head-on. "Come with me on tour."

"No."

“No?” His short laugh is incredulous. “Not even a moment’s thought? Just no?”

“You’re reuniting with your band after a year. No way in hell am I showing up on your arm like some countrified Yoko.”

He laughs again, this time with more humor, though his expression is strained. “You know, the whole Yoko thing was wildly exaggerated. The Beatles were already drifting apart.”

“The fact that you called it a ‘Yoko thing’ proves my point. Truth doesn’t really matter. Perception does. And your bandmates will not appreciate me showing up in tow.”

His fingers grip my thighs. Not hard, but firmly enough to show his agitation. “You don’t know that. You haven’t even met them.”

“I know people.” Using his shoulders as leverage, I rise off him and sit on the couch at his side. “Mr. Scott looks at me like I’m a problem he needs to take care of.”

“Call him Scottie, and he looks at everyone like that.” Killian turns to face me. “Besides, I don’t want you to come with me as arm candy. I want you to play with me.”

I think my mouth falls open then. I know I can’t do anything more than gurgle like a fish out of water as I stare back at Killian’s expectant face. It takes me a minute to find my voice, and it’s a pathetic squeak when I do. “Play? As in, go on stage with you?”

“Of course.” A wrinkle forms between his straight brows. “What else would I be talking about? I’ve been writing those songs for us.”

“Killian...I’m not...” I lift my arms, searching for the words. “Were you even listening when I told you about my spectacular failures? I am a stage fright queen.”

“Lots of people have stage fright.” He doesn’t blink, doesn’t waver. “And if I hadn’t seen the regret in your eyes when you told me those stories, I might be inclined to let it go.”

I ball my fists, wanting to stomp my foot. “Never mind I’m an amateur. I play music on my porch in my underwear, not in front of eighty-thousand people. People,” I add, when he tries to talk, “who wouldn’t be there to see *me* anyway.”

Killian crosses his arms over his chest. It isn’t fair that he hasn’t put a shirt on. All that raw strength ripples under his golden skin and makes me want to cave just so I can touch him again.

“Are you finished?” he asks.

Ogling him? Never. But I realize he means my rant. I give him a sour look, which he returns with a raised brow.

“First,” he says, “if you played in your underwear, eighty-thousand people would definitely be watching you.”

He ignores my eye roll.

“Second, this is rock. All of our success is part talent, part luck, and crazy determination.” His lip curls. “Jax used to joke that we’re all amateurs up there. Lucky-ass dilettantes.”

A sigh leaves me, and I slump against the couch. Outside, Brenna is marching around, ordering moving men. Scottie stands on the porch across the way, his gaze on my house. I know he can’t see me, but it feels like he can. It’s a matter of time before he comes back over here.

Killian’s deep voice is low, persuasive, pulling me back to him. “All I’m asking for is three songs: ‘Broken Door’, ‘In Deep’, and ‘Outlier’.”

The songs I’ve worked on with him. They’re beautiful, relying on harmony and vocals over power. And they’re nothing like Kill John’s usual sound.

“How do you know the band will even like those songs?”

He won’t meet my eyes. “They will.”

“Which means you don’t know.”

“It’s my band.”

“It’s theirs too.”

The man actually growls. It would be kind of hot if I wasn’t so annoyed with him. Killian surges to his feet and spreads his hands out wide. “Why are you fighting this? The truth. Not the excuses.”

“Because I’m not impulsive like you! I need to think things through.”

He rubs a hand over his face. “You tell me you dreamed of this life. You tell me you tried but were encouraged to walk away. You asked me how it felt to perform in front of an audience, to be adored. Let me show you. Let me give you the world, baby doll.”

If anything, I feel worse now. A horrible, crawling sensation invades my belly, and I have the urge to run to my room to hide. I pick at the fray on my jean shorts. “That was just…pillow talk.”

“Pillow talk?” He blanches.

I wince. “You know, *tell me about your life*. Getting to know you.”

His cheeks flush. “You were humoring me?”

“No. I wanted to know you. What your life is like outside of here.”

“But not see it for yourself?” His eyes narrow, that flush running down his neck.

“Exactly.”

Silence grows so thick, the sounds of truck doors slamming ring out in the room. The movers are done. And I’m guessing we are too. A lump swells in my throat. But I don’t move. I stare up at Killian, who looks back at me with disgust.

“Bullshit,” he whispers.

Someone lays heavily on a car horn. I’m guessing Brenna.

“They’re waiting for you,” I say.

His nostrils flare. Then he’s moving. I’m in his grip before I can blink. He hauls me up and gives me a hard, biting kiss. I welcome the sting, biting back. The idea that I won’t get to feel him or taste him any more rips my heart apart. His kiss turns softer, but not sweet. No, he’s molding and shaping my lips with his, savoring.

I try to put my arms around him, but he pulls away. He’s breathing hard, his bottom lip swollen and wet. “I’m going now before I say something I’ll regret.”

Part of me regrets ever meeting him. Because this hurts too much. I could go with him. I could lose myself in him. Even as I think it, my entire body freezes in fear so violent, I swallow convulsively. I can’t do it. I can’t leave this house.

He searches my face for some sign. Whatever he sees has his jaw clenching. His fingers bite into my upper arms. “We aren’t done. Do you hear me? Not even close to done.”

“I don’t want to be done,” I whisper.

His teeth meet with a loud click. “Then stop being a coward and get your ass to New York.”

When I don’t say anything, he curses and strides away. The door slams in his wake. And he’s gone.

Chapter 11

Killian

New York will always be my home. It has a strange effect on me: instantly relaxing and instantly energizing. Going to meet Jax, however, is another story. My fingers drum a beat against my thigh as I ride the private elevator up to his apartment. Scottie offered to arrange a meeting on neutral ground, but I rejected the idea. Jax isn't my enemy. He never was and never will be.

Doesn't mean I'm looking forward to this.

The elevator opens directly onto his foyer.

Two years ago, a magazine did a huge spread on Jax at home. Jax showing off his industrial loft, living the life of a young rock star. What they never knew is that it was all a lie. It wasn't even Jax's place; it was Scottie's.

Jax's real home looks like something an old New York society matron would live in: dark wood floors, crown molding, rich colors on the walls, classic artwork in ornate gold frames. It makes me laugh every time I visit because I half-expect Jax to greet me wearing a smoking jacket and clutching a pipe.

"Every time you walk in here, you're smirking."

Jax's voice halts my progress. I hadn't even noticed him.

He's leaning against the arm of a green velvet settee in his parlor—yeah, he has a parlor, for fuck's sake.

I stare at him for a second. He's bulkier than I've seen him, his color healthy, his light brown hair longer than usual, almost reaching his collar. I set my guitar case down. "It's because I'm expecting to be greeted by a butler. Or maybe find a little poodle yapping at my feet."

"I've been thinking of getting a dog." Jax stands. The corners of his eyes crease, his head cocking to the right. I know his face as well as my own. Better, because I've seen it since we were six years old. So I know he's tense and hating it.

That makes two of us.

I drop all pretense and move across the room to pull him into a guy hug, giving his shoulder a slap. "Fucking idiot," I say gruffly. "You look good."

He hugs me back before we break apart. "You look like shit. What the fuck did you do to your hair?"

I know he's bullshitting me, but my hand reflexively goes to my shorn hair. For an instant, I don't see Jax but Libby standing before me, her small breasts trying their hardest to poke through the thin tank she's wearing, her cheeks flushed, and her hands shaking as she cuts my hair. I can almost feel her fingers sliding along my scalp again, manipulating my head in the direction she wants it.

Christ, just thinking about her makes my chest hurt.

"Something I should have done a while ago," I say lightly, like I'm not fucked up inside.

Jax nods, but doesn't say anything else. We stand there, looking at each other, neither of us speaking. It's been this way since he woke up in the hospital. Me, because I couldn't think of anything to say that didn't end up with me shouting at his dumb ass, and Jax?

I used to know what he was thinking just by looking at him. Or I thought I did. I've realized I didn't know shit.

"Well," Jax says, breaking the silence. "You want a drink or something?"

"No. I'm good."

He nods again, then curses. "Fuck it, Kill, just get it out."

Get it out? I don't even know where to begin. Heat swamps my chest and pushes its way up my throat. My fist connects with his chin, and Jax hits the floor, knocking over a side table on his way down.

"Jesus." Jax rubs his face and gives a weak laugh. "I forgot how hard you hit."

I flex my fingers. "I didn't know I was going to do that."

"I did." He grunts and slowly rises to his feet, waving off my offer of help. Jax touches his lip where a bead of blood wells. "You feel better?"

"No." I head to the kitchen to get some ice. "My hand fucking hurts."

"Yeah, sorry my face got in the way." He catches the ice pack I toss him. "You gonna ice that hand?"

I want the pain. "I didn't hit you that hard."

Jax snorts and heads over to an old fashioned sidebar. His mini fridge is stocked with bottled waters and juices. A big change from the beer and vodka that used to fill it. "Want something?"

"A cranapple."

We drink our juice like good little boys until I can't take it any more. "It was the worst fucking moment of my life. Finding you." I swallow hard and stare down at my reddened knuckles. "I get that it was worse for you. Doesn't help. I...you scared the fuck out of me."

"I know." His expression is hollow, the ice pack lying limp in his hands. That day, his green eyes had been bloodshot and dull. They're glossy now, and he blinks, looking off. "I wasn't thinking about you. Or anyone."

"I was your best friend. And you just... You could have come to me."

He huffs, trying to smile but failing. "You would have tried to make it better."

"Damn fucking right I would." I push off the chair I've been leaning on and pace to a window half-obscured by red silk curtains.

"I didn't want to be fixed," he says. "Not then."

I can't even answer.

Jax sighs. "If I'd been in my right mind, I would have done things differently. But that's the problem; I wasn't."

My fingers dig into the silk. "You gonna do it again?"

It takes too long for him to answer. And when he does, his voice isn't strong. "I don't intend to."

I snort, anger racing hot through my veins. "That's comforting."

"I'm being honest. I'm getting help. That's all I can do."

Turning to face him is worse. He looks calm, composed, while I'm ready to jump out of my skin. "I don't know if I can do this again," I tell him. "If it's touring, the life, that set you off, I don't want to do it. I'll be worrying that I'll find you again, drowning in your own vomit."

A vivid image flashes in my mind. But it isn't of Jax. It's of me, of Libby hosing me down, putting me into a bed and ordering me not to mess it up. Guilt and loathing snake down my insides.

Jax glares at me. "I deserve that. But let's get one thing straight: You, Killian fucking James, aren't God. You can't fix everything or protect us all."

“The fuck?”

“Don’t give me that. You’ve always been like this, taking all our shit on as your own. Thinking you can fix everyone’s life and make it better. You can’t. Just yours.” He stands and slaps the ice pack on the table. “What I did was fucked up and shitty. I’m getting help. That’s all I can say. Either you can deal with that or you can’t. Your call.”

He heads for the small studio he has in the apartment, not looking back.

Left alone, I turn back to the window. Far below, traffic is a constant stream, people darting around on the sidewalks. Always trying to fix people’s lives and make them better? Is there anything wrong with that?

I think of Liberty being here with me, what she would say right now. But she’s silent in my head. Instead, I see the fear and frustration in her eyes when I tried to get her to agree to perform with me.

“Fuck,” I whisper. Pulling out my phone, I text her. Her replies are stilted. Mine are too. Each exchange falls like a stone in my gut. I’ve damaged something between us. My thumb caresses the screen. I want to go to her. But I’ve got work to do here too.

Tucking the phone in my pocket, I grab my guitar and go to play with Jax.

* * * *

Libby

He’s gone. And it’s as if the sun has died. My orbit is off, everything dark and silent. It hurts to breathe, hurts to move. I knew he’d eventually go; I knew it would hurt. But I still wasn’t ready for this. Nothing is right anymore.

I try to work. I have the creativity of wet cardboard. I kind of just sit, limp and staring. I finish up my projects—I won’t be surprised if my clients complain about the uninspired work I’ve sent them—and turn away new jobs. I have enough money saved to take a vacation of my own.

Only what I’m really doing is walking from window to window, jumping at every little sound and catching my breath whenever a car drives along the road, which isn’t often. Because I live in Nowhereville.

As soon as Killian left, I knew I’d made a mistake. I should have gone with him. I should have told my fears to shut up. But hindsight really is a bitch. Only now do I see what I’ve become.

A person can get...stuck, for lack a better word, in a life. It’s surprisingly easy, really. Hours bleed into days; days fade into months. Before you know it, years have passed, and you’re just this person, someone your younger self wouldn’t even recognize.

My parents died, and somehow, so did I. Friends drifted away—no, I drifted away from friends. I can’t pretend differently. I drifted away from everything—wrapped myself up in Grandmama’s old house and a job that meant I never really had to leave home, and just hunkered down. It wasn’t even a conscious decision. I simply retreated and never reemerged.

Killian wanted to drag me by my ankles back into the world of the living. Worse, he wanted to push me into its spotlight. Now he’s gone.

And I let him walk away.

“I’m an asshole,” I say to the room. Silence rings out.

I used to love silence. I hate it now. Hate. It.

“Fuck it.” I’m not sure I like this development of talking out loud to myself. But I have bigger things to worry about.

I’m lying on the floor, wearing Killian’s dirty Star Wars T-shirt like some lovelorn idiot, so I use my phone to open a search engine. I have no idea where Killian stays, but at least I can get to the correct city.

I’m scrolling through flights to New York when my phone vibrates with a text.

You were right. I needed to face Jax on my own.

I stare at the screen. Frozen. This is good. Why doesn’t it feel good?

Little dots pulse at the bottom of the screen as he writes. Another text pops up.

We’re cool now. I actually want to get back to work.

Swallowing hard, I force myself to write.

I’m glad. Everything will be okay. You’ll love it.

I don’t know what else to say. I *am* happy for him.

He answers.

I miss you. Promise me you’ll come to a concert.

No more requests to come play with him. Blinking hard, I stare out the window where the sun shines bright and hot. My vision blurs, and I blink again.

Of course I will.

A tear runs down my cheek. I ignore it.

He writes again.

I want to apologize. I tried to push you into something you weren’t ready for. It was selfish. I’m sorry.

He’s being sweet, and yet my throat hurts from trying not to sob.

It’s okay, Killian. I know you meant well.

Jesus, we’re texting like strangers. I try to think of something light, something that sounds like us. Anything. But then he texts.

Gotta go practice. Talk later?

Perhaps we will. But I know for sure what we had isn’t the same anymore. My hand trembles as I type.

Sure. Have fun. :)

The little smile emoticon stares back at me like a mockery. I turn off my phone and toss it aside before Killian can answer. Lying on the floor in the sun, I close my eyes and cry. I missed my chance and only have myself to blame.

Chapter 12

Killian

The VIP section can either be an oasis of calm or a pulsing storm of frenetic energy. When you're famous, you quickly learn that it's your call how the night will go. You want privacy? You get it. You want a group of women willing to ride your dick and moan your name? Sure thing.

Tonight it's privacy. Jax and I wait in a room overlooking a crowded bar and an empty stage. Even though the club has a VIP room, it's not actually pretentious, serving beer and burgers rather than champagne and cocktails. Up-and-coming live acts perform nightly, and the crowd loves to dance for the fun of it, not just to be seen.

Music thumps and pulses from down below, but it's relatively quiet up here.

A waitress in worn jeans leads Whip and Rye in a moment later.

The second he sees us, Rye, our bass player, comes bounding over. And though I'm taller, he nearly hauls me off my feet as he gives me a squeeze that bruises my ribs. "About time you got here, fucker." When I laugh (wheeze) he sets me down, giving my head a slap. "Thought you might become a fucking hermit."

Rye is built like a linebacker with the energy of a puppy. A scary combination. He's grinning wide now, but there's caution in his eyes. His quick glance toward Jax tells me all I need to know. They're not sure of him either.

"I was on vacation, asshole."

"Out tanning his ass while we're working," Whip says, coming alongside of us. People often think we're related because we look a lot alike, only his eyes are blue. In school, we used to tell girls we were cousins, but it's bullshit. He's all Irish, with a faint accent to prove it.

He gives me a quick tap on the shoulder. "Tell me you found some hot girl to keep you occupied."

I've never hidden anything from them. But for some reason, I don't want to tell them about Libby just now. Not when I know they'll ask questions.

"According to Brenna," Rye says, "he had a cute little neighbor."

My back stiffens. "You gossiping with Brenna again?"

Rye's cheeks flush a little. It's well known to all of us that he has a thing for my oblivious cousin. And, yeah, I'm using it to my advantage just now.

But he quickly snorts. "I'm taking that evasion as a yes."

We join Jax at the table. "What's he evading?" Jax asks.

"Talking about the friend he made at summer camp," Whip says.

A waitress comes in and sets down the round of beers Jax ordered. Rye gives her a look, and she smiles wide. "I shouldn't ask...but are you JJ Watt?"

We all choke on our beers, trying to hide our laughter. Except Rye, who flushes again. His smile is easy. "Don't tell anyone I'm hanging out with One Direction here, 'kay? Might mess with my image."

"Okay." She frowns slightly as I give Rye the finger, and Whip kicks his shin under the table, making the bottles rattle.

“Jesus,” Rye says when she leaves. “One year out of the press and I’m usurped by a linebacker.”

“You do kind of look like him,” Whip says, squinting at Rye. “Only shorter. Could get you a lot of sloppy-seconds action, though.”

“My action has and always will be prime and all mine, fuck you very much.” Rye sets his attention back on me. “So what about your summer crush?”

“Talk about evasion.” I take a long drink of my beer before giving him a bland look. “Yes, there was a neighbor. No, she wasn’t a summer crush.” Libby is much more than that. “We hung out. She’s cool. Her dad was a studio guitarist. George Bell.”

“No shit?” Rye leans in, interested.

“You know him?” Whip asks.

“I didn’t know him personally,” Rye says. “But I’ve heard of him, sure.”

It isn’t a surprise that Rye knows about Libby’s dad. Whenever we went on tour, Rye would have his nose in some music history book. There isn’t an instrument he can’t play or a musical tidbit he can’t name. And we’ve tried to stump him. Many times. We always fail.

“You guys haven’t?” he asks when we all kind of look blank.

“Not even a little,” Jax says.

“He was a beast guitarist. Could have been a star on his own. But I guess he didn’t want that. Sat in sessions for a lot of huge bands in the late eighties and nineties.”

“That’s what Libby said. He taught her to play.” I glance around at their smirks. “Jesus, would you stop thinking with your dicks. She actually helped me come up with songs.”

“Do tell,” Jax draws.

I don’t appreciate the look in his eyes, as if Libby is already cheap entertainment. I might have gotten around to telling them about my relationship with her, but not now. Instead I lean back in the booth seat and shrug. “She sings and plays guitar. And frankly, she’s fucking phenomenal.” I pause, considering, but fuck it, these are my best friends. I can’t hide everything. “I asked her to come play with us.”

“What the fuck?” Jax looks at me as if I’ve sprouted a dick on my forehead.

“Don’t worry, she said no.” It still smarts. Because I know she was born to be out there. The same way I was.

“How about asking us first?” Jax says with another look of disgust. “Kill John doesn’t need another member.”

“It was to perform three songs with us as a guest. Shit, Jack White does it all the time, and it’s brilliant.”

“You’re no Jack White.”

“I’d say I’m better, but from where I’m sitting right now, I admire Jack’s willingness to branch out and test his limits. We don’t.”

Rye laughs darkly. “He’s right, man. We need new material.”

Jax is still pouting like I peed in his Wheaties.

I shake my head. “If you want to know the truth, I had no interest in coming back until I heard her. She was inspiring.”

They all look at me for a long moment, then slowly Whip nods. “Happened to me in Iceland. Was wandering around, not really into anything. Then I went to this club. There was this deejay, a mix master. His sounds were wicked hot, like nothing I’ve heard before. I hung out there all week and started working on some beats with him.”

Jax frowns but doesn’t say anything.

“Whip called me up,” Rye puts in. “I flew out to meet him, and we started composing.”

“Let me get this straight,” Jax says slowly, his frown growing. “None of you wanted anything to do with music this past year?”

Heaviness settles over the table. I lean in, resting my forearms on the cold glass. “We might as well clear the air now. Yeah, Jax, we were fucked up.” I gesture toward Whip and Rye with my chin. “What you did threw us all off. I’m not saying it to make you feel guilty—”

“Oh, well that’s a comfort.” He snorts and takes a drink.

“Too fucking bad,” I snap. “It is what it is. And if it took branching out and roaming the world to find our way back, if we all found different sounds and inspirations, well, that’s a fucking boon, not something to bitch about.”

Jax glares at me while Whip and Rye sit quiet but tense. We all stare at each other for a long minute, the club pulsing and throbbing around us.

Then Jax sighs and runs a hand over his face. “You’re right. I know you’re right.” His head hits the back of the booth with a thud, and he blinks up at the ceiling. “I haven’t had some sort of musical epiphany.” His green eyes cut to us. “But I want to play. I need to.”

His urgency is palpable. It freaks me out that he wants to go on for the wrong reasons. But I’m not his dad. I can only support him and do what’s best for the band. “That’s why we’re here,” I say.

With the edge of his thumb, Jax picks at the soggy label on his beer bottle. “It means a lot.” He glances up, faces us. “I’m serious. I know I’ve been an asshole. But... Thanks for coming back.”

Thing is, Jax was never an asshole before. He was the happy one, the guy who got us motivated. I know Whip and Rye are thinking it too. The table goes silent again, and I wonder how we’re ever going to get back to that easy place we lived in for so long, whether it’s even possible.

“Aw, come on now,” Whip blurts out in a plaintive whine better suited to a seven year old. “We’ve done the heavy. Can we just get over ourselves and drink our fucking beers?”

Jax laughs at that. “Yeah, man. We can do that.”

Rye raises his hand to get the attendant who is quietly standing far off in the corner of the room. He whispers something in the man’s ear while the rest of us drink “our fucking beers” and look down at the action going on in the main room.

Not a minute passes before the door opens and a group of women enter.

Fuck.

“Thought we might like some company,” Rye says. Musical genius, Rye might be, but he’s also a total dog when it comes to sex. “You know, before all the bonding occurs.”

The women are beautiful, well dressed, and very interested. A few months ago, I’d have been all over that. Now I’m annoyed that I can’t hang out with my best friends for more than ten minutes without being interrupted. I don’t even think about my dick. He’s taken.

What I don’t expect is Whip and Jax to be less than enthusiastic as well. Whip looks pained, his gaze darting down toward the dance floor and then to his hands fisted on the table. Jax just looks blank. But when he catches my eye, the look disappears and he sits back, parting his thighs to make room for the girl he grabs around the waist and pulls into his lap.

“Ladies,” he says.

The girls giggle.

The sound crawls over my skin. When the rest of the women descend on the table, pushing themselves into the booth, I raise my hand. “Hold up,” I say to a very pretty brunette in nearly sheer silk. “I gotta piss.”

Classy. It has the effect I wanted. Her nose wrinkles, and she scurries out of my way. But her expression quickly smooths. “Hurry back. I can’t believe I’m going to party with Killian James.”

She’s not. But I don’t correct her.

I slide out and head for the exit.

“Wait up.” Whip is at my side. “Wanna go down to the actual bar?”

I want to ask him why he’s suddenly not interested, because he’s a bigger player than Rye. But then I’d leave myself wide open for the same question. So I just nod.

The bar is crowded, people bumping into us. But there’s anonymity here too. As long as we don’t make eye contact with anyone, we’ll be left alone for now.

“I got used to not being recognized,” I tell him as we drink our beers.

“Me too.” He glances at the empty stage. “Kind of liked it.”

“But you want to get back to that.”

“I must be a glutton for adoration.” His eyes meet mine. “You?”

I think about it for a second. Did I miss the adoration too? There’s a strange tension in my spine, along my arms. I look at the stage, and my heart beats faster. “I miss it.”

I don’t add that I fear it too. It would be so easy to let the need for it take over.

“Yep.” He takes a drink. “As for the rest? I feel old now.”

I have to laugh at that. “Old and boring.”

“Maybe.” He shakes his head. “I want something real. Get back to that place we were when we wrote ‘Apathy’.”

A place of truth. I had that with Libby. I felt it when we sang. I want it back. I want it with her at my side. Does that make me selfish? I don’t know. But regret weighs on my shoulders. I backed off, gave her space. And it feels like a mistake.

I have made enough mistakes in my life. I set my bottle down on the bar, my stomach sour. “I want you to listen to the songs I wrote,” I tell Whip. “I think they’ll go with what you and Rye have been working on.”

Whip slowly smiles. “We’re gonna do this? Kill John rebooted?”

Anticipation licks over me like a good buzz. No more regrets. Forward action from here on out. “Yeah, man. We are.”

* * * *

Libby

I’m having a pity party of one, lying on the couch and staring at the ceiling when someone knocks on the door. It sends my heart into instant overdrive, and I’m not ashamed to admit that I need it to be Killian.

Even so, I sit there for a long moment, trying to stop shaking.

Another knock gets me up. My legs wobble as I head for the porch. Outside, a town car sits in the drive. My mouth goes dry, my palms damp. They slip on the knob as I wrench open the door.

Disappointment sends my heart skydiving to my stomach.

“What the hell are you two doing here?”

Scottie gives me a dry look as he speaks to Brenna. “I thought Killian said she was shy.”

Shy? Is that how Killian sees me? Knowing him, he probably called me a hermit, which isn't exactly wrong. I used to relish that, but now I realize how stupid it was, hiding away from life.

“Shy does not mean mute,” I snap. “Or deaf. Try addressing me instead of your assistant.”

“I love her more every time I see her,” Brenna says with a bright smile. “She's like a little Kate Hudson. Only not as blond. Or as perky, thank God.”

“Don't you two have an a cappella contest you should be commentating on?”

Scottie's perfect mouth twists. “A cappella? What are you nattering about?”

Brenna snorts. “She's cute. No,” she says to me in an overloud voice. “We've moved on to solo acts, kid.” She bumps my hip with hers as she walks up into my house. She does it so easily, I don't even think to stop her.

Thankfully Scottie has some manners and inclines his head. “You really do not want to let her loose in your house unattended, Ms. Bell. May I come in?”

“If you can control Thing One, then you might as well.”

Already Brenna has poured three glasses of ice tea and is rummaging through the kitchen for God knows what.

“Where are your cookies?” she mutters, opening a cabinet. “Kitchens like this always have cookies. I've seen it on TV.”

“I have crackers, yogurt, and very sharp knives.” I shoo her away.

“No cookies?” She lays a hand on her chest. “I've been waiting all day for some.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” I barely have any food in the house. I haven't felt like eating—I'm shocked too.

But because my hospitality gene kicks in, I put the drinks on a tray and take them out to my living room. Scottie and Brenna follow. For a minute, we sit sipping ice tea in heavy silence. Well, Brenna and I do. Scottie won't touch his glass, just eyes it suspiciously. I'm tempted to tell him it's not poisoned. Then again, part of me likes the idea of him fearing it just might be.

Setting my glass down, I get more comfortable in my chair. “All right, then. Why are you here?” Why isn't Killian here if they are? I miss him so much it hurts to breathe, and their presence makes it worse.

Scottie's expression begins to sour as if he's choking down something particularly distasteful. He can't blame my tea, at least. Brenna, on the other hand, starts to snicker. A lot.

Scottie shoots her an ugly look before leaning forward. “Killian has a message for you.”

“A message?” My heart kicks into high gear, but my mind skids to a halt. “What the hell is this? The fifth grade? Why can't he just call me?”

The corner of Scottie's eye twitches, and Brenna coughs loudly into her hand. Tears are forming beneath her cat glasses.

“Yes,” Scottie grinds out through his teeth. “That would have been the logical choice.” The twitching by his eye gets worse. “However, we're here to deliver it—”

“Is it a singing telegram? Because that might be worth it.”

Brenna loses the fight and erupts with laughter, her slim form doubling over.

“Go search for cookies,” Scottie snarls at her, though he hasn't really lost his cool. He's as contained as ever—well, aside from the eye tick thing.

Still hooting, Brenna staggers off, and Scottie turns his focus back to me. “There are days I truly hate my job.” He pulls a folded piece of paper from his inner breast pocket and hands it to me. “Don’t ask. Just read the bloody note.”

Well then.

I hate that my fingers shake as I take it from him and open the smooth, creamy paper. Killian’s penmanship is slanted and messy. And my heart instantly squeezes. Damn, I miss him.

Libs,

You gave Scottie shit about this, didn’t you?

I pause, and part of me itches to look up to see if Killian is hiding somewhere in the room. It’s silly, but Jesus, sometimes the man spooks me. I push aside the thought and keep reading.

You don’t know how much it kills me to miss seeing Scottie choking on his disdain.

I fight a smile. He’d have loved the singing telegram part.

You don’t know how much it kills me not seeing you, Liberty Bell.

The note ends there, and I snort, not at all amused.

“If he wants to see me,” I can’t help but complain to a silent Scottie, “then why the hell isn’t he here? And what the hell is this little—”

With a long-suffering sigh, he holds out another note. I pluck it from his grasp.

I can’t be there. I’ve committed to practice and have been threatened with bodily harm if I try to sneak out. Have a little pity and read the damn notes, okay?

Lips twitching, I look up at Scottie. “Give me the next one.”

Grumbling under his breath, Scottie pulls out a larger tri-folded paper.

I can’t be there, Libby. But you can be here. You know you can. Come to me, Libby. Get on a plane and be with me. I miss you so much, I can’t even call you. Because hearing your voice, hearing you say no, you won’t join me, would rip my guts out.

So, like a coward, I sent Scottie and Brenna. (Plus payback’s a bitch, and Scottie was due. He’s dying right now, isn’t he? Go on, laugh. It will make it worse for him.)

I do laugh, because I can hear Killian’s voice in my head, cajoling and teasing. He wants me. A shuddering breath escapes me, and I blink to clear my vision.

These songs I wrote with you, they’re our songs, not mine. I wrote them because of you. I’m not going to sing them with anyone else but you.

Come on tour with me. Meet the Animal firsthand. She’ll purr for you, Libs, I promise.

Say yes, Liberty. Say it. Come on, just one little word. Part those pretty lips and say it. Y-E-S.

Okay. I’m not going to write any more. Except for one last thing.

The letter ends, but Scottie is already holding out another note, this one a bright, obnoxious yellow. I have to bite my lip at his pained expression, and I take it in silence.

Killian’s scrawl is deep and thick in this one.

If you don’t get your sweet butt on a plane, I’m going to send Scottie and Brenna to your house every other week until you or they crack. I’ll do it, baby doll. Don’t think I won’t.

Yours,

K

“He’s deranged,” I mutter, lovingly folding up the paper and toying with the edges.

“As you say,” Scottie deadpans. His gaze bores into me. “Well?”

A scattered stack of papers litters my lap. I rest my palm on their cool surface and sigh. “I’m calling him.”

From the kitchen, I hear a long groan.

“Fucking hell,” Brenna shouts. “If I have to keep coming back here, you’d better start making cookies!”

Chapter 13

Killian

“I miss fucking.” With that little tidbit, Whip tosses a drumstick in the air, watches it twirl, and catches again.

“Not interested in helping you out there,” I say, lounging against the couch as I down a bottle of ice-cold water. I don’t tell him that I miss it too.

We’ve just finished an intense session, playing for a few hours. It felt good. Really good. Sweat slicks my skin, my blood is humming, and I’m keyed up. If Libby were here... But she isn’t. Scottie has to be at Libby’s by now. I shift in my seat, acid rising in my stomach.

“If you miss it so much,” Rye says from his perch on a speaker, “go out and fuck someone and spare us your whining.”

Whip gives him the finger while still tossing his drumstick. “Can’t. I’m traumatized.”

At this we all sit straighter.

“Holy shit,” Rye drawls. “Sir Fucks-a-lot has gone cold? Say it ain’t so.”

Whip shrugs, concentrating on his stick. “Ran into some gritty kitty. Put things in perspective.”

Rye and I shudder in sympathy.

“What the fuck is a gritty kitty?” Jax asks. He rarely talks now, but his brows raise in interest.

I wonder if that’s why Whip brought this up, because it isn’t like him to talk about personal stuff. And then I instantly resent the thought. We’re trying to get back to that place where we aren’t worrying about Jax and his moody ass—so different from the way he used to be—but it isn’t easy. It sits on us like a stone.

I’ve got to guess it sits on Jax too.

Whip spins in his seat, neatly catching the falling stick. “How can you not know about those kitties? I refuse to believe that you, Mr. Jax-in-any-hole, hasn’t encountered one.”

Jax’s lip curls, but his eyes are laughing. “Maybe because I don’t use juvenile-ass language, so I don’t know the term?”

We all snort at this.

“You shitting me?” I laugh. “You’re the asshole who got everyone calling me Manwingo for a year.”

“Manwingo!” Rye and Whip shout happily.

Jax almost smiles. “It was a compliment, chucklefuck.”

I raise a brow.

Jax reads it well. “Yeah, okay, point made. Still don’t know what gritty kitty is.”

Rye shudders, and Whip’s mouth puckers. “Dude, it’s pretty self-explanatory. I went down to feast on what looked like it would be a pretty sweet kitty and it was all—”

We groan, cutting him off.

Jax shakes his head. “Shit, that’s just wrong. I can’t believe I forgot that one.”

“It’s like he’s a born again cherry.” Rye laughs.

“It was so unsavory,” Whip goes on. “Realized I didn’t know this girl’s name or where the hell her pussy had been before. I got the fuck out of there. Figured enough was enough.”

“Just because you encountered some grit doesn’t mean you gotta quit.” Rye wags his brows.

“Your rhymes give me heartburn, man,” Whip says.

“Well, you’re depressing the fuck out of me,” Rye says as he stands and stretches his arms overhead. “Let’s get the hell out of here and go to a club. Find some premium, well-maintained kitty.”

When none of us say anything, he lets out a noise of disgust. “Come on. I swear, if you all start acting like old men, I’m going to kill my…” He trails off, going pale.

No one looks at Jax, but he laughs hollowly. “Word of advice: Stay away from OD-ing. Not as fun as it looks, man.”

Heavy silence falls over the room, and Jax lifts his head to look at us. His expression twists with a smirk. “Too soon?”

It will always be too soon for me. But I’m saved from answering when my phone rings.

The familiar tune of “Hotel Yorba” plays, and I’m not embarrassed to admit my heart stops. Libby. I roll off the couch, striding toward the door as I pull out my phone. “Gotta take this.” I might be running at this point.

Fuck. If she’s calling to say no, I might punch a wall. I go into the padded sound booth so no one can hear me.

“Libby,” I answer. Do I sound breathless? Shit, this girl has me acting like a preteen, and I don’t even care.

“You have some interesting communication skills,” she says by way of greeting.

I grin. Sending Scottie and Brenna to give her notes might be construed as juvenile and slightly corny, but there is some method to my madness. I knew it would either annoy her or throw her off guard before she could retreat behind her walls. I’m hoping for the latter. “I’d prefer talking face to face.”

She huffs, but it doesn’t sound angry. “I got that.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense, Elly May. I’m dying here.”

“And you think calling me Elly May is going to help your cause?”

“Liberty Bell,” I warn. Hell, I’m sweating. I lean against the wall. “Out with it, evil woman.”

A sigh, and then her voice goes soft and small. “I miss you too. So much.”

“You’re killing me, babe.” My eyes close. “You know what? I lied. If you don’t come to me, I’m coming to you. And I’m not leaving empty handed.”

“You’d forcibly haul me back with you?” she asks with a husky laugh.

“Yep. Might take you over my knee before I do, though.”

I’m not going to lie; my dick gets hard at the thought. It twitches when she laughs again.

“You like living dangerously.”

“You’d be well satisfied.” I smile but it’s weak. “Tell me, Libby. Tell me you’re on your way.”

She sighs. “You want me there to visit or to perform?”

I want her as my partner in all things. I know that now. But one issue at a time.

“Babe, I’ve made what I want very clear. Stop hiding away in that house.”

“Killian, do you understand that the idea of getting on a stage and performing for a Kill John-sized crowd makes me want to vomit? As in, I’m eyeing the bathroom as we speak.”

I want to hug her so badly. I clench my fist against my thigh. “Do you really hate the idea? Between you and me, without thinking about anything else, what does your heart say?”

Silence follows, highlighting the sound of her breathing. “I’m afraid…” Her voice is stark. “...that I’ll lose myself.”

“I won’t let you.” She has me now. Even if she doesn’t fully realize it. I’ll always be there for her. I just have to show her.

She speaks again, barely a whisper. “I’m afraid I’ll look ridiculous up there.”

I let out a breath. “Oh, baby doll. If you could just see yourself the way I see you. Your voice, the passion in the way you play—that brought me back to music. You belong out there. You said you wanted to fly. So fly with me.”

“Why is this so important to you?” she rasps. “Why are you pushing it so much?” I can practically hear her brain whirring. “What aren’t you telling me?”

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. If I want her trust, I have to go all-in now. “The first time I told my parents I wanted a guitar, they sent an assistant out to buy me a six-thousand-dollar Telecaster.”

She’s silent for a beat. “Is that supposed to be bad?”

I snort in tired amusement. “They got me lessons from the best teacher in New York. Because, and I quote, ‘Killian’s finally found a little hobby.’”

I keep talking, exposing more. “When I told them I wanted to form a band, be a rock star, they asked me if I needed them to book a concert hall for me. They knew some people.”

“I...ah...I don’t understand. They sound more supportive than most parents. Maybe a little patronizing, but they clearly cared.”

“Libs, I meant it when I said I had a good childhood, the best of everything. But I was also something akin to a pet. Interest in who I was or what I did with my life wasn’t there. I wasn’t missed or needed. And that isn’t a poor-little-rich-me speech. Just the bald truth. To this day, they haven’t heard a single song or gone to any of my concerts. Which is fine.”

But it isn’t.

She clearly picks up on that. “So you want to fix me because of what? Childhood angst?”

Something in me snaps. “I’m trying to show you how much I care, that your dreams mean something to me! They’re not things to be swept under the rug or given lip service. They fucking matter, Libby. *You* matter.” I stop there, my body tensing. I’ve said too much, exposed my underbelly. It isn’t a comfortable sensation.

She draws a breath, the sound crackling through the phone. “You matter too.”

My eyes close. Maybe some of my motivation is selfish, because I miss her so badly right now it hurts. I’m so into this girl. She has no idea how much.

“I’ve always had my guys, the band. We pushed each other when one of us doubted. We were a team. I wouldn’t be where I was without them. I want to be that for you, Libby. You’re too talented not to at least try.”

I swear, it feels like hours before I hear her response. Her laugh is tired and brief. “God. Am I going to do this?”

“Yes.”

“That was rhetorical.”

“I’m just moving the process along, babe.”

She pauses for a second before speaking. “I have conditions.”

“Name them.” My heart pounds, adrenaline making me pace.

“I don’t want anyone to know about us.”

“Okay—Wait, what?” I halt, gripping the phone too tightly. Hide us? “What the hell? No. Why?” I’m sputtering now. “Is this that whole Yoko thing again?”

“It isn’t a ‘thing’,” she says with annoying patience. “It’s a legitimate concern—even more if I’m going to be on stage with you.”

“Because your talent will suddenly disappear if people know my dick’s been in you?”

“Don’t be crude.”

Oh, I’m being crude. I rest a fist against the wall. Just rest it. For now.

Her voice softens. “Please put yourself in my place. I’m an unknown, untried musician who you want to put on stage with the biggest band in the world. No one does that, unless they’re getting themselves some.”

“Which I am,” I point out, stupidly.

“You trying to piss me off?” she snaps.

I sigh and thump my forehead against the wall. “No. I didn’t mean it that way. Go on.”

“You’re right. People are probably going to think something like that regardless. But you go and tell your band that you want your girl on stage with you? They’re going to think one thing: I fucked my way up there.”

Wincing, I grind my teeth, trying to think of a retort.

I hear her voice catch. “I have my pride, Killian. Don’t take it from me.”

“Baby doll.”

“Let me prove myself before they set their minds on who or what I am.”

I’m silent for a long minute. “Fuck,” I snarl, pushing off the wall. I sigh and the fight goes out of me. “All right. You’re right. I know you’re right. But they’re going to know the second they see us together, Libs. I’m not good at hiding how I feel.”

“Did you tell them about us?”

I stare through the glass. A sliver of the next room is visible, and with it Jax’s profile. He looks relaxed. Solemn but okay.

“Brenna and Scottie know, obviously. But they won’t say anything. The guys don’t, though. Not details like that.” I hadn’t wanted to share, as if by telling them about it, I’d lose something private, something real. “Just that you helped me with my music and that you’re talented as all fuck. They know I sent Scottie to coax you out here.”

“And they don’t mind?”

My teeth sink into my bottom lip. Truth? Or lie? But it isn’t really even a question. “They thought I was cracked at first. Then I showed them the songs and played that recording we did of ‘Artful Girl’.”

I used my phone for that, and the sound quality was shit, but Libby’s talent shone through even then. It had been more than enough, for almost everyone. Jax is being a pain in the ass. But I’d expected as much.

I rub the back of my stiff neck. “They want to meet you.”

It feels like an eternity before she talks. “Okay, I’ll come. I’m not promising I’ll go through with it. But I’ll try.”

Every tense muscle I have seems to release at once, and I lean on the console. I swallow hard before answering her. “I won’t say anything about us. But once we’re alone, all bets are off. That’s my time, Libby. And I intend to use it well.”

I swear I can feel her blush through the phone. But then her husky voice comes in strong. “Good. I’ve been left to using my imagination, so you’d better be creative.”

This girl.

My dick is thick and demanding in my jeans now. Palming the head to ease its pain, I grind out the only thing I can. “Get here.”

* * * *

Libby

My legs feel rubbery as I end my call with Killian. I'm going to do this. I'm going on tour with Kill John. I want to throw up. I want to see Killian so badly my teeth hurt. But performing on stage? That's another kettle.

I'd rather focus on his last words and the heated need in his voice. He'd been hurting—the same way I'm hurting now. I didn't know it was possible to feel empty between my legs, to actually want a cock in there so bad it aches. No, not just any cock. Killian's. It has to be his now. Damn the man, but he gets to me.

But I have guests camped out in my house, and I'm not walking around with hard nipples and flushed skin. So I take a deep breath and think of the time I walked in on Grandmama watching porn. Sufficiently horrified, I walk back into the living room.

"You look green around the gills," Brenna remarks. "Tell me that's because you're coming to New York."

Close enough. I nod.

Scottie goes...less stiff. "Very good." He looks me straight in the eye. It hits me anew how attractive this guy is. Not even sexually, though he has that too, but just the sheer force of his looks is enough to make me speechless. His crisp British accent doesn't hurt either. "You've made the right decision, Ms. Bell."

"Is that based on you not having to pass me any more notes in study hall, Mr. Scott?"

His eyes narrow. "Precisely."

While Brenna snickers, he stands and pulls his cuffs back into place. "I have a few calls to make."

The second Scottie is out of the room, I relax. I'm not proud of this. But damn.

"It's ridiculous, isn't it?" Brenna says in a whisper that carries all over the house. "How insanely gorgeous Scottie is?"

She's either too good at reading people or just as dazed in the man's presence as I am. I'm guessing a little of both by the way she seems to shake herself out of a trance.

"Are you and he..."

"God, no," she says with a snort.

"Flattering." Scottie's dry tone catches us red-handed as he walks back into the room. He really is unfairly man-pretty. All shiny and chiseled. Not my type, but a girl can admire.

"Obviously you heard me say you were hot," Brenna says. "You don't need any more of an inflated head."

Scottie takes a seat on my grandma's pink chintz armchair. Surrounded by flowers, he sits as regally as if it were a throne. "Looks are one thing. You insinuated that my character was faulty, which is far worse."

"Oh, stop fishing." Brenna turns to me. "He passes the first test but failed the second. And it has nothing to do with personality but basic chemistry. We have none."

"What are the tests?" I can't help but ask.

"Yes," Scottie urges. "Enlighten us, dear." He glances at me. "She's right, though. No sexual chemistry to speak of."

Brenna takes a sip of lemonade. “Whether you admit it or not, every person you meet, you assess for two basic things: hotness and fuckability.” She nods and continues. “Test one: Hotness. How hot do you find a person? Obviously Scottie’s hotness goes to eleven. He knows it. We all know it. Test two: Fuckability. Given the circumstances, would you want to do them?”

“This is true,” I admit, holding up my hand. “Yes and no.” Because I know she’s going to ask if Scottie passes those for me. Of course he’s hot. And though he acts like a snooty old man, he can’t be much older than thirty. But no matter how good-looking he is, there’s only Killian for me now.

She pouts, then goes and looks at Scottie, her gaze roving over him. He sits still, amusement in his eyes. She glances back at me. “Nope. There’s still no spark. I could look at him all day, but that’s about it.”

I nod. Brenna and I are in total agreement.

“If you ladies are done dissecting my physical attractiveness,” Scottie says, “I’d like to get going. Ms. Bell, I’ve booked you a flight to New York with Ms. James. It leaves in three hours, which means you’ll have to get packing now.”

“Aren’t you coming?”

“No.” He adjusts his already perfect cuffs yet again. “I’ve other business to attend to first. I’ll be following later.”

Brenna makes a noise that could mean anything, given her perfectly composed expression, but neither of them addresses it. She stands and heads toward my room. “Right then, on with the packing.”

No way am I leaving Little Miss Bulldozer to pack for me. I hurry after her, excitement and anxiety thrumming through my veins.

Chapter 14

Libby

New York City has a sort of silver tint to it—half of it in constant shadow, the other half shining in the sunlight slanting through the tall buildings. I crane my head, gazing up through the car window at those skyscrapers like the little yokel I am. I don't even care. It's a people-watching paradise, a constant rhythm and flow of human activity. There's an energy here that permeates the air and sinks into your skin. I have the urge to ask the car to pull over so I can walk.

"You want to roll down the window so you can pant like a dog?" Brenna's voice is full of humor.

I don't take my eyes off the scene rolling past. "I tried that earlier, and you complained about the hot wind mussing your hair. Remember?" We'd just come out of the Holland Tunnel, popping straight up in the middle of the Theater District, and I'd nearly jumped out of my seat from excitement.

Brenna makes a noise of smothered agreement. "We'll go exploring later. In fact, speaking of mussed hair, how do you feel about a makeover?"

The question pulls me from my window, and I sit back against the plush leather seat of our hired limo. "As in we have some sort of *Princess Diaries*, dude takes a pot of wax to my eyebrows and a weed whacker to my hair moment?" I laugh faintly. "Am I that bad?"

"No, of course not." Brenna's cool gaze travels over me as if she's inspecting a derelict house in need of rehab. "But every girl can do with a bit of sprucing up now and then. Especially if she's going to be in the press."

Press? My stomach takes an unruly tumble. "You don't need sprucing," I point out, ignoring the angry antics of my innards.

She shrugs, not even causing a wrinkle in the scarlet red suit painted on her. "I've had my makeover."

"If that's the result, sign me up."

"Really?" Her eyes glint, and it's only half evil.

It's my turn to shrug. "You think I'm going to complain about some shopping, a day in a hair salon, and a massage? Just because I don't usually do those things doesn't mean I don't like them."

"I never said anything about a massage."

"Oh, there will be massages. Mani-pedis, too."

"I like the way you think, Liberty."

We share a grin, and then she's on the phone making plans. When she finishes, she eyes me again.

I refuse to fidget. "You're looking at me like I'm a lump of clay."

"Just waiting for me to mold," she agrees with a nod. She arches a finely plucked brow.

"Nothing too outrageous. I still want to look like me. Only...better."

She chuckles. "I understand completely. We'll bring out the best version of you."

"And then get massages."

"That's the real carrot, isn't it?"

“Yep. I’m all over it like a starved bunny.”

Even though she’s smiling slightly, her gaze turns cool and cautious. “You realize Killian wants to pay for this.”

“I figured. If he’s offering, I’ll accept.”

Brenna sits back, crossing her legs. How she manages to make that look sexy and casual is beyond me. At this point I have a girl crush. “You know,” she says, “I expected you to resist Killian footing the bill. Cry independent woman and all that.”

“In the course of a month, Killian has torn apart my lawn with his bike, thrown up all over my favorite shirt, and eaten my food almost daily. I wasn’t too happy about the first two, but feeding him was my pleasure. I’m guessing this is Killian’s pleasure. Refusing a gift he’s offering would be petulant. And I sure as hell don’t have the money for what you have planned.”

“You’re slightly odd, you know that?”

“Says the pot to the kettle. Now tell me, is that your natural hair color or did you get it done at the salon we’re going to?”

The limo turns up Fifth Avenue, and a shaft of sunlight slides through the windows. Brenna’s red-gold hair gleams brightly. “Only my stylist knows, hon. But I do have some ideas for you.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I’m going to enjoy this,” she says with satisfaction.

Five minutes later, the limo pulls up in front of a salon. We’re whisked into a lounge area that is cordoned off from the main salon. There, a ridiculously gorgeous woman with brilliant pink hair, wearing what has to be the perfect little black dress, offers us a beverage.

I look around with wide eyes as I sip my chai-matcha tea—honestly, they must have a barista on staff. The space is all white, so pristine it seems to glow.

Lady Pink returns within a minute. “If you ladies will follow me.”

“They’re ready for me?” I slant Brenna a look. “Did you have an appointment already set up?”

Brenna matches my stride. “Of course I did. I’m a planner.”

“And I am apparently predictable.”

“Hardly.” Brenna’s sleek ponytail sways with a shake of her head. “Besides, if I needed to reschedule, they’d work around me. Even you have to realize the power Killian’s name wields.”

“At a salon?”

Brenna smirks. “Do you know how important that man’s damn hair is? That close crop you did on him nearly broke the internet.”

I can only gape.

“I know,” she says, amused. “Young girls were crying over the loss of his beloved flowing locks, as if it signified the coming of the apocalypse.”

“I was under the impression his hair was overgrown.”

That snags her attention. “It was. But he usually wears it chin-length. You really didn’t know who he was when you met?”

I resist the urge to squirm under her stare. She might not look very much like Killian, but clearly their interrogation skills were inherited from the same ancestors. “He was the last person I expected to find on my lawn. I guess my brain never connected any dots.”

My sneakers slap against the concrete stairs as the salon hostess guides us up to the next level. She looks down her nose at my Chucks but apparently knows better than to risk more than that. I shake my head and pull my attention back to Brenna.

“But honestly, the only place I might have seen Killian is on an album, and he isn’t on a single Kill John cover. None of them are. Why is that?”

“In the beginning, it was a statement. No pretense, just music. Now it’s tradition.” She waggles her perfect brows. “Of course it also helps add to their mystique and unattainability. But that was my doing.”

I’d guess Killian doesn’t care about that one whit, but she appears so proud that I nod.

My stylist is Lia, who immediately begins running her fingers through my hair while peering at me in the mirror. Until now, haircuts for me have been taking the scissors to my split ends. Who knew someone massaging my scalp and simply playing with my hair would be so relaxing. But my lack of styling clearly shows, because Lia and Brenna start discussing their plan of attack.

“We’ll shape around your face and give your hair some movement,” Lia explains.

“She’s got great summer highlights,” Brenna adds. “But maybe add a bit of richness to her base color?”

One hour later, my hair is wrapped in tin, and I’m stuck under a heater while two women do my nails. Brenna has been dancing around me, almost giddy.

“Next we’re getting your brows tinted a shade darker and shaped. And then we’ll go shopping for clothes. No, lunch first. Then clothes.”

“Don’t leave out my carrot,” I remind her.

“Oh, the massages we save for last. We don’t want to ruin our chill.” She gives a happy sigh. “I might even throw in a facial. Yeah. That sounds heavenly.”

It’s hard to resist her enthusiasm. In lots of ways, she’s a female version of Killian with her easy charm and bull-in-a-china-shop method of taking over. In some ways, that helps. It isn’t in my nature to make easy friends or do small talk. With Brenna, I simply sit back and let her roll.

“Oh,” she exclaims, “I forgot about the shoes! And—you think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

Caught giving her a bemused smile, I can only shrug. “I kind of envy the way you enjoy your excitement. I’m more contained, and sometimes I’d rather not be.”

The manicurists leave, setting my hands under mini dryers. My nails are now a dusky, pale blue. After my hair is done, Brenna and I will get pedis to match. I’ve never had one, and suddenly I find that sad. Living under a rock was a waste of life.

Brenna toys with a hair clip. “I’m not always like this.” She leans in, her eyes wide behind her retro glasses. “Most people think I’m a bitch.”

“I get that from people too.” Mainly because I have no idea how to talk to others without wanting to swallow my tongue.

Brenna’s nose wrinkles. “Damned if you’re too quiet, and damned if you’re too confident.”

“Sounds about right.”

“My friends are all guys.”

“I don’t have any friends,” I counter.

We both laugh, each of us almost shy.

“Killian is not only my cousin,” Brenna tells me, her expression wide open. “He’s one of my closest friends. He’s clearly nuts about you. Honestly, I’ve never seen him write a girl notes before. The fact that he cajoled Scottie into delivering them is nothing short of miraculous. I swear, Killian must have some major dirt on him.”

She’s rambling, which is kind of sweet. But I won’t say that; I’m pretty sure she’d be mortified.

At any rate, she keeps talking. “What I’m trying to say, rather badly, is that I hope we can be friends too.”

Either it’s a sign of how lonely I’ve been or I’m hormonal, because I damn near get weepy and have to blink a few times before answering. “I could use a good friend.”

* * * *

Killian

Truth? I don’t have to be playing for an audience to get a hard-on over music. It just has to click, and I’m lit up.

That said, Scottie set up a gig at the Bowery Ballroom. It was our first time out in over a year. We’d grown used to stadiums, fifty-thousand fans at least. Singing for five hundred?

It’s golden. My body throbs with the sound, sweat coating my skin. Lights burn my eyes, turning the crowd into a moving haze, limed in brilliant reds and blues.

I’m full-on pumped when we start playing “Apathy”.

It isn’t planned. I’m not even sure who decided to do it. One second we’re playing random notes, the next we’re a cohesive unit, hammering out the song that made us stars.

I lean into the mic, singing the lyrics, my guitar pick flying over the strings. In that place, there is no thought, no fear, nothing but rhythm and flow. Nothing but life.

I hit the high note in the song. Sound vibrates in my chest, throat. My guys are around me, supporting the song, elevating it to a new level. The Animal roars, cheering, a mass of bodies pulsing up and down. They’re in it with us, feeding us love and energy.

And I’m home, back in that place where everything makes sense.

Until I look up, and I see her in the wings. Liberty. Watching me in my element. It’s like I’m hit with an electric current. I sing for her, play for her.

Libby’s eyes hold mine, a smile lingers on her lips. I can’t help grinning back. Fucking hell, she’s beautiful. I’m so happy to see her, it’s all I can do not to walk off the stage and grab her.

We finish the song, and the Animal howls.

It wants more. Always more.

But we’re done for now. Bowing, I toss my mic to a stage hand and jog off.

Whip gives a shout, twirling his sticks on his fingers. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

The guys laugh and talk as they move on to the dressing room. Press waits, along with record execs and fan club members who won the meet-and-greet lottery. Someone hands me a bottle of water and a towel. I’m operating on auto, my body humming so hard my fingers shake.

Cold water goes down my burning throat. But I’m looking at Libby.

She hangs back with Brenna, about twenty feet from me, just inside the edge of the stage. The same push-pull I’m feeling is reflected in her eyes. The need for contact, the awareness that we can’t do anything about it here because she won’t let my guys know about us.

I resent the hell out of that. But she’s here, and that overrides everything else.

And no one has noticed her. The only people left around us are the stage crew. Brenna gives me a wink and follows the guys backstage.

My entire body throbs, amped up and jittery. Holy hell, she’s beautiful. Did I ever think of my Elly May as plain? Her skin is golden from endless summer days on the beach. Her hair, in shades of honey brown and pale blond, flows around her face like shining ribbons.

Then I notice her dress. And my brain skids to a halt. Fuck me sideways. My dick, who's already rising to his happy stance, jerks against my jeans.

The pale gray dress isn't short; it comes to her knees. It doesn't show cleavage, because it's one of those halter tops that exposes her arms but fastens around her neck. And yet it's fucking indecent. Because it's thin silk and shows the shape of her, clinging with loving care to the points of her perky tits. Everyone that looks at her knows exactly what she has to offer.

Mine. All mine.

I can't wait any longer. I stride toward her, loving the way she stands straighter, her pink lips parting, her eyes wide. I'm close enough to smell her scent, something warm and floral from her day at the spa. I lean down and give her a quick, impersonal kiss on the cheek, when I really want to claim her mouth.

"Killian." Her voice is breathless, happy. Eyes the color of blue-green frost shine up at me.

Emotion swamps me. It's like nothing I've felt before, both leaching me of strength and giving me a rush of pure lust.

My fingers tighten at my side. I want to touch her smooth skin, slide my hand underneath the edge of her top. "Come with me."

Chapter 15

Libby

I don't know exactly what I expected when we finally came face to face. I'd purposely let myself get carried away by Brenna's exuberance when she dragged me all over the city so I wouldn't think of Killian. I lost track of the boutiques we visited, trying on endless outfits and buying so many things that I ended up closing my eyes as Killian's coveted black credit card swiped through machine after machine.

Now, my body is relaxed, my hair styled and highlighted, my brows plucked and shaped. I feel pampered and beautiful. And horny. Horribly, achingly horny.

Seeing Killian perform, his lean, muscular body glistening with sweat, his hands working his guitar with confidence, got to me. His voice, his energy, all that passion had me in utter thrall. I wasn't the only one. Everyone was under his spell, adoring him, wanting him.

And he is here with me, his eyes hot, his touch light on the small of my back as he guides me down a dark hall.

He pauses to grab a gray hoodie lying on a pair of old speakers and slips it on, covering his bare chest. I doubt the sweatshirt is his, as the word "Staff" is in bright yellow across the back of it. His brows waggle. "My master disguise."

Putting the hood over his head, he taps away at his phone before tucking it back in his pocket. Another glance my way, and he softly grins. "God, I missed you. I should have asked you to meet me at my place because it is fucking hard not touching you right now."

"Why didn't you?" My high-heel sandals clack on the concrete floors. I'm not used to wearing heels, but this dress doesn't work with anything else. Stupid dress. It's thin silk, and I'm braless. Every move I make sends the fabric dancing over my freshly rubbed and moisturized skin—agony because I can't help but think of Killian's hands, mouth, lips. I want them running over me instead.

At my side, he gives my shoulder a gentle nudge with his elbow. "Because I'm an arrogant bastard, and I wanted you to see me."

Those luscious eyelashes bat innocently, and his smile is cheeky.

"You were so pretty," I tell him truthfully but with a teasing tone.

He blushes. "Baby doll, you're tempting me to stop."

"No," I say, with exaggerated breathiness. "Don't stop, Killian. Don't stop."

I bite back a squeal as he suddenly spins, hooking me around the waist with his arm and tugging me behind a stack of crates. Our laughter mingles as he kisses me, quick, hot, playful, taking little nips of my lips. "Brat." His eyes are alight with happiness.

I steal my own kiss before pulling back. "Take me home, lawn bum."

Holding my hand in his, he jogs with me down the hall and into a back alley. A limo waits there.

"Michael." Killian tips his chin to the big, beefy man standing by the car. "You met Liberty today."

"I had the pleasure," Michael says, opening the back door for us. "Ms. Bell."

Michael had played the part of both chauffeur and bodyguard for Brenna and me today. We hadn't talked much. Brenna assured me that was the norm, and shared her suspicions that

Michael was actually a cyborg. Having read more than my fair share of sci-fi romance, I'd found myself wanting to agree.

Inside, the limo is cool and quiet, the windows darkly tinted to keep prying eyes out. A bucket is filled with ice-cold waters, and the privacy screen is up. I don't get to see much more, because the moment the door closes on us, Killian's hands cup my cheeks and his mouth is on mine. It's sweet relief.

I drink him in, kissing him back with a fervor that surprises me. I love his taste. I love the plush but firm feel of his lips. He breathes, and I take his air into me. Because I need that. I need to know he's alive and warm and right here. My lids prickle, the burn of tears threatening. I don't even know why.

"God," he groans, sucking on my bottom lip. "I needed to do that. You don't know how much I needed it."

"I'm pretty sure I do."

Somehow I've ended up sprawled across the seat with Killian half on top of me. He smells of clean sweat, his firm body damp and hot against mine. And when he moves, his hoodie clings to my arm. He glances down at himself and grimaces. "I should have showered."

"Babe, you are hot as fuck this way."

In the act of taking off the hoodie, he pauses. A shocked laugh bursts out of him. "'Babe?'"

"Yeah." I catch the cute little lobe of his ear and suckle it. "You're a total babe so..."

"I've never been anyone's babe. Kind of love being yours." Killian tosses the hoodie out of the way and kisses his way down my neck, pausing every now and then to touch each spot as if he needs to reassure himself that I'm really here. His warm breath gusts over my skin as he sighs into the hollow of my throat. "You smell edible."

"Pretty sure it's from being rubbed all over with oils."

I feel him smile against my neck. "You're giving me ideas, baby doll." A big warm hand runs up my calf and slides under my dress. "So soft. You have fun today, Libs?"

That hand moves higher, finding my butt like it's on a mission. I wiggle a little when he gives me a possessive squeeze. "Are you wearing a thong?" He goes to peek, lifting my skirt, but I swat his hand back down.

"Today was awesome. Thank you." Leaning back a little, I meet his heated gaze. "You haven't said anything about my makeover. Do you like it?"

Killian slowly blinks as if coming out of a daze. "You're beautiful. But you always are. I'd say something better, but...hell...I just see you."

Warmth floods my chest. "That's more than enough."

He hums a little, his gaze sliding over my face and wandering down. "Now, this dress..." The calloused tips of his fingers ease under the silky top and gently stroke my nipple. I catch my breath, molten heat pouring over me. "This dress," he murmurs, "is another story."

Back and forth he goes, caressing my breast, giving it a light squeeze, fondling my now-stiff nipple with a lazy sort of slowness. I can only bite my lip, close my eyes, and arch my back, trying to follow his touch, beg for more.

His other hand moves from under my skirt to reach around to the snap of my collar. One flick and the whisper soft silk slithers to my lap, leaving me exposed. My breasts tremble as the car bounces over a rut. My nipples stand stiff and swollen, waiting for him to give them attention.

Every inch of me tenses with a delicious tightness. No one can see through the glass. But the idea that someone might heightens my lust.

“Fuck, I’ve missed this sight,” he rasps just before leaning down to suck a nipple into his mouth.

So good, the way he tugs at it—not too hard, but greedy, like he loves to torture me. I groan, my hands coming up to capture the back of his head and hold him.

“Damn it,” he says, his lips teasing the aching tip. “Our first time is not going to be in the back of a limo.”

I struggle to catch a breath. “Then why did you take my top down?”

“Couldn’t resist. Needed to see the girls again.” He kisses one nipple then the other, greeting them. “Ladies.”

Between my legs, I’m swollen and tender. I shift my thighs and press into the hard lump of his cock where it’s nudging me. “Tell me you have condoms.”

The tip of his tongue runs down the small curve of my breast. “Are you kidding me? I’ve been walking around all day with a stack in my back pocket.”

“Take one out and get in me.” I wrap my legs around him and give him a glare. “Now.”

“Ah, baby doll, I love how much you want it.” He gives me a swift, deep kiss. “But I’m not caving. I’m gonna do you right. Naked and in my bed.”

The evil tease. Thinking he’s cute with that shit-eating grin, and looking so gorgeous I could cry. With a loud sigh, I lift one arm over my head, which brings my breasts up higher. His gaze follows the movement and grows slumberous.

“You asked if I was wearing a thong,” I say, slowly parting my thighs. The action grabs his attention enough that he moves back to kneel on the limo floor before me. My skirt rides up. I reach down and ease it farther. Cool air kisses my skin. “I’m not.”

An audible swallow, and then Killian’s body does a full shudder as he grips the edges of the seat. “Fuck. Me.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do,” I tell him as he stares like a man starved at my exposed sex.

“Oh, Libs,” he says softly. “Look how wet you are. That pretty pussy all puffy and pouting for it.” The tip of his finger slides along those swollen lips. “You hurting here?”

I shift my hips, heat licking up my thighs and pooling between my legs. “Yeah,” I whisper.

He nods. “Yeah, you are.” That finger runs back and forth, ghosting over my clit and sliding down to my opening. I moan, spreading my legs wider, and he nudges a rough fingertip in just enough to make me feel it. I rock my hips, trying to take him in. He has mercy and pushes that long finger into me. I moan in gratitude.

“I’m going to lose my mind when I fit myself in here,” he murmurs in a dark voice. He doesn’t touch any other part of me as he slowly fucks me with his finger. It only serves to draw all attention to the act. Another finger slips in, and he spreads them wide as he pumps. “You like that?”

I can’t answer, only writhe and stare at the absorbed expression on his face. As if he feels my gaze, his eyes flick up. They gleam black in the dim interior. “Okay, baby doll,” he tells me, “I’ll make it better.”

His free hand rips at the button of his jeans. And then his cock springs free. I haven’t forgotten how big it is, but seeing it now, engorged and hugely erect, has my insides clenching in anticipation. Killian must feel my reaction because he makes a hungry sound and pushes another finger inside me.

I’m stretched wide, filled up. But I know his cock will feel like more.

He slips out of me and pulls a condom from his pocket. “Play with that clit while I do this.”

My shaking fingers obey, sliding through my slickness. I want to be filled up so badly, my hips push restlessly against the seat as he rolls on the condom.

Killian's big palm rests on my hips, his fingers spread wide to hold on to me, his hot-coffee gaze rapt. "Now that's a pretty sight. Hold yourself open for me, baby."

I do as he asks. He makes a sound, low and guttural, almost a whimper but more needy, and all the muscles along his abs visibly clench. His free hand goes to his cock, giving it an idle stroke.

"Hell, I'm gonna have to get another taste of that." His breath is a warm sigh before his lips gently press to my swollen sex. It sends a jolt of heat through me. And when he hums his approvals against my pussy, I keen.

"Killian..." My hand cups the back of his head. I don't know if I want to push him away or shove him closer. He's slowly killing me, the way he peppers soft, lingering kisses between my legs, as if he's kissing my mouth. His tongue is lazy yet greedy, finding every hidden space and sensitive swell.

"Killian, please. Now." I tug his ear and he laughs—the fucker—sending more heat skittering between my thighs.

After a little goodbye flick to my clit with his tongue, he rises and takes a seat next to me. "Come here." His hands find my hips and he lifts me to straddle him.

Slouched back, he appears almost relaxed: rock and roll royalty lounging in his limo. But I don't miss the tension tightening the corners of his eyes, or the way his hand trembles slightly as he brushes a lock of hair back from my face. Between us, his cock lays like a steel bar against his defined abdomen. I want to wrap my hand around its girth and squeeze. I want to sink onto it and forget my name.

The man is so beautiful, his bold features stark, his eyes bright. My hands run over his smooth skin, hard muscles flexing at my touch. I trace a small, tight nipple, loving the way his nostrils flare in response.

Killian's rough fingertips trace my brow. "I want you so fucking much. Feels like I've always wanted you." He pulls me close, kisses my mouth. "It's taking all I have not to just plow into you, fuck the ever-loving hell out of you."

Our breaths hitch in unison, and I kiss him again, sucking his full lower lip. He groans a little, his hands bracketing my jaw. "We're taking it slow," he insists, and I half wonder if he's talking to me or to himself. "Slow. I don't want to hurt you."

The whole time he talks, he slowly rocks his hips, sliding his dick back and forth between my legs. He's so wide, my sex parts around him.

My breasts press against his chest as I lean forward and rise up on my knees. "Come into me, Killian."

"Fuck," he whispers, swallowing hard. His eyes hold mine as he reaches between us and guides the wide crown of his cock to my opening. I don't close my eyes, don't breathe, as I slowly sink down. The first breach pinches. I hold there as Killian pants, his fingers pressing into my jaw as if he's struggling to keep still.

The car goes over a bump, and he thrusts up into me. My breath hitches, my inner walls stretching and grasping. "Holy hell," I gasp.

"Babe." He kisses me, gently working his hips, easing his way farther in. All the time kissing me, like I'm his drug.

And I feel drunk on him, my senses swimming, my head heavy, and my body hot with pleasure. All I can think is that Killian is in me. He's part of me now. I feel him in the taut pull of my hips, deep in my body where the head of his cock pushes against some spot that lights me up.

I move with him now, meeting him thrust for thrust, our lips barely brushing, tongues almost idly touching. I take his air, and he takes mine.

"So good." He shivers, surging into me. "You feel so damn good. More. Give me more."

I grip his shoulders, bite his upper lip, lick it. Lust has made me feral.

His hands slide to my butt, gripping me there, and the tip of his finger toys with the entrance to my ass.

It's all too much. My forehead rests against his as I pant and ride him, claimed, owned. He has me.

My orgasm is a long roll, picking up speed and rushing over me with such force that I can only cling to him, cry out, and move against him in a messy, desperate way. I lose sight of everything but that feeling.

And then his arms are locked around me, crushing me to his chest as he thrusts into me hard, fast, frantic. I love the sounds of his cries, the way he groans like he's dying and somehow waking up all at once.

For a long moment, we lie limp—me against him, Killian against the seat. Deep within me, he still pulses, and my body squeezes him in response. Killian chokes out a weak laugh and snuggles me closer. His lips find my cheek; I'm too wrecked to turn my head and kiss him back.

"Holy hell, woman," he says against my damp skin. He lets out a shuddering breath. "Holy fucking hell."

"I know," I whisper. It's never been this way. And I know without doubt that Killian James isn't just an addiction, or a summer fling. He's becoming my everything. And that is both exhilarating and terrifying.

* * * *

Killian's place is about what I expected for a rock star who values his privacy. It's a penthouse in a converted church just south of Washington Square—a mix of sleek modern and old-world style with soaring ceilings, dark wood floors, glass walls, and massive stained-glass windows. The rooms are open and airy, a large terrace taking up the whole back. In his white kitchen, beneath a vaulted and beamed ceiling, he makes us *cubanos*, a sandwich of roasted pork, ham, swiss cheese, mustard, and dill pickles, grilled until it all gets hot and gooey.

"Why didn't I have you cooking for me before?" I muse before taking another huge bite.

He gives me a satisfied look around a mouthful of sandwich. "And miss out on your cooking? No way. I do make a mean *ropa vieja*, but that takes time."

"This is perfect."

We eat and drink icy beers. It's two in the morning, and everything is quiet and calm. His place is huge, but here with him, it feels cozy.

"Do your parents still live in New York?" I ask him.

"From October to December." Killian takes a swig of his beer. "Right now they're on their yacht, probably docked in Monaco or Ibiza depending on Mom's mood and Dad's business deals. If Mom wants to party, it's Ibiza. If Dad has a deal, it'll be Monaco."

"Wow. I mean, I've read about lifestyles like that but to actually live it..."

“My dad grew up with polo ponies. He went to Trinity at Cambridge. His ‘chums’ are royalty. It’s his normal.”

I can only stare at Killian. His shoulders are tight, his gaze distant. “It’s your normal too.”

He sets his beer down and meets my eyes. “I was always stuck between worlds. Staying with my *abuela*, traveling with my parents, the band. To be honest, Libs, I have no fucking idea what normal is. But I want it.”

The intensity of his stare, the way his voice dips lower, makes me take his hand and squeeze it. I want to give him normal, but I don’t know how. Not when I’ve left my normal behind to be with him.

I help him load the dishwasher when we’re done. Though he had a quick shower before making dinner, he’s still shirtless and wearing worn jeans that hang low on his slim hips. His bare feet are pale against the ebony floorboards.

I’m barefoot too, and, for some reason, that makes this feel more domestic. As if we both live here.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my neck as I put the last plate in place and catch him watching me. “What’s that look?” I ask, because his expression isn’t one I’ve seen before. It’s light, and yet something is going on behind those dark eyes.

He shakes his head, biting his bottom lip. “Nothing. Just missed doing this with you.”

“This” being the dishes. He always helped me with them when we were at my home. It became a ritual: Killian would watch me cook and keep me entertained with stories and anecdotes, we’d eat, then we’d clean up together.

“It feels right, you know?” he says, that soft smile still in his eyes.

Just like that, I need to hug him. I step close and wrap my arms around his waist. My lips press light kisses to his chest, because, really, I can’t be this near and not kiss him.

Killian immediately melts into me, his arms coming up to squeeze me for a long moment, almost bruising but welcome. I want that strength. I want to feel as if nothing can come between us.

Long fingers comb through my hair, massaging my scalp. I snuggle in closer, my cheek pressed against him. The beat of his heart is steady and strong.

“When do we leave New York?” I ask.

His voice rumbles low in his chest. “Next week. We head north, then west.”

My hands smooth along the valley of his back, where the flat slabs of muscle frame his spine. His skin is heated satin. “I need to find a place to stay.”

The muscles beneath my palm bunch, and he pulls back. His dark brows lower on a frown. “You think I coaxed you all this way to send you off to a hotel? You’re staying here, Libs.”

Here is where I want to be. The idea of leaving him, even for the night, makes my skin cold. “Won’t…” I take a breath and forge on. “Won’t the guys wonder why I’m at your place?”

That frown grows, but he shakes his head and gives me a quick kiss on the temple. “Nah. I have people stay here all the time. I invited you as my guest, so it would only be right.”

“Right.” I try to draw away but he won’t let me.

Instead his lips slowly curl into a smile. “I like that you’re jealous.”

“Jealousy is not an admirable trait,” I mutter, face flaming.

“Don’t care.” He rocks me ever so slightly. “Means you consider me yours.”

He sounds way too smug. I give his side a poke, and he skitters away, giggling—which is way too cute—then cuddles me again.

“I might have had guests. But no one has ever stayed in my room, baby doll.”

“Ever?” The question comes more like a snort.

That annoying smile of his grows. “If I hook up with someone, I take them to a hotel. Learned that lesson when pictures of my old apartment ended up on the Internet, and personal effects had a nasty habit of walking away without my permission.”

“God, that’s sleazy.” I kiss his chest again. “I’m sorry they did that to you.”

His fingers continue their massage along the back of my skull. “It should have been expected. They just wanted a piece of the fame or a souvenir. Like bragging rights.”

He says it so matter-of-factly—as if it’s no big deal to be treated like a thing instead of a person. He might not mind, but my stomach sours at the thought. But was I any better? Back home, I have a Univox Hi-Flier that was played and then subsequently smashed by Kurt Cobain; it’s framed in a glass case in my upstairs office. Dad got it from some friend or another way back in 1989 before Cobain was a legend. A smashed and useless guitar, cherished because a rock idol played it.

I’d wanted to give it to Killian as a gift. But now I’m not so sure.

“So no,” Killian goes on, unaware of my inner turmoil. “Only friends and fellow musicians get to stay here.” He pauses. “And girlfriends. They get the full experience.”

Warm to the core, I smile against his skin. “But you just said no one has stayed in your bed.”

“No one has,” he answers easily before his voice goes soft. “Until you.”

Funny how some confessions can stop your heart and steal your breath, send everything spiraling. I close my eyes and hold him. He’s never had a girlfriend? I wouldn’t care if he had. Only here and now matter. But the idea that he’s never let anyone else in sends the weight of responsibility settling heavy on my heart. I need to tread carefully here, keep him well and somehow find my place in this new world of his.

Killian slowly lets me go but holds my hand. His expression is tender, his eyes tired. “Let’s go to bed.” A quick smile. “I love saying that to you.”

He’s going to kill me. They’ll find me lying on the floor, my heart burst wide open, too full of him to stay in my chest.

He guides me past a living area, a media room, and up a glass-and-steel staircase. We pass two more bedrooms and a reading nook, back-lit by another arched stained-glass window. His room is white, one wall taken up by a massive round stained-glass window. A king-size ebony wood canopy bed on a crimson rug dominates the space, though there’s a sitting area with a black leather loveseat and a modern gas fireplace off to the side.

At his bedside, he helps me out of my dress with touches so tender, I’m in danger of bawling. My parents took care of me, of course. But this is different. I had boyfriends in high school, one in college. I’ve never felt *cared for*, as if I could do anything, say anything, and it wouldn’t matter. I could fall apart, and Killian would be here to pick up the pieces and put me back together.

He kisses me on the shoulder and pulls back the cover so I can get into his luxurious bed. A second later, his jeans are off, and he’s climbing in with me. The covers are cool and crisp, his pillows a cloud of perfection.

I smile wide. “You did buy my pillows.”

He gathers me against him, warm skin to warm skin. Heaven. “Told you I was in love.”

He says it lightly, but his dark eyes hold mine.

Everything feels both fragile and so much stronger now. I touch his cheek, trace a line along the shell of his ear before leaning in to kiss him. His hands cup my jaw and he kisses me back, lips tender, tongue delving in, tasting me as if I’m delicious.

The bed creaks as he rolls me over, settling between my spread thighs. The heat of his hardening cock presses against my belly. My hands explore the crests of his shoulders, the taut curves of his arms, and back up to his neck where his skin is baby-smooth and sensitive.

With a satisfied hum, he rocks his hips, that heavy cock sliding over my growing wetness. He kisses my top lip, the bottom one, angles his head and dips in for another taste. It's slow, drugging. I melt into the bed, my touches weak but hungry.

His scent. His skin. The powerful grace of his body. I need it all.

Killian is a magician. Somehow he's conjured a condom. Or maybe he had it all along. My mind is too hazy to remember. He leans to the side, exposing his flat abs and thick cock.

I take the condom from his hand and roll it over his length. I go slow because the weight of his meaty cock in my hand is too good to ignore. He grunts as I squeeze him, give a little tug. And then he's settling back over me, his mouth hot on mine. Our kiss loses finesse.

"Libby," he whispers. And when he slowly sinks into me, that perfect intrusion of hot flesh, his eyes meet mine. "This is just the beginning," he says.

And I know he isn't talking about sex. He means our life.

My voice is breathless, tight with excitement. "I can't wait."

Chapter 16

Libby

I ride to Whip's apartment with Killian. Michael drives as usual, and I learn that he's worked for Killian for five years. Today's car is a sleek silver Mercedes sedan with a cream leather interior that's butter soft beneath my roving palm. A palm that's damp. I'd rather the car turn around, but I have to face the rest of Kill John sooner or later.

"Why the limo yesterday?" I ask because I can't listen to my running thoughts any more.

Killian catches my hand and holds it in an easy clasp. If he feels how clammy I am, he's nice enough not to mention it. "It was your first time in New York, and you were having a *Pretty Woman* moment. That definitely calls for a limo."

"It would be smart not to mention *Pretty Woman* in that context," I tell him dryly.

His cheeks flush. "Shit. Right. You are a powerful, modern woman. If anything, I should be the prostitute here—"

"Not helping."

"Right. Right. No payment for sex of any kind." He lifts my hand and kisses my knuckles.

"But lots of sex is still on the table. Hot, dirty, sweaty—"

I grab the back of his neck and haul him down to silence him with my mouth. He likes that, and practically climbs on top of me as he kisses me back.

Making out like teenagers in the backseat, this is what he does to me. We're both breathless when we pull apart. "If we keep this up," he murmurs, "I'm going to ask Michael to circle the block."

"No," I squeak out in horror. "He'd totally know what we were doing!"

He gives me a dry, slightly pained look. "I'm *sure* he had no clue what we were up to last night."

"Don't tell me that," I wail, covering my face. "God, I'll never be able to look him in the eye again."

Killian just laughs, pulls my hand away, and gives me a sweet kiss.

When we pull up, I keep my head down and mutter a quick "Thank you" to Michael as he holds the door for me.

Whip lives in a loft in Tribeca. According to Killian, half of it has been sound-proofed and converted into a stage and a small recording studio.

"Nothing too fancy," Killian had said as we got dressed to go. "Just convenient for when we want to mess around with new sounds or practice."

After Killian punches in a code, we take an old-fashioned service elevator to the top floor. It opens onto a light-filled space with worn wood floors and exposed brick walls.

I follow Killian farther into the loft on legs that feel like noodles, my pulse thrumming in my neck so hard I'm sure it's visible. When he stops short in the entrance and turns my way, I almost stumble into him.

Killian braces my shoulders, then ducks his head to meet my eyes. "Hey. Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

His dark eyes shine with emotion. “You are Liberty Bell. The woman whose guitar playing and voice brought me to my knees. You were born for music.” His fingers squeeze just enough to hold my attention. “Nothing anyone says can take that away. You belong here.”

My eyes smart. “Stop,” I whisper. “You’re going to make me cry.”

His smile is tilted and brief. “Kick ass, Elly May.”

A laugh bubbles in my chest. “Kick ass, lawn bum.”

With a quick kiss to my forehead, Killian sets me back and walks on into the loft. “Yo!” he calls out, his voice echoing in the cavernous space. “Where’s everyone at?”

We move past funky ‘50s modern furniture, a kitchen with navy cabinets and copper appliances, and through a pair of glass doors.

A group of guys stand around an open space with a small seating area and a low stage, set up with a drum kit and several guitars to the side.

They all turn when we enter, and I swear I’m about to stumble to my knees, I’m so nervous. Two of them are tall and lean like Killian—one with dark hair and blue eyes who looks like he could be related to Killian, and another with brown hair and green eyes. His expression is guarded, his body tense.

Another guy is built like a football player and has sandy hair and a big grin.

“Killian,” says the big guy. “You brought a friend.”

Killian’s tone is easy. “Guys, meet Libby.”

The one who looks a lot like Killian is Whip Dexter, the drummer. He shakes my hand in a bruising grip and gives me a friendly smile. “Heard your demo tape. You’ve got a great voice.”

Blush. “Thanks.”

The big guy, who is Rye Peterson, the bass player, nods in agreement. “I hear you play the guitar as well.”

“Yep.” I’m holding the case of my old Gibson, my palm so sweaty I’m in danger of dropping the damn thing.

“Glad to have you join us,” Rye says. “It’s gonna be fun, kid.”

Kid. Okay. I can handle “kid.”

Jax, the sullen one with brown hair, is the last to saunter over. All the guys are good looking. But Jax would be perfect in an Abercrombie and Fitch catalogue. He’s got that all-American, pouty perfection about him. I suddenly remember that the press has called Jax a devil in an angel’s body, and Killian an angel disguised as the devil.

I can see what they meant. Jax appears wholesome, polished—the kid you send to Harvard and he returns to run for office. Killian looks more like the guy waiting on his motorcycle down the street for your daughter to crawl out her window.

Personality wise, I know Killian is kind and honest. Apparently everyone else does too.

As for Jax?

He gives me a long look, and I’m clearly found wanting. “Liberty Bell, was it?”

“Pretty hard name to forget,” I say, not liking his tone.

“True.” He glances at Killian, and the ice in his gaze melts a little. “You ready?”

Like me, Killian is carrying his guitar. He sets the case down and rolls his shoulders.

“Thought we’d show Libby how we do things, and then try a few songs with her first.”

“Good plan,” Whip says. “Show the newbie the ropes.”

Jax’s expression is a parody of confusion. And he makes his opinion perfectly clear. “We said we’d hear Liberty play, and then decide—not that she was automatically in.”

A small shock ripples through me. At my side, Killian tenses. “No,” he says patiently. “We agreed she was playing.”

Whip frowns and glances from Jax to Killian and back again. “Man—”

“We always hold an audition,” Jax snaps. “For every opening act. Always.”

“She isn’t an opening act,” Killian shoots back through gritted teeth. “She’s playing with us.”

“All the more reason she should fucking audition.”

Rye holds up a massive hand. “Come on, now, assholes. I want to jam. Not listen—”

“Why are you afraid to let her do this?” Jax cuts in, not taking his eyes off Killian.

Killian’s cheeks darken, and I know explosion is imminent. I step between them. “It’s fine. I’m happy to try out.”

A growl of protest sounds in Killian’s throat, and I shoot him a look. “Seriously.”

“Protective, are we?” Jax asks him.

“What do you want?” I ask Jax before Killian loses it.

Jax finally meets my eyes. I expect anger or dislike, but see none of that. If anything, his expression is perfectly polite, as if I truly was just another act trying to secure a place in their tour. But then it fades, and a glimmer of something—not hate, but something dark and unhappy—glints in his eyes.

“I heard you’re a fan of grunge.” He gives me a lazy, tilted smile that really isn’t a smile at all. “Why don’t you sing us ‘Man in the Box’?”

The entire room seems to stutter to a halt. “Man in the Box” is a classic Alice in Chains song. Layne Staley owned that song with his intense, deep-throated growl, much the way Janis Joplin owned “Piece of My Heart” with her razor’s-edge voice. To try to sing it is to risk looking like a total idiot.

Something everyone in the room clearly understands.

Killian slams his fist against his thigh. “What the fuck, Jax? Stop being such a dick and—”

“No,” I cut in. “It’s okay.” I grab my guitar. If Jax wants to haze me, I’m not going to back down. “I’m good.” I give Jax a level look. “Nice choice.”

His gaze slides away as he crosses his arms over his chest. “Just get on with it.”

“Dick,” Whip mutters under his breath.

My hands shake a little as I walk up to the mic. Killian looks like he wants to take a swing at Jax, but he keeps his attention on me, and when our eyes meet, he gives me a small nod. I almost smile at his support, but neither one of us wants to give Jax ammunition.

Rye makes a noise of annoyance and moves to my side, picking up his bass.

“No helping her,” Jax calls.

“Fuck you,” Rye says blandly. “It’s our band, J. Not yours. And I’m playing for Liberty.”

I give him a small smile then move in close. “Let me get through the first refrain,” I murmur. “I’ll stop. Then we both start up.”

Rye’s hazel eyes brighten. “You got some ideas, don’t you, sweets?”

“Yeah.” I’ll do the song my way, but I’m sure as shit not going to have Jax accuse me of punking out. Part of me wants to howl with laughter. It seems just yesterday, I was afraid to play in front of Killian. Now I’m going to sing in front of Kill John, and I’m not scared—much. I’m pissed.

Taking a cleansing breath, I start in on the opening lick. It isn’t easy, and I haven’t played this song. But I’ve heard it enough, and can feel my way through it. I don’t go hard and fast like

the original, but softer, slower, playing the opening riff over and over until I have the proper rhythm and feel. When I sing, it isn't with anger but with pain. I sing it my way, a lament.

I hear a noise of approval. I don't look. I don't look at anyone. My heart beats hard in my chest. I finish the first refrain of the song, then abruptly stop. Glancing at Rye, I nod, then my eyes meet Jax's.

I give him a big smile. He blinks.

And then I hit it hard, fairly screaming into the mic. Do I sound like Layne Staley? Not even close. But that isn't the point. The point is to act like I do. Fake it till you make it.

I see Killian begin to grin. Whip pops up and runs to his drums. He starts to play. Me, doing a song with Rye Peterson and Whip Dexter. Chills dance along my arms as I sing.

I close my eyes and lose myself to the music. My throat is raw, sweat running down my back.

Suddenly there's another guitar, the sound so strong and perfect, my eyes snap open. I expect to see Killian by my side, but it's Jax.

I stutter a lyric. And he gives me a look, a ghost of a smile twitching on his lips before it's gone. He sings backup, adding to the sound, making it better.

Killian jumps up and whoops, raising his fists.

We finish the set, and I'm left panting and feeling like I've swallowed razors.

Jax looks me over, his expression blasé as ever. "All right."

"That's it?" Rye says, giving my shoulder a hearty slap as Killian jogs over. "Naw, she killed it. Acknowledgment, Jax. Give it."

Jax snorts. "The point was to see if she'd try." He gives me a rare friendly look. "You did."

"You're still a dick," Killian says. A brief touch to the small of my back is all he gives me. It's more than enough right now, even if I want to turn and fling myself on him. His deep voice affects me as it always does. "She's in."

Jax nods, focusing on putting his guitar down. "Guess so."

A wave of dizziness threatens to topple me. Holy shit; I'm playing with Kill John. What the fuck am I doing?

Chapter 17

Libby

Boston, Fenway Park. Full house. But don't worry, Killian told me earlier, it only seats about thirty-seven thousand people. *Only. Ha.*

Said people are now chanting something that sounds a lot like "Kill John." The floor beneath my knees vibrates with heavy bass as Not A Minion—the opening act—does their finale.

Where am I?

Crouched over a toilet, heaving my guts out.

I slump back, fairly disgusted that I'm on this nasty floor, but too weak to get up.

A faint knock sounds on the door.

"Go away. *Forever.*" I add with emphasis.

But the door opens. Footsteps echo. A pair of worn, black boots appear on the opposite side of my stall. I would think it's Killian, but I know his stride. The man walks with a swagger, as if he's making room for that heavy, long dick he's packing in his pants. This walk is much cleaner, but just as confident.

However, the last person I expect to hear is Jax. "Do I need to throw you a life raft? Or is your head finally out of the toilet?"

"Har." I wipe my mouth and curse the gods that Jax, of all people, has found me in such a low state.

Slowly, as if expecting another round of vomiting, he opens my stall door. I glare up at him, misery weighing me down. His expression, as usual, is placid. He hands me a frosty bottle of ginger ale. "Drink up, chuckles. You're on in twenty."

I take the proffered bottle with gratitude. The soda goes down cold and wonderfully refreshing.

"I want to die." I glance at him. "I don't even care if lobbing death jokes your way is in poor taste. That's how serious I am."

He laughs, short and dry. "I like you more for not curbing your jokes for me." He offers me a hand, and I take it, letting him pull me up.

I keep gulping the ginger ale as I make my way to the sink. Jesus. I look strung out—totally haggard and slightly green. Setting aside the soda, I wash my hands and pat cold water on my sweaty face. "So why are you here," I ask him. "You lose a bet? Draw straws?"

A soft snort echoes in the room. "I volunteered."

I stare at him in the mirror. "Well...that's new."

Jax's reflection shrugs. "The rest of them would just baby you. We don't have time for that."

Time. Right. My time is almost up. The sound of Not A Minion finishing up and the subsequent roar for Kill John is hard to ignore. The whole room hums with suppressed energy, as if a great beast is waiting to be let out of the gate. The Animal. That's what Killian calls the crowd. I understand that now. Too well.

Cold sweat breaks out along my back.

"I can't do it," I blurt out. "I'll barf on stage. I know it. I told Killian I was defective this way. Shit. Shit."

Jax leans a shoulder against the wall and watches me. After a moment, he pulls out a packet containing a tiny toothbrush and a little tube of toothpaste and hands it over. “You know why I have these things?”

“You’ve got magic wizard pants on? Is there a tent in that pocket too?”

“Not now,” he says with a small smile, “but maybe later when a couple of eager female fans drop on my lap.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Gah. I set myself up for that. Unclean!” I shove my new toothbrush in my mouth and brush with vigor.

He chuckles. “I have these things because I was just in the little boys’ room doing the same.”

I freeze. “You?” I squeak around the brush in my mouth, toothpaste foam bubbling on my bottom lip.

“Me,” he says, frowning at my display. “Every freaking show.”

I quickly rise and grab a paper towel to pat dry. “Seriously?” I mean, Jax Blackwood having stage fright?

He shakes his head as if I’m being ridiculous. “It happens to a lot of performers. Barbra Streisand quit doing live shows because she had it so bad.”

“I have to pause here,” I say. “You, Jax Blackwood, Mr. Too Cool Rocker, just referenced Barbra Streisand.”

He pulls a face. “Smart ass. She’s a legendary singer. Of course I know who she is.” His lips twitch, but then he’s calm again. “Would it be better if I’d said Adele? Because she’s been known to puke beforehand too.”

“Marginally,” I grump.

He rolls his eyes. “If you go out there and hurl on stage, we’ll talk. Until then, buck the fuck up, drink your soda, and be on cue. Got it?”

“No.”

His eyes narrow to icy green slits. “Killian put his ass on the line for you. He believes in you, which means I have to too. Do not make him look the fool.”

Of all the things Jax could have said to snap me out of my fear, that was it. I kind of hate him for finding my weak spot so easily. All I can do is salute, unable to resist sticking one finger up slightly higher than the others. “Got it.”

“Good. Twenty minutes!”

Yep. I’m going to die.

* * * *

Killian

I love playing at Fenway. It’s historic, filled with quirks. Legends have performed here, and it’s imbued with the soul of baseball. Even though I’m standing under the burn of electric lights, I swear I can smell baseball—a faint aroma of hot dogs and beer, grass and sun. The stadium isn’t huge, but it feels that way. Walls of fans rise almost straight up around us. The floor is a vast sea of writhing bodies. In the distance, I can just make out the baseball diamond, protected from fans by metal fencing.

My body vibrates as I finish singing and step back to take a drink of water. My hand shakes just a bit. I’m nervous. Not for me. For her.

Whip and Rye keep up the beat, doing a jam solo that will lead into the next song, “Outlier.” It’s Libby’s first song with us.

I see her hovering in the wings, her face pale as death. My poor girl, torn up by stage fright. Jax offered to talk to her. Seeing as he’s been a grumpy pain in the ass about her until now, I was more than happy to let him go. Maybe they can form a friendship. Something I’d love.

I catch her gaze and give her a slight nod and a smile. *You got this, baby doll.*

Like a good soldier, she straightens her spine, slips her guitar strap over her head, and takes a visibly deep breath. God, but she glows with an inner light as she strides out on stage.

The Gibson L-1 open body practically dwarfs her small frame. She’s wearing another silky sundress, this one white with big red poppies all over it. Chunky black boots grace her feet, just like the first time I met her.

Rye picks up a fiddle, and Jax switches out his Telecaster for a mandolin. Last week, we toyed with “Outlier” and “Broken Door,” finessing the sound. Now it’s perfect. John, who’s in charge of all my equipment, hands me my Gretsch, and I walk to the mic.

“We’re gonna do things a little different tonight. Get a little soulful.”

The Animal howls its approval.

I grin into the mic. “And this lovely lady to my right,” I say as Libby walks up to the mic next to mine, “is the talented Ms. Liberty Bell. Let’s give her a proper welcome.”

She trembles as the Animal screams, catcalls, and hollers, punctuating the night air. She doesn’t look at me, doesn’t do anything but stare out at the sea of humanity with wide eyes. And for a cold second, I fear for her. Have I pushed her too far? Have I fucked everything?

But then Jax starts picking on his mandolin, and Rye starts up on the violin: go time. Whip ticks out a one, two, three, and Liberty explodes into action, hitting her mark with perfect precision.

Her voice is clear and utterly beautiful. It breaks my heart and makes it swell all at once.

Jax sings backup. And then it’s my turn to join in.

Libby and I harmonize. As she turns, the harsh stage lights set her aglow. She looks at me and smiles. Her joy is fucking incandescent. It sets me off, the surge of pure emotion stronger than anything I’ve ever felt on any stage.

Here is where she’s meant to be.

The song ends too soon. My need to kiss her is so strong it hurts. A vibrating roar of approval surrounds us. She beams as she takes her bow and exits. I don’t want her to go.

The rest of our show goes by in a blur until she returns for the last song. We’ll do an encore later, but for now, we’re ending with “In Deep.” It’s a love song with a sarcastic bent. Libby and I will play eighty percent of the song ourselves with the band coming in for the finale.

The second she’s back by my side, my body tunes into hers. Looking more confident now, she plucks the opening tune—light, playful.

I don’t face the crowd. I turn to her. I play and sing for her. And she sings back to me, her eyes shining bright. This. This is what it’s supposed to be about.

We finish on a lingering note, and then Libby and I exit. The rest of the guys will play on for a few minutes. I need those minutes. I want to talk to her, find out if she feels as amped as I do.

But Libby apparently has other ideas. She doesn’t look my way as she walks off stage, her pace so quick it’s practically a jog. Her hair whips around her head as she wrenches off her guitar and thrusts it in John’s waiting hand. I toss him my guitar as well, not slowing down. I’m so pumped, my heart races, my cock is a steel bar, bent painfully against my jeans. It wants out and in Libby.

But that's not going to happen now.

Past working crew, loitering execs, and God knows who else, she moves, never stopping, not making eye contact with anyone. I don't bother talking. She can't outrun me—my longer legs keep me in pace with her frantic strides—and eventually, she'll have to stop.

Right before she hits the ladies room, she announces in a loud voice, "I'm going to throw up."

Shit.

She storms into the restroom, and I follow—like hell am I going to leave her to deal with this alone again. The second I step through the doorway, I'm caught up in a tiny whirlwind of hot female flesh.

Libby slams into me, knocking me back against the door. Her mouth is on mine before I can take a breath. Hot and wet and demanding, she devours me.

My restraint shatters. On a groan, I kiss her back. It's a messy clash of lips, tongue, teeth. Fuck if my knees don't go weak. I slump down the wall, my hands grasping her plump ass. With an impatient, angry little sound, she climbs up my body, wrapping her legs around my waist.

Lust rages through me. I spin her round and her body thuds into the door. My hands are sliding up her thighs, pushing between us to get at her core. "Jesus," I grit out. She's fucking soaked, wet thighs, hot, swollen pussy.

Her underwear snaps in my hands.

Libby whimpers, thrusting her hips into mine. "Fuck." It's almost a sob. "Fuck... I'm...I need..." Another sob breaks free, and she sucks on my lower lip, licks my mouth.

"I know," I say, yanking at my jeans with clumsy hands. "I know."

I don't know how I manage to get a condom on. Blood rushes in my ears, and my heart is about to pound out of my chest. I'm in danger of coming. Our bodies, slick with sweat, slide against each other.

"Now, Killian. Now," she breathes into my mouth. Her body shudders. "Oh, fuck, I need you now."

"I got you."

One hard thrust, and I'm halfway inside heaven. She's hot as a furnace and so tight my eyes squeeze shut. Another thrust and she slides up the door with the force. Groaning, I grab her shoulders, pull her down onto me as I shove my dick all the way in. So fucking good.

Libby's panting hard, her head falling back with a thud as she wails. Her fingertips sink into the nape of my neck. "More." It's barely audible. But I hear it.

I pump into her, mindless and driven with the need to fuck. My balls slap against her ass. My head sinks down to rest on her shoulder as I brace my arms on the door and pin her to it with the force of my thrusts.

The instant she comes, her tight channel milking me, I lose it. An orgasm rips through me so hard everything goes white. I stay there, ass clenched, body bowed into hers, legs shaking for one long moment. And then I release on a sigh.

Exhausted, I press my cheek to hers, and she cups the back of my head.

"Fuck," I say, ragged.

She giggles, snorts, and turns her face into the crook of my neck. We both stand there, weakly laughing like loons, my dick still deep inside her.

The outside world returns too quickly, and I hear Jax's voice, amplified over the mic, saying, "Goodnight, Boston!" Time's up.

Chapter 18

Libby

My little bedroom at the back of the tour bus is dark and cool, swaying slightly as we speed along toward Cleveland. Boneless and limp with exhaustion, I can only lie here and stare up at the ceiling. I'm too stirred up to sleep but can't seem to make myself move.

Every second of tonight plays like a movie in my head. The blinding light, the darkness beyond. The way the crowd moves like a living thing. And singing, playing my guitar. It had been...everything. The high of my life. Transcendent.

I had no idea.

And playing with Killian? That was pure joy. I could have laughed like a giddy kid riding a coaster. I want that feeling again and again. And I want that release of pure heat and lust that came afterward, Killian's thick cock driving in me, nailing me against the door. It was hard, fast, and everything I needed.

I want him now. But it isn't as if he can be in this room without raising questions. Hell, we were lucky to get away with screwing like jacked-up rabbits in the bathroom. He'd had to scramble, shoving his dick back in his pants and running out to meet the guys in their dressing room before doing two encores.

Now he's out in the main area of the bus, jamming with his guys. It's three am, and they haven't slowed down. I can't blame them. Energy courses through my limbs and makes me twitchy.

"Fuck it." I wrench back the sheets and tug on my ratty sweats.

Music flows as I trudge down a narrow hall, flanked by four bunk spaces, and into the main sitting area. The guys stop playing as I enter. I probably look a sight with my overlarge Massive Attack concert tee and baggy pants.

"*Heligoland*." Whip gestures to my shirt with his chin. "Fucking love that album."

I find space on the couch between him and the wall. Killian's dark eyes are on me, a smug, satisfied smile lingering there. I'd be annoyed, but my smug, satisfied lady bits refuse to be hypocritical.

"Can't sleep?" he asks me. His big hand is wrapped around the neck of his guitar, a gorgeous 1962 Gibson J-160E. John Lennon played that model. And now Killian James, capable of making that beautiful instrument sing, does too.

Those long fingers have played my body just as well. I press my knees together. "Too jittery."

"You'll get used to it," Rye says. He's holding a pair of maracas, which makes me smile. He smiles back. "You know, by staying up all night."

The guys laugh.

Jax peers at me. "Didn't hurl on stage."

"Yay me," I deadpan. "Thanks, by the way. You saved my bacon."

"Mainly, I saved the rest of us from having to smell your breath," he says with a shrug, but the corners of his eyes crinkle with humor. "I'll ask Jules to keep extra ginger ale and toothbrush kits in stock."

Jules is one of the assistants and is riding on another bus. So many buses. A bus for roadies. One for Brenna, Jules, wardrobe coordinators—that the guys have a wardrobe kind of made me snicker, but it’s basically the shit job of doing their laundry—and press coordinators. One for the Not A Minion. And one for Scottie. Yes, he has his own bus. The guys, however, have always travelled together and stick with that tradition. And none of the other buses is as nice as ours with its black-and-cream leather interior, full kitchen, bath, and dozens of luxury perks—well, maybe Scottie’s is too, but he won’t let me in to check.

Killian hands me a bottled lemonade from the ice bucket at his side. There are also beers in it, but he knows me well. I take a long drink, refreshed by the sweet-tart flavor.

“So,” Whip asks, tapping a quick beat on the small *djembe* drum he’s holding. “How did it feel busting your rock concert cherry?”

I grin around my bottle and absolutely refuse to look at Killian. Memories of our bathroom visit are like handprints on my skin. “Once I got on stage, it was...perfection.”

Whip laughs. “Yeah. It’s something, isn’t it? And you did good. Better than you think.” His blue eyes crinkle with glee. “I remember our first big gig.”

“Madison Square Garden,” Rye puts in, chuckling.

“We’d done dozens of smaller clubs,” Whip explains, “but finally we had hit our stride and were on a major tour. So there we were. Opening night. Jax is puking up a lung behind a set of speakers, sending roadies scattering like roaches in the light.”

I laugh, and Jax shakes his head.

Whip continues with a big grin. “Rye’s pacing back and forth, babbling about how he can’t remember any of the music.”

Killian flails his hands as if to mimic Rye, and his voice rises to a falsetto. “‘What’s the opening song?’ ‘What do we play after?’ ‘How do I fucking play my fucking bass?’”

Rye’s cheeks pink. “Fuck, it’s so true. I was a total blank.”

“And you?” I ask Whip, because he’s telling the story.

“Oh, I was a hot mess. Poked myself in the fucking eye with my stick.”

“What?” I laugh.

“Seriously.” His eyes gleam. “I don’t even know how I did it. But the motherfucker was so swollen, I couldn’t see out of it.”

“Oh, God.” I wipe my own eyes, now blurry with tears, then catch Killian’s smiling gaze. “Where were you in all this?”

“Oh, Killian was right in the center of the storm,” Whip says. “He just stands there, hands on hips, looking at us. And then yells...”

At once Jax, Rye, and Whip shout, “That’s it, I want my mommy!”

Killian laughs, ducking his head.

The guys crack up.

“It was so fucking random,” Rye says, practically choking. “We all stopped our shit and just gaped at him. Pulled us together in an instant.”

Killian catches my eye, and I smile. Happiness and a tender, finer emotion swell in my chest. I adore this man. Everything about him. As if he reads this, his expressive eyes darken, and I feel his care, his need as clearly as if his arms were wrapped around me.

I blink and look away, not wanting the others to see what has to be clearly stamped on my face. “Well,” I say, “I guess my vomit session wasn’t so bad after all.”

“You were golden, Libs,” Killian tells me, his deep voice encouraging. “And it will only get easier.”

“Says you,” Jax retorts. But he turns his attention to the guitar in his hand and plucks out a familiar tune.

On cue, the guys follow suit and start to play The Beatles’ “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da” with Killian and Jax harmonizing, Rye playing a small lap keyboard, and Whip beating on his *djembe*.

Whip nudges me with his elbow, and I join in singing.

We go like that all night, singing, playing, and trying to best each other with choosing obscure songs to perform. And the bus speeds down the endless dark highway. I have no idea where we are. But that’s just geography. For the first time, I have some inkling of who I really am.

* * * *

“Like sex on Sunday, sliding skin to skin,” Killian growls to a crowd of sixty-thousand screaming fans, but his hot eyes are on me. “I’ll sink into your grace, lick up your sweet sin.”

Jesus. I was there when he wrote those lyrics, and it still makes me weak at the knees when he looks at me as though he’s remembering every touch between us. Then he sings with his deep, raw voice, as if promising me more.

My words come out raspy, needy when I sing back, “You think you have me figured out. You think you want in, but that’s not what love’s about.”

At my side, Rye bumps shoulders with me as we play, and Killian sings the refrain of “Broken Door.” Stage lights turn everything into a white haze. Their heat caresses my skin. Energy flows through me on a wave, making the tiny hairs along my body stand on end. My nipples tighten, slick need swelling between my thighs.

If I hadn’t already had sex with Killian, I’d think this was the most addictive thing in the world. Because, in this moment, I’m not Libby, the woman who has fears or doubts, who worries about where she’s going in life or where she’s been. In this moment, I’m just me, in my most basic version.

There is freedom in that. Joy.

It’s the long crash down that sucks. Every time a concert ends, I’m disoriented, buzzing, and slightly dizzy. There’s one thing that truly breaks the tension and brings me back to reality. Unfortunately, it’s also the riskiest.

The risk doesn’t stop me, though. Or Killian. We both need it too badly.

Minutes later, we’re hidden in a storage closet that smells of Lysol, and I’m bent over a stack of old amps, Killian buried deep inside me. His big, rough hands cup my breasts as he thrusts hard and fast. Frantic, his hips meet my ass with a *slap, slap, slap*, the sound mixing with our muffled grunts.

The way he fills me, wide and thick, each thrust hits a spot within that I feel in my throat, in my toes. Cool heat ripples down my back, up my thighs. So good.

I push back, meeting halfway, needing the hard hit of him.

“Jesus,” he grunts, his hips jerking. “That’s it. Show me how much you fucking love this.”

Faster, harder. It almost hurts. But it isn’t enough.

We’re too in tune for him not to notice my distress. He jerks a hand out from underneath my top, nearly tearing it. His fingers slide between my legs, find my clit. It doesn’t take much. I’m so primed, my clit so swollen, that he merely has to tap it, give it a little flick like he’s playing my body. And I go off.

I bite my lip, holding in my scream. He's in so deep, his cock so big, that I feel myself pulse around him. He feels it too, because he groans long and low, arching his hips into me as he comes. For a second, we're suspended there, straining against each other in search of our own pleasure. Then all that tension drains out in a mutual sigh.

Killian's body sprawls on top of mine, our panting in sync. Our fingers twine as we struggle to regain our breath. I come back to myself in stages, clarity of vision first, then the scent of our sweat mixing with cleaning supplies and must, the meaty girth of Killian's cock still lodged inside of me, and...

"There's a wet rag under my cheek." I wrench my head away.

Killian peers over my shoulder and snorts. The sound of it sets me off, and we both start laughing. Well, I'm laughing and also a bit disgusted, because my face was in a dirty rag.

"You were on the rag," Killian snickers, his chest shaking against my back.

"Ugh, that was bad. Just bad. The worst joke ever." Still, I'm laughing. Part of it is the release, but most of it is as simple as the fact that Killian makes me happy.

He eases me to standing, his arms wrapping around my shoulders, his cock slipping out of me. "I have more where that came from."

"No doubt." I rest my head in the crook of his arm.

His breath is warm as he kisses my temple and gives me a squeeze, then steps back to tuck himself into his jeans. I don't know where he put the condom, but I'd rather keep that mystery and focus on the lean wall of his chest. Absently, I trace a line on his tattoo. "We better get back. This was crazy. Someone is going to notice."

"Naw," he says with a wink. "They're all off doing the same."

"They are? How do you know?"

"The need to fuck after a show is pretty common. It's what we all do. You know, find a willing..." His words end on a strangled cough, and he scratches the back of his neck, his cheeks flushing.

"Right. Of course." My fingers fumble with my top, smoothing out the rumpled lines from where his hands invaded.

Killian steps close, his hands clasping my upper arms. "Hey, stop."

I glance at him. "What?"

The corners of his eyes crease in agitation. "I shouldn't have brought that shit up. I did those things in my past. My present is all you."

"Believe me," I manage to get out, "I have no interest in thinking about your past. I know it has nothing to do with us."

He frowns, his gaze darting over my face. "Then why are you upset? And I can tell when you are, so don't deny it."

Killian, the mind reader. I roll my eyes, trying to shake him off. He won't let me go.

"I'm not jealous." Much. Okay, I hate thinking about him with other women. Sue me. "It's just...is that what we're doing? Using each other to get off?"

"No," he says calmly. "I'm making sweet, sweet love to you. In a supply closet." His dark eyes glint. "On a rag."

"You just had to get that in there, didn't you?" I sigh and push a hunk of my hair back from my face. "You know what? It's stupid. I'm the one who practically mauls you every time we end a set."

"I like it when you maul me." Killian waggles his brows.

Despite my mood, I snicker before sobering. “I just... It suddenly felt a little seedy when you said that. As if you’d be doing this regardless.” Would I too? No, I can’t imagine having sex with anyone else.

Killian’s expression goes serious as he cups my cheeks. He doesn’t say anything as he kisses me, no tongue, just his lips mapping mine with tender care. When he pulls back his gaze is intent. “We are never seedy. Dirty, kinky, hot, sweet, okay. But never seedy. And if I didn’t have you tonight, I’d go jerk off somewhere.”

“Lovely.”

“I’m all class, babe.” He gives me a happy smile and a kiss on the cheek. Then, checking to see if the hall is clear, he glances back at me. “I’ll go first this time. The guys think you have an after-show vomiting problem, so we’ll just go with that.”

“Great. I’m known as Betty Barf.”

Killian laughs softly at my expression, then kisses me again. “*My Betty Barf.*”

The second he’s gone, my smile fades. I can’t shake my unease. My attachment to Killian, my need for him, is in danger of consuming me. When I’m with him, it’s as real as anything I’ve ever had. But if we weren’t in each other’s pockets, would it last?

Chapter 19

Killian

Anyone who tells you it's easy to go on tour is lying. Performing is basically your reward for constant travel, no sleep, fighting exhaustion, and making nice with endless people who view you as something not quite human. Idolized, adored, isolated. Worst of all are the long nights on a damn tiny bus where I can't crawl into bed with Libby. It makes me...twitchy.

I'm not sure I even like this dependence on another person. But, like any addict, I'm not looking to break the habit. If anything, I crave more.

Thank God for Chicago and two nights at a proper hotel—and the suite with an adjoining door to Libby's that Brenna booked me.

Unlike other tours, we're keeping the partying to a minimum. We have tonight off and have taken over the hotel's private movie theater. It's fairly small, about fifty seats, with a small lounge just outside.

While the staff loads up the movie, we hang out in the lounge and have drinks.

"I'm going to ask Libby out on a date," Whip announces, casual as fuck.

The beer I'm holding almost slips out of my hand before I clutch it tight. "What? Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'? She's hot in that girl-next-farm-over kind of way." He flicks his tongue against his teeth. I want to punch those teeth in.

"Lots of hot women on the road," Rye says, his attention half on a group of women he gave passes to last show. They're now walking into the lounge. One or all of them will get lucky tonight.

"Pick one of them," I say to Whip, trying to calm down. Honest to God. Because I'm having a hard time not launching myself at my friend.

Whip scowls. "I told you chuckleheads, I want a girl I know. No more groupies. And Libby is fun."

Fun. Yeah. I know exactly how fun Libby is, and I don't share. The thought of stomping my foot like a two year old and shouting "Mine!" runs through my head. That would go over well.

Jax gives Whip a long look. "We don't fuck the staff."

"Libby is not staff," I snap. Though why I point that out now, I don't know. *Stupid*. Let Whip think that if it means he'll back off.

"We pay her a lot of money to perform with us," Jax says in a bored tone. "So I'd say that makes her staff."

"She's an equal," Whip retorts. "Which makes it even better."

"And when shit goes south?" Jax asks. "What then? You're stuck with someone who hates you, and it brings us all down."

Whip rubs the back of his neck. "That would be awkward."

Thank fucking God. I might not have to kill him after all.

"Worse if she turns you down," Rye adds. "Then you have to face her knowing..." He trails off when Brenna bursts into the room with a loud laugh, stumbling on her sky-high heels. She's arm in arm with Jesse, one of our sound techs.

Whatever Jesse's telling her must be hilarious, because she's snorting and burrowing her face in his neck while his hand travels down to grab her ass.

At my side, Rye growls like a feral dog. The rest of us exchange a look. Here we go.

Brenna gives Jesse's ass a squeeze back before she heads to the bar, her hips moving in an exaggerated sway. Rye jerks to his feet, his eyes tracking her.

"Man," I say. "Don't do whatever it is you're thinking."

He either doesn't hear me or doesn't want to. Rye brushes off Whip's attempt to grab his wrist and stalks off. Heading for trouble.

"Should we stop him?" Whip asks.

"Too late for that," Jax mutters. "Years too late."

Rye's already in Jesse's face, his voice loud enough to carry over the din. "Man, we did not hire you to fuck around with our publicist."

"Are you kidding me?" Brenna all but screeches as she rushes over, getting in between Rye and Jesse. "You did not just say that."

"I'm pretty sure I just did," Rye snaps. "Seriously, Bren, have some self-respect."

Oh. Shit.

"You have some fucking nerve, *Ryland*. Can't keep your dick in your pants for five minutes, and you're lecturing me?"

"Yeah, well, I'm not the one in charge of PR." He's red in the face now too. "You set the example, honey."

"Don't you 'honey' me, asshole." She pokes his chest. "Or go around acting like some jealous—"

"Jealous? More like disgusted."

I push to my feet as Brenna goes bright red.

"You mother—"

"All right," I cut in. "Why don't we take it somewhere else?" I nod to the very interested crowd forming. Someone giggles, a few people duck their heads. But most stare.

Brenna blanches, her gaze darting around before zeroing in on Rye, who doesn't appear to be bothered at all. "You are an asshole," she hisses beneath her breath.

It's the lowest she's kept her voice the whole time, but the force of her anger is enough to make Rye flinch. He opens his mouth like he's going to reply, but Brenna turns away from him, grabbing a mute Jesse by the hand and stalking off.

Jesse glances back, clearly fearful for his job.

I wave him off as Rye snorts.

"Little wuss didn't even stand up for her," Rye mutters.

He brushes past us, stealing a beer out of some guy's hand as he goes. The door slams on his way out.

"That right there." Jax shakes his head in disgust. "That's why you don't fuck with your crew."

* * * *

Libby

"I bet they're doing it within the week," one woman says to another as they drink martinis and watch Brenna and Rye stomp off in different directions.

The other woman snorts. "They're probably already doing it. And can you blame her?" She sucks at her teeth. "Rye is hot as hell."

“Mmm...all those massive muscles.”

“Personally, I’d rather do Killian. Tight and lean, with those sinful eyes. And that walk of his. You know he’s loaded for bear.”

“I have no idea what that means,” her friend says with a laugh.

But I do. I turn away before I have to hear more speculation over Killian’s equipment. Or the women who clearly want a chance to find out how big it actually is.

After-parties are a fact of touring life I never really considered. Frankly, I think they blow. Oh, meeting true fans is fun. They practically vibrate with joy when they finally face one of the guys. It’s cute. At least, those types of fans are. Then there are the groupies. Women whose job, it seems, is to put another notch on their proverbial bed posts. I shouldn’t hate on them, and I try really hard not to. But watching them hang on Killian like he’s a steak thrown into a pack of lionesses isn’t easy.

And they will do anything—*anything*—to get attention. I’ve seen more tits in these past weeks than in the whole of my life. Tops coming off at the oddest times. Like, oh, hey, the music started? Let me rip off my top and shake what my mama gave me. Or my plastic surgeon. Same difference.

Doesn’t matter if it’s a room full of journalists, record execs, roadies, and other hangers on. In fact, that somehow appears to make a strip show more thrilling for them.

Killian doesn’t encourage them. If anything, he always shoots me a pained look that says, “See what our hiding is making me do?” I love him for it. And hate myself a little more each time.

Oddly, Whip is also shying away from women. I’d wonder if he didn’t fancy them, but his eyes always stay glued to the displays of female flesh as if he’s hypnotized. Jax appears as apathetic about women as he is about everything. Oh, he goes off with a few, but the enthusiasm isn’t there.

Rye is the only one who seems to enjoy it. At least he did until he blew up at Brenna. Now that they’re gone, it’s business as usual: overly loud and fake laughter, people looking around to see who’s looking at them.

“Always something to talk about,” says a female voice at my side as I lean against the bar and sip my drink. A pretty blonde who’d look right at home in a Southern sorority gives me a pleasant smile. “Or write about, as the case may be.”

A press badge on her chest identifies her as Z. Smith.

Protective of both Rye and Brenna, I give the woman a quelling look. “Must be a slow day if a little argument is something to write about.”

She shrugs, her gaze drifting over the room. “Depends on who’s arguing.” Her sharp blue eyes settle back on me. “I’m Zelda, by the way.”

I take her offered hand. “I love that name.”

“I hate it,” she says with a nose wrinkle. “But it’s mine, so what can I do? You’re Liberty Bell.”

“Which makes me an expert on oddball names,” I say with a laugh.

“I don’t envy the jokes you must have heard when you were younger.”

Though she’s simply chatting with me, I don’t relax. Brenna and her assistant, Jules, have drilled into me the importance of watching your tongue with the press. They can take anything you say and twist it.

“The best response,” I tell her lightly, “is to just yawn in the face of idiocy.”

“I’ll remember that.” Her expression becomes a bit sharper. “So what do you think of being on tour? This is your first public experience, correct?”

Here we go. Interview time. “It’s a learning curve, but I’m enjoying it. The guys have been very supportive.”

“Killian James brought you in, right?”

“Yep.”

“I heard some story that you were neighbors this summer.”

Probably because that’s what Brenna put in my press statement.

“That’s right.”

“Lucky you.” Zelda nudges my shoulder with hers as if we’re old friends. “Out of all the guys, there’s something about Killian. He’s delicious in that bad boy, charm-your-panties-off kind of way.”

“I try not to think of the guys that way,” I tell her, lying through my teeth, because her description is on point. “I have to work with them.”

“Are you telling me you aren’t fucking him?”

Her blunt question comes at me like a punch, and I recoil. “Excuse me?”

Zelda gives me a smile that’s all teeth. “Sorry. I’m pretty blunt with my words after all these years in this business. But honestly? Killian James is infamous for being irresistible. And there are the facts. First you’re neighbors, and then he’s bringing you, a complete novice, on tour with him.”

My heart thuds against my ribs. It’s not like I should be shocked; she’s saying everything I’ve warned Killian about. Almost verbatim. Expected observation or not, the humiliation I feel at being looked upon as nothing more than Killian’s whore, is nearly crippling.

And then I get angry—at myself for predicting this, at her for thinking the same thing.

I give her a long look, watching her fight not to squirm. “You’re kind of young to be a reporter assigned to Kill John.”

“What are you talking about? I’m twenty-six, which is probably older than most of these groupies.”

“Yeah, but they’re here for one thing. Are you too? Because most of the other reporters I’ve met are men in their thirties, at the very least.”

Zelda’s eyes narrow. “It’s a tough business.”

“And a girl’s got to use whatever assets she can to rise, is that it? Is that how you got here, Ms. Smith?”

“Oh, I get it. Shaming me, are you? It was a valid question, you know. You’re linked with James. No one has ever heard of you before now. I have to wonder—”

“If I fucked my way in? Of course you do. Because that’s what everyone wonders about attractive, successful women, don’t they? Did we get here on talent or by spreading our legs? If I was a man, would you ask the same?”

“Killian hasn’t been known to like men.”

“And that’s the reason you didn’t ask.”

Her mouth purses. “Point taken.”

“Here’s an exclusive for you, as honestly as I can put it.” I lean close. “Killian had to talk me into doing this. Because I told him people would make ugly assumptions about him bringing an unknown on tour with Kill John. But if you truly do know anything about him, you’ll know that he is stubborn as the day is long. And that for Killian, his love of music and what works for his band trumps any threat of stupid rumors.”

“You’re quite loyal to him, aren’t you?”

“Of course I am. He gave me a chance few others would dare. Every member of Kill John did.” I feed her the standard press line with a placid smile on my face. “Which is why it’s a joy to work with them and contribute in any way I can.” I stand and smooth my skirt. “Have a nice night. I hope you enjoy the movie.”

She doesn’t say anything but follows my progress with her beady eyes as I head for the movie theater. And I pretend that my insides aren’t shaking from the cracks in my pride.

Chapter 20

Killian

One good thing about being a rock star? Diva moments are not only expected, they're never questioned. For once, I take full advantage of that as I enter the theater and make my way to the back row to claim a spot. My immense scowl wards off anyone who thinks of joining me.

I'm scrolling through my phone when someone plops down in the seat next to me. Whatever send-off I'd planned to say dies with I see it's Libby. She's carrying a big bag of caramel corn and a bottle of water.

"Libs," I say in greeting.

"I can't believe we're going to see *The Force Awakens*. I missed it when it first came out."

"My little hermit. When was the last time you actually saw a movie in a theater?"

She stuffs a handful of caramel corn in her mouth before muttering, "Shut up."

I help myself to some caramel corn...definitely better than movie quality. "You can thank Scottie for tonight's pick. He's a massive Star Wars geek."

"No," she breathes, scandalized. "That's so..."

"Human? Yeah, I was surprised too." I love Scottie. He's my rock in this business. But the dude is twenty-eight going on eighty. Half the time I expect him to wave a cane and shout at us to get off his lawn.

He's staked a claim in the middle of the middle row and, like me, is giving anyone who approaches a death glare.

Libby tucks her water bottle into the snack holder at her side.

"Can you believe this place?" With big eyes, she glances around at the fiber optic art on the walls and the massive crystal chandeliers, and at the rows of double seats that are basically meant for two. Her hands smooth over the wide leather armrest at her side. "I mean, reclining loveseats? Shut the front door." With a little "Whoop!" she hits the button that lifts our shared footrest.

My lips twitch.

"Calm down, Elly May." I mean it as a joke, but my voice doesn't quite get there.

Libby stops her gawking and narrows her eyes. "Why do you look all pissy?"

I give her an affronted look before leaning in a little to whisper under my breath. "Whip was considering asking you out on a date."

Pissy? Yeah, I'm pissy all right. What I don't expect is Libby's flush of pleasure.

"Isn't that sweet," she says, pleased as fucking punch.

"Sweet?" I hiss. "You like the idea?"

The corner of her mouth turns down. She pokes my side, and I barely manage to hold in my yelp.

"Stop thinking with your dick," she whispers.

Sadly, my dick isn't the one doing the thinking. It's the organ a little farther north, which is now pounding with agitation. I cross my arms over my chest and slump in the seat. Not exactly mature, but this is where she's led me.

Libby's pleased expression doesn't fade but grows. "It's just nice to be liked, you know? It means he accepts me being here. Besides," she says, looking out over the room as people finish taking their seats. "I don't think he was serious, anyway."

"I'm pretty sure he was." *The fucker.*

"Then why is he over there sticking his tongue down that reporter's throat?"

My head snaps up, and I'm greeted by the sweet sight of Whip making out with the pretty blonde who's been trying to get interviews all night. Okay, it's not a sweet sight, and I quickly avert my eyes. But my relief is palpable.

"You know," I say conversationally, as I kick back, "I want to fuck you right now."

Libby jerks as if she's been pinched and sits a little straighter, before getting a hold of herself and slouching as if she's completely chill. Cute.

She gives me a smirk and sips her water. "And what?" she drawls. "Mark your territory? Assert your manly dominance?"

"Yep." I slide my gaze to hers. "But mostly I just want to fuck you all the time."

God, I love the way her lips part as her body flushes with heat. So subtle, but there all the same. It makes me hard as steel, my balls squeezing tight. I don't look at her but pretend I'm observing the room. The lights are lowering for the movie now, the empty chairs in front of us obscuring our lower halves.

My hand falls to the space between us and smooths along her hip. She delicately shivers as my fingers trace her thigh.

"What about you?" I murmur, toying with her skirt in the darkening room. "You want to fuck me, baby doll?"

"Right now I want to kick you," she gets out between clenched teeth. "Keep your hands to yourself. There are nosy-ass people everywhere."

"They're all watching the movie, not us." Focusing on the screen, I keep my expression neutral as I ease my hand under her skirt. Her skin is smooth and warm. The movie starts in a blast of music and the familiar old logo as I trace over her knee and up her soft thigh. "And that wasn't a no."

She makes a cute growl in the back of her throat, but her legs part just enough to give me room to delve between them. Her inner thighs are hot and damp, and my cock twitches.

The storyline rolls along; my touch roams. Libby remains utterly still, but I can practically feel the tension vibrating within her. When the tip of my finger skims the crease where her thigh meets her hip, her breath catches, legs parting wider.

"Have I mentioned how much I appreciate this new skirt-filled wardrobe?" I whisper, drawing circles along her skin.

"Brenna's idea." Her hips shift just a bit, following my touch. "Right now I'm missing my shorts."

I smile, my eyes on the screen, my fingers drifting to the edge of her panties. "Later, you can put them on and we'll play Fuck the Farmer's Daughter."

She stifles a laugh, which turns to a strangled whimper when I pluck her panties. Her voice goes breathy. "I'm trying to watch the damn movie. I'm not interested in fooling around." She moves a tiny fraction, nudging against my finger.

In the dark, I grin, heat and lust pulling my abs tight. "I'm sorry," I say, not sorry at all. "But I don't believe you. I'm gonna have to check."

"Killi—oh, hell."

I'm thinking the same as my finger slides over slick, swollen skin. And it makes me feel like a fucking god. Because I did that to her. I'm the one who gets her this wet. The one she needs. I'm the one she's panting for right now, moving against my touch with a tiny whimper.

I'll make it better. It's my job now. My privilege. And I'll be damned if anyone tries to take that away.

* * * *

Libby

I really should stop Killian. We're playing with fire, fooling around in so many public places. A reporter just implied that I whored myself to him. And here he is fingering me in a movie theater.

I should protest, but the man is a damn musician; he plays my body like a master, never missing a beat. I can't resist that. I don't want to, not when each sure, sly touch sends heat and pleasure shimmering over my skin. Not when I can almost feel him holding in a grin, his shoulder pressed against mine, his eyes on the screen as he oh-so-gently circles my clit.

He plunges a finger into me, and it's all I can do not to moan and part my thighs wide, ride his hand. I struggle to keep still, keep my eyes on the fire fight playing out in some distant galaxy.

God, he's too good. Every time he pushes in, his finger crooks, hitting a spot that has me biting my lip. I can feel myself getting wetter, my flesh plumping. Beneath the sound effects and music of the movie, I can hear the sounds of him working me—wet and deep, slow and steady torture.

My head falls back against the seat, my breath coming in sharp bursts. Above the waist, I'm still, my hand only shaking a bit as I take a bite of caramel corn, pretending all is normal. But below, my thighs part wider—the simple act illicit and ratcheting up the tension in me—my hips make small movements, pushing each thrust of his finger in deeper.

Another whimper escapes me. Killian leans in, his lips close to my ear. "Shh...I'm trying to watch the movie."

The rat bastard gives my clit a flick with the tip of his thumb. I twitch, and he plunges two fingers in deep. My lids flutter, my heart pounding. I'm going to kill him. Soon.

"Mmm..." he says, his thumb continuing to fondle me. "I love this part. Such a sweet movie."

My breaths are coming fast and light. Heat swarms my body. The fact that someone might see, that we could get caught, intensifies everything.

Maybe I should be ashamed of that, but I can't be. Not when an orgasm is stealing over me, creeping like a hot hand over my thighs, down my back, along my breasts.

It catches and holds, taking my breath. I stiffen against the seat, practically vibrating.

Killian's deep voice, barely a whisper in the dark, is at my ear. "This one is mine. Give me what's mine, baby doll." Teeth nip my lobe, his fingers pushing up into that spot. "Come."

And I do. All shuddering, repressed breaths, body shaking, my thighs squeezing against his hand. I come so hard I see stars behind my closed eyes. As I sag into the soft seat, he leaves me with a last, lingering caress—a gentle tap as if rewarding me for a job well done.

I should kick him for that. But I can't move. He's destroyed me.

"Jerk," I whisper without heat.

His shoulder nudges mine. “You can take your revenge later.”

I glance at him then, only when I can finally meet his gaze without showing how much he affects me. His dark eyes glitter in the flickering light. When I try my best to reprimand him with a look, he grins wide. Impossible to resist. I don’t know why I even try.

Taking a quick glance around to see if anyone is watching, I lean in and give the hard swell of Killian’s biceps a soft kiss. His muscles twitch in surprise, but then he sighs, his long body slouching down in the seat.

His hand finds mine in the darkness between us. In a low voice only for me, he speaks one last time. “Baby doll, I *could* assert my manly dominance, thump my chest, and declare you’re mine. But it wouldn’t mean a damn thing if I’m not yours in return.”

Chapter 21

Killian

My mood is mellow now. Getting Libby off will do that for me. I take my time heading out when the movie's over. Eventually I'll meet her in the suite. She'll draw us a bath, insisting that we have a nice, hot soak to end the day. She always does. Libby is a creature of habit, and I find that oddly soothing. Whatever craziness life throws my way, I want her there, calm and steady.

Scottie is standing by the exit door, arms crossed, feet planted. His expression is granite. In other words, he's ticked. Why he's glaring at me instead of Brenna and Rye, or even Whip and that reporter, I don't know.

"What's up?" I ask. "Someone talk during the movie? Or are you still pissed Han died?"

His eyes narrow. "Some things we don't joke about, Killian."

Right. Brenna had told me she was almost one-hundred-percent sure Scottie cried when they first went to see the movie. I didn't know the man could produce tears.

"Maybe it was a fake-out," I tell him. "You know, he's really hanging on some scaffolding, waiting for Billy Dee to pick him up... Right. No more talking about Han."

Scottie grunts and walks with me out to the lobby. It's fairly empty now, hangers on and crew having gone off to the next party.

"You're not as circumspect as you'd like to believe," he tells me.

Confused, I glance at him. He glares right back.

"Eventually people will notice you and Ms. Bell getting cozy."

My steps slow. "Say what you're going to say, Scottie."

He stops and faces me. "You saw what happened with Rye and Brenna tonight."

"Everyone saw. Your point?" My mellow is heading toward pissed off.

"The longer you draw this out, the worse it will be when people learn the truth." He sets his hands low on his hips. Lecture stance. "There's a saying: Shit or get off the pot."

"That's classy for you, Scottie."

"You two want to be together, make it known. Brenna and I will find a way to deal with it."

"We're not a problem for you to deal with," I snap, keeping my voice low.

"You are. And if you can't see that, you're being deliberately blind."

For a second, I have to look away.

Scottie takes the moment to go in for the kill. "I want her, Killian."

I reel back as if punched in the gut, and he rolls his eyes.

"To manage, you git." For the first time, humor lights his expression.

I take a bit longer to calm. "Jesus, say it another way then. I already had to deal with Whip tonight, for fuck's sake."

"I've never seen you so territorial." He's quietly laughing at me. Ass.

"Get used to it." I run my hand over my tight neck. I definitely need a soak now. "Seriously, though? You want to take Libby under your wing?" I know what that means. It's something anyone who knows anything about the industry dreams of. Scottie is a legend.

He started off with us, convincing four eighteen-year-old punks to take a chance on him, never mind he was basically our age with absolutely no true experience at the time. We took that

gamble and never looked back. As for Scottie, he's picked up a select number of other clients along the way, all of them going platinum.

The man is a business and marketing genius with a killer instinct. If he says someone has it, the music industry listens.

"You were right to ask her on the tour," he says. "She is exceptional. Brenna tells me she's getting an increasing number of interview requests for Liberty, fan mail by the dozens. We haven't said anything to her because we don't want to overwhelm her at the moment."

"Good plan." Because Libby would freak. And not in a good way. "But why are you talking to me and not her?"

"I plan to discuss this with her. Perhaps suggest we start once the tour is over." His eyes narrow as he studies my face. "I want to know how you'll take it."

And then I remember how it was in the beginning. I didn't own a second of my life. She does this, and our time together will whittle down to nothing. Absently, I rub my abs, where my stomach squeezes in protest. Really not feeling mellow anymore.

"I don't know how Libby will handle going full tilt," I tell Scottie. "Or if she'll even want to. But I won't stand in her way." I'd never do that, even if it means that, one day, she's gone.

* * * *

Libby

Scottie makes me nervous. I can admit that. I'm not attracted to him, but I won't deny his effect. The combination of his stunning looks, hard eyes, and crisp voice acts like an avalanche on the nerves. You're pinned in place, and even if you look away, he's trapped you with his voice.

So when he approaches me during the sound check at the stadium, I tense, keeping my eyes on Killian singing as long as I can.

A low chuckle washes over me. "Avoiding eye contact won't make me go away, Ms. Bell." Bracing myself, I turn. "Prolonging the inevitable is a thing with me, I guess."

He's not smiling—he rarely does. But his eyes are soft—well, for him. "Intelligent move. I want to discuss something with you. Have you a moment?" He inclines his dark head toward the right wing row of seats, just far enough away that we can hear each other while Kill John runs through an older song.

I'd rather stay here and not discuss anything. But I nod and lead the way.

He waits until I'm seated to fold himself into a nearby seat. And then he looks me over as if inspecting a bug. "You are not backup material."

Instantly I tense, steel coming into my spine. "Seriously? Is this some fucking cliché shakedown? Because we can skip to the end right now where I tell you to fuck your mother."

"Colorful," Scottie murmurs, looking amused. "No, Ms. Bell, this is not a shakedown." He peers at me. "You do have a vivid imagination, however. And I now see why you're so compatible with Killian. Same descriptive vocabulary." He leans in, resting his hands on his knees. "You are a headliner, Ms. Bell. Front and center stage."

"I...ah... What?"

He keeps his tone even and patient, as if he's talking to a distracted child. "Your sound, the quality of your voice, is unique. More importantly, when you get on stage, you are compelling. I want to represent you, Ms. Bell. Develop you."

My ears ring faintly. “Hold on. First, please stop calling me Ms. Bell. It reminds me of being sent to the principal’s office.”

“Fair enough.” His expression says I’m insane.

“Second. I’m...well, I’m not an entertainer. I came for Killian.”

I glance in Killian’s direction, and our gazes clash. Even now, he’s aware of where I am. His dark eyes crinkle, as if he’s trying to encourage me, even as he sings and plays his guitar. I break eye contact and face Scottie again.

“I’m not a star.”

Scottie’s brows draw together. “There are many things you are not, Ms.—Liberty. But you *are* star material. More importantly, when you get on a stage, you come alive.” He gestures toward the band with his chin. “Just as they do. Tell me you do not feel that.”

“I do.” My insides being to tremble. “I love it, but...”

“The worst thing you can do in life is ignore an opportunity out of fear.”

“I’m not afraid.”

His dry expression makes a mockery out of that statement. I cringe. “Okay, a little. It’s just... I do love it. But the rest? The public side? No, thanks.”

Scottie sits back, resting his ankle on his bent knee in that way men have of crossing their legs. “I am afraid to fly,” he tells me.

“Okay...”

“Utterly and completely,” he continues, his body stiff. “Every time I get on one of those death contraptions called a jet, I want to vomit.”

“But you fly all the time.”

“My job demands that I do.” Another brow quirk. “You understand my meaning?”

My head feels heavy as I nod.

Maybe Scottie notices that I’m on the verge of panic, because his voice goes soft as Kill John ends their set and the music stops.

“Killian believes in you.”

I refuse to look in Killian’s direction again.

“He brought you here, put you on that stage, because he believes,” Scottie murmurs.

A shuddery breath leaves me.

“You had to know this,” Scottie says.

“Yes.” I knew. But I’d never allowed myself to think too deeply on what was behind all his support. Had he pushed Scottie on me too?

As if reading my mind, Scottie makes a noise of disagreement. “No one in this group does something against their will. Including me.” He leans in, forcing me to meet his eyes. His expression is hard, serious. “I have little interest in managing a reluctant singer. You have to be all-in or you will fail.”

“Then why approach me at all? When you knew I’d be reluctant?”

“There’s a difference between snapping out of a fear and being unwilling to do a thing at all. I wanted to discover which scenario I was dealing with.”

“And now you know?”

Scottie gives me one of his quick, tight smiles. “Only you can tell me that. I’ve merely opened the door for contemplation.” He rises, crisp and fresh as ever in his perfect three-piece suit. “You know where to find me when you have an answer.”

Chapter 22

Killian

“Where the hell are you going?”

Jax’s question stops me short. So close to the exit, and yet so far. I turn and adopt what I hope is a bland expression. “To bed. Catch a nap.”

Yeah, that goes about as well as expected. The guys look at me as if I’d just said I wanted one of them to put a diaper on me. Once they get over their horror, the questions start flying.

“Bed? There had better be a woman waiting in that bed.”

“More like three,” Whip adds. “It’s freaking four o’clock. You don’t go up to bed at four for anything other than three women.”

“Is that a new rule?” I deadpan.

“It ought to be,” Rye retorts, disgust still riding high on his face.

“Seriously, Kills?” Jax shakes his head. “Are we old men now?”

I can’t tell them the truth. That I do have a woman waiting for me. Or that Libby is better than three women, better than any amount of women. So I have to stand here looking like a killjoy and a dick. “I’m just tired.” Lame. Lame. Lame.

“Fucking lame, man.” Rye shakes his head.

I keep my mouth shut.

“Next thing you’ll be telling us you have a headache,” Whip says, his nose wrinkling like he’s scenting something ripe.

“Now that you mention it,” I start with a forced grin.

They all roll their eyes and groan. Jax tosses a water bottle at my head. I catch it mid-air.

“Take some aspirin and buck up,” he says, chucking a small pill bottle next.

I catch that too and clutch it in my hand. Fucking hell. I’m stuck. We have a rare night off. After we wrapped up our run-through and initial sound check, Libby went upstairs, saying she was taking some time for herself. None of the guys questioned that. Why should they? She’s entitled to some personal space.

I am not given the same leeway. No, they want to hang out, go to a bar and check out the local scene—which means women. Ordinarily, I’d be down with spending time with the guys. They’re my best friends; we’ve been apart for nearly a year. But having to push off advances from women without the guys figuring out why? Not easy. And not fun.

Neither is continuing to pretend that Libby is just my friend. I can’t touch her the way I want to, which is pretty much all the time and all over. I practically have to sit on my hands to keep from reaching for her. Makes me damn grumpy.

Worse? Libby has been sliding me looks all day. And they were not sexy, when-are-you-going-to-be-inside-of-me-again looks. She’s thinking things. Never a good sign when it’s accompanied by frowns.

Scottie talked to her earlier, so it’s a pretty good bet that’s what it’s about. But I can’t figure if she’s mad or not. And I want to know. Now. When she cut out on the evening early, it wasn’t like I could say, “Oh, hey, I’m leaving with Libby too.” I’m stuck biding my time.

I might have channeled my inner toddler and fucking pouted were it not for the fact that the guys would wonder about that too. Fuck it.

Frustration claws its way up my throat, and I blurt out the one thing I know will make them back off, even if it humiliates me in the process. “I have the shits, all right?”

Three sets of shocked faces stare back at me.

“Now can I go, or is there anything else you wanted?”

Rye clears his throat. “Dude, just go. I mean, take care of you and all that.”

“Grab some Pepto or something,” Whip adds helpfully.

“Didn’t you just use that bathroom?” Jax darts a glare toward the bathroom in question.

“You better not have befouled it—”

I ping the water bottle back at him. “Shut the hell up.”

I’m never living this down. I’ll be Senōr Shitpants for the whole tour. But it sets me free.

“I’ll meet up with you later,” I tell them as I head for the door.

“Not if you’re still Crappy McGee,” Rye calls out.

“Maybe we’d better have Jules order a box of Depends just in case.”

Yep. The whole tour.

When I finally let myself into her room, I’m tense, irritable, and ready to climb the damn walls.

Libby is in the bedroom and calls out a faint “hey” as I set the keycard down on the console and toe off my shoes. My insides are still jumpy, but I can’t ignore the simple fact that walking into a space that contains Liberty is like stepping into a hot shower after a long show. My muscles release. I can breathe. I feel like myself again.

Her disembodied voice comes from the bedroom. “You know what sucks?”

“When cable networks decided to split TV seasons in half?” I peel my shirt off and toss it aside, heading her way. “I mean, what is that shit? Don’t make us pay just because you have a slow-as-fuck production schedule.”

“Don’t really watch TV.”

Halting in the doorway, I press a hand to my heart with a pained groan. “That’s it; we can’t be together anymore. And what the hell are you doing?”

Liberty stands on her tiptoes at the top of the bed, her sweet ass peeking out from under the edge of one of my T-shirts while she tries to reach something on the ceiling. “What I wouldn’t give for a broom. I’m trying to get this moth—”

My yelp effectively cuts her off. I scramble back to the edge of the door. “Moth? Where is the fucking moth!”

Libby turns, her mouth hanging open. “What on Earth?”

A cold sweat breaks out over my skin as I eye the tiny hell devil fluttering around the pot light over the bed. Jesus, did I miss that? It makes a move my way, and I shout, jumping farther back. “Kill it, woman! Kill. It!”

Libby sputters out a laugh then does a double-take when I fall onto the arm chair. “You’re serious.”

I don’t take my eyes off Mothra. “Are you going to kill it, or am I calling security?”

Snickering, she picks up a pillow.

Horror arcs through my gut. “Not the pillow—” She smashes it into the moth. And I shudder. “Damn it, I’m not using that pillow. Ever again.”

“We’ll wash the case.”

“Not good enough. Put the pillow in the hall.”

Libby gives me a side-long look as she grabs a tissue and cleans up the little moth carcass. Or I think that’s what she’s doing. I can’t watch.

“Is it gone?”

Libby’s warm thighs slide over mine, and her weight settles on me. Even though I’m still crept out by the moth previously hanging out above my bed—just fucking waiting to get me when I slept—my hands immediately seek her, smoothing over her soft skin and grabbing hold of her ass. God, I love her ass, plump yet toned. I could squeeze it all day.

She makes a little throaty noise, her arms coming up to wrap around my neck, and heat flares up my thighs. I tug her closer, wanting her over my dick. She doesn’t resist, but she’s definitely distracted.

“What’s with the moths?” she asks, placing a soft kiss at the corner of my eye.

It’s weird to shiver with both the pleasure of her kiss and revulsion for the moth. As good as she feels, an intruder moth has the power to send me running. I grimace and concentrate on her scent, her warm skin. “I hate them.”

Libby makes a soft sound. “I got that. Why?” Her fingers trace patterns through my shorn hair.

“It’s stupid.” I kiss my way up her neck. “I was nine. At summer camp. A moth flew in my ear, started fluttering around...” A full-body shudder threatens to dislodge Libby from my lap, and I squeeze her tight, pressing my face into her hair. “Let’s not talk about it.”

She chuckles, her hands roaming over my shoulders, my nape. “Poor Killian. Don’t worry; you’re safe now.”

I grunt, nudging her with my hips. “I’m not convinced. Kiss it and make it better, Libs.”

I can almost feel her smile. “Where does it hurt, baby?”

“The tip of my dick.”

Libby hums, rocking against said dick. “Hmm... So a moth crawled up your—”

With a yell, I leap up, sending her butt to the floor, where she cracks up as I jump away. I glare as my chest lifts and falls. “You are fucking evil. *Evil.*”

I try not to notice that her shirt is around her waist and her legs are spread wide as she lays there laughing her ass off. Libby wipes her eyes. “You walked right into that one.”

No, I won’t smile. Growling like I mean it, I swoop down and haul her up. She squeals as I throw her over my shoulder and toss her onto the bed, landing on top of her before she can get away. Caging her between my arms, I frown down at her. She just smiles and laughs.

“You’re supposed to be repentant,” I say.

She responds by craning her neck and kissing the tip of my nose. “Okay.”

I settle more comfortably between her legs. “Don’t give me that cute smile.” My lips brush her cheek. “I’m mad at you.”

“Uh-huh.” Her hands find my neck, her fingers digging into the tense muscles there. She snickers again.

“Keep laughing,” I say. “See where that gets you.”

“Did you know you can laugh yourself to death?”

“What? Fuck, don’t tell me that.” I kiss the crook of her neck, lingering there. “I’ll end up living in fear that one of us will die laughing.”

My hands bracket her delicate jaw, and I kiss her again, just to feel the shape of her smile. Libby melts beneath me, her lips opening. But I’m not the one doing the taking. She kisses me like I’m her favorite flavor.

Her lips curve against mine. Another smile. I’d have all of them if I could. This is why going out no longer means anything. If the guys had this, they’d get it.

“Don’t worry,” she says, playing with the short ends of my hair. “I’ll protect you.”

“Protect me from laughing? I don’t see how since you’re the one who usually makes me laugh.”

“Whenever you’re in danger of losing your breath with laughter...” She suckles my earlobe, bringing me in close, her voice a soft tickle on my skin. “I’ll mention moths.”

I yelp, a jolt of ear-to-moth-induced terror lighting through me. Libby tosses her head back, cackling. I launch myself on top of her, my fingers finding her sensitive spots. “You evil pixie. Cruel, evil...”

Words dissolve. I’m done for with this girl. I sink against her with a sigh, careful not to crush her, but letting her feel my weight. My eyes close as I wrap myself around her. “I missed you today.”

My voice is muffled in her hair but she goes still, clearly hearing me.

“I was right there with you,” she says in a low voice.

“Were you?” My back tenses, and I remember her earlier distance, the coldness of being shut out. “Felt like you were somewhere else.”

She tenses too, her body squirming. I don’t let her go. She’ll run, and I hate that.

“Killian, let me breathe.”

“Breathing’s overrated,” I mutter but roll off her.

Libby sits and swings her feet over the side of the bed, giving me her back. Fuck it. I’m not letting her hide. I push up and sit next to her.

“Scottie talked to me today,” she says, staring at the floor.

“I saw.” I’d been waiting for her to tell me. For any word. Instead I’d gotten silence.

An exasperated sound tears from her throat. “You could have warned me.”

“Yeah, I could have.” I run a hand along the back of my neck. “I didn’t want to.”

She turns toward me so fast, her hair slaps my shoulder. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

I snort, holding her glare. “So you could run from it? Talk yourself out of things before you heard what he had to say? No, Libs, I’m not kidding.”

“You don’t know that—”

“I do. I know you. Whether you want to admit that or not.” I lean closer. “I. Know. You.”

I hear her teeth clack. “If you know me so well,” she grinds out, “you should know I don’t want or need you to plot my life.”

“And if you knew me at all, you’d never accuse me of that.” I lurch to my feet and pace away, my face going hot. “Shit. I mean, you seriously think that’s what I did?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “You just admitted to talking to him!”

“Talking, Libs. That’s all. Jesus.” I clamp my hands to the back of my aching head. “He asked my opinion. I gave it. Don’t turn this into some wild conspiracy.”

Libby stands, her fists balling at her sides. “Are you telling me you didn’t bring me here thinking this would happen? That you didn’t, for one second, think about Scottie trying to make me something I’m not?”

“You think I’m going to deny that the second I played with you I knew you’d be great on a stage? I’m not.” I laugh without humor. “And you shouldn’t either.”

She blows out a breath. “I’m not a star.”

Something in me softens, and I take a step closer. “You’re already halfway there. You just don’t see it yet.”

Panic flares in her eyes, and she backs up, her lips parting as she struggles to breathe. “I want this.”

The crazy thing? I'm the one who lights up inside. Her successes have become mine. "Babe, you'll have it."

But she shakes her head as if I'm not getting it. "A few months ago, I was living by the sea. The only people I talked to were Mrs. Nellwood and old George at the gas station."

"And did you like it?"

"I hated it," she hisses, her eyes going glassy. "You took me out of that. I never dreamed this life would happen. But it's here. And now..." A furious blush stains her cheeks. God, my girl has pride by the boatload. But her confidence has been kicked hard. Libby brushes back a lock of her hair and lifts her chin like she's squaring off for a hit. "You agree with Scottie that I should do something that will take me away."

The implication hits me like a brick. My heart squeezes in my chest. She's so fucking wrong. How can she be so right for me and so wrong about herself? I close the gap between us and draw her into my arms. She struggles, trying to break free as I "shhh" her under my breath and rub her arms.

"It's not about sending you away, baby doll. It's about setting you free."

Her back stiffens. "Free? I'm sorry, but that's just semantics, Killian."

"No way," I say against her cheek, still holding fast. "You want the truth? When Scottie told me he was going to ask to represent you, a part of me hated the idea." My fingers grip her silky hair. "A big part of me. Because I want you here. With me. Always."

She sucks in a breath, like she's going to respond, probably tear into me. So I kiss her, soft, searching, then hard and a little desperate. We're both panting when I pull away. My chest hurts, and when I rest my forehead against hers, I'm suddenly so weary I have to close my eyes.

"But that's selfish, Libby. And I can't do that to you. Never to you. Because you deserve that chance, even if it pulls you away from me for a time. So I told him to go for it."

"Killian." She sighs and rubs her hands along my chest, almost as if it soothes her more than me. "Not everyone has your confidence. Some of us need to feel our way around a little."

My lips press against her forehead, and I breathe her in before speaking. "Babe, if I've learned anything about opportunity, it's that you make it happen. Fear will only hold you back. You can have the world. Just reach for it."

"I don't need the world," she whispers.

"What do you need?" I ask just as softly.

Her hands slide up to my neck, her lips nuzzling my jaw. "You."

I swear my knees go weak. I have to lock it up, suck in a breath. I hug her tight, unwilling to let go even to find her mouth. Not yet. "Fuck, Libby." I snuggle her closer. "We need to stop hiding. I fucking hate it."

I feel her tense and cup her cheeks. Her eyes are wide and panicked. It pisses me off and makes me want to cuddle her, protect her from the world. Only I'm the source of her pain. Which is a kick in the gut. It turns my voice raw. "You want me, but you want to hide us?"

"When you put it that way, you make it sound petty."

"Well, excuse me for stating the facts." Irritation crawls up my spine.

She flinches, her fingers wrapping around my wrists. She holds me there. "Words are simple, Killian. Real life is a bit more messy."

"Bullshit. Why are you resisting this? Because I gotta tell you, it hurts."

"Jax is just starting to respect me."

"Jax can go fuck himself," I snap, then sigh. "Baby doll, you have his respect. It's not going to go because we're together."

“You sure of that?” She doesn’t sound remotely convinced.

I open my mouth to answer, but it gets lodged in my throat. Because who the fuck knows with Jax anymore? Libby’s eyes narrow.

“You can’t even deny it,” she points out.

“Look, maybe I don’t know exactly how he’ll react.”

“And the reporter who asked me if I was fucking you?”

“What?” A lick of anger flicks against my neck. “Who the fuck asked you that?”

“A reporter in Chicago. She asked me flat out if I was fucking you. She wondered why else I—‘a nobody’—would be on tour with you.”

“All right, what’s this chick’s name, because I’m not having that shit.” In fact, I’m rethinking having any fucking reporters at our after parties. Not if they’re going to harass Libby.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says in a weary voice.

“Of course it does—”

“No, Killian. It doesn’t. Not if that’s what they’re all thinking. Getting them fired or cussing them out will only fan the flames.”

“Shit.” I pace in front of her, grasping the back of my neck. “It’s a bunch of bullshit, you know. Anyone who hears you knows you’re talented. Scottie wouldn’t want you as a client if you weren’t. Trust me on that one.”

“I do.” Libby approaches, eyes wide and pained. Her palm rests on my chest a second before she wraps her arms around my waist, and because I can’t stand not touching her, I hug her close. She nips at my neck then sighs. “I hate it, you know. You think it’s easy for me to hide how I feel?” She laughs but it doesn’t sound happy. “God, it’s the worst kind of torture. Even worse than back when we first meet and I was trying to keep my cool and not jump your hot bones.”

My eyes close again, and I rest my cheek on her head. “That so?”

“Mmm-hmmm... Because now, I know what I’m missing.” Her fingers steal under my shirt and stroke. “You are the best part of my day, Killian.”

My throat locks up with embarrassing swiftness, and I hold her tighter.

Delicate fingers run along my back. “Nothing would make me happier than being able to claim you in public. But that joy would be blackened if, in return, we have to deal with ugly speculation.”

I think about how I would have reacted if I’d heard the reporter ask Libby those questions. I would have lost my shit. I know it. And the knowledge sinks like a stone in my gut. Gone are the days of wild, out-of-control rocker behavior. You cause a scene, you’re gonna pay. Record label lawyers breathing down your neck about breach of contract and behavior clauses, press replaying your actions in slow motion over and over. It isn’t pretty.

One of the absolute worst parts of Jax’s suicide attempt were the clips of him being wheeled into an ambulance, which played on a seemingly endless loop, along with the smug-as-fuck reporters discussing why he did it and whether he’d ever recover his career. Was it the band’s fault, or was he was just trying to get attention?

Turning away from the life was the only recourse any of us had to maintain our sanity and dignity.

I take a heavy breath and let it out slow. “Okay, we don’t have to make it public yet. But the guys? They can keep secrets. Hell, we’re trained to close ranks. No one will know shit unless we let them. And I’m tired of hiding this from my friends. I’m tired of lying. It isn’t exactly admirable, either.”

She lets me go and runs her hand through her hair. “I know. But the guys won’t look at me the same way.”

“I disagree. But, hell, it shouldn’t matter what they think.”

She snorts, her lips twisting. “No, it shouldn’t. But it does. And I’ve yet to come across anyone who truly doesn’t care what the people they work with think about them.”

“I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.” She rests a hand on my chest. “You have more confidence than any one man has a right to, but you want your friends’ good opinions. You wanted it for me. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have done all that you did to smooth my way.”

Pressure tightens against my ribs, and I grunt. “Okay, fine. I want them to like you. I want us to get along. But—”

“Right now it’s just us in our own private little bubble. Everything changes when we tell them, for better or worse. If we could just wait...” She bites her lip. “Please, Killian? Please, just a little longer?”

My chest tightens even more. Sure, she has a point, but when will that ever change? And if she doesn’t want this now, when will she? I swallow hard against the lump in my throat. “I hate this. All day I wanted to touch you. It’s not even sex, Lib. I have to fight the impulse to hold your damn hand. I’m cut off at the balls.”

Her mouth quirks, but it only fuels my anger.

“I can’t do this much longer.” The words hang there, sounding harder than I intended.

“Do what?” she asks, her face paling.

I stare at her, realizing I could give an ultimatum. I could force the issue. I’m not used to feeling helpless or hurt. Fuck. I take a breath past the ache in my ribs. “You’ve had a lot heaped on you today. I’m taking a shower.” I back away from her, heading toward the bathroom. “Figure out your shit, Libby. I’ll be here when you do.”

* * * *

Libby

I’ve hurt him. I know this. I knew it when I asked Killian to keep our relationship quiet, and when I asked him to continue doing it. I hate hurting him. But I see what he either can’t or refuses to acknowledge. The world isn’t black and white. And the band isn’t all right. They’re walking wounded right now. The love between them is clear. They’re brothers. But Jax leveled a blow they’re still reeling from. And the idea of adding more drama, more uncertainty makes me feel ill.

At first, it was pride that had motivated me to keep my relationship with Killian a secret. But now it’s something more. I care about these guys, as individuals and as a group. I don’t want to get between them when they’re obviously still fragile.

I tell myself all of this. But it doesn’t help when we climb into a limo and head out for the night. The guys want to relax, let off some steam by going to clubs. I should have stayed in, but when Whip called to ask, the look on Killian’s face—as if he expected I’d keep away from him—hurt too.

So here I am, crammed in between Whip and Rye, who are trading jokes over my head: most of them about Killian’s supposed intestinal distress. Putting the pieces together, it sounds as if Killian made an excuse to return to me at the expense of his pride. I feel even lower.

Not that Killian appears bothered by their teasing. He sits across the way, his long body lounging against the seat, his thighs spread wide as if he means to take up as much space as possible. As we drive along, the lights of the city slip in and out of the darkened car, illuminating his face, then throwing it into shadow.

He doesn't say much, only stares out of the window and occasionally snorts at a shit joke. But then, as if he feels my stare, he glances my way. Our gazes clash, and it's as if someone's pulled a rug from under my feet. My insides swoop, heat prickles over my skin. And on the heels of that comes a rush of emotion, squeezing at my heart, catching me by the throat.

It's always this way. He looks at me, I fall. I have an awful feeling it will be this way my entire life. Killian James wakes me up, makes me whole.

I want to tell him this, to put my hand in his and ask that he never let go. But he glances off, leaning over to say something to Jax. I can't hear what—my heart is thundering in my ears.

The car halts, the door opens. I'm ushered out to follow the flow of the guys into a club. We head up to a VIP section at the top of a massive circular steel staircase. People watch as we go.

Gazes crawl over my skin. For years the guys have lived this way. I don't know how they manage. Perhaps they love it. They're all smiling, clasping hands with people they know, pausing to hear someone whisper in their ears.

Killian is ahead of me, walking with Jax. They're practically mobbed by women, until just their heads are visible above the swarm. I set my jaw and follow. This is part of Killian's life. There isn't a thing I can say here because, in the world's eyes, I'm just his friend. This hasn't bothered me before now. It felt more like a secret we shared between us. Women could hover, but they'd never go home with him.

Now it just hurts. Because it suddenly seems as though I'm glimpsing a future where I'm not there. I can't even pinpoint why I feel this way. Only that Killian and I have been moving along at full-tilt and the slightest knock might push us off course. Or maybe it's because I know that Killian doesn't need me as much as I need him. Why would he? He has the world. And I am completely out of my element when it comes to this life.

"I need a pity party cocktail," I say in Brenna's ear as she comes alongside me.

Her gold eye shadow glints in the light. "Extra strength?"

"And fruity," I add. "Pity cocktails should always be fruity."

She grabs my elbow and leads me to a somewhat quiet little booth in the far corner of the room before she goes off to get us drinks. There are times when the band requests a small room just for them. This is not one of those nights. People flow in and out—mostly in—like cattle through a gate. The music isn't as loud in here, but it's enough that conversation isn't going to be on the agenda. Whip is already standing on one of the tables, dancing with a brunette in a tiny silver dress.

I regret not putting on a little dress as well. In a sea of itty-bitty dresses, I'm the conservative one in black skinny jeans, heeled boots, and a green silk camisole. I'm comfortable, but I don't feel sexy. There are times when a girl needs sexy. That's the thing no one ever tells you. Sexy can be both a weapon and a wall of defense.

The booth I'm sitting in wiggles as Rye plops down next to me. He drapes an arm along the back of my shoulders and leans in. "What's shakin', bacon?"

My lips pull in a reluctant smile. "Nothin', stuffin'."

He takes a sip of what appears to be a gin and tonic—because of course he's already been served. There's probably a waitress on standby for him. "You look like you've swallowed a goat."

“A goat?” I laugh. “How the hell does that look?”

“Faintly ill and fighting a gag.”

“You really know how to make a girl feel good about herself, Rye.”

He sticks the tip of his tongue between his teeth in a lewd gesture, but then his expression turns gentle. “I’m serious, Buttercup. You all right?”

“Buttercup?”

“Yeah, you kind of look like Princess Buttercup.”

“That’s about as far a stretch as saying you look like the Dread Pirate Roberts.”

“I could totally rock a mask. It’d be kinky as fuck.” He takes another sip, his eyes roaming before coming back to me. “So, what’s going on? Someone being mean to you?”

“What? No. It’s nothing.”

“You sure? Because I don’t have these massive biceps just for show. I’ll gladly put on the hurt for you.”

“You’re sweet. But it’s really nothing. This is just not my scene.”

“It’s no one’s scene. You have to own it to make it yours.”

“Well, I’m not interested.”

A glance across the room and find Killian’s familiar form. He has two women clinging to his arms, though he doesn’t seem to notice them as he talks to John, one of our sound engineers. The blonde on his left clearly doesn’t like being ignored and begins to stroke his chest. My own chest tightens, and I look away.

“Right there,” Rye points to my face. “Goat look.”

“Argh, would you stop using goat? I’m going to develop a complex.” My laugh feels forced. “I’m fine.”

“Here we are,” Brenna announces brightly as she sets down two martini glasses, filled with lime green liquid. “One fruity, pity-party cocktail—industrial strength.”

Rye gives me a look. “You were saying?”

“What was she saying?” Brenna asks, sitting down and taking a sip of her drink.

At this point it’s a miracle she’s including Rye in the conversation, so even though I’d rather not talk about it, I answer. “That I do not look like I swallowed a goat.”

One finely plucked brow rises. “Of course you don’t, darling. It’s more like you sucked a lemon.”

I roll my eyes and grab my drink. It’s tart, sweet, and burns a little going down. Perfect.

“She’s in a mood,” Rye says. Without warning, he wraps a beefy arm around me and pulls me in for a hug, sloshing my drink all over the table. “There, there, Buttercup, tell me who put the frown on your face, and I’ll best them with my sword.”

A weak laugh breaks free, and I rest my head on his shoulder. I’m an only child, but I know Rye would have made an excellent big brother.

It’s almost strange how I can feel Killian when he comes near. One second, I’m grinning, feeling a bit heartsore but cared for. The next, my body tenses, my heart rate picking up. I know it’s because of him, and it’s not a surprise to look up and see him standing in front of our table.

The blonde is still on his arm. The woman hasn’t done anything remotely wrong, and I hate her.

Everything inside me plummets. I feel like I’ve swallowed a goat.

His gaze flicks to me, then settles on Rye. Tension lines his mouth as he bends forward to be heard. “Hey, man, Jenny here wanted to meet you.”

Rye instantly untangles himself from me and gestures for Jenny to scoot in on his opposite side. "By all means. Meet me, adore me, buy me a drink. I'm good with all the above."

A barely veiled gagging noise comes from Brenna's direction. Rye ignores it and tugs Jenny down on his lap.

While she giggles and snuggles close to Rye, Killian glances back at me. His eyes are hard, and I want to laugh. Does he really think I'm cozying up to Rye? The twitch at his jaw tells me he does. I glare back, annoyance plucking at my skin.

"I was going to ask if you two needed anything," he says, overloud to compensate for the music. "But it looks like you're taken care of."

I'd like to tell him where he can take his snide tone. But Brenna cuts in. "Hang out with us." She sounds almost desperate, her body stiff and her gaze resolutely *not* on Rye and his new friend.

Killian doesn't look at me as he shakes his head. "Jax has been giving me shit about being a *hermit*," he emphasizes the word like a whip in my direction. "Hiding away in a booth isn't going to help."

Ass. I'm not a hermit. Not since he dragged me into this life and made me see what I was missing. And I don't hide. Okay, right now I have the urge to crawl back into my shell. But I've grown out of it. I'd be miserable there too.

A lump rises in my throat, loneliness washing over me like a wave. But then Killian turns to me, leaning in a little. Even in the cold, musty air of the club, I catch his scent, spicy and warm. His coffee eyes soften. "You good?"

The lump in my throat grows. He's giving me what I asked for. Anonymity. If I don't want our relationship public, this is how it has to be. But he's still mine. I can see it now in the way his eyes suddenly look pained.

"I'm good," I croak.

He peers at me for another second, then nods. "See you."

As soon as he's gone, I deflate in my seat.

"Trouble in paradise?" Brenna murmurs in my ear.

I down the rest of my cocktail before answering. "He doesn't like hiding."

I don't worry about Rye overhearing. He already has his tongue down Jenny's throat, and they're slowly listing to the right.

Brenna ignores them, her expression so smoothed out, I know it's costing her. She takes a sip of her cocktail. "My cousin is surprisingly forthright."

"You think I'm a jerk, don't you?" I need another drink.

"God, no." She leans against my shoulder in a show of support. "You're protecting yourself in a shit world. Doesn't mean he'll like it."

"I thought I was protecting myself," I tell her, misery swamping me faster than the alcohol can numb it. "But thinking back on how I felt when that reporter questioned me, I think I'd rather tell the world to fuck themselves than cower."

Brenna knows all about my run in with Ms. Zelda Smith. "Yeah, well, Zelda didn't seem to have a problem fucking a band member, so she can't exactly throw stones."

"Honestly, I don't want the public in my business. Ever. But that's more about being a private person in general."

"They don't have to be. Famous people hide their relationships all the time. Well..." She gives me an apologetic smile. "For as long as they can, anyway."

Famous. I want to laugh. I'm not famous. But Killian is. And his life is just coming back into focus.

"If it were just me and him? I might not mind so much. But the guys are getting back together. Jax clearly didn't want me joining them."

"You're protecting them." She sounds genuinely surprised.

"Is that so wrong?"

A frown works over her face, and she turns her attention toward the part of the room where the guys are now laughing in a group—well, except for Rye, who is making noises so lewd I really don't want to look.

Brenna's expression softens as she watches Killian and Whip do some weird sort of hip bump, as if they're demonstrating a dance move to a bunch of starry-eyed women. "You should have seen them before Jax... They were like a bunch of puppies." She laughs, takes a drink. "We all were, really. Even Scottie. It was this wild ride, never coming down, party, play, party."

Emptiness fills me. I can't be that girl. I don't want to be.

Brenna glances at me. "It was all bullshit, though. Nothing real. When Jax tried to— It broke us all."

"Killian said as much—about it shaking them up."

"He's right. Yanked us out of childhood." She shakes her head, pursing her glossy red lips. "It's not a bad thing, Libby. Living like that wasn't healthy. These boys, they had nothing to ground them. Nothing that meant anything."

The music changes to "Right Now" by Mary J. Blige, and a woman pulls Killian out to dance. He lets her. He's not doing anything lewd. Just dancing. Doesn't change the fact that another woman has her hands on him, swaying and grinding with the beat.

Brenna talks quietly in my ear. "Life moves forward, Libby. Trying to stop it or rewind is a waste of energy."

Watching Killian dance cuts into my heart. I can't breathe. I have never been a jealous person. I can safely say it's the worst emotion on earth. And now it writhes inside me until I want to throw up just to get rid of the feeling.

All the things I've said to him, all the things he's said to me, the things we've done—all of it—whirl around in my brain. I think about that day I first saw him sprawled on my lawn. If I had picked up the phone and called the police instead of engaging with him, I'd be blissfully ignorant right now. Safely hidden away from the world. From life. A life without Killian.

When the woman's hand drifts to Killian's butt, I stand, knocking into the table. Drinks slosh, the table screeches.

"Excuse me," I mutter to Brenna, who wisely scrambles out of my way.

My exit from the table is far from graceful, more like a bulldozer pushing everything out of its way. And Killian's head jerks up, his eyes finding mine. A worried look works across his face.

I can only stare back, drinking in the sight of him.

His dark hair, cropped close to his well-shaped skull, highlights the sharp curve of his cheek bones, the slashes of his brows, and the soft curl of his lips. He is a beautiful man. Dressed in a black button-down shirt and black slacks, he also looks nothing like the man I found drunk on my lawn. Here, he is the slick millionaire, the effortlessly cool rocker, an untouchable idol everyone wants a piece of.

People surround him, a wall of human flesh between him and me. I ignore it all. This isn't what's real.

His frown grows as I walk, my steps determined. Inside, my heart is pounding. I don't know what he sees in my face, but his careful expression shatters. Dark eyes fill with purpose, his body standing taller. He excuses himself and moves, liquid grace, powerful strides.

I start to shake, deep within me. Desire I can handle. But the emotion in his face, as if he knows—*he knows*—I'm breaking apart, and he is too, blurs my vision. I blink twice and go to him, shouldering people aside.

He meets me halfway, stopping before me, his height blocking out everything around us. He gazes down at me, searching my face. "Elly May?"

My head tilts back to meet his gaze. "Lawn bum." I reach up, cup his cheek, sandy with stubble, and tug him close. Our lips meet, his questioning, mine demanding. And then he lets out a low sound, like a sigh, but rougher, needy. His arms wrap around me, hauling my body against his as he angles his head and sinks into a kiss that takes the strength from my knees. But Killian has me secure.

There, on the dance floor, we kiss, and it's messy, dirty, and filled with silent confessions: *I'm sorry. I know. I need you. I need you more.*

When we finally pull back, his lips curve in a half smile, and his fingers lace with mine. "All right, then."

I touch his cheek again. "I adore you, Killian James. Whatever may come of it, I'm no longer willing to hide you away like you're something to be ashamed of. Everyone should know that."

His smile grows, and he rests his forehead on mine. "Pretty sure everyone does now."

I snuggle into his embrace. "Good. Then I won't have to take out an ad."

A half-laugh rumbles out of him. His hand slides up to my neck and gives me a squeeze. I close my eyes.

"Time to go," he whispers. "Before I take you right here."

I can't stop grinning. "Move your things to my room. Or I'll move to yours."

"Baby doll." He kisses me again, softly this time, then presses his cheek to mine. "I do, too, you know. So much it hurts."

"Are you two done?"

Jax's irritated tone erases our glow in an instant. Killian straightens to his full height and turns. Jax's look of utter disgust actually hurts to see. I'm not sure I even like the guy, but he's Killian's closest friend and important to him.

"Yeah," Killian says slowly, ice in his voice. "We're done."

Jax snorts. "I fucking knew it. Thinking with your dick."

I twitch, and Killian's grip on my hand firms as he pulls me closer to his side.

The room stirs, and I realize Brenna and Scottie are directing people out. Bouncers do a great job of helping them clear the room in what seems like seconds.

"Jax, man," Killian says. "Don't go there."

"Why not? We're all thinking it."

Whip draws near. "We're not *all* thinking that."

"Definitely not what I'm thinking," Rye adds. "About time, is more like it." He gives me a happy smile. "No more swallowing goats."

"No," I say, giving him a small smile back.

The rest of the guys are clearly confused by that one.

But Jax snorts. "And yet you all know exactly what I'm thinking."

“Why don’t you lay it out for me?” Killian asks. There is a silky, dark note in his voice that I’ve never heard before. A definite warning.

Jax either doesn’t hear it or doesn’t care. “If you wanted your side piece to come on tour, you should have just said so. You didn’t have to drag her on stage and mess with the band.”

Killian sucks in a sharp breath and lets it out slowly. “I’m not gonna hit you,” he finally says. “You deserve it. But I’m not. Get this now. That is the last time you disrespect Libby. You got me?”

Jax glances at me, and for a second I see a wince of regret, then it’s gone. “You disrespected yourself,” he says, “hiding and pretending this was about performing.”

“You’re right,” I say before Killian can respond. “Which is why I’m no longer hiding.”

“But you’re still going to pretend like you belong here?”

Okay, that hurt.

Killian snarls, taking a step toward Jax. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“My problem? You fucking lied. To all of us.”

“Dude,” Rye says, shaking his head at Jax. “It was obvious they were together.”

“Seriously. Take your head out of your ass, man,” Whip adds, giving Killian a cheeky smile. “I knew he was gone on her the moment he started waxing lyrical about her voice. And it’s not like they’re very good at hiding those moony looks they keep throwing each other.”

Killian’s eyes narrow. “You knew and you were going to ask her out?”

“Naw, I was just fucking with you, Big K. You should have seen your face. I thought you were going to bust something.” Whip laughs.

“I was about to bust *your* face,” Killian mutters, but he doesn’t look truly pissed. Not at Whip, anyway. He sets his attention back on Jax. “You used to be better than this.”

“And you used to be straight with me.”

Killian’s brows lift. “You get the hypocrisy you’re throwing my way, right?”

The corners of Jax’s mouth go white. “Nice.”

“Jax,” Whip begins, but Jax gives him a quelling look.

“We didn’t need this bullshit right now,” Jax says. He walks off without another word.

Chapter 23

Killian

“Libs?” My voice is barely above a whisper in the dark hotel bedroom.

Hers comes back just as soft. “Yeah?”

“When I told you I’d never had a girlfriend, it wasn’t to score points. It was a warning.”

Sheets rustle as she lifts up on her elbow. The soft fall of her hair slides over her shoulder, the silky tips tickling my arm. “Warning?”

I roll on my side and pick up a lock of her hair. “That I have no idea what I’m doing. That I’ll probably do stupid shit.”

“Killian, what the hell are you talking about?” She doesn’t sound annoyed, more amused.

My eyes have adjusted to the dark enough that I can make out her features. Naked and mussed after hours of sex, she’s also so beautiful, I’m having a hard time concentrating. But her brows lift a little as if to prompt me to speak.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her.

“Sorry? Why?” She shakes her head. “I’m the one who should be sorry. I hurt you. And it hurts me too.”

I’m pretty sure if I kiss her now, I’m not going to stop. So I give the ends of her hair a gentle tug in acknowledgment. “Same goes, baby doll.” A sigh escapes me before I can rein it in. “You were right. I push too hard to get what I believe is best, and I don’t think things through. Tonight was a shit show. Just as you predicted.”

Already, the press is going crazy. I haven’t told her about the social media frenzy and the way the world is now demanding our story—and to know everything about her. I don’t want that nonsense invading this space.

She doesn’t say anything for a second, then her warm palm finds my chest. I close my eyes as she smooths her hand over my skin. “We were both wrong. And both right.”

I blow out a breath and look up at her. “I’m going to have Brenna put out a statement that we fell for each other during the tour, and that’s all we’re giving them.”

Libby’s brows draw together. “Why?”

“Because your happiness is more important to me than anything else.” A dark, ugly slide of regret goes down my insides. “And I’ll be damned if anyone treats you the way Jax did tonight. I’m sorry about that too, Libs. So fucking sorry.”

Her hand slides up to my neck as she leans down and kisses my chest, right over my heart. Soft lips brush over my nipple before her little teeth nip it. My abs tighten in response, and a familiar heat surges up my tired, but clearly still eager, cock. Libby gives me one more tender kiss, then braces her arms on my chest. “Promise me something.”

“Anything.” My arms come around her waist, tugging her closer.

She smiles. “You might regret answering so easily.”

“Never.” I kiss the crook of her neck, stroke her hair.

“Don’t be mad at Jax.”

Well, hell. I draw back enough to meet her gaze. “Feelings are a little hard to ignore, Libs. And I’m fucking pissed.”

The tip of her finger traces my eyebrow. “I know you are. I’m asking you not to be. You need each other.”

I want to argue, but she talks over me.

“And you aren’t happy when you’re pissed at him.”

“There are times when I truly dislike that you read me so well,” I tell her.

“He has a right to be mad. I was wrong to ask you to hide it from your friends, and I plan to apologize in the morning.”

My back teeth clench. “He had better apologize in return. That shit was uncalled for—”

“Killian,” she chides. “Let it go. I don’t want to regret what I did tonight.”

“Regret it?” I scoff, dragging her fully on top of me where she belongs. Her soft tits pillow on my chest, and I grunt with contentment. “You’d better not. That was hot as hell. *Very Officer and a Gentleman.*”

She giggles. I love when my girl giggles. She needs more lightness in her life. “What are you on?”

“It was,” I protest, kissing the tip of her nose. “I half expected you to pick me up and carry me out of there.”

Her laugh is full-out now. “Nerd.”

I nod. “And I loved seeing you jealous.”

“I was not,” she protests, her nose wrinkling in disgust.

“Was too.”

“Not even.”

“So much. Your skin had a green tint. Pretty, but not as pretty as it is now, all sex-flushed and wanting more. It’s okay, you know. I’ll give it to you. I’m easy that way.”

Her laughter shakes her body, the smooth curve of her belly pressing into my hard dick. She shakes her head again. “Good. I’ll always want it from you.” Her eyes glint in the dim light. “And I was jealous.”

“That’s it.” I roll over, pinning her to the bed. “No sleep tonight. Because I need to make a few things clear, and it might take some time.”

* * * *

Libby

Killian makes himself at home on top of me, bracing himself on his forearms.

“I’m not going to be jealous anymore,” I tell him before he can speak. A counterstrike, because jealous is a petty emotion I don’t want any part of, if I can help it. “That was a rare anomaly.”

“Okay.” He answers so easily, as if content with whatever I say. I think he’s just humoring me. His brows lift a touch, and there’s a smile in his eyes. “Did you stake your claim on me tonight because you were jealous?”

“You know I did.” I poke his side, finding the spot that makes him yelp before I grow serious. “Actually, I thought of how my life would be if I’d never met you, and didn’t have you in it. That is unacceptable.”

“You’ll never have to know how it would be,” he whispers. “Because I’m not letting you go.”

Cupping the back of his neck, I kiss him. And he sighs, sinking into it.

“Seeing you pawed by other women did suck, however.” I give him that honesty because he deserves it.

“I hate being pawed by other women,” he breathes against my lips. “Kiss me and make it all better.”

I do, practically eating at his mouth because Killian tastes so good, and because no matter how many times I touch him, I always want more. My body trembles, my legs twining around his waist, pulling him closer.

He undulates against me, rocking his hips into mine, clinging like he’ll never get enough either.

One of his hands slides to my neck, stroking it, the other dips between us. His fingers find mine, guiding them down. I wrap my hand around his hot flesh, and he groans.

“This is yours,” he says, thrusting a little in my grip. “As his owner you have an obligation to take good care of him.”

I smile against his mouth. “Oh, yeah?”

“Mmm...” He nips my chin, makes his way down my neck. “Pet him, kiss him, keep him warm at night, entertained during the day.”

I stroke along his length, squeezing the tip. Killian hums in approval.

“Like that, yeah.” He sucks at the crook of my neck. “So you know, he’ll also need plenty of quality time with his new best friend, Pretty Pussy.”

A soft laugh escapes me, but my body heats. I’m bone-tired and sore. We’ve been at it all night, and still I want him inside of me again, pushing his way in with that low, greedy grunt he always makes. The thought makes me lightheaded. My thumb circles the broad head of his cock, where it weeps. For me.

“If he’s mine,” I whisper, nibbling at his ear, “maybe he doesn’t have to get all dressed up when he comes in for a visit.”

Killian stills, his breath warm and damp at my neck. “Are you saying you want me to fuck you bare?”

I can’t tell if surprise or caution tightens his voice. I’ve never asked a guy to go without. I’ve never wanted to. But I do with Killian. “Do you not want to?” I ask, cautious now too. “Because it’s okay if you—”

“I want it,” he cuts in, husky and insistent. His gaze darts over my face. “You on the pill now?”

“Had a shot. Three months of clear sailing. So to speak.”

A familiar, cocky grin spreads over his face. “You know, going without, this speaks of long-term commitment, doesn’t it? You don’t say, ‘Fuck me bare,’ unless you’re thinking it’s just you and me for a long time.”

I still, lifting my head up. “You’re pulling me out of my happy place, Killian James.”

His chuckle vibrates along my skin. “And here I am about to sink right into my happiest place.” My noise of annoyance only serves to make his eyes crinkle. “Babe, it’s just you and me.” With that, his too thick, too hard, too fucking perfect cock pushes in.

That first thrust of his is always a shock to the system, my body reacting to the invasion with a ripple of pure heat and a pinch of sweet pain. But it’s that feeling of connection, our bodies finding each other again in the most elemental way that clutches my heart.

Killian enters me, and I am whole. It is that simple.

I know he feels it too, because his body trembles on a gusty sigh. He doesn’t stop until he’s made his way fully inside—big, bold, and undeniable.

“Hey,” he says softly, holding himself there. “Look at me.”

My lids flutter open, that lazy, languid feeling coursing through my body like liquid golden heat.

His eyes shine with emotion. “You and me, Libby. We stick together, and everything will be okay.”

I believe him. There in the dark, surrounded by his strength, I believe that nothing will ever tear us apart.

Chapter 24

Libby

Seattle. It's cold. It's rainy. It's beautiful. It's also the last stop on the US leg of the tour. From here we go overseas—, to Berlin first. I have no idea why we're jumping all over the place, but Brenna has explained it has to do with concert promoters and venue schedules. I really don't care; going to Europe is exciting, and I can't wait.

For now, though, it's Seattle. Once we check into our hotel, the guys and I pile into a van Whip rented. He's driving, and for once, it's just the five of us. No crew, no managers, assistants, or journalists. It's kind of nice.

First stop is Caffè Ladro, where I'm served a latte so pretty with its little stacked hearts on the foam that I almost don't want to sip it. But I do, because the roasted-coffee scent is making my mouth water. It's rich, creamy, dark, and damn delicious. I don't feel even a little embarrassed when I moan.

The guys chuckle, but are equally engrossed with their own drinks.

A couple of scones and a second round—this time in to-go cups because, damn, that's good coffee—and we head out to Aberdeen and Kurt Cobain Memorial Park. Cobain's ashes were scattered, so this is the closest thing the guys can get to a grave site, and they want to pay their respects.

A soft mist falls when we finally find the park. It's tiny and forlorn, not much to it. Frankly, the place depresses me. A homeless man shuffles by, headed for the bridge by the river as we stand in silence around a stone guitar memorial marker.

Killian's arm wraps around my shoulders, tucking me close, with Jax on my other side, huddled up as we all are. I'm fairly certain Killian finds the place equally sad. But it's Jax's expression that catches my attention. He appears haunted and faintly green around the mouth.

I know Cobain was his idol. There are similarities between them—both left handed guitar players, both shot to fame with dizzying speed, and both unable to handle it. Unfortunately Cobain, unlike Jax, succeeded in ending his life.

I have no idea what Jax is thinking, but I can't stop myself from taking his hand in mine. He stiffens at the contact, sucking in a swift breath. I'm not surprised. We haven't spoken much since he found out about my relationship with Killian. He hasn't been rude or shunned me, but he's definitely retreated further into his shell.

Not looking up, I give his hand a squeeze, try to tell him I'm here, that I'm his friend if he'll have me.

His cold fingers lay still for a moment, then slowly, he squeezes back.

“‘Love Buzz’ was the first song I learned to play on bass,” Rye says suddenly. He laughs. “Didn't even realize Nirvana was doing a cover until years later.”

“If they loved a song, they'd play it,” Killian says. “No pretension about only doing their own songs. It was all about the music.”

Jax's smile is barely a curl of his lips. “Remember that phase when we tried to sing like Kurt?” He glances at Killian. “And you lost your voice?”

They all laugh as Killian winces. “Ah, man. I sounded like a bull being castrated.”

I snicker at that. Especially since Killian's voice is closer to Chris Cornell's. "In college, someone fed me 'special brownies'" I tell them. "I had no idea what they were. I ended up dancing around the dorm, singing 'Heart-Shaped Box.'"

"I'd pay money to have seen that," Killian says. "Big money."

"Apparently, I had food on the brain, since I kept singing, 'Hey, Blaine, I've got a blue corn plate! Falling deeper in depth on piles of black rice.'"

The guys crack up. I join them until our laughter drifts off.

We stand silent for a minute more, lost in our thoughts. Then Jax lets me go, and we head back to the van. On the way I notice Killian's bloodshot eyes. I'd been so worried about Jax, I hadn't thought about how it would be for the rest of them. They very well could have done what I did for their friend.

But Killian gives me a small, quiet smile. "Thank you," he says, glancing at Jax, then kissing me softly. "He needed that."

Hours later, my subdued mood hasn't lifted as we attend Kill John's record label party at the hotel's rooftop pool area. The views of Puget Sound are breathtaking, the food excellent. The people? Loud and plastic comes to mind.

"You're with me tonight, kid." Whip appears at my side and pulls me into a hard half hug. I almost choke on my salmon puff.

"To what do I owe this honor?" I ask as I wipe a crumb from my lip.

His pretty profile is stern as he surveys the crowd. "The piranhas are out in full force tonight. A guy could get eaten alive."

There *are* a lot of gorgeous women here, and a lot of suits, as Killian calls the record label execs. I don't know which makes Whip more wary. I'm definitely not liking the way the suits keep looking at me as if I'm a stray that wandered into the party uninvited. Though it's probably all in my head.

"You need to be my beard," Whip tells me for clarification.

"You're bi?" I ask, because I really don't know.

He glances at me, blue eyes twinkling. "Well, as a teen, I thought a little variety would add to my sexual mystique. But, alas, dicks do nothing for me. I'm all about the kitty."

I'm rolling my eyes when another male hand wraps around my wrist. This touch I know well.

Killian gives Whip a look. "Dude, get your own woman."

"I tried. You cockblocked me." Whip winks at me.

"What happened to that reporter you were all over at the movies?" I ask.

"You saw that?"

"Everyone saw that," Killian and I say in unison.

Whip makes a face. "Turns out she thought the best way to get info out of me was to suck it through my dick."

"Sounds labor-intensive," Killian says with a laugh.

"More like a lost cause." Whip's nostrils flare then his expression clears. "But she had great technique."

"*La-la-la*," I sing. "I can't hear you."

Laughing, Whip lets go as Killian fits himself behind me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders.

"See," Whip quips. "Cockblocker."

Killian's cheek rests against mine for a second before he gives my temple a kiss. "He thinks because we're faux cousins I won't kick his ass. He's wrong."

They're grinning, so I ignore the boast. "Faux cousins?" I ask.

"Chicks used to think we were related because we look so much alike," Whip tells me. "We said we were cousins. For some weird-ass reason, that got us a lot of play." He frowns. "Women are strange creatures."

I laugh, snuggling back into Killian's embrace. He's warm, solid, and all mine. "If you say so. Though I think it probably had more to do with you both being hot, as opposed to related."

"See?" Whip says brightly. "She thinks I'm hot."

"She thinks I'm hotter," Killian counters. "Don't you, babe?"

"Scottie's really the hottest of you all," I tell them.

Killian chuckles darkly, and his hand slips down just a bit. Under the cover of his bent arm, his fingers graze the side of my breast, his warm palm giving me a gentle squeeze. I squirm a little and feel his grin against my neck. "If you say so, baby doll."

Cheeky ass.

Whip rolls his eyes, but leans in and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Any time you want to dump this bum, you know where to find me."

He gives Killian a tap on the shoulder as he heads into the crowd.

"Can we leave now?" Killian murmurs. His hand is still busy, slowly fondling me, each touch getting heavier, more direct. I squirm again, my butt pushing against his rising interest. He grunts low, nudges me back.

"We can't," I whisper, though I really want to agree. "You promised Scottie you'd make nice with those journalists."

Killian sighs, grinding his dick against my bottom one last time before letting me go. "Okay, fine. But we're not staying long."

I watch him walk away, because his ass in those well-worn jeans is a thing of beauty. I'm already regretting being good tonight.

"Wow," says a male voice in the dark. "You've got Whip Dexter and Killian James wrapped around your finger. You must be good."

The bar table next to me is tucked in the shadows, away from the bulk of the party. I hadn't seen the guy until now.

He steps my way, clearly thinking he's the shit. Tight black, leather pants, flowing white silk shirt. I want to ask him which '80s hair band's wardrobe he raided. He's extremely good looking, in a slick, pretty boy way—dark hair falling over his brow, pouty lips, fine, almost girlish features.

I stare at him, unimpressed with the way he casually flicks his hair back from his face. "Good at what?" I mean, I know what. I just want him to say it.

"You doing them both?" He shows his teeth. "Or maybe taking the whole band on?"

"Let me ask you something. Do you actually think that's acceptable to say to someone?"

Pretty Boy gives me an innocent smile. "Aw, come on. I'm just kidding around. Seriously. I know the score. We newbies don't get anywhere without a little persuasion." He offers me his hand. "I'm Marlow."

I glance at the offered hand. "Marlow, I don't care if you sucked dick to get invited here or not. But do not disrespect women as an opening line." I push off from the table. "If you'll excuse me."

A hard hand slaps down on my shoulder, and I'm wrenched around. The guy is scary strong—something I didn't anticipate because he looks all of a hundred twenty pounds. Angry grey eyes glare down at me. "You've got a some nerve," he snarls, his fingers biting into my skin. "I'm a signed artist. Who are you? Killian James' fucking whore."

"Get the hell off—"

He invades my space, my back hitting the edge of the bar table. "Why don't you play nice? Be a little friendly."

It's then I see how glassy his eyes are, the pupils wide. It distracts me. Without warning, he grabs my breast and squeezes. Hard.

Revulsion, rage, shock—all of it floods me. For a bright, hot second I can't move. And then the rage takes control. My hand flies up, fingers punching into his eye sockets.

He rears back, stumbling, and I knee him between the legs. Unfortunately, my hit glances off his thigh. But he's stunned and blinking frantically, snarling out curses.

I know when to run. My heels grind into the pavement as I pivot, my heart in my throat, flight taking over fight. I hear him coming for me.

"Fucking bitch!" Nails scratch my exposed back, catching on my halter. It rips, the sound loud against the buzzing in my ears.

My hands fly to my top, grasping my breasts to keep the fabric from falling down farther. I think I cry out. I don't know for sure because another shout drowns out all sound.

And then Killian is there, bearing down on us like death. I sob. His expression actually scares me, even though I know it isn't directed my way. He brushes by me, and with another enraged bellow, grabs Marlow by his neck.

The guy doesn't stand a chance. Killian slams him to the patio pavement. He doesn't talk, doesn't hesitate, just starts whaling on the guy with his fists. It's terrifying, brutal.

Around me, a crowd gathers. Phone camera flashes go off, others held up to record it all. Three more guys blow past me. Whip, Rye, and Jax.

They're trying to pull Killian off a struggling Marlow, who gets a hit in. Not that Killian feels it. He strains against Whip and Jax's hold. "Get the fuck off. You mother fucker..." And with that, he kicks Marlow. A security guard rushes into the fray.

I bite back another sob. Something soft and warm settles over my shoulders: a tiny beaded shrug jacket. At my side, a woman with heavy gold eye makeup gives me a small smile. "It's all I have." She puts an arm around me, drawing the shrug farther over my exposed shoulders. "You okay, hon?"

She's a groupie. I know her on sight. And her kindness breaks me. I start to cry again. Two other women join us, closing ranks, protecting me from the cameras.

Maybe Killian's rage has run its course. Maybe he hears me. Whatever the reason, he throws off Jax and Whip with a snarled "I'm good."

His gaze finds me, and the ugly expression on his face crumples as he comes. "Libs."

I clutch his shirt as he hugs me hard, his body damp with sweat. The rest is a blur as we're ushered back to our room. But not before I see Scottie's expression. Shit has clearly hit the fan.

* * * *

"What the bloody hell was that?"

Killian looks up from his spot on the couch and gives Scottie a cold look. "That was me kicking a shitbag's ass."

He hasn't stopped shaking, and he hasn't let me go. Even when a doctor looked at his swollen and bruised hand—and suggested Killian should have an X-ray for broken bones—he had an arm around me, squeezing me tight. The only time he released me was to pull off his shirt and put it on me.

Scottie snorts now. “That shitbag was Marlow. The label's newest and hottest young star, for fuck's sake.”

Lovely. The sick feeling in my stomach intensifies.

“He's going to be singing through a feeding tube if I see him again,” Killian snaps.

“At any rate,” Scottie retorts, “I was asking Libby, not you.”

All eyes turn to me, except for Killian's. He just cuddles me closer. “Leave her the fuck alone. She's been through enough.”

“It's okay, Killian.” I rub my hand down his forearm, trying to calm him. He grunts but relaxes a little.

Scottie, Jax, Whip, Rye, and Brenna are all waiting. I take a deep breath, because remembering makes me shake as well. “He came out of nowhere,” I say. “Said that I should...” I glance at Killian.

He exhales a hard breath. “Just say it, baby doll. I'm not going to hunt him down or anything.”

This doesn't sound remotely sincere.

“He suggested that since I was servicing all the members of Kill John, I should do the same with him.”

“Mother fucker,” snarls Killian.

“Dicknozzle,” Whip mutters.

The rest are silent. Waiting for me to continue.

“I...ah...told him what I thought about that, then I tried to leave.” Cold fear trickles down my spine. I'm safe. I know this. But I don't feel it. At my side I feel Killian tense more and more. He's practically twitching.

I blink several times. “He...ah...grabbed my breast.”

Killian makes a sound I can't even interpret, and I'm suddenly on his lap, wrapped up tight. I breathe for a couple of seconds before I finish the story. “This blow-up was my fault.”

“No fucking way,” hisses Killian.

“It's never your fault,” Brenna cuts in. She's been silent until now. But I see the way she trembles. “Never.”

“I just meant, when he did that, I poked him in the eyes, tried to ball him. That's what really set him off. He deserved it, but I should have handled it quietly, left sooner.”

“And I would have just beat the shit out of him sooner,” Killian says, pressing his face into the crook of my neck. “Baby doll, I'm so sorry.”

“It's okay.” But my eyes tear up. I've never been physically attacked before. I took self-defense courses during college because it seemed the safe thing to do. But reality is different, and not so easy to let go.

Scottie sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “Nothing is ‘okay.’” He pins me with an icy stare. “Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then get some rest.” He turns his attention to Killian. “You. I want those fingers in the splint the doctor left. Don't give me shit, or so help me...” He holds up a hand and appears to be doing a mental countdown.

“I’ll splint the damn fingers,” Killian says, exasperated. He already has them wrapped in ice. I’m afraid to look. His whole hand was swollen, the knuckles split and bleeding, before they treated it.

Finally Scottie blows out a breath. “We need to fix this.”

“It won’t be easy,” Brenna says somberly. “The entire fight was filmed from multiple angles and is already being played on numerous outlets.”

“Fuck,” sneers Jax. He doesn’t look at me, though I feel the weight of his disappointment in the air.

It doesn’t matter that we’re here because a self-centered prick thought it was okay to put his hands on me, or that I defended myself the best way I could. Guilt still rides me. I’m the one who was involved. Everyone here knows Killian wouldn’t have lost his shit if it hadn’t been in my honor.

I can’t bring myself to look at anyone.

Chapter 25

Libby

Late at night, when we finally slip into bed, Killian holds me for a long time, his chest to my back. I drift in the warmth of him, body and soul at peace. And he breathes me in, slow and deep as if he's memorizing my scent.

"I could have killed him," he whispers in my hair.

In the dark, my hand finds his forearm, pressed across my chest, and I stroke his skin, tracing the muscles beneath it. "But you didn't."

His breath is soft and low. "I totally lost my shit. Didn't think of anything but beating his ass."

"It's over now." Under the cool of the covers, with his heat along my skin, I'm safe. And though Killian is more than capable of protecting himself, I wish he felt safe as well.

His fingers curl around the curve of my shoulder. "I've never been needed by anyone but the guys. We became each other's family. I watch out for them."

I don't say anything, simply run my fingers over the strong bones of his wrist, along his inner arm where his skin is like silk over stone.

"I failed them, Libs. I should have known Jax was losing his grip."

"Killian—"

"I should have kept us together after he tried to end it instead of drifting away."

The covers rustle as I turn to face him. "Almost every night for a year, I went to bed thinking I should have tried to get my dad into rehab. I should have said something instead of looking the other way." I cup Killian's cheek, rough with the day's growth. "Half the time I couldn't look in the mirror because I thought, would my dad have been happier, would he have drank less, if he'd never given up the life to have me?"

Killian's eyes widen as if he's in pain. "No, Libby. No one who knows you would ever consider you a regret."

I sigh, my thumb touching the corner of his mouth. "That's the problem, though. Logic tells you one thing, but you still feel another. You can tell me I'm wrong about my dad. I can tell you you're wrong about failing the guys. But believing is harder, isn't it?"

His lips press against my brow. "I don't want to fail you, Libs. And right now, I don't know how avoid doing that."

"I feel the same," I whisper.

He moves over me then, settling his body on mine. There, in the dark, he makes love to me. It's almost desperate, the way we touch—searching kisses, fumbling caresses. And it's heartbreakingly tender. Every touch counts, feels like the end of something, the beginning of something else.

I'm terrified, and I don't know why. Maybe he is too, because he doesn't let me go. Not when we reach our climax, and not when we drift off to sleep in the waning hours of the night.

In the morning, I'm alone. Killian has gone to get his hand X-rayed just in case there are fractures.

I eat breakfast in my room and don't expect visitors. When Jax shows up, I'm wary. He barely looked my way last night, as if he couldn't stand the sight of me.

“You want some coffee?” I ask as he follows me into the suite’s living room where the room service cart is set up.

“Yeah, sure.” He taps his thumb against his thigh.

We’ve been traveling together for a while now, but we’ve never really been alone except for that first night when he came to check on me and my sad case of stage fright. We’re not friends, but I’ve never considered him my enemy. Unfortunately, I have no idea if that’s true for him or not.

In silence we sip lukewarm coffee until I can’t take it anymore. “You here to bawl me out or something?”

Jax smirks. “You have a bit of a dramatic side, don’t you?”

“Oh, please, you looked like you wanted to spit nails last night.”

His mouth twitches. “Last night was fucked up. On all counts.”

I run a thumb around the thick edge of my cup. “It was at that.”

Jax sets his cup down. “Despite what you may think, I like you, Libby. You’re talented as hell. You belong in this world as much as any of us do.” Shock courses through me, but he doesn’t stop there. “And I’m sorry as hell that dickhead put his hands on you. He deserved a beat down.”

“Why do I feel there’s a ‘but’ coming along?”

His green eyes lock on mine. “The record label is going to give Killian hell. Right or wrong, what he did looks bad for the band. And for you.”

“I know this.”

“I know you know. But do you understand the power you have over Killian? It’s pretty apparent, he’ll always choose you over anything else.”

“What do you want me to say?” I ask. “I’m sorry this happened. I wish it hadn’t. But I can’t change Killian’s reaction.”

Jax rubs his fingers over his forehead then peers at me. “And in the future? When other assholes come out of the woodwork? Because they will. Half the public already blames you. For the simple fact that you’re a woman, and Killian’s now acting unhinged.”

“Great.” Though I’m not surprised. Victim-blaming is alive and well in modern society.

“Yeah, great,” he repeats with a sigh. “He cannot handle it—not when the spotlight of judgment is on someone he cares about. He couldn’t handle it on me, and he absolutely won’t be able to take it on you.” Jax kneels next to me, his eyes tired but intense. “There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t feel the repercussions of what I did. I feel guilty as all fuck for the way I hurt them. But especially for the way it caused Killian to break down. Because he was the one who tried to shield me from the press and take it all on his shoulders.”

After last night’s confession, I know more than anyone how much it still hurts Killian. My throat clicks as I swallow. “This is why you didn’t want me here?”

Jax nods. “I didn’t know what would happen. But I knew there’d be something.” He laughs sadly. “There always is on a tour. And I knew Killian wasn’t ready. He doesn’t have his walls up anymore.”

No, he doesn’t. I don’t either. Both of us are walking around exposed and vulnerable. I feel naked enough as it is. But the idea that I’m also Killian’s weakness is intolerable. You’re supposed to protect the ones you love, not leave them open to pain.

“Promise me something,” I whisper, because my voice is fast fading. “Be...kind to him. Take care of him. He needs it.”

Jax nods, tension working between his brows. When Jax leaves, I head to another room.

Scottie answers on the second knock. It's a betrayal, what I'm about to do. But it doesn't stop me. "Can I come in?"

* * * *

Killian

"We are not amused, Mr. James."

Sitting at a glossy conference table in a cold hotel meeting room is not my idea of fun. Listening to the duo I like to call Smith One and Smith Two is giving me heartburn. My two least favorite record label execs sit across from me, both of them in identical black Armani suits and sharing the same reproachful expression. They only need sunglasses and ear pieces to complete the Agent Smith look.

As soon as I calmed down last night, I knew this meeting was coming. You cause a scene at an industry party, you will be hearing about it.

Back when Kill John first started, we'd been their bitch—attending parties and functions when they wanted us to, touring when they demanded it, every damn aspect of our lives under their control. Those days are gone. You put out a diamond-status album like we did with *Apathy*, and the tables turn. Kill John no longer kisses ass, we get our cocks sucked.

Doesn't mean certain execs don't forget that once in a while, especially when they smell blood in the water—something Smith One clearly has been waiting for. "First we had to deal with John Blackwood's drug habit—"

"He didn't have a fucking drug habit," I snap. "He was clinically depressed, and I'll thank you to shut the fu—"

Scottie holds up a hand. "What happened with Jax isn't pertinent to yesterday's events."

"I beg to differ," Smith One says. "It is yet another pileup in the car wreck that is Kill John lately."

A red haze swarms over my vision. "Metal Death left a bathtub full of actual shit in a hotel room, but you've got a problem with me defending a woman?"

"Property damage can be quietly taken care of," Smith One retorts. "You, on the other hand, attacked a man in a room full of reporters."

"Details."

"You damaged our newest talent, breaking his nose and busting open his lip, because you can't keep your dick in your pants."

"No," I say with exaggerated care, "I beat the little turd because he couldn't keep his hands to himself." I give Smith One a smile with teeth. "You see the difference? Because it's an important one. You go after an unwilling woman—my woman in particular—and you're going to get hurt."

He doesn't miss the warning. His eyes narrow. "We've had to hold off our promotional plans until Marlow's face heals. Thousands of dollars wasted in cancelled appearances."

"You should probably talk to him about his behavior. Assign him community service so he can think about his sins."

"You think this is funny, Mr. James?" Smith Two taps his gold pen on the table as if to get my attention. "Because I assure you the label isn't laughing."

"No," I agree. "They're sweeping an attempted sexual assault under the table. Bravo for that."

“Not to mention,” Smith One puts in, “that you damaged *your* hand.”

I refuse to move my wrapped fingers from their gaze. “It’s fine.”

“It’s insured for a million dollars, Mr. James.” Smith One shoves a stack of papers toward me as if I’m going to read them. “Premiums just went up.”

I laugh, a short bark of annoyance, and then catch Scottie’s eye. Up until now, he’s been sitting back, almost lounging in his chair. Although the Smiths are wearing Armani, Scottie’s sharp tailoring makes them look like slobs, because his charcoal-grey bespoke three-piece suit is straight up Gieves & Hawkes out of Savile Row. My father shops there, and his standards are only slightly less particular than Scottie’s.

Scottie’s appearance is its own form of intimidation. The fact that nothing scares him is another.

“Marlow is a flash in the pan,” Scottie says, bored. “And yet here you are insulting your highest-earning client. I suggest you make amends for wasting his time with this meeting and direct your efforts to putting a better spin on the story.”

Smith and Smith blink in unison, and Smith One sneers. “Mr. James is under contract—”

“Mr. James has fifty-million followers on Twitter alone.”

News to me. But I join Scottie in leveling them a long *How you like me now, bitches?* stare. Whatever it takes to get them off my back and away from Libby.

Scottie rises. “None of whom would appreciate him being mistreated. Never underestimate the power of social media or fanatical fans. Now if you’ll excuse us, gentlemen. My client has a concert to perform.”

Smith Two’s cold eyes follow our movements. “Make all the veiled threats you want, Mr. Scott. But we will have order. No more running off the rails, or there will be repercussions.”

* * * *

“Those two are a pain in my ass,” I grumble as we walk back to my suite.

“They’re right, you know.” Scottie’s laser gaze slashes my way. “What you did was stupid. On all counts.”

“What the hell?” I glare at him. “You’re actually taking their side?”

He stops short, turning to face me. We’re of a similar height and stand eye to eye. “You *are* under contract. They *can* make your life difficult, and they most certainly can blackball Liberty from gaining a foothold in this industry, if they so choose. They were interested in signing her. But now they have concerns over PR issues created by your blowup.”

My heart skips a beat, cold flooding my veins. I’m as untouchable as I’m going to get. But I cringe with regret at the thought of putting Liberty’s future in jeopardy.

“Setting that aside,” he continues, “you’ve managed to bring Kill John back into the limelight, though not as a band united, but as the butt of a sad joke where Killian James flies into a jealous rage because Marlow, the new hot—younger—rising star, got handsy with some tart.”

“Hey.” I step closer. “Don’t call Libby that.”

“I’m not calling her that. They are.”

“You think I should have just let that shithead off?”

“No. If it were me, I’d have done the same. I’d like to rip the tosser’s tiny balls off and cram them down his throat. But it doesn’t change the fact that we have to fix this. And quickly.”

“Shit.” Hands on hips, I duck my head and try to calm my breathing. “How?”

Scottie doesn’t miss a beat. “Take her off the tour.”

“No.” My loud reply echoes in the hall. “She’ll think we’re punishing her.”

“That’s merely a matter of your fear and her ego at risk. The reality is she’ll be miserable with all this added speculation, the two of you constantly under the microscope. However, if she were on her own...”

“On her own?”

“People already love her. Brenna’s staff is fielding hundreds of requests a day for more Liberty. It’s her moment to break out. So let me break her out while she’s hot.”

I don’t want to agree. Everything in me screams in protest. If she goes, I’ll lose her. My fear is that simple. But it isn’t my call to make. It isn’t even Scottie’s; it’s Libby’s.

I know this, and yet the idea of sending her out to the wolves suddenly chills me. I want her to shine, *and* I want to wrap her up and tuck her into my side.

“This morning, she sought me out to talk,” Scottie says. “She agreed to let me manage her. She also asked me what I thought she could do to make things easier for you.”

It shouldn’t feel like a betrayal, but it does. Not that she wants to try or that she was looking out for me, but that she discussed these things with Scottie first, not me. I don’t have any experience in relationships, but I’m fairly certain confiding in the other about life-altering decisions is a key component.

My head aches something fierce; my guts are rolling like I’m hungover. I want more time alone with Libby, away from the world. But that’s not going to happen. I want to do right by her, but I’m bumbling my way through. “What did you tell her?”

“I told her to get off the tour.”

“Jesus, be a dick, why don’t you?”

“I’m being realistic. And I think she understands that.”

My jaw aches from grinding my teeth. “If she wants to do this, I’m not going to hold her back. I’ve already told you that.”

“Yes, I know. The problem is, mate, she doesn’t *want* to leave you.”

I’d be happy about that, except I have a bad feeling she’s holding on out of misplaced loyalty. The whole situation is a shit cracker on top of a shit day. And it isn’t even noon. “She’s tough, Scottie. But not hardened. I don’t want her crushed before she has a chance to bloom.”

“I’m planning to stick with her, if that makes you more comfortable.” Scottie’s gaze is level, calm. “Jules can manage the day-to-day tour details here.”

Jules, Scottie’s assistant, is great. But I really don’t give a fuck about the tour at this moment. Clearing the thickness out of my throat, I search for words. “Protect her.” I press my hand to my eyes to ease the hot throb of pain behind them. “That’s all I care about.”

Silence follows. For once, the ice man is gone. In his place is the Scottie I met years ago as a young punk hungry for fame, the one who looked after Jax when he tried to take his life. This Scottie is the man you’ll follow anywhere because you know he’ll have your back.

Those eerie blue eyes of his seem to burn with determination. “There are no guarantees in life. I cannot promise you the world won’t try to chew Liberty up and spit her out. But the woman gives me shit on a continuous basis. And I’ve made grown men cry.”

Despite my crap mood, I feel a smile forming. “My favorite was when the owner of The Lime House blubbered.”

Scottie’s eyes narrow with remembered glee. “Complete tosser.” His expression evens out. “As you say, she is tough. And she’ll have me on her side.”

Which in Scottie terms is to say she’ll have the best in the business at all points. It still sits heavy in my gut that she won’t have *me*. Not if I do what needs to be done to get her to go.

My headache threatens to crush my skull. I'm going to have to let Libby go. Set her free. I swallow hard and nod. "I'll talk to her."

Chapter 26

Libby

I'm curled up on the couch in our suite, playing the guitar, when Killian finally returns. He leans against the door for a long minute, head tilted back, gaze on some distant point. The lines of his body are tight with tension, making him appear almost gaunt. I want to go to him, hold him close. But he pushes off and heads my way.

"Everything all right?" I ask, setting the guitar aside as he hunkers down before me, sitting on the low coffee table. Bluish smudges mar the skin beneath his eyes. There's a scrape along his jaw, presumably where Marlow punched him, and his hand is splinted. Guilt is a punch in the heart.

Killian sighs and leans forward to rest his head on my shoulder, his hands going to my hips. Immediately, I wrap my arms around his back and stroke him. We sit in quiet until he takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Shit day, baby doll."

"Yeah," I agree, my throat thick.

He kisses the side of my neck, a soft press of lips, then sits up straight. His face is somber. "Talked to the record execs."

I sit up straighter. "They're giving you trouble, aren't they?"

"They tried." He shrugs. "They were pissed about the fight. But that's to be expected."

"I'm so sorry—"

"No," he cuts in. "Don't start that again. We both know who is to blame, and that fucker isn't coming anywhere near you again."

"Doesn't make it any better, though, does it?"

Killian's sigh is tired and low. "Guess not." He snorts with disgust. "They want me on my best behavior from now on."

My fingers feel cold, and I rub my damp palms along my thighs. "Killian—"

"You talked to Scottie." Pain shadows his eyes, making them dull. He doesn't ask about what. It's obvious he knows.

I clear my throat. "You're upset."

He smiles, but it isn't with humor. "No, Libby. I'm proud. This is huge. It's the next logical step, and you're taking it." His big hands curl around my knees, giving a small squeeze. "It's huge. I'm happy for you."

"You don't exactly look happy," I point out. My heart begins to pound with a sick dread, and I don't even know why.

Killian's gaze slides to the side, his teeth catching his lower lip. "I just wish you had come to me instead of him."

"I know. I'm sorry." I touch his hand and find it cold. "I wanted a different perspective. And you kept telling me everything was fine, not to worry. But it isn't fine. And I do worry. I want to help you."

Killian takes that in with an expression I can't fully read. Regret, maybe? Hurt, definitely. But his voice is even when he finally speaks. "Scottie told me he thought you should start working with him now. Said it was your time to break out."

"He did," I say slowly. "But the tour is still going."

Killian grips the back of his neck, his arm flexing. He won't meet my eyes. "The tour is moving to Europe. No one will question if you aren't there."

No one will care. Because I am not really a part of Kill John anyway. I know this. I never wanted to push my way into their band. It still doesn't stop the shards of pain from stabbing their way into my chest.

I need to get a grip. I am the one who went to Scottie. He told me that leaving the tour was best. But for some ridiculous reason, I thought Killian would put up a fight. That he wouldn't want me to go. Pride. Stupid pride.

"No, I suppose not." I hate that my voice breaks.

He nods, the action slow, as if it's taking effort. "Scottie can get you set up in L.A. By tomorrow."

My insides swoop. "Tomorrow?"

Holy hell, I'm being handled, a problem swept under the rug. It's one thing to take control of the problem, but to have Killian actually agree with Scottie is unsettling.

Still, I have to ask. "Is that what you want?"

Killian looks at me sharply. "It isn't about what I want anymore." He lets his hand fall, and for a moment, I think he'll reach for me. But he rests it on his thigh. "It's about what's best for you. For the band. It would be better for you if you do this now."

"But is it what you want?" I snap, unable to let it go.

Killian seems to brace himself. When he lifts his head, his eyes are clear. "Yeah, Libby, it's what I want. I think you should go."

Nausea rolls in my belly. God, how many times had my mama warned me? Musicians don't stick when life gets hard. And if they do, they regret it. I lurch to my feet.

He tries to grab my wrist. "Libs—"

I brush him off with a tight smile. "I'm okay. I have to stand. My legs are falling asleep." I pace to the window where rain streaks down in rivers, the landscape blurry and gray. "It's a good plan," I manage. "The best plan."

He's silent, and I risk a look. I wish I hadn't. Pity etches his features. Fuck that. My fingers curl around the heavy drapes. He's sending me away. After all his cajoling, after outright ordering me to join him, when the shit hits the fan, he fucking sends me away.

"I could come with you for a bit," he says. "Help you get set up."

Jax's warning runs through my mind. Killian will put me first. Even though it's clear he wants me gone, his loyalty will always drive him into doing the noble thing. I'm the problem here. I refuse to add more to it by tearing him away from his life, his obligations.

Killian had the courage to push me toward a life I didn't want to admit I craved. I can do this for him now and walk away with dignity. The lump in my throat reaches epic proportions. I swallow convulsively, willing myself not to cry. "And leave the tour?" I choke on a sharp laugh. "No. That's ridiculous."

He frowns. "Libby, if you need me—"

"I don't." I know he cares. But I'm done being his problem to solve.

He recoils as if I've slapped him. That burns too. I'm not the one backing off. He promised everything would be okay if we stuck together. And now this.

"Okay, then," he says slowly, the frown growing deeper.

I want to rage and fight. But pride forces me to remain calm. I refuse to be any man's regret. I sigh and run a hand through my hair. My head hurts. My heart aches. "Killian, I'll be fine. It's like you said; this is just the next step." *Where I leave you. I don't want to leave you.*

“And your tour won’t last forever. I’ll just wait in L.A....” I trail off, not really knowing what else to say. Everything is jumbled and stuck in my chest.

His body is stiff as he stands, setting his hands low on his hips. “Look... You’ll be busy. I’ll be busy.” He takes a breath, like he’s trying to force his words out. “You can take this time to settle down, see what you really want.”

“What I really want?” My lips feel numb. He’s not just sending me away. He’s letting me go. And here I was worried about setting *him* free. I want to laugh. Or cry. It’s a toss-up.

“Yeah,” he croaks. “Without me hovering or holding you back. You can... You can figure out if this is the way you really want to live.”

Somehow I find the strength to nod. “Yeah, you’re right. Everything has been going full-tilt. Half the time, it didn’t even seem real.”

He blanches at that but makes a noise of agreement. It’s so stiff, his manner so impersonal.

I find myself babbling on, making excuses for both of us. “And it would be stupid to hold each other back when we don’t know where we’ll end up.”

Lie. Lie. Lie. I want to beg him to just hold me, tell the world to fuck off. But he’s already backing up.

His gaze is clear. “This is good, Libs,” he tells me, his voice flat. “You’ll see. You can take the time now and find out if this is the life you want, without me interfering. And I can...” He shrugs. “I can do the tour like a good little rocker and stay out of the news.”

I flinch. It’s my fault he was in the news. “So, that’s it then.”

Killian’s dark eyes hold mine. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

* * * *

Killian

I let her go. It needed to be done. For her sake. I tell myself these things as I make an excuse to get the hell out of the room, claiming I need to do a sound check. She doesn’t stop me. That hurts just as much as anything. Maybe I expected her to tell me it was all a mistake, that she was only saying what she thought I wanted to hear, that she needed me.

But she let me leave. Are we broken up? I’m not even sure. I was trying to be supportive, to get her away from this mess. But it feels like something else. Like we’re done.

Taking the elevator down, I can’t look at myself in the door’s reflection. My entire body hurts, my heart screaming at me to get the hell back in that room and stake my claim.

She doesn’t need me.

She made that clear.

No one in my life has. Not my family, not Jax when he was hurting so badly he’d rather end things than reach out to me, and not Libby.

What the hell is wrong with me that I need to be needed?

By the time I reach our practice space, set up in some conference room, rage pumps through my blood. I said what I had to say to get Libby to go. Only now do I realize I’d wanted her to fight me with the same conviction she fights everything else. I wanted her to choose me. How fucking selfish is that?

I did the right thing here. She’ll be out of the tour’s harsh glare. People won’t see her as my girl, but a talent in her own right.

I plug in my guitar. I’m shaking so hard, I drop my pick twice.

“Fuck it,” I snarl.

“Someone is in a mood,” Whip says from the door. He walks in and takes a seat at his kit. “What crawled up your butt?”

“Libby isn’t going to Europe with us.”

“Why? Because of last night?” He shakes his head and taps on his cymbal. “That’s bullshit. And you’re okay with this?”

No, I’m not fucking okay. I’m barely holding it together.

“She wants it. Scottie’s taking her under his wing.” The words taste like ash in my mouth.

Whip gapes at me. “And she said this? She said, ‘Killian, I want to ditch your ass and go off with Scottie to find my fame.’”

“No,” I mutter. “She didn’t say it like that.” I turn away from him and grab a fresh pick. “She...I gave her a push.”

“Man, I don’t think—”

“It’s done.” I turn on an amp and flick the volume up to full. “You gonna play or continue to piss me off with questions?”

“By all means,” Whip says, twirling his drumsticks. “Let’s play.”

But it’s no fucking good. I don’t get further than a few chords before the rage surges up once more. My fingers fumble on the strings. I can’t play. I don’t *want* to fucking play. This time, the rage chokes me. I can’t breathe. I can’t think. I’m barely aware of ripping the guitar strap off over my head. The Telecaster in my hand smashes into the floor with a satisfying crack and a deafening buzz of reverb.

Guitar destroyed, chest heaving, I don’t feel better. Not even a little bit.

Whip comes to stand by my side, surveying the damage. “Guess we aren’t playing today. Come on. We’ll medicate with single malt like proper rock stars.”

Libby wouldn’t like me drinking. But Libby won’t be around by tomorrow. I press my fingers to my aching forehead. “Yeah, a drink sounds about right.”

* * * *

I come back to Libby in the middle of the night, and she’s asleep. I curl myself around her anyway; she feels so good I almost can’t stand to touch her anymore, not when she’s leaving.

The thought hits me like a comet, and my insides flare. I must make a noise because she stirs, her voice soft and muffled with sleep. “Killian?”

She turns in my arms, her body warm, her fingers tracing my brow. I was going to let her sleep, but I can’t. My hand slides to her cheek.

“Give me this,” I whisper. “Before you go. I need this.”

I find her mouth. I’d say kissing her is like coming home, but I’ve never had a true home. I don’t know if the sense of rightness I feel with her means home or not. Right now it’s something stronger, tinged with desperation. I’m desperate for her. The way she tastes, the way she moves, the little sounds and sighs that only she makes.

There’s no one else like her. There never will be. I know that now. Maybe I’ve always known that, but now it feels like I’ve discovered something too late.

Libby moves against me, waking up in my arms, and she kisses me back, her hands roaming over my arms, neck, back, like she can’t find a place to land. We go slow, lingering, memorizing each other. I angle my head and open her mouth wider with mine, get deeper, take more. I need it all.

The bed creaks as I roll over and fit myself between her willing thighs. She gasps in my mouth, and I swallow her breath. I want it all, and it isn't enough right now by half. Breaking away from her lips, I lean back so I can pull the shirt over her head. It's my shirt. The ratty old thing I wore at the beach when we first met. It has to mean something that she's always wearing it.

I'm pulling at straws. And she's naked beneath me. My hands ghost over her satin skin. Perfect.

In the dark, I trace the topography of her body with my fingers and lips, kissing my way down her graceful neck, along her collarbone. I take my time on the little places I've often overlooked—the center of her chest where I can feel her heart beating, the soft, fragrant curve along the side of her breast.

The skin on her inner arm is like fine silk; she shivers as I run the tip of my tongue in patterns down to her elbow. Libby sighs my name, her fingers combing through my hair and massaging the tight spots on my nape. Beneath me, her thighs are parted wide, her body pliant. The wet heat of her sex press against my chest, calling my attention.

I slide farther down, licking and nipping my way along. I love the way she squirms. I know how much she gets off on the anticipation of me reaching my destination. It's a little game we've played many times: how long can we draw it out, touch each other and yet not touch those places we want it the most.

I press my lips against the hard curve of her hipbone, my arms wrapped tight around her waist. Fuck. No one knows me better than this woman. And I'd bet my life I know her better than anyone on Earth. And I'm sending her away. She's going. It's so fucking wrong, it's choking me.

I try not let it show. But I can't stop the tremor running through me.

"Killian?" her vanilla cream voice slides through the dark.

Tell her. Tell her what she is to you. She's your lodestone. You have a fucking map inked on your body, but you are completely lost without her right next to you. Tell her.

I suck in a breath and surge down. My mouth finds her slick, swollen flesh, and I latch on, feasting like it's my last meal.

Libby gasps, her body arching off the bed. In the gloom, her skin is a pearly cream, her sweet little tits pointing up and shaking as she writhes. I hold her hips down and eat her out with no finesse, just greed. And she whimpers and cries.

Good. Remember that. Need it. Crave it. I know I will.

I don't let her come. Not yet. When she quivers against my tongue, her clit swelling, I lift away. Libby cries out, her arms reaching for me.

"Shhh," I whisper, crawling over her. "I got you."

Her damp breasts cushion my chest as I settle over her, needing that skin-to-skin contact. The throbbing tip of my cock finds the slick notch of her pussy, and I push in, no hesitation—a little mean about it, even. We both need that.

The first thrust is always the most painful. Because it never fails to punch me in the heart, the fucking perfection of her, the tight, hot, wet clasp. Like home. Yeah, she's my home. My everything.

She never shies away from me, but raises her hips, spreads herself wider, as if she needs to take every inch I can offer. Her legs wrap around me, her hands grasping my shoulders.

"Killian."

We move as one, pulling apart, sliding back together. It's slow torture. Every time I ease back, I feel cold. Every thrust in, I want to grind myself there, imprint myself from the inside.

My arms bracket her slim shoulders. In the dark, I find her. Her eyes glint as she stares up at me, and we slowly undulate. Her air becomes mine.

Tell her. Beg her not to go.

I dip my head and kiss her, kiss her until I don't feel anything but her mouth, her body. Kiss her until I can't think about tomorrow.

I'm probably crushing her. There isn't any space between us. But she's wrapped tight around me, not letting go. Her lips consume me, her sweet pussy milking my dick as she comes. And I want to shout. It can't end. Not yet.

But then I'm coming too, so hard my body shakes. I don't make a sound. I can't. I'll be begging her if I do.

I fall asleep wrapped up in her, my fingers clinging so hard to her shoulders that my knuckles ache.

In the morning, she's packed before I'm out of bed. The sight of her bags settles like lead in my gut as I pull on a pair of jeans.

"You're leaving now?" I ask, stating the obvious. But, Jesus, she's fast.

Libby shifts on her feet, as if she's already imagining walking out the door. "Your plane leaves tonight, anyway. Scottie got us a flight out early."

Right. Because he's now the one she plans things with. He's her manager. He *should* be planning her life right now. He does the same for me. A green tinge of jealousy clouds my vision.

"Okay, then. I guess you gotta go."

Libby nods and grips her rolling suitcase. "Have a safe flight."

"Yeah, you too." Fuck, we're already talking like strangers.

She glances at the door and a small smile tugs at her pretty lips. "Seems we're destined to always be leaving each other."

So stay. Tell me you can't live without me the way I can't live without you. But she doesn't. And I don't either. I should. My heart tells me I'm a fool not to tell her how I feel. But I've pushed and cajoled Libby too much already. She needs this, and I refuse to stand in her way just because I'm hurting.

If you love someone, you set them free. Isn't that how the saying goes? That, if it was meant to be, they'll come back. Doesn't help me for shit right now, though.

"Well..." I make an abortive move to go to her just as she leans in to hug me. We meet in the middle, our lips brushing, her nose bumping into mine. It's quick, almost impersonal. It fucking sucks.

"Call me," I tell her.

Her gaze is on the floor. "I will."

One last awkward hug, and then I step back, stuffing my hands into my pockets. I'm not proud of that, but I know I won't be able to let her go if I don't distance myself first. I don't watch her leave, just turn away and head for the bathroom. But I hear the door click and the hollow sound of an empty room loud and clear just the same.

Chapter 27

Libby

As I board my plane, I've realized two things: I let Killian go without a fight. And he did the same with me.

At the time it all felt very self-sacrificing. Now I feel as though I've swallowed razor blades. Why didn't we just talk to each other? Why didn't I put up a fight? Why didn't he?

Self-doubt is not my friend, and it's whispering in my ear. Did Killian regret putting so much on the line for me? Getting his band and himself in hot water again because of me?

I lean my head against the small plane window and close my eyes. When has taking a break ever resulted in something good? Isn't it just another way of saying goodbye?

The plane takes off, and I feel like I've left a large chunk of myself behind.

LA is...not what I expected. Oh, I thought there would be sun, sea, and palm trees. And LA has that in spades. What I did not realize is that a good chunk of LA is made of long, slightly downtrodden strip malls.

That all changes when Scottie checks us into the Hotel Bel-Air. The place is gorgeous with its fragrant gardens, soaring stucco architecture, and swank black-and-white color scheme. It has to be expensive as hell, but Scottie made clear that he's footing the bill until we sign a deal with a record company. And Scottie does *not* stay in dumps. Or so he tells me when we part ways to settle into our rooms.

My room has its own garden terrace with a Jacuzzi plunge pool, living room, and a fireplace. Instantly, I want to take a picture and show Killian. He'd love this place. It occurs to me that he's probably stayed here many times.

But I don't. I need to make a clean break with this. Go cold turkey. If I keep calling him, I'm going to want to be with him even more. I'm going to end up saying something stupid like, "please take me back!"

I put my phone away and take a long bath. I decide then and there that if I ever have the money to build a dream house, I'm designing it just like this place. I'm just not entirely sold on the location.

After room service of a spectacular lobster Cobb salad, I meet Scottie in the lobby.

The man looks right at home here in his cream-colored three-piece suit, gray silk tie, and sky blue shirt. He's wearing loafers and sunglasses. All of this would look ridiculous on a mere mortal, but not Scottie.

"Are you sure you've never modeled for Dolce & Gabbana? Because you look exactly like that model—"

"Don't say his name," Scottie snaps, glaring at me over his shades. "Ever."

"You're just giving me ammunition," I reply in a sing-song voice as he guides me out to a waiting Mercedes sedan.

"I've filled an entire cemetery with musicians who have tried to tease me, Ms. Bell."

He doesn't appear serious. Of course with the sunglasses on, it's hard to tell.

Our destination is a recording studio, and I try not to gape as I spy not only a few famous movie stars walking by but two of my favorite singers chatting in a glass-and-steel break room inside.

“This way.” Scottie ushers me into a smaller, private booth where a man waits for us.

He looks to be in his mid-forties, balding (with gray frosting what hair is left) and icy blue eyes. Those eyes lock on me, and I can see their keen intelligence. He stands as we enter.

“Scottie. Good to see you.”

They exchange handshakes, and then the man turns his attention to me.

“This is Ms. Liberty Bell,” Scottie tells him.

“Love the name.” He shakes my hand. His grip is fast and brutal. His smile is genuine. “Did you two come up with it?”

“No, sir. My parents had that honor.”

“Honey-sweet voice as well. Excellent.”

I might be offended if it wasn’t clear he was figuring out how to market me.

Scottie gestures for me to take a seat, and the two men follow suit as soon as I do.

“This is Hardy,” Scottie says to me.

“As in ‘Hardy Jenns. With two Ns’?” God help me, I flipped him off. Wincing. I lower my finger. “I’m sorry—”

“Let me guess,” Hardy interrupts with a wry smile. “You hate when it does that.”

I smile too. “It’s bad form to mix movie quotes.”

Scottie looks at us with his usual put-out expression. “When you’re done with your ’80s movies fun, I’d like to get on with this.”

Both Hardy and I blink in shock.

“Hell, Scottie,” Hardy says with a laugh, “I had no idea you’d lower yourself to watching ’80s movies.”

“Mmm...” Scottie hums, deadpan. “And sometimes I listen to rock music. Fancy that.”

Hardy leans closer to me. “Warning: taunt the tiger too much and he’ll swipe.”

I like Hardy, with his easy humor and kind eyes. He’s nothing like what I’d heard from my parents about record producers being egotistical artists who liked to browbeat musicians.

The thought amuses me, and I actually turn my head, some deep-seated part of me expecting Killian to be at my side so I can share a look with him. But he isn’t here. His absence is a cold blast against my skin, and my smile dies.

Thankfully neither of the men who actually are in the room seems to notice.

“Hardy is an excellent producer, and we’ve been discussing your options.”

“I’ve seen clips of you with Kill John, Liberty—”

“Call me Libby. Please.”

“Well, Libby, you have a voice and natural sound that guys like me dream of developing.” His icy eyes light with excitement. “I’ve got a few ideas I’d like to run by you.”

“I’m game if you are.” That sounded all right, didn’t it? On the inside I’m shaking like a leaf in a storm. If I can get through this without giggling like a fool, I’ll be happy.

Scottie is texting, but he glances at the door when it opens, and three more men enter.

“Ah, yes.” Scottie puts away his phone. “Your backup band. Tom plays guitar, Murphy on bass, and Jefferson on the drums.”

The guys file in. They’re all older than me, clearly seasoned musicians. Guys like my dad, who worked the industry but never tried to make a bid for stardom. Instantly, I feel a measure of comfort. Glancing at Scottie, I’m guessing he knew exactly what he was doing when he hired them. And I have the urge to kiss his handsome cheek. If I didn’t know it would make him uncomfortable as hell, I would.

“You look like your mother,” Tom says as he sits down.

Surprise tingles over my skin. “You knew her?”

Of the three men, he’s the oldest, probably in his forties. “I knew both your mom and your dad. Marcy and George were true talents.” His brown eyes grow solemn. “I was sorry to hear of their passing.”

“Thank you.”

Murphy and Jefferson take a seat as well.

“Marcy and George,” Jefferson says. “And your name is Liberty. That some sort of George and Martha Washington joke?”

“You know, you’re the first person who actually got that,” I say with a laugh. “Most people focus on the whole Liberty Bell thing.”

“I’m named after Thomas Jefferson,” he says. “So I get the torture too.”

“Shit, at least you weren’t named after the place where you were conceived,” Murphy adds. The tall, wiry guy grins at me from behind a mop of blond hair.

We all think about it for a second, and then I groan in horror. “Oh my God, they didn’t name you after a Murphy bed, did they?”

His cheeks go ruddy. “Fuck yeah, they did. Why they had to share that little factoid with me is the real question.”

“And yet you shared it with us,” Hardy says.

“My pain is now yours.”

Laughing, we move on to discussing Scottie’s grand plans for me, which include developing some new songs, recording, and, in the meantime, doing the publicity circuit with appearances in small clubs and on talk shows.

It sounds exhausting and exhilarating. The guys Scottie’s hired are supportive and clearly talented. It’s a dream come true. But the hole in my heart still bleeds steady and cold. I tell myself I’ll get over it, but it feels like a lie.

* * * *

Killian

The Animal is gone. In its place is an ocean of people. And endless sea of writhing bodies, screaming for Kill John, screaming my name. I have to answer. They’re waiting for it.

“Hello, London.” My voice echoes into the sea, and the sea roars back

They want me, adore me. For the first time in my life, I don’t care.

* * * *

“Hey, it’s Killian. Apparently, my mother hen tendencies are strong. You said you’d call. You didn’t. Let me know you’re okay. That’s all I want, and I’ll get out of your hair.”

* * * *

“Hey. It’s Libby. You didn’t answer, so here goes. My backup band is great. The guys are nice. Not as great as your guys, but I like them. I did my first talk show appearance. Felt like a complete fake. Then again, the actress who went on before me was so out of it, an intern literally had to snap his fingers in her face to get her to react. Once on, though, she was on. Host’s breath smelled like tapioca. Which is weird. I’ve never even had tapioca. How do I know what it

smells like? But it was the first thought that popped into my mind when I caught a whiff. Anyway, going to bed.”

* * * *

“Damn after parties are too loud. Sorry I missed your call, Libs. Had my volume up full blast and still didn’t hear it. Whip recorded your show on the bus DVR. You were awesome. Don’t like how Tapioca Breath was staring at your tits, though. Next time I’m on that show I might have to accidentally step on his balls. Libby, I really...”

* * * *

“Your connection is shitty. All I heard was something about Whip, awesome, and balls. Then it went dead. I’m not sure I want to know. Lie. I do. Tell me you haven’t moved on to balls. Oh, and say hi to the guys. I’ve got to go.”

* * * *

“Service to the US sucks here. I can’t get a call through half the time. And—would you guys shut the fuck up? I’m on the phone. Sorry. I’m trying to find a private place here. I’d call you when I get back in my room, but the time difference sucks too. I’m pretty sure you’re asleep right now. Shit. It’s breaking up...I...”

* * * *

“It’s a lost cause trying to connect, isn’t it? Why don’t we try to talk when things calm down? And...well, if we’re really taking time to figure things out, maybe we shouldn’t be talking so much right now, anyway. Not that I don’t want to talk to you. I just...we’re both busy. I’m babbling so I’m going to hang up now. Take care, Killian.”

* * * *

I listen to her final message three times. It doesn’t get any easier to hear. I’ve lost her. What I don’t know is if it’s because I sent her away or if she simply realized that she doesn’t feel as strongly for me as I do for her.

I want to ask—no, demand—that she tell me. I want to lay it all down and hash this shit out. But I can’t do that over the phone. And I can’t leave the tour. I can’t do that to the guys.

My thumb taps the edge of my phone as I think of what to say.

I’ll let you go for now. But text me if you need anything. K?

When she doesn’t answer my text, I chuck my phone across the room. The door to the dressing room opens before impact, and the phone smacks the center of Jax’s chest. He frowns down at the phone that’s clattered to the floor before looking back up at me. “Fans are waiting for the meet and greet.”

As if to punctuate his words, a group of women bursts in behind him on a wave of giggles. Their smiles are eager and all for me. All blonde, all gorgeous, they’re whispering in a language I don’t understand. Norwegian. We’re in Norway.

I rub the aching spot over my chest. Fuck. I need to let this thing with chasing Libby go. She's busy building her life. The life I sent her to lead. My life is here. Doing what I've always done. I've survived just fine for twenty-six years without her. I can survive now.

"Right." I find a smile and paste it on. I won't touch them. The idea makes me ill. But I can play host. I can do that much for the guys. "Welcome, ladies."

Chapter 28

Libby

I'm tired. So tired I don't remember where I am half the time. Everything is nebulous. I'm living in this strange cloud filled with too many strangers and too many fake smiles—my fake smiles. I hand them out like a politician passes out buttons. And I feel just as slick doing it.

I have been completely on my own for a while now. But not since my parents died have I felt so utterly lonely. It doesn't matter that I'm surrounded by people, my schedule full. I don't have the one person I want at my side. Hell, I even miss the guys. A lot.

My backup band is great. But they aren't true friends. When the job is done, they head home to family. And Scottie is a man unto himself. In a strange way, he's a lot like me. Not shy, not antisocial exactly, just self-contained and private. I certainly can't throw stones his way. But he doesn't make for an ideal companion.

"Is it always like this?" I ask him as we leave yet another party in the Hills. The house was breathtaking, the people there even more so. I met actors I'd watched since childhood and those who are just now hot commodities. So many gorgeous creatures, I hadn't known what to do with myself or what to say. Not that I had to say much of anything. Most of these people love to hear themselves talk.

All night, I had to check myself from turning to whisper a comment in Killian's ear. Because he wasn't there. Why can't my brain and body seem to get that message?

"Is what 'always like this'?" Scottie answers, nose deep in his phone calendar.

"The endless pushing." I ease my shoes off my feet, wincing. Thanks to Brenna, I now own my own Louboutins. My appreciation for them died the first time I put them on. "Two months we've been at it. At this point, I feel like a snake oil salesman."

Scottie's lip twitches. "I do so love your expressions. Don't change them. They add color to your persona."

"Good to know," I mutter, then nudge his arm with my elbow. "I'm talking to you. Get your nose out of that thing. It's indecent."

Good lord, Killian must have learned that imperious brow quirk of his from Scottie. This man's is downright glacial. But he does put his phone down.

"What is the problem, Ms. Bell?"

"I go to these things you and Brenna book for me, and the parties y'all seem to think I need to attend, and I feel...I don't know. Fake. Like I'm faking it."

Scottie stares at me as our hired car snakes down the twisting mountain road. When he speaks, his tone is softer than I expected. "You are faking it."

"Excuse me?"

"Calm down." Scottie leans back, resting one ankle on his bent knee. "In here, we are simply Libby and Gabriel—"

"That's your name? How did I not even know your name?"

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Back to the point—"

"How old are you, anyway?"

He glares ice chips. "Twenty-eight."

"Back the truck up. Really? I thought you were in your thirties."

“We see what we want to see. And if you’re good, you make people see what *you* want them to see. For my job, if I skew slightly older I’ll garner more respect and credibility. All bullshit, but appearances matter in this world.” He pins me with a look. “Which is precisely my point. Stardom is an illusion, an ideal carefully cultivated by persons like myself and Brenna. In private, you can be yourself. But the moment you step in the public eye, you become Liberty Bell, talented ingénue—”

“Hey! I can be sophisticated.”

“Who,” he says over me, “is taking the music world by storm with her unique sound. That is all they’ll know. Because that is all you’ll show them.”

“I just want to be me.”

“You misunderstand. You are being you. Merely another version of you. It is armor, Libby. If you give them all of yourself, the world will drain you dry. But if you go to these events and act a part—something they’re all doing as well—you have a certain freedom. It isn’t real. Therefore it isn’t really you who’s constantly being watched and judged.”

I get what he’s saying. It still deepens the pit of loneliness that’s been haunting my insides. “Is that what Killian does?”

Scottie’s gaze goes sharp. “Not with you. Or his inner circle. But you have to have seen the difference in how he acts with the rest of the world.” Scottie’s hand drifts toward his phone, left lying on the seat cushion. “And he’s had years of practice. He knows just how much to give without losing himself.”

I’m not so sure. He was lost when I found him on my lawn. I saw him come back to his own, saw the shadows leave his eyes. Together we were happy, solid, alive. And I left him. Just as surely as he left me.

Suddenly, I don’t want to talk anymore. I just want to crawl in bed and burrow under the covers, pretending that I’m not constantly reaching for someone who isn’t there.

* * * *

Scottie’s right. As days pass, it does get easier. It’s not exactly fun, but it isn’t the torture I made it out to be. And when I perform, even on my own, the adoration of the audience is a beautiful thing. Killian had it right: it *is* addictive, almost as good as sex with him. But I’ve known that bit for a while. And though I feel myself getting into a groove, finding my place, it’s still all wrong. I can’t shake the emptiness inside me—an emptiness I’ve never experienced before now.

A week later, Scottie leaves me to check on Kill John in London. It takes all I have not to beg him to let me go with him. Brenna will remain with me in his place now. And though I’ve missed her and love her company, her presence is another thorn in my side. She’s been with the guys—with Killian—all this time. I constantly want to ask her about him. And I constantly refrain from doing so. Call it pride, but I don’t want to hear about him from second-hand sources.

Tonight, Brenna has taken me to a club. I don’t blame her. That’s the way the guys relaxed after “work.” Me? I’d rather play my guitar in my room.

The place beats with music so loud the floor rattles. Bodies writhe, laughter breaking out in disjointed bursts. Beautiful people, impeccably dressed and with perfectly capped smiles, wide and fake, are everywhere—eyes on everyone else. Watch and be watched.

I hate it. Longing for my porch hits me so hard that I struggle to catch my breath.

“I can’t stay here,” I tell Brenna at my side.

She nods. “Thank God. I’m really beginning to hate this shit.”

We make an about face, and Brenna calls our car service.

Back in my suite, I take a long, hot shower. It doesn’t seem to wash the fug off my skin. I’m imbued with an ugly feeling: time of my life, and it’s a void. I dress myself in my beloved Star Wars shirt that used to be Killian’s. The soft cotton caresses my skin as I pull on sweats and go back to the living room.

Brenna greets me with a cocktail. She’s been serving me way too many of these Pity Party of One drinks. I reach out to take it from her, my fingertips brushing the icy glass, when a wave of nausea hits me so hard I double over.

“I can’t do this,” I wail, hunching on the ground.

In an instant, Brenna is kneeling by my side. Her hand rubs gentle circles over my back as I try to catch my breath. “What is it, Libs?”

“God, don’t call me that.” I can’t hear Killian’s nickname for me right now.

“Okay. Okay.” She continues to pet me as if I’m not totally off my nut.

Taking a deep breath, I push my hair out of my face and sit on the floor. The carpet has a scummy film over it, the way most hotel carpets do. I wrap my arms around my knees. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to freak out.”

Brenna copies my position, her sky-high heels snagging on the carpet. “Freaking out doesn’t bother me. It’s *why* you are that’s my concern.”

“I don’t know.” I wipe my watery eyes. “I just saw myself taking drink after drink. The same way my father did—so casual, like it’s no big deal...”

“You are not your father,” Brenna insists. “And far from an alcoholic. Trust me, I’ve seen my share of them.”

I try to smile but can’t.

“What’s wrong, Libby? Talk to me.”

Absently, I rub my thumb over my knee. “I had a guitar in my hands before I learned to write. I never tell anyone that. But it’s true. Music was our family’s way of communicating. My parents died, and I just let it go. Until Killian.”

I glance up at Brenna. “My mom didn’t want this life for me. She thought it was too hard, soulless. My dad didn’t either. But because he thought it was too addictive. And I told myself I resisted being here because I was afraid or shy. But it was them and their constant warnings that if I tried to live this way, I’d lose myself.”

“Libby,” Brenna says quietly. “Your parents’ experiences don’t have to be yours. What do you want? If you want to quit and go back to your farmhouse, you can.”

Closing my eyes, I can see the golden coastal light slanting through the old glass of my grandmother’s house, the worn floorboards, the battered farm table where I served Killian biscuits. The echo of his laughter haunts my memories.

“I was on vacation there,” I tell Brenna. “That wasn’t real life.”

“What is for you?”

“I love singing, making music, performing. Killian saw that in me when I couldn’t see it myself. But this life right now? It’s empty. It doesn’t...it doesn’t have him.”

I miss Killian with a force that’s nearly crippling. We haven’t spoken in a while, and that’s on me and my pride. It still hurts that he sent me away. Find myself, my ass. I’d found myself with him. But I let him go too. The fact that we both just seemed to give up depresses me. Maybe we weren’t meant to be.

Silence ticks.

“You have to know Killian is crazy about you,” Brenna finally says.

“I thought so,” I say thickly. “But if he really was, he wouldn’t have told me to go live my life without him. Would he?”

“What?” she sounds shocked.

My chest clenches, and I have to force myself to tell her the rest. “He could have said we’d met up at the end of his tour. But he didn’t. Instead he tells me that we should take this time to reevaluate what we want.”

It isn’t until I say the words that I really feel how badly he’d cut me. “He pushed me away.”

Brenna looks at me for a long minute. “I know my cousin. He has never been this way about a woman. Ever. If he said that, he was probably trying to do something noble and set you free.”

I laugh without humor. “Oh, he certainly did that.”

“No,” she says gently. “I mean, he told you what he thought you needed to hear to go because he thought it was best for you. Not because he didn’t want you anymore. That’s typical of my big-hearted but ham-handed cousin.” She gives my arm a nudge. “Come on, Libby, he’d be here in a heartbeat if you asked him to, and you know it.”

“Brenna, my dad drank to escape the reality of life with me and my mom. I cannot be any man’s burden. I can’t. I want Killian to know I’m okay on my own too. That I can manage without him holding my hand.”

“But you aren’t okay.” Brenna’s pretty face pinches. “You’re miserable.”

I stand and dust myself off. “You know what? I am. I miss Killian so much it’s eating me alive. But worse than that, I’ve been feeling sorry for myself. Moping like a sadsack.”

Brenna’s face changes. “Okay...”

“We doing the Late Night Show tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you make sure Killian sees me on it?” I know she can. Between her and Scottie, they could take over the world if they wanted to.

“Sure thing.”

“All right, then. I have to practice a song.” I head for my room. One thing is certain: the tight band I’ve kept around my emotions has snapped. And now broken, nothing can hold back the tide. I need to find my way back to happy.

Chapter 29

Killian

I have no idea where the fuck we are. I don't really care. Jax can shout the customary, "Hello, insert whatever the hell town," for once. Our dressing room is like all the rest: stark and filled with people who don't need to be here.

A shrill laugh stabs at my nerves. I don't bother looking to see who it is. Scottie's brought in a small TV. Libby is going to perform on the Late Night Show. She's in L.A. Right, I'm in New York. Hours behind her.

Scottie gives me a nod, turns on the TV, and sits in the chair beside me, crossing one leg over the other like the elegant bastard he is.

On the screen, the audience claps, Libby having already been announced. And there she is, walking on to the tiny soundstage with that determined stride I know so well. Brenna has developed a signature look for her: flowing, almost bohemian knee-length sundresses and big, chunky combat boots. Pure Libby.

My chest clenches at the sight of her, a pang of longing shooting through my heart. It hurts seeing her. Agitated, I turn the volume up high as she gives the audience a nod of acknowledgment.

Libby plucks a few strings on her Martin, then leans closer to the mic. Her pretty lips are glossy and pink, and the ghost of their touch tickles along my neck.

"My best friend in the world taught me this lesson," she says in that sweet vanilla cream voice of hers. "Just took me a while to believe it."

And my heart pounds. Am I that friend? I hate that I have to ask myself. God, please let it be me.

Libby starts singing Prince's "Cream." Perfect tune, perfect delivery. There's a little smile about her mouth, almost wry, a bit bittersweet. And she looks at the camera—directly at it, as if she finally owns her talent. Her song choice confirms it, the lyrics about taking your chance, reaching for what you want in life.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. A frisson runs over me, just as powerful as when I first stepped on stage. I can actually feel the world shifting gears, changing her life and mine into something new once again.

A girl tries to hang on my arm. I brush her off without taking my eyes from the screen. "Do you see her?" I say to no one in particular. "Right there, that's my girl. Isn't she fucking luminous?"

Whip stares down at the TV with a proud smile. "That she is, man."

I turn to Jax. "And I made her feel like I didn't want her when I sent her away. Because I'm an idiot."

Jax sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "And I'm an asshole. Kills, man, I encouraged her to leave the tour. Said you'd be distracted by her. But that was my own shit talking, me trying to put things back the way they were before."

I should be pissed. But mostly I'm just tired of struggling to pretend everything is normal. "We broke, Jax," I tell him while watching the TV. "We're gluing ourselves back together, but it's never going to be the same."

“Fuck. I know.”

The defeat in his voice makes me bump his shoulder with mine. “We’re not who we were. We’re better. Evolution, Jax. Not regression.”

He shakes his head, but he’s fighting a smile. “I’m sorry, though. I miss her too.”

Libby’s smoky voice snags my attention again. “She’s it for me. It’s a done deal.” I’ve been hers since the second she hosed me down and woke me up. “My life doesn’t work anymore without her in it.”

“I know, man. We all know it.” Jax puts a hand on my shoulder. “Do this show, and then you go get your girl.”

* * * *

Libby

It takes forever to wash the makeup off my face. By the time I’m done, my skin is pink and angry at me. But I feel better. Freer. Sometimes all it takes in life is to decide to own it. And everything changes. Would Killian understand? I sang that song for him as much as for myself—to tell him I finally got it. Life is what you make of it. I know that now. Because of him.

I hear Brenna enter the suite and go out to meet her. She has a box of pizza in one hand.

“Your performance was totally awesome.” She does a little victory dance that makes me laugh.

“You’ve told me that three times now.”

“You have to give reinforcement in threes,” she says, sticking out her tongue. “Otherwise it doesn’t stick.”

“Consider it stuck, then.” I accept a piece of pizza and take a big bite. So good. I’m starved tonight.

Brenna scarfs down her own slice. “The guys are in New York now.”

I pause mid-bite. “I thought they were in London.”

“They were. They got into New York this morning for their final concert of the tour. They always like to end things on their home turf.”

“Right. I’d forgotten that.” Longing falls like a heavy blanket on my shoulders. I actually roll them as if I could shrug the feeling off. Doesn’t work, though. I set my piece of pizza aside and search for a water in the mini fridge.

“They’re on stage now,” Brenna says, watching me with wary eyes. “Scottie has a recording of it he wanted you to see.”

“Scottie does?” I can’t keep the skepticism out of my voice.

Brenna gives a cheeky grin. “Pretty sure he was ordered to.”

“Hmmm…” I can’t say more. The idea that Killian is passing me yet another proverbial note sends me a flash of hope and an ache of nostalgia.

We curl up on the couch, and Brenna plays the video. God, it hurts seeing him. Bare chest glistening with sweat, ratty old jeans hanging low and lovingly outlining that nearly obscene bulge of his—he’s a hot rock star at his finest. And the way he holds that white and black Telecaster in his big hands is like music porn.

His deep, rich voice sends a shiver down my spine as he dips his head to the mic. “We’d like to play a tribute tonight. If you know the words, sing along.”

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't "Darling Nikki." Oh, but it's so good. Killian's voice is pure sex, dripping with sticky sin. And watching him work his guitar? Jesus. Heat washes up my thighs, pools between my legs.

Killian's beloved Animal goes wild. Women scream; men hold their hands up in solidarity. They all join him, shouting the words.

He absolutely shreds the guitar on the solo, his hips thrusting, his back bowed. Emotion pulls the slashes of his brows together, has him biting his lip. I've seen that face before—when he's over me, coming, giving in to lust.

In my periphery, I catch a glimpse of Brenna gawking at the screen and then back at me.

I don't know what to say. A lump closes my throat. I swallow hard against it, but the pain doesn't go away. My hands start to shake.

Killian's shouting how he wants another grind.

A song about a freaky whore? About a deal with the devil? An unforgettable woman? It could be all and any of those things. A tribute? To whom? Prince? Or me? I sang "Cream." Now he's singing this.

"Libs—" Brenna starts to say.

I hold up my hand. "I...ah...I'm going to bed. I need to think..." I don't say anything more. But I do leave my phone on the table as I walk away. Because I have a feeling he'll call, and I have nothing I can say to him over the phone.

Chapter 30

Killian

I'm on my phone the second I get back to the dressing room. My blood is pumping, my body humming. I have to pace to cool down. People flow around me, laughing, staring, trying to get close. I want to order them out, but I'm too busy trying to call Libby. I keep getting her voicemail.

I don't leave a message. I want to talk to her.

Sitting my ass in a chair, I start to text her, only to see one from Brenna.

What the fuck was that? Idiot. (!!!!) >:-(

I read it twice before holding up the phone to the guys. "Why the hell is she yelling at me?"

"Dude." Rye shakes his head. "I told you not to choose that song."

"What's wrong with 'Darling Nikki'? It's my favorite song on *Purple Rain*—an album we talked about when we first bonded over music. She played Prince tonight. I played Prince tonight. I'm supporting her. How can it be more clear?"

"A." Rye holds up a finger. "That is way too esoteric."

"It's supposed to be," I protest. "It's a message to her, not the rest of the world."

"B," he says over me. "'Darling Nikki' is what Prince sings to Apollonia when he's basically calling her a whore."

Whip nods. "Yeah, the lyrics pretty much say she's only good for freaky sex."

I stare at them, incredulous. "Why didn't you all tell me this *before* we did the fucking song?"

"You were pretty insistent," Rye says with a shrug.

"And you knew the lyrics," Whip points out calmly. "You just sang them."

"Of course I know the lyrics. It's the *context* I didn't get."

"Context is everything, man."

I press the heels of my hands against my eyes and try not to shout. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

Jax hands me a water. "Relax. If she knows you as well as I think she does, she'll get your message." He fights a smile. "Convoluting as it was."

"Shit."

* * * *

"Libs, if you get this message, call me. Please. Baby doll. Please. I need to talk to you. I...ah...that song was for you. Shit. Not to call you a whore— I mean, never! Okay? It was because I am so proud of you. I wanted to tell you— Just call me, okay? Please."

* * * *

"Libs. I'm getting a little concerned. Where are you? Pick up your phone."

* * * *

No texts either? You're killing me here.

* * * *

"Elly May, pick up the damn phone. Call me back. I'm getting on a plane and tracking you down. Or I would if I could fucking find you. Damn it, I told you I'd get shit wrong. I want to make them right. Please let me."

* * * *

"I need you, all right? That's what it comes down to. You're it. My present, my future, my everything. Not my whore. I haven't even seen the damn movie! Okay, just... yeah. Call me."

* * * *

Libby

New York City. One redeye flight, and I'm here. I feel like I've been run over with a sand truck. Gritty-eyed and sore, I sit passive as a makeup artist works on my face. Someone else is blowdrying my hair, attempting to give it some waves around my face. Good luck with that.

I'd rather be anywhere but here. But Brenna, now crowned Official Pain in My Ass, booked an interview with *Vanity Fair*. I *could* cancel, she told me. But it would look bad. Especially considering the little gossip column that showed up on TNV last night.

I don't have to look at it again to remember it. The fucking thing is burned in my brain:

Last night on the Late Night Show, the new darling of the music world, Liberty Bell, performed an absolutely cheeky rendition of Prince's "Cream." Not much by way of news unless you consider that, only an hour later, rock god and rumored boyfriend of Ms. Bell, Killian James, countered with a cover of "Darling Nikki" during Kill John's concert in Madison Square Garden.

One must speculate, is James declaring their supposed fling officially over? Thanking Bell for a good time? Or is he asking her for another go? Whatever the case, we are certain Killian's loyal fan base is waiting with bated breath to find out if their sexy idol is once again single and free.

Well, I can't exactly blame them for interpreting Killian's message that way. But it stings to know people are all up in our business, judging us. I feel naked down to my soul.

It will be over soon. I haven't turned on my phone yet. I know Killian has been trying to contact me. But the conversation we need to have can't happen over the phone.

Frankly, I'm sick of phones and texts. I avoided social media and casual texting all these years for a reason. I don't want cold and impersonal. I don't want to hide behind a screen. I need personal contact, face-to-face communication.

The makeup artist finishes, and an assistant with a Bluetooth headset has me sit on a chrome-and-leather chair.

"There's water just here," he tells me as if I can't see the ice bucket at my side. "The green one is excellent. Imported from Japan at over four hundred dollars a bottle."

I refrain from pointing out how crass it is to tell me that, and choose the slightly less ostentatious bottle of Bling H2O with the logo bedazzled onto it.

A reporter comes in, her hair brilliant blue, her smile welcoming. I steel my spine and grit my teeth. *Just get through this, and you'll be free to go. Get through this.*

“There’s been so much written about your involvement with Killian James. But you and James have been rather closed-mouthed about the topic.” The reporter gives me a slight but encouraging smile, her blue hair slipping over one eye. “Given last night’s performance, would you care to offer us a little bite?”

“There isn’t much to tell that the world doesn’t already know.” Not really true. But true enough.

The reporter’s smile has an edge to it now—a barracuda searching for blood in the water. “Oh, now, I’m not so sure about that. After all, we don’t know your side of the story.”

Nothing to lose. And everything to gain. “What do you want to know?”

Chapter 31

Killian

“You ever think about it?” I whisper. She sits before me, skin gilded in the evening light, eyes glazed, frosted jewels. So fucking beautiful it breaks my heart. “What it would be like? You and me?”

“Yeah.”

I breathe in her scent. Touch her skin. “You can have the world. Just reach for it.”

“I don’t need the world,” she whispers in my ear.

“What do you need?” I’ll give her anything. Everything.

Soft hands on my neck, gentle lips mapping my skin. “You.”

“Dude, we have to get out there.” Rye’s voice comes to me at a distance.

I stare down at my phone, rubbing my thumb over the screen.

“Dude?”

“Killian,” Jax says, sharper. “Snap out of it.”

I run a hand through my hair. It’s longer now, in need of a trim. “She isn’t answering me. I don’t know where she is. Brenna won’t tell me.” We’re back at the Bowery Ballroom where we started our tour. Memories of Libby flood in, and I swallow hard.

A hand lands on my shoulder. Jax’s eyes meet mine in the mirror. “As soon as the show is done, we’ll pile up on Scottie and make him cry uncle.”

“Yeah,” Whip agrees behind me. “That shithead definitely knows where she is.”

I’m pretty sure we could break Scottie’s legs, and the man still wouldn’t talk. He’s like ice that way. From outside the dressing room door comes a steady chant for Kill John. The air hums, but I don’t feel the familiar crackle of anticipation.

“Come on, man.” Rye slaps my other shoulder. “Get off your ass. Moping is a destructive and unattractive quality.”

This from the guy who stayed in bed for a week when John Entwistle died, crying that The Who would never be the same again. But he’s right. I pull myself together because my guys need me.

One more show and I’m free. Just get through this.

* * * *

Libby

The last time I saw Kill John perform, I was in the wings, watching them from behind. Being in the audience is an entirely different experience. On stage, the crowd’s energy comes at you like a wave. In the audience, I feel the full force of Kill John’s power. And it is awe inspiring.

Killian’s deep, luscious vocals blend with Jax’s brutal melody. Together they are rage and yearning. Whip beats on his drums with perfect timing and rhythm, while Rye’s funky bass supports it all. That is the technical aspect. But the real truth of their music cannot be defined. You have to feel it.

I'm swept up by it and find myself dancing with the crowd. Scottie assigned me protection in the form of a massive bodyguard named Joe. He's at my side now, blocking people from crushing too close or stepping on my toes. It's sweet, but not necessary. The club is small and not so overcrowded that I can't move.

Kill John finishes up "Oceans," and a sweaty Killian pulls off his damp shirt. Predictably, whistles of approval break out all over. His lips twist but he doesn't acknowledge them as he gulps down some water.

Standing midway to the stage, I can see him clearly enough to note the shadows under his eyes and the lines of strain around his mouth. And though no one else would notice, I can tell the guys are concerned. It's in the way they watch him, Rye and Jax's bodies angled slightly toward him like shields.

While the crowd shouts requests, the guys make a few adjustments, Jax and Killian getting different guitars and Whip picking up a new set of sticks. Killian's movements are unhurried, almost languid.

"Play 'Oceans' again," a guy right behind me yells loud enough to blow my hair forward.

The request is ridiculous enough to grab Killian's attention. He lifts his head, a smirk on his face as if he's going to say something, but then our gazes clash. I know the second he realizes it's me. Because everything freezes. His expression wipes totally blank, then shatters, his lips parting on a breath, his eyes going wide.

I feel that look down to my toes. It wrenches my heart. I know there and then that he's hurting as much as I am. It's all there in those coffee dark eyes. Everything that's passed between us—every look, word, touch—is all there. Tears blur my vision, and I offer him a watery smile.

He twitches as if he's fighting not to hop off the stage. But then a slow smile spreads. He barely nods. I wonder if he's having as hard a time functioning as I am.

When he turns toward his guys, his movements are jerky. One by one, three sets of eyes focus on me. Whip's expression is one of relief. Rye's smile is wide and bright. Jax stares at me for a long moment and then gives me a small chin tip.

My heart thuds as Killian turns back to the mic. His gaze locks onto me. "I met my best friend on the lawn of a farmhouse. I'd lost my way, my music. She helped me find it again." I choke back a sob, clutching my arms around my chest, as Killian keeps talking. "Back then, she asked me to sing one of my songs for her. I wouldn't do it. Truth is, I wanted her to like me more than she liked my music."

The crowd *awws*, and he gives them his cheeky smile. "I know. I'm pathetic, aren't I?"

"I love you, Killian," shouts a woman at the back. "Have my babies!"

"No," cries a man near the stage, "have mine!"

Killian chuckles low in the mic. "Sorry, guys. I'm taken." While the crowd moans, he grins and switches out his Telecaster for a big acoustic Gibson J-200, plucking a few chords. "Thing is, I still want her to like me. So I'm not gonna play a Kill John song right now. I'm gonna play an old favorite of mine. And maybe I'll get the message right this time."

There's a wolf whistle in the crowd.

Jax leans close to his mic. "You'd better, or we're benching you for the rest of the game."

People laugh again, but I'm stuck on the happy grins Jax and Killian exchange. Gone is the underlying tension that's seemed to ride them, replaced by an easy joy and appreciation for each other that brings a lump to my throat. The band is in perfect sync as they start to play "Trying To Break Your Heart" by Wilco.

A half-laugh, half-sob breaks free. His choice is quintessential Killian; he'd never go for a straightforward, saccharine love song. But this song, with its twisted lyrics and gently teasing remorse, makes perfect sense to me. The music is lilting and bittersweet and full of possibility.

Tears blur my vision, and I'm laughing again. Laughing and crying.

He catches my gaze, and his eyes soften. Through the lyrics, he tells me how much it hurt to let me go. How much I hurt him. How much he wants me back.

My feet start moving. I weave through the swaying crowd, Joe helping to clear a path. Killian watches me come, his whole heart shining in his eyes. He's calling to me, singing that he's the man who loves me.

By the time I reach the stage, it's apparent to the audience that something's going on. People make room, their smiles wide. But not as wide as Killian's.

Setting his guitar down, he strides over and holds out his arms. The second our hands clasp, something inside me relaxes. He hauls me up with ease, and then I'm in his arms. Holding tight, his long, lean body surrounds me, a shelter from all things.

He's sweat-slicked and trembling. My nose is crushed against his pec. I don't ever want to let go.

"Libby," he breathes into my hair. "You're here."

If anything, he holds me tighter. It's okay. I don't need air. Just him.

I turn my head and find his jaw with my lips. "You asked me to come. In the song. You asked me to come back to you."

He bursts out in a broken laugh that makes his chest hitch. "You got that? No one else did."

I close my eyes, let him support me. "No one else matters."

He shivers harder. "Only you, Libs."

Suddenly I hear the crowd again, hooting and shouting. Killian must hear them too because he lifts his head, giving them a wave and a smile. I see the blur of stage lights, dozens of phones held overhead, and Jax's wink. Then Killian hurries me off the stage, refusing to let me go.

He doesn't stop until we're alone in a small dressing room.

I don't know who moves first, but the door closes, and I'm wrapped in him. I've missed the way he feels, his taste, the scent of him. His hands bracket my cheeks, his mouth moving over mine.

"I missed you," he says between frantic kisses. "I missed you so fucking much. I shouldn't have let you go." He kisses my eyes, my cheeks, the corner of my ear. "I thought I was setting you free. But it killed me. I need you, Libs. So much."

"I know." I cup the back of his neck and squeeze as I meet his gaze. "It was the same for me. I was just...empty."

Dark, pained eyes search mine. "And then that stupid song. You wouldn't answer me. I thought—"

"I'm sorry," I cut in. "I didn't mean to upset you. I just needed to think things through. And I wanted to talk in person."

He nods before dipping down to rest his forehead against mine. "What are you thinking, baby doll? What do you want?"

"You." When he jerks, I grip his hard biceps. "I just want to be with you."

"Good. Because I don't think I can function anymore unless you're here."

"I missed you," I tell him. I don't think I can express it enough.

For a long moment he just looks at me. "I made a career off writing songs. They've given me awards for my lyrics. And never can I get the message right with you."

“I don’t need you to—”

“I love you.”

My breath catches in my throat as my heart stops. I exhale in a burst, and he kisses my lips softly. So softly. The tenderness in it breaks me. I nearly sob when he does it again.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to say all this time.” He smiles, the barest curve of his lips. “I used to think those were just words. Something I could put in a song. They didn’t mean anything. I get it now. I get it.”

“Killian…”

The tip of his thumb caresses my cheek. “Love breaks your heart, fucks you up—perfect, all-consuming chaos. I didn’t know what to do with that. It felt safer to walk.” He wraps me up in his arms, his eyes on mine. “But it’s also this. Peace, and warmth, and so fucking beautiful, you’ll risk anything to keep it.”

“Killian…” I cup his cheek, run my fingers into his hair. Just hold him. “You do just fine getting your message across. I love you too, you know. So much.”

Oh, God, that smile—it’s pure happiness. “I need you to understand, Libby. You’re my reason, the answer to all questions.”

“And you, my sweet lawn bum, are my home. I’m just wandering unless I’m with you. And I’m so tired, Killian. I need to be home now.”

He takes a deep breath, pressing his lips against my forehead as if he has to ground himself. “I’m here. You’re here.” He ghosts a kiss over my cheek. “We’ll make it work. I’ll take time off and travel with you—”

“I’ve realized something,” I cut in. “I don’t want to be a star. Not at this level. It isn’t me.”

He frowns down at me. “Were you that miserable?”

“No, honey. It was an experience of a lifetime. I wouldn’t change the opportunities you gave me for the world. But these past few months?” I shrug. “Maybe I am my parents’ daughter. All I know is that it isn’t the stardom that lights me up. It’s playing, singing. It’s being with you. Those things matter to me. The rest is just…air.”

Killian’s soft laugh is wry, the corner of his mouth kicking up. “Funny thing, I realized that too.”

I still. “You want to quit?”

“No. But I do want to slow down. I want time with you. Time to enjoy life.” He shakes his head. “Kill John will always be part of me, but I’ve changed. We all have. I don’t know what will happen, but I’m not afraid of it anymore.”

I take a deep breath, press my cheek against his jaw. “You pulled me out of my shell. All that I am now is because of you.”

His fingers thread in my hair, giving the strands a gentle tug. “And you woke me up again. Let’s make a life together, Liberty. It’ll be good. So fucking good.”

I meet his eyes, those coffee dark eyes that always hold promise of sin and sweetness. Excitement tingles over my skin, pulls at my breath. “I can’t wait.”

Epilogue

Killian

The winter grass is the color of toasted sand, stretching toward a slate gray sky. It's windy these days, the air wet with salt and sea. But on Libby's farmhouse porch, with the cast-iron stove going, it's warm enough for me to hang out in jeans and a T-shirt, my bare toes tapping on the worn floorboards.

I'm sitting in a rocker, drinking coffee and inhaling a heaping plate of the best damn biscuits in the world. Looking back on it, I probably fell in love with Libby the first time I ate one of her biscuits.

I tell her this now, and she gives me a look. The kind that says she finds me amusing but doesn't want to admit it.

"Mama always said a man was led by his stomach and his cock," she says from the rocking chair at my side, while she idly strums her guitar. "It was just a matter of figuring out which one needs the most appeasing at the moment."

I take another bite of heavenly baked goodness. "After we eat, you can appease my cock."

She hums. "Good thing it's so cute, or I'd take exception to that."

"Cute? My cock is no longer appeased."

Libby fights a smile. But her attention is on the Gibson in her hands. It's my guitar, but she plays it so well. A sweet melody rings out, old-fashioned and happy but nostalgic. Her honey-soft voice joins in as she sings "Sea of Love."

The sound of her wraps itself around my heart. Her sound is home and hope all rolled in one. It always was. It always will be.

When she finishes, I turn to her. "Was that for me?"

Her smile is soft, beautiful. "They all are."

It's a good thing the guys aren't around to see me welling up. Just yesterday, Rye texted to say it was only a matter of time before Libby and I started looking like the couple in *American Gothic*, that all I needed was a pitchfork. We sent him a picture of us standing in front of the house, me with pitchfork in hand, both of us flipping him the bird.

We haven't been completely idle. For the past month, Libby and I have been writing songs. A couple of them are for Kill John, a couple are for Libby's album. She still doesn't want the limelight, but Jax, of all people, pointed out that she can have a career on her own terms. So that's what she's going to do: write, record, and perform in small venues.

Next week we're going back to New York. I'll start trying out the new songs with the guys, and Libby will go to the recording studio. But for now, I'm making the most of our semi-vacation.

I set down my plate and grab my Martin, making a few adjustments. "I've got a song. But you have to sing with me."

"I will if you tell me what you're playing," she says.

Grinning, I bite my lip, a thrill of anticipation going through me. "You'll get it."

I start the White Stripes' "Hotel Yorba." By the end of the opening riff, she's playing along, her rhythm framing my lead. We sing the refrain laughing, playing our guitars double time.

Her eyes are bright when the song ends. "You have that as my ringtone."

“Yep.” I lay my guitar down. “Set it the second I left this house and you behind.”

“Why that one?”

“Lyrics fit my mood. I, too, just wanted to be back on this porch, alone with you.”

Her expression softens. “Well, here we are.”

“And what about the rest of it, Libs?” I ask, my chest growing tight. “Am I the man you love the most?”

A flush rises over her cheeks as she looks at me, the little spot where her pulse beats on her neck visibly fluttering. She knows the lyrics. She knows what I’m asking. “Yes,” she says, almost shyly.

I’ve had this planned. Doesn’t stop my heart from trying to pound its way out of my chest. Slowly I kneel in front of her, my hands settling on her lush hips. “I’ll love you my whole life, and it won’t feel like enough. So what do you say, Libs? Want to go get married?”

Her smile is my sun. She wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me. “Where’s my ring, lawn bum?”

I smile against her lips. “Look in my pocket, Elly May.”

Her little jolt of surprise is cute. Did she think I wouldn’t have it? The way her hand shakes as she pulls out the small box tells me she’s as nervous as I am. For a long moment she looks at the vintage gold-and-emerald ring. Then her eyes well up, and she flings her arm around my neck, putting me out of my misery. “Oh, hell. I’m marrying a musician.”

I hold her close, breathe her in. “We’re gonna have so much fun.”

Her laughter is a warm breath against my neck. “Yes, we are. And I’ll love you forever, Killian James. That much I know for certain.”

Sneak peek of MANAGED * book 2 in the VIP Series

Preview of Scottie's book

Sophie

You know those people who Lady Luck always seems to be kissing on the cheek? The one who gets a promotion just for showing up to work? Who wins that awesome raffle prize? The person who finds a hundred-dollar bill on the ground? Yeah, that's not me. And it's probably not most of us. Lady Luck is a selective bitch.

But today? Lady Luck has finally turned her gaze upon me. And I want to bow down in gratitude. Because today, I've been upgraded to first class for my flight to London. Maybe it's due to overbooking, and who knows why they picked me, but they did. First fucking class, baby. I'm so giddy, I practically dance to my seat.

And, oh, what a beautiful seat it is, all plush cream leather and burl wood paneling—though I'm guessing it's fake wood for safety reasons. Not that it matters. It's a little self-contained pod, complete with a cubby for my bag and shoes, a bar, an actual reading lamp, and a widescreen TV.

I sink into the seat with a sigh. It's a window seat, sectioned off from my neighbor by a frosted glass panel I can lower with the touch of a button. Or the two seats can become one cozy cabin by closing the glossy panel that sections off the aisle. It reminds me of an old-fashioned luxury train compartment.

I'm one of the first people on board, so I give in to temptation and rifle through all the goodies they've left me: mints, fuzzy socks, sleep mask, and—*ooh*—a little bag of skin care products. Next I play around with my seat, raising and lowering my privacy screen—that is until it makes an ominous-sounding *click*. The screen freezes an inch above the divider and refuses to rise again.

Cringing, I snatch my hand away and busy myself with removing my shoes and flipping through the first class menu. It's long, and everything looks delicious. Oh man, how am I supposed to go back to the cattle-roundup, meat-or-chicken-in-a-tin hell that is economy class after this?

I'm debating whether to get a preflight champagne cocktail or glass of white wine when I hear the man's voice. It's deep, crisply British, and very annoyed.

"What is that woman doing in my seat?"

My neck tenses, but I don't look up. I'm assuming he means me. His voice is coming from somewhere over my head, and there are only male passengers in here aside from me.

And he is wrong, wrong, wrong. I'm in *my* seat. I checked twice, pinched myself, checked again, and then finally sat down. I know I'm where I'm supposed to be—just not how I got away with it. Hey, I was as surprised as anyone when I went to the ticket counter, only to be informed I was in first class. No way am I going back to coach now.

My fingers grip the menu as I make a pretense of flipping through it. I'm really eavesdropping at this point. The flight attendant's response is too low to hear, but his isn't.

"I expressly purchased two seats on this flight. Two. For the simple purpose that I would not be seated next to anyone else."

Well, that's...decadent? Whacked? I struggle not to make a face. Who does that? Is it really so awful to sit next to someone? Has this guy *seen* economy? We can count each other's nose hairs back there. Here, my chair is so wide, I'm a good foot away from his stupid seat.

“I’m so sorry, sir,” the flight attendant answers in a near purr, which is weird. She should be annoyed. Maybe it’s all part of the kiss-the-first-class-passengers’-asses-because-they-paid-a-shit-ton-to-be-here program. “The flight is overbooked, and all seats are spoken for.”

“Which is why I purchased two seats,” he snaps.

She murmurs something soothing again. I can’t hear because two men walking past me to get to their seats are talking about stock options. They pass, and I hear Mr. Snooty again.

“This is unacceptable.”

A movement to my right, and I nearly jump. I see the red suit coat of the flight attendant as she bends close, her arm at the man’s screen button. Heat invades my cheeks, even as she starts to explain, “There’s a screen for privacy...”

She stops because the screen isn’t rising.

I burrow my nose in the menu.

“It doesn’t bloody work?” This from Snooty.

The rest goes just about as well as you’d expect. He rants, she placates, I hide between page one and two of the menu.

“Perhaps I can persuade someone to exchange seats?” the helpful flight attendant offers.

Yes, please. Fob him off on someone else.

“What difference does it make?” Snooty snaps. “The point was to have an empty seat next to mine.”

I’d love to suggest he wait for the next flight and save us all a headache, but that’s not in the cards. The standoff ends with the jerk plopping into his seat with an exasperated huff. He must be big, because I feel the whoosh of air as he does it.

The heat of his glare is tangible just before he turns away.

Fucker.

Slapping my menu down, I decide, *Fuck it; I’m having some fun with this*. What can they do? They’re loading the plane; my seat is secure.

I find a stick of gum in my purse and pop it in my mouth. A few chews and I have some superior gum-smacking going on. Only then do I turn his way.

And freeze mid-chew, momentarily stunned by the sight sitting next to me. Because, good God, no one has the right to be this hot and this much of a jerk. This guy is one-hundred-percent the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen. And it’s strange because his features aren’t perfect or gentle. No, they’re bold and strong—a jaw sharp enough to cut steel, firm chin, high cheekbones, and a bold nose that’s almost too big but fits his face perfectly.

I’d expected a whey-faced, graying aristocrat, but he’s tanned, his coal back hair falling over his brow. Sculpted, pouty lips are compressed in irritation as he scowls down at the magazine in his hand.

But he just as clearly feels my stare—the fact that I’m gaping like a speared fish probably doesn’t help—and he turns to glare. I’m hit with the full force of all that masculine beauty.

His eyes are aqua blue. His thick, dark brows draw together, a storm brewing on his face. He’s about to blast me. The thought hits along with another: I’d better make this good.

“Jesus,” I blurt out, lifting my hand as if to shield my eyes. “It’s like looking into the sun.”

“What?” he snaps, those laser-bright eyes narrowing.

Oh, this will be fun.

“Just stop, will you?” I squint at him. “You’re too hot. It’s too much to take.” This is true, though I’d never have the guts to say so in normal circumstances.

“Are you quite well?” he intones, as if he thinks the opposite.

“No, you’ve nearly rendered me blind.” I flap a hand. “Do you have an off switch? Maybe put it on low?”

His nostrils flare, his skin going a shade darker. “Lovely. I’m stuck next to a mad woman.”

“Don’t tell me you’re unaware of the dazzling effect you have on the world.” I give him a look of wide-eyed wonder. At least I hope that’s what I’m doing.

He flinches when I grasp the divider between us and lean in a bit. Hell, he smells good—like expensive cologne and fine wool. “You probably have women dropping at your feet like flies.”

“At least dropped flies are silent,” he mutters, furiously flipping through his magazine.

“Madam, do me the favor of refraining from speaking to me for the remainder of the flight.”

“Are you a duke? You talk like a duke.”

His head jerks as if he wants to look my way, but he manages to keep his gaze forward, his lips compressed so tightly they’re turning white at the edges. A travesty.

“Oh, or maybe a prince. I know!” I snap my fingers. “Prince Charming!”

A blast of air escapes him, as if he’s caught between a laugh and outrage but really wants to go with outrage. Then he stills. And I feel a moment’s trepidation, because he’s obviously realized I’m making fun of him. I hadn’t noticed how well-built this guy is until now.

He’s probably over six feet, his legs long and strong, encased in charcoal slacks.

Jesus, he’s wearing a sweater vest: dove gray and hugging his trim torso. He should look like an utter dork in it, but no... It only highlights the strength in his arms, those muscles stretching the limits of his white button-down shirt. Unfair.

His shoulders are so broad they make the massive first class seats look small. But he’s long and lean. I’m guessing the muscle definition under those fine and proper clothes is drool-worthy too, damn it all.

I take it all in, including the way his big hands clench. Not that I think he’ll use his strength against me. His behavior screams pompous prick, but he doesn’t seem like a bully. He never truly raised his voice with the flight attendant.

Even so, my heart beats harder as he slowly turns to face me. An evil smile twists his lush mouth.

Don’t look at it. He’ll suck you into a vortex of hot, and there will be no return.

“You found me out,” he confides in a low voice that’s warm butter over toast. “Prince Charming, at your service. Do forgive me for being short with you, madam, but I am on a mission of the utmost import.” He leans closer, his gaze darting around before returning to me. “I’m looking for my bride, you see. Alas, you are not wearing a glass slipper, so you cannot be her.”

We both glance at my bare feet and the red Chucks lying on the floor. He shakes his head. “You’ll understand that I need to keep my focus on the search.”

He flashes a wide—albeit fake—smile, revealing a dimple on one cheek, and I’m breathless. Double damn it.

“Wow.” I give a dreamy sigh. “It’s even worse when you smile. You really should come with a warning, sunshine.”

His smile drops like a hot potato, and he opens his mouth to retort, but the flight attendant is suddenly by his side.

“Mr. Scott, would you like a preflight beverage? Champagne? Pellegrino, perhaps?”

I’m half surprised she didn’t offer herself. But the implication is there in the way she leans over him, her hand resting on the seat near his shoulder, her back arched enough to thrust out her breasts. I can’t blame the woman. Dude is potent.

He barely glances her way. “No, thank you.”

“Are you sure? Maybe a coffee? Tea?”

One brow rises in that haughty way only a Brit can truly pull off. “Nothing for me.”

“Champagne sounds great,” I say.

But the flight attendant never takes her eyes from her prey. “I really do apologize for the mix-up, Mr. Scott. I’ve alerted my superiors, and they shall do everything in their power to accommodate you.”

“Moot at this point, but thank you.” He’s already picking up his magazine, the cover showcasing a sleek sports car. Typical.

“Well, then, if there’s anything you need…”

“I don’t know about him,” I cut in, “but I’d love a—hey! Hello?” I wave a hand as she saunters away, an extra sway to her hips. “Bueller?”

I can feel him smirking and give him a look. “This is your fault, you know.”

“My fault?” His brows lift, but he doesn’t look away from his magazine. “How on Earth did you come to that conclusion?”

“Your freaky good looks made her blind to all but you, sunshine.”

His expression is blank, though his lips twitch. “If only I could strike women speechless.”

I can’t help it, I have to grin at that. “Oh, I bet you’d find that marvelous; all of us helpless women just smiling and nodding. Though I’m afraid it would never work on me.”

“Of course not,” he deadpans. “I’m stuck next to the one afflicted with an apparently incurable case of verbal diarrhea.”

“Says the man who is socially constipated.”

He stills again, his eyes widening. And then a strangled snort breaks free, escalating into a choked laugh. “Christ.” He pinches the bridge of his nose as he struggles to contain himself. “I’m doomed.”

I smile, wanting to laugh too, but holding it in. “There, there.” I pat his forearm. “It will all be over in about seven hours.”

He groans, his head lifting. The amusement in his eyes is genuine, and a lot more deadly because of it. “I won’t survive it—”

The plane gives a little shudder as it begins to pull out from the gate. And Mr. Sunshine blanches, turning a lovely shade of green before fading into gray. A terrified flyer. But one who clearly would rather the plane actually crash than admit this.

Great. He’ll probably be hyperventilating before we level out.

Maybe it’s because my mom is terrified to fly as well, or maybe because I’d like to think Mr. Sunshine’s horrible behavior is fear-based and not because he’s a massive dickweasel, but I decide to help him. And, of course, have a little more fun while I’m doing it.

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Thank You!

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Reviews help other readers find books. If you enjoyed *IDOL*, please consider leaving a review.

I like to hang out in these places: Callihan's VIP Lounge, The Locker Room, Kristen Callihan FB author page, and Twitter

Playlist

Django Reinhardt, Limehouse Blues
Nirvana, Smells Like Teen Spirit
The Black Keys, You're The One
Sinead O'Connor, The Last Day of Our Acquaintance
The Beatles, In My Life
Bon Jovi, Wanted Dead or Alive
Pearl Jam, Indifference
Alice in Chains, Man in the Box
The Beatles, Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da
Mary J. Blige, Right Now
Nirvana, Heart Shaped Box
Prince, Cream
Prince, Darling Nikki
Wilco, I Am Trying to Break Your Heart
Cat Power, Sea of Love
The White Stripes, Hotel Yorba

About Kristen Callihan

Kristen Callihan is an author because there is nothing else she'd rather be. She is a RITA award winner, and winner of two RT Reviewer's Choice awards. Her novels have garnered starred reviews from Publisher's Weekly and the Library Journal, as well as making the USA Today bestseller list. Her debut book FIRELIGHT received RT Magazine's Seal of Excellence, was named a best book of the year by Library Journal, best book of Spring 2012 by Publisher's Weekly, and was named the best romance book of 2012 by ALA RUSA.

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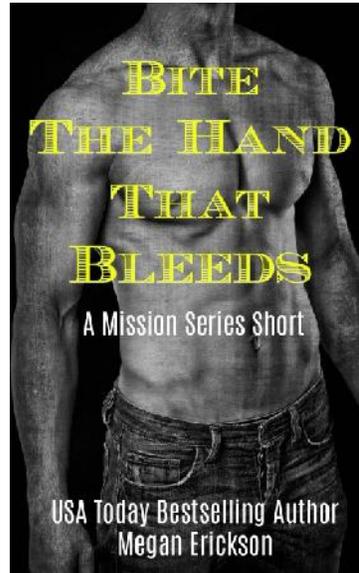
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Bite the Hand That Bleeds

A Mission Series Short Story
By Megan Erickson



Chapter One

I'd done a lot of stupid things in my life for money, but agreeing to go to a vampire club took the cake as the stupidest.

Basically this could go one of two ways—I'd regret it tremendously or it'd be the time of my life that I took to my grave. As long as this didn't put me *in* my grave. That was up for debate.

"I wish they'd hurry up already." Cassie rubbed her bare arms against the chill as we waited at the head of the darkened alley.

I raised my eyebrows at her. "I'm sorry, do *you* want to tell the vampires that that they need to adhere to Cassie Time because you forgot a damn coat?"

She rolled her eyes at me. "I didn't bother. Javier said it's hot as hell in the club."

Right, I figured free-flowing blood and orgies had a way of heating up a room. When Cassie pursed her lips at me, I realized I'd said that out loud. *Oops*.

I shifted my weight from foot to foot to take pressure off these stupid heels I was wearing. They were bright red with silver spikes and sexy as hell—but they pinched my toes. Drawing attention to myself in Mission City was on my *never ever do* list, and these shoes—along with my skin-tight jeans, and black corset peeking from beneath my leather jacket—would draw all kinds of attention. I wasn't sure why I was wearing this, but the dress code for humans to get into Bite was sex. Seriously that was the message—dress like sex. I didn't think a giant dick was a proper costume, so here I stood with my tits out in a bad part of Mission, hoping like hell some vampire arrived soon to take me underground, where I'd give up my blood for money.

My life was insane.

A week ago, I'd been living in blissful ignorance that vampires only existed in books and movies. I had no idea that in old subway tunnels beneath these streets was a community of vampires. They kept their existence a secret, but were more than happy to pay humans if we showed them a vein. The only reason Cassie and I got an invite to Bite was because Javier—a hookup of Cassie's—was a recruiter for them. He'd been clear—tell anyone about the club and there would be swift consequences. I'd asked what they were, and Javier had just stared hard at me. So naturally I took that to mean the consequences were torture and dismemberment not unlike the end of *Braveheart*.

For once, I was going to keep my mouth shut, because I needed that money. My dad had never been around, and my mom passed away years ago, so it was up to me to keep food on the table for myself and my younger brother. I'd spent the last month working four ten-hour waitress shifts in a row at the diner, so I was happy to do literally anything else for cash. The blood trade apparently paid great, so when Javier told us about Bite, I jumped at the chance. Why not? As for Cassie, she bussed tables as a cocktail waitress at a topless bar and was about done getting her ass grabbed without her permission.

I'd even done my hair, which was a first in...who knew how long. I hadn't had a haircut in probably a year, and the ends of my dark brown hair brushed the top of my ass. I'd straightened it and let it down. Even Cassie was surprised not to see it in its ever-present knot.

A loud crack sounded out on the street, and Cassie and I jumped. Fuck, I hated this city sometimes. That could have been anything from a car backfiring, to fireworks, to a gunshot. There weren't really any good parts of Mission. The city had long ago fallen into poverty after

the steel mill went out of business. But where we stood? The worst of the worst.

“Shit, are you sure this is legit?” I asked. I was half convinced this was just going to be a bunch of weirdos who thought they were vampires. Which, you know, hey whatever floated their boats as long as I still got paid. We were down to crumbs in our fridge.

Cassie leaned into me and dropped her voice. “I swear. Javier showed me the marks on his neck.”

I scoffed. “He could have made them himself.”

One second, we were staring at a brick wall, and in the next second, the bricks were blurred—actually blurred out like a dream sequence—and a giant form stood in front of us.

By giant, I mean giant. He stood probably seven feet tall, a bulky mass of muscle beneath a pair of jeans and long trench coat. His boots were larger than my head, and when he smiled, fangs punched down against his lower lip.

“Passes, ladies.” He held out his hand, and we both stared at the giant fleshy thing.

I’d told myself earlier today this was true, that vampires existed, but now that one was standing in front of us, I realized I wasn’t prepared. No fucking way.

My gaze lifted back up to his face, and I pointed at my own teeth. “Those are... those are real?”

Cassie hissed something at me.

The vampire’s smile didn’t waver. “Yeah, want to touch one?”

“Nope.” I held up my hands. “I’m good. You’re good. We’re all good. Great, good, great—*oomph*.” Cassie saved me from my runaway tongue with a swift elbow to the ribs.

She smiled her flirtatious Cassie smile at the vampire while I caught my breath. From her top, she pulled our passes that she’d received from Javier and handed them over to the big man. He glanced at them, and then stepped to the side, pointing at the blurry wall of brick. “Go on and walk through, and I’ll take you to Bite.”

Cassie took a step forward but I didn’t budge. *Wait a minute*. This was moving a little fast. “Uh, hey, can I ask a question first?”

Cassie turned around and bugged her eyes out at me. “Roxy!”

“Second question.” The vampire said.

“What?”

“This is your second question, but go ahead.”

Oh, so we had a wise guy vampire guide. Figured. “This is a paid gig, right? So when does the money exchange hands?”

The vampire looked half amused, half irritated with me. “Blood first, money second.”

I frowned. “That doesn’t seem fair. You all have the upper hand down there. How do I know you’re not going to keep me down there as a blood slave or something—”

Amusement fled the vampire’s face like a receding tide. “That is against the laws of our clan. For centuries we have vowed never to harm humans, or drink their blood without their consent and as long as I breathe, it’ll be that way for centuries more.”

When he finished talking, his shoulders were heaving, fists clenched, eyes swirling. And I was trembling so hard my teeth clacked. I liked to think I was a badass, but in no way did I have bravado in front of a pissed-off vampire. I’d made a joke that had offended him, and he wasn’t going to let it slide. I swallowed, trying to calm my racing nerves, while Cassie stood nearby, her face pale as a sheet.

“I-I’m sorry,” I said to the vampire.

His shoulders relaxed a bit. “It’s okay. That is... not a joke to us. We do not harm humans.

You have my word.”

The way he said his last sentence, I realized that was a big deal to him, to give me his word. Words didn’t mean shit to humans anymore, but I wasn’t going to get into that with him. I nodded. “Okay, thank you.”

He gestured behind him at the shimmering door. “Are you going to attend Bite tonight then?”

“We just...walk through that wall?” I asked,

Cassie looked like she was going to murder me.

“It’s a portal,” the vampire said. “We’ve installed them several places around the city. Only the members of our clan—the Gregorie clan—can activate the portals to access the tunnels. They’ve long been sealed over to humans.”

I glanced at Cassie, and then down at my pinched toes in my heels. I lifted my head and looked the vampire square in the eye. “Okay. Yeah. I’m ready.”

With one last look back at Mission, I followed Cassie through the door.

We walked down a set of damp concrete steps. Our guide—his name was Zeb, we learned—explained how the club would work. He was adamant we’d never be forced to do anything we didn’t want to do, which was a nice thing to hear, but I’d believe it when I saw it. He also explained that before we were bitten, we’d inhale somnus, which was a gaseous drug the vampires secreted from their wrists. It was also what they used to activate the portals. Zeb said the somnus would make us feel like we had a good alcohol buzz, and was necessary because without it, their saliva would turn us into vampires. So yeah, somnus and I were gonna be friends.

Vampires couldn’t get human venereal diseases, and didn’t really understand condoms, so we the burden of birth control was on the humans. No problem, I had an IUD, but I wasn’t intending to get quite that intimate with a vampire anyway.

Zeb also told us he was part of the Gregorie clan—named after the ruling family. I asked if there were more of these “clans” and all he said there was another in Mission, but they were not friendly to humans. When I tried to ask more questions about them, he clammed up.

We walked down a long hallway lit only by sparse wall lights until we reached a nondescript door that only said BITE along the top.

He turned around at the door and faced us. “Either of you change your minds?”

“What if—?” Zeb’s gaze shifted to me, and Cassie rolled her eyes. I glared at her. “I’m just wondering if I can change my mind once I’m in there.”

“Sure.” He grinned, all fangs and white teeth. “But I doubt you will.”

I decided not to ask what that meant. Maybe ignorance was bliss here.

“We’re ready,” Cassie said.

“Feel free to dance and loosen up first.” Zeb said. “You can always turn down a vampire who approaches you. Once you meet, they will likely take you to the Feeding Room. At midnight, all humans go there to be picked by a vampire. They feed; you get the money. Any questions?”

He looked at me pointedly. I shook my head.

With a nod, he opened up the door and waved us inside. The base of the music hit me like a punch to the gut and a resounding boom rattled my spine. The heat was like a wall, and I could already feel sweat dripping down my neck. I took off my leather jacket and tossed it on a rack

along the wall with a dozen other jackets. I was loath to part with it, because I loved that jacket, but I also didn't want to die of heatstroke.

Cassie and I made our way toward the dance floor, where a spotlight roamed over a mass of bodies. Everywhere I looked, I saw skin. Vampire males apparently hated shirts? Because glistening pecs were everywhere. Was that sweat or blood clinging to that man's nipple? Actually, never mind. "Ignorance is bliss. Ignorance is bliss." I chanted to myself.

"What are you saying?" Cassie yelled over the music.

"I need a drink!" I answered. Wait, did alcohol in my blood affect its...value? See, there I went with more questions.

Cassie was already grooving to the music and about three vampire studs were checking her out. With every sway of her hips, her skirt brushed the bottom of her ass. Was she wearing underwear? Fuck, I needed a Xanax.

I glanced off to the side of the dance floor, where there was a large area full of couches. I wasn't sure what I pictured when Javier had told us this was a club with no inhibitions. But whatever I imagined didn't prepare me for what I saw. The lights were dim, but I could still make out the activities going on.

Now I understood why we were supposed to dress like sex. The walls, the couches, heck even some of the floor was covered with partially dressed bodies. I was starting to be able to pick out the vampires right away. They were generally larger than humans, with large jaws to accommodate their fangs. And there was something about the way they carried themselves that was altogether not human.

Cassie and I stared as a male vampire stuck his tongue in a human man's mouth, and then his hand down the man's pants. The man's knees buckled, then his body convulsed as his head fell back and his lips parted on a moan I couldn't hear, but could *feel*.

On the couch behind them, a male vampire lay on top of a human woman, his hips churning between her legs. Even with the pounding base, I could hear her loud cries of ecstasy.

Cassie exhaled loudly. "See? We can get vampire dick and cash. Sign me the fuck up."

"Pretty sure you already signed up, tiger." I nodded to the dance floor. "Get out there."

She ran her tongue over her teeth, moving her body in a way I wished I could. She tossed her hair over her shoulder and shot me a sexy grin. "I love it here. It feels so free!"

I guessed that was one way to describe it.

I tapped her on the arm as one vampire who'd been checking her out strode toward us. "Hey, uh, I'm going to grab a drink. Go do your thing."

She lashed out a hand and gripped my wrist. "You okay?"

I smiled and lied. "Yep, fine! We'll meet up in the Feeding Room, okay?"

She blew me a kiss, and then turned right into the bare muscled chest of a vampire who looked like he was going to devour her. Literally.

I skittered away, the dance floor making me feel claustrophobic. I wasn't sure where to go. I was here, so I wanted the cash. Maybe it would be better to stay out of the way, then head to the Feeding Room at midnight, get bitten, and get the fuck out. Did I really have to make a friend? As amazing as orgasms were, I was kinda cool keeping my pants on too.

Why did this have to be a social thing? Where did I sign up for the quick feeding with zero house music and orgies? Vampires needed to know about drive-throughs.

Near the bar was a small hallway and I ducked into the entrance, hoping to blend into the shadows. Too bad I hadn't brought a book. I slid my back down the wall until I sat on the floor. Bending my neck forward until my hair formed a curtain to hide my face, I prepared to wait until

I was shuttled into the Feeding Room at midnight. I'd make up a story to tell Cassie of course. Something that involved a sexy vampire with a big dick and talented hands. I would let my fantasy steer toward his tongue between my thighs, but I had questions about fangs and delicate skin.

The music changed, and I closed my eyes, wondering if I could get a quick nap in. Then the light shifted, just a slight flicker that I noticed from behind the thin skin of my eyelids. I opened my eyes, not lifting my head yet or making any sort of movement, to see two giant black boots planted in front of me.

I wasn't stupid. Of course whoever was attached to those boots saw me, but I told myself if I didn't move, maybe they'd go away. Move on. Go meet someone interesting who wasn't cowering in a dark hallway.

But then the vampire crouched, his massive legs folding so I got a glance of thick thighs and massive hands that could palm my skull.

One of those hands extended toward me. It took everything in me not to flinch or run away. My heart was pounding out of my chest, the beat of it rivaling the music out on the dance floor. One finger touched the bottom of my chin and lifted.

My gaze went up taking in a muscled torso and broad shoulders covered in a dark T-shirt. I squeezed my eyes shut before I got to his mouth. He had to be a vampire; he was huge. Bigger than Zeb. Bigger than the ones I saw on the dance floor.

Wait, maybe this was a good thing he was big. Surely he'd want someone with more...blood, right? A larger person?

"Look at me," his deep voice rumbled.

The command was like a hand plunging itself into my throat and tightening around my heart. I had to obey. There was no ignoring this voice.

I opened one eye to look into the dark gaze of a vampire. His black hair was brushed back, although a few strands fell down his forehead, nearly covering one eye. His full lips were parted slightly, just enough that I could see the tips of white fangs touching his lower lip. His chin was pronounced, cheekbones high and sharp. And those eyes were pools so dark that I nearly tipped over and fell inside.

He didn't say anything, and so I opened my mouth and said the first thing that entered my brain. "Okay, I'm looking at you."

He didn't grin. He didn't react at all, and that finger of his hadn't left my chin, like he knew if he let go, I'd break his gaze. I wouldn't. I was pretty sure I couldn't. Did he cast a spell on me? I had thought vampires didn't have magic, but that was before I saw them make a door out of a solid wall.

I probably shouldn't be back here. Would he kick me out? Shit. I needed this money, and I hoped I didn't blow it. "Am I in trouble? I just came back here to get a breather." Shit I was rambling, the words tumbling out of my mouth like blood from burst vein. "I'm totally prepared for the, uh, feeding and stuff. All about giving up the blood. Totally cool with it." I held up my wrists and rotated them. "See? Clean. Good to go." I beamed a bright smile.

The vampire stared at me for a long time, and just when I began to tremble a bit under his heavy glare, his gaze shifted to my neck.

My pulse was out of control now, an escalating *ra pam, ra pum, ra pum* in my neck. Could he see the veins? Could he smell the blood as it rushed underneath my skin?

"Do you—" My throat went dry. "Do you need to feed?"

His head tilted slightly, and then he reached out and wrapped his long fingers around my

forearm. I held back a gasp at his grip as he studied the underside of my wrist. His thumb brushed the skin before dropping my arm. I shuddered at the brief touch.

“First time?” he asked. I nodded as I nibbled my lip. His gaze dipped again then rose back to meet my eyes. “I don’t need to feed from you.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what to think about the pang of disappointment that streaked through my chest. I was terrified of this guy. He’d probably rip out an entire vein with that massive mouth. He cleared his throat, and I realized I’d been staring at his lips.

I shook my head, wondering what was wrong with me. I relied on my wits, and here I was caught staring at this vampire’s lips, wondering what it would be like to feel them on my neck.

The vampire rose to standing, and gestured for me to stand up. It took me a bit to scramble to my feet and I wobbled slightly on my heels. He steadied me with a hand on my elbow. “I’ll escort you through the club and set you up in a private room until it’s midnight.”

Well, that was nice. He wasn’t giving me the option of staying here in my dark hallway, but what he suggested couldn’t be bad. Except... “I’m sorry but who are you? Do you have ID or a business card or something?”

He stared at me like I had three heads. “Dru.”

“Is that your name or some vampire title?”

Again with the stare like I was fucking crazy. “My name.”

“And—”

“I’m head of security.”

Head of—Oh. *Oh*. He was a big shot. “Nice to meet you. I’m Roxy.”

His lips moved, like he was sounding out my name, but he didn’t make a sound. He dropped his hand on my elbow, jerked his head in an indication for me to follow him, and walked into the club. I did my best to keep up with his long strides.

We skirted the dance floor, and I kept my head down, eyes on my feet. When a husky moan reached my ears, louder than the base of the music, I assumed we’d moved into the couch orgy portion of the club.

The moans were plentiful, and the obscene noises coming from the couches had my head coming up, my gaze sweeping the area. Because really? Who wouldn’t stop to look at this?

Three female vampires were topless, writhing on a couch in a mass of limbs...wait was there a fourth? I counted off the legs I saw, but got lost at five and had to start over.

My head whipped to the side at the sound of some filthy words, and I saw Cassie on the couch, head back, legs spread, her skirt pushed up around her waist. A male vampire flicked a nipple on her pale breast, his white fangs flashing in the eerie light of the club. A shudder ran through her entire body as his lips grazed the underside of her other breast and he made his way down, down...

Cassie’s head fell forward, she opened her eyes, and locked gazes with me. Fuck, I was a voyeur, spying on my friend. But damn, she looked so happy, face flushed with pleasure. I shot her a thumbs up, which was geeky as hell, but the only thing my hands wanted to do. Her shoulders shook with a silent laugh, and then she winked at me just as the vampire did something between her legs that had her eyes squeezing shut again.

Okay I needed to look away now. My friend was happy and clearly being taken care of. So, yeah. She was getting hers. I was being led to a private room where I could be by myself. At least one of us was getting the full vampire club experience.

A shadow fell over me, and I realized that I’d been planted in one place, staring at Cassie. Dru was probably not pleased. I glanced up, an apology on the tip of my tongue, only to look

into the eyes of a vampire who was decidedly not Dru.

This one wasn't quite as big as Dru but still bigger than a human. His lips were pulled back, fangs massive in his slick grin. His hair was long, brushing the top of his shoulders. His nostrils flared as he peered down, and his gaze settled on me like a rain of icicles. My hands instinctively came up and I wrapped them around my middle, glancing around for Dru. Fuck, how did I lose the biggest damn vampire in the place?

"Ah, pretty human," he said, his raspy voice like a swarm of bees. "No need to hide. I see how you're intrigued by what's happening around you." He took a step closer and alarm bells rang in my ears. I should step back, get away... "I can make you feel so good, better than you've ever felt in your life."

I opened my mouth but with a quick movement, he had me backed up against a wall. I couldn't see Cassie from behind the male's big body, and I wasn't sure she'd hear me anyway if I yelled for help, not with the loud music.

My stomach dropped as the vampire lifted his hand, a single finger brushing a strand of hair off the top of my breast. He licked his lips as he stared at my flesh. I was just a network of veins, and while this was what I signed up for, being pressed against a wall with this vampire at my front was not my idea of a fun time.

My voice was failing me. Every time I opened my mouth, only a series of clicks came out. The vampire pressed his thigh between my legs, and the scent of him clogged my senses. Panic set in, and my heart pounded, my palms sweating as I raised them to half-heartedly push him away...

His body disappeared.

The heat of him was gone, his scent, everything and in his place was the massive hulking form of Dru.

The vampire who'd pressed me against the wall was on the ground, Dru's boot on his throat. Dru hissed something at him, words I couldn't hear because my heart was still pounding a drum beat in my skull. I placed my hand on my chest, confirming the organ was still there, that I was still alive and breathing, that my blood was still in my body.

The vampire was hauled to his feet by two other massive vampires and dragged away. Dru finally turned to me, his face like thunder. "Where the fuck did you go?"

"I didn't go anywhere!" Now my voice worked.

"Then why weren't you behind me?"

Oh so this was my fault? Rape culture was a thing in vampire world too? "I stopped to say hi to my friend. I didn't expect a freaking vampire to come out of nowhere and press me up against the wall and threaten me with a good time, okay? Is this my fault?"

Dru growled—honest to God growled—and a tingle raced down my spine. I shouldn't be turned on by that, and especially after what just happened. But I was. Goddamnit, I was. Did they pump aphrodisiacs through the air vents in this place or something?

Dru leaned in, placing a hand flat by my head, and bent down to speak inches from my face. He sighed heavily before he spoke. "This is not your fault. And I'm sorry. Volmer will be punished for what he did. He's been...a little aggressive lately, and he went too far this time."

All the fight went out of me, and I slumped against the wall. "Okay."

Dru's hand rose slowly, and then curled around my neck. He lifted my chin with his thumb, and the heat of his palm spread over my chest, tightening my nipples. I bit my lip to cut off a moan, and Dru's eyes shifted. "Are you all right?"

I nodded, unsure I could speak. I was aroused; there was no other explanation. I rubbed my

thighs together, trying to ease the ache and the pooling heat in my stomach.

His hand tightened, fingers digging into the back of my neck, and I arched into it, pressing my breasts against him, not knowing what was wrong with me, but unable to stop it.

He dropped his hand, lurching away from me, and running his hands into his hair and then down his face. I stumbled a bit at the loss of his body against mine. Had I done something wrong? Was there some sort of vampire make-out etiquette I didn't know? Cassie seemed to be doing just fine.

"I thought—"

"Do you want me to leave you here or do you still want to go to a private room to wait?" His voice was strained, but I didn't miss his meaning. *Leave you here.*

I blinked at him. "Would you stay with me, or—"

"No, I have to work. You pick. Stay here or private room?"

That stung a bit, but what did I expect? I hadn't exactly been charming since I'd met Dru. If my options were to stay here alone or in a private room, I wanted the private room. When I told him, he nodded at me curtly.

This time he took no chances. He wrapped long fingers around my wrist and didn't let go, even as I had to jog to keep up with him. My heels were killing me, and I focused all my energy on staying upright and not twisting an ankle.

We sped by the couches, and I didn't look up. I kept my gaze on the way his T-shirt stretched across his muscular back and broad shoulders. He pushed open a door and then we were in a long hallway. I didn't have time to look around because seconds later, we were through another door which opened up into some sort of lobby.

He didn't drop my wrist, but I dragged my feet to slow us down, because I wanted to get a look at this. Also because my feet felt like they were going to fall off. The lobby was a semi-circle, and a large staircase was in front of us, leading up several stories. The floors gleamed and for a second, I imagined I was in some fancy hotel I'd only ever seen in the movies.

We walked around to the back of the staircase, where a female vampire sat behind a desk. She smiled at Dru, and her gaze drifted to me briefly before snapping back to him. "Hello, Dru. Would you like a room?"

"Yes," he said shortly and snatched the key from her outstretched hand. "Block it out all night, please."

She nodded with a polite smile, and then Dru was once again tugging on my wrist, pulling me toward one of several hallways lining the outside of the circle. Except this time, my feet were done. My right ankle said, *fuck this shit*, and collapsed like a drunk at an open bar wedding. I cried out as the pain shot through my leg. I would have hit the floor in a lump of tired of human, but I had a vampire companion who could move at the speed of lightning. He scooped me up into his arms, his dark eyes smoldering as they took in my body.

"What happened?" He demanded, his brows a straight line of anger. "Are you in pain? Was it from Volmer?"

I shook my head and pointed at my feet. "These heels...I'm not used to walking in them. My ankle rolled."

He stared at my foot, then back at my face as he continued to walk down a hallway lined with doors. "Why would you wear shoes you can't walk in?"

"They're sexy," I muttered.

He stopped at a door and unlocked it quickly, despite my weight in his arms. He didn't set me down inside the door. Instead he kicked it shut with his foot, and then carried me to the bed,

where he placed me down gently. He knelt at my feet and removed my heels, his warm hands caressing my ankles. “Which one?” he asked.

I pointed to my right.

He gripped it and rotated the joint, watching my face as he did. “That hurt?”

“A bit.” To be honest, his touch was making me forget about the pain. I hadn’t expected him to be gentle, but he held my foot like it was precious.

“Forgot how fragile humans can be,” he said, almost to himself.

“Hey,” I said. “We’re not *that* fragile.”

He raised an eyebrow, just one, and I got Jason Momoa vibes that made my blood heat. “We’re not,” I insisted. “It’s just those stupid shoes which I only wore because the dress code had made it clear we should come looking hot as fuck. And those shoes are definitely hot as fuck.”

He wasn’t looking at my shoes on the floor. He was looking at me. My face. “You don’t need the heels, Roxy.”

I swallowed, wanting to yell at him to let go of my foot, which barely hurt anymore. His touch was confusing me, arousing me. He lifted his hand and tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear. “You’ll have your pick when it’s time to head to the Feeding Room. I’m sure they’ll be plenty lined up, eager to get a taste of you.”

Don’t you want a taste of me? That was the first thought that flashed through my head. I bit my lip to prevent the words from flying out of my mouth, and his gaze immediately dropped. My pulse raced and I gripped the sheets of the bed, wondering why my body was lighting up, why I couldn’t stop staring at his lips and wishing his hands would travel up my calf higher and higher...

He stood up abruptly, dropping my leg like it was on fire. I stared at his back as he faced the door. “Dru?”

“I need to go,” he said. He didn’t even glance over his shoulder at me. “You’ll be fine here, I’ll have someone come get you when it’s time.”

No, he couldn’t leave. I wasn’t sure why yet, but I was in a panic. “Dru—”

“Bye, Roxy.” He turned the doorknob and opened the door.

“Dru!” I said, standing up quickly, which was a bad idea. As soon as I put weight on my ankle, pain shot up my leg. “Shit, fuck, ouch.”

The door slammed shut and Dru was back in my face, placing me back on the bed, his hands once again massaging my ankle. “Damnit, Roxy.” He sat down beside me on the bed, intent on his task.

I didn’t care about my ankle. “Why are you so eager to leave?” I asked. “Can’t you stay?”

He wouldn’t meet my eyes. “I can’t. I have work to do...and I can’t.”

Fine, he was making me come right out and say it. “Why won’t you feed from me?”

His hands paused on my ankle, and he lifted his head slowly. “Did someone explain to you what it’s like when a vampire feeds from you?”

Zeb had told us when we were walking in, but I might have zoned out a couple of times. “A little bit.”

He sighed heavily. “First of all, we need to feed right from the vein every few days. The rest of the time, we drink stored blood. Our saliva is an aphrodisiac. You’ll want to fuck. Some humans are used to it, and it doesn’t affect them much anymore, and that’s who I usually feed from. But this is your first time, and...”

I still didn’t understand. “So what, you don’t want to have sex with me so you won’t feed

from me?”

He met my gaze squarely. “I don’t fuck humans.”

Oh. *Oh*. Should I be offended? “Do you think we’re dirty or—?”

He shook his head. “No, I just don’t do it.”

I was nosy as fuck. “Why?”

He blinked at me. “You ask a lot of questions, don’t you?”

“Yeah, it’s my flaw, sue me. So...why?”

This time his hand settled on my thigh, and the heat from his palm seeped through the denim. He rubbed his forehead with his other hand. “If I tell you, will you let me leave and quit trying to walk on this ankle?”

I pursed my lips together and nodded.

“About ten years ago, I fed from a human the first time she ever came to Bite. Blood virgins are...a bit of a novelty here. At the time, I was cocky and everything was a competition. So I fed from her and fucked her, and then went back to high-five my friends.”

“But it didn’t end there. She came back the next week. And the next. She became obsessed with me. With our culture.”

“Did she want to be with you? Are human-vampire relationships allowed?”

“It’s...allowed in special cases. Anything that puts us at risk for detection must be approved by our clan’s Council, like us traveling street-side frequently or allowing a human down here for anything other than blood transfer. But I don’t think she wanted anything from me other than to be turned to a vampire.”

“Is that possible?” I asked.

“We don’t just turn humans,” he said. “That has to be approved by our Council too. And it’s a process. She wouldn’t take no for an answer. Every time I saw her, she seemed more out of her mind than before.”

“I...didn’t know what to do. I finally told her she couldn’t come back, that she had to forget about us. She didn’t like that, and somehow found out information about the other clan in the area. Unlike us, that clan is more than happy to use humans as blood slaves. They didn’t turn her. They sucked her dry. Killed her.”

“Jesus, Dru,” I breathed out. “That’s awful. I’m so sorry. For her and you.”

“I feel responsible, and although it’s never happened again with humans we invite, I can’t bring myself to get too close to humans. So I don’t.” The sadness in his eyes made my heart ache. “I won’t. Even if you tempt me like I’ve never felt before.”

My breath caught in my throat. “But surely you’ve been tempted by a human before. In the last ten years.”

He shook his head. “I haven’t. Even with her all those years ago, it was about the competition.”

“So...” Heat rose up my neck. “What do you mean I tempt you?”

His hand left my thigh and he rubbed his chest. “Around you, I feel...” He let his voice drop, and didn’t finish.

“What? You feel what?”

“I don’t know the word, okay?” His frustration was visible in the lines around his mouth, the piercing way his dark eyes studied my face. “I don’t know the word for this burning in my chest, this pull toward you and this need to be in your presence. I don’t know what it is, just that the feeling terrifies me as much as I crave it.”

I stared at him, unsure what to say, because I was fitting his words together in my head like

a puzzle. I still didn't have the larger picture when he stood up. "That's why I have to go," he said.

"Dru," I pleaded.

"You promised," he said softly. "I told you, and now you let me leave."

I stared at him helplessly. How had I only met this vampire a mere ten minutes ago and now I was devastated to watch him walk out that door. But he was right. I'd promised. And who was I to make him go against his personal convictions? So I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Okay," I said hoarsely. "Will I—will I see you again?"

He reached down, his large hand resting on my cheek and his thumb caressing my lip. "No."

I appreciated his honesty. I gripped his wrist and pressed a kiss to his thumb. "Okay. I...thank you. For everything. Out there. This room. Your kindness. And your heart." His lips parted, and the tips of his fangs gleamed. *He's a vampire, Roxy. What the fuck is wrong with you?*

"Bye, my not-fragile Roxy."

I laughed, and he dropped his hand. In seconds he was out the door, and he shut it behind him with a soft click.

He hadn't looked back.

There was nothing to do. I had my phone, and because there was no Wi-Fi, I played some crappy game apps that my brother had told me to download. I tested my ankle and although it was a bit swollen, the pain wasn't as bad. I couldn't put my heels back on, but I could put enough weight on it to walk with only a slight limp.

Also I was a little scared. Would I want to fuck a vampire once they fed from me? The thought of taking my pants off for anyone right now was not an arousing thought. *Except if it was Dru.*

No, stop it. I wouldn't see him again. So I waited in that room for what felt like hours, hoping that Cassie was all right, that Dru had forgotten about me, and that I wasn't paired up with some lame-ass vampire.

I wandered around the room. It was basically like a hotel. There was a small bathroom with a shower and a single bed. Just when I was contemplating taking a nap, there was a knock at the door. I froze. "Uh, come in."

The door opened, and I breathed out a sigh of relief when the woman from the front desk smiled politely at me. She wore her hair in tight bun, and her dress shirt stretched across her ample chest. She was doing just fine in her sky-high heels. I'd abandoned mine in the corner.

"Are you ready to head to the Feeding Room, Roxy? Dru asked me to escort you."

Oh, *escort*. Fancy. Except I stood there in my bare feet. My makeup was not looking so fresh anymore, and my finger-combed hair was still full of knots. I was...not my best. I cleared my throat. "Yeah, I'm ready."

She smiled at me again, and then gestured for me to follow her.

We walked down the hallway, out into the lobby, then through a doorway framed in red. This hall wasn't lined with doors. There was just one at the end, and that, I suspected, was the Feeding Room. She pointed to it. "You'll walk right through there, and toward the back, you'll see a seating area for the humans. You'll be chosen from there."

Chosen. She made it sound kinda nice, but at this point, I just wanted to give up my blood so I could get the money and run. I nodded at her, and walked through the doorway.

I'd already passed through orgy central back in the club, but nothing prepared me for this. Sex acts, sex everywhere. Threesomes, foursomes. Limbs and blood and orgasms. For a moment I stood frozen at the front of the large room as I watched a woman getting the ride of her life while straddling a vampire.

Blood dripped from two small holes in her neck, slipping down between her breasts, where the vampire was smearing it on her nipples and sucking it off.

Hot damn.

The woman looked over at me, and smiled.

Okay, that was my cue to get to my area. I padded barefoot to the human seating, glancing around for Cassie, who I spotted in the corner pressed up against a wall with a vampire between her legs. Her eyes were closed, mouth open, and she looked blissed out. At least one of us was happy.

In the human seating, a female vampire who seemed to be the "human corraller" told me to sit anywhere. I took a chair near the front. As much as I wanted to hide, I needed to get picked. A line of vampires stood behind a rope, and I watched as one came to the front and scanned all of us. He chose a male human toward the back. The human walked away with the vampire, then the next blood-sucker in line stepped up. It went that way for a while, and I was picking at the chipped polish on my nails when I heard a deep voice say, "Her."

I glanced up. A male vampire stood at the front, and his gaze was on me. I looked behind me, wondering if he meant someone else. I pointed to myself and mouthed the word, "Me?"

He looked confused, and said something to the corraller. She looked at me with an exasperated expression. "You! Let's go."

Oh shit, okay. This was it. My time to shine. "Do your thing, blood," I muttered to myself. "Taste great. Don't make me horny."

The male vampire looked young, younger than Dru, but I didn't know much about how vampires aged, so he could have been four hundred years old for all I knew.

"I'm Tack," he said. "Your name?"

"Roxy." I felt so stupid, walking beside him in my bare feet. He was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, but he looked like a million bucks with his hair nicely styled. He smelled good too.

I still didn't want to fuck him.

"Look," I said. "Do we have to, uh..." I made a face, hoping he got my drift and that I wouldn't have to say the words.

He just stared at me.

"Do we have to..." I made a thrusting motion with my hips.

Now he looked slightly alarmed. "I'm sorry, what are you trying to ask?"

I was an idiot. "Do we have to fuck?" I blurted out. "This is my first time, and I kinda just wanted to give up the blood rather than the pussy. Like, one thing at a time, know what I mean? Baby steps."

By now we were in the corner of the room, an empty couch near us that I couldn't stop staring at. Was that where I'd be sitting when he bit me?

"I...can't lie and say that I don't want to fuck you," he said. Were all vampires honest? I liked this. "But we can't—and I won't—pressure you into doing anything you don't want to do. Maybe we should start with the feeding, and see how you feel?"

Right, he was banking on that damn aphrodisiac. Fuck, I missed Dru. I felt safe with him, and while Tack seemed perfectly nice, I didn't want him. Not like I wanted Dru.

Why was I doing this? Why was I making a big deal about my first time? I wasn't a virgin—

sex-wise. I needed to shut off my brain and get on with it. *You can't always get what you want, Roxy.*

I smiled at him. "Sure, uh, that sounds great."

He smiled back, his grin all teeth and fangs. They looked sharp. Well of course they did, they had to slice flesh. No one wanted dull fangs, right? This was good. I sank down onto the couch and he plastered himself next to me. He passed his wrist in front of my face, and I inhaled something sweet. The somnus. My head fuzzed a bit, not too much. Not enough to calm my nerves, that was for sure.

He placed his hand on my throat, and his thumb caressed the vein on the side of my neck. "You have beautiful skin." His breath warmed the side of my face, and I closed my eyes, pretending I was somewhere else as his nose nudged my earlobe. "I saw you sitting in there and I knew I had to have you. Blood virgin, right?"

"Yes," I whispered.

He moaned and pressed closer. His hand tightened, and I felt the scrape of a fang on my skin. This felt wrong, so wrong. *Stop thinking. Stop thinking. Just let it happen.* What's a little blood exchange between a human and vampire?

"You'll see," he said, his voice rough with arousal. "One bite and you'll be begging for it, and I'll make you feel so good, you'll want to come back again, and again."

I was going to throw up. I placed a hand over my mouth, because I was worried I'd spew bile.

"You'll love it, Roxy, just you wait."

He pulled away, and I waited for the slice of the fangs, for the suction of his mouth as he drank my blood, but with a jolt, the heat of his body left my side.

Someone yelled, and it sounded like Tack. I popped my eyes open only to see Dru growling a few words at Tack before turning to me with fire in his eyes.

The dark hue of his irises was swirling with red, mixing together like flames in the night. "What—" I began as he scooped me into his arms and strode across the room. I buried my head in his chest, not sure why he was here, and barely even caring about the money anymore. He'd come back, and I was in his arms, and for now that was good enough.

We traveled quickly, quicker than a human could travel and within seconds we were back in my room where my heels still rested in the corner. He sat me down on the bed and then kneeled on the floor between my legs. He circled his arms around me and buried his face against my stomach.

He didn't speak, and neither did I. Out there, I'd been trembling and sick to my stomach. In here, safe with Dru, my blood settled, my nerves smoothed over.

I ran my fingers through Dru's hair, and scraped my nails over his shoulders. His hard muscles shifted beneath my palms, but still he didn't speak, didn't give me an explanation as to why he'd taken me from the Feeding Room.

This massive vampire was on his knees at my feet. His arms were wrapped around my hips, and I'd never felt so safe and protected.

Okay, and turned on. Like a lot turned on.

I shifted my weight as the heat in my belly dropped lower. "Dru," I said softly. "Why?"

His shoulders heaved with a sigh, but he didn't talk. Instead I felt his lips move against my skin between the bottom of my corset and the top of my jeans. Oh shit, and it wasn't just his lips, it was his tongue too, dipping in my bellybutton and teasing at the edge of my waistband.

"I've been hard since I saw you." His deep voice rumbled against my skin. "Thought I could

send you off, let you collect your money and get out of here but knowing you were there, that someone else was going to—” His words cut off on a moan and he leaned back a bit to grip my waist. His thumbs dipped beneath my jeans and pressed closed to where I ached for him. He licked his lips and tortured eyes met mine. “Fuck, I can smell you, Roxy. I can smell how much you want it. Is this for me?”

He could smell my arousal. Why was that hot? I dug my nails into his shoulder and pressed into his hands. “Yes. It’s for you.” Except, I didn’t understand what was going on. “But you said... you said you wouldn’t feed from me. Or touch me.”

“I know what I said.” His voice was a growl. “But I couldn’t let another vampire bite you. I walked in there and saw how scared you were. I had to protect you, even if I’m fucking terrified you’re not safe with me either.”

I touched his brow, his sharp cheekbones, admiring the perfect cut of his face. Was there a better face ever made? Probably not. “I think I’m safe with you.”

He swallowed. “Roxy...”

“Do you want my blood? My body?”

A shudder ran through his body. “More than I’ve ever wanted anything in my whole life.”

I wanted him too. “And you’re worried because of what happened last time?”

He nodded.

“I’m not her. If you weren’t a vampire, I’d want you all the same. Please trust me.” My body responded to his hands and his voice. What would it be like to kiss him and feel his skin against mine? I had to know. Fuck all the reasons I came down here in the first place. All that mattered was here and now, this moment in time in this room with Dru. “Then take it. My blood and my body. I want you to.”

His nostrils flared as his breath came faster. His hands gripped me tighter as his control seemed held by a thin thread.

“Please, Dru.”

His hands left me, and I nearly wept. This was it. He was going to walk out on me again. Goddamnit, why did I have to find the one vampire with a conscious?

Except he stayed on his knees, and his hands rested on his thighs. And when he spoke, he was all authority and command. “Take off your pants for me. I want to see you.”

I shivered as his words danced through my blood. I stood up on my bare feet and slid my pants down my legs slowly. I kicked my jeans off to the side, and since I hadn’t worn underwear, I stood in front of him wearing only my corset.

He sucked in a breath as he stared between my legs. His lips were parted, and his tongue poked out to catch on one of his fangs. “Your smell is...” He inhaled again, his eyes sliding closed briefly before popping back open. “Sit down.”

I sat down, the bedding cool on my bare ass. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this exposed in front of a man. Just... everything all out. In a lit room. With hungry eyes taking me in.

He spread my legs and pressed a kiss on the inside of my left knee. As he drew closer, I braced myself with my arms behind me, still in awe of this massive vampire on his knees looking at my like I was the Hope diamond.

He was in no hurry. His hand slid up my thigh and then his thumb was pressing against my wet flesh. “So soft and pink and so fucking wet, Roxy.” His thumb pressed harder, teasing my opening. “You always get this wet?”

“Not usually.”

He drew his thumb back and wiped it on my inner thigh, leaving my skin glistening. “I wanted to do this from the first moment I saw you,” he said, then lapped at my pussy with that long tongue. I nearly came off the bed. I cried out as his tongue worked miracles, swirling around my clit, dipping into my entrance, then lapping up all the wetness that he caused.

He ate pussy like a starving man, humming to himself so the vibrations echoed throughout my body. Every once in a while I felt the prick of his fangs and it only sent my arousal higher. I gripped his hair and ground into his face, unable to control myself, and he must have loved it because he growled and went at me with his tongue harder.

I couldn’t stop my hips from churning as my body sought the orgasm I wanted so badly. I was heaving, crying out, whimpering his name as I fell onto my back, no longer able to hold myself up.

He lifted his head for a moment, his lips red and wet, eyes inhuman. “Come on my tongue, Roxy. Want to taste every bit of it.”

“Oh fuck,” I breathed just as his tongue went back at my clit and he plunged two fingers inside of me.

My back bowed off the bed and like a bolt of lightning, I came. The thunder rolled through me, spreading to every limb and to the tips of my fingers as Dru didn’t let up.

When I collapsed back on the bed, he still wasn’t done. His tongue was softer now, but he was eagerly lapping up everything my body had to offer.

When he lifted his head, I knew this wasn’t even close to being over. He stood up slowly, towering over me. The veins in his neck protruded as he seemed to fight to keep himself in check. He fisted his shirt at his upper back and pulled it over his head, dropping it to the side before quickly shucking his pants.

Fuck me. He was the most perfect specimen I’d ever seen. Massive shoulders, a huge chest that could probably bench-press five of me, and a tight stomach of rippling muscle. Between the boulders of his thighs was a long, thick dick that was pointing right at me. My pussy clenched.

He pushed me up higher on the bed and with a quick flick of his wrist, rolled me over onto my stomach. He made short work of the laces on the back of my corset and then tugged me up onto my hands and knees. This was never a position I liked—it made me feel too vulnerable, but when his hands settled on my hips, and his thighs pressed against the backs of mine, I felt nothing but arousal.

A hand wrapped around my throat and then he pulled me up, my back to his front. I moaned at the possessive way he gripped me. I’d just come, but I wanted him between my legs again, his mouth, his fingers, that thick cock. Goddamn anything, as long as it belonged to him.

“Your pussy,” he said, as his other hand flicked my nipples, “melted on my tongue. Dripped for me and tasted just like honey.”

I tried to talk, but the only thing I managed to say was his name on a whisper.

“That’s it,” he said. “Say my name. Scream it, whisper it, shout it. I’ll hear it every possible way from your lips by the time this night is over.”

His hand passed in front of my wrist, and that scent hit my nostrils again. “Gonna take that blood you offered, then I’m going to take your body again and again.”

“Yes,” I managed to say. “Please. Just don’t stop touching me.”

When his fangs entered my skin, I didn’t even feel the pain. He kept a firm grip on my throat as he drank from the side of my neck. With every drag, I felt an answering pulse inside, like he had a direct link to my clit. I reached down to feel myself, and my fingers came away slick. His fingers replaced mine, and he slipped three inside me, pumping them in time to his sucks.

I was on another plane of existence with the sensation of my blood being pulled through my veins and his fingers tapping at my g-spot. I came again, his name on my lips like a chant.

When his fangs left my neck, he licked the wound. I glanced over my shoulder to catch a glimpse of him, his fangs and lips dripping with red blood—my blood. He let me drop back onto the bed, and I caught myself on my hands just as he gripped my hips and thrust into me.

I screamed at the sensation of his cock stretching me. No one, nothing had ever felt like this—he filled me perfectly like he was made for me.

He didn't waste any time. His hips jerked as he slammed into me, and I was babbling his name in a hundred different ways. He wrapped his fist around my hair and tugged, the force sending my ass slamming back into him. Oh God, the sensation in my scalp rode a knife-edge of pleasure and pain that throbbed in my clit. Since when did hair pulling trigger an erogenous zone? I was out of my mind as he planted one fist into the bed, the other using my hair like an anchor to hold me right where he wanted me.

I wanted to be there too.

His teeth skirted the rim of my ear. "So tight for me, Roxy. Been waiting all your life for me, haven't you?"

Yes, no, probably. I couldn't talk, not with my head forced back at this angle, and I didn't want to. I was his to fuck, to use, to drink. My body would fuel him and also be the vessel for his release. And fuck, I wanted to be. I needed to be. I craved the way Dru fucked me like he owned me. Maybe he did, at least the part of me that wanted to be owned.

His teeth sliced into vein below my ear and I cried out, the orgasm racing through me like a tsunami. I'd lost count of how many times I'd come, between Dru's fingers, tongue, and cock.

He drank from me greedily, the delicious drag flooding my senses. He fucked me through it, our bodies moving together, slick with sweat and blood. He hadn't even come yet, and my thighs were soaked from my wetness. The obscene sounds of him sucking my neck and fucking into my wet pussy filled the room, the erotic echoes only making me hotter.

I came again, and just my inner walls clamped around his dick, he roared, and I felt his cock pulse inside me.

My arms and legs gave out, and I fell onto the mattress in a heap, his dick still inside of me. I was wrung out, exhausted, and so fucked out, I wasn't sure what my name was anymore.

But I knew his. I'd always know his. "Dru," I whispered.

His tongue was at my neck, licking at his bites, and his hands brushed my hair off of my sweaty neck. "My Roxy," he practically purred. "What I wouldn't give to be able to stay inside you forever."

His dick pulsed again, and more wetness slipped out of me. I felt him pull out, and something in me panicked. My eyes flew open. "Hey, don't leave—"

"Not leaving," he said. A warm, wet cloth wiped between my legs. When he was finished cleaning me, he wrapped me in his arms. I might have muttered his name again, but then I was asleep in seconds.

But when I woke up, the sheets beside me were completely cold. I rubbed my eyes and sat up with the sheet clutched to my chest, and glanced around the empty room. God, I ached everywhere. Every muscle. I didn't even want to know what my hair or face looked like. But I didn't care about that right now, because my first priority was figuring out where the fuck Dru went.

He wouldn't have bailed on me again, would he?

Shit, I couldn't panic. If I acted like a clingy human, he'd freak out that I was going to do the same thing the last human did. *Calm down, Roxy*. It was just good sex, right? *Really* good sex. He hadn't even kissed me, I realized now as I brushed my fingers over my lips. He'd bitten me, fed from me, and coaxed multiple orgasms from my body. But he hadn't once kissed my lips.

Except I didn't really believe it was just sex. Not when I remembered his whispered *My Roxy* in my ear. The tender way he held me. The attention he paid to my body, like he wanted to know every detail.

The door opened and I clutched the sheet to my body tighter, quickly glancing around for somewhere to hide. When Dru's body filled the doorway, relief swept through me.

He watched me cautiously as he made his way across the room. He wore a pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and his hair was slightly damp, like he'd just showered. I wanted him all over again. "How'd you sleep?" he asked as he sat down beside me and placed a warm, foil-wrapped bundle on my lap. I blinked at it, then up at him. "Um, okay, I guess. What time is it?"

"Ten am."

"Oh shit," I muttered. "What time did we fall sleep?"

"You fell asleep around two I think."

"When did you fall asleep?"

He cocked his head at me with a slight frown. "I don't sleep."

I was in the process of unwrapping the foil when he said that. "What do you mean?"

"We don't need to sleep. If we do, it means we're sick and need to feed."

"Oh." That was probably Vampire 101 and I should have known. In the foil was a scrambled egg sandwiched in an English muffin.

Dru cleared his throat. "We hire a human cook who helps us since we don't really need food. If there's something else..."

"This is fine," I said before I took a bite. Damn, I was hungry.

He watched me as I ate, and when I was finished, he handed me a water bottle. I could have used some coffee, but beggars couldn't be choosers. After I'd chugged half of the water, I set the bottle on the table beside the bed.

Belatedly, I realized the sheets had slipped down to my waist, so I was topless. But Dru wasn't staring at my chest. He hadn't taken his gaze off my face once. I was starting to be self-conscious about it. "Is there something on my face?"

He shook his head. "I like to look at you." His voice dropped to a low rumble. "And memorize what you look like so I can recall it easily after you leave."

This was when he should kiss me. I wanted him to kiss me. What would his full lips feel like on mine? Would his fangs nick me? How would that talented tongue play with mine?

But he didn't, instead all he said was. "Your friend is waiting for you. I'll leave so you can get dressed."

He stood up, and I reached for him. "Please don't go."

His gaze darted to my hand on his arm, then back to me. Shit, I was doing it. I was being weird. "I mean... I'll get dressed in the bathroom. Would you just wait? And then we can say goodbye." I was proud of myself that my voice didn't crack on the bye, even if I felt the burn of tears at the back of my eyes.

He nodded, and I scrambled off the bed, grabbing my clothes on the way to the bathroom. After shutting the door, the first thing I did was check out the damage in the mirror. Wow, so,

my face didn't look too bad. In fact...did he clean my face? It was makeup free. I pulled my hair up into a bun, wiped my face and dressed quickly.

When I returned to the bedroom, Dru was sitting on the edge of the bed, his elbows braced on his thighs. He lifted his head, and I adjusted the corset that I definitely didn't want to be wearing any more.

His expression was frustratingly neutral. I wanted to see him in pain like I was. I knew in my heart I wasn't like that other human. I didn't want to be a vampire, I wasn't obsessed with this club. I just wanted to be in Dru's presence, to kiss his lips and feel his arms around me.

When I stood in front of him, he reached out a hand and drew me closer, between his legs. He rested his forehead on my stomach, and the sight of his bent head gave me flashbacks to last night.

I wanted to ask if I could come visit him, but I wasn't sure how he'd take it. So I stayed silent, and ran my hands through his dark hair. Was this our goodbye? A wordless one?

Finally he stood up, and with a tight jaw said, "It's time."

Right, Cassie was waiting. I picked up my heels and stood behind Dru as he paused with his hand on the door. He glanced at me over his shoulder, and opened his mouth like he'd speak, but then his eyes clouded over. With a nod, he opened the door and walked out.

We made our way through the club, now mostly empty except for a cleaning crew. Cassie stood near the entrance, arms wrapped around her waist, craning her neck to see me from behind Dru's body.

"Roxy!" she squealed and raced toward me on bare feet. She crashed into me, and I wrapped my arms around her. "Oh my God, I was so worried. I didn't see you all night." She held me at arm's length and studied my face. "You okay?"

I wasn't. Nope. "Yeah, I'm fine. Are you okay?"

She beamed at me. "Great! I'll be back for sure. What about you?"

I glanced at Dru, but couldn't see his eyes as he stood in a shadow. "Uh, I'm not sure. Maybe in a couple of months if I need the money."

"Oh, speaking of money." She held up two envelopes and handed me one. "Here's yours."

I took it from her, the weight of the money not comforting at all. This was what I'd come here for, and now that I had it, it felt wrong, dirty. I was getting paid for what Dru and I had done. All I said was a soft, "Awesome."

"Ready to go? I have your jacket by the way." She handed me the leather bundle.

"Zeb will lead us back upstairs." She pointed to our guide from last night, who stood by the doors.

I clutched my jacket, glad for the familiar feel of the soft material. "Oh wow, thanks. And yeah, I'm ready."

She turned around with a flare of her skirt, and I risked another glance at Dru. He didn't move toward me, and my heart felt like it was cracking into a dozen pieces. When I walked by him, his hand shot out, gripping my wrist. I paused as his thumb caressed the soft skin. "Bye, Roxy."

Those words were final. And I vowed that no matter how poor I was, and how desperately I needed the money, I wouldn't return. It wasn't worth it to put myself or Dru through this. It ended here. Now.

"Bye Dru," I said. Then I hurried after Cassie.

Two months later...

“See you tomorrow!” I called to the cook as I left the diner after a ten-hour shift. I had the next two days off, and I planned to spend them all on my couch reading and sleeping. My feet were killing me, and I was glad that the walk home was only two blocks.

Mission was quiet tonight. The cold always had a way of keeping the shenanigans to a minimum. Still, I wrapped my coat around myself and stuck my hand in my pocket, where I kept my pepper spray on my keychain.

I’d always avoided Mission at night, and lectured my brother about his curfew as well. But every since that night at Bite, I’d found excuses to extend my time outdoors at night a little bit. It was stupid. I knew that. Dru wasn’t coming up here to see me. But that didn’t stop me from glancing around, hoping for a glimpse of those dark eyes and sharp jaw.

That vampire had utterly ruined me. I dreamed of him. And sometimes I wondered if I was going slightly insane, but then I realized I was...in love. Or in lust. Or infatuated. Which was maybe still insane. I’d known him for one night. Every time I thought about him, my stomach went fluttery like it did when I got a crush—which I hadn’t had since I was a teenager.

I couldn’t talk to anyone about him. I hadn’t told Cassie. She would have thought I was crazy. She was basically a groupie now. She went to the club almost every week and asked me to come with her every time. I always said no. She tried to get me to talk about what happened, and I refused. What Dru and I had shared was between us.

I didn’t want to go to Bite, because what if he wasn’t there? Or worse, what if he was drinking from another human? He was probably back to fucking them now since I’d proven not all humans went nuts on him. If I went there and saw him with his tongue between another woman’s legs...

I squeezed my eyes shut. *Stop it, Roxy.*

I reached my apartment and jogged up the stairs to my floor. After unlocking the doorknob and the two deadbolts, I called for my brother. “Nate!” I shut the door behind me and hung my coat and purse up on a hook by the door. “Nate!” I called again. No answer. Frowning, I made my way to the kitchen to see a note on the fridge.

Spending the night at Andy’s, be back tomorrow afternoon. Love ya.

Nate was sixteen and had a job that he worked after school hours. He was a good kid, and Andy was one of the few friends of his who had decent parents.

I looked around the apartment. I had it to myself. This was a novelty. I stripped as I made my way down the hallway, peeling off my apron, my jeans, and my grease-stained shirt. After a quick rinse in the shower, I combed out my hair and let it down so it could dry. With a towel wrapped around me, I walked into my bedroom to find something to wear.

And I promptly screamed when I saw a figure standing by my bed.

I mean an actual blood-curdling scream, which I shut off with a hand clapped over my mouth when I realized it was Dru.

Dru was in my apartment.

I stared at him with wide eyes, taking in his massive form, his dark eyes. He wore a long leather jacket that reached his knees, and beneath that, a pair of jeans, and a dark shirt.

But what I noticed the most was how sunken his eyes look, how his eyes were narrowed like he was in pain. His lips parted, and his voice was like sandpaper. “Roxy.”

I leaped at him. Because oh God, he was here, in the flesh, in *my* world this time. I wrapped

my arms around his waist and clung to him. His fingers sifted through my wet hair. “Roxy,” he said again, and I pressed against him harder.

He stumbled a bit, and I pulled back as he sank down onto the edge of my bed. His shoulders trembled slightly and my happiness at seeing him was quickly replaced with concern. I tilted his chin up so I could get a good look at his face. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

His eyes weren’t focusing well. “Tired.”

“Oh, well we can sleep—” I frowned. “Wait, you don’t sleep. What’s going on? Are you sick? When’s the last time you fed?”

He licked his lips and his gaze dropped to my neck before slowly returned to my face. “A bit ago.”

I gripped his chin tighter. “How long ago, Dru?”

“Supposed to have fresh blood every few days, but I’ve been stretching it out…” His voice trailed off.

“What the hell?” I was frustrated now. “What’s going on?”

“I’m weak,” he said abruptly.

I stilled. “Well that’s because you need to feed—”

He shook his head. “I’m weak because I want you.” His hands wrapped around the back of my thighs and drew me between his legs. Heat spread to my core quickly and I held back a gasp as he kept talking. “I tried to keep going. I fed from other humans, but they didn’t taste like you. They didn’t smell like you. No one said my name in your voice, or ran their fingers through my hair. Every time I fed, I could only picture you, and it was torture.”

His hands slid up higher, under my towel. “Dru,” I murmured.

“See? That. Fuck I missed that.” He moved the edge of my towel to the side and nuzzled against my bare hip. “I missed the sounds you make when you come, how well you fit me. I haven’t been able to touch anyone in two months. I’m the weak one, Roxy. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

His tongue swirled around my hip bone and I clutched his shoulders. I hadn’t even wanted to touch myself the last two months, as my sex drive was at an all-time low, but one look at Dru, and I was soaking wet. I knew he could smell it through the damp towel.

“You let me leave,” I said. “You let me walk out, and you didn’t ask me to come back.”

He lifted his head. “Did you want to come back?”

“I don’t care about going back to Bite. I only wanted to see you.” I swallowed. “But I didn’t know how that could work. I’m human, you’re…not, and…”

“I can come visit you.” He seemed to come alive a bit now, his eyes more alert. “I’ll get permission from the Council. And I’ll take you underground on your days off to show you my apartment. It’s not the norm, but we’ll make it work. We have to. I want—I need you to be mine. I have since I first saw you.”

I didn’t know much about vampire social constructs. “And will you…only be mine?”

“Of course. I don’t want anyone else.”

Could this really work? “When I left, you didn’t…” Shit, I’d been an emotional void for two months and now I was going to cry.

“I didn’t what?” His hands cupped my bare ass.

“You didn’t even kiss me,” I choked out.

His eyes widened, then he blinked a few times. “I…I didn’t, did I?”

I shook my head and bit my lip.

His eyes fell to half-mast and the corners of his mouth turned up slightly. “Does my Roxy

want me to kiss her?”

“More than anything,” I whispered.

He gripped my head and tugged my face down, then pressed his lips to mine. Oh fuck, this was better than I imagined. His lips were soft, yet commanding, parting mine as he dipped his tongue inside. He kissed like he fucked, with an all-consuming possessiveness. I whimpered into his mouth, my knees going weak as he turned me inside out.

With a grunt, he tugged me into his lap, my knees on either sides of his hips, and pulled the towel off my body. His lips slid down my jaw. “I can’t...I can’t wait anymore. I need to taste you...”

“Bite me,” I said, grinding into the hard length I could feel through his jeans. “Take what you need, then fuck me until we can’t speak.”

He moaned, and when his teeth sliced into his neck, I knew I’d found home.

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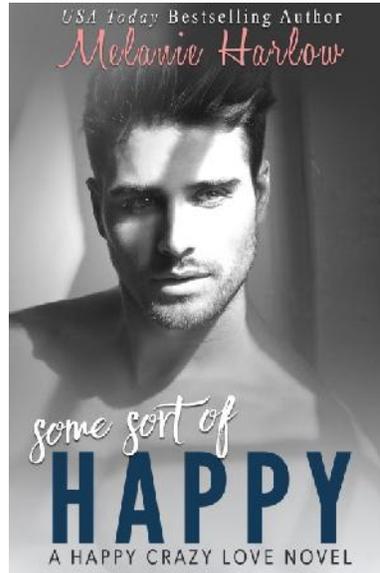
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Some Sort of Happy

A Happy Crazy Love Novel
By Melanie Harlow



Acknowledgments

To my family, I am so lucky to have the forever things with you. I love you so much.

To the team that makes it possible for me to put pretty books into the world: Jenn Watson, Cait Greer, Tamara Mataya, Angie Owens. I'm so grateful.

To Paula Erwin, for reading and sharing thoughts with me, especially for getting into Sebastian's head. This book is so much better because of you!

To Danielle, whose gorgeous poetry always inspires me. THANK YOU for letting me pilfer words and riff off your ideas.

To Linda Russell, for making me come out of the cave and talk about my books. You're awesome.

To Melissa Gaston, I don't know how I did anything without you! Never leave me.

To Kayti and Sierra and Laurelin, without whom there would be no Melanie Harlow, because you have talked me off the ledge so many times. Thank you for believing, even when I don't.

To the authors who have been so generous with their time and advice and experience, especially Laurelin Paige, Lauren Blakely, Corinne Michaels, M. Pierce, and Claire Contreras. I've learned so much from you, and I'm so lucky to call you my friends.

To the ladies of TWS, The Order, FYW and especially The Harlots, thanks for never letting me feel alone in this endeavor! You make me smile every day.

Finally, thank you readers and bloggers for reading and talking about books you love, especially The Dirty Laundry girls, The Literary Gossip, Fiction Fangirls, The Rock Stars of Romance, True Story Book Blog, Vilma's Vixens, Schmexy Girls, Aestas Book Blog, Shameless Book Club, Shayna Renee's Spicy Reads, Short and Sassy Book Blurbs... None of this would be possible without you!

Epigraph

Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness.

It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.

Mary Oliver

Chapter 1

Skylar

I'm not an awful person, I swear I'm not, but you wouldn't know that if you saw me on Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy).

Oh, you've never heard of it?

Good.

It's a ridiculous reality show where 30 beautiful girls compete for the love of a hot cattle rancher. To show their devotion, they do meaningful things like wear cowboy boots with tiny denim shorts, squeal for him at the local rodeo, and, of course, take their turn on a mechanical bull. This last activity will later be edited into a hilarious #FAIL reel since none of the women ever lasts more than ten seconds, and some not even two.

(If you must know, seven. And it wasn't pretty.)

"It's back on!" My younger sister Natalie bolted from the bathroom to the couch, jostling my arm when she flopped down next to me.

I frowned. "Nat, making me watch myself on Save a Horse is possibly forgivable, depending on how they edit this last segment. Spilling my margarita while I watch it is not." I'd hoped a tequila buzz would numb the shame of watching myself be an obnoxious twat on TV, but so far, it hadn't happened.

In my defense, producers told me to be an obnoxious twat. As soon as I got to Montana, they took me aside and said, "We like you, but we want you to be the crazy one people will love to hate, and we'll make sure you stay on the show longer if you're good at it." After thinking it over, I agreed. After all, the whole reason I was doing the show was to get noticed by casting directors. If I was just another nice girl who got cut after the first episode, where would that leave me?

But had I known that clever editing would make me look even worse than I'd acted—a feat I'd have sworn wasn't possible—I might have reconsidered.

"Oh, come on." Always able to see a bright side, Natalie patted my head. "Every show needs someone to hate on, and that person is always the most memorable, right?"

Noisily I slurped up more margarita. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Yes! Can you name one nice person from a reality show? No," she went on before I could answer. "That's because nice people are not fun on TV."

Sinking deeper into the couch, I watched myself trash someone's outfit on the screen. "They're not making me look fun. They're making me look like a hideous bitch." I picked up my phone and checked Twitter, even though I knew it would be painful. "Yep. Just like I thought. Hashtag skylarsucks is trending. Oh here's a nice one: Skylar Nixon is not even pretty. Her mouth looks like my asshole."

Natalie took my phone out of my hands and threw it down between us on the couch. "Screw that, people are stupid and just like to hear themselves talk. Listen, you did this show to get your name out there. And it worked! A month ago, you were just a beauty queen from Michigan. Last week, you were in US Magazine! I'd call that a success, wouldn't you?"

"No. They took a picture of me pumping gas and I looked fat." I shut one eye, barely able to watch myself sidle up to poor, hapless Cowboy Dex and flirt shamelessly. A moment later, it cut

to an interview with me in which I gossiped about other contestants, spilling a secret one girl had told me in confidence. “Jesus, I’m even more horrible than I remember.”

“Hey, they *asked* you to be horrible. You proved that you can take direction! You’re *amazing* at horrible!”

Miserable, I licked the salted rim of my glass and threw back the rest of my drink. “I don’t think I can keep watching this trainwreck.”

“You’re gonna miss the lasso ceremony!”

“Good.” I stomped over to the kitchen counter, which, unfortunately, was still in earshot of the television. For the last month I’d been living in a small, repurposed barn on my parents’ farm, and everything was in one long room, kitchen at one end, bedroom on the other. Actually, it wasn’t even really a bedroom, just a bed separated from the main area by thick ivory curtains that pooled on the floor. I’d added that touch myself. In fact, one of the reasons my parents let me move in to one of their new guest houses rent-free was to help my mother decorate them. Not that I had a degree in interior decorating—or anything at all. But I did like the challenge of taking a raw space and making it beautiful. *I should have gone to college for design.*

Or taxidermy.

Or underwater basket-weaving.

Or fucking anything that would have given me a real career to fall back on when the whole I’m Gonna Be a Star thing went tits up.

I took my time in the kitchen, plunking a few more ice cubes into my glass and pouring generously from the oversized jug of margarita mix. But I returned to the couch in plenty of time to watch Cowboy Dex give out lassoes to the girls who’d roped his heart that week. Rolling my eyes so hard it hurt, I marveled that I’d managed to keep a straight face during this nonsense. No, even better than straight—my expression was sweet and grateful as Dex handed me that rope. Poor guy. He was cute and all, but dull as ditchwater. We actually had no chemistry whatsoever, but I’m sure the producers told him he had to keep me around for a while.

Oh, you didn’t know producers manipulate things on reality TV to get the conflicts and tension they want for ratings? They do. All the time.

Here are some other secrets I can tell you, although you didn’t hear them from me:

Those shows are cheap as hell. All the contestants “volunteer” their time, and the only things that are paid for are travel, lodging, meals, and drinks. For the two months I spent filming, I’ve got nothing to show but more credit card debt because of all the money I spent on clothes and shoes and hair and makeup.

Speaking of drinks, contestants can have, and are encouraged to have, as much alcohol as they want at the ranch, because a bunch of tipsy women are always more fun to watch than a bunch of sober ones. The showrunners made it a point to ask about favorite drinks during the interview process, and always kept the bars stocked.

Which leads me to my final point. Producers are the masterminds of the show—the contestants are more like puppets. The show might not be scripted, but if you’re not saying the things they want you to say, if you’re not having the conversations they want you to have, they’ll stop the cameras and tell you, “Talk about this.” And they edit so shrewdly, snipping out what they don’t want or stringing together words said on completely different occasions to create a sentence never uttered by anyone—there’s even a name for it: frankenbiting.

Like that—right there. “I never said that,” I said, lowering myself onto the couch and wincing when I heard myself remarking snidely, “People from small towns are all small-minded and stupid.”

Natalie sucked air through her teeth. “Wow. That is pretty harsh. You didn’t say it?”

“No! You can totally tell it’s edited—see the way it cut away from my interview to a voiceover? My voice doesn’t even sound the same! Those fucking producers were so slimy.”

The shot went back to me during the interview, and God, I hated my face. And my stupid girly voice. And who told me that color yellow looked good with my skin tone? “I’m actually from a small town. I grew up on a farm in Northern Michigan, but I couldn’t wait to get out of there.”

Wait a minute. Had I said that? I bit my lip. I honestly couldn’t remember. And seeing as I’d recently moved back to said town in Northern Michigan, it was particularly embarrassing.

And then it got worse.

“It’s nothing but a bunch of drunks, rednecks and religious gun nuts,” I heard my voice saying as footage of some unfamiliar old-timey main street flashed on the screen, complete with a farmer riding a tractor through town. “I’d never go back.”

“What?” Furious, I got to my feet. “I *know* I never said that! That footage wasn’t even taken here!”

“Can they do that?” Natalie wondered, finally sounding a little outraged on my behalf. “I mean, just take any words you say and mix and match like that? Seems wrong.”

“Of course it’s wrong, but yes, they can,” I said bitterly. “They can do anything they want because it’s their show.” I poured margarita down my throat, hoping nobody around here was watching. This stupid show wasn’t that popular, was it?

My cell phone dinged. I grabbed it off the couch and looked at the screen. A text from our oldest sister, Jillian. She was a pediatrician and usually too busy for television, but lucky me, she must have found time tonight.

What the hell was that???

But before I could reply, another text came in, this one from my mother.

I thought you said last week was the worst. The thing with the mechanical bull.

My head started to pound. I clicked on my mother’s message and wrote back, I thought it was! I told you not to watch this show, Mom. They manipulate things. I never said that stuff. But I knew she wouldn’t get it. No matter how often or how well I explained the way editing worked, she still didn’t understand. My phone vibrated in my hand. “Oh, Jesus. Now she’s calling me,” I complained.

“Who?”

“Mom. She’s watching the show, even though I told her not to. Do I have to answer this?”

My sister shrugged. “No. But you live on her property. She can probably see in the windows.”

I ducked, then sank onto the couch again. Generally, I didn’t ignore my mother, but right now I really didn’t feel like defending myself or lecturing her *again* on the how-and-why of television editing for ratings. I clicked ignore and tossed my phone on the table. “Can we please stop watching this now?” Picking up the remote, I turned the television off without waiting for her answer.

“It’s not that bad, Sky.” Natalie got off the couch and went to the kitchen to refill her glass.

“Yes it is, and you know it. I just insulted everyone we know here.”

“Maybe no one is watching,” she said, ever the optimist.

“I seriously hope not.” I hugged my legs into my body, tucking my knees under my chin. Glancing out the big picture window, I saw darkness falling over the hilly orchard where I’d grown up. Memories flooded my mind...running through the rows of cherry trees, inhaling the

fragrant blossoms in the spring, picking the fruit in the summer, rustling through crunchy fallen leaves in the fall, throwing snowballs at my sisters in the winter. Maybe I didn't appreciate it enough when I was younger, but I loved it here. For all its glitz, New York had never felt like home to me. I'd even liked Montana better than Manhattan.

Natalie returned to the couch and leaned back against the opposite end, stretching her legs out toward me. "All right, silver lining. You did exactly what you set out to do—draw attention to yourself. You've always been good at that."

Had she intended to be snide? Natalie wasn't the cryptic remark type, and neither was I. If we had something to say to one another, we said it.

I eyeballed her. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

"Don't get prickly." She nudged me with one bare foot. "I'm just saying that you know how to work a room. You obviously charmed the producers into wanting you to stay on."

"But not so much that they thought I'd win the cowboy's heart on my own," I pointed out.

"You said yourself you guys had no chemistry."

"We didn't. But why me?" I whined. "Why couldn't they've asked someone else to play the villain?"

"Because they didn't trust anyone else to play it right. They needed someone to be devious and manipulative but also beautiful and appealing enough for it to be realistic that he'd keep you on so long. I think it was a compliment!"

I held up one hand. "Please. Everyone there was beautiful. I was nothing special. And haven't you heard? My mouth looks like someone's asshole."

She kicked me. "Stop it. You have that something extra—you light up a room, you always have." She slumped like a hunchback and contorted her pretty features. "The rest of us just linger in the shadows, waiting to feed on your scraps."

I rolled my eyes. Natalie was perfectly lovely, and she knew it. She just had no desire to emphasize it. While I adored cosmetics, she usually went bare-faced. I was a hair-product and hot roller junkie; she let her choppy blond hair air dry. I could easily—and happily—blow a paycheck on a pair of Louboutins; she saved every penny she could and always had.

And that's why she owns her own business at age twenty-five and you're still scrambling to get by at twenty-seven. You might be the big sister, but she's got a diner, a boyfriend, and a condo. What do you have?

I propped my elbow on the back of the couch and tipped my head into my hand. "God, Nat. I really fucked this up. It didn't lead to Scorsese knocking at my door, and I probably just alienated everyone we know."

"Quit being such a drama queen. They'll forgive you once you flash that Cherry Queen smile at them."

"Ha. Maybe I should dig out my crown and start wearing it around town. Remind them they liked me once upon a time."

"Does that mean you're staying here for good?"

Picking up my drink, I took a slow sip. "I guess so, although I promised Mom I'd be out of this guest house by the end of the month. It's rented for all of June, July, and August. That gives me about three weeks to figure out where to live, or else move in with them." I grimaced into the glass. "God. I'm such a loser. Moving in with my parents at age twenty-seven."

"You're not, Sky. But if you still want to be an actress, why not go back to New York and try again? A lot of people don't break out right away."

How many times had I heard that over the last few years?

I thought about it, swirling the ice around in the glass. Could I take the New York audition scene again? All the rejection was so disheartening. Then there was living in the city itself. New York had such frantic energy, at every time of day during every day of the week. Once upon a time I couldn't wait to be a part of that. Of course, I'd romanticized it entirely—the life I'd imagined included actually *getting* the jobs I auditioned for and being able to pay my rent with plenty left over for shoes, blowouts, and trendy nightclubs, where I'd clink glasses with elite theater people who called each other darling and invited me to summer with them in the Hamptons.

Needless to say, that's not how it went.

I spent four full years in New York, and the last year I paid my rent solely by bartending, lying to my parents, my sisters, and anybody else who asked about going out on auditions. How pathetic is that? I mean, plenty of people lie on their resumes about their successes, but there I was lying about my failures, making up jobs I *didn't* get.

That beer commercial? They went younger.

That legal drama? Turns out they wanted a brunette.

That web series about vampire nannies? Never heard back.

So after spending my entire childhood dreaming of being an actress—and vowing to everyone I would become a star if it killed me—in the end, I wasn't cut out for it. Or maybe I just wasn't good enough.

Either way, it was really depressing.

I was debating the move back home when the opportunity to do *Save a Horse* came up, and since I hated the thought of coming back a failure, I figured I'd give it one last-ditch effort to find success.

In hindsight I probably should have just crawled out of the ditch and held up the white flag. *Or better yet, told someone to shoot.*

"I don't know, Nat. I...didn't really love living in New York." Admitting how homesick I'd been seemed like another failure.

"Well, what about going back on the cruise ships?"

I made a face. "Nah. Two years was enough for me—I only did it for the experience. And the money."

"Then stay here," she said firmly. "Your roots are here. Your family is here. You've got a job you like. You can find a place to live."

"I do like my job." I looked over her head out the window again. "And I did miss it here," I admitted carefully. "But won't everyone think I'm a big fat failure?"

"Fuck them!" Natalie said in a rare outburst. "What do you care what people think of you anyway?"

I shrugged, wishing I didn't care. But I did. So much it hurt. My ten year high school reunion was three weeks away, and as it stood now, the girl voted Most Likely to Shine would walk in there with a pretty dull story—Failed Actress with No Plan B.

I wanted to be able to say I'd achieved something in the last ten years. But the problem was, I hadn't. I had no career, no husband or children, no home of my own. Everybody else there would have pictures of their beautiful families to show and stories of their successes to tell. And what did I have?

Seven seconds on the mechanical bull.

And some really nice shoes.

Chapter 2

Skylar

The next day, I showed up for work at Chateau Rivard's tasting room hoping no one at the winery had seen the previous night's show.

"Morning, John," I called to the tasting room manager.

"Morning, Skylar." He was inspecting wine glasses behind the long, curved wooden tasting counter. In his fifties, he was thin on top and thick through the middle and way, *way* too serious about wine, but I liked him well enough. He'd taught me a lot in the last month.

"Just give me a sec and I'll help you." I went to the employees' room in the back and stowed my purse and keys in a locker before joining him again. "Anything new for today? Oh, I wanted to ask you about doing some videos this month. I had an idea for a series of tasting clips, just short ones for our website and the YouTube channel, that would teach people about tasting different kinds of wines but not be snooty or overly preachy, you know? Just something fun and approachable, and we could highlight our riesling for summer."

"YouTube?" John squinted at me through his glasses. "Do we have a YouTube channel?"

"We will. I hope." I smiled at him as I unrolled the sleeves of my white blouse. It was a warm day, so I'd cuffed them this morning, but the cavelike tasting room always stayed cool with its stone floors and walls. To me, it was a little dark and dungeony, and the fancy French furniture was definitely tired and uncomfortable, but the Rivard family was all about tradition and resistant to change. Even though I was technically just the assistant tasting room manager, I thought I could help to modernize the place a little bit—not only the look of the tasting room but in other ways as well. If I was going to work up the nerve to ask for a raise, I'd better prove my worth. "I also have some ideas for additional summer events. I'm going to talk about it all with Mrs. Rivard as soon as possible."

"Actually, she does want to see you." John set one glass down and picked up another, holding it up in the dim light thrown by an ugly old brass chandelier overhead. "She said to send you to her office when you arrived."

"Oh." That was a little odd. I usually didn't meet with her in the mornings because we did vineyard tours then. "Do I have time? Isn't it like quarter to ten already? We've got two groups booked this morning."

"I'll cover for you here. Go ahead."

An uneasy feeling weaseled its way under my skin. "Did she say what it was about?"

He shook his head. "Nope. Just said to send you."

I tried a joke. "Should I be worried?"

"No idea. But you should probably go now. She doesn't like to wait around."

No, she didn't. Miranda Rivard was a stickler for many things—things like punctuality, manners, tradition. She was the family's third generation winemaker, although the Rivards had farmed this area long before that, and she was entirely dedicated to preserving its history. That devotion was nice when it came to saving the lighthouse or securing historical landmark status for an old log cabin, but difficult to work around when it came to convincing her to update her tasting room or embrace technology.

I fretted as I took the steps up to the winery's large, ornate lobby—also outdated—and

waved a distracted hello to a few employees at the help desk. Why was I being summoned like this? Could it be something positive? Why couldn't I shake the feeling it was something bad?

I opened the heavy wooden door labeled Offices. Mrs. Rivard's—I didn't dare call her Miranda—was at the end of the long hall, but that morning I wished it were longer. Standing with my hand poised to knock, I gave myself a little pep talk.

Relax. There's no way Miranda Rivard watches Save a Horse. It's probably something about the social media accounts you suggested setting up.

Right. That had to be it. Smoothing my skirt and squaring my shoulders, I knocked twice and waited.

"Yes?"

I opened the door and poked my head in. "John said you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Skylar. I do. Come in." She gestured to the chairs in front of her desk and my stomach lurched.

Stop it. This is where you interviewed, so it's probably where she conducts all her employee meetings. I'll just leave the door open. No one gets fired with the office door open.

"Shut the door. Have a seat."

Fuck. I'm so fired.

I approached the chairs and stared at them, like maybe if I chose the right one this would go better for me.

"Sit, sit," Mrs. Rivard said a mite impatiently. She looked exactly the way you imagine a witch would look in real life—sharp features, shrewd eyes, long skinny fingers—but without the bedraggled hair. Her gray bob was perfectly even and hung in one shiny sheet to her chin. She wore very little makeup but her skin was actually pretty good for a woman her age, and I briefly considered opening with a compliment. However, I reconsidered when I saw the critical look in her eye, the firm set of her mouth.

Slowly, I lowered myself to the edge of one brown leather chair, desperately trying to think of a way to change the tone of this meeting. *Speak before she does! Open with something positive!*

"I'm glad you wanted to meet with me this morning, Mrs. Rivard, because I had an idea I wanted to run by you for a video series." I tried the beauty queen smile on her.

It didn't work.

"Skylar," she said firmly, linking her fingers together beneath her chin, "I'm afraid I had to make a difficult decision."

I kept the ghoulish smile frozen in place. "Oh?"

"Yes. It's about your position here at Chateau Rivard. You see, our brand projects a certain image, and—"

"Mrs. Rivard," I broke in. "If I could just—"

"Don't interrupt. As I was saying, Chateau Rivard is very serious about its reputation. We are the oldest winery in this area and have always been dedicated to quality, professionalism, and tradition. We stand out in the market because we are more upscale, and we cater to discerning wine drinkers who expect our wines—and our staff—to be beyond reproach. Do you understand?"

I sighed. "Am I here to be reproached?"

"When you interviewed, I was pleased with your appearance, your family's history in the area, your role as former Cherry Queen, and your enthusiasm for our wines."

I faked that enthusiasm, I felt like telling her. I didn't know anything about your wines, but it

was a job interview and I'm an actress. "And now?"

"Now, I regret to say that I'm afraid those initial impressions have been eclipsed by your recent behavior on television and the subsequent media attention to it. Specifically, this morning's article in the Peninsula Press."

"What article?" I asked, gripping the arms of the chair. My Froot Loops churned in my stomach.

"You've not seen it?" She raised one thin brow and glanced meaningfully at the newspaper on her desk.

"No." Panicking, I jumped up and grabbed the paper. My eyes scanned the headlines—and there it was.

FORMER CHERRY QUEEN MORE TART THAN SWEET.

I read the article quickly, my heart sinking with every snarky comment and embarrassing rehash of my misdeeds on the show. The writer mentioned how proud everyone had been to see a hometown honey on television but how that pride had withered as the weeks went on. *Who'd have thought we'd ever see our sweet Cherry Queen drunk on vodka and suggestively riding a mechanical bull?* he asked.

"What? That's not even right! It was tequila, not vodka!" I blurted.

"I hardly think that detail makes a difference." Mrs. Rivard's tone was arch.

Maybe not, but I was hoping for more erroneous statements in the article, things I could point to and say, *That wasn't me! I never did that! I never said that!* But unfortunately, everything he'd written about was something shown on screen. He ended the article by condemning me for the terrible things I'd said about where I came from, where my family still lived and worked, how I'd insulted good people with my catty, callow words, the same people who'd crowned me Cherry Queen and happily allowed me to represent them all over the country.

The country! I thought ungraciously. *The farthest I ever went as Cherry Queen was an Elks Lodge in Flint!*

But it wouldn't serve me now to be defensive. If I wanted to keep this job, I needed to apologize and agree that my behavior was not appropriate.

"Mrs. Rivard, I'm very sorry about the show. I agree, the way they are portraying me is not very...appealing."

"The way *they* are portraying you? You don't think your own actions were...*unappealing*?" She mocked my use of the word.

"Well, yes and no. I mean, I did do and say some things I shouldn't have, but the editing makes it look much worse. People have to realize that."

She tilted her head. "Perception is reality, Skylar. I'm surprised you haven't learned that yet."

I didn't know what to say. She was right. My entire body felt as if it were shrinking.

"And I'm afraid that the way you're perceived now isn't the image I want in a front-of-house employee."

I said nothing as the heavy shame of being fired settled over me like thick gray fog.

"I'll mail you a check for your last week. Good luck." She stood, and I took it to mean I was dismissed.

"Thank you," I said morosely.

"I'm sure you'll find another job," she added when I was at the door. "You were a good salesperson, and many comment cards specifically mentioned your name as a positive aspect of our tasting room experience. But I might suggest moving. People have long memories in small

towns.”

I nodded and slipped out without meeting her eyes, desperate to stem the tidal wave of tears I felt gathering momentum inside me. She didn’t deserve to see me cry.

Skirting the crowd in the tasting room, I quickly ducked into the employees’ room and grabbed my purse and keys, then rushed out again without even saying goodbye to John. I was sure he knew I’d been fired. How humiliating to think about our conversation this morning—he *knew* I was going upstairs to get canned, and there I was chirping about YouTube videos!

Choking back sobs, I got into my mother’s battered old SUV and drove away from Chateau Rivard, allowing anyone who watched to perceive the reality of my middle finger out the driver’s side window.

At first I was just going to go back to the guest house and crawl back under the covers, but I found myself passing the road that led to my parents’ farm, unwilling to explain the situation to my mother yet. Instead I kept going north, straight to Lighthouse Park at the tip of the peninsula. I’d been back for weeks but hadn’t yet visited this spot, a favorite of mine as a child. My dad used to take my sisters and me for walks on the paths there, pointing out the “Indian Trees” with their trunks bent at extreme angles by Native Americans hundreds of years ago to mark the trails. We’d hunt on the beach for fossils and tour the lighthouse, and he’d tell us about the ghost of Mable Day—an old lovelorn sixteen-year old girl from New York whose wealthy parents refused to let her marry a sailor she met while summering here. When he sailed again without marrying her and his ship was lost at sea, she drowned herself in the bay. I could still hear my dad’s hushed, eerie tone as he delivered the final line: *And if you listen carefully at night, you can hear her crying in the wind.*

Those were the kinds of stories I’d shared with guests in the tasting room, thinking that local color always helped to make a sale—it gave them an emotional investment in the product, something to talk about when they uncorked the bottle back home.

After parking in the near-empty lot, I walked past the lighthouse and down the dozen wooden steps to the beach before slipping off my heels. The breeze off the water was cool, as was the sand beneath my bare feet.

Glad to have the beach to myself, I moved a little closer to the water and plunked down in the sand, tucking my flared striped skirt around my legs. Leaning back on my hands, I closed my eyes, tilted my face up to the sun, and tried to give myself a pep talk.

Come on, think. Refocus. So no acting jobs materialized from Save a Horse, but did you ever really think they would? No. And instead of considering the consequences of acting like an evil twunt on national television, you jumped in and did it just to please those producers and stay in the limelight. The problem with you is that you never think ahead—you just grab on to opportunities here and there without ever thinking about what will happen if things don’t turn out perfectly.

I frowned. This was not peppy.

But I had to face it—many things in my life could be summed up with the phrase, *It seemed like a good idea at the time.*

Rollerskating down that slide in fifth grade. (Lost my balance.)

Waterskiing in a bikini at the sophomore class picnic. (Lost my top.)

Shooting whiskey with Tommy Parker before climbing in the bed of his pickup at the senior class bonfire. (Lost my virginity.)

Actually, it wasn’t a terrible first time, from what I can recall, although that’s not saying much—the memory is a bit fuzzy to this day. But Tommy was sweet to me afterward and we

hung out all summer before he left for college in the fall. Three years later, when I was in contention for Cherry Queen, I was a little nervous he'd show up telling everybody about the time I'd "displayed poor conduct" in the back of his truck, which would make me ineligible. But he didn't—he was a good guy, just like most of the people I knew around here. I felt awful that I'd said such nasty things about them.

And the shitstorm was only getting bigger. When I thought about the article about me in the paper, I wanted to make like Mable Day and disappear under the water. Tearing up, I lay back on the sand, covering my face with my hands. God, I'd made such a mess of things. One upon a time, I'd been admired and respected around here. Played the starring role in every local production. Waved from floats and pedestals. People had asked for my autograph. Taken selfies with me.

Now I was reviled for my ungrateful, bratty behavior.

But what could I do to show everyone that I wasn't that bitch from the show? That I was still the same girl they'd always known, just a little older and wiser—OK maybe not wiser, but at least trying to learn from my mistakes? I'd signed a contract forbidding me to talk about my time on Save a Horse, so it's not like I could come totally clean. There had to be another way.

Then it dawned on me.

I could reach out to the Cherry Pageant people! All the festivities were coming up in July, and maybe there would be a role for me as a former queen.

I sat up with renewed energy. Yes—that was it. I'd repair my reputation by embracing my community, getting involved, doing good deeds. I'd donate my time and energy to needy organizations. I'd work any event at the festival they wanted me to. I'd visit schools, cut ribbons, kiss babies. I'd even pick cherries in my crown—what a great photo op! They probably wouldn't pay me, but that was okay. My parents would let me move in with them for the summer. After the festival, my reputation would be repaired, my confidence would be restored, I'd find a new job somewhere, and start saving up for my own place.

I took a deep breath, and the cool, damp air revitalized me. It smelled both earthy and clean, like the woods and the water, like the springs and summers of my childhood. Getting to my feet, I brushed the sand off my skirt and turned around, proud of myself for coming up with a solution, like a real grownup.

To my surprise, I was no longer alone on the beach. A man sat about twenty feet away, forearms draped over his widespread knees, hands clasped between them. He knew I was there, he must have seen me when he arrived, but he said nothing as I made my way to the steps and never looked away from the water. He had a nice profile, actually. Short dark hair, strong jaw covered with neatly trimmed scruff, nice ears. Sounds weird, I know, but I got the Nixon ears that stick way out, which is why I rarely wear my hair back and always notice ears on other people.

He wore aviator sunglasses, jeans and a light brown jacket, and I noticed he had a thick notebook next to him on the sand, the old fashioned spiral kind with a bright red cover. Intrigued, I nearly called hello, but something about the utter stillness in his pose told me he didn't want to be bothered, and the greeting stuck in my throat.

Maybe he watches the show, I thought glumly. Maybe he knows exactly who I am and just doesn't want to talk to me.

My spirits withered as I headed for the wooden steps, but I realized I hadn't picked up my heels from where I'd been sitting. I pivoted sharply, but somehow my ankle didn't get the message and I went down hard on my hands and knees in the sand. A little squeak escaped me as

I hit the ground.

Oh God. Please don't let him be watching me.

A few seconds later I heard his voice.

Chapter 3

Sebastian

I saw her. Of course I saw her. I thought she was crying at first, because she was lying on her back, hands over her face. Although I was disappointed not to have the beach to myself, I felt a tug of sympathy and thought about asking if she was okay. But when I got closer and realized it was Skylar Nixon, I hesitated.

Skylar Nixon.

I hadn't seen her in ten years, but I knew it was her. That hair—so light blonde it was almost silver against the sand. Her fingers covered her eyes, but I knew they were blue. Not bright or sharp like a gemstone, but sweeter, softer, like faded denim. I didn't know this because of any extended time spent looking into them directly, but from staring at her senior yearbook photo every night for a year while feverishly jerking off to the fantasy of her straddling my body in the dark.

But I'd bet every guy in our graduating class had that fantasy. She was just so beautiful.

We didn't run with the same crowd back then—mostly because she had a crowd and I did not, which was fine with me. In those days, I preferred solitude. I sought it. Much easier to be alone with my anxiety than have to explain it to anyone.

It was still easier.

But I wasn't that kid anymore, and here was a chance to prove it. Maybe this was serendipity.

I started walking toward her, and suddenly the voice in my head spoke up. *Don't do it. She's too lovely, too fragile. You'll hurt her.*

Suddenly the disturbing image of Skylar gasping for air, my hands around her neck, lodged in my brain, along with the question *What if I choked her?*

I stood there, paralyzed, desperately trying to push the thought from my head, and then I remembered I wasn't supposed to do that. I had to talk back.

Stop it. Those fears aren't rational. I've never choked anyone.

I hadn't, had I? My mind suddenly went into overdrive, sifting through years of memories, trying to find the one where I must have choked someone. That's why I was thinking about it now, wasn't it?

Rational thought tried again. *No! This is fucking ridiculous. You've never fucking choked a person!*

But already that gut-gripping unease had me reconsidering my intent to speak to her. Even if I'd never choked anyone in the past, I must want to.

The other voice refused to quiet.

You know what will happen if you go over there and speak to her. So maybe you won't choke her, but you'll make a mess of things. Go ahead, start a conversation. If you're lucky, she'll remember you as the class freak and run off like a scared rabbit. If she likes you, you're in even bigger trouble, because that's how it all starts. And it ends with you ruining her life, just like you ruined Diana's. You're poison.

By this time, my heart was pounding furiously and my hair stood on end. The voice was right, he was totally right.

Distressed, I moved away from her, being certain to take an even number of steps, and sat down quietly in the sand, waiting for my heart to quiet down.

But it didn't, because a moment later, she stood up, brushed herself off, and saw me.

Did she recognize me? I hoped not. I knew I looked different than I did back then, but I still didn't want to take any chances.

Don't look at her.

I said it eight times in my head.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her walk toward the steps and then hesitate, like she might say hello. I held my breath. Counted to eight.

Suddenly she turned and went down hard in the sand, and before I had time to think I was on my feet, rushing toward her.

"Are you all right?" I asked, taking her by the elbow to help her up.

"Yes," she said quickly, her cheeks going adorably scarlet. "Just a little sandy and a lot embarrassed. Thank you."

Once she was on her feet, I dropped her arm and stepped back as the horrible fear of harming her popped back into my mind. She looked up at me curiously, like maybe she was trying to place me. If it was possible, she was even more beautiful than I remembered.

"I'm Skylar," she said.

"I know who you are." I hadn't meant it in a bad way, but I was trying so hard not to think about hurting her that my voice was strained, my tone sullen. *God, I'm such an asshole right now.*

She must have taken offense, because her face fell, her complexion darkening further. "Right. Well, okay then." Without any kind of goodbye, she brushed past me, scooped up a pair of shoes from the sand and stomped back over to the steps. She quickly slipped her feet into her heels and thumped up each stair with angry clacks.

Part of me wished I would have at least told her my name, reminded her that we'd once known each other, but another part just felt relief that she was gone and I hadn't harmed her. The thought of choking her stubbornly refused to leave my head, and I walked back over to where I'd been sitting and dropped down onto the sand, hating myself.

Fucking hell. I'd made so much progress in the last year, and I'd let the sight of an unrequited ten-year-old crush undo it all. I was a fucking disaster and I always would be. Grabbing the notebook next to me, I hurled it into the water.

Two seconds after I heard the splat, I regretted it. "Fuck!" I jumped to my feet and trudged into the water to get the damn thing, which hadn't gone very far. The water was frigid but shallow, and I rescued the journal before it was submerged, although I soaked my sneakers and the bottoms of my jeans in the process.

Reaching the sand again, I dropped down and fanned open the dripping notebook, its pages covered in neat, small lettering. In the beginning, the pages all looked the same.

Eight words per line.

Every line.

Ken, my therapist, never actually read my journal, it was just for me, so at first I'd reverted to the old habit, even though the whole point of the journal was to help me stop engaging my compulsive behaviors. But eventually, I'd stopped writing in it that way. I'd stopped doing a lot of things I used to do to cope with the fears and doubts that wouldn't leave me alone. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time I'd had a setback like I'd had today. Then again, it was the first time I'd approached a woman I was attracted to since everything with Diana fell apart. Add to

that it was a girl I'd crushed hard on back in high school, and maybe it was no wonder.

Frustrated, I dropped the notebook into the sand. Maybe it was just too soon. Maybe it was just the wrong woman. Or maybe I was just doomed to be alone for the rest of my life. My own misery was enough—why should I make someone else unhappy too?

Ken was always encouraging me to be more social, but I hadn't come back here to make friends or reconnect with anyone. I'd come here for peace and solitude, to start over, and to forget about New York and everything that happened there.

Forget that I'd lost my job.

Forget that I'd lost my mind.

Forget that I'd lost the only woman who'd ever loved me.

No, that was wrong—I hadn't lost her. I'd driven her away.

I deserved to be alone.

Chapter 4

Skylar

Inside my mom's car, I pulled the door shut and let my forehead drop onto the steering wheel.

Forget him. He doesn't matter.

But the way the handsome stranger on the beach had looked at me, the way he'd said *I know who you are* with such blatant contempt, truly bothered me. How long would I have to be ashamed of myself?

Don't think about that. Think about the plan you have to make things better. Taking a deep breath, I sat up tall, turned the key in the ignition, and headed for home.

When I got back to the guest house, I went in and made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and poured a glass of iced tea. With my sandwich in one hand, I opened up my laptop with the other. I found contact information for pageant marketing director Joan Klein easily enough, and as soon as I finished my lunch, I dialed her number.

She didn't answer but I left her a message explaining who I was and volunteering my time for the festival and related activities. I told her I was free anytime and eager to get started, and I gave her my cell phone number.

After that, I changed from my work clothes into jeans and a tank and grabbed my bucket of cleaning supplies from the pantry. I'd give the place a good dusting and scrubbing, and then later I'd invite my mom over for a glass of wine and give her some more ideas for redecorating the guest houses. *I'll show her the Pinterest board I made, run some paint colors by her for the bathrooms, and offer to do the painting myself—if I'm not too busy with my new job.*

I smiled as I filled the bucket. Through the open window I could hear an old Hank Williams tune, which meant my father was probably working in the nearby pole barn with his radio on. It lifted my mood further, and I hummed along as I dusted, the melody taking me back to grade school summers, when Jilly, Nat, and I would all pile in the front seat of his truck and go for ice cream after dinner, my mother yelling from the driveway about seat belts. Those summers always went by so fast—you blinked and it was September again. I couldn't *believe* ten years had gone by since I'd graduated from high school. Where had they gone? And what about the next ten years... would they fly by just as fast?

For a moment, I tried to imagine myself ten years from now, age 37. Where was I? What was I doing? Did I have a career of some kind? A husband and family? I had no clue, which was kind of distressing, so I shoved that thought out of my mind and focused on my housework.

About fifteen minutes later, my cell phone rang. I set down my dust rag and looked at the screen.

Yes! It was Joan Klein.

"Hello?" I chirped.

"Hello, is this Skylar Nixon?"

"Yes, it is." Happy, happy!

"Hello, this is Joan Klein from pageant corporate.

"Hello," I gushed like she was my long-lost best friend. "How *are* you?"

"I'm fine, thank you. I'm glad you called, Skylar. We'd like to meet with you."

"Fantastic!" I bounced around a little. "I can meet any time."

"Could you come down to the offices this afternoon?"

"Of course, no problem."

"Around three?"

"I'll be there."

"Thank you. We have some paperwork for you to sign. Oh, and if you could just bring your crown with you, we'd really appreciate that."

"Certainly I can. I know just where it is." Wow, they wanted a photo already! I'd put my work clothes back on—I hoped I hadn't gotten my new skirt too sandy.

"See you then."

"See you then!"

I ended the call and hugged my phone to my chest, thanking my lucky stars that something had gone right today. Deciding to forego the floor mopping for now, I left the guest house and walked over to my parents' house to fetch my crown.

No one was there, but the door was unlocked as usual, so I let myself in and hurried over to the mantle above the fireplace. There was my crown, right next to a photo of me at the coronation. I picked up the frame and studied the picture—I looked so happy. So hopeful. So confident that every dream I had would come true if I just wished hard enough, worked hard enough, wanted it hard enough.

My smile faded as I set the frame down and looked at the other items displayed on my mother's mantle of parental pride. There was Jillian in her cap and gown, graduating from medical school. There was Natalie cutting the ribbon the day she opened the coffee shop. Moving back a few steps, I tried to look at everything as a stranger might. What did these things say about us? For a moment, I imagined my mom showing our photos to a new friend.

This is Jillian, the smart one. She's a doctor now, isn't that something?

This is Natalie. She's our little entrepreneur!

And this is Skylar. Isn't she pretty?

Frowning, I grabbed the crown off the mantle and left the house before my mother got home and asked me why I needed it.

* * * *

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" I was seated in front of Joan Klein's desk, staring at her in disbelief. "Maybe I misunderstood."

Joan, a former beauty queen herself, had a beehive hairdo that looked like it might have been shellacked in 1975 and eyebrows penciled in way too dark. She cleared her throat. "Corporate feels, Ms. Nixon, that your current reputation is at odds with the qualities we look for in a Cherry Queen. We do not believe you would be an asset to the pageant at this time, and in fact we feel you have violated your contract."

"Violated my contract? Are you joking?" I blinked a few times, but her pursed mouth did not ease into a smile.

"No. I am quite serious. If you look at your contract, which I have a copy of here, you will see that you agreed to refrain from engaging in any public behaviors that would discredit the Queen or the pageant."

"But—but that was seven years ago!" I sputtered.

“The contract has no end date. Once a queen, always a queen,” she said dramatically.

“Oh my God. So now what?”

“Your crown and title are being revoked, and we’d like you to sign right here.” She set another contract in front of me, the page full of tiny black print. “This says that you understand your title is being forfeited due to breach of contract and you will no longer refer to yourself as a former Queen, advertise yourself as such, or appear at any functions claiming to be such.”

“Seriously? I made a mistake! Don’t we all make mistakes sometimes?”

“Yours were very public, Ms. Nixon. Too public.”

“It was just a TV show!” But in my head I heard Miranda Rivard’s voice: *Perception is reality, Skylar.*

“It was a reality show. You played yourself,” Joan pointed out. “And then there is the matter of that tattoo.” She nodded toward my arm, and I looked down at the pretty flowers and vines circling one upper arm.

“What about it? The contract only said I couldn’t get any tattoos during my reign, which I didn’t. This is only two years old.”

She went on, ignoring my question. “We would appreciate it if you did not speak to the press about this or mention it on any social media. We’ll handle it.”

“Speak to the press? Are you kidding? Why would I want to call attention to this?” I scribbled my name on the contract without even reading it. Didn’t matter what it said, I no longer cared.

“Leave the crown, please. It’s pageant property.”

My jaw dropped and I hugged the crown to my stomach. “You can’t have my crown.”

“Yes, I can.” She tapped my signature with the pen. “You just agreed to return it.”

I wanted to throw it at her, but I mustered my pride and managed to set it down gently on the desk—right after I bent that stupid fucking rhinestone-studded oversized metal piece of shit in half with my bare hands.

Chapter 5

Sebastian

After the episode at the beach, I went straight to the gym. In college I'd learned that working out was one of the things that helped me stay mindful of the present reality and stop "fearcasting" about the future. When I was running or lifting or hitting the heavy bag, all I thought about was my body getting stronger, my muscles working harder, my heart pumping faster. It forced me to stay in the moment, helped me work off the tension and anger I carried, and had results you could see. However, even running an extra mile and adding extra reps hadn't been enough to banish Skylar Nixon from my mind.

But actually, it was kind of nice.

Because rather than the fearful, disturbing thoughts I'd had at the beach, my head was filled with other images of her—pleasant images. As I pushed myself to the limits of exertion, I thought of her body beneath mine, her hands on my back, her lips falling open. I thought of those blue eyes closing as I slid inside her, slow and deep. I thought of the soft sigh of pleasure I'd hear before she whispered my name and pulled me in closer.

At home in the shower, I invited those thoughts back in, welcomed them as I let the water run down my body and took my dick in my hand.

Oh yeah, jerking off was another activity in which I stayed mindful of the moment. Sex was too, although I hadn't had sex in almost a year. Fuck, I missed it. But sex with strangers had never been my thing—although I might have to make it my thing unless I wanted to spend my life celibate.

Or maybe sex with a friend...

I tightened my fingers around my shaft and stroked myself with long, hard pulls as the steam billowed up around me. God, what would it feel like to get inside Skylar? To smell her skin, taste her lips, watch her arch beneath me? Could I make her come? Was she quiet or loud? Did she like it on top? Would she let me pull her hair? Bury my tongue in her pussy? My hand worked faster, harder. "Fuck," I whispered, over and over again as my cock went rock solid and then throbbed in my hand. I groaned as the tension inside me released in thick hot spurts, my leg muscles tight and trembling.

For a solo flight, it was a pretty fucking good orgasm, and it made me wonder if maybe I should try talking to her again.

Immediately, the voice was back.

Don't be fucking dense. You think jerking off to some adolescent fantasy means you can handle being alone with her?

I wouldn't have to be alone with her. I could just talk to her. Reintroduce myself. Be her friend.

No. You can't trust yourself. You want her too much.

I wanted to argue, fight back.

But I had no weapons to battle with, no words to hurl at this fucking ghost that refused to stop haunting me. What if I never got free of it?

After getting dried and dressed, I scrubbed my shower tiles and called my therapist to see if he could fit me in this afternoon.

* * * *

“I had a setback today.” I wasn’t much for small talk.

“Oh?” Ken, a soft-spoken man with glasses and a thick blond beard, crossed his legs and regarded me patiently. “What do you think triggered it?”

I shifted uncomfortably on the couch in his office. “I saw someone from my past, a girl I went to school with.”

“A friend?”

“Not exactly...I didn’t really have friends in high school, partly because of my erratic behavior in years prior, but also because I isolated myself. People really didn’t know what to make of me, so I was largely ignored. But this girl. She was just...nice. We were assigned as lab partners in chemistry a few times because our last names were close in the alphabet. I used to get so nervous before school if I knew we had to work together.”

“Did you have thoughts about her back then?”

Fuck yes I did. I still do. “Not obsessive thoughts. Just average teenage boy thoughts and average teenage boy nerves around a pretty girl. But mine were compounded by the fact that I knew everyone thought I was crazy. *I thought I was crazy.*”

Those years had been such a fucking nightmare—my father dragging me to doctor after doctor to figure out why I was so obsessed with contamination, why I was always counting things like leaves on trees or blades of grass or lines on the highway, why I was convinced that terrible things were going to happen to people I loved because of me. They did everything from dismissing the shit I did as adolescent quirks to diagnosing me with depression.

Several therapists were convinced I secretly blamed myself for my mother’s death from a car accident when I was eight (she was coming to pick me up from a friend’s house) and believed the fear of doing harm stemmed from that, but they couldn’t tell my dad why I had to flip a light switch on and off eight times before leaving a room or explain to my teachers why I had to click my ballpoint pen eight times before answering every test question or clue my middle school gym classmates in as to why I would play second base but not first or third. I could still recall the what-the-fuck looks on their faces when I tried explaining that two was a good number because it was even, and even better, a factor of eight, but one and three were bad numbers because they were odd.

Ken pushed his glasses further up his nose. “You once mentioned things were better by the time you finished high school.”

“They were,” I conceded. By junior year, we’d found a doctor familiar with OCD and I was put on medication, and I started seeing a therapist regularly. “By the end of high school, I had more good days than bad, but I still stuck to myself. The social damage had been done and I just figured, fuck it, I’ll start over in college.”

Ken flipped back a few pages in the notepad on his lap. “You said your undergraduate years were fairly normal, but we haven’t talked much about them. You had friends? Dates? Girlfriends?”

“Yeah. Starting over in a new place felt good. The thoughts and the compulsions never entirely went away, but I learned to cope. I felt I had control over them.” I thought about Skylar on the beach again and felt the back of my neck grow hot. “As opposed to fucking today.”

“But we’ve talked about how having *control* over your thoughts isn’t the answer. It isn’t possible for anyone, really. One of your main goals at this point is to let go of that excessive

need for control and learn to live with risk and uncertainty. Learn to let the obsessive thoughts be.”

“Yeah, I *know* that, and when I’m sitting here or when I’m alone or out among strangers, I’m fine with that,” I snapped. “But today was different.”

“What happened?”

I told him what had transpired on the beach this morning, the image of Skylar’s blond hair against the sand, her slender legs extending from her skirt still fresh in my mind. “And yes, I tried talking back and reasoning with myself and being an observer and all that, but nothing was working. I couldn’t deal with it the usual ways.” I shrugged angrily. “So I counted. Ran away from her.”

Ken nodded slowly. “And afterward?”

“I felt like shit,” I said. “I was furious. I wanted to punch someone. Myself, I guess.”

“What did you do?”

“I went to the gym.” *And then I went home and jerked off while thinking about her just like I used to when I was seventeen. I’ll probably do it again tonight because two is a better number than one. One is bad.*

“Did that help?”

I almost smiled. “Yeah. Sort of.”

Ken rubbed his beard and thought for a moment. “Do you think, if you saw her again, you might try speaking to her?”

I linked my fingers in my lap and stared at them, trying to imagine shaking her hand without fear. “I don’t know. Part of me wants to. Another part says why invite trouble? I’m doing okay these days, you know? At least, I was. Working on the cabin, handling a couple cases for my dad’s firm, writing every day, staying active... Until I saw her this afternoon, I felt stronger than I have in a long time. I think that’s why I’m so fucking angry about the relapse.”

“One relapse doesn’t undo all the progress you’ve made, Sebastian. It could just be a bad day.” Ken uncrossed his legs and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “I’m not going to force you to do it, but we both know that avoidance is never a successful strategy when it comes to obsessive thoughts. It always backfires, which leads to more anxiety and distress. If you really want to move forward, you should talk to her. Is this someone you think might be just a friend...or something more?”

“Just a friend,” I said quickly. “I’m done with relationships.”

“Give yourself time. You’re only twenty-eight, Sebastian. One bad breakup doesn’t mean you won’t find happiness with someone else eventually.”

“It wasn’t just one bad breakup. This was just the first time someone told me I ruined her life too.”

“You didn’t ruin her life.”

Agitated, I ran a hand over my hair. “Diana had a wedding dress, Ken. Invitations had been ordered. Deposits paid. Honeymoon cruise booked—not her dream honeymoon, of course, which was my fault because I refuse to get on a plane, but a honeymoon nonetheless. I’m never doing all that shit again, because it will all have to be undone when I panic and relapse and she realizes she can’t be married to a fuck-up like me who has—wait, let me see if I can get this right—no fucking clue what it means to love someone because I can’t get out of my head long enough to put someone else’s needs first unless I’m fucking her.” I spat Diana’s words back at Ken as if he’d spoken them. “That’s what she said, and she was right.”

“Sebastian, stop.” Ken sighed and straightened up. “We’re not talking about proposing to

this woman. Or sleeping with her. We're talking about a conversation. And if the obsessive thought returns, don't try to banish them and don't run away. You've got tools to work with. Try magnifying, or the watching/waiting we've talked about. Do the writing exercise where you imagine the worst. That's worked for you in the past."

I was quiet for a moment. Flexed my fingers a few times. "I'll think about it."

After the session was over, I left Ken's office building and walked down the street to Coffee Darling. When I first started going there last year, I had to bring my own cup from home because I was so worried about contamination. But exposure therapy had helped me work through it, and now I felt a lot more comfortable walking into a bar or restaurant and using whatever was given to me. Did I love it? No, and a little doubt always lingered about how clean the utensils were, not to mention the kitchen, but usually I managed to cope without embarrassing myself or anyone with me.

The small shop was empty, and the owner, Natalie, was wiping down the counter, but she looked up and smiled at me when I came in. "Hey stranger. Haven't seen you in a while. How's it going?"

"Good, thanks." I liked Natalie, partly because she talked so much I never felt like I had to say anything, and also because she understood when I shamefacedly explained why I brought my own coffee cup to her shop. She never launched into any defensive explanation about how clean her place was—and it was clean, I never even hesitated before using the bathroom there, and public restrooms were a huge trigger for me—she just poured coffee and chatted away. When I was finished, she always rinsed and dried the cup for me, too. Best of all, she seemed to know when I didn't want to be bothered, and she'd leave me alone with my caffeine and my notebook.

"Come on in. The kitchen's closed, but since you're just a coffee drinker, have a seat and I'll pour you a cup."

"Are you sure? If you're closed, I can—"

"No, no, come sit down. You can keep me company while I go through the closing routine."

Removing my sunglasses, I set them and my keys on the counter and sat down. After Natalie poured me some coffee and disappeared into the kitchen, I opened up my journal, frowning at the damp pages, and turned to what Ken called my Exposure Hierarchy. The idea was to list things that make me anxious and then rate them with subjective units of distress, or SUDS, based on how uncomfortable or scared they made me. Some were related to my fears about germs and contamination, some were related to my ordering and number compulsions, and some were related to frightening "what if" thoughts that assailed me for no good reason, like thinking I'd go batshit crazy and stab someone if I held a kitchen knife in my hands.

I thumbed through page after page of items, dozens of things I couldn't bear the thought of doing at one time. And I wasn't allowed to count while I did them, or numb myself, or repeat any mantras. I had to actually focus on what I was doing, mindful of the fact that it was a truly uncomfortable, if not horrifically disgusting, thing.

But I'd done it. I'd done almost everything on the list. I was doing so well, it had been months since I'd had to add anything to it.

My ultimate goal was to feel good enough to go back to work full-time this summer, not at a big-name, high-pressure law firm like I'd been at in New York, but for my father, who had a small practice in town and had offered me a job. Would the work be as exciting as what I'd done in New York? No, but I hadn't handled the stress of being an associate at a corporate firm very well, to put it mildly. The eighty hour work weeks, the all-nighters, the tedious grunt work, the insane deadlines, the constant pressure to bill, being ignored or hazed by senior partners...

Actually, I was amazed I lasted as long as I did. I was fucking miserable the entire time.

But looking ahead, I thought I could be happy practicing law in a low-pressure setting, and living here would allow me to get better acquainted with my little nieces and nephews and spend plenty of time outside. I was considering training for a triathlon next year too. Working on my physical self was always gratifying—the rewards were guaranteed.

A lonely life? Maybe.

But a quiet life. A peaceful life. One where I didn't have to worry about making anyone else suffer.

Unfortunately, it would always have to include battling the unfortunate, fucked-up circuitry in my brain.

After a sip of coffee, I took my pencil from my jacket pocket and turned to the end of the list. Taking a deep breath, I added another item.

Talk to Skylar Nixon.

I stared at the words and tried to think about rating the task—how anxious did the thought of talking to her make me? But before I could decide on a number, I got the uneasy feeling that someone was watching me. I looked over my left shoulder, and there she was. Standing just inside the door, so pretty she took my breath away, and staring right at me.

Chapter 6

Skylar

Our eyes met, and a shiver moved through my body.

Holy shit. It's him again.

And he's really hot.

After leaving the pageant offices in a huff, I'd marched down the street to Coffee Darling, Natalie's adorable little bakery and coffee shop. When she opened it two years ago, it was only coffee and the muffins or donuts she made herself at the asscrack of dawn, but she'd since hired another pastry chef and also offered light salads and sandwiches at lunchtime too.

It closed after the last of the lunch crowd left, usually by three each day, so I was surprised to see someone still seated at the counter when I walked in. I was even more surprised to discover it was the guy I'd seen at the beach this morning—I recognized the light brown jacket.

He looked over his shoulder at me, and now that he'd taken off his sunglasses, I could better appreciate his good looks—the light eyes, the angled cheekbones, the full mouth. When he frowned at me, I felt the embarrassment of face planting in the sand all over again, which was dwarfed only by the shame I'd experienced when he'd said *I know who you are* and I realized he'd seen me on Save a Horse.

And he probably read the paper this morning. He hates you, just like everyone else in this town. This is what your life is now.

Fine, I could handle it.

I scowled right back.

Just then Natalie came through the door from the kitchen and grabbed the coffeepot behind the counter. “How about a warmup?” she asked him.

He kept staring at me without answering her question, and the tension was too much for me to bear. “For fuck's sake, just say it!” I exploded. “Yes, I'm who you think I am. Yes, I'm that bitch on TV. Yes, I said shitty things about nice people, so just stop staring at me and tell me flat out that I deserve all the crap that's happening to me today, including falling on my face!”

“Skylar!” Natalie glanced frantically back and forth from me to the guy. “I'm sorry, Sebastian. This is my sister, Skylar, and apparently she's having a *very bad day*,” she said with a pointed look at me. “Otherwise I cannot imagine why she would come in here and scream obscenities at my customer.”

“Insanely bad,” I confirmed. “Someone should just shoot me. Either of you have a pistol?” I looked at the guy again, but he was no longer focused on me. He was frantically closing his notebook and tucking it out of sight in his jacket.

Instantly I felt guilty. “Hey, don't go. I'm sorry about that.”

“It's all right,” he said quietly. “I'm done anyway.” He pulled out his wallet and threw a few bills on the counter.

“No, please stay. You just got here.” Natalie filled his cup with coffee and set down the pot. “And put your money away. Coffee's on me.”

“Keep it as a tip then. See you around.” He picked up his keys from the counter, put his sunglasses back on, and moved toward the door.

I raced ahead of him, unable to bear the thought he would leave still thinking I was a

horrible person, even though I felt like one. “Hey, don’t leave on my account. I really am sorry.” Leaning back against the glass door, I smiled. “Can I try again?”

Slowly, he lifted his head and met my eyes. Stared directly into them, so hard my breath caught in my chest, and I felt desire stir low in my belly. With the short hair and the aviator glasses, he looked like a fighter pilot or something. Even the stubborn set of his jaw turned me on. Rawr.

“I’m Skylar,” I said, extending my hand. Then I wrinkled my nose. “But I guess you already know that from the Save a Horse, right?”

His brow furrowed. “Save a what?”

“Save a Horse. The reality show I’m on?” The fact that his expression remained perplexed gave me hope. “You mean you haven’t seen it?”

“No. I don’t watch much TV.” He paused. “You don’t remember me.”

“I don’t think we’ve met.” I tilted my head coquettishly. “I’d remember you. Definitely.”

Although, wait a second—there was something familiar there. Had we met? Was he an actor I’d been introduced to in New York? Why couldn’t I place him? And why wouldn’t he shake my hand, which was still extended between us?

It took him forever, but finally he reached for it.

“And you are?” I prompted. Man, this guy was gorgeous but a bit lacking in social niceties.

“Sebastian Pryce.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said, enjoying the cozy fit of my hand inside his. “Are you—“

And then it hit me.

I did know him.

At least, I’d known a Sebastian Pryce. We’d gone to school together for years. But this couldn’t be *that* Sebastian...could it? I looked down at our hands. The Sebastian I’d known wouldn’t have shaken hands because he was always so paranoid about germs. Kids used to tease him by touching his shoulders and saying, *Better go wash your hands, Sebastian. I gave you cooties.* And even though it was ridiculous and we all knew there was no such thing as cooties, he always asked to go wash his hands after that. In fifth grade one time, our teacher had said no because we were getting ready to take a test, and he’d completely flipped out and started tapping on his head and counting out loud. It was awful.

He let go of my hand and I continued to stare at him. Now I saw it, but... holy makeover. I swallowed. “Wow. Sebastian. You look...different.”

“You look the same.”

Was that a compliment? Hard to tell from the way he said it. “Thanks,” I said uncertainly.

“You’re welcome.”

Wow, this was awkward. Like trying to flirt with a tree.

A tall, strong, beautiful tree, but still a tree.

I wasn’t usually tongue-tied around men but I had no idea what to say to Sebastian Pryce after all these years. And why did he seem so angry? Was it because of the way he’d been treated in school? I’d never teased him myself—I’d actually been kind to him, hadn’t I? Although he’d probably been bullied a lot, and I hadn’t exactly stood up for him. Was it possible he held a grudge? What the hell—it had been ten years!

“Could I get by please?” he asked tersely. “You’re blocking the door.”

“Oh. Right, sorry.” Flustered, I watched him push it open and bolt out like the building was on fire.

Aggravated, I turned to Natalie and stuck my hands on my hips. “What the hell? Why was

he so rude?”

“*He* was rude?” Natalie’s eyes went hula hoop wide.

“Yes! He could have accepted my apology or said something nice. He barely acknowledged my existence!” I threw a hand in the air.

Natalie smiled knowingly. “Not used to being ignored by a hot guy, huh?”

“Shut up! That’s not it.” I crossed my arms defiantly. That wasn’t it, was it? “Okay, that’s partly it.”

She laughed as I looked out the door again, recalling the punch-in-the-gut feeling I’d had when he’d turned to look at me. Then I noticed the notebook on the sidewalk—the red spiral one I’d seen earlier at the beach. “Hey, he dropped something.”

Hurrying out the door to pick it up, I looked down the street in the direction he’d gone. There was no sign of him, so I took it back into the shop.

“He’ll probably be back for it in a minute,” Natalie said. “He’s always carrying that thing around.”

“It’s soggy,” I said, holding it by one corner. “What the hell does he do with it?”

“Writes in it, I assume.”

I slapped the thing onto the counter next to the dollar bills he’d left and sat down, eyeing it curiously. “I wonder what he writes about.”

“So do you two know each other?” Natalie picked up a rag and began wiping the counter, moving the notebook aside. “He’s not much of a talker but he did say he grew up around here.”

“Yes, you don’t remember him? He was in my class, so a few years ahead of you, but he looked totally different back then.”

“Really? What did he look like?”

“He had this long dark hair he used to hide behind and he wore really baggy clothing all the time.” I thought for a second. “Or at least it seemed baggy, but maybe he was just really skinny.”

Natalie’s eyebrows shot up. “Not anymore. One time he took off his jacket and he was wearing this really fitted t-shirt. That guy is ripped now—his arms and chest are amazing.”

“Seriously?” I glanced out the door again, wondering where he’d rushed off to. “Does he ever come in with anyone else? He was a pretty odd kid. I don’t remember him having friends in school. He used to be obsessed with germs, like total OCD. People used to tease him about it.”

She nodded. “That makes sense. The first time he came in here, he brought his own cup.”

My jaw dropped. “Weird!”

“It *was* weird,” she admitted, “but also kind of sad. And at first he just said he preferred to use his own cup, but after he came here a few times, he told me about the germ fear and said he was working on it. And then one day, he didn’t bring it.”

“Did you, like, congratulate him?”

“Nope, I didn’t even mention it. I just poured his coffee and went about my business. Like I said, he’s not really a talker, and I didn’t want to embarrass him. And I think…” her voice trailed off and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth.

“What?”

“Nothing. I shouldn’t spread gossip.” She focused extra hard on her cleaning rag.

I rolled my eyes and put a hand over her wrist, stopping her frantic motion. “Nat, please. Who the hell would I tell? No one is even speaking to me around here!”

She sighed and stopped wiping. “Well, after he left here one day, I heard these women talking about him, something about his having a nervous breakdown last year and moving back home to recover. One of them might have been a relative of his.”

“Really?” My heart ached a little for the lonely, frustrated kid he’d been and the awkward man he’d become. Memories long forgotten surfaced—the way he’d arrived mid-year in the fourth grade and struggled to make friends. The way he’d stayed in at recess once to help me in math. The way he’d eaten lunch alone. *I should have been nicer. Then and now. I’m a horrible person.* As if I needed another reminder.

“That’s what I heard. Apparently he was a lawyer in New York City, and engaged to be married.”

Intrigued, I reached for a chocolate chip cookie from under the glass lid of a cake stand and took a bite. “Wow. I wonder what happened to the girl.”

She shrugged and resumed her cleaning. “I don’t know, but he comes in here a lot and there’s no wife or girlfriend that I’ve seen.”

I took another bite, trying to recall one *real* conversation we’d had in all the years we knew each other and failed. “That’s sad. I remember him being, like, super smart. He helped me in math sometimes. And chemistry, I think. His family still around here? If I recall, he had some older brothers. Maybe one of the women was a sister-in-law.”

“I think they’re still around, based on the limited conversations we’ve had, but he still seems lonely to me. Like he might need a friend, you know?”

Depressed, I stuck the rest of the cookie in my mouth. “Well, he doesn’t want to be *my* friend,” I mumbled. “He made that pretty clear.”

“I think he’s just shy.”

“I think he hates me,” I said, swallowing the last of the cookie and eyeing another one. “Just like the rest of the world.”

“So what happened to you today, anyway? Why were you so mad when you walked in?”

While she swept up, I told her about being fired, about my brilliant idea to work for the festival, and about the humiliating meeting with Joan Klein. Then I reached for a second cookie.

“They took your crown away?”

“Yes!” The outrage hit me all over again. “So I smashed it!” I took a giant chomp out of the cookie as Natalie burst out laughing. “It’s not funny!” I yelled, crumbs flying from my mouth.

“I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t laugh, but it’s just so silly. Who cares who was queen all those years ago? It’s ridiculous.”

“I care!” I thumped my chest. “It was the *one* thing I had, the one great achievement in my life, my *mantle picture*! And now it’s gone and I have nothing! My life is a complete mess and I’m a total failure at everything I do!” I threw the cookie down, put my face in my hands, and finally gave in to the urge to cry like a baby, which made me feel even worse about myself.

Natalie came over to sit beside me, leaning the broom against the counter. “Hey,” she said, rubbing my shoulder. “Don’t say that. You’re not a failure. You’ve had plenty of great achievements. Look at all the starring roles you had around here growing up. Mom has entire albums full of your pictures on stage.”

I picked up my head, tears leaking from my eyes. “Yes, I was a big fish in this little pond. But I wasn’t good enough to make it for real, Nat. I didn’t even like trying. You know what I liked best about acting?”

“What?”

“The curtain call. The applause when it was over.” I sat up straight and sniffed. “Let’s face it. I’m shallow and vain.”

She slapped my shoulder gently. “Come on. Everyone likes to hear praise sometimes. And okay, maybe you’re a little vain, but you’re a hard worker—you just need to find what it is you

like to do.”

“I just wish I was *good* at something,” I fretted.

“You could be good at anything.” She slung her arm around my neck and squeezed. “You’ll figure it out, Sky. Things will work out.”

“How? The entire town, possibly the entire country, hates me, I have to go home and tell Mom and Dad I was canned, and a really cute guy just gave me the brush off.”

“Mom and Dad aren’t going to care you were fired from Rivard. They’ll support you no matter what, and so will I, and so will Jillian. That’s what family does.”

I swiped at my nose. “I’m just so fucked up compared to you guys.”

“What?” She leaned away from me. “What are you talking about?”

“You and Jilly did everything right. Your lives are perfect.”

“Now you’re just talking crazy. No one’s life is perfect. Jillian was just complaining to me the other day that she wants to date but can’t meet anyone worth her time, running this business is exhausting, and if you want to know the truth, I think Dan’s cheating on me.”

I gasped. “What? No way. You guys have been together forever.”

She shrugged. “That doesn’t mean anything. I saw some text messages on his phone from a girl at his office that have me wondering.”

Dan was like a brother to me, since he and Natalie had been together since high school, but I’d kill him if he hurt her. “You need to talk to him. Right now.”

“I will. Maybe it’s nothing.” Her expression said otherwise. “Anyway, we were talking about you. Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah.” I sniffed. “I need a tissue.”

Natalie reached for the napkin dispenser and slid it over to me. “You still have plenty of old friends here too. Why don’t you look them up? You work all day and spend all your downtime working on those guest houses.”

Plucking a napkin from the dispenser, I blew my nose disconsolately. “I don’t know. I only stayed in touch with a few people after I left. And everyone who stayed around here is either married and pregnant or married with kids. It’s hard to relate.”

“Well, then, I think you should make a new friend.” She flashed a meaningful look out the door.

I considered it. He *was* cute, and smart, if a bit socially awkward. Maybe I could draw him out. That was one thing I was good at, talking to people. “I could ask him if he’s going to the reunion, I guess.”

“There you go.” She stood and picked up the broom again, resumed her sweeping.

“How can I find him?”

“He’ll probably be back in here first thing tomorrow looking for that notebook. I’m surprised he’s not here already.”

I thought for a second. “Well, I do need a job. Want to hire me?”

“You know what?” She stopped sweeping and looked at me, resting her chin on the top of the broom. “I *was* planning to hire someone part time since the tourist season is picking up. I can’t pay you what Rivard paid you, and you won’t like the hours, but the job’s yours if you want it.”

“I’ll take it. At this point, I don’t even care what it pays, I just need something to do while I figure my life out.” I picked up my half-eaten cookie. “These are amazing. I’m going to get fluffy working here.”

Natalie groaned. “They are, and I’ve eaten way too many today so I’m heading to the gym

after this. Want to go for a swim with me?"

Natalie had been a champion swimmer in high school. Her definition of "go for a swim" was not the same as mine, which involved more floating than laps, preferably on a raft with a cupholder for my frozen daiquiri.

"No way," I said. "I'm too out of shape to swim with you. But I'll get on a bike or a treadmill or something."

"Great. You can come for dinner if you want too. We're grilling kebabs."

"The chicken wrapped in bacon?" I asked hopefully.

"Yep."

"Sold." I felt a little better. Nothing makes a bad day better like bacon. "What can I do to help you close?"

"Why don't you sweep, and I'll do kitchen duty?" She held the broom out to me, and I saluted before taking it from her.

But after she'd gone into the kitchen, I remained on the stool with the broom in my hand, staring at the notebook on the counter.

Sebastian Pryce. After all these years, he was a hot, mysterious lawyer with a firm handshake and a tragic past. Was his standoffish demeanor just a defense mechanism? He'd jumped up to help me at the beach this morning in a heartbeat, so I knew he had manners. And those eyes. When he'd taken his glasses off and looked at me, there was something other than coldness in them, despite his tone. Was it fear? Sadness? Was he still afraid of being rejected?

I flattened one hand on the notebook's front cover. What was in here?

For a moment, Sebastian's right to privacy warred with my insane curiosity about him...how wrong would it be to take a peek?

Totally wrong.

But maybe there was an address or phone number in it? I could justify it that way, right?

You just want to get up in his business.

I ignored that and opened up the front cover. Blank. I flipped to the back cover. Blank.

Well, damn, I thought, randomly flipping to a page in the middle. *Guess you'll have to find me, then.*

And speaking of me.

There was my name.

My mouth fell open as I took in all the words on the page, which really didn't make much sense to me.

Sitting on the beach, looking at the water. 0
Refraining from spacing hangers in closet just so. 50
Writing less than eight words on a line. 30
Eating a mint after it falls on floor. 80
Zipping up my fly less than eight times. 50
Turning off the television on an odd channel. 60
Locking the front door less than eight times. 70
Sitting in a restaurant chair that feels "wrong." 75
Eating at a restaurant without bringing own dishes. 80
Handling a kitchen knife while others are present. 90
Talk to Skylar Nixon.

What the hell was this?

I read the list again but felt no closer to understanding it. Some of the items seemed like maybe they were things that made him nervous, and others were just odd behaviors. Zipping his fly eight times? A chair that feels “wrong”? Why couldn’t he handle a kitchen knife in front of other people? Was he scared of knives? And what was with the numbers? I felt sorry for him, but boy...this was pretty odd.

If he wanted to talk to me, why hadn’t he done it today? He’d had plenty of chances. Was he just too shy? Biting my lip, I turned the page.

And saw my name again.

Skylar

I think I loved you is not the best
introduction after we’ve just met
I realize this. And maybe you will
never know
never know

Maybe it is too soon (or too late?)
to tell you about the dream I had
your laugh was a butterfly

Today when I touched you
I felt a familiar chill down my arms. I think it
came from the future (or the past?)
With your hand in mine I saw the
tragedy of us
unfold quite clearly

I have no choice but to
keep my distance
but your beauty is gravity
and terrestrial bodies will always fall

I read it again and again and again, gooseflesh rippling down my arms. He wrote poetry? Had he written this for me today? Did he really feel this way about me? My heart was pounding. I stared at the words, trying to memorize them, scared Natalie was going to catch me snooping but needing desperately to take something beautiful from this day, even if it was sad too.

A few seconds later, someone pounded so hard on the door that I gasped.

Spinning around, I slapped my hand over my heart when I saw Sebastian through the glass. I slammed the notebook shut. *Act natural. You saw nothing. You know nothing.*

But suddenly I wanted to know everything.

Chapter 7

Sebastian

Fuck, I scared her.

I watched Skylar whirl around at the sound of my banging on the door and put a hand over her heart. When she saw it was me, she picked up the notebook from the counter and walked toward the door. The moment she unlocked it, I yanked it open and snatched the notebook rudely from her hands. I'd been in a complete state of panic since realizing it wasn't in my jacket, but I felt only mild relief to have it back in my possession. Had she looked inside it?

Fucking hell. I'd die. Die.

"Hi," she said brightly, coming outside. The door swung closed behind her. "I wondered if you'd come back for that."

"Yeah. Sorry." I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye, so I stared at her feet. They were small and narrow, and even though she wore high heels, she was still a good six inches shorter than me.

"No problem, we're still here closing up."

I nodded, the tension in my gut uncoiling a little. She wasn't acting as if she'd seen anything crazy. I risked a glance at her, and those blue eyes cranked my adrenaline right up again.

"So, did you move back recently?" Her tone was light and friendly and she leaned against the door, hands behind her back. It made her breasts stick out a little, and I looked at them before I could help myself. The thought of accidentally choking her jumped unbidden into my mind, and I took a step back.

Shit. Just get the fuck out of here.

"I gotta go." Without meeting her eyes, I turned and counted off my paces in sets of eight as I hurried away from her.

Hating myself, I went home and cleaned my house from top to bottom, took another shower (during which I jerked off to her again, which only made me feel more loathsome), ate dinner staring at a stupid cable news show that reaffirmed my belief that the world was a fucked-up place full of greed and cruelty, and went to bed.

Staring at the empty space beside me, I counted myself to exhaustion, and went to sleep.

* * * *

The next day was a little better, although I was angry with myself for being such a dick to Skylar.

To work it off, I went to the gym in the morning and spent the early afternoon working outside at my cabin. The piece of property on Old Mission Peninsula I'd inherited from my mother was small, but it was well off the main road and had about twenty waterfront feet, although no beach. The land had been in her family for a hundred years or so, and when she died, it was divided into three parcels and willed to my two brothers and me. They'd sold their plots to a developer, but I'd held on to mine and built a cabin on it. A contractor had done the construction last summer, and I'd spent my winter working on the interior, installing reclaimed wood floors and kitchen cabinets, stained concrete counters, new appliances, a stone and tile

bathroom downstairs. The whole place wasn't even eight hundred square feet, but it was plenty of room for me.

My latest project was an outdoor shower. With the water line prepped and in place, I began working on installing the solar water heater, so that showers out here would be refreshing rather than dick-shrinking cold. Of course, the entire time I worked I pictured Skylar underneath the shower head, warm water running down her body, dripping off her curves, clinging to her skin. Oh fuck. Now I was hard. Frowning, I adjusted my jeans and kept working.

Damn it, why did I panic around her? Why couldn't I manage a simple conversation? I'd been battling obsessive thoughts for the majority of my life, and Ken was right—I had plenty of strategies in place for dealing with them. So what the fuck was it?

Was it her looks? Was it because I felt guilty for the way I used to think about her? The way I still thought about her? Or was yesterday just a bad day? It was almost like I'd had too many good days, and the doomsayer in me needed to speak up and remind me I wasn't okay. I'd never be okay.

I wondered what she was thinking. Would she even talk to me again if I approached her? Once something was on my list, I couldn't give up on it—and I knew that if I didn't work through my issue with her, it would continue to haunt me. This wasn't a huge town, so I was bound to run into her from time to time, and I couldn't retreat whenever that happened. Ken was right about that too—avoidance never works, not for me.

I might be an asshole, but I wasn't a goddamn coward. Not anymore.

Next time I saw her, I'd do better.

Chapter 8

Skylar

I started working for Natalie the next day, and by three o'clock, my feet were killing me, my lower back ached, and I was exhausted. My sisters were both early risers, as were my mom and dad, but waking before six AM felt like medieval torture to me, and the weather wasn't helping. It had been cloudy and gray all day, and the rain had just started to fall. Nap weather.

"Is it over?" I asked, when the final lunch customers had left, opening their umbrellas before heading out. "If it isn't, I think I have to quit."

"It's over." Natalie grinned at me over her shoulder as she piled dishes from their table on a tray. "We can close up."

"Thank God." Wincing with every step on my sore feet, I went to the door to lock it and flip the sign to CLOSED. Then I collapsed on the nearest stool, flopping forward over the counter. "I'll help you in a second. I need a rest."

"Don't close your eyes," she warned. "You'll fall asleep, I know you."

I did have a knack for falling asleep pretty much anywhere when I was tired. My eyes were already drifting shut as I settled my cheek on one extended arm. "Shush. Just need a minute."

"I'm taking these dishes to the kitchen, and once they're loaded in the dishwasher, your rest is over."

"Mmkay." Drowsy and warm and lulled by the sound of the rain, I'd just started to doze off when I heard a few sharp raps on the glass. "Go 'way. Closed," I mumbled without picking up my head.

The knocking continued, growing even louder. What the hell, could this person not read?

"Okay, okay." Reluctantly, I slid off the stool and turned to see a drenched Sebastian Pryce through the glass, rain coming down in sheets behind him.

My stomach jumped, and I rushed over to the door, fumbling with the lock before pushing it open. "Come on in," I said, a little breathless. All I could think of were his words about me. I could still see them on the page...

*I have no choice but to
keep my distance*

"My God, you're soaked." I looked him up and down, taking in the dark jeans and the light brown jacket, although it was dripping wet, as was his hair. "Can I get you a towel or something?"

"No, that's okay."

"How about a cup of coffee then?" I glanced behind me to make sure we still had some in the pot.

"No, thanks. I didn't come for coffee. I was just running an errand downtown and saw you through the window. I didn't realize you worked here."

I smiled. So talkative today—almost friendly. "It's my first day." Lowering my voice to a whisper, I leaned toward him and spoke behind one hand. "But you just caught me napping on the job."

He smiled at me, a slow, sly grin that made my knees go weak. "I won't tell."

"Thanks." I waited for him to tell me why he was there but he said nothing for a moment,

his eyes running over my hair and face, lingering on my mouth.

but your beauty is gravity

I licked my lips. “Are you sure I can’t get you anything to drink? The kitchen just closed, or I’d offer you something to eat.”

“I’m sure. I’m not hungry. I just came in to talk to you.”

and terrestrial bodies will always fall

“You did?”

“Yes. I owe you an apology.”

A blush warmed my cheeks. “It’s okay.”

“No, it isn’t. I shouldn’t have rushed off yesterday. I feel bad about it.”

“Well, I shouldn’t have come in here screaming like a banshee either.” I shook my head, smiling ruefully.

He shrugged. “It’s all right.”

God, he was so damn cute, all wet and sheepish. “Sure I can’t get you some coffee? I hate to send you back out into the rain so fast. I’ll sit with you.” *Come on, let’s get you out of those wet clothes.*

His lips tipped up again, and my heart ka-banged like a sixth grader’s with her first crush. I loved how one of his eyebrows sort of cocked up higher than the other when he smiled. “No, thank you. I should go.” He turned and pushed the door open, then looked over his shoulder and said, “But it’s good to see you again.”

When he was gone, I stood there staring out the window at the rain for a solid five minutes, suddenly wide awake and more curious about him than ever. Suddenly I wished I’d stuck a note in his pocket.

Do you like me? Check yes or no.

* * * *

Coffee Darling was only open until mid-afternoon, so I had plenty of time left over in the following weeks to help my mother update the guest houses. I’d get up at five, work at the shop until the lunch crowd left, and then head back home to paint, change up window treatments, and swap out old linens or light fixtures for new ones. On my days off, I’d go hunting at antique shops for old chairs I could recover, tables my dad could help me refinish, or just pretty things that would look nice hanging on the walls or sitting on a shelf.

In the evenings, I helped my mother tweak their farm’s website, which was dated and busy. I convinced her to hire a photographer to take new photos, and found a graphic designer to work on a new logo.

I can’t say I was any closer to figuring out what to do with my life, but I felt good about helping out my family, and staying busy made it easy to put off worrying about the future or dwelling on my failed career as an actress. My most immediate concern was that damn reunion—could I show my humiliated face? My final episode of *Save a Horse* aired toward the end of May, (no, I did not watch) but I still felt the disgusted stares and heard the angry whispers of locals here and there. It would probably be a while before I felt totally comfortable being in a crowd again.

If only I had someone to go to the reunion *with*. But my two closest girlfriends from school lived out of town and weren’t attending, and Natalie said showing up with *her* as my date would be worse than going alone. If Sebastian had come into the shop again, I would’ve asked him

about it, but he never did. I asked Natalie about him once, and she said he was kind of like that—he might come in every day for a week and then not at all for two. Then she teased me about the crestfallen look on my face so much that I didn't ask again.

I was starting to think I'd *imagined* his poetic words about me when I ran into him at the hardware store one night in late May.

I was in aisle four looking for screws for these cool cast iron bin pulls I'd just bought at an old barn-turned-antiques store, and I was having trouble finding the right size. Frowning again at the vast selection in front of me, I was thinking of asking for help when I heard a voice behind me.

"Skylar?"

I turned, and there he was. "Oh! Hi." Suddenly I remembered my hair was in a ponytail and quickly tugged the elastic out before he could notice my Nixon ears. Slipping it over one wrist, I tried to shake out my hair, fluff it out a little.

"Hi." He smiled and my heart thumped hard at the slow stretch of those full lips and the way one of his brows arched higher than the other. Why on earth had he hidden that face for so long? "How are you?"

"Good. I'm just looking for a screw." My eyes went panicky wide as I realized what I said. "For *some* screws, I mean. Not *a* screw."

He laughed then, a warm, genuine chuckle that sent joy spiraling up inside me. "Do you need some help?"

"I do, actually." I held up one bin pull. "I bought this antique hardware but I can't find the right fit for the hole."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

"I hate when the screw is wrong for the hole." With an easy grin on his face, Sebastian took the pull from me and examined it. "Hmm. Let's see." He hunted around for a moment, during which I covertly studied him from the corner of my eye. He was tall and trim, with a nice round ass which I may or may not have leaned backward to check out while he tested a few different size screws. "Aha." He faced me and held one out. "This should work."

"Great. If they have eight of them, I can get this job done tonight."

"You need *eight* screws to get the job done?" That brow cocked even higher. "That happens to be my favorite number."

Now *this* guy I could flirt with.

I rolled my eyes and pushed gently on his chest, which was broad and thick. He wore a navy blue track jacket which fit his upper body much better than the old baggy sweatshirts he used to wear in high school. "Very funny. So you're talking to me today, huh?"

The smile slid off his face, and immediately I was sorry I'd mentioned anything about our previous meeting. "Yeah. Sorry again about... that one day. I was just..." He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, his muscular chest rising and falling. "I don't know. I was having a bad day."

"Me too. God." My shoulders shuddered at the memory. "An awful day."

He looked at me sideways. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I got fired. And then I fell on my face in front of you at the beach. And then the Cherry Pageant people took my crown away." At the time, it had seemed like such a serious personal insult—now it just sounded silly, like I was a child whose favorite toy had been taken away. *Probably because that's exactly what you are.*

"Why?"

I sighed, closing my eyes. "It's a long and embarrassing story."

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "We all have those."

I thought about what Natalie had said about his recent past. *What do you know, Sebastian Pryce and I have something in common.* It gave me an idea. "Hey. Want to trade long and embarrassing stories over a drink?"

His expression immediately went from sympathetic to scared, and I wondered if I'd gone too far.

"I'm sorry." I glanced around. "You came here for something, and the store's about to close. I shouldn't keep you. It was just a thought. Maybe some other time."

"No, no. It's okay." He paused. "Actually, I think I'd like that."

I cocked my head. "You don't sound too sure about it."

"I'm sure." He tapped my nose, an affectionate gesture that surprised me. "Listen. It's not every day that *thee* Skylar Nixon asks me for a drink. You have to give me a minute." Lifting an arm in between us, he pinched the skin on his wrist.

"Oh, stop." Flustered, I pushed his hand down. "Don't be silly."

He grinned. "I need to grab some chairs, though. Should we meet out front?"

"Chairs? You're shopping for furniture at the hardware store?"

"Adirondack chairs. For my patio. They've got them on sale here this week."

"Oh. Where do you live?"

"On Old Mission. I built a cabin."

"Really? That's awesome. I love cabins. So much charm."

"I'm not sure *you'd* call it charming yet, but it's working for me."

"I'd love to see it. Maybe I can help." He looked at me sort of oddly, and again I wondered if I was being too forward. "Sorry—it was just a thought. I tend to say anything that comes into my head. I should really learn to think before speaking."

"No, no, it was a nice thought. I just—haven't had many visitors."

I decided to drop it. "Well, I'm going to pay for my screws"—I sighed, squeezing my eyes shut. "Don't even make a joke, please—and then I will meet you out front. Sound good?"

He nodded, a smile tugging at his lips. I liked the way the bottom one was fuller than the top. "Sounds good."

He brushed by me, and I pretended to occupy myself counting out eight screws, but really I watched him as he walked away, enjoying the fluttery feeling in my stomach. I admired the great ass, the trim waist, the V of his torso to his shoulders. The back of his neck...I'd never seen the back of his neck, and suddenly I really wanted to touch it. I imagined what he'd look like naked, and the flutter moved lower.

Whoa, there, Skylar. Just calm down. Yes, it's been a while since you were in the saddle, but that is no mechanical bull you're looking at. And if what Natalie said was true, he probably needs a friend.

Still.

I tilted my head to get a better angle of the view.

I could go seven seconds on that body. I could go seven seconds on that body all. night. long.

Chapter 9

Sebastian

The fact that I ran into Skylar again on a good day was the most mercy I'd been granted in a long time. It's not that the obsessive thoughts weren't there, but they didn't feel so huge or compelling. I was able to consciously file them in a compartment of my brain I thought of as the Fuck You I Don't Care folder and be myself. On my good days, I could do that.

It felt so easy to talk to her, and she was so sweetly embarrassed about her unintentionally dirty remarks.

But I had an unintentional twitch in my pants when she put her hands on my chest, and I faltered when she mentioned my behavior from two weeks ago. I had no decent explanation. The truth was, not a day had gone by that I hadn't thought about her.

And then there she was. Chatting me up. Asking me for a drink. Expressing interest in where I lived. Wanting to come over and see it.

And I'd handled myself just fine.

I could have said no to the drink. I could have gone home, crossed Talk to Skylar Nixon off my list, called today one of my best days yet, and allowed myself a celebratory beer on the deck in one of my new chairs, most likely followed by celebratory jerking off to the memory of her ass in those yoga pants. (Twice, of course.)

But the truth was, I didn't want to be alone.

Was it wrong to take her up on her offer just for a little company? Would it be too misleading? She was pretty and sweet, but dating was out of the question. She deserved better than me. And I couldn't see her as a fuck friend, either. She was too good for that.

Keep it in your pants asshole. She said a drink, that's all.

So while I selected and paid for my Adirondack chairs, I made up my mind to get to know her the way I wished I would have in school, and not to let either my attraction for her or my irrational fear of hurting her get in the way. I'd keep my compulsions in check, and stay in the moment.

For a guy like me, it was a pretty fucking tall order.

But today was a good day.

* * * *

She pulled up next to me as I slid the heavy boxes containing the chairs into the back of my truck. "What do you think?" she asked through the open windows of an old Ford Explorer. It surprised me—I'd pictured a girl like her driving a much flashier car. Although her clothing today had surprised me too. I couldn't ever recall seeing Skylar Nixon in sweats before. They looked good on her, though. She was small but curvy, not waif-thin like a lot of the beautiful women were in New York. Skylar looked like the kind of girl you could go hiking with, but then you could take her out for ice cream afterward, and maybe she'd order a double scoop.

It gave me an idea.

"Hey, have you had dinner yet?" It was close to six, and I hadn't eaten. A restaurant was always a trigger risk, but if ever I was going to take one, it should be on a day like today.

“No.” She glanced at the plastic bag on the passenger seat. “I was trying to get this last chore done first, but I don’t care about it now.”

“Would you maybe want to grab a bite?”

She smiled. “Sure. Place?”

“What do you feel like?”

She thought for a second. “I wouldn’t say no to a cheeseburger.”

“How about Sleder’s?” I suggested. “Meet there?”

“Okay. Or we could drive together,” she said with a shrug. “I’ll ride with you and you can drop me here afterward.”

“All right.” I said it, but the hair on the back of my neck stood on end as I moved around to the passenger side to open the door for her.

“Thanks.” She hopped up into the cab and I shut the door, my heart pumping a little too quickly for comfort.

And then the voice spoke up.

Maybe this was a mistake. Now you’ll be alone with her in your car, and—

No. No. This is a good day. Please don’t ruin it, I begged the voice. Please let me enjoy her company without complications. One evening. It’s all I ask. One normal evening with a friend, the first one in a year.

I slid behind the wheel and shut the door, feeling the tension in my shoulders, my arms, my jaw. Sticking the key in the ignition, I put both hands on the wheel and gripped tight. Fuck.

“Hey.” She put her hand on my arm, and I couldn’t even look at it. “*Hey*. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, I met her eyes. Their color looked even sweeter in the slanting gold light of the sunset. I flexed my fingers on the wheel. My composure was slipping, and she knew it. *You’re going to scare her. Fucking quit it.* But how could I explain my erratic behavior to her *without* scaring her? Before I could get a handle on what to say, she spoke up again.

“I don’t know you at all, Sebastian. And maybe girls shouldn’t jump into trucks with strange men who could be serial killers. But you know what? I need a nice night out with a friend. And for whatever reason, I trust you. Somehow I get the feeling that it’s *me* making *you* uncomfortable.”

Damn, she was intuitive. And a chatterbox, just like her sister. For a second, I felt like smiling—how did those two ever have a conversation without talking over each other? I cleared my throat. “Yeah.”

“Would it be better if I drove myself to Sleder’s?” She took her hand from my arm and put it on the door handle. “I really don’t mind. I shouldn’t have just assumed I could jump in with you.”

“No,” I said, too quickly and loudly. After a deep breath, I turned my upper body to face her. *Better to tell her on a good day. It’ll come out clearer.* “Please stay. I’m just going to be up front about this, Skylar. And if you want to drive yourself after I tell you, or if you want to forget dinner altogether and just go home alone, I’ll understand.” *I’ll die a little, but I’ll understand.*

“Okay.” She put her hands in her lap and looked at me expectantly. Her trust in me was so endearing, suddenly I couldn’t resist a little joke.

“I’m really a serial killer.”

For a second, her face blanched, but she recovered quickly, slapping me on the arm. “You big jerk! Come on. Talk to me. I know we weren’t friends in school or anything, but we’ve at least known each other for a long time. Fourth grade, right? You came in the middle of the year.”

She was right. We’d moved up here from Chicago after my mom died to live closer to my

dad's family. "You remember that?"

"Yes. And I remember that you were really good at math and once stayed in at recess to help me with lattice multiplication."

"I did?" Holy shit, how could I have forgotten that? I was touched that she remembered something about me—something positive and not odd. The tension between my shoulders eased a little. "Okay, I'm not a serial killer. But the problem is that sometimes I think I could be."

"What?" She looked at me strangely, then glanced behind her out the window, like she was considering making a run for it. Not that I blamed her. I hesitated...was telling her the right thing? If she bolted, wouldn't I feel even worse?

Stop fucking second guessing yourself. Just tell her.

"It's this glitch in my brain," I finally said. "A fear of doing harm lodges there and refuses to leave. I've read that other people have these thoughts occasionally, a fleeting image of doing something completely out of character, something violent and horrible, but then it passes as quickly as it comes. Not for me. When that kind of thought enters my brain, it takes up permanent real estate, and nothing I do or say can evict it."

"Like what kind of harm?" she asked cautiously.

I couldn't tell her about choking her—I just couldn't. "It's usually something specific," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "For example, I used to refuse to pick up knives in the kitchen at home if anyone else was around because I was scared I'd lose my mind and stab someone. In fact, I made my father hide the sharp knives, and I'd only use plastic."

Her jaw dropped. "What? But you know you wouldn't stab anyone."

"Doesn't matter. I feel like since the thought is there, that must mean I really want to do it and I'm not the person I thought I was." I braced myself, waited for her to say *You're not the person I thought you were either, so I'm getting the fuck out of here* but she didn't.

"That's awful," she said softly. "Have you always felt like that?"

"It started when I was about eight, but I didn't really get diagnosed until my mid-teens. And all the stuff I used to do, that I still sometimes do, the counting and all that, the obsessions with certain numbers—somehow my brain thinks that helps. It relieves the anxiety for the time being and makes me feel safe, makes me feel other people are safe."

She nodded slowly, taking it all in. "And the...germ thing? The hand washing?"

So she does remember that. "That's related too. Those are visible, compulsive aspects of OCD, the ones people tend to focus on, but for me, at least at this point in my life, the worst are the obsessive thoughts. I'm usually able to manage the other stuff."

"Can't you just..." She flipped a hand in the air. "Shove them out of your mind? Like, think about something else? That's what I do."

I shook my head. "I wish I could, but not only is that impossible for me, the more I try to do that, the worse it gets."

"God, Sebastian, I had no idea. That must be so hard to live with."

"It is." It felt surprisingly good to open up to her. The only other person I'd talked to like this in the last few years were therapists. "You know that voice in your head that knows all your deepest fears and apprehensions, the one that knows exactly how to make you doubt yourself, the one that refuses to leave you alone until you feel so on edge that you can't even function?"

"Yeah," she said quietly. "I hate that voice."

I regarded her a moment. "What does yours say?"

She sighed. "That I'm stupid. That I'm a failure. That I'm never going to be as successful as my sisters and I should just stop trying."

Her candor surprised me, as did her doubts about herself. On the outside, Skylar Nixon appeared to have everything going for her. But I knew better than anyone that you can never tell what demons someone is fighting. “And you know that’s not true. But it’s hard to ignore, isn’t it? For me, it’s impossible. I have to learn to accept it as part of me without being its victim, without sacrificing my entire life to it.” *Or worse, someone else’s*, I thought, hearing the sound of Diana’s anguished sobs behind a locked bedroom door.

She tilted her head, her expression curious. “How do you do it? Medication?”

I refocused on the woman in front of me. “Yes. That’s part of it, but the meds don’t cure it. I think the bigger help, for me anyway, is the therapy, and what my therapist has me do on my own to cope. A lot of it has to do with staying mindful of the moment, and not worrying so much about the past or future.” I took a deep breath and exhaled. “I have good days and bad. Today is good.”

She smiled. “I think so too.”

* * * *

It might have been a good day, but walking into a restaurant with Skylar still made me edgy. We were seated at a four-top table, and she sat adjacent to me, which put her closer than if she’d sat in the chair across from mine. People were staring at us, and they were probably wondering what a girl like her was doing with an eccentric like me. I wasn’t stupid—I knew rumors had gone around after I’d returned from New York, especially since one of my sisters-in-law has a big mouth, but I was used to not caring what people thought. Skylar, though, kept her head down, her hair hanging in her face. Was she ashamed to be seen with me? If so, then why had she suggested a drink? This was a mistake.

“Are you okay?” she asked, her eyes concerned. “I’m sorry people are staring at us,” she said. “It’s my fault, and it’s probably making you feel weird.”

“Your fault? I think it’s my fault.”

Her eyes went wide. “*Your* fault? Why would it be *your* fault? I’m the one who made an ass of myself on national TV.”

I assured her I had never heard of the show and couldn’t care less about it, nor did I care what other people in here might be whispering about her.

“Thank you. I wish more people cared less. I keep getting the evil eye from all corners of the room.” She stuck a forkful of cole slaw in her mouth.

“You know who you are. Fuck them.”

She smiled ruefully as she swallowed. “I wish I could have that attitude. I know I shouldn’t care about what people think, but easier said than done.”

“Yeah. I know that feeling.” I shook my head. “Listen to me giving advice about being sure of yourself. Jesus.”

She gave me a sympathetic half-smile and picked up her cheeseburger. “So you had a good day today. Tell me about it.”

While we ate, I told her about how I’d hung a hammock between two birches that morning and took a nap in it this afternoon.

“Oh my god, I *love* naps,” she enthused, munching a french fry. “Any day with a nap in it is automatically better.”

“Agreed.” For a moment, I indulged in a fantasy of the two of us in my hammock, Skylar lying on top of me, head on my chest, her bare feet tangled with mine, the leaves shading us from

the afternoon sun. I'd play with her hair and she'd sigh softly, and we could fall asleep to the sounds of the birds and wind and the water.

I wish things were different.

I picked up my beer and took a long pull. No sense in thinking like that. I was who I was. "So did *you* have a good day?"

"I guess so. I worked this morning, and then I went shopping for something to wear to the reunion."

"What reunion?"

"Ours. Our ten-year high school. It's this Saturday. I was going to ask you if you were going." She picked up her wine glass.

"Uh, no. No fucking way." I took another drink and shook my head as I set the bottle down. "There's no one there I'd want to see."

"Oh." Her face fell, which she tried to hide by taking a long sip of wine. Several long sips.

"Let me rephrase that," I said, sorry I'd hurt her feelings. "I'm looking at the only person I'd want to see there right now."

Her eyes lit up, her cheeks blooming pink. "Thank you."

"But there's no one there who'd care about seeing me."

"That's not true," she said, setting down her empty glass. "I'd care."

"Thanks, but I'd rather shoot myself than go to that thing."

She sighed. "That's kind of how I feel about it now too. I know everyone there will just be talking shit about me, being pretend-nice to my face."

"Then don't go."

"I have to."

"Why?"

"Because if I don't, everyone will talk shit about me."

"Wait, you just said they'd talk shit about you if you *did* go."

She thought for a second. "Yeah, but it would be worse shit talk if I wasn't there," she said with some sort of female logic that baffled me. "So I have to go, and you should go too. In fact, we should go together."

I almost choked. "What?"

"We should go together." She braced her elbows on the table and leaned toward me, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Then we could give them something new to talk about."

I leaned in too. I couldn't resist. "Yeah? Like what?"

"Like this."

And without any warning whatsoever, she kissed me. Put those soft pink rose petal lips right over mine and left them there for a second, during which I was too stunned to move. My cock jumped, and I pulled away.

Then she sat back, her expression horrified. "Oh God. I'm so sorry."

Chapter 10

Skylar

Holy shit. What did I just do?

I kissed him. I kissed him.

I *kissed* Sebastian Pryce.

I tried to read his expression, but I couldn't. Best I could tell, it was somewhere between *Jesus Christ, why the hell did she do that?* and *Goddamn, let's flip this table out of the way and go at it.*

An eternity passed. Several species of birds went extinct. Continents drifted.

"Say something," I begged. "I feel horrible right now. I shouldn't have done that. Can I blame the wine?" Yes. That was it. Pin the kiss on the Pinot.

But *had* it been the wine? Maybe it was something else. I was no math expert, but this was an intoxicating equation: Hot Guy with Mysterious Past + Way With Pretty Words x Chivalry at Beach / His Aloofness at Coffee Shop (Immunity to My Face & Flirty Efforts) + Innuendo at Hardware Store x Honest Confession about OCD Struggles → Curiosity + Arousal (Belly Flutters + Pulse Quickening).

Or was I overthinking this? Maybe the plain, crazy truth was just that I was attracted to Sebastian Pryce. But he was probably one of those quiet, tortured geniuses that didn't go for girls like me. He went to law school, for heaven's sake! He wrote poetry!

His lips tipped up slightly, those warm lips that had felt so good against mine. "Ah. Sure. It's fine. Don't feel horrible, really. You just surprised me." He shifted in his chair.

"I can tell." I reached for my wine glass but it was empty. Frantically, I looked around for our server. *Waiter! This is an emergency!*

"Hey." He put his fingers over my wrist. "It's okay."

"Are you sure?"

His light green eyes were clear and his voice gentle. "I'm sure. I don't want you to feel bad."

"Okay." Since he'd been pretty forthcoming about everything tonight, I was sort of hoping he'd elaborate on his feelings, but that's all he said.

For the rest of the night.

I mean, seriously, he totally shut down.

Not in an angry way or anything, but he just stopped talking. No more jokes, no more smiles, no more stories. Was he anxious? Angry? Confused? Scared? In any case, I was so embarrassed and flustered I talked about anything and everything just to fill the silence.

We finished our meals—I decided against the second glass of wine, especially since he just had the one beer—and he drove me back to my car. I chirped like a bird on crank about random nonsense the entire ride back, and as we pulled into the hardware store lot, I looked over and saw him laughing a little.

"What?" I asked.

"You. Do you ever stop talking?"

I slapped my hands over my face. "No. I mean yes, but no. Not when I'm nervous." Beneath my palms, my face was hot.

"Why are you nervous?"

“Because! I made an ass of myself by kissing you in the restaurant! And you’re all smart and silent and mysterious and I’m just...” I threw up my hands. “Obvious and silly.”

“Is that what you think?” He put the truck in park and shifted on the seat to face me.

“Yes.” I turned toward him. “Because before I did that, everything seemed fine. And then afterward, you kind of just...shut down.”

Nodding slowly, he rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I guess I did.”

“Why? Were you mad?”

He looked at me strangely. “Why would I be mad?”

“I don’t know! I can usually read people pretty well but your face was like totally impassive. Fucking stonehenge. And you weren’t talking either, so I felt crazy awkward and tried to talk for the both of us.”

He cracked a smile. “You did it well.”

I stared helplessly at him, finally out of words.

“Okay look.” He put an elbow on the back of the seat and propped his head on his fingers. His expression more relaxed, amused even. “I’m sorry I shut down. I was trying to process some things.”

“Like what?”

“Like why you did it.”

“I did it because I felt like it. How’d you feel about it? Be honest.”

He smiled lazily, and I had the insane desire to trace his lips with my tongue. “Good.”

I gaped at him. “That’s it? Good? You’ve been silent for an entire hour and a half and that’s all I get? *Good?*”

“Uh huh.” His eyes glittered in the dark, and I hoped he was undressing me with them.

“Oh, that is *so* mean.”

“Sorry. I’m a man of few words.”

“How can a lawyer be a man of a few words?”

A beat went by. “Did I tell you I was a lawyer?”

Oh fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. “Um, you must have, right?”

“I don’t think I did.”

He didn’t seem angry, but there was an edge to his tone that hadn’t been there before, a wariness, maybe. I decided to come clean. If we were going to be friends, I felt like I owed him the truth about what I’d heard. After all, he’d been honest with me about his struggle with OCD.

Plus the silence was killing me.

“Okay, don’t be mad. Natalie mentioned that she’d heard some women talking in the shop about you. She told me she overheard you were a lawyer in New York.”

“Anything else?” His voice was tight.

I took a breath. “Yes. There was something about you having some sort of...mental breakdown last year.” I decided to skip the fiancée part.

He nodded slowly, a reaction I was starting to recognize as his *I need to take this in so don’t ask right now* gesture. But I was me, so I asked.

“Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

“Oh. okay.” At a loss for what to say and worried I’d pushed too far, I slung my bag over my shoulder and reached for the door handle. “I should get going anyway. Thanks for dinner. I had fun.” I opened the door, and he grabbed my arm.

“Hey.”

I looked back at him.

“Come here.” He tugged me toward him, and I shut the door. “I’m sorry. I just don’t want to talk about that stuff right now.”

“It’s fine,” I said with a shrug. “Your past is none of my business. I shouldn’t have asked about it.”

“Skylar.” Taking my hand in his, he gently rubbed his thumb across the tops of my fingers. “I’ve said more to you tonight than I’ve said to anyone but my therapist in the last year. And I don’t even remember the last time someone kissed me the way you did.”

My heart raced with pleasure—not desire or lust or sympathy, just pleasure. It meant something to me that he’d opened up a little tonight, especially since he seemed to have built such protective walls around himself. Not that I blamed him. The more I thought about what school must have been like for him, the worse I felt. How horrible to live like that, to be so alone.

“I’m glad you did,” I said softly. “I like listening to you, and talking to you. And kissing you.” I lifted my shoulders. “I like *you*, Sebastian. I want to know you better.”

His eyes dropped to our hands. “I’m not an easy person to get to know.”

I tipped his chin up, forcing him to look me in the eye. “I’m willing to try.”

Chapter 11

Sebastian

She got out of the truck and shut the door without another word. I watched her open up her car, get in, and drive off, wishing I'd have had the nerve to say more to her.

Of the two of us, she was the brave one, I thought. Brave enough to ask me for a drink, brave enough to trust me alone with her, brave enough to kiss me just because she felt like it. That actually made me smile. *I did it because I felt like it.* I could still hear her voice, guileless and sweet. And I could still see the look in her eye as she leaned toward me, daring and sexy. Then her lips on mine... I groaned aloud and put the truck in drive.

She had no idea what she did to me. Of course I couldn't talk after that. I was too busy trying to surreptitiously adjust my boxers and not think about my dick. But of course, since I was trying not to think about it, it was all I could think about. Could she tell?

Maybe not, since she thought I might be mad that she'd kissed me. Mad, for fuck's sake. The only thing that made me mad about it was that I couldn't tell her how much I liked it, how much I wanted to do it again before she got out of the truck, how many times I'd imagined kissing her back when she barely knew I existed—and how much better the real thing was. It had taken some serious fortitude not to yell "CHECK, PLEASE," grab her by the hand, and run out of there so I could take her back to the cabin and kiss her properly. Lavishly. Thoroughly.

How long had it been since I'd had a woman stretched out beneath me, writhing in pleasure while I devoured every inch of her skin? And Skylar's skin looked so delicious. *I bet it would feel like satin under my tongue. Taste like cherries and vanilla ice cream.*

Fuck, I was hard again.

And she *knew*. She *knew* about New York, or at least the bare bones of it, and she'd still asked me out.

As I drove the long, dark highway up the center of the peninsula, her SUV ahead of me, I found myself wishing again that things were different. No, that *I* was different. That I had something to offer her. Sure, there would be good days, like this one. And for a while, maybe the good days would outweigh the bad, or maybe she'd find the good days *worth* the bad. But that wouldn't last.

So when Skylar turned off 37 onto the road leading to her parents' farm, I didn't follow her like I wanted to. I didn't pull up next to her in the dark, get out of the truck and wait for her to ask me what I was doing there. I didn't grab her and crush my mouth to hers without saying a word. I didn't hold her body close to mine and fiercely whisper how much it meant that she was willing to try.

But I wanted to.

So badly it hurt.

* * * *

When I got home, the cabin seemed particularly dark and empty. I didn't feel like mindless television, and the internet would only depress me, so I picked up a book my dad had given me recently, sat on the couch and tried to read. But I couldn't focus on the story—the silence was

smothering me tonight. Throwing my jacket on, I walked outside and unloaded the Adirondack chairs from the back of my truck. But once I'd lugged the boxes over to the patio, I didn't feel like putting them together. Instead, I left them there and wandered down to the dock, grateful for the nighttime noise of the crickets and owls, the water lapping softly against the rocky shore.

What was Skylar doing right now? Sleeping? Watching TV? Or did she like to read at night like I did? Maybe she'd felt industrious when she got home and was attaching her bin pulls to the kitchen cupboards. *I wish I was there to help her. I should have offered.* I didn't even have her number to call her again. Why hadn't I asked her for it?

After a few minutes, I went back inside and sank onto the couch, feeling so lonely and sad I did something I hadn't done in months. I picked up my phone and called Diana.

As always, it went to voicemail.

"This is Diana. Leave a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

"Hey...it's me." I closed my eyes. "I know it's been a while. But I was thinking about you and thought I'd try to reach out. I guess you're still not ready to talk to me, and that's okay. I just wanted to let you know that you were on my mind and I hope you're doing well. And...I'm sorry. I know I've said that a million times, but I am. I wish I could go back and do it all differently. Anyway. Goodnight."

I ended the call, feeling, as I always did after calling Diana, a mixture of guilt and disgust with myself. *I should delete her number and quit bothering her.*

I was about to do just that when it vibrated in my hand.

It was Diana's number.

Fuck. She'd never actually returned a call. Now what? Grimacing, I pressed Accept. I owed her at least that much.

"Diana?"

A long pause. "Hi."

"How are you?"

"Fine. I...heard your message just now."

I closed my eyes. "Yeah. Sorry about that. I shouldn't call you."

"No, you shouldn't." She sighed. "But I guess if I really wanted it to stop, I'd have changed my number by now."

"I've often wondered why you haven't."

"I don't know. I must like the reminders you're doing okay." She paused. "Are you?"

I answered semi-truthfully. "Mostly. What about you?"

"I'm okay."

"Still in New York?"

"Yes." She was silent again, and I worried she was crying. Fucking hell, had I not caused this woman enough pain? "Why did you call tonight?" she finally asked, and I heard the struggle in her voice.

To punish myself. "To apologize, I guess."

"You can stop doing that. I've gotten all your messages."

"Does that mean you forgive me?"

She didn't answer right away. "For what, Sebastian?"

Something twisted in my gut. "For all of it." *Proposing when I wasn't sure. Shutting you out. Refusing sex. Not making time for therapy. Not taking the meds. Overdoing alcohol. Being late for everything. Lying to you. Calling off the wedding. Breaking your heart.*

The list was so endless I couldn't even begin.

“Does my forgiveness even matter anymore?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Why?” I parroted, although it was a fair question. Diana and I were over, after all. But I hated the thought that she’d resent me for the rest of her life. I deserved it, but deep down inside, I felt like if she told me that she was able to let it go and move on, that she was happy again in spite of the pain I’d caused, then maybe it would mean that I deserved some happiness too. That I wouldn’t have to punish myself forever. “I don’t know. It just feels right to ask for it.”

“God, Sebastian. That apology sucked.”

I winced, but I also smiled a little. It reminded me of something Skylar would say. “Yeah. You know me. Not great with words.”

“That’s not true. You just don’t trust yourself to say what’s on your mind.”

Again, I thought of Skylar. “I suppose you’re right. Maybe I should work on that.”

“Are you going to therapy?”

“Yes.”

“Good. And you’re back in Michigan?”

“Yes. I built a cabin on the property I own. Where I tried to make you go camping that time, remember?”

“Oh, God. That experience still haunts me.”

I imagined her shuddering, the shake of her narrow shoulders. “Yes, city girl. You’d hate it.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter anymore. You can camp out in the woods all you want now. I’ll be here in my apartment with my doorman out front. And if I feel like flying off to Rome or Paris for a romantic vacation with my boyfriend, I can do it.”

There it was—the dig at me for being scared to fly. She never missed an opportunity.

“Sounds perfect for you.”

“It is.” She was quiet a moment. “Are you dating?”

I paused. “No.”

“Why the hesitation?”

“I don’t know. It feels weird to talk about it with you. And I’m not really dating anyone. I met someone recently, but—“

“Who is she?” she asked quickly.

“No one you’d know. Just someone I went to school with. But we weren’t really friends.”

“Oh. She’s from there?”

“Yeah.” On the off chance that Diana knew Skylar from that reality show, I decided to change the subject. “Anyway, it’s nothing. I barely know her.” The conversation was starting to feel a little strange, so I decided to end it. “Well, thanks for calling me back. I appreciate it. And...it’s good to talk to you.” That was true. Her low, smoky voice didn’t have the power over me it once had, but I felt relief that we were finally able to have a civil conversation. And I was glad she seemed well. Maybe I hadn’t done irreparable harm.

But she didn’t hang up. “Can I ask you a question, Sebastian?”

Oh god. “Okay.”

“Why did you propose? We could have just broken up if you didn’t love me enough.”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. *Fuck. I never should have said that to her.* “I told you. I was trying to be the person you wanted me to be.”

“So it was my fault.” A hard edge to her tone now.

“No. None of it was. I’ve told you that too. I’ll take all the blame.”

“I *loved* you. I was willing to put up with all your shit. And you gave up on me. On us. You humiliated me.”

“I know.” That thought haunted me. Diana *had* loved me, even with all the strange quirks. What if I never had that again? Even if I hadn’t been madly in love with her, maybe I should have tried harder to make it work. “You deserved better.”

“Damn right I did,” she said bitterly. “We had a perfect wedding planned, Sebastian. A perfect life.”

No, we didn’t. Not for me. That life in New York...the pace of it, the crowds, the social scene, the pressure to constantly work more, earn more, have more. You loved all that. But it was tearing me apart.

“I should go.” I ended the call without saying anything else and went to bed, upset that I’d made the call in the first place. What the hell did I expect? I’d called off the wedding with six months to go, told her she wasn’t the one—why should she forgive me?

She shouldn’t. You don’t deserve it. You’ll never deserve it. And that’s why you’re alone right now.

Sometimes I wondered if I’d made the wrong decision...maybe I had loved her enough and didn’t know it. Maybe I should have tried harder to live with the doubt. Maybe I should be married to her right now.

But it wasn’t Diana I missed when I got between the sheets that night. It wasn’t her body I wanted next to me. It wasn’t her smile or her voice or her laugh or her kiss I dreamed about.

It was Skylar’s.

And even though I knew I was no good for her, I also knew I wanted her too much to stay away.

Chapter 12

Skylar

I had the following day off from Coffee Darling, and I went to bed relishing the thought of sleeping in. But, wouldn't you know it, my body clock was used to waking up early now, and my eyes opened at six and refused to stay closed again. *Oh well*, I thought, swinging my legs over the side of my bed. *Maybe I'll get a nap in later. Might as well get up and get some things done.*

By nine, I'd attached all the bin pulls to the kitchen cupboards—laughing to myself when I recalled all the screw jokes from last night—taped off and primed a bathroom, and thought about Sebastian approximately one million times. Despite the slightly awkward ending, the spontaneous date had been a lot of fun.

Besides being handsome, Sebastian was a great listener and he made me laugh. I loved how open he'd been about his OCD, how honestly and self-deprecatingly he'd told me what it was like. My heart ached for him and how tough it must have been all those years before getting treatment, especially without the support of friends. And every time I thought about the beautiful, sad words he'd written about me, I got chills.

He'd said he wasn't easy to get to know, and I'd meant it when I said I was willing to try. Would he let me?

While the primer dried, I decided to get started refinishing an old bookshelf I'd found in my parents' attic. My mother helped me carry it out to the driveway, where I'd laid newspapers on the ground.

She ran a hand over the top, which had several gouges. "Cripes, this thing's pretty beat up. It was my grandfather's. It's called a lawyer's bookcase."

"Really?" I said, my ears perking up at the word *lawyer*. "I'm going to take off the varnish and paint it white."

"That'll be nice. He'd be pleased you're going to use it."

"I won't keep it. It's for a guest house." I picked up the can of paint and varnish remover I'd purchased and began reading the directions on the back.

"No, you should take it when you move out."

Was I imagining things, or did she emphasize the words *move out*? Was she dropping a hint? My eyes traveled over the words on the can but I didn't process them.

"Where are you thinking of going?" she went on breezily.

"I haven't decided yet," I said, finally looking up. "I didn't know I was being thrown out quite so soon."

"Honey, I'm not throwing you out." Her tone was soothing but firm. "You know the guest houses are all rented come Memorial Weekend. That's a week away."

"And?"

"Well, don't you think you should have a plan?"

"I thought I could just move into the big house at that point. Just until I think of a plan." I shook the can and pulled off the cap, hoping she'd leave me alone to work. When she didn't, I began spraying.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my mother cross her arms. She was petite and curvy, like Natalie and me, albeit with a few extra rolls around the middle. Only Jillian got our dad's long,

lanky frame and dark eyes.

“Are you going back to New York?”

“I don’t know yet, Mom. I just said I don’t have a plan.” I tried not to sound as annoyed as I felt.

“Well, do you have a deadline in mind? For having a plan, I mean?” she pressed.

I stopped spraying and faced her. “Do I need one? If I’m not welcome at your house, just say it.”

“Sky, don’t be silly. Of course you’re welcome. My children are always welcome. I’m only trying to help you think ahead. You don’t want to live with your parents forever.”

I realized that she also meant *I don’t want my adult daughter living at home with me forever*. She and my dad were probably used to their privacy and routine by now. As if that wasn’t enough, she went on.

“And what about a job? It’s nice you’re working with your sister, but is that really what you want to do, work at a coffee shop? If it is, that’s fine, but—”

“I get it, Mom.” I turned back to the bookcase. “I’ll come up with a plan.”

“Okay. Dinner at six thirty, don’t forget. I’m making fried chicken,” she said proudly. “Nat, Dan, and Jilly are coming too.” She patted my shoulder and headed back into the house.

Great. Another family function where we can all compare the Nixon sisters. Which one of these is not like the others?

Usually I looked forward to family dinners, but my mother’s words had cut deep. For the past couple weeks, I’d done a pretty good job avoiding the hard questions, but clearly I couldn’t go on like this forever. If only I had some kind of calling, like Jillian’s to be a doctor, or a dream that was achievable with hard work and dedication, like Natalie’s shop.

As I scraped off the old varnish, I tried to think of jobs I’d enjoy going to every day, something I could get excited about, something that would make me happy. My mother was right in that coffee shop employee wasn’t really on the list. And as much as I loved the farm, agriculture wasn’t really my thing either. I’d enjoyed the job at Rivard, but there was no way I’d get that position back. I was too ashamed to even ask for it. But maybe something like that...something fun, something that allowed me to work with people, something that allowed for creativity and spontaneity.

Christ. That is the vaguest fucking job description ever. You suck.

I did. I did suck.

By the time I’d taken off the varnish, eaten a quick lunch, and plugged my dad’s sander into the extension cord I’d run from the house, I was convinced I’d never be happy and I should just face the fact that I was a twenty-seven year old loser with a pretty face and not much else.

And even that wasn’t going to last forever. Thirty was around the corner, and then forty, and then fifty, and then sixty...decades of wrinkling and sagging. But would there even be anyone who cared? My romantic history was as crappy as my job history—I wasn’t even sure I’d ever been in love.

I was still brooding about it when Sebastian’s truck pulled into the driveway an hour later. Immediately my mood improved.

“Hey,” I said, telling myself to walk, not run, toward him as he got out. “What are you doing here?”

He shut the truck door and leaned back against it, hands in his pockets. The sunglasses on his face hid his eyes, but he was smiling. “I came to see you.”

My insides danced a little. “How’d you find me?”

“I went to the shop. Your sister told me it was your day off and said you might be here.” He glanced over to where I’d been working. “Am I interrupting?”

“Not at all. I need a distraction, actually.” *The kind that happens without pants.*

“Want to show me what you’re working on?”

“Sure.” Trying to keep my thoughts clean, I led him over to the bookcase and explained what I was doing. “It was my grandfather’s bookcase.”

“Even better. You have a connection to it.”

“Yes.” I clasped my hands together and rocked back on my heels. “What are you up to today?”

He shrugged, dropping his eyes to the ground a moment. “I had to go into town for a few things, but it’s such a nice day, I thought maybe I’d put together those chairs I bought last night and sit on the patio this afternoon.”

“Sounds nice. It *is* beautiful today, supposed to hit seventy-five.” *Invite me. Invite me. Invite me.*

“Yeah.” He ran a hand over his short hair. “You mentioned wanting to see the cabin. I thought maybe—”

“I’d love to! Just give me one minute, okay?” Turning around, I went to unplug the sander when I panicked. I faced him again, my lower lip caught between my teeth. “Wait. You *were* going to ask me to come over, right?”

He laughed, his face lighting up. He looked so different when he smiled! “Yes. I was. You saved me the trouble.”

“Whew. Okay, good.” I put away the tools, and Sebastian helped me move the bookcase into the guest house, where I snuck away to quickly run a brush through my hair and rinse with mouthwash.

Not that I was planning on attackkissing him again. But maybe he’d take the lead—I’d just do my best to let him know I was interested without being too forward.

“I like your house,” he said when I came out of the bathroom.

“Thanks. It’s my parents’ house, technically, but I’m living here for the time being.”

Recalling the conversation with my mother, I frowned.

“You don’t like living in it?”

“No, it’s not that. I just don’t...you know what?” I sighed, shaking my head. “Let’s not talk about it.”

His mouth fell open. “*You* don’t want to talk about something?”

I slapped him lightly on the arm. “Haha. No, I don’t. So let’s go, I’m dying to see your place.”

“Yours is much fancier,” he said as we walked outside. “Mine’s going to look very bare to your eye.”

I’d like your ass bare to my eye, I thought as I followed him to his truck. “Hey, do you want me to drive myself? That way you won’t have to bring me back.”

He opened the passenger door for me. “I don’t mind bringing you back.”

“Okay. Thanks.” I climbed into the truck, feeling his hand brush my lower back. My entire body jittered with excitement, and I felt like a kid who just learned school is canceled for the day. There was some kind of new current between us—I couldn’t put my finger on it exactly, but I thought it had to do with him...he was so much more relaxed than he’d been at the end of the date last night. Did this mean he was up for seeing where this might go?

I told him to take the long, winding drive around the orchard before heading back out on to

the highway, and I pointed out all my favorite spots on the farm—the best trees to climb, my favorite shady spot for reading, the perfect hiding places for hide and seek or ducking chores.

“You must have missed all this when you moved away,” he said, turning onto the main road. “Sounds like you really love it.”

“Yeah, I do. And I did miss it.”

“Think you’ll stay here for good?”

“Probably,” I said, staring out the window at the familiar landscape—the rolling hills, the orchards and vineyards, the old red barns with their peeling paint, the new faux chateaux of stone and brick. “What about you?”

“I’m staying. At least, that’s the plan for now.”

I asked him if he’d liked living in New York, and we both agreed it was great in some ways and difficult in others. He confided that the pace of big city life and the demands of his job probably contributed to his relapse. “I like the outdoors a lot,” he said wistfully. “Hiking, fishing, camping. And I didn’t get the chance to do those kinds of things very often. Plus my ex-girlfriend wasn’t into them.”

I was surprised he mentioned her. “A city girl, huh?” I questioned, totally curious.

“Yes. All the way.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him rub one finger along the stubble beneath his lower lip. After a moment, he went on. “Actually she was my fiancée.”

I risked a sideways look at him. “Wow. It was pretty serious then, huh?”

“Felt like it. For a while.”

“What happened?”

He shrugged, his jaw stiffening. “I fucked up.”

“How so?” I prodded. “Sorry, I’m being nosy. You don’t have to answer that.”

He didn’t say anything for a few minutes, and I hoped he wasn’t mad. *For fuck’s sake, Skylar, he just told you last night he didn’t want to talk about it.* But then he spoke up.

“I told her I wasn’t sure she was the one.”

“Ouch.” But I stifled a smile. Why did I feel so pleased about that?

“Actually, I said I wasn’t even sure I believed in the idea of the one, but even if I did, I wasn’t sure it was her.”

“Wow. And the ring was on her finger at this point?”

“Yeah. All two point five carats. Which she picked out and which I hated.”

“Why?”

“Because two point five is an annoying number. It seems like it should be even but it has a five in it.”

I blinked at him.

He glanced sideways at me. “I’m kidding, sort of. Like I said last night, I’m just not an easy person to be with. Sometimes I’m surprised she lasted as long as she did.”

“Because of the OCD, you mean?”

“Yeah.” His tone had gone darker. “Or maybe I’m just bad at relationships. I’ve been told I don’t communicate well. Also that I’m stubborn, unpredictable, and a real dick when I want to be.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Wow. That’s quite a list. And she still said yes when you proposed, huh?” Feeling this moment could use some levity, I leaned over and gave his leg a smack. “You must be dynamite in the sack.”

He grinned, his shoulders relaxing. “That list wasn’t all from her,” he said, turning onto a gravel drive that led through the woods. “But come to think of it, I’ve never had any complaints

about my sexual prowess.”

“Good to know.” I wanted to keep flirting, but just then the cabin appeared through a clearing, and I gasped. “Sebastian, it’s beautiful!”

“Thanks.” He parked on a gravel drive that looped in front of the house, and I got out of the truck and shut the door behind me. It was so quiet, all I heard were birds and the breeze rustling the leaves on the birch trees. I turned in a slow circle. The setting was gorgeous, but it was so remote—wasn’t he lonely all the way out here by himself?

“Ooh!” I squealed. “Look at your cute front porch!” Two wooden rocking chairs sat facing the woods. Two, I thought. Was he eventually thinking he’d share the place with someone? Or did he really just hate the odd number one?

“Yeah, I like to sit out there in the morning, watch the sun rise while I have coffee.” He went up the steps and unlocked the front door.

“Sunrise?” I winced, following him inside. “I’m more of a sunset sort of girl. The sun rises too early for me.”

He laughed. “Then you’ll like the patio in the back. You could watch the sun set over the bay.”

“Perfect. Show me.”

He took me through the cabin first, apologizing for its lack of furniture and decoration. True, it was a bit sparse, but it had a rustic, masculine beauty about it that just needed a little touch of feminine texture and color. I loved everything he’d done so far, from the floors to the counters to the bathroom tile, and it smelled amazing in there—like lemon and cedar. He probably cleaned it constantly because of his OCD. Was it wrong that it sort of turned me on?

“You’ve done a great job, Sebastian. You should be really proud. What’s up there?” I gestured to the ladder leaning on the wall between the kitchen and bath. “Bedroom?”

“Just a loft. But it’s nice. You’ve got to watch your head up there because of the sloping walls—well, I do,” he teased, looking down at me, “but one of them is almost all glass.”

“Like to give the birds a good view?” I poked him on the chest.

“Ha. Yeah.”

I started to climb, looking over my shoulder. “Mind if I go up?”

Chapter 13

Sebastian

Good fucking god.

She was climbing the ladder to my bedroom and her ass was right in front of my face. My cock began to stiffen.

Sweet Jesus, could I please go ten minutes without getting an erection around her?

I'd woken up this morning (hard) thinking of her, and even though I'd told myself a million times not to go looking for her today, I hadn't been able to resist. *I just want to be around her*, I told the doomsayer in me before he could go on the offensive. *I won't touch her. I just like seeing her smile, hearing her chattering bird voice, making her laugh.*

"Go ahead," I told her. "I'll wait down here."

She looked down at me, making my heart beat faster. "You can come up too, silly. I don't think you're going to try anything."

Oh no? You should feel my dick right now. "It's pretty small up there."

"It's not small, it's cozy," she said, reaching the top. "Get up here." She moved deeper into the loft so I couldn't see her anymore, and I quickly adjusted myself before climbing up after her.

When I reached the top, she was standing in front of the huge, sloping window opposite my bed. "You have a family of cardinals," she said.

"I know. They're noisy in the morning." I stood next to her and looked out. Goddamn it, I could smell her. Mostly it was the varnish remover she'd been using, but there was a hint of something sweet and floral beneath it—I fucking loved that she was girlish and feminine but not afraid to work with her hands.

"I thought you were up before the sun, mister coffee-on-the-porch-before-dawn." She poked me in the ribs, sending a jolt through my veins that seemed to go straight to my cock, and that part of my anatomy didn't need any more encouragement right now. I moved away from her a little, and she giggled. "What, are you ticklish? Huh? Huh?" She started poking me over and over again, in the ribs, on my stomach, on my chest.

"Goddammit, Skylar, knock it off." I tried to back away but she followed me, poking at me everywhere. "Quit touching me."

"I know, I'm too handsy." She stopped and held up her palms toward me. "But they're clean, I swear."

"That's not what I meant," I snapped. I knew she'd been joking but her comment was a good reminder that girls like her didn't belong with creeps like me. I didn't need the voice to tell me that.

"Okay, okay. Relax." She dropped her hands to her sides, the light leaving her eyes. "Sorry. I was just playing with you. Friends do that, you know."

"I know what friends do," I said angrily. "I *have* had friends before, Skylar, I'm not a total fucking loser." But my tone was anything but friendly, and I hated myself for it. It wasn't her I was mad at.

Shaking her head, she backed away from me. "Jeez, you can be an asshole out of nowhere."

"I'll add that to the list." Now I was a sarcastic, sneering asshole. Fucking hell.

She climbed down the ladder without looking at me.

I let her go, sinking onto my bed. Knees splayed, I propped my elbows on my legs and took my head in my hands. Fuck. I *was* an asshole out of nowhere. But she didn't understand what it felt like to want someone so badly and be terrified to touch her.

I heard the front door open and close and thought I wouldn't blame her if she took off in the truck. Dragging my feet, I climbed down the ladder and went to find her.

She wasn't on the porch or in the truck, and I stood still for a second, rubbing my face with my hands, weighed down by guilt and regret. Where had she gone? Had it been the *back* door I heard? I walked around the side of the cabin and looked around. She wasn't on the patio or back steps, and I didn't see her on the dock either. Frowning, I turned and looked back at the driveway, which snaked through the woods. I hoped she hadn't taken off on foot. I was just about to get in the truck and go find her when I heard her voice.

"I'm over here. In the hammock."

Relief washed over me. I looked over to my left and saw her sitting in the hammock, her feet dangling. Slowly, I made my way over to her. My heart ached when I saw the downtrodden expression on her face. "Hey."

"Hey," she repeated tonelessly, staring at the patio.

I nudged one of her sneakers. "Room for two on there?"

"I'll get off." She started to get up, but I put a hand on her shoulder.

"No, don't. Can I sit with you?"

She shrugged, but she sat back and let me lower myself onto the thick woven ropes next to her. My heart beat quicker at her nearness, at the warmth of her leg against mine, at the scent of her hair. I wanted to touch her so badly, hold her close and apologize, ask for another chance. But I couldn't.

We sat in silence for a moment, and I waited for the voice in my head to start in with all the horrible calamities that could befall her from sharing a hammock with me. But I heard nothing but the birds and the water. *Apologize, asshole. You hurt her feelings.*

"I'm sorry, Skylar," I said, sliding my hands up and down the tops of my own legs to keep myself from touching hers. "I shouldn't have been short with you."

"Whatever. It's fine." She still wouldn't look at me.

"No, it's not. I'm angry with myself and I took it out on you."

"What are you angry about?"

"Lots of things, but mostly that I don't trust myself around you." I curled my fingers into fists.

"What? That's silly." Her tone had lightened a little.

"But it's the truth. It's my truth, anyway. And it makes me push you away."

"It doesn't matter that *I* trust you?"

"It's not that it doesn't matter, Skylar. It does, and I appreciate it." A warm breeze blew in off the water, and I closed my eyes a second. "What you did upstairs, make a joke...that's actually good for me."

"It is?"

"Yes. Ken, my therapist, would have taken your side and told me to lighten up."

She frowned. "That doesn't sound very nice. You can't help the way you are."

Now she was defending me. So fucking adorable. "No, I can't. But I wish I could. I wish I were different." I looked down at her, and those baby blue eyes pulled another truth from me. "Especially where you're concerned."

She shook her head. “I don’t want you to be different, Sebastian. I like you, even though you’re moody as fuck.”

I laughed—that was as apt a description of me as I’d ever heard.

“And I understand that you need time to feel comfortable around me.”

“Thank you.” I braved putting my hand on the top of her thigh. Her skin was warm and smooth beneath my palm.

She looked at my hand on her leg, started to say something, and stopped herself.

“What?” I asked.

“I’m just wondering…” She fidgeted uncomfortably under my gaze, looking up at me through her lashes. “I mean… God, this is so embarrassing. I guess I’m wondering if you’re even attracted to me. Half of me says not to flirt with you because you just need a friend right now, and the other half says I can’t help it because I’m really attracted to you.”

Christ, was she serious? “Skylar, all of me says I spent the entire second half of dinner last night thinking about fucking you. Does that answer your question?”

She gasped and looked up at me, her mouth hanging open. Her eyes danced with shocked delight.

“But you were right—I do need time.”

“Okay,” she finally managed.

We sat there for a few minutes in silence, and I gently rocked the hammock forward and back. Eventually, her head tilted toward me, and she rested it against my arm, making me smile. This I could handle. This was the sort of pure, peaceful moment I desperately needed to feel like myself. A sense of calm pervaded me, and I breathed deeply, allowing the verdant, woodsy air to fill my lungs. Skylar’s breathing was deep and even too, and a moment later I realized she’d fallen asleep.

Testing myself, I lowered my lips to her head and gently pressed them to her hair.

No voice. Just stillness and peace.

Flooded with gratitude, I inhaled the sweet floral scent of her shampoo before closing my eyes.

It might not have been the nap fantasy I’d had last night, but it was a damn good start.

Maybe there was hope for me.

Hope for us.

Chapter 14

Skylar

I woke up leisurely, completely comfortable. Next to me, Sebastian's breathing was slow and steady, so I figured he'd fallen asleep too. There was something so nice about falling asleep next to someone you liked—it was intimate without being sexual, which was exactly what we needed.

Well, it's what *he* needed. I'd take a shot at sexual if he'd let me.

A deep, hard shot.

But I also didn't want to rush anything. He seemed so sensitive, so concerned about making the wrong move, or making a move too soon.

I needed to stretch but I didn't want to wake him, so I stayed like I was and thought more about what he'd told me about himself. It seemed so strange that he didn't trust himself around me when he *knew* that was his OCD talking and not his real self. But I had no idea what it felt like not to be able to ignore that mean voice in your head—these days I was the fucking champion of putting that voice off, shoving it aside so I didn't have to take a critical look at myself.

My insides warmed when I thought of the way he'd said he wanted to let me in, and they went molten when I recalled him saying he'd thought about fucking me. He could go from one extreme to the other so quickly. What would he be like as a lover? Sweet and tender? Rough and demanding?

And that body. My god.

My belly flipped as I let my eyes sweep over his abs and crotch and legs, and warmth tingled between my thighs. Was it possible to straddle someone on a hammock?

Stop it. You just agreed to give him time, and it's probably been about twenty minutes.

Right. He probably meant more time than that.

Just then his hand twitched on my leg, and his breathing altered. "Mmm. Did I fall asleep?"

"Yes. But I don't blame you. It's so quiet and peaceful here, I fell asleep too. In fact, I could go back to sleep." I closed my eyes, not wanting him to move yet. He trailed one finger up my thigh, sending gooseflesh rippling across my skin. My God, I wanted him to touch me so badly. How long would I have to wait?

"Do it. I'm going to put those chairs together."

Sighing, I watched him walk over to the two big boxes on the patio. Then I stretched out on my side in the hammock, tucking my hands beneath my face. Guess there would be no straddling today. But I could think of worse ways to spend an afternoon than watching Sebastian perform manual labor outside in the heat, arm muscles flexing. I was dreamily watching him finish up the first chair when he surprised me by initiating a conversation.

"So you said something last night I'm curious about." He set the drill aside and studied his work.

"What was it?"

"You mentioned how the voice in your head tells you you're a failure."

"Oh, that." I frowned. "Yeah, it does. All the time."

He started working on the second chair. "Why do you think that?"

Between short bursts of noise from the drill, I opened up about how I felt lost at this point in my life, about how ashamed I was that I'd failed to make it as an actress and had no backup plan, and about how my sisters' success only served to make me feel worse. "I feel horrible saying that," I admitted. "I'm so proud of them and I'm happy they're so good at what they do. It's not like I begrudge them their success. I just feel bad about my lack of it, and envious that it was so clear cut for them—the path to it, I mean."

"It's not like that for a lot of people, though. And if Natalie's business hadn't done well, would you have called *her* a failure?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, then?"

I frowned, waiting for the drill to quiet. "That's different. That was a business. My failure feels more personal."

"Maybe you were supposed to fail." He flipped the chair upside down to get at the bottom. "Maybe there's something else you're supposed to do with your life. That's sort of how I feel about myself."

I watched him work for a few minutes, more curious than ever. "Really?"

"Yeah. I thought I wanted to be a corporate attorney in New York, but I hated it."

"That's not the same as failing."

He stood up straight and looked over at me. "I was fired, Skylar. For being late too often. For erratic behavior. For getting in a fist fight with a senior partner."

"Oh." I swallowed. "Uh, my mother says failure builds character."

He smiled wryly. "You should listen to her."

"I do," I said. "This morning she basically told me to get a fucking life. Or at least a real job."

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

"I was trying today to think of something, and I just don't know. That's pathetic, right? That I'm almost twenty-eight and have no idea?" Frustration tightened my throat, and I willed myself not to cry and spoil this nice afternoon.

"I wouldn't say that."

"I would. And I'd add that I'm not good enough at anything to make the choice easy, and I have nothing unique to put on a resume. The truth is, Sebastian, I'm just not that interesting of a person." Saying it out loud brought both relief and pain.

"I don't believe that for one second," he said firmly. "You're outgoing and smart and beautiful. When I look at you, I see someone who'd be good at anything she set her mind to."

"That's not me at all!" I blustered, sitting up swiftly and nearly toppling backward out of the hammock. "But I feel like I've been impersonating that person for so long, I don't even know who I actually am!" To my dismay, I burst into tears, and I was so embarrassed I jumped out of the hammock and ran down toward the dock, where I put my face into my hands and sobbed.

I heard footsteps behind me, and then felt Sebastian's hand on my shoulder as he turned me into his arms. "Hey, you. Come here."

His chest was warm and solid, and I collapsed against him, crying into my palms. He rubbed my back and trembling shoulders, shushing me gently.

"Here I thought it was *my* anxiety I'd struggle with today," he said after a few minutes. "But you're a mess."

I half-laughed, half-sobbed. "Thanks."

"How much of this is because of that stupid reunion on Saturday?"

“I don’t know. Some of it, I guess.” I took a few hitching breaths, trying to calm down.

“You should skip it. I think it’s making you feel worse.”

“I know it is. But I have to go. I said I’d help with decorations.” I looked up at him with tearful eyes. “Would you come with me? Please? Just as friends,” I said quickly. “I won’t try anything.”

He smiled but shook his head. “I really can’t, Skylar. It would serve no purpose and just dredge up painful memories.”

Nodding sadly, I wiped my eyes and sniffed. “I understand.”

“Need a tissue?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on. Let’s go find some in the house, and then after I finish the chairs, we’ll go do something fun. How does that sound?”

“Good.” I sniffed again, wondering what his idea of fun was. Algebra? Sudoku? Chess? “What’ll we do?”

“I don’t know. Want to go buy a canoe?”

I couldn’t help smiling a little, it was so random. “A canoe?”

“Yeah, I’ve been wanting one. Or maybe a rowboat. You can help me decide.”

“All right.”

“Then we’ll bring it back here and take it out on the water if it’s calm enough. How does that sound?”

“Good.”

“Can you paddle a canoe?”

I nodded. “I’m good at it, actually.”

He elbowed me as we walked toward the cabin. “And you said you’ve got nothing for your resume.”

I laughed, my spirits lifting.

* * * *

We compared prices of canoes and rowboats at the sporting goods store, but Sebastian seemed less worried about price than he was about buying the perfect boat. *Like me with shoes*, I thought, sucking on the honey stick I’d bought at the counter. I never could resist those things.

He ended up buying a beautiful wooden rowboat plus some oars and a light anchor—as well as another honey stick for me. The total cost was so high it made me wonder where his money came from. He’d said he worked part-time for his dad, but was that enough to live on, build and furnish that cabin, *and* have money for luxuries like a boat?

“So this might be none of my business, and you can tell me to piss off, but without a full-time job, how do you live?” I asked once everything was loaded in the truck and we were on our way back to the cabin.

“I have some investment income.” He ran a hand over the scruff on his jaw before going on. “My mother’s family had money. Old money. My father had no interest in it, so after she died, he and her parents set aside an inheritance for each of her children. I used some for law school and some to build the cabin, but the rest is invested. I don’t like to touch it, but I *have* used some of the interest to live on over the last year.”

“Oh.” I wondered if his mother’s death was too painful to talk about. “Were you close to your mom?”

He nodded before taking a deep breath. "I was only eight when she died. As painful as the last year of my life has been, it doesn't come close to that loss. Nothing ever will." His voice cracked on the word ever, and my heart did too.

"It's a good thing we're driving because I really want to hug you right now and I can't."

He gave me a mock dirty look. "You stay in that seatbelt."

I smiled, chewing on the empty honey stick he'd bought me. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine losing a parent."

"You close to your family?"

"Yes. My mother pissed me off this morning, but generally we are all pretty tight." I propped my elbow on the open window and let the wind rush through my hair. "I wish my parents would have pushed me harder to go to college."

He glanced at me. "Did they push a little?"

"Oh yeah. We had big fights about it. I said it wasn't for me and all I wanted to do was act. They said they'd pay for college but they wouldn't give me money just to move to New York. So I worked and saved and went on my own—and it took me a long time, like years, because I'm not by nature a saver."

"That's a great accomplishment. You're too hard on yourself."

"Maybe. Anyway." I sighed, dropping my hand to my lap. "Now after all that, I wish I'd have listened to my mom and dad when they said I'd be sorry to have no degree to fall back on."

"So go to college now."

I gaped at him. "Now?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Because I'm old."

He smiled. "You're not old. But let's forget about age for a moment. What would you study?"

"Hmmm. Good question. I don't know." I thought about it. "Actually, I sort of liked working in the tasting room at Rivard. Giving tours of the chateau, talking to people about the wines and the area. I had some ideas for the place too."

"What kind of ideas?"

"Design ideas. And I wanted to modernize their brand a little, but there was resistance, and I wasn't there long enough to convince them."

"Okay. So maybe you'd like something in marketing or PR."

"Maybe." A little enthusiasm bubbled up inside me. "But I don't have any real experience or skills. I just know what looks nice. Or at least what I think looks nice."

"Skylar, anyone who meets you knows you have good taste. I think you'd be great at a job like that. You just need to find the right one."

Pleasure swelled inside me at his compliments, at his confidence in me. I wished I had it in myself. "Thanks. I'll give it some thought."

When we reached the cabin, we hauled the boat down to the dock and put it in the water. It was late afternoon but the sun was still high in the sky, and air was hot and still, just a slight breeze off the bay. I wiped the sweat from my forehead with my arm while Sebastian tied the boat to the dock.

"I wish I'd have grabbed my bathing suit. The water looks good."

He looked up at me with a doubtful smile. "You'd swim? It's a warm day, but the water's still pretty cold."

I lifted my chin. "I'm a brave little toaster. Hey, do you have any sunscreen?"

He straightened up. “Yes. Bathroom drawer on the bottom right.”

“Thanks.” Inside, I fought the urge to rifle through Sebastian’s entire bathroom cabinet to learn more about him. I opened only the bottom right drawer, which was very neat and contained sunscreen, shaving cream, razors, and bar soap. Using the mirror over the sink, I applied some SPF 30 to my face, arms, and legs, and brought it outside with me to offer some to Sebastian.

Oh fuck. He took off his shirt.

My belly backhandsprung repeatedly as I approached the dock, where he was loading the paddles into the boat. Natalie hadn’t exaggerated; Sebastian *was* ripped. He was tall and slender, so it wasn’t an obnoxious sort of ripped, but the curves and lines on his body made my breath come faster. His skin was as beautiful as his bone structure—golden and smooth.

“Want some of this?” I asked, holding up the sunscreen.

“Nah. I don’t mind the sun.”

“Sebastian! You have great skin. You should be nicer to it. Here, let me.” Hahaha, fucking genius! Hiding a smile, I flipped the lid and squirted some into my hand. “Turn around.”

He sighed, but did as I requested, and I put my hands on his upper back. Biting my lip, I slowly rubbed the sunscreen into his skin, sliding my palms across his broad shoulders and along the back of his neck. I stayed well away from the waistband of his faded red shorts, but I did notice his blue plaid boxers peeking out above it. My stomach contracted.

“Okay. Front.”

Slowly, he turned to face me, and I swear I was just going to offer him the tube to do it himself, but the combination of his face and those glasses and the stubbled jaw and the sculpted chest and the abs—THE ABS—overpowered me. I nearly moaned aloud, imagining how those muscles would flex as he moved above me.

Gahhhhhh, don’t touch him, Skylar. He doesn’t want it.

But...but *abs*. If he said no, he said no.

“Want me to do it?” I asked brightly.

He hesitated. “Okay.”

FAHK.

Trying to control my racing pulse, I squirted some more sunscreen into my palms and rubbed them together. Then I put them on his chest.

And left them there.

Awestruck, I stared at my hands on his sun-warmed chest. Bits and pieces of me tightened and tingled.

“I think you’re supposed to rub it in.” His tone was amused.

Huh? Oh. Right.

Slowly I began to move my hands in lazy circles on his *pectacular* chest. When it was absorbed, I slid my hands lower without bothering to put more sunscreen on them. The hard ridges of his abdominal muscles rippled beneath my fingers, and I slid them back and forth along the furrows.

Yes. I fingered his furrows.

“Wow.” My voice cracked, and I swallowed. “You must do a lot of crunches.”

He chuckled, and the muscles twitched beneath my palms, shooting pure lust through my veins.

Oh, God. If it was any other guy, I’d have slipped a hand between his legs right then and there. But Sebastian was different, and I didn’t want to ruin this by moving too fast. Last time I’d gotten touchy-feely with him, he’d panicked.

But he was still now. Too still, maybe.
I looked up at him. "Is this okay?"

Chapter 15

Sebastian

Was this *okay*?

Your hands are inches away from my rapidly rising cock. Your nipples are hard—I can see them through your shirt. You’re looking up at me with such sweet concern, but I can see the way you want me, too, and fuck, I want you that way too. But something inside me won’t let me touch you.

I cleared my throat and took a step back. “It’s fine. Should we go?”

Her face fell, but she nodded.

After jumping into the boat, I took Skylar’s hand and helped her in, but I noticed that she let go of me as soon as she had two feet on the bottom of the boat. She settled at the front, arms wrapped around her legs, sunglasses hiding her eyes.

After untying the rope, I pushed away from the dock and picked up the oars, angry with myself again. I knew she’d been hoping I’d be fucking normal for a few minutes and at least kiss her or something, but I couldn’t. Not that I didn’t want to—my god, I was lucky I didn’t come in my pants the second she put her hands on me. Every male instinct in my body was screaming at me to throw her down right there in the boat and ravage that hot little body until she begged for mercy.

Was I crazy not to?

She wanted it, didn’t she?

God, it had been so long...and I wanted her so fucking badly.

As I watched her tilt her head back, lifting her face to the sun and exposing the pale white skin of her neck, I waited for the voice to kick in.

But it didn’t. Amazed, I allowed my gaze to travel from her neck down her arms to her hands, which were crossed in front of her shins. She’d taken off her sneakers and her toenails were painted bright blue. Her legs were folded up in front of her chest, but I remembered how her nipples had been hard a few minutes ago and wondered if they still were. What color were they? Pale pink? Or deeper, like a rose? What would they feel like beneath my fingertips, between my lips, against my tongue?

Fuck, I was so hard, and wanted so badly to touch her. I could be gentle, couldn’t I?

It was worth a try. She was worth anything.

“Your toes match your eyes,” I said, hoping to make her smile.

Her lips tipped up, but she said nothing.

“Skylar, you’ve been silent for five whole minutes. That’s a record, I think.”

“Ha ha.”

I stopped rowing and let us drift. On a Wednesday afternoon, there weren’t too many boats out on the bay, and none were heading in our direction. I dropped the light anchor into the water and made sure we were tethered. Skylar still hadn’t said a word, but at least she’d opened her eyes and was looking at me.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

She lifted her shoulders. “I’m just embarrassed again. I keep touching you, and it’s the wrong thing.”

“No. It’s not.”

“You get so jumpy.”

“I know, but it’s not because I don’t like it. I do. It scares me how much I do.”

“Well...good. I guess.” She tipped her head back again, then wiggled so she was lying on her back on the bottom of the boat.

Carefully I moved to her side and stretched out next to her, head propped in my hand.

“Hey.” I tapped her nose.

She ignored me, which made me smile.

“Still planning on taking a swim?”

“I might. If I get hot enough.” She folded her hands on her belly.

“That an invitation?”

She stuck out her tongue at me.

Smiling, I took off my sunglasses and studied her for another minute, appreciating the flawless symmetry of her face.

I fucking loved symmetry.

Her rosebud mouth pouted just a bit, and I traced her lips with one finger, licking my own. She was startled by my touch, her mouth opening slightly, her breaths warm and quick against my hand.

Pretty soon I couldn’t resist—I leaned over and pressed my lips to hers.

She let me kiss her, but didn’t really kiss me back, and her hands remained on her stomach. I lifted my head and looked down at her again. *Stubborn little butterfly. Give in to me.* I kissed each eyelid and the tip of her nose. Then I lowered my lips to her forehead and left them there. The voice returned.

You really think you should do this?

Yes. Shut the fuck up and go away. Or don’t. But I want to know what it’s like to kiss this woman, to touch her and feel her touch me. So you can either stick around and watch, or you can fuck right off.

Feeling proud of myself, I kissed her lips once more, and her eyes opened.

“Sebastian,” she whispered. “What are you doing?”

“Ignoring the voice in my head telling me not to touch you.”

She reached up and took my face in her hands. “Good.”

My mouth closed over hers and she rolled to her side, putting her lower body flush to mine.

Easy, easy, I told myself as her lips opened wider and I slipped my tongue between them.

She tasted sweet, like mint and honey, and I lazily stroked her tongue with mine. My hands itched to explore her body, slide beneath her clothes, feel her bare skin, but I didn’t allow myself the pleasure yet. It had been so long, and my cock ached to get inside her, but I wanted to go slow, do this right.

She wasn’t making it easy, though—not with the way she kissed, playful and light one moment, greedily sucking my tongue into her mouth the next, not with the way she raked her nails through my hair and held my head in her hands, not with the way she pressed her curvy little body closer to mine, throwing one leg over my hip. My erection bulged against my shorts, and I put my hand on her ass to pull her closer, rub my cock against the sweet spot between her legs.

She moaned as I kissed her throat, swirling my tongue on her skin. “Mmmm. That feels so good,” she said softly, sliding a hand down my arm. “You surprised me.”

I buried my face in her neck, breathing in her scent. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. In a good way.” She took my jaw in her hands, bringing my mouth up to hers. As the kiss deepened, she slipped a hand between us and rubbed my cock through my shorts...sweet, soft, slow strokes that made me dig my fingers into her back and pant against her lips. I rocked my hips, thrusting against her palm, and slid my hand underneath her shirt.

Are you fucking crazy? You can't touch her like that. You won't be able to stop. You're already so hard it hurts. Another minute and you'll be totally out of control and she'll be helpless against you. And you're all alone out here on the water. No one would hear her scream.

“Skylar,” I said, leaning my forehead against hers. “Maybe we should stop.”

“You want to stop right now?” She pressed harder against my erection. “I can think of something more fun.”

I groaned. “I know, but—just wait.” I sat up, breathing hard.

“Okayyyy,” she said, clearly confused.

I shoved my sunglasses on my face and moved to the opposite end of the boat from her to sit on the bench. But first I had to adjust myself.

She laughed. “I'd say I'm sorry, but you know I'm not.”

“I know. And I'm not either. It's just...” I ran a hand over my hair and decided to be honest. I'd fucked up with Diana by trying to hide this shit. “The voice is telling me I'll hurt you.”

She looked surprised, her eyebrows rising. “It is? Right now? Tell it to fuck off.” She leaned forward conspiringly and whispered, “I like it a little rough, anyway.”

“For god's sake, Skylar. Don't say that stuff to me,” I snapped. “You don't know me at all.”

“I'm trying, Sebastian! What the hell?” she cried, throwing a hand up. “Listen, if we're going to be friends and I'm going to help you through whatever issue you have being close to me, then you should get used to the way I talk. I told you, I'm a very open person. I say what's on my mind. Now what the fuck is on yours?”

“I told you. I'll fucking hurt you.”

“How?”

The words stuck in my throat, but finally I blurted the fucked-up truth. “I'll choke you.”

Her jaw dropped, and her fingertips touched her throat. “Choke me?”

I nodded angrily. “Yes. I know it's irrational and stupid, and I know you can't understand, but it's real to me.”

Rather than reassure me I was being ridiculous, she crawled over and knelt between my feet. “Sebastian,” she said firmly. “Put your hands on me.”

“What?”

“Around my neck. Do it.”

“No!” I gripped the edge of the bench, and she grabbed at my wrists.

“Come on, grab me by the throat,” she said, her voice growing louder as she grappled with me. “Choke me if you're going to!”

“Will you fucking stop it?” I yelled at her, putting my hands in the air. “Get away from me!”

“No!” She stood and kept grabbing at me, the boat rocking perilously, and finally I did as she asked and wrapped my hands around her neck or else she was going to tip us over. She dropped to her knees again at my feet, her fingers tight around my wrists, holding them to her.

I felt sick inside. “Is this what you want? For me to hurt you?”

“You won't hurt me.” In contrast to my panicked yelling, she spoke quietly, if a little breathlessly, and in her eyes I saw no fear. “You won't hurt me.”

We paused there a moment, my fingers around her neck, both of us breathing hard. My heart pounded, my body coursing with adrenaline, and my hands shook. Desperately I battled the urge

to count as I inhaled and exhaled slowly, trying to calm my overwrought nervous system. But as the seconds ticked by and I did nothing violent, I realized she was right—I wasn't going to harm her. My body relaxed, my breathing slowed.

"There," she said softly. "See?" She pulled my hands off her neck, and immediately I curled my fingers over the edge of the bench again. She scooted even closer to me. "Now tell me what to do so we can go back to what we were doing."

"There's nothing you can do," I said sourly. "It's just the way I am." I looked out across the water, unable to handle the hurt expression on her face. *You fucking coward.*

"I don't believe that."

"Well, it's true." I fucking hated myself, so I took it out on her, of course. "You think this is the first time this has happened to me? I know how this goes, Skylar." I forced myself to look at her. I wanted the asshole in my head to see exactly what he was giving up. "We have sex because we like each other and we're attracted to each other and we think that's enough but then who we are isn't really what the other person thinks we are, so nothing works out and a year later we end up disappointing each other and blaming ourselves for what we should have admitted in the first place—this shouldn't happen."

She sat back, her butt on the boat's bottom. "Holy shit, Sebastian."

"What?"

"You're killing me. I can't even think where I'm going to live next week and you're able to imagine exactly what would happen in a year if I give you a hand job in this rowboat."

She was going to give me a hand job. Fuck.

"Is that what happened with your ex?"

Running a hand over my hair, I exhaled. "Sort of." The wind picked up, and I listened to the waves lap against the side of the boat for a moment. The sound calmed me. *This isn't that. Skylar isn't Diana.* "I'm sorry. I panic easily."

She nodded. "I'm beginning to see that."

Well, this was it. She was realizing how difficult I was, how frustrating it was to get close to me, and she'd abandon me because of it. It's nothing I didn't expect...it had happened plenty of times before with girls a lot less beautiful than Skylar. So her next words shocked me.

"You know what we need? Some fried chicken. You're coming to dinner at my parents' house."

Nausea hit me. Strangers. A dinner table. A new situation. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Well, I do. And you're going to come along and make it up to me for being a jerk just now when all I'm trying to do is have some fun." She hugged her knees again, tilting her face to the sun. The light played with her hair, streaking it with silver and gold. It looked so soft and warm, and I wondered if I'd ever get another chance to run my hands through it.

"What time is it?" she asked suddenly.

I pulled my phone from my pocket. "Close to six."

"Dinner is at six-thirty, so we should think about heading back."

I frowned. "Skylar, I'm not entirely comfortable with this. It's nothing against your family, I just don't like situations where I don't know anyone."

"You know me. And Natalie will be there with her boyfriend, Dan. You can meet him, and our older sister Jillian, and my parents too. They are perfectly nice people with clean dishes. And we don't use sharp knives for fried chicken, so you don't have to worry about stabbing anyone. But if you do, stab Dan. Natalie thinks he might be cheating on her."

"That's not funny."

She lowered her chin and looked up at me. “Yes it is. You gotta lighten up a little, Sebastian. I’ll help you.” She leaned back on her hands and stretched her feet toward mine, batting one of my ankles with her toes. “Think how proud your therapist is going to be when you go in there next.”

“He will be,” I admitted. “He told me I should talk to you.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

I exhaled slowly, nervous to share this with her but feeling like I owed her something good. “Because the day I saw you at the beach, a lot of...feelings surfaced that triggered a relapse.”

“What kind of feelings?”

Fuck, this was embarrassing. “Old feelings. I used to...have a crush on you. In high school.” She beamed. “You did?”

“Yeah. Along with every other guy there,” I said under my breath. “I had no chance.”

“Stop.” She kicked me gently. “You never said anything about it.”

“How could I? You were surrounded all the time. And I was so fucking awkward and shy.”

“You *were* shy. You’re still shy. Sort of.”

“Yeah. I guess.”

She didn’t say anything for a minute or two, just stared out across the water. I was about to start rowing us back when she asked a question that surprised me.

“Why me?”

“Huh?”

“Why did you have a crush on me? Was it because you thought I was pretty?”

I had to think about it. Of course I thought she was pretty—everyone did. But that wasn’t all of it. “It wasn’t just your looks,” I said. “I was an observer back then, not really a participator, so I saw a lot of what went on without actually being involved. I saw that you were nice to everyone, that you didn’t bully or cut people down, that you went out of your way to smile and say nice things to people. I liked that you weren’t shy about raising your hand in class to admit you didn’t understand something. I liked that you sometimes asked me for help.” I paused to take a breath.

“Wow. That’s like the most I’ve ever heard you say at one time.” Her smile lit up her face. “And I’m totally flattered.”

That smile. It was like a drug—I wanted to say anything, do anything to keep it there. “So yes, Ken—that’s my therapist—told me that if talking to you was a fear, then I had to conquer it.”

She met my eyes. “And you did.”

“I did.”

“So now,” she said, “you’re going to conquer fried chicken, potato salad, and cherry pie with the Nixon family.”

Taking the oars in my hands, I shook my head. “You’re much bossier than you were back then.”

“I’m not bossy,” she said indignantly. “I’m just good at seeing what needs to be done.” She grimaced. “Except when it comes to myself. Then I’m horrible.”

I began rowing us back toward the dock. “I’ll help you. Maybe we can help each other.”

Chapter 16

Skylar

I watched Sebastian row us back toward the cabin, the muscles in his chest and arms working hard. Even though our brief romantic interlude had not gone exactly as I'd hoped, the conversation we'd had afterward felt good. Sincere. He seemed to be comfortable opening up to me, and I loved that—for most guys, it would be the other way around. They'd be all over the sex part, and then when you asked about their thoughts or feelings, they'd go silent. Sebastian had those silent moments too, and moments where he snapped, but I felt like I understood him better. He was just so hard on himself.

Why can't he be hard on me?

Stifling a smile, I recalled how divine it had felt when he'd let himself relax for a few minutes with me on the bottom of the boat. I probably pushed it too quickly with the hand thing, but I couldn't help myself—and he'd felt *so good* beneath his shorts. Thick and long and solid. Lust zinged between my legs and I pressed my thighs together.

Damn. Sebastian needed time to work through whatever had his mind all jacked up when it came to touching me, and I *wanted* to be patient for him, but lord almighty I had some frustration to work off.

I'd have to get my vibrator out tonight.

The thought made me wonder what *he* did to relieve that kind of tension, and right away I pictured him naked, lying in that bed in the loft getting himself off, the muscles in his arms working hard, his abs flexed.

Oh crap. I better look away from him right now.

Maybe I'd get the vibrator out before dinner. The way I felt right now, it wouldn't take more than a minute.

* * * *

I ended up not having time for a solo session because in order to make dinner on time, Sebastian had to get ready and drive back to the farm with me since I didn't have my own car. While he cleaned up, I sat outside on a chair he'd put together and tried very hard not to think about him in the shower.

OK, somewhat hard.

After about fifteen minutes, he came out to the patio dressed in khaki pants and a fitted navy blue button-down with the sleeves cuffed up. "This okay?"

"Of course. You look great."

"I didn't have time to shave." He rubbed his chin. "Sorry."

"Stop it. I like the scruff. And we are very casual, I promise. I texted my mom that I was bringing a friend to dinner, and she was delighted. But we better hurry so I have time to change."

We pulled up between the big house and my guest house right at six thirty. Sebastian waited in the living room while I stealthily scooped a clean pair of panties from a drawer and flipped through casual dresses I had hanging on a rack beneath some corner shelves.

"That your closet? Very clever," he said.

“Gotta make use of every inch of space in a place this small. Okay, I’ll be right out.” I grabbed a flowy little dress with cami straps and a deep V neckline and ducked into the bathroom. Tossing my shorts, panties, socks and t-shirt in the hamper, I threw my hair up in a clip and quickly showered, then slipped on the new panties and the dress. Crap, was it too sexy? The neckline was low and I didn’t wear a bra with this dress, but the dress wasn’t tight or short, and the pretty floral pattern gave it a touch of innocence. I put on some deodorant, fluffed out my hair, and added a dab of perfume behind each ear. A quick swipe of pink lip gloss was the only makeup I had time for.

“Okay, dressed,” I said, sliding open the repurposed barn door that now served as bathroom door. “Now shoes and we’ll go.”

Sebastian was standing by the window, hands in his pockets. He turned to me, his eyes traveling down my body. A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he cleared his throat. “You got the bin pulls attached. I like them.”

“Me too.” I hurried over to the corner shelves, beneath which I had shoeboxes stacked, and dug out my light brown wedge sandals. “Actually, I’m happy with the whole place. Wish my mother wasn’t kicking me out of it next week. It’s rented for the summer,” I went on when I saw the question on his face. I shoved my feet into the sandals and tugged the straps over my heels.

He nodded in understanding. “So you need to find an apartment?”

“Yes.” I grabbed my phone off the table and led the way out, pulling the door shut behind him. “But before that happens, I’ll need to find a better paying job. Working for Natalie is fun, but it won’t pay my rent.”

Sebastian fell silent as we headed across the drive toward my parents house, and he walked sort of slowly and stiffly, like a prisoner headed for the guillotine.

“Hey.” I grabbed his hand. “No worries, okay?”

He looked down at our hands, his mouth set in a grim line.

“Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“You know what I used to do when I’d get nervous before auditions?”

“What?”

“I’d imagine the very worst thing that could happen. Like forgetting my lines or falling on my face. Wetting my pants. Those things still wouldn’t kill me.”

He stopped walking right before we got to the front porch. “Except when I imagine the worst thing that could happen tonight, Skylar, I’m not wetting my pants. I’m stabbing someone.”

I turned to him. “Who are you stabbing?”

“I don’t know. Whoever’s closest.” His worried expression told me he was serious, and I was tempted to hug him, tell him he didn’t have to come to dinner if he didn’t want to, assure him I understood. But somehow I thought that wasn’t what he needed.

“Well, remind me not to sit next to *you*, then.” I headed up the steps. “Come on. Let’s do this.”

* * * *

My family welcomed Sebastian warmly, Natalie giving me a smug smile behind his back as he shook our father’s hand.

“I take it things are going well,” she whispered on our way to sit down at the big antique table in the dining room, which was already laden with platters and serving bowls full of food.

I shrugged. "They're okay."

"I want details!"

"Tomorrow at work," I promised.

"Sebastian, why don't you sit here next to Skylar?" my mother suggested, pulling her usual chair for him. I sent her a grateful look.

Natalie sat on Sebastian's other side, and Dan next to her. I wondered if she'd confronted him about the text messages yet. We'd have to talk about that tomorrow, too.

"Sebastian, do you have an older brother?" asked Jillian, who was seated across from him. "I went to school with a Malcolm Pryce."

He nodded. "Yes, that's my brother. He's three years older than I am."

"Does he still live around here?"

"Traverse City. He's an attorney in my father's practice also."

OK, so far so good. He wasn't exactly relaxing in his chair, but his tone of voice sounded normal.

Jillian picked up a salad bowl. "Oh, are you a lawyer?"

"Yes." He swallowed, maybe bracing himself for more questions about his past, and I put my hand on his leg to remind him he had a friend at the table. I wasn't going to let the conversation go anywhere that would embarrass him. I might not have a college degree but I was a master at manipulating a crowd. He patted my hand, and I smiled at him.

Suddenly I could feel my mother's eyes on me, and I could just imagine how pleased she was—not only had I brought a handsome new friend to dinner, but he was a lawyer too. Imagine that, Skylar did something right! Frowning, I picked up my wine glass and took a big sip.

The rest of the meal went smoothly, and even if Sebastian remained a little tense, he fielded questions politely and complimented my mother on her cooking. I winced once when Dan asked him why he'd moved back here from New York, but he simply said he missed the area and wanted to be closer to his family. My shoulders wilted with relief, and I put my hand back on his leg under the table. He covered it with his again, and this time, he left it there.

Our eyes met in the mirror above the sideboard on the opposite wall, and something about the look we exchanged made my insides swoosh, my panties get a little wet. Maybe it was just the candlelight playing tricks on me, but I liked the fire I saw in his eyes, which looked darker in the dim room.

After coffee and dessert, my sisters and I helped my mother clear the table, and then they shooed me back into the living room, where Sebastian sat with Dan and my father discussing the lack of skill in the Tiger bullpen.

He stood when I entered. "I should get going."

"I'll walk you out," I said, hoping our evening wasn't over but unsure how to keep it going.

Sebastian thanked my parents for dinner and shook everyone's hands—I wondered if handshakes still bothered him—and we walked outside. The sun was setting, bathing the undulating landscape in beautiful amber light. Row after row of cherry trees grew on the hills, and I inhaled the lush air, which was much cooler than it had been all day.

"So was it torture?" I asked as we strolled toward his truck, wrapping my arms around myself to fight the chill.

He shook his head. "Your family is very nice."

"They are, thanks. Sorry for all the questions. They can be so overbearing sometimes."

He smiled slightly. "That's okay. Nothing I couldn't handle tonight."

"I'm glad."

We reached his truck and he took his keys from his pocket. Part of me wanted to invite him in to my guest house for a beer, but another part said that wouldn't be wise. Maybe it was enough today that we'd spent time alone, that we'd kissed, that he'd had dinner with my family.

"Well, goodnight. Thanks for coming." Rising up on tiptoe, I put my hands on his chest and kissed his cheek. He kissed mine too, and then pulled me in close for a hug. I held him tight, my arms around his neck, our chests pressed together. I could smell the clean, masculine scent of his skin, feel his breaths start to come faster, igniting the hum inside my body. My thoughts strayed to my vibrator.

"It's the craziest thing," he said in my ear, his voice low and raw.

"What is?"

"I don't want to leave you."

My heart nearly burst open with longing for him. "I don't want you to, but this house is, like, right next to my parents, and—"

"Come home with me." He released me slightly, keeping his arms around my waist and looking down at me. I saw that fire in his eyes again like I had in the mirror, felt the heat radiating from his body. "Give me another chance to make up for this afternoon."

"Yes," I said without any hesitation. "Just give me a second."

"Skylar, wait." He grabbed my arm, and I worried that he'd changed his mind.

His face was grave. "I want you so bad I can hardly breathe, but I have to be honest. I'm not looking for—"

"Shhh." I put a finger over his lips. "I'm not asking for a commitment, Sebastian. I just want to be with you."

Heart pounding, I ran into the house and pulled Natalie aside. "Can you grab my phone from the kitchen? If Mom asks, just tell her Sebastian and I went for a drive."

"Awwwww," she said, her voice rising like I'd been caught doing something naughty. "I'm gonna tell."

I slapped her arm. "Shhhh! Just grab it please."

Laughing, she ducked into the kitchen, where my mother was blasting Pavarotti and loading the dishwasher. Not that she'd have cared what I was doing—she'd probably have been happy, actually—but I didn't want any questions tonight.

A moment later Natalie returned with my phone. "Here you go. Have fun. Details tomorrow," she said forcefully.

"Promise." I scooted for the door.

"And don't be late for work!"

I rushed back outside, where Sebastian was waiting for me at the open passenger door of the truck. "Everything okay?" he asked, helping me up.

I smiled at him. "Yes. Everything is perfect."

"Good. Now buckle your seatbelt. I'm planning to speed."

Chapter 17

Sebastian

I drove back to the cabin with a heavy foot, one hand on the wheel and the other on Skylar's lap. She held it in both of hers, almost like a child clings to the string of a helium balloon. I knew why—she was scared I'd change my mind.

But I wanted Skylar in my bed more than I could remember wanting any woman there. Maybe it was the ten-year crush, maybe it was the way she kept touching me during dinner, maybe it was the smell of her hair when I'd hugged her or the feel of her breasts against my chest. Maybe it was her willingness to be patient but also to push me to do things I was reluctant to do.

I still couldn't get over the way she'd made me grab her throat this afternoon. What had possessed her to do that? Why did she trust me more than I trusted myself? What did she see in me?

Whatever it was, she'd silenced the voice within me. I knew better than to think it would last forever, but I hadn't had one disturbing thought at dinner, unless you counted thinking about fucking Skylar with my tongue while her parents were at the table. That was kind of disturbing. But it didn't scare me—in fact, when I was hugging her goodbye, the only fear I had was, *What if I don't touch her tonight and tomorrow I'm a prisoner of my own mind again?*

I couldn't waste this chance. I'd dreamed of her for too long, and I was tired of being so fucking alone. I wanted her. I needed her. Now.

I took my hand and put it on her bare leg, just above her knee, tempting the voice to tell me to stop.

Nothing.

I slid it higher up her thigh, heard her breath catch.

But in my head, exquisite silence.

She widened her knees, inviting me, and I slipped my hand to her pale inner thigh, beneath her dress. The skin there was silky beneath my fingertips, and I traced a little spiral pattern, moving toward her pussy.

"I'm going to kiss you here," I told her, never taking my eyes off the road. "And here." I brushed my fingers over the crotch of her panties, and she spread her legs farther. "And especially here." Edging my fingers inside the silk, I teased her open. She moaned lightly as I circled my fingers over the hot little button. "I want to feel your clit get hard against my tongue."

"Oh God," she gasped, tilting her hips toward my hand.

It was so fucking sexy I nearly pulled over. But I didn't want to rush this. I'd been dreaming about her for ten fucking years. The first time had to be perfect, slow and sensual and romantic. Candles and wine and soft, clean sheets.

If I made it home.

"I love that you're wet already," I said, sliding one fingertip inside her, the other hand gripping the wheel tightly.

"I've been wet since you took your shirt off on the dock," she breathed. "God, that feels so good. I want more." She grabbed my wrist and pushed my finger deeper inside her, nearly causing me to run off the road.

Breathing hard, I fingered her as she moaned softly, imagining my dick sliding between those soft, snug velvet walls. It swelled inside my pants, bulging against the seam. “My cock is so hard right now,” I told her, trying to keep my voice steady as my foot pushed harder on the accelerator. “I want to fuck you with it. I want it right here.” I plunged two fingers inside her.

“Sebastian,” she panted, gyrating against my hand. “I want you so badly. I want my hands on your cock, and I want it inside me. Hurry.”

My mouth fell open. Jesus Christ. I’d never been with a woman who talked that way, *ever*. And the fact that it was Skylar had me jumping out of my skin.

OK, fuck the candles and wine.

I turned off the main highway on to my driveway, tires screeching, gravel spitting, and flew fifty feet through the woods toward the cabin before slamming on the brakes.

Before I even had the truck in park, she was slipping her shoes from her feet.

I undid my belt and jeans and shoved them down enough to free my cock. “Shit, I don’t have a—“

“I don’t care.” Eyes on my erection, she slid her panties down her legs. “I’m on the pill.”

“Then come here.” I reached for her, flipping her onto my lap.

Reaching beneath her dress, I fisted my cock as she straddled me and positioned the tip between her legs. For just one second, I had a flash of doubt. Not an obsessive thought, but just a concern. *She’s so small.*

“Don’t you fucking dare.” Lowering herself, she took me in deep, slowly sliding all the way down, her eyes steady on mine, her hands squeezing my shoulders. “I want this, Sebastian. I want this so badly. I fucking need it. Give it to me.”

My name on her lips as she glided over the most sensitive part of my body set fire to my blood. With her tight, wet pussy sheathing my cock, any thought of turning back was abandoned. My body took over, yanking down the loose straps of her dress and taking her breasts in my hands. They were perfect—not too big, but round and plump and creamy white, with pert little light pink tips. “Yes,” she breathed when I sucked on one taut peak, her hips beginning to move over mine. “Oh God, that feels so good.”

Oh fuck.

This could potentially be over ridiculously, tragically fast. She was too beautiful, too warm, too wet, too fearless. And the way she was looking at me, like my cock was the best thing she’d ever felt inside her, like she couldn’t get enough and yet it was too much, like she wanted this as much as I did. Was that even possible? I slid my hands beneath her dress, clutching her to me as I flicked her nipple with my tongue and thrust up inside her.

“Yes, yes,” she murmured, rocking against me, her fingers digging into my arms. “I love your mouth on me, and your body is so hot, and your face is so beautiful, and your cock is so big—“

“Fuck,” I seethed, sucking air between my teeth. “Goddammit, Skylar. I wanted to take my time, give you everything you want. You keep moving like that, talking like that, I won’t be able to last.”

“I’m getting everything I want.” Grinding against me, she arched her back and swiveled her hips in some clever little female maneuver that had me groaning in agony. “Right now. Right here. Right *there*... fuck yes, right there.”

“Yeah? You want it right there?” I tilted my lower body to give her a deeper angle, and she cried out, her eyes closing, her movements small but fast and frantic and *fuck* she was so beautiful when she came, her head thrown back, her mouth open wide, her pussy clenching my

cock in tight, hard contractions I could feel.

Heat buzzed through my arms and legs, centering in my groin as I grabbed her hips and worked her up and down my cock, my eyes fastened on her perfect tits as they bounced in front of me. God, she was so wet and tight and her little noises were so hot and this was so much better than my fantasies because she was here and I was coming inside her *right. fucking. now.* I growled, my body seized up as the climax hit, but she kept moving, sliding up and down my shaft, crying out every time her ass hit my thighs, taking every last drop I had to give.

When my body had gone still, she ran her hands through my hair, down my arms, up my chest, finally taking my head in her arms, pulling it to her chest. I lay my cheek against her breasts and listened to her heartbeat, closing my eyes and thanking whatever gods existed for letting me have this, even if it was only for tonight.

“Did I rush you?” she asked breathlessly, her lips against my forehead.

“No.” I slid my hands up the back of her dress and locked my arms around her. “Believe me, I’m happy I held out as long as I did.”

She laughed. “I like hearing you’re happy.”

Then stay with me, I thought. Stay with me.

Chapter 18

Skylar

He seemed so different. So relaxed and at ease in his skin, so unafraid. I wondered if it was stress relief—the sex itself—or if it was that he'd broken down a barrier—sex with me. But I didn't dare ask about it. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, right?

We went into the cabin and cleaned up, Sebastian offering the bathroom to me first. "There are clean washcloths in the bottom left drawer, towels under the sink, soap in the shower. Use anything you want."

I felt pretty wet and sticky, so I decided to take a quick shower. I hung my dress and panties on the door and washed up with a bar of soap in his shower that smelled delicious and looked like it had honeycomb in it. After drying off with a fluffy navy blue towel, I hung it up and slipped back into my panties and dress.

When I emerged from the bathroom, Sebastian was just coming in from the patio, his feet bare. "I thought maybe we could lie in the hammock. It's cool out there, but the sky is clear. Good night to see stars."

"I saw stars twenty minutes ago in your truck," I told him with a smile. "Right through the roof."

He grinned back at me before pulling a thick charcoal gray fleece blanket from an old trunk serving as a coffee table. "We'll take this blanket out, but if you're cold just tell me."

"Okay." I picked up a framed photograph on a side table. "Who's this?" I asked, turning it so he could see the photograph of the two grinning little girls, one missing both front teeth.

"Emily and Hannah. My nieces. They gave that to me last Christmas." He switched off the living room lamp as I set the frame down.

"Ah. They live around here?"

He nodded and turned the kitchen light off. "Malcolm and his family live in Traverse."

"I bet they're happy you moved back."

He opened the sliding door and waited for me to go through it, then he tucked the blanket under his arm and followed me out before closing it behind us. "Yeah, they are. They worry about me living alone up here, though. Like I'm a kid. Drives me crazy."

I shivered walking across the stones toward the hammock, my skin prickling in the chilly night air. "Do you get lonely?"

"Sometimes. Not tonight." He lowered himself into the hammock and stretched out on his back. "And that's all that matters to me right now. Come here."

Smiling, I took off my shoes and carefully climbed on beside him, tucking myself in against his warm, hard body. Together we spread the blanket over our feet and legs, and he pulled it up over my shoulder.

"Warm enough?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you." I snaked one arm across his stomach, beneath his shirt, taking the opportunity to feel up his abs again. "Hey, what's that honeycomb soap in your bathroom? I love it."

"My sister-in law Kelly makes it. Malcolm's wife"

"Really?"

“Yeah, she makes all kinds of stuff with honey. Her family keeps bees.”

“How cool. I’ll have to find out where to buy it. Maybe my mom will stock some products in the guest houses. I want her to have all local things.”

He squeezed me. “That’s a great idea.”

I asked more about his extended family, and Sebastian recited for me the names and ages of all five of his nieces and nephews.

“I’m impressed,” I said. “Do you know their birthdays too?”

“Yes, and my brothers’ and their wives’ and my dad’s if I thought about it, maybe even yours.”

I picked my head up and looked at him. “Shut up. Really?”

He narrowed his eyes. “You have a winter birthday, right? Is it in December? Maybe the twenty-first?”

I gasped. “Yes! How do you know that?”

“I have a good memory for facts, especially involving numbers.” His mouth hooked up on one side. “Want me to recite two hundred decimal digits of pi for you? Would that turn you on?”

“It might,” I said, and I was only half kidding. “God, you really have a thing about numbers, don’t you? But how did you remember my birthday?”

He shrugged. “I probably saw it written somewhere, although it’s an odd number and I don’t like those. You should have an even birthday.”

“What?”

He chuckled. “Nothing. Just a joke.”

I loved hearing him laugh. Putting my head on his chest again, I snuggled in a little closer. “This is so nice. I’m so glad you invited me back here.”

He kissed the top of my head and brought one hand to my hair, twining one long wavy strand around his fingers. “I wasn’t sure you’d want to come.”

I wanted to look at his face, but I loved his hand in my hair so much I stayed where I was. “Why not? I was here all day, just about.”

“I know, but...I send a lot of confusing signals.”

“You do,” I agreed. “But seeing as I like your company and I have no better offers these days, you’ll do.”

He pulled my hair, making me squeal. “Very funny.”

I giggled, picking up my head to look at him. “I’m teasing. I want to be here. I needed this.”

“Needed what?”

“Just...this.” Even I wasn’t sure exactly what I’d meant, but something about being there in his arms, feeling wanted and beautiful and free and sexy—it gave me hope. I’d felt so bad about myself for so long that I’d forgotten it was possible to feel this good, this excited about life and its twists and turns. Maybe it was just a physical thing between us, but it was enough, and if it fulfilled a need in him too, then all the better.

We kissed, slowly and lazily, his tongue parting my lips. After a moment, one of his hands stole up to my breast, squeezing it softly, and I moved a hand between his legs, stroking him like I had earlier in the boat, feeling him come to life beneath my palm. “I’m glad you’re here too,” he whispered against my lips. “Otherwise I’d be upstairs in my bed jerking off to you right now.”

My core muscled tightened at the image, and I pressed my hand over his erection. “You just put a very naughty thought in my head.”

“What’s that?” His fingers teased my nipple through the thin material of my dress, making them both stiffen and tingle.

“I want to watch that.”

He went still. “You do?”

I bit my lip. “Sorry, is that too dirty? I’ve never watched anyone do it themselves before, I just think it would be hot. But it’s probably too dirty.”

“No. No. You just surprised me is all.” He kissed me again, deeper this time, his tongue more demanding, stroking into my mouth with a skill that started a hum between my legs. “Want to come upstairs?” he whispered.

“Yes.” I slid off the hammock after him and bent to pick up my shoes when he grabbed my arm.

“Leave them.” He pulled me roughly toward the dark cabin. A minute later I was breathlessly climbing the ladder to the loft. When I reached the top, I was surprised at how light it was up there—the moonlight shining in the huge window bathed the entire room in silver. I noticed the blue bedspread had been folded back to the foot of his bed, revealing crisp white sheets. Sebastian came up behind me and lifted my dress by the hem, and I raised my arms. He slipped the garment off my head and when I turned to face him, he was turning it right side out, as if he were going to hang it up or something.

“Really, Sebastian?” I grabbed the thing and threw on the floor.

“It’s a nice dress.”

“Oh, God. You’re so cute. But fuck the dress. And fuck your shirt too.” I started unbuttoning his shirt, my fingers trembling with the need to touch him. He helped me finish and I shoved it down his shoulders, dropping it next to my dress. Grabbing his white t-shirt at the neck, he tugged it off, adding to the pile of clothing on the floor. Immediately, I threw my arms around him, pressing my breasts against his warm, bare chest and crushing my mouth to his. He wrapped his arms around my back and lifted me off the floor, and I instinctively circled his trim waist with my legs. His muscular torso felt hot and hard against my inner thighs.

“Your body is incredible,” I panted as he moved his hands beneath my ass. “I’ve been dying to get my hands on it all day.”

“I’ve been hard for you for *two* days,” he said, his fingers kneading my flesh. “And we both know that two is better than one, so I win.”

Turning us toward the bed, he knelt on the mattress, laying me down gently on my back before pulling my drenched panties down my legs. I propped myself on my elbows, excited to watch him take his pants off and get started on the show. But after removing his shoes, he crawled up my body, lowering his mouth to my chest.

“Hey.” I fidgeted impatiently. “You said I could watch.”

“You can. You can watch me do this.” He drew a circle around one hard nipple with his tongue before sucking it hard. “You can watch me do this.” He dragged his tongue in a line straight south, making my clit tingle. “And you can watch me do this.”

Pushing my legs apart, he buried his tongue in my pussy, stroking up through the center and lingering at the top before doing it again.

“Oh, God...” It felt so fucking good, and watching him do it made me so hot, I couldn’t bring myself to protest. My mouth hung open as he slowly circled my clit with his tongue, dizzying, decadent arcs that made my toes curl and my hands claw at his bedsheets. Then he sucked it into his mouth, rubbing his tongue against it.

“You taste even better than I imagined, Skylar Nixon.” He picked up his head for just a second. “And I imagined it a lot. So you have to let me have this.” Dropping his mouth to me again, he pressed my thighs wider as he worked his tongue and lips and teeth over me until the

room was spinning and I could hardly breathe.

“Fuck, Sebastian,” I panted. “You are a fucking master at this. You’re gonna make me come so hard.”

“Good. Let me feel it.”

I gasped as I felt one finger slide inside me. Then two.

“Oh God! What are you doing to me?” Dropping my head back, I fisted my hands in his sheets and writhed beneath his agile tongue and dextrous fingers.

Actually, writhed doesn’t even begin to cover it.

I thrashed and moaned and cursed and grabbed his head and rocked my hips, grinding against his greedy mouth until I exploded in feverish bursts of white hot madness, crying out with every rhythmic pulse around his fingers and against his tongue.

When my body had stopped convulsing, he straightened up and unbuckled his belt. “Still want to watch?”

“Fuck yes, I do.” I braced myself on my elbows again, watching as he stepped off the bed and got completely naked. Moonlight dusted his shoulders and hair, outlining the powerful masculine lines of his body. The front of him was in shadow, but I could make out the serious expression, the flat hard stomach, the fully erect cock. It stood out from his body as he came toward me, and I nearly lunged for it, mouth open.

He knelt on the bed again, legs apart, and took himself in his fist. Slowly he began working his hand up and down its thick, hard length. I was breathing hard, my heart pounding in my chest. “God. I could watch you all day.”

“I can still taste you.” His voice was low and gravelly. “You’re on my tongue, like honey.”

“Oh God.” Desire ignited again inside me. I sat all the way up, knees wide, one hand moving between my legs. “I’m so wet. You’ve got me dripping.”

“Yes,” he hissed, his jaw clenched. His hand moved faster. “Drip all over your fingers. Let me watch.”

Without tearing my eyes from his body, I rubbed my clit, widening my knees and arching my back. The second orgasm built even quicker than the first, gathering momentum inside a minute. “Christ,” I whispered, working my fingers faster, watching the muscles in Sebastian’s abs and forearm and shoulder flex. “You’re going to make me come again. And you’re not even touching me.”

A few seconds later his body was sprawled over mine, his cock pushing easily inside my slick wet center. “I can’t take it, you’re too beautiful,” he whispered, driving deep. “And I’ve thought of this so many times—I can’t have you in my bed and not be inside you.”

“I *want* you inside me.” I clawed his back, his arms, his ass, digging my fingers into his flesh, pulling him closer. “You feel so good there.” And he did—so good I was starting to panic this was the best sex I’d ever had and I’d never feel this way again. What if this was a one-time deal? What if tomorrow the voice in his head told him he’d smother me in my sleep if I stayed the night? He reached behind me, tilting my hips up so he could rub the hard base of his cock against my clit as he rocked into me. I was both amazed and terrified by his skill, by his size, by the way he knew exactly what I needed to feel. Deep inside me, something began to tighten.

Too deep.

That deep.

Oh god. Oh no.

Please, please don’t let Sebastian Pryce own the one cock that can reach The Spot.

But he did. The tip of Sebastian’s cock was hitting The Spot, territory uncharted, unknown,

unreachable by all prior cock owners who'd attempted to scale the surrounding heights.

This couldn't be.

No! No! No!

"Yes, yes, yes," I breathed against his neck, my entire lower body seizing up, my nails clawing at his skin. *Fucking hell, Sebastian...you're so amazing and generous and hard and deep and fuck*—"Oh God, you're perfect. Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop!"

"Never," he growled, thrusting faster and tighter to me. "Come again for me, beautiful, let me feel you."

My second climax hit me hard, and I dropped my head to the side, mouth open, gasping as my core muscles tightened around him, again and again and again.

He came before my orgasm had even ended, throbbing long and deep inside me, his body going plank stiff above me. My hands felt the muscles in his ass flexing, causing a fresh wave of contractions in my lower body, and I rode them out on a long, blissful sigh.

Perfection.

Chapter 19

Sebastian

Every moment.

From the front seat of my truck (who'd have guessed Skylar Nixon had a dirty mouth?) to the hammock (her hair pouring like liquid gold through my fingers) to my bedroom (better than any fantasy I'd ever had about her, and certainly better than any reality I'd ever experienced), every single second with Skylar had been perfect.

I'd been able to stay in the moment ever since she'd agreed to come home with me, so focused on her that there was no room in my mind for anything else. It was enough to make me utter those two little words to myself, the scariest two words I knew... *What if?* Only this time, the words didn't frighten me because I was anxious about causing harm—the question wasn't *What if I hurt her?* The question was *What if I could make her happy?*

And that was fucking terrifying.

How had she done it? I lay atop her now, our bodies still connected, our breathing still synced, our skin still slick, and wondered what spell had she cast to make me think after just two days that she could be mine and I could be hers and we could have this little place in the woods on the water where no one would bother us? Where we would love each other and explore each other and hurt each other and forgive each other and find grace in one another's bodies and souls? Surely there had to be something enchanted about tonight—some blissful, ephemeral witchcraft that was bound to fade and break once the sun came up.

Because I knew better than anyone that this feeling never lasts, not for people like me. It's an illusion that makes you feel good for a time, but it makes the fall that much worse when you realize it was only a tease. *See what it could be like? See what you can't have? See what you'll ruin?*

Skylar shifted beneath me, and reluctantly I rolled off her, stretching out on my back, hands behind my head. I locked my fingers together, refusing to let myself touch her the way I wanted to. Expecting her to get out of bed, I was surprised when she turned toward me and laid her cheek on my arm. I wanted nothing more than to hold her, but I couldn't—I had to steel myself for the inevitable crash that was coming after such a high. I closed my eyes, inhaled and exhaled, desperately trying not to think about how hurt she was going to be when I pushed her away again.

She lay next to me for a minute before nudging my side. "Hey."

"What?"

"What are you thinking?"

That I wish tonight would last forever. That I knew how to love someone without hurting her. That I believed in happily ever after. "Nothing. I'm tired." Her disappointed "oh" softened my heart, but I willed iron into it. "I should take you back."

Slowly, she sat straight up. Looked at me in disbelief. "That's it?"

"What's it?" Like I didn't know.

"That's it for tonight? *I don't want to leave you, come home with me, I'm so glad you're here...* and after everything we did tonight, all you can say is *I should take you back?*" She threw my words back at me.

“Yeah. I guess so.” I shifted uncomfortably. “You were expecting something else?”

“Oh my God. Whatever. Fine.” She got off the bed and scooped her panties off the floor, stepping into them before throwing her dress over her head. The silhouette of her curvy breasts and hips against the window made my jaw clench. “Your sheets are a mess,” she said, fluffing that cloud-of-gossamer hair I loved. “Do you have a spare set to sleep on?”

“I have seven spare sets.”

She stopped moving and looked at me. “You have eight sets of sheets?” Then she threw her hands up. “What am I thinking? Of course you do. Do you want help stripping the bed?”

“No.” Did she think I didn’t want to sleep with her honey-and-almond scent next to my skin? I knew it was my soap she’d used but damn if it ever smelled that good on me.

“Okay then. I’ll meet you in the car.” She went for the ladder and started down.

Fuck. *FUCK.*

“Skylar, wait.” I sat up, dragged a hand over my hair. “Don’t go.”

“Too late, asshole.” She continued down the ladder and I heard her jump to the floor.

Her feistiness almost made me smile.

“Fuck!” I thumped a fist into the mattress, hard. Then I did it again, and again. I knew I shouldn’t take my frustration with myself out on her, but it was so hard. If I didn’t harden my heart against the what ifs, they’d drag me under. She’d drag me under. I’d be fooled again into thinking I was capable of being the person a woman deserved, of loving her the way she needed to be loved. And I knew—I *knew*—I wasn’t.

So fuck the big, sad ending. I could stop this bleeding at the source, and I would.

Angry and sad, I threw my clothes on and jogged out to the truck, where she was already waiting in the passenger seat, legs tight together, arms crossed. I knew she was really mad because it was the first time she was totally silent for more than five minutes. We were almost to her parents’ place when finally she broke down.

“I’m sorry,” she said shortly, her tone cold.

I glanced at her, but her pose hadn’t changed. “What are you sorry about?”

“For thinking I could do this. It’s too frustrating. You’re too frustrating. You won’t talk to me.”

I pressed my lips together. Stared straight ahead.

“This is what I mean!” She glared at me but I kept my eyes on the road. “If you’d just tell me what’s going on in your head, maybe I could help!” she snapped.

God, she was so maddening—how could I explain that I had to keep her at a distance for both our sakes?

“You told me earlier today that you wanted to let me in. To give you time to let me in.” Her voice had softened a little. “And I wanted to. I was willing to. It was *you* who asked for more tonight.”

She was right. I felt some of my hardness crumbling, and I grasped at it. “Look, this is me. This is what I do. And if it’s too frustrating for you, then it’s better to end this now.”

“End *what*? We never started.” She looked away from me again.

A few minutes later, I pulled in her parents’ driveway and put the truck in park.

“If you just wanted the lay, Sebastian, you could have said so,” she said bitterly. “You’re a great fuck.”

Then she jumped out, slammed the door and marched angrily over to her little house. When she disappeared inside without even pulling out a key, I realized she hadn’t even locked it tonight. *Damn it, Skylar! You should lock your doors!* The ferocious need to protect her growled

and bit at me beneath my skin, and I thumped the steering wheel hard twice, fighting the urge to go make sure it was secure now.

The urge won. Furious, I strode to her door and tried the handle. Locked.

“Fuck you!” I heard her cry from inside. “Go away!”

Just go. You're no good for her.

Back in the truck, I threw it in reverse and tore out of there, tires spinning.

* * * *

When I got home, it was after midnight. I went straight up to the loft, where her scent still lingered. After undressing, I lay on my stomach atop the sheets where she'd offered herself up to me, no questions asked. I closed my eyes and she appeared...sultry and brazen as she straddled me in the truck, shivering and sweet as she lay with me in the hammock, hotter than fuck sprawled under me in my bed.

Hurt and angry on the ride home.

Groaning, I punched the pillow twice and flipped over onto my back, staring at the sloping ceiling as my thoughts turned resentful.

Did she really think I'd used her just for sex? How could she, when I'd confessed to her how I used to feel about her ten years ago? When I'd told her today I wanted to let her in but needed time? Did she think I hadn't meant the things I'd said?

It was just like a woman to say she understood about needing to give a guy time and then demand to know his feelings at every turn. What the fuck did she expect from me? I'd told her before things even got physical with us that I was bad at relationships and not interested in one. What else was there to tell her? If she didn't want to hang out anymore, fine. Good. I didn't need her. I didn't need anyone. Better to be alone than a constant disappointment to someone.

At least she thought I was a great fuck.

Chapter 20

Skylar

“Wow. You look kind of rough. Late night?” Natalie’s brows lifted suggestively.

“Sort of.” Listlessly, I stacked coffee cups behind the counter. I’d hardly slept, and I was so tired when my alarm went off I’d nearly called in sick.

“Did you have fun?” Natalie prompted loading muffins into the display case.

“Yes.” I sighed. “And then no. I need coffee.”

“Help yourself.” She nodded toward the pot. “Why no?”

As we went through the morning routine, I filled her in on what I’d learned about Sebastian over the last couple days—his OCD, his fear of harming people, his past, his cabin, his family, his aversion to relationships, his former crush on me...everything I knew. I even told her about snooping in his notebook.

She gasped. “What? That’s awful! I can’t believe you did that!”

I grimaced. “I know. I shouldn’t have. But I was so curious about him, and he wouldn’t talk to me! He still won’t.”

She looked confused. “What do you mean? You just told me a crap ton of info about him. Didn’t he tell you all that?”

My chin slid forward. “Well, yeah, he tells me that kind of stuff. But he doesn’t—“ I stopped. He *did* talk to me, it wasn’t that so much. “Okay, it’s not that he won’t talk, it’s that he *will*, and he says these sweet, crazy things, and then stuff happens, and he freaks out and turns into an asshole.”

“What kind of stuff?” she asked, her eyebrows lifting.

I sighed. “Sex stuff.”

She gasped. “You had sex?”

“Yeah. And it was amazing,” I said sadly. “Best I’ve ever had.”

“Wow.” The first customers had started to arrive, so we had to get to work, but we agreed to go for a drink that night to talk, and I texted Jillian to join us too.

All morning and afternoon, I mulled over what had happened, and by the time we closed the shop I had to admit there’d been a lot more good moments than bad last night. Had I jumped down his throat too quickly? All he’d done was suggest driving me home.

But no. No.

I could tell that something was different with him after that last time in his room. I didn’t really think he’d used me for sex—I’d only said that to hurt him. But *something* had happened to make him go cold by the end of the night.

So what was it?

* * * *

After we closed, I went home and took a long nap. When I woke up, I felt more rested but had no better understanding of Sebastian’s motives for shutting me out. Maybe my sisters would have some insight.

We met at Trattoria Stella at seven and sat at the bar, Jillian flanking me on one side and Nat

on the other.

“So what’s new?” Jillian shrugged out of her jacket. She looked professional and mature in her dress trousers, pumps, and sleeveless silk blouse, and I immediately felt childish next to her in my ripped jeans and sandals.

Quit being stupid. It’s not about clothing.

“Skylar had amazing sex last night.” Natalie leaned forward, elbows on the bar. “And she’s gonna tell us about it.”

“Amazing sex. What’s that like?” Jillian asked wistfully, picking up the wine list.

“I wouldn’t know either,” Natalie replied.

“Why?” I looked at her. “The text messages?”

Natalie shrugged, her mouth in a grim line. “He says those are nothing. We’re just in a dry spell, I guess.”

“Everything seemed fine at dinner last night,” Jillian offered, “and speaking of dinner.” She elbowed me. “I take it the amazing sex was with Sebastian, the guy you brought to Mom and Dad’s?”

I nodded glumly.

“You don’t look too happy about it.” Jillian tilted her head. “What’s up?”

We ordered wine and some appetizers, and while we nibbled and sipped, I spilled to Jillian the story I’d told Natalie this afternoon.

“OCD is really rough on kids. I’ve got a few patients with it.” Jillian swirled her last ounce of chardonnay in her glass. “And you’re never really cured of it.”

“I know. He said the same.” I took a bite of calamari and didn’t even taste it. “But is it the OCD that’s making him so moody? One second he’s sweet and talkative and laughing, and the next he’s a total dickhead.”

Jilly shrugged. “It could be. Obsessive impulses can pop up at any time or they can be there all the time. If he’s struggling with something in his head, he might not be able to just ignore it and keep up the chatter. Maybe going silent is one of his strategies for dealing with the thoughts instead of trying to bury or avoid them.”

“Yeah.” I set my fork down, feeling full although I’d barely eaten. “Makes sense, I guess.”

“Did he say anything about the fiancée?” Natalie asked.

“Not much. Just that he fucked up.” I didn’t feel like blabbing the details he’d told me about their breakup—in fact, I felt strangely protective of them.

“Maybe he’s not over her?” Jillian suggested.

I shrugged. “No, I don’t think it’s that.” Suddenly I just wanted to go home and get back in my bed.

“Maybe he’ll call you to say sorry,” Natalie said, her blue eyes wide and sympathetic.

“He doesn’t even have my number. And he already said sorry.” My throat felt tight, which made me angry. Why should I cry over him? “He just didn’t say anything else.”

“What did you want him to say?” Jillian looked at me like I was a little crazy. “It was pretty much your first date, wasn’t it? Maybe you’re expecting too much.”

“Just forget it,” I snapped. “It obviously didn’t mean anything.” I felt bad that I was being so prickly when my sisters were only trying to help, but I was getting more depressed by the minute. Without the fun distraction of Sebastian on the horizon, I was right back where I started.

Chapter 21

Sebastian

The day after I slept with Skylar, I had an appointment with Ken, which I wasn't looking forward to. In fact, I nearly canceled it, but then I remembered how easy it was to backslide and justify when I got this way. I'd avoided therapy in the past because of something I didn't want to face, but that had only made it—and everything else in my life—worse.

So after a hike at Old Mission Point Park and a quick session at the gym, I showered, dressed, and went to his office.

"I slept with someone last night," I announced as soon as I slumped against the back of the sofa.

Ken, who hadn't even sat down yet, looked a little taken aback at my choice of openers, but recovered quickly, lowering himself into his leather chair. "Oh?"

"Yes. That girl—woman—I mentioned a couple weeks ago. The one I used to have the crush on." I stared at my jeans, an older pair that had been washed so many times the denim had faded to that blue color I loved.

He flipped back a page on his notepad. "This is the one you were going to approach again because you'd had the setback the first time?"

"Yes. I approached her the next day." I could still see the happy surprise on her face when she ran to the door to let my dripping wet ass in.

"It went well, I take it." Ken's tone was amused.

"Yeah." I frowned. "Too well."

"How so?"

"I went out with her Tuesday night, then spent almost all day yesterday with her, then last night we—" I rubbed the stubble on my jaw, still feeling her satin thigh against my cheek. "You know."

He kept a straight face. "Go on."

"At first I was troubled by the thoughts of harming her, and I can't say that's entirely gone away. But over the course of the day, it was replaced with this...I don't know. Wanting."

"Wanting for what?"

"To be someone else." *To be the kind of guy who can touch her every day without fear. To be the kind of guy who can get on a plane and fly her somewhere romantic. To be the kind of guy whose mind doesn't convince him of things his heart knows aren't true.* "To be different."

He lifted his shoulders. "Sounds like she likes who you are. Does she know about—"

"Yes," I interrupted. "Right up front I told her about my issues and why they make it tough to be close to me." I sighed, closing my eyes for a second. "She said she was willing to try."

"Good." He sat back and pushed his glasses farther up on the narrow bridge of his nose. "So why do you want to be someone else?"

"I want to be someone that could make her happy," I said, crossing my arms in frustration, hands fisted. "And I can't because my mind won't let me."

"There's more to your mind than OCD," Ken reminded me. "A lot more than that."

I studied my legs, seeing her straddling them. *Fuck.* I closed my eyes again, but she was there too. "I'm not right for her. She deserves better, or at least *normal*, and she'd realize that

fast. She's smart."

Ken crossed an ankle over a knee. "So let her make that decision. Fear of intimacy is not OCD, by the way. Neither is being afraid to commit. There's no reason why you can't give this a try, Sebastian."

"Yes there is," I said, annoyed with him. Ken was probably married with three kids and thought it was all so fucking *easy* when you met someone you wanted to be with. "My entire *being* is the reason. All the shit in my head. She says she likes me, but she also said I frustrate and confuse her. That shit doesn't go away."

"She's confused by your thoughts? Your compulsions?"

"No, I mean those would probably get to her eventually, but right now it's with my moods. My silences. Whenever I sense myself letting my guard down, I retreat into myself and push her away. But I have to, because I know how this ends."

Ken's brow furrowed and he set his notepad aside in favor of crossing his arms just like I was. "I'm not sure I understand. You're scared of physically harming her? That's why you push her away? Or you're scared of getting emotionally attached to her? Those are two very different things. Let's figure out what we're dealing with."

I hesitated. Some part of me didn't want to admit to Ken that I was scared for my own sake—that I saw myself falling for Skylar, that I was half in love with her already, but that I'd be unable to make it work, and losing her would destroy me.

"What happens when I make us miss dinner reservations for the tenth time because I have to check the locks again and we're halfway there?" I asked. "What happens when she asks me to slice the turkey at Thanksgiving and I can't pick up the fucking knife because I think I'll stab someone? What happens when she needs to fly somewhere and it's an odd day and I get down on my knees in the airport and beg her not to get on that plane?"

"I don't know, Sebastian. Because that's just fearcasting. It's not real. And you've got ways to cope with those things."

"Well, *I* know." I stared Ken dead in the eye. "I'd drive her mad. She'd fucking decide she's had enough, and she'd leave."

"But that's not what happened with your last relationship, is it?" he pressed. "You told me *you* called things off. And frankly, it was the right decision, was it not? You didn't actually want to marry her. That means your doubts were *not* inconsistent with your true feelings. That's not OCD, Sebastian. That's stopping yourself from making a mistake." He held up his hands. "Now. Maybe you went about it all wrong, but that's another matter entirely."

I dropped my gaze to my legs again, spoke a little more quietly. "It won't work in the end. I don't know how to make it work. She'll leave."

"And then you'd be alone again," Ken said. "Probably forever."

"Exactly."

"Because you're a horrible person who doesn't deserve to be happy."

I nodded. This guy knew me way too well by now. It was aggravating as fuck.

"Bullshit, Sebastian."

"Huh?"

He shrugged. "Bullshit. If you truly believed you're a horrible person, you wouldn't be here talking about her. You'd have given up already and holed up somewhere to be alone and miserable for the rest of your life. And you *do* know how to make it work—you're just scared."

I swallowed, unsure if I should tell Ken to fuck off or keep talking.

"The truth is, you're letting guilt from the past and fear of the future poison the potential of

this relationship already, even though you really like this woman and think you could be happy together.” He pushed up his glasses again and leaned forward, knees on his elbows. “But you have to be willing to try, Sebastian. You have to be willing to fail. And that takes guts.”

My arms came uncrossed. Was he calling me a coward? “I have guts,” I said defensively. “I’m just trying to think things through. I don’t want to make the same mistakes I’ve made before, Ken. This girl is...special to me. She’s different.” I took a breath. “She’s perfect.”

Ken shook his head. “Nobody’s perfect. Not her, not you, not me...I don’t even think this is all stemming from OCD. Mostly, I think this is just a man scared to let himself be emotionally vulnerable to a woman he cares about.” He smiled wryly. “Oldest story in the book.”

* * * *

Later that afternoon I took the rowboat out on the bay and thought about what Ken had said. Was he right? Was it plain old fear of rejection rather than my OCD getting in the way of my taking a risk? How could he know, anyway? He didn’t hear that voice in my head that made me doubt everything. God, what I wouldn’t give for some fucking *conviction* about something.

The truth was, I *didn’t* want to be closed-off and miserable for the rest of my life. Maybe I’d thought I could be alone, but that was before Skylar showed me what it was like to be with her. And it wasn’t all sexual—well, it was a lot sexual—but it was also emotional. She made me want to share things with her I’d never talked about outside therapy. She made me want to change the way I lived my life. She made me want to deserve her, or at least try.

But I’d fucked up already...Would she forgive me if I apologized again?

Probably. That was the kind of person she was. But she might not be willing to take another chance on me without some assurance that I wasn’t going to keep doing this. And how the fuck could I offer her that kind of assurance when I had none of it myself?

All I could do was try harder, and as I rowed hard back toward the cabin, muscles aching, I vowed that I would.

She was worth the effort.

* * * *

The following day, I spent the morning at my father’s office, getting caught up on some files he’d assigned me, and the afternoon covering the front desk for Lorena, his assistant, who had to go pick up a sick child at school. My dad had offered to call in a temp, but I assured him I could handle the job. Mostly I spent the time thinking of things I could do for Skylar, ways I could make it up to her for being such a dick. I still hadn’t contacted her, but I had an idea in the back of my mind.

Around three, a couple came into the office that I’d never seen before. She was little but curvy, like Skylar, with a thick head of wavy light brown hair and a friendly smile. He was dark-haired and taller than his wife—they both wore rings, I noticed—but not really a tall guy. I wondered if she was pregnant, because as soon as they entered the lobby, she sank into a chair and put both hands over her stomach. “Oof,” she said, closing her eyes.

“Are you okay?” the guy asked, putting a hand beneath her chin. “I can run you home, Mia. You don’t have to be at this meeting.”

“I’m fine, just woozy. We’re already here so let’s get this done.”

He straightened up and approached me at the desk. “Hi. We have an appointment with

Malcolm Pryce at three fifteen. Lucas Fournier.”

I noticed he had a slight accent. “Of course. I’ll let him know you’re here.” But after fumbling for a moment with the complicated phone on Lorena’s desk, trying to use the intercom, I gave up. “Okay, forget this thing. I’ll just go back there and tell him.”

“Thanks.” He smiled, but quickly turned his attention back to his wife.

I went down the hall and knocked on Malcolm’s open door. “Your clients are here. Fournier?”

“Oh, right. Fuck. ” He pushed back from his desk, which was a mess. It drove me crazy how disorganized he was. How the hell could he find anything in this shit pile? “I need a few minutes. I’ll meet with them in the conference room. Can you show them in?”

“Sure.”

“Great, thanks.” He stood up and straightened his tie before stacking some paperwork together.

Back up front, I found Lucas Fournier seated next to his wife, her hand in his. “Malcolm will be right up,” I told them. “In the meantime, I’ll take you into the conference room. I’m Sebastian, Malcolm’s brother.”

“Nice to meet you.” Lucas got to his feet and shook my hand before helping his wife rise slowly from her chair. “This is my wife, Mia.”

“Hi.” She shook my hand as well. “Sorry I’m a little green in the face. This pregnancy is killing me.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure what to say. “Congratulations?” I tried.

She smiled. “Exactly.”

“This way, please.” I showed them to the conference room and got them each a water bottle from the fridge in the kitchen across the hall.

“Thank you,” Mia said gratefully, unscrewing the cap and chugging the water. “I’m so thirsty all the time.”

“It’s because you’re working too much,” scolded her husband. But he did it gently. “You need to hire someone to help you.”

“Yes, I know. I’ll get around to it. But I haven’t found anyone I trust yet, and I like things done a certain way.” She tipped back the water bottle again and probably didn’t see him roll his eyes.

“Yes, I know. But you said you’d hire someone by the end of the month, and if you don’t, I will.”

“What do you do?” I asked, mostly to be polite.

“We own Abelard Vineyards,” he answered, pulling out his wallet and handing me a business card.

“Oh, nice.” I studied the card, my mind clicking. “I’ve heard of it. You took over from another winery a few years ago, right?”

“Yes, and bought some property adjacent to it, which is why we’re here. There’s a dispute over the property line with a neighboring farm, and we’ve already planted the area in question.” Lucas glanced at his wife. “We’re also expanding our tasting room and events schedule this summer, which is why we need to *hire more help now*.”

She ignored him. “Can I use your bathroom please?”

“Sure.” I gestured behind me. “It’s just down the hall to the left.”

“Thanks.” She looked at Lucas. “Be right back.”

He watched her leave, shaking his head. “She *just* went at the doctor’s office. It’s insane.”

I had no fucking idea what to say to that. What possible appropriate comment was there to make about his wife's bladder? Luckily, he saved me.

"This is our third, so you'd think I'd remember all this."

"Wow. Three." I'd never pictured myself with kids, and Diana hadn't wanted any, so I couldn't imagine life with one, let alone three.

"Yeah, that's why she needs an assistant. But she's so damn stubborn." He shook his head.

"What sort of help does your wife need? I know someone who was the assistant tasting room manager at Rivard, but she's looking to do a little more."

"Really?" Lucas looked interested. "What's she doing now?"

"She's working at Coffee Darling currently. That's her sister's shop. But I know she'd like something else."

He nodded. "I know that place. They have good croissants." Pulling out his wallet again, he gave me another card. "This is Mia's card. Pass this along to her, and have her give Mia a call to set up an interview." He smiled wryly. "Although my wife's so picky and so *moody* these days, I almost don't want to send your friend into the lion's den."

"She can handle moody," I assured him. "And I think your wife would like Skylar—she's beautiful and smart, and she works really hard."

Lucas grinned. "Is her last name Pryce?"

"Ah. No." The tips of my ears burned. "It's Nixon."

"Well, what are you waiting for, Pryce? Marry that girl." His grin widened before he tipped up his water bottle again.

I rubbed the back of my neck, which suddenly felt hot too. "Yeah, it's probably too soon for that. We've only been on one date."

Mia came back in the room, and his eyes lit up at the sight of her. "Sometimes that's all it takes," he said.

Chapter 22

Skylar

The Saturday before Memorial day, which was also the day of the reunion, I got off work a little early and moved my things into my parents' house.

Back in my old room, I plugged in my laptop and phone, shoved a few boxes under the bed, hung dresses, skirts, blouses, and coats in my closet, and stacked shoe boxes beneath them. Into the drawers of my old dresser went underwear, socks, pajamas, bottoms and tops, workout clothes and a couple bathing suits. I tried not to feel too depressed about having to live with my parents, but it was hard. Every noise I heard, from the slam of the dresser drawers to the squeak of my old bed springs, reminded me that I was right back where I started from ten years ago. Even the smell of the house hadn't changed—there was always a pie in the oven because my mother sold them at the little farm stand on the road.

Once everything was moved and unpacked, I went back to the guest house and helped my mother give it a thorough cleaning. She praised everything I'd done with it, from paint colors to linens to small finishing touches like the bin pulls, thanked me for my hard work, and told me I could stay at home as long as I liked. She knew something was up with me.

"Everything okay?" she asked, looking over at me from the window she was washing.

"Fine." I continued wiping down the counters.

She was quiet a minute, her cloth squeaking on the glass. "Sebastian is nice. He going with you to the reunion tonight?"

"No."

"Why not? I thought you graduated the same year."

"We did. He doesn't want to go." I finished with the counters and moved on to the oven, which I hadn't even used that much because I really didn't cook. Yet another adult skill I didn't have.

"Oh. What about Dani and Kristen?"

"They couldn't make it in. Dani's due in like two weeks, and Kristen's in-laws were visiting or something."

"Are you going alone, then?"

"I guess."

She stopped what she was doing and came over to the kitchen. "You don't sound very excited about it."

"I'm not."

"So why go at all?"

I shrugged. "Maybe I won't."

"Skylar."

I finally turned and looked at her.

"What's with you?" Her expression was concerned. "You're not acting like yourself."

Sighing, I leaned back against the oven. "I'm just trying to figure out some stuff and it's stressing me out. I'm not much looking forward to the reunion because I'm embarrassed about failing as an actress and being on Save a Horse and the whole dethroning thing, but I haven't done anything else worth talking about."

“You’ve done a lot of things!” She threw up one hand. “You’ve traveled, lived in New York City, been on television...how many people can say that?”

“I don’t know. Doesn’t seem like much compared to what I *said* I was going to do.” I threw the rag onto the counter. “Or compared to what Nat and Jilly have done. I just feel like an asshole, okay? That’s what’s with me.”

“Skylar Nixon, you listen to me,” she said so forcefully I had to meet her eye. “I did not raise my girl to talk that way about herself. So you went to New York to chase a dream and it didn’t happen, so what. You know what I always say about failure.”

“It builds character,” I mumbled.

“That’s right. Failure builds character, and character is what you need right now. Character and confidence. This is no big thing! You think you’re the first small-town girl with stars in her eyes that got disillusioned with the reality of trying to make it in that world?”

“No,” I said through clenched teeth. God, now I was a fucking cliché.

“Of course you don’t, because you’re not stupid. Now, your entire life everyone’s been telling you what a special snowflake you are—but the truth is, you’re just like the rest of us, honey. That means sometimes you’re gonna get what you want, sometimes you’re not. Sometimes you’re gonna get it only to find out it’s not what you thought it was gonna be. It’s all part of the journey. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said, even though part of me was like, *What do you mean I’m not a special snowflake? Was your mother supposed to say this stuff to you?*

“Good. You can walk into that reunion tonight and be proud of who you are, Skylar. You’re a beautiful girl with a great big heart and a lot of potential. Good Lord, if we all had the answers by age twenty-seven, life would be pretty boring, don’t you think?”

I curled my upper lip. “I hate boring.”

She laughed, coming around the counter to give me a hug. I let her, wrapping my arms around her plushy middle and taking comfort in her pie-crust-and-Windex scent. “You always have. Go have fun tonight. You can think about life’s big choices tomorrow.”

* * * *

The reunion was being held at The Corner Loft downtown. I got ready in my old bedroom, feeling a little like I was leaving for the Prom, only without a date. In the spirit of being more responsible, I’d decided to take back the outfit I’d purchased to wear to the reunion and wear something I already owned—a fitted LBD with cap sleeves that hit me about mid-thigh. It was a little more conservative than I usually dressed for parties, but I wasn’t feeling all that festive. For me it was all about the shoes anyway, and I wore black strappy Louboutin heels with a satin bow at the back.

I took an Uber downtown, arriving early as promised to help with decorations. The reunion committee was there already, placing centerpieces on tables, setting up a photo booth, and giving a photo montage a test run on a large screen against one wall.

Jennifer Krege, the committee head, greeted me warmly. We hadn’t been close friends, but I remembered her as an outgoing high-achiever. “You look beautiful,” she said. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Thanks. You look beautiful too.” She was very pregnant, her dress and flats were adorable, and I was jealous of the way she could wear an Audrey Hepburn updo. My ears made me look like a muppet when I tried. “What can I do to help?”

She put me to work setting out votive candles, and when that was done, she asked me to help her move some tables to make room for dancing. Other committee members said hello, and while no one squealed with joy when they saw me, no one spit in my eye either. Maybe the evening would be okay.

I relaxed even further after a couple glasses of wine, and even managed to have some fun reminiscing with former classmates about school plays, favorite teachers, choir trips, Homecoming parades and various dances. Maybe I was a little bit careful whenever I talked to someone to keep the conversation focused on the past, but other people seemed more interested in reliving the old days rather than talking about their current, everyday lives too. Only a few asked about Save a Horse, and when I confessed that pretty much everything they saw was staged, they said (much to my relief) that's what they figured since I'd never been anything like that in school, and we went on to talk about other things.

Only one creeper asked about the mechanical bull, but I quickly excused myself to the ladies room after that.

But as the evening wore on, I found I enjoyed hearing about the different paths my classmates had taken, and I didn't resent their happy marriages or adorable kids or professional lives. In fact, I was genuinely happy for them. There were even a couple divorces and failed start-ups and one juicy affair rumor, so I didn't feel completely terrible about my mistakes or lack of direction. When people asked what I was doing now, I simply said I'd moved to New York for a while but missed home and family, so I was working for Natalie and the family farm while I figured out what to do next.

Far from being judgmental, some of my married-with-kids classmates expressed envy at my having so much time to myself, at all the possible avenues still open to me. I smiled and agreed, but inside I thought it would be nice to owe a little time to someone. It made me think of Sebastian (again), and I wondered what he was doing tonight. I hadn't heard from him since I got out of his truck.

"I mean, seriously, you could like take off tomorrow and go to Rio or something and no one would even bother you," Katelyn Witzke was saying to me, although her eyes were scanning the room behind me. "Ooh! There's Sam Schatko. He looks bad. Did you hear about his wife? I heard she's screwing his boss. Can you imagine?"

"No. Hadn't heard that," I murmured, thinking if Sam Schatko had bullied his wife like he'd bullied kids in school, he probably deserved it. But I didn't say anything. Katelyn and I had run with the same popular crowd, but even back then I remember her always gossiping about someone. I hadn't liked it much then and found it even less tolerable now.

"Anyway, I can't even go to the bathroom without the boys following me in there. A shower by myself feels like heaven. And speaking of heaven, what god is that?"

"Huh?"

"That guy right there, behind you. He's gorgeous. Did he go to our school?"

Confused, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Sebastian walking through the crowd, looking right at me. My breath caught in my throat—he *did* look gorgeous. And so serious. Wearing a dark blue suit and white dress shirt without a tie, he turned every female head in the place as he crossed the room. My stomach flip-flopped madly as he came closer.

Wait, I was mad at him. I narrowed my eyes.

But as he came closer and I saw the uncomfortable, almost pained expression on his face, I didn't have the heart to brush him off when he got to my side. Had he come here for me? He had to.

Still, it had been three days. I could make him sweat five more minutes. I turned back to Katelyn.

“Do you know who that is?” she whispered, staring over my shoulder, her dark eyes like saucers.

“Mmhm.” I lifted my wine glass to my lips nonchalantly, trying not to betray the hammering in my chest. A moment later, I heard his voice low in my ear, felt the warmth of his body at my back.

“Hey.”

A shiver moved up my spine. I looked at him over one shoulder.

Then I waited.

For an apology. A how are you. A nice to see you. Anything that would indicate he knew he'd hurt my feelings and felt bad about it. Seconds ticked by and he remained silent, so I looked at Katelyn again, who was standing there with her mouth agape. “I'm sorry. You were saying?”

Then I felt it—his forehead dropping gently onto the back of my head, and resting there. Something squeezed my heart, but I refused to give in. Then I felt the hand on my hip, heard him whisper my name, and I knew I was lost.

Katelyn was positively riveted. “Is—is this your husband, Skylar?”

“No. This is Sebastian Pryce. Sebastian, do you remember Katelyn Witzke, used to be Katelyn Ellis?” He didn't move. “Say hello to the nice lady, Sebastian,” I said firmly.

Sighing, he came out from behind me and held out his hand. “Sorry. Hello.”

“Hi,” Katelyn said uncertainly, taking his hand. I could tell she was struggling to place him, just like I had, and I could also tell the moment it clicked, because she blinked, her mouth falling open again. “Wait a minute—you're not the Sebastian Pryce from our graduating class, are you?”

He nodded, looking more uncomfortable by the minute. Unable to stay mad at him when he seemed so miserable, I took his hand. “Sebastian moved back about a year ago, and we ran into each other at Coffee Darling. He's an attorney now.”

“Oh,” she said, recovering somewhat. “For what firm?”

“My father's.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't, and I scrambled to cover the awkward silence. “Hey, would you mind getting me another glass of Riesling, Sebastian?” I asked him. “I'm empty.”

“Sure.” He took my glass. “And then maybe we can talk?”

“Okay.”

He looked at Katelyn. “Can I get you anything?”

“No thanks.” She held up her glass of merlot. “I'm good.” As soon as he was out of earshot, she pounced on me. “Oh my god! Is that really Sebastian Pryce? The crazy one? Are you guys dating? He's so hot! Is he, like, normal now?”

Irrked by the word *crazy*, I was already frowning by the time she got to *normal*. “Don't say that about him. He wasn't crazy, he was just...shy. And a little anxious.”

She shrank away from me, screwing up her face. “Are we thinking of the same person? He was totally nuts. Remember all the weird things he used to do? The washing his hands thing and the way he'd arrange all his pens and pencils on his desk so they were the exact same distance apart and the way he wouldn't sit in an odd row in any classroom? I remember this huge fight he got into with Mr. Parlatto because he wouldn't sit in the first row.” She lifted her wine to her lips. “He was a total freak.”

I was furious now, my hands fisting at my sides. “I remember how he used to get teased for being a little different,” I snapped. “And I realize now how tough it must have been for him to go through school without any friends. I wish I’d have shown more compassion, something I think we *all* could use a little more of. Excuse me.”

I found Sebastian in line at the bar, fending off the advances of a drunk Cassie Callahan, our prom queen and head cheerleader. Fierce, territorial desire for him ignited inside me. “Ready to go? I need a ride home.”

“Yeah,” he said. “You don’t want your wine?”

“No. I’m done.” Without a word to anyone else, I took Sebastian’s hand and pulled him through the crowd, well aware of the stares we got. At the coat check, Sebastian held my coat for me and I slipped into it, then he tipped the woman two dollars before taking my hand again. My heart was pounding as we descended the stairs, and I had the desperate urge to kiss him, to wrap my arms and legs around him, to cover his body with mine and protect him—which was ridiculous. I was half a foot shorter than he was, even in my heels. And he was a grown, gorgeous, strong man, not the misunderstood child he’d been...but still. Something inside me just wanted to get him alone and hold him, whisper to him, take him inside me and make him feel good. He’d come here for me, even though he hadn’t wanted to. Even though he’d known how people would gossip and wonder.

We didn’t speak until we got outside on the empty sidewalk. “Fucking hell,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck as we turned the corner. His truck was parked on the street a few cars down. “How did you stand it in there that long?”

I didn’t answer. Instead I moved in front of him and threw my arms around his neck, kissing him hard, my feet coming right off the ground. His arms looped around my back

“What are you doing here, anyway?” I whispered against his lips.

“I came for you.”

Gratitude made my body tingle, but I wanted more. “Why?”

“Because I’m sorry.” He set me on my feet and looked me in the eye. “Because it wasn’t just about sex, and I treated you like it was. I was wrong.” Lowering his lips to mine, he kissed me before whispering in my ear, “Give me another chance. Please.”

“Oh, God, Sebastian.” Taking his face in my hands, I rose up on tip toe and looked up at him. “I don’t even feel like I have a choice. I want you too much.”

He exhaled, his breath warm on my mouth. “Come home with me. Stay the night.”

I kissed his lips. “Yes.” The side of his jaw. “Yes.” The base of his throat. “Yes.”

Chapter 23

Sebastian

Somehow I managed to drive home, although I don't know how, since the moment I turned the key in the ignition, Skylar unbuckled my belt, undid my pants, and stuck her hand inside my boxers.

"Move your seat back," she said, pulling my cock out and slipping it through her fingers.

I did as she requested, looking around to make sure no cops were in sight.

"Now drive," she demanded. "Or I'll stop."

Groaning, I put the truck in drive and tried to concentrate on the lines and lights and signs and traffic rather than on her hand working up and down my shaft, or her thumb circling the head, or the way she watched what she was doing, a little moan escaping her mouth. And speaking of her mouth.

When I turned onto the dark, quiet highway on the peninsula, she unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned toward me. "Careful now," she whispered. Before I could stop her, she fluffed her hair back behind her shoulders, fisted my dick, and put her head in my lap. The next thing I felt was her tongue swirling around the tip of my cock like it was an ice cream cone and she didn't want to waste a single drop. Oh fuck, oh fuck, now I was picturing her with my cum dripping off those round pink lips like melting vanilla ice cream.

I garbled something unintelligent, but what I meant to say was, *I can't drive, I can't drive*. It got even worse—better?—when she took just the head in her mouth and sucked, first gently and then hard, her fingers closing tight around the base.

My leg muscles tightened up. "Jesus, Skylar. Easy." I tried to relax my lower body muscles, which wanted to flex and thrust and push deeper into her mouth.

She took her lips from me with a little pop and giggled. "No, it's hard. And I think it's getting harder."

"Oh, fuck. Fuuuuuuuck," I moaned as she slid her lips down to her fingers, enveloping my cock in hot, wet heaven. She kept it there, half in her mouth, half in her hand and worked it from both ends, jerking and sucking until I was positive I was going to lose control of my truck, my orgasm, and my sanity.

"Mmmmm." She lifted her head again. "I can taste you," she whispered. "I love it."

My jaw ticked. "You are a very bad girl."

"I know." She rubbed the tip in circles against the flat of her tongue, and I cursed again, making her laugh.

God, that laugh. I'd never grow tired of it. And then I made the mistake of glancing down at that blond hair. I'd seen her from behind tonight, the moment I stepped into the room. I'd hated every step of the walk to get to her, feeling the eyes of everyone there on me, but I'd kept my focus on that hair and those curves in her tight black dress and those alabaster legs that had been wrapped around my body just a few nights ago. When I'd gotten close enough to see her shoes, blood rushed to my groin at the sight of the bows tied above the high heels.

I'd gone there to apologize, to show her I wanted to be there for her, to make an effort at being the kind of person she deserved—and then all I could think about was fucking her with her shoes on.

If I could hold out.

“Wait,” I begged her as I felt myself nearing the point of no return. We were getting close to the cabin, although I could hardly feel my foot on the pedal. “I don’t want to come yet. Just wait.”

“Not. Waiting,” said the little vixen, taking me all the way in. My cock hit the back of her throat and my legs seized up.

Fuck, I have to pull over. Veering to the shoulder, I braked hard and came to an abrupt stop, my breath coming fast, my heart pounding inside my chest. *Please don’t let a cop come by here tonight*—at least not for the next thirty seconds, which was all I’d have before—

“Jesus. Skylar.” Turning off the ignition and the lights, I grabbed her hair, gathering it in my fists.

“Yes,” she whispered, yanking me hard and tight and fast with her hand. I could feel her breath on my cock, teasing me, and it made me want to tease her a little.

I tightened my fingers in her hair, not pulling too hard, but not letting her get her mouth back on me either.

She gasped. “Oh, you’re so mean. Let me. Please. I just want to taste you.” She looked up at me with those big, soft eyes and I swear to fucking Christ I almost lost it right there in her face.

“You’re a very bad girl, Skylar Nixon.”

Her lips widened into a wickedly delighted smile. “Let’s play a game.”

Oh, Jesus. What was she up for? What was I up for? “What kind of game?”

“Just a little something I’ve been thinking about.” She licked me, and I let her. “Let’s pretend we’re back in school and we’re skipping class.”

I closed my eyes, willing myself not to come too fast, but the fact that she wanted to indulge in a little fantasy was liable to put me right over.

“And I’ve never given anyone a blowjob before. You’re the first, Sebastian.” Her voice had changed. It was higher-pitched, more girlish.

“Yeah?” I managed, relaxing my grip in her hair a little.

“Yes.” She brought her legs up beneath her so she was kneeling on the passenger seat. “Tell me what to do to make you come.”

“Uh, hearing you say that would’ve made me come already.”

She gave me a dirty look, then pouted. “Come on. Play with me.” A dirty little grin stretched her lips. “I just want to please you.”

When she lowered her mouth to me again, her ass in the air, I put one hand on it as she took me in deep again, slowly gliding her lips and tongue and teeth down my cock and back up, again and again and again.

“Fucking hell, Skylar Nixon. If this is your first blowjob, you are a goddamn prodigy.”

She giggled, pulling me from her mouth. “You like it?”

I licked my lips and palmed her perfect ass. “Yeah.”

“Have you seen me around school?” She arched her back, batted her lashes at me. “I’ve seen you.”

“Every day,” I growled. “And every day I want you just like this. On your knees for me.”

“Really?” She smiled shyly. “Tell me what to do.”

I inhaled. “Put my dick in your mouth,” I told her. (Somewhere inside my head was a skinny, awkward teenager screaming *Oh my god, you just told Skylar Nixon to put your dick in her mouth!*) “Yes, just like that.” She took me between her lips and resumed the slow bobs of her head, the tight squeezes with her hand. “It feels so good when you take my cock in deep like that.”

I love your tongue on it.” She paused with the tip hitting the back of her throat and I groaned, lifting my hips off the seat.

“Yes, yes...” I whispered. “Fuck yes, like that. You’re so beautiful, and I’ve thought about this so many times...” I loosened my grip on her hair further and she moved her hand and head faster, making my lower body tingle and clench and burn. Oh fuck, I was close—did she really want it this way?

“I’m gonna come, beautiful. You’re gonna make me come in your mouth...are you sure?” In answer, she went even harder at me, moaning and sucking and jerking me with tight, hard pulls, keeping me deep inside her mouth. *Oh god oh god oh god—fuck yes!* I spanked her ass hard, left my hand there as my climax ripped through me and I came in her mouth, my cock throbbing hard, my breath escaping me in loud, strangled growls.

When it was over, she swallowed and straightened up to her knees, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Was it good?” she asked, all wide-eyed innocence and full, puffy lips.

“Uhng” Yes, that’s what I said. Uhng.

She smiled slyly. “I hope so. I liked it. Maybe you’ll let me do it again sometime.”

“Maybe.” Grabbing her jaw with one hand, I pulled her face to mine. “But first, we’re going home to eat, because I’m starving.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “And then I’m going to punish you for being such a naughty little schoolgirl.”

Her eyes gleamed with blue fire. “I was naughty, wasn’t I?”

I kissed her lips. “Yes.”

“It was your fault. Wearing that suit and coming to surprise me that way.” She buckled herself in while I did up my pants, and as we drove the short distance to the cabin, I kept looking at her legs...and her shoes.

It gave me an idea, something I’d always wanted to try but never had the nerve to attempt because of who I was. But Skylar was different.

She understood me.

Chapter 24

Skylar

“Are you hungry?” he asked once we got inside.

“Sort of.” I slipped out of my coat, setting it and my purse on the couch. I had no idea if I was hungry—my stomach was doing all kinds of crazy acrobatics.

He went into the kitchen, flipped on the light and started rummaging around in the fridge.

“Sort of. Hm. Will you eat if I make something?”

“Sure. You cook?” Surprised, I went over to the little breakfast bar and sat on a stool.

“Yes.” After washing his hands, he pulled out a carton of eggs and a green bell pepper. “Are you impressed?”

I nodded. “Definitely.”

“Good.” He pulled two small tomatoes, a bag of shredded mozzarella cheese, and a package of bacon from the fridge. “Do you cook?”

I pursed my lips. “I’m more of a sous-chef.”

He grinned and grabbed milk, butter, and a bag of basil from the fridge before closing the door. “You can help.”

“Okay.” Excited, I joined him in the kitchen, washing my hands at the sink. “What should I do?”

“Can you chop the basil and slice the tomatoes?”

“Sure. Knife?” I looked around for a knife block but didn’t see one.

“They’re in the cupboard above the fridge. I’ll get you one.”

“Why the hell are they up there?”

“No reason.” He opened the cupboard, and I saw the block tucked inside it.

Liar.

“Hey,” I said. “Bring the entire block down.”

He froze.

“I mean it. Get the whole thing.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose a second, but then he reached in and lifted the block down, setting it on the counter.

We both stared at it.

I pulled out the biggest butcher knife he had. “Take it.”

Grimacing, he took it from me and held it in his hand.

“Are you going to stab me?”

“No!” He looked horrified.

“Good. Are you going to stab anyone, ever?”

“No.” He stared at the blade. “No, I’m not.”

“Then why do you have to keep your knives way the fuck up there?”

He shrugged. “Old habit.”

“Well, break it. If I ever come over to cook again, I need to be able to reach things. I’m high-cupboard challenged.”

He handed me the knife, taking a breath. “You’re right. I’ll move them down.”

“Thank you.” I located a cutting board and got to work, while he melted some butter in a

pan on the stove.

“Did anyone ever tell you,” he said, “you’d make a good therapist?”

I laughed. “No. But I’m glad you think so.”

“Hey, do you like champagne?” He opened the fridge and pulled out a long-necked green bottle. “My brother and sister-in-law got me this when the cabin was finished and I never opened it.”

“I love it,” I assured him. “Pop the cork.”

* * * *

Sebastian had no dining table, so we ate Caprese omelettes and drank champagne sitting next to each other at the breakfast bar, a lemon beeswax candle burning between us.

“That smells so good. I’ve got to get your sister-in-law’s information,” I said between bites. “Don’t let me forget.”

“I saw her yesterday. She gave me some samples and a card for you. Oh,” he said, as if he’d just remembered something. “I have something else for you too.” He set his fork down, stood up, and reached for his wallet, which was on the kitchen counter. “Here,” he said, handing me a business card.

“What’s this?” I took it from him and studied it. “Abelard Vineyards, Lucas and Mia Fournier.”

“I met them yesterday at the office. My brother Malcolm is helping them settle a property line dispute.” He sat down again and resumed eating. “They’re new owners, in the last couple years or so, and they’ve expanded. She’s pregnant, and she’s looking for an assistant. Someone to help with the tasting room and special events.” He glanced sideways at me. “I thought of you.”

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face. “Thank you. That’s so sweet.”

“He said she’s picky, but I know she’d like you.”

My heart sank a little. “Picky? I bet she wants a college degree. Or more experience.” I set the card down and picked up my champagne.

“Her husband didn’t say anything like that. He just said she’s choosy about who works there. You should call her.”

I bit my lip, bubbles lingering on my tongue. “You think so?”

Sebastian set his fork down again, grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me toward him, kissing my lips hard. “I know so. Who wouldn’t adore you?”

A blush crept up my chest. “It does sound perfect. I’ll think about it.”

* * * *

When we’d finished eating, we poured the rest of the champagne into our glasses and went out on the patio. This time we shared one of the Adirondack chairs Sebastian had put together, me sitting on his lap.

“Are you cold?” he asked me, and I loved the way his brow furrowed with concern. “I’m sorry. I’m in a suit but you have bare arms and legs.”

“I’m okay. I’ll let you know if I get cold.” I kissed his forehead, my right arm around his shoulders, my left holding my wine glass.

We were quiet for a moment, and it was a comfortable silence. I wasn’t even the one to break it.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said. “I thought maybe I’d fucked things up too much the other night.”

“I was a bit thrown,” I admitted. I took a sip of champagne. “Can you tell me what happened?”

He didn’t speak right away, and I didn’t force it. “I panicked.”

I looked at him. “Why?”

“Because you...do something to me I didn’t expect. Something I don’t even really understand.” He dropped his eyes from the water to my legs. “Sorry, I know I owe you a better explanation,” he started, but I hushed him with a kiss.

“You know what? Not right now you don’t.” I kissed him again. “You really don’t.” In all honesty, I didn’t even really understand what was happening between us, and I sure as hell hadn’t expected it either. Maybe tomorrow we’d talk. Tonight, I just wanted to be with him.

We kissed again, sweet and slow and searching, and eventually Sebastian set down his glass to brush my hair back from my face. “Do you know,” he whispered, “how many nights I dreamed about you?”

I shook my head, my pulse quickening.

“Countless. And in countless dreams, you weren’t as beautiful as you are in real life.”

I smiled. “You liked the blow job.”

He groaned. “Fuck yes, I did. But I like even more than that about you. You make me want to take chances I never thought I’d take again.”

“What kind of chances?”

“Being close to someone. It’s never easy for me, but you make it feel that way. And every time I’m with you, it gets easier.”

After a deep breath, I asked, “So in the car tonight...no bad thoughts?”

He shook his head. “None. You managed to shut down my brain entirely—at least, *that* part of it.”

“You thought with something else?” I asked playfully.

“That’s the fucking amazing thing. I didn’t think at all. I just felt.” Then he kissed me again, and again, and again, his tongue parting my lips, his hand traveling up my leg to my waist. “You have no idea what that’s like for me—to just feel. It’s heaven.” He put his hand on my face and kissed his way across the opposite cheek to whisper in my ear. “You’re an angel.”

I smiled at the sweet words, at the tingle between my legs, at the way I could feel his cock stirring beneath me. “An angel, huh?” My eyes closed as his mouth traveled down one side of my throat, his hand pressing the other side. His warm, wet tongue on my skin sent darts of lust straight to my core.

“Yes,” he said, his voice low and rough. “But this little angel has to answer for her earlier disobedience.”

My heart stopped for a second, then raced. “She does?”

“She does.” He slipped an arm beneath my knees and stood, cradling me as we walked toward the door. “And she better not talk back this time.”

I laughed, although a funny little tickle that felt a little like fear was fluttering in my belly. “Where are you taking me?”

“Shhh. My turn to play.” He went up the steps, opened the sliding door, and set me on my feet inside the cabin. “No questions. Go up to the loft and wait for me. Don’t get undressed and *don’t* take off your shoes.” His light eyes appeared black and glossy in the dark.

“Okay,” I whispered, wondering what he was planning to do with me up there. “Should I be

nervous?” It was a joke...sort of.

“Should have thought of that before you tried to run us off the road tonight.” He leaned in, one hand on either side of the doorway. “And before you mentioned you like it a little rough.”

My mouth fell open as he shut the sliding door and walked away. Oh my God, where the hell was he going? And what on earth was he planning? This was a guy who had some pretty violent images in his head from time to time...did they ever merge with his fantasies? I bit one knuckle, hesitating for just a second before hurrying over to the ladder.

My heart thumped hard as I carefully climbed the ladder in my heels, wondering if it was wrong to be so turned on by the fact that I wasn't one hundred percent sure being the object of someone's fantasies was entirely safe. I trusted Sebastian...but still.

What was he going to do to me?

Chapter 25

Sebastian

I hurried through the dark to my tool shed, where I knew I had some thick cotton rope left over from stringing the hammock. My heart was beating fast, both from nerves and excitement. I wanted to follow through with this, but I also hoped my brain wouldn't trip itself up. Indulge Bondage Fantasy with Skylar Nixon wasn't on the SUDS list, but it was definitely something I'd imagined and never thought I'd have the nerve to try. It was a risk, but I was getting better about those.

After picking up the wine glasses off the patio, I went around to the front door, solely for the purpose of making Skylar wait and wonder a little longer. She was so fucking adorable, and the look on her face when I'd told her to go up and wait for me was priceless.

I fucking loved that she liked to talk dirty, to fantasize out loud, to play a little. I'd never been with anyone like her before, and I'd never felt comfortable enough with anyone else to show that side of myself. Given my mental struggles, I was always so worried that they'd think I was sexually aberrant or perverse.

Although I felt a little perverted right now, sneaking in my own front door with coiled rope in my hand, setting the glasses on the table and switching off all the lights. But mostly I was fucking ecstatic...up in my bedroom waiting for me was the most impossibly beautiful angel I'd ever seen, and she was going to let me tie her up and get her off.

She just didn't know it yet.

I climbed the ladder slowly, drawing out the suspense. When I reached the top, I found her sitting primly on the edge of the bed with her hands in her lap, legs together and feet flat on the floor. She hadn't turned on the light, and since the night was slightly overcast, the moon didn't offer much in the way of illumination either. Still, her eyes went right to the rope in my hand, and I heard her breath catch.

But she didn't ask.

God, she was so fucking perfect. My heart was hammering, and the crotch of my pants was hot and tight. I set the rope on the nightstand and slipped off my jacket, tossing it next to her on the bed.

"Did I tell you how much I like your shoes tonight?" I asked, removing my cuff links. After slipping them into my pocket, I cuffed my sleeves, fighting the urge to rip off that black dress, throw her legs in the air, and fuck her into oblivion with my hands wrapped around her ankles.

She shook her head.

"I love them." Moving closer to her, I switched on the bedside lamp.

"Thank you." She looked up at me, her eyes wide and trusting and just a little bit worried.

"Are you nervous, angel?"

She glanced at the rope on the table, then back at me, licking her lips. "Maybe a little."

Was she playing or serious? She was an actress, after all. Maybe she knew how hot it was to play the innocent. Either way, her answer made my cock even harder. It was so goddamn sexy—being both her tormentor and her protector. I tipped her chin up. "You know I'd never hurt you."

"I know." Her voice was small but sure.

"Stand up."

She stood and gazed up at me through her lashes.

“Turn around.”

She presented me with her back, and I moved her hair aside and slowly unzipped her dress. Black lace appeared as the two sides separated, and my breath stopped.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a corset.”

“With straps?”

“Yes. It keeps everything smooth and in place under a fitted dress like this...plus I like nice underwear.” She shimmied the dress down her arms and legs and stepped out of it, laying it on the bed.

My legs felt like they might give out—below the corset, which laced up the back, she wore a matching black thong. I let my eyes wander from her long blond hair to the cinching of the corset to the perfect ivory curves of her ass down her slender legs to those fuck-me-I’m-adorable heels. *Jesus. I don’t care what anyone says, NO MAN is good enough to deserve this.*

But since I was here.

I moved up behind her and kissed her back, rubbing my lips softly against her skin. Her perfume was slightly floral, slightly sweet, like orange blossoms, and I inhaled, taking her scent into my head and chest. “You smell good enough to eat,” I said, running my hands down her arms from shoulder to fingers. “But first...” Pausing to grab the coil of rope from the nightstand, I brought her hands behind her back and crossed her wrists. As I wound the rope around them, I spoke to her in a low, soft voice. “You’re so beautiful, angel. The most beautiful woman I’ve ever known. That kind of beauty has a strange power over men—it makes us feel strong and yet weak. Protective of it and yet defenseless against it.” Her breath was coming faster, her chest rising and falling. I completed the knot and turned her to face me. “Does that make sense?”

She swallowed. “I don’t know.”

I slipped my fingers into her hair and lowered my mouth to hers, parting her lips with my tongue. It made me hungry. I dropped to my knees in front of her, as all men should. “Open your legs.”

She widened her stance and I kissed my way up each inner thigh, dragging my rough jaw along her smooth skin. “You have to remain standing. That’s my rule.” Then I put my lips on that black lace, fastening my mouth on her pussy, my hands running up the backs of her legs.

She whimpered, her legs trembling. “Oh god, oh god. Your mouth...”

I worked the little scrap of lace aside and fucked her with my tongue, my hands on her ass, holding her to me. She tasted like honey and oranges and I couldn’t get enough. Burying my face between her legs, I plunged my tongue inside her and then stroked it up her center, finally moving the lace aside with my hand so I could get at her clit.

The second I licked it, her knees buckled a little. I circled her thighs with my arms to hold her up as she moaned and cursed me.

“Enough, please,” she begged. “I can’t stand anymore.”

“Come for me, and I’ll let you lie down,” I whispered.

“I don’t know if I can, standing like this. My legs...” Her tone was pleading, desperate.

“You want to come. I know you do. Come on, angel.” I circled her clit with my tongue, sucked it into my mouth. I did all the things I’d done the other night that had made her gasp and sigh and moan, slipping two fingers inside her and twisting them the way she liked. The knowledge of her body, of her mind, intoxicated me. *I know what Skylar Nixon likes. I know what makes her come.*

And I did make her come, her pussy clenching around my fingers, her voice crying out in waves that matched the rhythmic spasms. When her legs finally gave way, I flipped her onto her stomach so her upper body lay across the bed, bound wrists at the small of her back. Her slender arms were pale against the black satin corset. *God, her ass is all mine. And fuck, those legs. Those shoes.* “Don’t move,” I told her, yanking her wet underwear off. Then I stood and unbuckled my belt, undid my pants.

“Yes,” she panted. “I want it.”

“Yes, what? What exactly do you want, angel?” Oh Jesus, I would probably go to hell for tying Skylar Nixon up and making her beg me to fuck her. But right now, my soul’s eternal damnation seemed like a fair price for this night with her.

“I want you, Sebastian,” she said breathlessly. “I want you to fuck me. Hard.”

“Hard?” I took my dick in my hand, stroking it as I took in the image of her bent over my bed, hands tied, legs straight, feet apart. I teased her pussy with the tip, smearing wetness from front to back, sliding it in the crack of her ass.

“Yes.” Her eyes were closed, her mouth open.

“Apologize.”

“Huh?” Her eyes popped open.

“Apologize,” I growled, pushing inside her. “For being so beautiful. For making me want you so badly. For breaking me down. For making me so fucking hard for you all the time.” Words slipped unbidden from my mouth as I grabbed her hips and thrust slowly in and out. “From the moment I saw you, I knew you could undo me. I knew I should stay away from you, but I couldn’t. I can’t. The only thing I can do is make you mine.”

“I’m not sorry,” she rasped, her bound hands clenching into fists just like her pussy was tightening around my cock. “I’ll never apologize. Never.”

“So you want this?” I pulled her back onto me, slowly but not gently. I watched myself disappear inside her body, mesmerized.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I want this. I *want* to break you. I want to be yours. I want you inside me.” Her voice hushed to a whisper. “I want everything.”

“Fuck. *Fuck.*” It was too much—all off it. The rope around her hands and her pale skin and curvy body, her words and the memory of her, the possibility of us. I held her hips and fucked her fast and hard and deep, and nothing—*nothing*—in my entire life had ever felt as good. Strength and power and indestructible certainty that I could do *anything* flooded my veins, and as I reached the breaking point, my entire body seizing up and then exploding deep within her, all I could think was taking *her* inside *me*, caging her within my bones, enclosing her within my ragged, imperfect puzzle of a heart.

Mine.

* * * *

Later, after I’d unwrapped her wrists and kissed the tender red marks on her alabaster skin, we undressed each other and slid between the cool white sheets in my bed, arms wrapped around each other tight. She fell asleep first, and I lay there stroking her hair, ignoring the ghosts that tried to fill my head with punishing dread, filling it instead with the scent of her skin, the softness of her breath, the weight of her head on my chest. Then I closed my eyes and held her as I drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, I woke first, facing away from her, one of her arms slung over my torso. I

picked up her hand and kissed it before sliding out of bed and pulling on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt from my dresser. Soft, golden morning sun was just starting to come in through the skylight, and I smiled at the way it fell across her features. I could get used to seeing the first light of day on her face.

It reminded me of a poem I liked by Robert Frost about the ephemeral beauty of the beginnings of things.

Was this our beginning? Would we always remember the first night we spent together? The first morning here at the cabin?

Don't be fucking melodramatic, snapped the voice. You have no idea what she's feeling. You think the things she said to you when you had her tied up and defenseless were real? It was a fucking game.

Fuck. It had been kind of a game, but I hadn't sensed any guile or pretense in her. It felt like she was speaking the truth. I *wanted* it to be the truth.

Could this work between us? I wasn't ever positive about anything, but something tempted me to think maybe, just maybe, Skylar Nixon could be the one woman who was strong enough, sweet enough, forgiving enough to be mine. The thought was both terrifying and beautiful.

Quietly I climbed down the ladder, used the bathroom, put the coffee on, and took my notebook out onto the porch. I felt rested, but throughout the night I'd woken up repeatedly with words scattered in my head, and I wanted to see if I could make some sense of them on paper. Sometimes letting the voice have his way in writing demystified it—lessened its foreignness inside my mind. These were *my* thoughts, *my* words, *my* feelings, and I owned them. I wasn't their victim. Pulling the pencil from the spiral where I'd tucked it, I looked out into the woods for a few minutes, letting the raw words weave themselves into poetry.

Skylar

You fall softly
like snow
mine

I am beneath you (I fall hard, like stone)
so I will catch you
on my tongue
You melt there like sadness
mine

I tied your hands (*mine*)
a vain, exquisite endeavor
to break you
mine

Shards of bone and soul
mine
littered the bedroom floor this morning
I stepped carefully around them
for fear of injury

mine

but you are brave, I think

You will gather them close
and try to smooth their jagged edges

mine

with the fearless, infinite grace
of your foolish heart

mine

Chapter 26

Skylar

Guess he wasn't kidding about the sunrise.

I had the day off, so arising at dawn hadn't exactly been my plan, but when I woke up and found myself alone in Sebastian's bed, I missed him right away. Holy hell, last night had been amazing. From the blowjob in the car—I don't even know what came over me, I'd *never* done that before—to the sex in his bedroom to the things he'd said...my mind was spinning. Jesus, had he really tied me up? Sebastian Pryce, who was so nervous about hurting people he kept his sharp knives hidden above the fridge, actually tied my hands behind my back so he could make me feel helpless against him?

I brought the sheet up to my mouth and giggled silently. God. He was such a study in contradictions. But I loved that he felt comfortable enough with me to do it. I loved the things he said while he did it. I could still hear his low, intense voice in my mind.

Apologize... For breaking me down... The only thing I can do is make you mine.

And I'd loved every second of it. I'd meant what I said—I'd never apologize for wanting him—but I didn't see it as breaking him. And as for being his... my stomach tightened at the thought. What did he mean by that? Like *his* his? The forever kind of his? Or was it just great sex? Maybe he was the kind of guy who said things in the dark he wouldn't repeat in the light. I wanted to talk about it, but it would probably be like pulling teeth. Tugging the sheet from what were probably perfect hospital corners, I wrapped it around myself and managed to get down the ladder without slipping.

The smell of freshly made coffee filled my head as soon as I started to descend. I didn't see him in the kitchen or living room, and then I noticed the front door was open. Through the screen door I heard the morning song of the birds, and I remembered he liked to watch the sunrise from the front porch. I set the sheet aside and scooted into the bathroom, where I found a new toothbrush and washcloth laid out for me. *God. He's the sweetest asshole ever. This could be really good between us...will he try?* After using the bathroom, brushing my teeth and scrubbing off what was left of last night's makeup, I poured two cups of coffee from the full pot, and waddled to the door, holding the sheet tight under my armpits.

"Hey," I said through the screen. He'd been sitting there writing, and jumped at the sound of my voice. "Sorry, didn't mean to disturb you."

"No, it's all right." He quickly closed the notebook, stuck the pencil inside the spiral, and set it on the porch floor before standing. "I didn't expect you up so early. Here, I'll get the door."

"Thanks," I said. "Wow, it's so beautiful out there."

He opened the door and took the cups from me. "I like your outfit."

"You're not mad I pulled the sheet off the bed?" I stepped past him onto the porch and took one cup from his hand.

"Uh, no." He let the screen door slap shut and brought his coffee to his lips. "I'm particular, but I'm not totally insane." He paused. "Usually."

Smiling, I swished over to the other rocker, sat down, and looked around. "So this is sunrise."

Sebastian laughed. "This is sunrise. Ever seen one before?"

“Yes. But not after a night’s sleep. The bars close late in New York, as you know, so if I worked till close, sometimes the sun was coming up by the time I got off. But it didn’t look like this. Or sound like this or feel like this.” I inhaled, the scent of dark roast coffee mixing with the fresh, woody air. “Or even smell like this.”

Nodding, he sat in the other chair. “The sunrise in the city is definitely different than it is out here.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, and I tried—I really tried—not to bombard him with personal questions right away. But there was just so much I wanted to know about him! Everything from *What do you like to eat for breakfast* to *What do you write about in that notebook* to *What did you mean last night that you wanted to make me yours* to *Are you ready for another round?*

But I didn’t want to spook him too soon, and anyway, it was nice just sitting here. *I could get used to this.*

Whoa. Whoa there.

Somewhere inside me, rational sense suddenly spoke up. *You just spent your first night together, so don’t go getting all attached to him or this or anything else. He already told you he moved here to get away and doesn’t want a serious relationship, so don’t go thinking one night of great sex was going to change his mind about that. You are not a special snowflake.* I lifted my cup to my lips.

“No frowning at sunrise.”

I sipped and smiled at him. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to. I was just thinking too hard.”

“Bout what?”

Inhale. Exhale. “About last night.”

A dark look crossed his face, and he looked out into the trees. “It was too much for you.”

“No! No, not at all. I liked it.”

“Did you?” He studied me.

It was cool on the porch, but my body warmed. “I loved it, actually.” I dropped my eyes to my coffee. “I’ve never done that before.”

“Me either.”

I looked up, surprised. “No? My God, you knew exactly what you were doing! You seemed so sure of yourself.”

“I know how to tie a good knot. And I’d certainly thought about doing it plenty of times.” He looked away from me for a second. “I’ve just never met anyone I felt comfortable enough to do it with.”

“Not even your fiancée?” I couldn’t resist.

“Especially not her.”

Oh my God, what did that mean? I was trying to work it out in my brain when he reached over and tugged on the sheet. “Hey. Stop analyzing. Last night was fun. Let’s leave it at that.”

What? Was he fucking kidding? I couldn’t leave it at fun! What about all the things we’d said? Didn’t they mean anything? “But—“

“No buts. Come here.”

A little frustrated, I got up, coffee and sheet and all, and went over to his chair, where he opened his arms and motioned for me to sit onto his lap. His chest was warm, and I leaned back against it, trying not to feel disappointed that he wasn’t going to tell me anything else.

And then the notebook at our feet caught my eye.

“So you really like that notebook, huh? Are you a writer too?” I ventured.

“No. Not really.”

“I noticed you have it with you a lot.”

He hesitated. “It’s part of my therapy.”

“Oh.” I paused for a sip of coffee, wishing I could see his face. Could I keep asking or was I pushing it? “Like a journal?”

“Sort of.”

And that was it. We talked a little about the reunion and the job at the winery he wanted me to apply for, but nothing more personal. When our cups were empty, Sebastian offered to refill them, and I stood. He kissed my cheek. “You’re even prettier with no makeup on. Do you know that?”

I blushed. “Thank you. I appreciate the things you left out for me in the bathroom. You do that for all your dates?”

“Stop it. I’ve never had a woman here, Skylar. You’re the first.”

As I watched him go inside, the thought of another woman here with him struck me with a jealousy so fierce it knocked the wind out of my chest. Shit. I really liked him. I wanted this. Why wouldn’t he talk to me? I looked down at the notebook again, the powerful urge to peek inside it overwhelming me.

No. Don’t do it.

But when I heard the bathroom door open and shut, I acted without hesitation. I wanted to know—was he feeling anything like I was? Was he just too reticent to tell me? Crouching down, I flipped quickly to the last page and looked to see what he’d written. My heart was already beating madly when I saw my name.

Skylar

You fall softly

like snow

mine

I read through the words on the page quickly, gooseflesh covering my skin, and when I didn’t hear the door open again, I read through it once more, savoring the words this time. Tears welled in my eyes—I did want to gather the broken pieces of him close to me. But what did he mean by my “foolish” heart? Was he saying I was dumb to think this could work?

I flipped back a couple pages and the word *kissing*. As I began to read, my stomach churned.

I’m kissing her. We’re on the couch, and she’s sitting beside me. My hands are in her hair, and it occurs to me that I could have the urge to put my hands on her neck and squeeze her throat, cutting off her air. I am weak and will give in to this urge. I pull back from the kiss and she smiles at me. I wrap my hands around her throat and watch the confusion come over her face, her blue eyes widening in concern. She is vulnerable and helpless and trusting. Helpless to control the impulse, I squeeze hard, so that she cannot breathe. Her pale complexion purples as she struggles to breathe, and her eyes are terrified. In a moment, it’s done. I’ve crushed the life out of this beautiful creature, and I deserve to die for it.

The screen door opened. “What the fuck?”

I jumped up, my face burning hot, my skin prickling with shame. “Oh god, Sebastian. I’m sorry, I—“

“Godammit, Skylar. This is personal.” He set the cups on the wood floor so hard coffee sloshed over the edges and picked up the notebook, which was still open to the page I’d read. As he glanced at it, his complexion darkened. “Fuck. Fuck!”

“I’m sorry,” I said, tears spilling over. “I just wanted to know how you felt and you won’t tell me. But...what is that stuff about choking someone?” Those words...what the hell was that about? Was it some kind of fantasy? Or was it therapy?

He slammed the notebook shut and stared at me. I’d never seen such rage in his eyes. “Did you need to see if I was the monster I say I am? Got your fucking answer, didn’t you.”

“Please. I don’t think you’re a monster.” I yanked the sheet up higher and wiped at the tears coursing down my cheeks.

“Yes, you do. I can see it on your face.

“No. It was so wrong of me to look in there, Sebastian, and I’ll never do it again. Please say you’ll forgive me.”

He closed his eyes, inhaled and exhaled loudly.

“Talk to me!”

He opened his eyes and stared hard at me. “I’m going to ask you something, and I want the truth. Did you look in it the first time? The time I left it at the shop?”

Oh fuck. This really sucked. I wasn’t even wearing clothes—I had no armor at all. Taking a deep breath, I nodded. “Yeah. I did.”

“What did you see?”

I swallowed hard. “I saw the list of things with the numbers, and I saw that Talk to Skylar Nixon was written.”

“Anything else?” The cold fury in his voice made me tear up all over again.

“Yes. I saw a poem you must have written about me the day we saw each other again at the beach. It was so beautiful, Sebastian. I was so drawn to you after reading it.”

He laughed bitterly. “Really.”

“Yes! At least I’m being honest!”

“You got caught. You have to be honest *now*.”

I bit my lip, torn between wanting answers and knowing I should shut up. “What was that about choking a woman? Was it therapy? Was it about me?”

“Fuck off. Not everything in my life is about you.” He turned and stormed into the cabin, leaving me to sob uncontrollably on the porch.

God, why couldn’t I have minded my own business? Why hadn’t I just asked him directly what I wanted to know? Why couldn’t he and I make this work, and was it even worth trying? If our start was this rocky, should we just forget it?

I collapsed onto the porch steps and cried hard into my arms.

Chapter 27

Sebastian

Up in the loft, I threw the fucking notebook on the floor and sat down hard on the edge of the bed. I was mad as fuck, and I was horrified. Skylar had seen really personal things that I'd written—things that I wasn't comfortable sharing out loud with her yet, so I'd lashed out. The SUDS list was one thing, I might have talked with her about that eventually anyway, but the stuff about her... God. She'd seen the exercise Ken had recommended where I imagine the worst—I'd written that the night I'd seen her at the beach in the attempt to lessen the impact of the thought, to wrest control away from it. I'd written in graphic detail about strangling her—my god, what she must think.

It was a matter of time, anyway.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Maybe that was true, I'd treated her with unnecessary cruelty. And yet she'd apologized and asked my forgiveness. I certainly knew what it was like to mess up and be sorry for it.

I was a monster.

You warned her. She can't say you didn't.

"So now what, asshole?" I muttered, running my hand over my hair.

From downstairs I heard the screen down shut, and a moment later I saw her blond head coming up the ladder. She got to the top, struggled with the sheet, then stood up tall. Her face was tearstained and her eyes were red, but the set of her chin was defiant.

"Here's the thing," she announced. "I'm not letting you ruin this."

"Ruin what?"

"Our beginning. I don't care what you wrote in that book, you are not a monster and I'll never think that. So if that's what has you all in fits right now, let's just get that out of the way."

I was too stunned to say anything.

"And I was completely wrong to look in your notebook the way I did. I'm sorry." She lifted her shoulders. "I just wanted to know how you felt."

I feel like I'm falling in love with you, and I'm scared.

"Sebastian." She walked toward me, and I focused on the sheet wrapped around her body. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know," I said lamely. I stared at her bare feet, toe to toe with mine.

"Yes, you do. You're scared. I am too." She put her hand under my chin and forced me to meet her eyes. "I was there last night, remember? I heard the things you said. I said things back to you, and I meant them."

Finally, I looked up and met her eyes. "I meant the things I said too."

"Okay." She rubbed my arm. "Then we have something worth fighting for, something young and a little unsteady on its legs, but it can get stronger."

"What if this is just too much work?" I blurted, hating myself for sounding like a coward.

"For who?"

"Both of us. What if I keep fucking up and you get tired of having to forgive me?"

"Hey." She knelt at my feet. "I don't want you to be anyone other than who you are. I don't know how else to tell you that. And look, it was me today that fucked up and needed forgiveness,

right?”

“I guess so.”

“And I’ll never do that again. Your journal is your business. Your therapy is your business. I was totally wrong to look in it.” She hesitated. “Even if your words about me did give me goose bumps.”

I laughed a little, embarrassed but pleased. “Did they?”

“Yes.” She looked up at me with wide, searching eyes, and I felt my dick begin to stiffen. “But why did you say I had a foolish heart? Do you think I’m a fool? Sometimes I think I’m not smart enough to interest you.”

My chest caved. “Skylar. I didn’t mean it like that.” Leaning down, I took her head in my hands and kissed her softly, then reached for the sheet wrapped around her. She stood and let it fall, and I grabbed her beneath the arms, tipping her back on the bed. I stretched out over her, covering her naked body with my clothed one, brushing her hair back from her face.

“I don’t think I’m good enough for you, you know that. And I’m going to frustrate and confuse you, just like you said. Maybe it’s the OCD, maybe I’m just difficult—I have no fucking clue. But I won’t deserve all the chances you’ll have to give me.”

She wrapped her legs around me and took my face in her hands. “I’m going to give them, though. And if that makes me a fool, well…” She smiled. “At least I’ll be your fool.”

I buried my face in her neck, not at all sure I wouldn’t tear up. “Mine,” I said hoarsely, kissing my way down her chest.

“Yours,” she whispered, arching her back when I took the tip of one breast in my mouth. “Yours,” she whimpered a few minutes later when I licked two fingers and circled them over her clit, slid them inside her pussy. “Yours,” she cried a few minutes later as I brought her to orgasm with my hand, my teeth biting down on one hardened nipple.

I hated taking my lips from her skin even briefly, but somehow she managed to pull off my shirt, and undo my jeans. After shoving them off, I settled between her thighs again, sliding my cock along her clit.

She dug her heels into my legs and clawed at my back. “Inside me. Please. I miss you there already.”

Another time I might have teased her, made her wait a little longer, but this morning I just wanted to do as she asked, feel her stretch and open for me, take me inside. Our mouths were open and hot and panting against one another’s as I slid inside her and began to move, slowly at first, reveling in every inch of slick, tight friction. She writhed and bucked beneath me, grabbing my ass with both hands, pulling me in deep and gasping in pain when I stabbed too deep.

“Too hard? I don’t want to hurt you,” I whispered, but my hips rocked harder and faster, taking orders from her hands.

“You won’t, you won’t,” she said, her eyes shiny and wild. “I love it deep like that. You have no idea how good it feels.”

I almost laughed. “I do, I promise.”

“Oh god.” She picked up her head, burying it in the crook of my neck, licking my throat, lifting her hips to meet mine thrust for thrust, driving me to the breaking point. “You make me come so easily, it’s like fucking magic.”

“Yes. Come with me,” I growled low in her ear, feeling that invincibility surge inside me. “Come hard on my cock, let me feel it.”

“Oh!” Her climax hit and she dug her nails in deep and held on tight, her lower body going stiff as I drove inside her, again and again. Then I buried myself as deep as I could, coming long

and hard, and still felt like I wanted more of her, wanted to give her more of me. *I miss you there already*, she'd said, and I hadn't even been inside her yet. But I knew exactly what she meant. Even as I held her trembling body close to mine, I mourned the inevitable loss of her. *Nothing gold can stay.*

Chapter 28

Skylar

The following week, I called Abelard Vineyards. Sebastian and even Natalie had encouraged me to do it Monday, but it took me a few days to work up the nerve. I wanted to be prepared in case she asked about experience, a college degree, why I'd been fired from Rivard, or even Save a Horse, on the off chance she'd watched.

So it was Thursday afternoon by the time I punched the number into my cell.

"Hello?"

"Hello, I'm calling for Mia Fournier."

"This is Mia."

I took a breath. "This is Skylar Nixon. I got your card from my friend Sebastian Pryce, and—"

"Oh, at the law firm! Yes! Lucas mentioned you might be calling."

I smiled, relieved that she knew who I was. "Yes. I understand you're interviewing for an assistant?"

"I am. Are you interested in the position?"

"Yes," I said, biting my tongue before I added, *but I'm not sure I'm qualified.*

"Great. Can you interview next week?"

I told her I could, and we set up an interview at Abelard for nine AM Tuesday. I'd have to make sure I got that day off from Coffee Darling, but since Natalie was so supportive, I didn't think she'd mind.

I went to bed that night happy but nervous, making a list on my phone of all the things I needed to do—print out a resume, plan my outfit, research Abelard Vineyards. I needed to ask Sebastian what he knew about them since he'd met them already, but that would be fairly easy. I'd spent three nights out of the last five at the cabin and I was here now.

"Stop worrying. She's going to love you." He turned back the sheet and climbed into bed, where I was sitting up cross-legged, my phone in my lap.

I didn't look up. "Maybe. We'll see."

"Stop." He grabbed my phone and hid it behind his back.

"Hey!" I got to my knees and tried to get it back.

"Enough," he said, holding it out of reach. "You have to get up too early to be doing this right now."

"Come on, give it back. I need it." I made several unsuccessful attempts to get it, and he laughed.

"You don't. You need to relax, I can see it on your face. Don't make me tie you up."

Sighing, I sat back on my heels. "Very funny."

"You're fucking adorable when you pretend to be angry with me." He set my phone on his nightstand and tackled me, throwing me onto my back. Now that we spent so much time together, I knew why his body was so hot—he went to the gym every fucking day! I was a slug compare to him. And he worked at the law firm a lot too. He'd worked a full day every day this week, and then worked out after that. We usually didn't see each other until dinner time or later, which was why I ended up spending the night so much.

It wasn't that I missed him so badly the two nights we spent apart I could hardly sleep. Nope. No way.

I squealed as I landed, grappling with him but laughing as he pinned my wrists to the bed near my shoulders. "Not a fair fight at all."

"Nope." He kissed me, his lips and tongue a soft contrast to the hard strength of his hands cuffing my wrists. "My sister-in-law wants to meet you."

"Oh?" A little thrill moved through my body.

"Yes. She came into the office this afternoon, and I asked her about supplying your parents' guest houses with products. She has a catalog she's going to give me to give to your mom."

"Great, thank you."

He kissed me again, on the lips first, then the neck and chest over the t-shirt of his I'd taken to sleeping in. "She asked if I'd like to bring you to their house for dinner."

"And what did you say?"

He barely took his mouth off me. "I said fuck no, you have terrible table manners."

I rolled my eyes and kicked my legs at him. "You're so mean. Get off me."

"Okay." He flipped to his back, dragging me on top of him, holding my wrists above his head. "Better?"

"Mmmmm." Was I mad at him? I forgot. I drew my legs astride his hips, and slanted my mouth over his. As the kiss deepened, I rocked my hips against his thickening cock, feeling desire spark at my center. God, I was beginning to think I was a fiend, the way we'd been going at it almost every night this week. Last night I'd slept alone in my old bed, and I'd been so lonesome for him I had to get myself off like a lust-crazed teenager, and I still could hardly sleep.

I'd been really good about taking my pill, but even so, in the back of my mind I wondered if any hormonal treatment would be strong enough to fend off his crazy smart, super ripped sperm. And holy shit, what would I do then? "I'll be right back," I whispered.

He didn't stop me from going for the ladder, which told me he probably knew what I needed to do. My pills were in my purse, which was downstairs, so it was a couple minutes before I climbed up again. The lamp was still burning, and the sight of shirtless Sebastian waiting for me in bed, on his back, the sheet pulled up to his hips, outline of his cock clearly visible, nearly made me trip over my own feet.

Grinning, I jumped on him, straddling his hips again, my hands on his warm, hard chest. He grabbed the hem of the shirt I wore. "Not that I don't love seeing you in my clothes, but I love it even more when you're naked."

I happily whipped off the shirt and tossed it aside, leaving only my panties between us. Sebastian, I discovered, always slept naked.

No complaints here.

His hands moved to my ass as I leaned down to kiss him, my breasts brushing over his chest. He moaned, his tongue stroking between my lips, his hips lifting to push up against me. I moved my body over his, sliding my clit along his thick, hard cock, feeling my underwear grow damp.

"Take them off." His voice was low and firm.

I smiled down at him. "Fiend."

"For you I am."

I bit my lip. "Did you miss me last night?"

"So much I could hardly stand it."

Shaking my head, I said, "Me too. What's with us? Is it because the sex is so good?" Then I

panicked. “I mean, it’s good for me...I hope it’s good for you.”

He spanked me lightly. “Stop. It’s amazing for me, and you know it. I can’t get enough.”

That put the grin back on my face and I swung one leg over so I could work my panties down my legs. I was so anxious to feel his cock hit The Spot I left them hanging around one ankle as I straddled him again. But he had another idea.

Shimmying down the bed until his head was between my knees, he looked up at me. “I used to lie awake at night and think about doing this to you.” He kissed one inner thigh and then the other, rubbing his scruffy cheek against the sensitive skin there before wiggling down even further and dragging his tongue up my center.

I shivered, falling forward to grip the simple wooden headboard. “Oh god, Sebastian. Your tongue is just...” But I couldn’t even find a word for it. Light and colors danced behind my closed eyelids as I dropped my head back, undulating my hips over his mouth. His arms looped over my legs, pulling me tighter to his face, and when I looked down I almost lost it at the sight of those gorgeous green eyes in the V between my legs.

“Fuck,” I breathed as he worked my clit with the tip of his tongue. “I didn’t even know enough to imagine this. I had no idea it was even possible to feel this good.” It was true—I’d been with some really good-looking guys, but somehow being incredibly handsome didn’t always correlate to being that skilled in bed. Natalie and I agreed that slightly less attractive guys were probably better lovers because they had to work harder for it. Like she once confessed that Dan had kind of a small dick but was really good with his hands.

Sebastian, however, had everything.

Everything.

Including his tongue buried in my pussy.

And when the tension at my core whirled into a vortex too strong for my body to contain, he moaned along with me as I rode out my orgasm above him, grinding unabashedly against his face.

When the spasms had stopped I moved down his body, prepared to take him in my mouth but he deftly flipped me onto my back and pinned my wrists by my head. In the lamplight I could see his shiny lips and chin, and my insides clenched with aftershocks. He kissed me hard and deep, his mouth open wide over mine, his tongue seeking mine. I tasted myself and him and us and sex and it was warm and sweet and I opened my legs for him, desperate to feel him enter my body and drive us both into another mad frenzy.

He glided in easily, and I tilted my hips to take him deep. When he was buried to the root, he paused and looked down at me, and I thought he was going to say something but he didn’t. He just kept his eyes on mine as he started to move, his hips rolling like ocean waves over mine. I strained up against him, pressing closer with my chest, lifting my hips.

“I missed you so much last night,” I whispered, every nerve ending in my body on fire. “I touched myself and thought of you.”

“I did the same,” he said, the muscles in his arms flexing as he braced himself above me. “Twice.”

I smiled, deliriously happy. “You win.”

* * * *

I spent the weekend working for Natalie and preparing for my interview. On Saturday after work, I went over to Jillian’s condo and she helped me put together my resume and print it on

good paper. I wasn't even sure she'd ask for it, and it wasn't terribly impressive anyway, but at least it had some references on it and accounted for my education and the last five years of my life.

Kind of sad I only needed a page for that.

"Are you sure I should list Miranda Rivard?" I scrunched up my face when I saw her name on the test copy we'd printed.

"She said it was fine, right?" Jillian set down a cup of tea for me.

"Yeah. I guess so." I'd called her the day before to ask her permission, and she'd said it was fine and she'd be honest about my good performance and the reason I was asked to leave. I didn't love that part of it, but I had to list *someone* from Chateau Rivard if I wanted to put my time there on my resume, short-lived as it was. "What do you think?"

Jillian looked over my shoulder, sipping her tea. "Let's go a little bigger with the font on your name and move your contact information here." She pointed to a different place on the page.

"Okay." It was small stuff, trivial even, but everything about the way I presented myself would be important, I knew that. After making the suggested changes, I printed it again. "Now how does it look?"

She picked it up off the printer and studied it while I got up to fetch the honey from her cupboard. I spooned some into my tea and stirred it up, then I sucked on the spoon. *Oh my god. My tongue is sore.* I laughed quietly to myself, turning my back to Jillian as I recalled the spectacular feats of fellatio I'd performed last night in the rowboat, which we'd taken out for a late night cruise. *Well, his must be too.*

When I turned around, Jillian was looking at me funny. "What?"

"What are you laughing about over there?"

"Nothing." I dropped my eyes to my tea and quickly sat down again.

"That is not a nothing face. That is an I-did-something-naughty face. Trust me, I'm the big sister. I know that face of yours."

I grinned, lifting my tea to my lips. "Guilty."

"So?"

"I have a very sore tongue muscle today."

Jillian's dark, high-arched brows shot up. "You *do*? And how's his tongue?"

"I'd be surprised if he can talk normally. I can barely *walk* normally."

"Oh my *god*," she groaned, fanning herself. "You're so lucky. Damn."

I picked up the resume. "So this looks good, you think?"

"Yes. It's fine. I want to hear more about the guy." She propped her chin on her hand and looked at my dreamily. "I need to live vicariously."

"Jill. Come on. You're beautiful. You're a doctor. Where are all the beautiful male doctors I see on soap operas?"

She rolled her eyes. "Married. Or fucking nurses. Or fucking anyone else they want to because they're too busy to have a relationship." Sighing, she sat up straight again. "And I guess I am, too. It just gets a little lonely sometimes."

"So fuck a hot doctor for fun."

"A year or two ago, I would have. I did. But now I think I'll hold out for something better. What about you? Is this going somewhere, you think?"

I shrugged, but couldn't keep the smile off my face. "I think so. Feels like it. I really like him."

“Long term potential there?”

I tilted my head this way and that. “Hard to say—I mean, it’s only been like ten days. I don’t even know what he’s thinking long term for himself. And he once said something about not believing in the one.”

Her brow wrinkled. “The one?”

“Yeah, you know. *The one*. The idea that there’s one perfect person for you and you have to find her or him.”

“Ah, a soul mate,” she said. “Very romantic idea. But I’m not sure it’s real, either.”

Glancing around at her clean, modern condo, I wondered if she ever pictured living here with someone else, or if she was content to live alone. “I don’t know what I believe. But I do know he sends mixed signals...when he first talked about his cabin I got the feeling he really enjoyed the solitude, but he always wants me to sleep there now, even if I have to get up crazy early for work the next morning and he has to drive me.”

“Sounds like he really likes you too, then.”

“I think so. I hope so.”

“It also sounds like you need your own car.”

I groaned, dropping my head back. “Yes. A car. An apartment. A job. Grown up things.”

“Well, here you go.” She set the resume in front of me. “Step one. Go get it.”

I took a deep breath. “You think I can?”

“I know you can.” She lifted her cup with two hands. “What’s with the insecurity? Since when have you ever lacked confidence about something?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “Since Mom told me I wasn’t a special snowflake.”

Jillian choked on her tea. “What?”

“Don’t laugh! I know it sounds ridiculous but Mom gave me this ‘pep talk’—I made little air quotes—last weekend, the day I moved out of the guest house, basically telling me that I need to quit whining, go out, and get a life for myself, because I’ve spent years getting everything handed to me and being told how pretty I am.”

Jillian shrugged. “Kinda true.”

“Thanks,” I said flatly. “Jeez, no wonder I like being around Sebastian. He’s always telling me how amazing and beautiful I am.”

“And you are.” Jillian patted my hand. “But you’re gonna have to work for what you want too. Nothing comes free.”

Chapter 29

Skylar

Later that night and all day Sunday, I spent a good amount of time researching Abelard Vineyards, and consequently, the Fourniers. On the About the Owners page of their website, I discovered that they'd met while she was vacationing in Paris and married in Provence. There was even a wedding picture, and I gasped when I saw it.

"What a beautiful couple!" I angled my laptop toward the kitchen Sebastian so he could see. He was putting dinner together for us while I took notes on the winery. "This is her? The woman you met?"

"That's her," he confirmed, going back to slicing potatoes.

"Look, they got married at his family's villa. Isn't that romantic? A villa," I said dreamily.

"Maybe you should start with an apartment," he teased, throwing the potatoes into a bowl.

"Hahaha. I don't even mean to live in—just to visit a place like that would be amazing." I clicked on the picture to make it bigger. "I've always wanted to go to France. Have you ever been?"

"Nope. That would require getting on an airplane."

I looked up at him, surprised. "You don't fly?"

He shook his head. "Never."

"How'd you get back and forth from New York?"

"I wasn't back and forth all that much, but when I was, I drove."

"Oh." I stared at the picture for another minute, not really seeing it. I was kind of bummed about this. "Are you scared of flying? Or you just don't like it?"

"I don't like it. In general, all transportation makes me edgy. Too many possibilities for tragedy to strike. Driving a car, at least I have some control. There's enough anxiety in my life without adding airplanes to the mix." He tossed the chunks of potatoes in some olive oil before dumping them on a baking sheet and sliding them into the oven. His movements had gotten stiff and his voice sounded a little testy, so I decided to drop it.

"Got it. Okay, it says here that she got her business and master's degrees at Michigan State and ran an event planning business in Detroit for years. And he was a professor in New York. A master's," I fretted. "And married to a professor. I bet she wants someone better educated."

"Stop it. Or you get no meat tonight." He looked at me threateningly over one shoulder as he turned the steaks in their marinade.

I held up my hands. "Stopping."

"Tell me what else it says."

"Okay, let's see. Here's some press clips about the winery." I read the sound bites out loud, followed links to full articles, and took plenty of notes. Apparently, Lucas Fournier purchased the land from a grower who was trying to expand the red wine scene in Northern Michigan, which hadn't taken off the way the white did. He was particularly interested in making gamay and pinot noir, so the next thing I did was research those grapes. I also read that Lucas Fournier had opened a successful absinthe bar in Detroit, and I read an interview in which he talked about being modern without sacrificing authenticity. About being willing to take risks. About trusting your gut even when common sense tells you otherwise.

Before I knew it, an hour had passed and Sebastian was asking if I was ready to eat.

“Yes, I’m sorry,” I said, sliding off my chair at the breakfast bar. “What can I take out?” We were going to eat on the patio, at a little outdoor dining set he’d bought at an antiques store today.

“It’s all ready.” He opened the door for me and I stepped out, gasping with delight when I saw the little dining nook under a tree in one corner of the patio. He’d put a light blue table cloth on the round table, set it with candles, and strung lights in the branches above. “It’s not a villa in France, but I hope you like it.”

“Oh my goodness! This is perfect!” I clapped my hands and grinned at him. “Thank you so much for making dinner. Sorry I wasn’t better company tonight.”

“I’m just glad you’re here. I know your mind is elsewhere.” He pulled out a chair for me, and I sat down.

“I’m learning a ton. Did you know that the Duke of Burgundy banished the gamay grape from his kingdom in 1395 because it competed too well with pinot noir, which was his favorite? He called it an evil, disloyal plant.” I laughed, spreading my napkin in my lap. “Kind of funny that those are the two grapes Lucas Fournier has.”

“I did not know that,” said Sebastian, sitting across from me. “Tell me more, since we are drinking the Duke’s favorite tonight, an Abelard Pinot Noir, in fact.” My heart fluttered as he poured. I loved the way candlelight played with the light green color of his eyes. I loved that he’d just made steak and potatoes and salads for us and set up this beautiful, romantic little spot. I loved that he’d encouraged me to go after this job, which I was even more excited about now that I knew more about the forward-thinking young owners. I loved the way he touched me, like he still couldn’t believe I was there and might disappear at any moment. I even loved that he looked at me with sadness in his eyes sometimes, because I knew it meant that he was struggling with things in his mind but letting his heart win. He hadn’t had any episodes the entire week.

At least not that he’d admitted.

But I’d given up trying to guess at every expression on his face, every silence he retreated into, every tense one-word answer to a question I was hoping he’d answer in elaborate detail. I accepted him for who he was, and how hard he was trying. The chance he was taking with me. I knew how difficult it was for him, and I loved him for it.

Holy shit, what?

You heard me. I love him for it. Just a little. Shut up and let me.

I picked up my fork, dropping my eyes to my plate. That was okay, right? To admit to yourself you’d fallen for someone? I mean, it didn’t have to be a big deal. It was just a feeling. A nice feeling, in fact. A nice, deep feeling. Who wouldn’t fall hard and fast for someone like Sebastian?

And God knows I like things deep, hard, and fast.

I stifled a laugh as I stuffed my face with potatoes, and Sebastian looked at me a little funny but didn’t say anything, which only made my conviction stronger.

But I wouldn’t say anything to him. Jesus Christ, I could only imagine what he’d do if I told him I loved him. I didn’t really have any hangups about it—I came from the theater world where everyone loved everyone, loudly and proudly (of course you could *hate* someone in that world and still love them loudly and proudly too but that was a different matter)—but I felt that Sebastian wasn’t the type to use or hear a word like love lightly. I understood that about him.

“So what do you think I should wear to my interview?” I asked with mock seriousness. “The navy and white striped skirt or the black dress? This is life or death, so think hard. I really want

this job.”

“Hmm.” He sliced off a piece of New York strip and chewed while pondering. “I’m a little partial to the black dress for obvious reasons, but I also like the striped skirt. You were wearing it the day I saw you at the beach.”

My jaw dropped. “You remember that?”

“Of course I do. With a white blouse and bare feet.”

“Well, I actually had shoes, just not when I ate sand in front of you. God, that was so embarrassing. I wish I could go back and undo it.”

“Don’t you dare.” He picked up his wine glass. “If you hadn’t fallen on the sand, I never would have talked to you.”

“Never?” I asked incredulously. “Come on. Yes, you would have. You came in to the shop later that day.”

He shook his head. “I came into the shop because I’d just come from my therapist’s office. And the reason I’d called an emergency meeting with my therapist was because of my run-in with you.”

I set my fork down. “So you’re saying if I hadn’t fallen on the beach, you wouldn’t have talked to me, you wouldn’t have needed that appointment, and you wouldn’t have been in the shop that afternoon?”

“Exactly.”

I sipped the wine and let the flavors mingle on my tongue. “Do you think we’d have found each other eventually?”

He shrugged. “Hard to say. I probably would have done my best to keep avoiding you.”

“Why?” I set my glass down. “I thought you always liked me.”

“Fear. It’s powerful.”

“Yeah. I guess.” But I hated the idea that we’d been such a near miss. In my mind we were destined to meet. Fate was powerful too, right? “So maybe...it’s a good thing I got fired? I mean, that’s what led me to the beach.”

“Maybe.”

My mind was already working backward. If Sebastian and I were the real deal, not only was it a good thing I’d gotten fired, but it was a good thing I’d done Save a Horse, a good thing I’d hated New York, and a good thing my career as an actress hadn’t taken off. Not only that, but it was a good thing he hadn’t married that tart in Manhattan. My god—Sebastian could be married right now! Eating dinner in some New York apartment with some other woman across from him! Someone who didn’t understand him at all.

For the first time, I felt grateful for the crappy decisions I’d made in the last year, because they’d all led me to this table, this man, this moment. It gave me a little boost—maybe, somewhere deep inside me, there was a woman who knew what she wanted, and what’s more, she knew what to do to get it.

* * * *

Tuesday morning dawned bright and sunny. A good omen, I thought. Per Sebastian’s advice, and because I thought it would bring me good luck, I dressed in the navy striped skirt, pairing it with a bright pink blouse this time. Based on the web site and the wardrobe I’d seen in pictures, Mia Fournier looked like a woman who appreciated color.

I’d spent Monday night at home since I wanted to get a good night’s sleep and look

refreshed, and Sebastian and I tended to stay up too late when we were together. My mother made me eat breakfast (a cherry turnover, which I ate standing up and leaning over my plate so I didn't drip on my blouse, and wished me luck before heading out.

While I was brushing my teeth, my cell buzzed with a text from Natalie. Break a leg this morning! Love you!

When I was almost out the door I texted back thanks, and noticed I'd missed a message from Sebastian too. Hi Beautiful. You don't need luck today, but I bet it's with you. Let me know how it goes. I'm thinking of you.

I smiled, pulling the door shut behind me. I did feel lucky, but I also felt confident for the first time in weeks.

Abelard Vineyards—named, I'd learned from an interview with the Fourniers, for a medieval French scholar who had a tragic but passionate love affair with a young student of his—was only about a ten-minute drive from my parents' farm, about midway between it and Sebastian's cabin. As I drove up the tree-lined drive, my heart started to pound. The place was absolutely breathtaking.

The architectural style was French, but rather than the dark, formal faux-chateau style of the Rivard family, the Fourniers had built a Provencal-style villa of light weathered stone with a faded red tiled roof and shutters painted a soft blue. It was luxurious without being imposing, authentic but not stodgy-looking.

The gravel drive circled in front of the main building, and I followed signs to visitor parking. When I got out of the car and looked around, I saw that the vineyards stretched out behind the buildings, a big red barn sat off to my left, and a sign pointing to the tasting room was straight ahead. Since I was meeting Mia Fournier in the tasting room, I followed the sign down a narrow gravel path around the side of the villa, admiring the flowers and herbs planted along the way.

Around the back was a large patio with tables and chairs, where guests could sit and watch the sun set over the rolling fields. Jutting off the stone building was a covered, tiled area lined with built-in upholstered benches and long picnic tables on either side of double doors. Six chairs lined the other sides of the tables, and adorably chic little topiary trees in clay flower pots rested on the tables. It was absolutely stunning, and already I wanted this job so badly I could taste it.

The glass doors to the tasting room off the patio were propped open already, allowing for plenty of natural light and a soft breeze. When I walked in, I noticed right away how the two-story ceilings and ample windows let in plenty of natural light, and the colors in the light stone walls were echoed in the neutral couches and chairs, which were grouped in one large sitting area in front of a huge fireplace at one end of the room. The plank floors were a medium-toned wood, as were the large square coffee table and several end tables. The one bright spot of color was a massive floral centerpiece on the coffee table—probably three dozen roses in various shades of pink.

Guess I wore the right thing, I thought with a smile.

"Hello! You must be Skylar."

I turned and saw a petite, curvy woman with long, wavy brown hair walking toward me from the other end of the room, where a curved wooden bar lined with stools took up one entire wall.

I smiled, moving toward her. "Yes. Good morning."

"Good morning." We met in the center of the room and she held out her hand. "I'm Mia. Welcome to Abelard."

I took her hand and met her eyes, noticing we were about the same height, although I wore heels today and she wore flats. “So nice to meet you. The place is stunning. I’m in love.”

“Thanks. It’s been a long road to get here, but we’re happy with it. Can I offer you something? Coffee or tea? A glass of wine?” She laughed, putting a hand on her slightly round belly. “I’m pregnant, so I can’t join you, but it’s never too early for wine.”

“Congratulations. Sebastian mentioned you were expecting. That’s wonderful.”

“Yes, our third. I thought we were done after two, but my husband had other ideas.” She rolled her eyes. “When we first met, he didn’t even want kids. Now he wants an entire litter!”

I laughed, wondering how old she was. She was radiantly beautiful with lovely skin, little tiny smile lines around her eyes the only sign of aging on her face.

“So anyway.” She fluttered a hand. “Can I get you anything?”

“No, thank you. I do love the Abelard pinot, but I should probably complete my interview before I indulge in it.”

She smiled and started walking toward the couches. “Let’s sit over here. I was going to do this back in my office, but it’s such a beautiful morning.” She sat at one end of a large couch and I chose a high-backed chair adjacent to it.

“It is. And I love the way you designed this so your guests have this gorgeous view, even when they’re inside. And that air!” I inhaled, taking in the scent of the fields outside. “So wonderful that you’ve made the sight and smell of the land the grapes are planted on part of the tasting experience. You’re hitting all the senses. Taste isn’t the only important one with wine.”

“Oh god, my husband’s going to love you.” She smiled, settling back on the couch. “So tell me about yourself.”

Taking a breath, I started with my roots on Old Mission and growing up here. I talked briefly about performing on cruise ships and my time in New York, but emphasized that I’d really missed home and my family and had decided to return this spring. “I didn’t really love living in a big city,” I confessed. “Maybe the shopping, but other than that, I prefer life here.”

“I agree.” She nodded. “Lucas, my husband, lived in New York when we were first dating, but when we decided to move in together, I was really glad we agreed on Detroit. It’s a fun city, but it’s less crowded and manic than New York.”

“Yes, I read that he opened an absinthe bar there? The Green Hour?”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Done your homework, I see.”

I lifted my shoulders, felt a blush warm my cheeks. “I figured I’d better. You run a pretty impressive operation here. If I want to be your assistant, I need to know my stuff.”

She laughed. “Thanks. So what else did you learn?”

“Well, I know that you ran a successful event planning business for years in Detroit, so I figured you might want to expand the event schedule here...maybe start promoting Abelard as a wedding venue? Possibly host small corporate events?”

She looked amused. “Go on.”

“I researched pinot noir and gamay, the two red wines your husband makes here, and learned quite a bit about why those wines should do well even in a cool climate like ours, and how our position along the forty-fifth parallel mimics the growing conditions in other parts of the world where those grapes do well. Part of that I knew because of growing up on a cherry farm,” I admitted. “Cherries do well here too for many of the same reasons—the soil, the hilly land, the water surrounding us.”

“My goodness. You really have done your homework.” She tilted her head and crossed her arms. “And you worked at Rivard?”

I shifted uncomfortably. I'd known it was coming and had rehearsed how to handle it, but it was still embarrassing. "Yes, for about a month. I really enjoyed the job, and I learned a lot there, but Mrs. Rivard had a problem with my performance on a reality television show, which painted me as a bit of a villain." *Please, please don't have watched the show.*

"Seriously?" She blinked. "What show?"

I screwed up my face and cringed. "Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)."

Mia burst out laughing and clapped her hands together once. "Oh my God, that's funny. Wow." Giggling, she tucked one leg beneath her and winked at me. "So did you? Ride a cowboy?"

"No." I shook my head. "The only thing I rode was a mechanical bull, and I only lasted seven seconds."

She gave me a sympathetic look. "Ouch."

"Yeah. The entire experience was pretty embarrassing, and I'd like to forget all about it. I asked Mrs. Rivard if I could list her as a reference, and she said I could. I don't believe she had any issues with my work there—it was simply a matter of my persona on the show not gelling with her vision of a good employee." I took my resume from my bag and handed it to her. "Her contact information is here, if you'd like it."

"Thank you." She studied the resume a moment. "Ah, you were a Cherry Queen."

I sighed, feeling like I should come clean. "Yes, I was, but they asked me not to advertise it. I put it on the resume because it's something I'm proud of, but after the show aired, they effectively dethroned me for bad behavior."

"Really?" Her eyes went wide. "What the heck did you do on that show?"

"I just wasn't myself," I said. "I acted a certain way because the producers wanted ratings, and they figured I'd get more attention if I played devious and mean."

"Did it work?"

I shrugged. "For a little while. But it sure backfired on my life. I shouldn't have done it, but...live and learn. On to better things."

She nodded. "I agree. We all make mistakes."

"There you are." The deep voice came from the far end of the room, and I looked over to see a ridiculously attractive man walking toward us. I think my jaw hung open a moment before I remembered to close it.

Mia looked over her shoulder at him. "Yes, I decided to sit in here. I didn't feel like climbing those stairs again and it's so pretty this morning."

He reached the back of the couch and placed a hand on her shoulder. "You okay?"

"Yes." She patted his hand and gestured to me. "This is Skylar Nixon, the friend of Sebastian Pryce. Skylar, this is my husband, Lucas."

I stood and he reached over Mia's head to shake my hand. He had dark eyes and hair, worn a little long and shaggy, and a fantastic smile. My god, what did their children look like? "Very nice to meet you," I said. "You have a beautiful place here."

"Our little Provence." He glanced at Mia. "My family has a vineyard there and we tried to create some of that magic here."

"Oh, I bet she knows all about that." Mia's eyes twinkled. "She's done her research."

"Oh?" Lucas looked at me.

"Yes." I smiled. "I know the location, I know you grew mostly grenache, and I know you got married there."

"See?" Mia glanced up at her husband and pointed at me. "This is what I need. Someone

who looks like this and has the brains to come prepared to an interview.”

“Thank you.” I rocked forward onto my toes, I was so happy.

“Sounds like this is going well, then. I’ll leave you to it. Skylar, very nice to meet you, and you”—he leaned down to kiss her, the back of his hand in her hair—“take it easy.”

“I will.” She reached up and touched his scruffy cheek, and something inside me twisted a little. They had such an easy way about them, you could just tell how close they were, how much they loved each other. I wondered about how they met, and decided if I got the job and we became friendly enough, I’d ask. Lucas waved at me once more before heading out the glass doors.

“Well,” Mia said, getting to her feet. “I suppose I should call your references, but unless I discover you robbed Rivard blind, I’d love to give this a try. The job involves assisting me in various capacities—from running tours to planning events to manning the tasting room to helping with marketing and PR. I’m very hands-on and I’ll train you for that stuff myself, but you’ll have to get some wine training from Lucas and the winemakers here.”

“Sounds great.”

“It pays hourly to start, sixteen an hour, but after three months we can revisit that number and even consider salary. I’ll call your references this week and confirm with you after I’ve spoken to them.” She made a face. “Not that I’m looking forward to speaking with that old bat Miranda Rivard, but I’ll do it.”

I laughed. “Thank you.”

She walked me outside, waving hello to someone watering the flower beds. “How soon could you start?”

“I’m working for my sister right now, but she said she could find someone to replace me within a week.”

“So Monday?” Mia asked hopefully. “Sorry to rush, I just want you to be as comfortable as possible before I have this baby, which is in the fall.”

“No problem,” I assured her. “Monday would be fine.”

“Great.” She held out her hand, and I took it. “So nice to meet you, Skylar. I’m glad Sebastian sent you my way. I have a feeling this is going to work out great.”

I smiled. “Me too.”

* * * *

Later that night, Mia Fournier called my cell phone and told me the job was mine if I wanted it. She said Miranda Rivard had praised my work ethic, performance, and attitude, and even admitted to feeling some regret at having let me go. When Mia heard that, she decided to snap me up right away, and asked if I could come in on Friday to fill out paperwork.

I was at Natalie’s when I got the call, and she and I both squealed and jumped up and down once I hung up. The next day, a sign went in the window at Coffee Darling looking for help, and by Friday, she’d already hired a college student who was home for the summer.

Sebastian was thrilled for me, and took me out for dinner at Mission Table the next night to celebrate. When he showed up at my parents front door, he presented me with a congratulatory bouquet of honey sticks tied together with a bright pink ribbon. I threw my arms around him and he lifted me right off my feet, laughing in my hair. If he’d have let go, I swear I’d have floated right into the sky.

At dinner that night, I laid out my summer plans, and he listened attentively. “I’m going to

bust my butt to prove my worth there, and hopefully negotiate a raise after three months. At that point, I think I'll have enough saved, and a good enough income, to afford a nice apartment and maybe buy or lease a car. The other thing I was thinking of is offering to rent a guest house from my mother come fall when the tourist season is over. Then I could continue to save and maybe buy something next year."

"Sounds good."

Suddenly I realized I was doing *all* the talking. I eyed him carefully. "You're awfully quiet tonight."

"Am I?"

"Yes. What's up?"

He offered me a slight smile. "Nothing. I had a rough day, I guess. But it's making me feel better to see how happy you are. I'm glad you got the job."

"Yes. Thank you so much. It's because of you, you know."

He dismissed that idea with a wave of his hand. "Nah."

"It is! I'm so grateful. And I'm planning to *show* you how grateful later on." I swirled my tongue around the scallop on the end of my fork suggestively.

"In that case, I'll take the credit."

I smiled, smug and happy. "Good."

Chapter 30

Sebastian

Every day that summer, she was the first thing I thought about in the morning, and the last thing I thought of before I fell asleep, whether she was beside me or not. And as the weeks went by, I wanted her beside me more and more. I missed her when she wasn't there—her smile, her laugh, her smell, her voice, her kiss, her touch.

I began working full time for my father's firm in June, and I was doing well. The workload was manageable, challenging enough to be interesting but not overwhelming; I went to the gym most mornings before work and felt physically as good or better than I had in years; and I kept my weekly appointments with Ken, sometimes going in for a last-minute lunch appointment if I felt like the voice was causing my confidence in myself, my work, or my relationship begin to falter.

Emotionally, I felt more stable than I'd ever felt. The obsessive thoughts weren't getting in the way of being close to Skylar, and she had this way of getting me to open up without being pushy. She was so honest about herself, so accepting of me, that I found myself talking to her about things I'd never shared with anyone—my favorite childhood memories of my mother, my love for poetry, especially about nature, and how I sometimes envied my brothers their happy marriages and families, even though I'd never been sure about having one of my own. One hot August night I told her how it was more an envy of their faith in themselves—the way they were able to make a decision like getting married or having kids without all the constant second guessing.

"I know what you mean," she'd said, sucking on a honey stick. I kept a supply of them at my house now. We were lying at opposite ends of the hammock, our bodies tucked alongside each other's. "Those forever things are scary to me too."

I chuckled. "Forever things?"

"Yeah. Marriage, family. I mean, I like the idea of a family but I'm not sure I'd be a very good mother. Natalie's positive she wants kids, and I think Jillian does too—but whenever I think about it, it seems like something so far off in the future. Forever things are what *real* grownups do." She laughed softly. "I'm not one of those yet. Maybe after I get a car I'll feel more grown up."

We were quiet for a minute, and I put my hands behind my head, hoping to sound casual. "What *about* marriage? Do you ever think about that?" To my surprise, I'd been thinking about it a little bit lately, imagining what it would be like to be married to her, contrasting the peaceful life we'd have here with the frantic, noisy one I'd almost committed to in New York. How had I ever thought that would be right for me?

"All girls think about that at some point." She shrugged. "I suppose I'm no exception. What about you?"

"Nah," I lied. She hadn't exactly jumped at the idea, so I figured I'd better not sound too enthusiastic. Maybe she was thinking of us as a just-for-now thing until the real thing came along? The notion crushed me, not that I blamed her. She could do so much better. "I'd be a terrible husband."

She took the honey stick from her mouth and pointed it at me. "I was totally gonna tell you

that. I mean, you can't cook, your house is filthy, and your dick is just meh."

I lunged for her and she screeched, jumping off the hammock and making me chase her onto the dock, where I threw her over my shoulder and carried her back into the cabin. She laughed and squealed, beating against my back in a futile effort to escape my arms. "I take it back, I take it back. I meant to say your dick is mehgnificent."

"Too late, angel. You ran from me. You know what that means." In the living room, I tossed her onto the couch, where she grinned up at me, breathless.

"But you don't have rope."

"No," I said, unbuckling my belt and sliding it off. "But this will do."

Her jaw dropped. "It will?"

"Uh huh. Stand up."

Poor little angel. I think her legs might have actually trembled as she stood naked at the end of the couch while I bound her ankles and bent her forward over the arm.

Mine did. They trembled with lust as I slid my fingers inside her pussy and then inside her mouth, listening to her suck them. They trembled with awe when I fisted one hand in her hair and teased her tight little ass with the tip of my cock, astonished at the way she let me desecrate her. They trembled with euphoria when I fucked her up against the wall, one hand rubbing her clit as she came and cried out my name over and over again.

My god, I love her, I thought as I flooded her body, my vision clouding at the edges. *I'm so in love with her I can't see. She's fucking perfect.*

Actually my entire life was pretty fucking close to perfect. I'd never been happier.

And I'd never been less sure that I could hold onto it.

Chapter 31

Skylar

“Come on,” I said, pouting. “Look at the sheet. Did I get it right?”

It was late August, and we were sitting on a blanket on the dock with a bottle of Abelard Pinot Gris, and Sebastian was supposed to be quizzing me on the tasting specs. Recently, Mia and Lucas had asked if I’d be interested in repping their wines in the Midwest, meeting up with distributors, shop merchants, and sommeliers since Mia would be too busy with three kids to travel. I loved the idea, but knew I had a lot to learn about the wines at Abelard and the industry in general before I took on that role.

“Yes, you got it right.” Sebastian set his glass and the binder aside. “But school is over for the day.”

“I have to learn this by the weekend,” I whined. “You said you’d help.”

“I know.” He took my glass out of my hand and set it next to the candle lanterns we had burning. “And I am. I’m going to help you relax.”

“Oh?” I leaned back on my hands, legs stretched out toward him. The mischievous glint in his eyes made me smile.

The summer was flying by in a happy whirlwind of work, wine, and great sex...definitely the best summer of my life so far. I loved the job at Abelard, I loved working for the Fourniers, and I grew more confident each day that I was doing a good job. Mia was an exacting boss, but fair and helpful and so organized I was in total awe. If I made a mistake or a miscommunication, she was understanding, and she was quick to praise when I did things right or took the initiative on something. She definitely had her own ideas about the way things should be done, but after we got to know each other a little better, she wanted to hear my ideas too, and encouraged me to be brave about voicing my opinions.

I functioned as both her personal assistant and assistant tasting room manager, and many of the ideas I’d had for Rivard were welcomed at Abelard. Lucas loved the idea about creating a YouTube channel for informal videos about their wines, and he thought I’d be a natural in front of the camera. Together with his chief winemaker, a French import named Gabriel Allard, Lucas and I outlined the video series to coordinate with events Mia had planned throughout the summer. I stayed late many evenings learning about the wines, and I took home a ton of additional reading about the grapes and the soil and the winemaking process. Many nights I fell asleep with books resting on my chest or my laptop still open beside me.

Often I was in Sebastian’s bed.

We saw each other three or four nights a week, and on my days off, which were always during the week, Sebastian would try to come home early and we’d go hiking in the park or swimming off his dock or take the boat out on the water. When I’d worry aloud that I was encroaching on the solitude he’d claimed to crave when we first met, he’d hush me with a kiss or put his hand over my mouth, and once he just picked me up off the boat bottom and tossed me into the water.

He’d slowly opened up to me about his past, both his difficult childhood and the last ten years. I tried hard not to pry, but ate up every word he said, every memory he shared. Gradually his moods made more sense to me, and I’d learned when I could ask another question about

something, when I could make a joke, and when I should just shut up and kiss him or hug him or better yet, do nothing but listen in silence. I became accustomed to his quiet moods, the occasional flare of his temper, and his infernal reticence about his feelings, and in turn, he endured my occasional insecurities about work, my eight million beauty products in his bathroom, and my ceaseless chatter about varietals, vintages, acidity, fruit, minerality and terroir—although he did tell me if I mentioned “floral notes” to him once more, he was going to ban me from drinking wine in his presence.

“Yes. Relaxing is very important for wine tasting.” He circled my ankles with his fingers and spread them apart before lying on his stomach between my legs. Then he moved up so his head was beneath my skirt. “Left up your hips.”

Grinning, I did as he asked and let him slide my panties off, then I gasped when he pushed my thighs further apart and swept his tongue up my slit.

“Mmmmm.” He did it again, lingering at the top. “Absofuckinglutely delightful on the palate.”

I burst out laughing, dropping back to my elbows and bending my knees. “Is that right?”

“Yes.” He flicked and swirled and savored. “My god, this vintage is magnificent. Light and refreshing with a fabulous fruit profile and balanced acidity.”

“Oh Jesus.” I clapped my hands over my mouth, laying all the way back, laughing and moaning with delight at the same time.

He sucked my clit into his mouth and nibbled on it, making my legs tingle all the way to my toes, which curled into the blanket. “Mmm, yes. An incomparable flavor and exquisite aroma. Full-bodied and delicious.” Two fingers slid easily inside me.

“I thought you said it was light,” I breathed, widening my legs even more, my hands seeking his head.

“It’s everything I like. Do I even need to mention its elegant floral notes? And the lingering finish, well...it’s indescribable,” he teased as he fingered me deep and slow and my body arched off the dock. When he put his mouth back on me, I came so hard I cried out *way* too loud, my voice echoing off the water. I covered my mouth again, but Sebastian just laughed, licking up the lingering finish until there wasn’t a drop left.

“Oh god, I’m so loud,” I whispered, embarrassed. “What if someone heard?”

“I really don’t give a fuck.” Sebastian got to his knees and undid his pants. “So come here and sit on my cock. I’ll hold my hand over your mouth if you want.”

I sat up, giving myself a moment to enjoy the sight of him there on his knees, his dick hard and waiting for me, his eyes dark and glowing in the candlelight. I loved the way his forearms looked when he cuffed his button down shirts. Crawling up on his lap, I put my hands on his shoulders and slowly lowered myself onto him, enjoying every slick, warm inch gliding deeper and deeper. When my ass rested on his thighs, his cock penetrating so deep I felt that wicked good twinge of pain, I wrapped my arms around his neck.

We stayed there a moment, eyes locked on each other, mouths open, breath mingling between us. The light, playful mood of a moment ago was gone, something heavier in its place. I threaded my hands into his hair, staring with wondrous disbelief at this man who was so beautiful, so smart, so strong, and yet still retained that sadness in his eyes, that lingering fear that he wasn’t good enough for me. My heart was pounding so hard, it echoed in my head. I felt so full, so deliciously full with him that I knew I was going to burst right then—not an orgasm, but an emotional release.

“I’m so in love with you,” I whispered, starting to roll my hips over his. “I’m *so* in love with

you, Sebastian.” My eyes teared up, although it made me happy to tell him. I didn’t care if he said it back or not—I felt it and I wanted him to know it.

“Oh god, Skylar.” He squeezed me tight, burying his face in my neck. “You’re all I want. All I dream about. I think I’ve always loved you.”

Tears dripped, although I smiled too. “Really? Always?”

“Yes.” He used his arms to move my body against his, a slow, undulating rhythm that had my core muscles coiling again. “Because I can’t remember what it feels like not to love you. Not to ache for you. Not to yearn for you.”

The words he used to describe his feelings broke my heart. “You don’t have to ache or yearn, love. I’m here.” I covered his forehead in kisses, pulling his head back to force him to look at me. “I’m here, and I’m not leaving.”

“You will,” he said, that inexplicable sadness in his eyes. “You should. I should suffer for you.”

“Shhh.” I kissed him before he could say anything more, plunging my tongue into his open mouth, wrapping my legs around him.

He straightened up so the base of his cock hit my clit and grabbed my ass hard with his hands, grinding me against his body. “Oh god,” I breathed against his mouth. “It’s so good, so fucking good.”

He groaned and thrust up hard and deep inside me one final time, using his arms to move me over him as we came together, our bodies pulsing in wondrous relief at the same time.

Afterward, he hid his face in my chest, and when a small sob made his shoulders twitch, my throat squeezed tight. Why was he so convinced I’d leave him? Why did he think he needed to suffer for me? Was it because no one had been understanding enough in the past? Had no one tried hard enough to break down his walls? Would he shut me out, retreat into isolation to protect himself?

“Sweet boy,” I soothed as his tears dampened my blouse. I ran my hands over his shoulders, down his back, pressing kisses to the top of his head. “You’ll never suffer for me. I won’t let you.”

“Don’t make that promise. You’ll regret it.”

“No, I won’t. What is this? What’s wrong?”

“Fuck. Sorry.” He quickly wiped at his eyes.

“Sebastian. Talk to me.”

“It’s nothing. I guess I just didn’t realize I was holding in a lot of tension.” He focused on pulling out of me, and the moment he did, I sat back and brought my legs together, covering myself with my skirt.

“Oh.” Well this was a letdown. Was he really shutting down on me right now? After what we’d just said to each other?

“I’m sorry about your skirt. I’ll pay for the drycleaning.”

I stared at him, blinking twice. “My *skirt*?”

“Yeah. I got...stuff on it.” He stood and did up his pants.

“Jesus Christ, Sebastian.” I scrambled to my feet, feeling warmth trickle down my leg. “I don’t care about the damn skirt. I care that you’re closing yourself off from me, right after I told you I loved you.”

“I’m not.” This without even glancing at me.

“You are. Why?”

He was silent for a second, staring out at the water, and I recognized the stubborn set of his

jaw. He wasn't going to talk.

"Fine. Be stubborn." Instead of engaging in the argument, I leaned down to pick up my shoes and my binder and stomped off the dock and up to the cabin.

Inside the bathroom I cleaned up with a wet washcloth, fighting tears as I looked at myself in the mirror over the sink. *This is him. This is what you'll have to deal with every time your relationship hits a milestone that freaks him out.*

But what milestones would there be? He'd just said the other night that he doesn't want the forever things—getting married, having kids. I'd played that off, and then we'd gotten distracted with sex—amazing, hair-pulling, wall-thumping, name-screaming sex—but later, as we lay next to each other in his bed, I felt sad that there was a possibility he didn't want those *forever* things with me. Maybe he was just scared of that kind of commitment—a lot of guys were. Or maybe he worried about passing his OCD on to his children if he had any. *Maybe he's scared he'd stab me with the cake knife at our wedding. But who the fuck knows, because he won't talk to me!*

A gentle knock sounded on the door.

"Just a second," I said. "Actually, just come in. I don't care."

The door opened and a downtrodden Sebastian appeared behind me in the mirror. I met his contrite eyes before rinsing out the washcloth in the sink.

He entered and stood beside me, taking the washcloth in his hand. Without a word, he wrung it out and dropped to his knees, and turned me to face him. Then he gently ran the cool, wet cloth up the inside of one leg.

I sighed. "I already did that," I said, although it was so sweet that he wanted to do it, I didn't protest when he stood, rinsed and wrung again, and knelt down to wipe the other leg, and then tenderly washed in between them.

He looked up at me. "I do love you. More than I've ever loved anyone."

I cupped his jaw with one hand. "Then let me in, and let me stay."

"I want to." The fear in his eyes broke my heart. "I'll keep trying."

Chapter 32

Sebastian

I started slipping the night Skylar told me she loved me. I knew I would.

It was all kinds of fucked up, I knew that too. Because I'd spoken the truth—I did love her more than I'd ever loved anyone before. My heart knew the truth, but it was as if my head refused to cooperate. Refused to believe in a future with her. Refused to let me feel secure in the knowledge she was happy with me.

She hadn't brought work clothes for the next day, so I had to take her home that night. Halfway down the driveway, I had to go back and check the locks on the cabin doors. The second time, we reached the road, and I had to reverse to check them again. A quarter of the way to the farm, I felt the need to go back and check them again, and I nearly turned around. I was so agitated, my hands shook.

"Hey." Skylar put three fingers on my wrist. "Stop. You locked the doors. I saw you."

I swallowed. "Okay."

"What's going on with you? Talk to me."

"It's nothing."

"Is it... what I said? Maybe that was too much."

The worry in her voice was like a punch in the stomach. "No, Skylar." I glanced at her, saw her chewing her bottom lip. I took her hand and kissed it. "I'm so glad you said those words to me, and I meant what I said to you."

Which was why I counted lines in the center of the highway, there and back.

And why I made sure I kissed her goodnight eight times and told her I loved her twice, praying she wouldn't catch on to what I was doing.

It was why I counted as I brushed my teeth, made sure I stopped reading my book on an even page, and switched the lamp in my bedroom off eight times.

In the dark, I lay my head on the pillow and worried with an intensity like pain.

I loved her, and she loved me.

Now it was my responsibility to keep her safe.

* * * *

Three days later I saw Ken, and he knew right away something was off with me. "How are things?" he asked, eyeing me warily from his chair.

"Fine." I kept all my answers short and offered nothing. When he asked about Skylar, I told him things were comfortable, and even as I spoke the words I tapped the side of my leg eight

times, dropped my head and blinked eight times, and when I left the building I made sure I took an even number of steps to get out to my car. I hated what I was doing, felt sick and shameful and loathsome, but I couldn't stop.

I'm sure Ken recognized I was not myself, at least not the self that I'd been in the past few months, but he didn't push.

Skylar was a little tougher.

"What's with you?" she whispered two weeks later when she caught me rearranging the place setting at my brother's house. I was trying to make sure the two forks were exactly the same distance from each other and the one nearest the plate was that same distance from it. Same with the spoon and butter knife on the other side.

"Nothing." I gave her a smile when she reached over and took one of my hands under the dining table.

"Are you nervous about something?" By contrast, she seemed cool and calm, although she was meeting my entire family for the first time today.

"No." Leaning toward her, I kissed her cheek to reassure her. The last thing I wanted was for her to think I had an issue bringing her around my family. I didn't—in fact, this had been my idea. Well, mine and my sister-in-law's. She and Skylar had met already because Skylar had arranged a meeting between Kelly and Mrs. Nixon about supplying her guest houses with products. Skylar had also arranged a meeting with Mia Fournier, and Abelard now stocked and sold Kelly's honey-based products as well. Kelly adored Skylar, and had encouraged me to bring her to dinner to meet the rest of the family. My father was here with his longtime girlfriend, my brother David was here with his wife, Jen, and my nieces and nephews sat at a kids table in the kitchen.

Skylar was her usual self, beautiful, relaxed, and outgoing, and it was wonderful to see how she fit in with my family. Diana had come to Michigan twice in our two-year relationship, and neither time had I felt as comfortable or proud as I did tonight. In fact, I quite enjoyed the impressed looks on my brothers' faces when they first saw her. My father, who'd met her once at the office, kept looking back and forth between us with a curious look on his face, and I wondered if he was thinking *How the hell did a guy like you get a girl like that?* Which is basically what I thought every time I looked at her.

"Your family is wonderful," Skylar said later as I drove her home.

"They love you." I tried to sound relaxed, but I was horribly tense behind the wheel. Lately I'd been obsessing over her getting into a car accident. She'd purchased her own car last week, a little Mini Cooper, and I was terrified that it wouldn't protect her. It was so *small*. Even in the truck, I was nervous about a crash. Then I felt awful for even having those thoughts because my brain convinced me I might *cause* the accident just by thinking about it.

"I love *you*." She reached over and rubbed my leg. "Are you sure you're okay? You seem distracted with something lately."

"I'm fine. Just tired." Inside my head were multiple voices screaming at me. One warned me that by shutting her out, I was avoiding the issue of relapse and contributing to the relationship's demise, if not my own. Another cackled with I-told-you-so glee, finding delight in watching me fuck this up just as predicted. Another begged me to keep doing what I was doing because it was the only way to reassure myself that no harm would come to her.

"Seems like you're more than tired." Her tone was wary. "I—I've noticed a couple things in the last couple weeks, and I'm concerned."

"Oh? Like what?"

She took a breath. “Like the checking the locks thing.”

I bristled a little. “I’ve always done that.”

“And the outlets?”

“I live in a cabin. I worry about fire.”

“And putting the knives back above the fridge?”

I’d been hoping she wouldn’t notice that. “I just did it to clear the clutter off the counter.”

She didn’t say anything until we pulled up at her parents’ place. Right after Labor Day, she’d moved back into the guest house she’d lived in last May, and I’d spent a couple nights here, although I felt much more comfortable at the cabin. Being in my bed with her was the one place I felt completely at ease in my body—and in hers.

“Want to come in? I have to work early tomorrow, but I’d love for you to stay the night.”

She took one of my hands in both of hers. “If you’re tired, we can go right to sleep, I promise.”

I smiled, with effort. “That rarely happens with us.”

“I know.” She gave me a wicked grin. “But I like it.”

“Why don’t you grab your stuff and come to the cabin with me?”

She considered. “I’ll need my car in the morning, though.”

“I’ll drive you to work and pick you up,” I said quickly. “I’m not working tomorrow.”

“No, that’s silly. I’ll get my work clothes and meet you back at the cabin.” She leaned over and kissed me quickly, and before she could get out of the car I grabbed her and kissed her again.

She caught me. “I know, I know. Two is better than one.”

“Busted.” I laughed a little, but inside I was dead serious.

Nothing could be done in odd numbers. Nothing.

Chapter 33

Sebastian

As autumn progressed, I fell more in love with Skylar every day, and knew if I could fucking let myself be sure of something, it would be that she and I belonged together. But the sense of impending doom, and the irrational fear that I would be the cause of it, tormented me.

I did my best to hide my anxiety from Skylar, but not all of my compulsive behaviors were easy to conceal. She knew something was up with me, but when she'd ask if I was okay, I'd lie and say I was stressed about work, or tired, or hadn't been eating right. She either believed me or pretended to, probably in order to give me space to work this out on my own, which made me feel even more guilty. I was lying to the woman I loved and she deserved better. *Don't believe me, I wanted to tell her. Don't let me shut you out. Don't take my silences for answers. Don't let me ruin this with fear.*

On my bad days, it felt like every step I took could trip the wire, every drastic thought I had would come to fruition, and every minute was sixty seconds closer to losing her. *Of course you'll lose her, the voice taunted. When have you ever been able to hold on to something good?*

But there were good days too.

When Mia Fournier had her baby in mid-October, Skylar was given a promotion, a raise, and a box of Abelard Vineyards business cards that said Skylar Nixon, Brand Representative on them. I sent her a dozen pink roses at work the next day and told her how proud I was of her that night. She asked if she could have a reward, and I said of course.

The wicked little thing asked if we could take a shower together, during which she begged me to jerk off in front of her and come on her chest. Which I did. Later on I blindfolded her and tortured her endlessly with my tongue for being such a naughty girl, her hands tied, her body stretched out on the bedroom floor.

On those kinds of days, I felt like a god. I could do anything as long as I had her. One chilly fall evening we dragged my sleeping bag out on the dock and spent the entire night out there, whispering and kissing and making love until the sun came up, when we finally went into the cabin and slept for hours in my bed. I came so close that night to asking her to move in with me, but I was too scared—if she was there constantly, it would be much harder to hide my rituals from her.

But god, how I loved her. Madly. Passionately. I wanted her with me all the time. I craved her with every fiber of my being. That night on the dock, I knew without a doubt I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her.

Finally, some fucking conviction.

In November, I started fantasizing about proposing. *This* was how you were supposed to feel when you asked someone to be your wife—wildly in love, every vein in your body running hot with blood when you're together, every beat of your heart an explosion. But the more I thought about it, the closer I came to asking her if she wanted to be stay with me forever, the more fragile she seemed in my eyes, the more obsessive thoughts pummeled my brain, and the less I felt I was good for her. She wouldn't be happy with me, would she? She couldn't be. I was a liar. I was a coward. I was despicable, tying her up and fucking her just to make her feel defenseless and vulnerable too.

But I couldn't stop.

Fear, guilt, and shame tortured me, and the more I fought it, the worse I felt in my skin. My life became a charade. I hid my relapse from Ken by canceling sessions for four weeks straight. I was able to hide it at work because my father let me keep my own hours—it never mattered if I was late. I stopped writing in my journal in the effort to hide it from myself, and I tried desperately to hide it from Skylar—but eventually it became impossible.

“What is *with* you?” she asked one cold, rainy night after I'd driven back to the cabin for the second time to check the outlets and appliances. We were on our way to meet the Fourniers for dinner and were late already, but I'd made soup on the stove that afternoon, and it was an odd day, and even though I remembered turning the burner off, I didn't trust myself. What if that memory was from a different day and the gas was still on? I'd made up some story about forgetting my wallet and then needing meds, but those were flimsy excuses and she knew it. “And if you say nothing, I'm getting out of this car. I've indulged you for too long.”

I pressed my lips together, remaining silent. When I pulled up in front of the cabin, I told her to wait in the truck. Running through the driving rain, I went inside and began checking the appliances, and when I turned around she was standing there, arms crossed.

“Sebastian. Stop it.”

“I fucking *can't*,” I blurted, gripping the edge of the counter. *You didn't check the toaster.*

“Then tell me what's wrong. You've been acting strange for weeks now, and you won't talk to me. I don't know what to do when you shut me out like this. I feel helpless!” She was wearing a fitted black coat and a new pair of leopard print high heels. Even furious with me, she was beyond beautiful. *Too beautiful for you.*

Turning, my head, I stared out the window. I couldn't look at her. *You fucking coward.*

“God, it's like you're two people,” she said, starting to cry. “The one that takes me to bed every night and says such sweet things and makes me feel so hopeful and good and safe, and this one that's just—“

“Crazy?” I finished, braving a sideways glance at her. “Told you.”

“Confused,” she said, shaking her head. “I have no idea what's going on with you, but unless you decide to let me in on it, I can't help you!”

Help me. Stay with me. Don't go. But I said nothing.

“God, you're so maddening!” She shook her hands in the air. “Why won't you talk to me? It's like you *want* me to leave!”

I swallowed, part of me desperate to fall on my knees and beg her to stay and the other part anxious to get this over with. *You always knew she'd go, didn't you? At least let it be on your terms.*

“Christ, that's it, isn't it? You're doing all this to drive me away so you can hate yourself for it afterward.” She shook her head. “Why do you think you don't deserve to be happy?”

“Because I don't!” I finally exploded. “I'm not right in the head, Skylar. I'm fucked up.” The truth gnawed painfully at my gut, and I felt no relief in voicing it.

Tears dripped from her eyes. “My god. You're so intent on punishing yourself for something you have no control over, you can't see straight,” she said. “Have you been going to therapy?”

I looked away again.

“Look at me. Have you?”

Reluctantly, my eyes met hers. “No.”

Drawing herself up, she wiped her eyes and put both hands over her heart. “I love you, Sebastian, so much it kills me to see you hurting. I want to make everything better for you, and it

breaks my heart that I can't. And I want a life with you, but I can't be the only one trying to make it happen."

"This *is* life with me, don't you get it?" I snapped, hiding behind anger and shame. "This is who I am."

"Bullshit. This isn't who you are, and you know it." She pointed a finger at me. "You're not an asshole, and you're not a freak, and you're not a monster." She took a step closer and the fresh tears in her eyes had my chest in a vise. "You're a beautiful, complicated man, Sebastian Pryce. And I adore you. But if you want to suffer here alone with your tortured soul because you think for some fucked up reason you deserve it, fine. Choose suffering over me. But I can't watch."

She turned and walked out the door, and I watched through the front window as she grabbed her purse from the truck and jumped into her car, not even trying to shield herself from the downpour. Instead of driving off in a huff, she sat sobbing in the driver's seat for a few minutes, which was even worse, and my hands gripped the cement countertop so hard I thought I might crack it.

Eventually she left, and I was so mad at myself I nearly put a fist through the kitchen window.

Voices warred inside me.

Go get her back, you asshole.

Let her go. She's better off without you.

You love her. You'll be miserable without her.

So what? It's better than making her miserable.

Women like her don't have to give second chances, you know. Get yourself the fuck together and go after her.

I felt like tearing my hair out. I wanted to punish my body, punish my brain for what it was making me think and feel. Even though I'd already been to the gym this morning, I went back and put myself through another grueling workout. Then I came back to the cabin, where everything reminded me of Skylar. The porch. The couch. The shower. The kitchen. The bedroom.

I made a sandwich but couldn't even eat it because I saw the honey sticks next to the peanut butter in the pantry. How long would it be before she gave those honey-kisses to some other guy? I stood staring out the sliding glass door onto the rain-soaked patio, recalling the night last spring when I'd bought the chairs and the next day when she'd watched me put them together. The hammock was down now, but I could still see her lying there, still feel the way her body felt on mine when we'd lain in it together last summer. I looked at the dock, where she'd first told me she loved me. Fuck, why couldn't I just be normal? Any other guy would have just bought the ring and proposed by now. A woman like her was one in a million.

My cell phone buzzed, and I pulled it from my pocket. It was Skylar's number.

I didn't even hesitate before pressing Accept. Even if she just wanted to yell at me, at least I'd hear her voice.

"Skylar?"

"No. This is Natalie. Sebastian?"

My heart stopped. "Yes. Is Skylar okay?"

"She's fine. But she had an accident."

"Oh my God." The room spun, and for a second I thought I might get sick. *I caused it. I caused it. This time it's real.* "A car accident?"

“No. She slipped and fell on some wet cement stairs outside a restaurant. She broke her wrist and hit her head pretty good, but she’s fine now.”

“Jesus.” I grabbed a handful of my hair and tugged on it. *So it wasn’t a car accident, but it was still your fault. She went to the restaurant alone and you should have been with her.* “Where is she?”

“She’s at Munson. But she doesn’t want to see you.”

“What? Why?” *You know why, you stupid fuck.*

“I don’t know. She didn’t elaborate, and she’s exhausted and loopy from the pain meds, but when I asked if I should call you, she said no, she didn’t want to see you and that if I called you she was never speaking to me again.”

“Fuck that. I’m coming.” I looked around for my keys.

“No! Please don’t.” Her tone was desperate. “Look, I called you because I knew you’d want to know, and I’m guessing she’ll eventually speak to me again after I tell her I did, but really—she’s got a bad enough headache right now. Whatever’s going on with you guys will have to get sorted out another time.”

My throat was squeezed so tight I didn’t know if I could even talk anymore. “Okay. Thanks.”

We hung up, and I considered my next move for less than two seconds.

Skylar was hurt. I needed to be near her.

Despite the rain, I drove fast, praying hard that Natalie had been truthful with me and that Skylar’s injuries weren’t worse than she claimed.

At Munson, I parked and raced into the lobby, looking around wildly before spotting the info desk. I got Skylar’s room information and headed for the elevators, but halted when one opened and Natalie stepped out.

“Sebastian.” Her blue eyes, so like Skylar’s they made my heart pump harder, went wide. “What are you doing here?”

I squared my shoulders. “You have to let me see her.”

“She’s finally sleeping. Please don’t go up there now.”

My posture deflated a little. “Are you sure she’s okay?”

“Yes.” She looked at me, chewing on her bottom lip. “You look awful. What’s going on with you guys?”

“I fucked things up.” I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, not sure why I’d just blurted that out to Skylar’s sister but oddly relieved that I did. “I fucked things up and now she’s hurt and it’s my fault.”

“What? She slipped and fell, Sebastian. She was wearing ridiculously high heels and it was raining. How can that be your fault?”

Tears formed and I pressed a thumb and two fingertips over my eyes, embarrassed. “It just is. I know it.”

“Good grief. Come on.” She took me by the elbow and turned me around. “Let’s go get a cup of coffee. It won’t be as good as mine, but maybe it’s drinkable.” I let her steer me down the hall and around two corners, then over to a table in the near empty cafeteria. Dejected, I sank into a chair. “Don’t move,” she said.

I sat with my head in my hands, and a few minutes later she came back with two steaming white styrofoam cups and set them on the table. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” She sat across from me. “Now spill. What happened?”

I shrugged and stared at my coffee. Where did I even begin?

She was quiet a minute, and I could feel her eyes on me. “I hope you don’t think she betrayed a confidence, but Skylar has mentioned your OCD to me.”

“I figured. I know you’re close.”

She picked up her coffee and blew across its surface. “Does this have anything to do with that?”

I sighed, feeling completely defeated. “Yes.”

More silence. “Do you have a therapist?”

“Yes. But I haven’t been honest with him about my relationship with Skylar.”

“Why not?”

“Because when she told me she loved me, I relapsed, and I was too scared to admit it.”

She tilted her head. “Scared of what? Don’t you love her?”

“Of course I love her. Look, I can’t even begin to explain the fucked up circuitry in my brain, but suffice it to say, I thought I was protecting her by saying nothing. By doing the things I did.” *Solid thinking there, asshole.*

Nodding slowly, she sipped her coffee. “What about now? Can you talk to him now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know if he can help me.” I swallowed hard against the bitter bile rising in my throat, so sick and tired of that voice in my head I wanted to scream. Why wouldn’t it just leave me the fuck alone? “I don’t know if anyone can help me.”

“I’m sorry.” She leaned forward, elbows on the table. “Because Skylar is crazy in love with you, you know. Every other word out of her mouth is your name. And I don’t think she’s going to let this go.”

“I love her too. But she left me, and she was right to do it.”

“Says who?”

The voice in my head. “Me.”

“You’re right. That is fucked up.” She sounded so much like Skylar, I looked up sharply.

“Sorry if that’s harsh, but I agree with you. I’m the first person to say I think Sky’s a great catch, but she’s a handful too. Ever tried to share a bathroom with her? Good grief, she’s a slob. Makeup and hair shit everywhere. And her shoe collection—my god! Good luck to any man who needs any closet space at all in her house.”

My lips tipped up a little. “Yeah. She does have a lot of shoes.”

“She’s a cover hog too. Ever notice that?”

I had, but it didn’t bother me. I’d subject myself to subzero temperatures before letting her be cold at night.

“And she’s pretty and all but have you ever seen her with her hair wet? Those funny little ears? They stick way out from her head.”

I found myself smiling at a memory—Skylar surfacing after jumping into the lake the first time we went swimming together, hands over her ears. I thought they were adorable, of course, but she hated them. “Yeah. But I actually like them.”

“What about the way she’s so obsessed with wine now? I never thought I’d get bored with wine, but Jesus, if I have to listen to her talk about *grapes* and *soil* and *fruit on the palate* any more, I’m going to strangle her.”

“She’s dedicated to her new job. I love that about her.”

“Well then, I’d suggest you try harder to get over feeling like you don’t deserve her, because believe me, all she wants is you, and any man that can put up with her bathroom mess and her closet hogging and cover stealing and fruit-on-the-palating *and* the Nixon ears...” She shrugged. “Seems like you guys should make this work.”

Miserable, I sat back in my chair and regarded Natalie. “Her faults are so small compared to mine. Mine drive us both crazy and they probably would for the rest of our lives.”

She tilted her head from side to side. “Maybe. Guess you won’t know until you try it. But nobody’s perfect, Sebastian. Give yourself a break.”

I sat there for a minute, my hands on the table, wondering what to do next. “She really doesn’t want to see me, huh?”

“No. Actually her exact words were, ‘Not until he gets his shit together. And I can’t be the one to get it together for him.’”

I frowned. She was right about that—I had to fix this on my own, if I could. But I was so worried about her. “What about her injuries? They’re not serious?”

“No. Like I said, a broken wrist and a bump on the noggin, that’s all. Since she lost consciousness briefly, they’re keeping her for observation, but she seems fine.”

The thought of her slender wrist broken and a bump on her head infuriated and saddened me. I wished there was some way I could bear the pain for her. “Is she in pain? Will her new insurance cover this? She just got benefits last month,” I worried.

Natalie scrunched up her face as she set down her cup. “Yeah, we’re waiting to hear. Our parents might have to help her out.”

My hand shot out and I grabbed her arm. “Please let me pay for it. I want to. I want to take care of her.” *Forever.*

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

Forever.

I didn’t even feel that bad about counting it out. I’d have kept going, to infinity, but Natalie shook her head. “She’ll never let you.”

I set my elbows on the table and buried my head in my hands. I had so much work to do.

Natalie touched my wrist. “Go see your therapist, Sebastian. And try again. She’s worth it.”

“She is worth it.” I looked up at Natalie, totally sure of what I was saying. “She’s the one.”

Chapter 34

Skylar

I woke up to the sight of Natalie reading a magazine in the chair near my bed. “Hey,” I croaked.

“Hey. You’re up.” She set her magazine aside. “How do you feel?”

I made a face, tried to shift positions. “Haven’t been this sore since I fell off the mechanical bull. Achey. Wrist hurts.” I lifted my left arm gingerly. “God, this really sucks.”

Natalie nodded sympathetically. “How’s your head?”

“Hurts. But still attached.” I tried to move my neck, which was stiff as hell. “How come you’re not at work?”

“I had Michael open for me.”

“Did you talk to Mia?”

“Yes. And Lucas and they’re both very worried about you and said not to concern yourself with anything at Abelard. I wouldn’t be surprised if Mia came by here today, or by your house tomorrow, if they let you go. She wants to see you.”

I nodded, but that hurt, so I just tried to lie still. “Jeez, how stupid was that fall? Why did I have to wear those damn expensive shoes?”

Natalie laughed ruefully. “It was probably a damn expensive fall. Think your insurance will cover it?”

I groaned. “I hope so.”

“If it doesn’t, Mom and Dad will help you. Mom will be here shortly.” She was quiet for a second, fiddling with the hem of her hoodie. “Sebastian also offered to cover the bill. He was here last night.”

At the sound of his name, my breath caught. “No. I don’t want his charity.” But the offer was sweet, and so like him, although I’d never take him up on it. We were broken up, as far as I was concerned. The thought made my throat hurt. My chest. My heart. Everything.

“He wasn’t an asshole. He was very upset. He wanted to see you.”

Carefully, I turned my head to look at my sister. I could tell from her voice there was more. “What else did he say?”

She shrugged. “Not much. Just that he’d messed up. He seemed to agree with you about getting his shit together.”

“Really? He talked to you about it?” Closing my eyes, I exhaled, scared to let myself be too hopeful but wondering if maybe the things I said last night had gotten through to him. The truth was, I didn’t want to be without him in my life, and I’d do what it took to help him—but he had to let me.

“I think he was going to talk to his therapist. He said he would.”

“He did? Thank God.” Relief eased some of my pain, at least the emotional grief. Going to therapy was the best first step. My eyes filled. “He’s so hard on himself. And I was really hard on him. But I love him—and he doesn’t understand how frustrating it is for me to see him struggling silently and not know what’s in his head.”

“I don’t know what’s in his head, Skylar. But I know what’s in his heart—you are.”

My throat closed up completely, and my head began to throb with the need to cry. I closed

my eyes and the tears slipped down my cheeks. “Was I wrong to walk out? Oh God, I’m awful. I should have stayed with him. Then I wouldn’t have fallen. It’s a sign I’m a horrible person after all.”

Natalie stood, grabbed a tissue from the bedside table and dabbed at my cheeks. “Stop. I don’t think you were wrong to leave. In my opinion, he needed that wake up call. And loving someone doesn’t mean you have to love everything they do. But it does mean you forgive them a little more often, a little more easily.”

I sniffed. “I once told him I’d give him all the chances he needed, and he called me a fool.”

“We’re all fools for love, aren’t we?” Her voice was wistful.

I looked up at her. “Things aren’t any better with Dan?” Last I’d heard, he’d admitted to a flirtation at the office, but nothing more.

“I don’t know. I guess they are. He claims the fling or whatever it was is over and begged for another chance, and we do have a lot of history. I don’t want to just throw that away.” She sat on the edge of the bed and chewed her lip a moment. “But I also don’t want history to be the *only* reason to give him another chance. When I see you talk about Sebastian, when I listened to him talk about you, when I saw the expression on his face when he said you were the one, I—“

“Wait, what? What did he say?” I didn’t mean to interrupt Natalie’s thought, and I did care deeply about her feelings, but I couldn’t just let her gloss over that. Had I even heard her right? My head was so foggy.

“He said you were the one.” Her face contorted with worry. She put her hands on her head. “Oh god, I hope I didn’t just blow what was supposed to be a really nice moment between the two of you by telling you that. He’s never said that to you before?”

“No,” I said slowly, my heart beating fast. Wasn’t *the one* kind of a forever thing? “He doesn’t believe in the one. Plus it’s an odd number. He hates those.”

“What?” She dropped her hands, her expression confused.

“Never mind. Just one of the quirks that makes Sebastian who he is.” But right then, I actually found his number quirks kind of endearing. “So he really said that?”

She nodded. “Yes. He definitely said, ‘She’s the one.’ But you can’t tell him I told you first!” Her eyes were wide and panicked.

“It’s okay. I won’t.” I pursed my lips. “But he better fucking say it to me eventually. Or I’ll be the one that got away.” Inside my heart was tripping over itself—the one! the one! the one!

Natalie laughed. “Somehow, I doubt that. Give him a little time, sis. He wants to make things right.”

A nurse popped in to take my vitals, so Natalie got off the bed. “Don’t go, Nat. I want to hear the rest of what you were saying about Dan.”

She sat on the chair again and stayed with me all morning until my mother relieved her. Some time during the afternoon, I was cleared for release and sent home with lots of pain meds and instructions to take it easy. My mother took me back to her house and insisted I stay there, even though I was a little desperate for some alone time. But it was nice to be fussed over and catered to, I’ll admit. She made spaghetti and meatballs for me, which I ate on a tray table at my cozy spot on the couch. Jillian came over with honey sticks, chocolate chip cookies, and my favorite shampoo and conditioner, and after dinner she helped me wash and dry my hair, then gave me a foot massage on the couch while I ate sweets and watched a Tiger game on TV with my dad.

I checked my phone only once and saw messages from Mia and Kelly Pryce, who must have heard about my fall from Sebastian, but there was nothing from him. Trying not to feel

disappointed, I put my phone away and tried to enjoy the time with my family, despite my aching head and sore arm.

But before I fell into a drug-induced deep sleep that night in my old bed, I fretted that he'd change his mind about me and go back to thinking that a relationship was just too much work, even if I was the one.

Chapter 35

Sebastian

“I’ve been lying to you.”

Ken took my characteristic bluntness in stride, regarding me silently, waiting for me to go on. If he was alarmed, he didn’t show it, nor did his expression betray any surprise at what I’d announced. He had to know something was up—I’d never asked him to come in on a Saturday before.

“And I canceled all of last month’s appointments to avoid facing the truth.” Perched at the edge of the couch, I slid my hands up and down the tops of my legs, anxious about making this confession but knowing it had to be done.

“I was worried about that.” He looked at me intently. “Did you have a relapse?”

“Yes. For months now, I’ve been backsliding.”

He reached for his notepad and clicked his ballpoint pen. “Intrusive thoughts?”

“Yes. And the rituals. And anxiety, the worst anxiety I’ve ever felt.”

He made a note and flipped back a few pages. “Months, you said? About when did this start?”

“August twenty-fifth.”

Ken looked up. “What triggered it?”

“Skylar told me she loved me.” For a second, I blamed Skylar for telling me she loved me for the first time on an odd day. Didn’t she know nothing good happened to me on odd days?

“And what about that was traumatic for you?”

I ran a shaky hand through my hair. “The weight of it. The responsibility.”

He made another note. “Tell me about the responsibility of loving someone.”

God, didn’t he understand me at all? “It’s not the responsibility of loving someone. Loving her is easy. It’s effortless.” I took a breath and tried to put into words how I felt. “It’s the responsibility that comes with letting someone love *you*. It means you’re beholden to that love. You have to nurture that love.”

“You have to deserve that love.”

Aha. He did understand me.

“Yes,” I said quietly. “And no matter how much my heart feels for her, my head just keeps convincing me I’m doomed to disappoint her, or worse.”

“You will disappoint her, Sebastian. That’s human nature. In any close relationship, there will be hurt and disappointment.” He set his notepad aside. “But there is also forgiveness. Redemption. No one expects you to be perfect.”

“Except for myself.”

“You’re going to have to let that go, Sebastian. We all know what it feels like to want to be a better person for someone, but aiming for perfection is a mistake.” He shifted in his chair, sat up taller. “Think back to when I first started seeing you. You set goals. You made progress. Things have changed now that you’ve fallen in love, but there’s no reason why we can’t adjust those goals, adjust your therapy to help you. You respond well to therapy, Sebastian. You’re disciplined and tough on yourself and determined. Let’s use those qualities to help you get back on track.”

I nodded, glad to hear his faith in me.

“Now tell me what happened in the last month.”

Sitting back on the couch, I described my last few months to him in detail, explaining how falling more in love with Skylar had triggered the faulty wiring in my brain to convince me the rituals would protect her. “Instead they drove her away,” I said. “She accused me of doing it on purpose, and I’m wondering if she was right. Maybe I wasn’t doing it to protect her—maybe I was doing it to make her leave so that it would be less painful. I’d have control over it, you know?”

Ken nodded. “You’d be alone by choice then, rather than be abandoned.”

“Right.” I exhaled, closing my eyes for a moment. “You know, I spent all last night wondering if those shrinks were right about my issues stemming from my mother’s death. Deep down, am I just scared of being left alone? Did I isolate myself in school because I was afraid to make friends? Did I choose Diana because I knew subconsciously there was never any danger of losing my whole heart to her? And did my feelings for Skylar trigger this relapse because it’s already lost?”

“Those are good, introspective questions, Sebastian.”

“But then I wonder if that’s all bullshit and it’s just neurological, not psychological.”

Ken nodded. “Also a valid question.”

I pinned him with a stare. “I need answers, Ken. I need help. I don’t want to lose her. Tell me what to do.”

* * * *

Together, Ken and I discussed strategies for getting back on track, some that had been successful for me in the past, and some that were new to me. He told me to schedule an appointment with my doctor to see about changing up some of my meds and specifically asked me to mention being treated for depression as well as anxiety. I promised I would. Then he asked how serious I was about Skylar.

“Serious,” I said. “In all of this, the one thing I have no doubt about is the way I feel about her.”

Ken smiled. “Perfect. So let’s bring her in here and talk about what she can do to help.”

Feeling optimistic, I left his office building, putting up the collar of my coat against the cold. I was dying to run right to Skylar and apologize and tell her I was doing everything possible to get better fast, but I thought it might be better to spend some time doing some serious self-reflection, setting new goals for myself, and pondering the best way to show her that I wanted to make a life with her, if she’d give me another chance.

When I got back to the cabin, I texted her instead. I miss you and I’m thinking of you every minute. If I’m silent for a while, it isn’t to shut you out. It’s to get well enough to let you in, and never let you go. I love you. I’ll always love you.

Chapter 36

Skylar

It nearly killed me not to call him the following week, but I knew he needed this time to work things out on his own. I answered his text with a simple I love you too and waited for him to come to me. I missed him terribly, but I was also glad he was taking this seriously...if he'd rushed right to my side, I might be tempted to think he wasn't taking enough time to think carefully about what he wanted for the future.

I knew what I wanted. Finally.

The days that Sebastian took for himself, I took for myself too, reflecting on what I'd accomplished this summer and where I was headed. I felt proud of the direction my life had taken: I had a job I loved and I was good at it; I had big-picture plans to save up the money to buy my own condo like my sisters had done; I made rent payments to my parents even though they said they didn't want them, I made a car payment each month *on time*, and I still had some left over for nice shoes. (Note to self: Do Not Wear Leopard Heels In Rain.)

Maybe I didn't have a wedding ring or kids like some people my age, but I had fallen madly in love...that was a good start, wasn't it? But the more days went by without hearing from him, the more I worried he'd changed his mind about me. His note had said I'll always love you, and in my mind I started to hear a sort of final, tragic ring to the words...like maybe we wouldn't get our happy ending but we'd always have last summer. Each night I went to sleep alone, I fretted and prayed and hoped and missed him. *Please don't let me miss him forever. Please don't let me regret anything. Please bring him back to me.*

And then one shivering cold evening in early December, I came home from work to find an envelope taped to the guest house door with my name on it. The writing was Sebastian's. Surprised, I looked around but saw no one around and heard only the wind gusting through the orchard. A few snow flurries were starting to fall from the inky sky as I pulled the envelope off the door and hustled inside, kicking it shut behind me.

Without even taking off my coat, I threw my gloves onto the counter and slid my finger under the flap. Inside were two sheets of notebook paper folded into thirds. Hands trembling, I opened them up. They had spiral fringe on the left as if he'd written them in his journal and ripped them out. The top one was a letter.

My sweet Skylar,

Sorry this letter isn't on nicer paper—you deserve beautiful things, and I promise to give them to you. But this paper suits me, I think. A little rough around the edges, but the words are heartfelt.

Thank you for giving me the time and solitude I needed to recover. I promise you, I have spent it wisely. Not a day (and certainly not a night) went by that I didn't miss you, but the issues I had to work through meant focusing fully on myself, mind, soul, and body, something I never want to do when you're around.

(Your body is much more fun.)

I've learned a lot about myself during the last month, and feel stronger than I ever have. Strong enough to admit how wrong I was to close myself off from you. Strong enough to see

how I let myself be the victim of my doubt and fear. Strong enough to realize what I need to be happy.

Can I please have another chance?

This cabin, this heart, this life feels empty without you.

Love,
Sebastian

P.S. I wrote something for you.

The words blurred as my eyes filled, and I sniffed as I slipped the letter behind the second page.

Skylar

My mind is constantly ticking
with doubts

tick did I lock the door tick did I turn off the stove tick did I check the outlets tick did I step
on a crack tick did I wash my hands enough times tick did I turn off the lights tick did I walk a
straight line tick did I take the right number of steps tick did I turn off the television on an even
channel tick did I close the book on an even page tick did I start the car on an even minute tick

what if I didn't

what if I didn't

what if I didn't

I don't know.

But I know

you wore a gray sweater
and had a crumbling leaf in your hair
the day we had a chemistry test
and before it started you turned and asked,
"Is sodium hydroxide an acid or a base?"

It was the first time you ever whispered to me.
(I liked that it was eight words.)

I don't know why eight
is better than seven or nine or twenty-one.
I don't know how many times I've told you
I love you
But I know that number is all wrong.

Your love may never silence the ticking
but I would trade silence for your laughter,
calm for your storms,
tranquility for love's madness,
the beautiful chaos of stars

The papers shook in my hands, and tears dripped off my lashes. I needed to see him. Tonight. Slipping the letter and poem back into the envelope, I tucked it into my purse and raced out the door, yanking it shut behind me.

* * * *

The drive to the cabin had never seemed so endless, not even the first night we'd been together, Sebastian's hand sliding up my thigh. At the thought of his touch, every muscle in my lower body tightened. It had been so long. Had he missed my body as much as I'd missed his? The snow fell a little harder as I drove up the highway, and I forced myself to slow down and be safe.

As I pulled up at the cabin, my heart pounded furiously. Lights were on—that had to mean he was home, right? Sebastian would *never* leave home without turning the lights off. I almost laughed as I ran up the porch steps, careful not to slip in the dusting of snow.

He pulled the door open before I could knock, and my breath caught at the sight of him. He'd gotten a haircut, and he wore jeans and a light blue sweater. His scruff was short and neat, and he looked rested and healthy and gorgeous. Heart pounding, I threw my arms around him, and he laughed, squeezing me tight and lifting me right off the ground.

"Hi," he said, his voice muffled in my hair. "You got my letter?"

"Yes. Thank you so much. I love your words." I inhaled the scent of him—there was smoke and wood on his skin, like he'd built a fire. "God, I missed you."

"I missed you too. I hoped you would come, but I didn't want to pressure you. Just because I was ready didn't mean you were." He pulled back just enough to kiss me, and the feel of his lips against mine was so thrilling I had no idea if my feet were on the ground or not. When the kiss grew deeper, he backed into the cabin, where I could hear a fire crackling in the fireplace, and pushed the door shut behind me.

"I'm ready. I'm so ready." Panting, I released him from my barnacle grip and started unbuttoning my coat. "Now take off your clothes."

He smiled. "I was going to say let's talk first, but—" His eyes widened and swept down my body after I threw my coat off, taking in the silk blouse, pencil skirt and heels. "Fuck talking."

One by one articles of clothing came off and were flung aside, and we tumbled naked onto the rug in front of the fireplace. I lay back as Sebastian knelt between my thighs.

"What do you want first?" he asked, his voice low and playful. "My tongue? My fingers? My cock?" He began stroking himself, sliding his erection through his fingers. "What did you miss the most?"

"Oh god, everything," I breathed. "I missed hearing you and seeing you and feeling you—every part of you."

"Which part first? You have to tell me or I won't let you have it." He rubbed the tip of his cock against one pale inner thigh.

Gahhhhhh, he was so hot! For the rest of our lives his quick mood switches might drive me batty outside the bedroom but inside it, they were like gasoline on the fire.

"Your cock," I managed, the fire hissing and sparking. "Give me your cock."

"Good girl. I'll be gentle," he said, giving me just the tip and then smearing my wetness up and down my pussy. He stopped and met my eyes. "At first."

My heart pounded hard as he slid inside me and then pulled out again, teasing me by giving

me a little more each time but never enough. Between each tortuous thrust, he played with my nipples, licking and sucking and biting them, pinching them into hard little peaks that tingled with lust.

“Fuck. If I didn’t have a broken wrist, I’d get rough with you right now,” I panted, my good hand pounding the rug, the injured arm over my head. “Beat your ass for tormenting me.”

He pushed in a little further. “Poor baby.”

“Please,” I begged, bringing my good hand to his ass. “I need you there. I need you inside me. All the way.”

Finally, he slid all the way in, so deep I nearly cried with relief. “Like this?”

“Yes, yes...” I pulled him into me, widening my knees. God, it was like he was *made* for my body. Every hot, thick inch of him filled me with such sublime perfection, I couldn’t even breathe for how good it felt. His hips moved faster, thrusting hard and deep, and my core muscles started to contract. “I’m gonna come,” I whimpered. “So hard, so hard. Come with me. Come inside me...” I moaned as my climax hit, and he growled low and long, grinding against me, his cock throbbing and thickening as my core pulsed around it.

He collapsed onto me, pressing his lips to my sweaty forehead.

“God, you feel so good,” I whispered, closing my eyes. “Tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay.” He lifted his head and looked down at me. “But I wasn’t before. And I need to apologize for not being honest with you. It was a mistake.”

“Apology accepted.”

He smiled. “You’re too easy on me.”

“I love you. And I once told you I’d give you all the chances you needed.” I took a breath. “Can you...tell me what happened?”

“Yes.” He rolled to his side and propped his head in his hand. As he talked, he played with my hair, twining it through his fingers.

“When I first saw you again, I was doing pretty well, I thought. I’d convinced myself that a solitary life was the only way I’d know peace, and peace seemed like the right goal. But then there you were.” He smiled. “Just as beautiful as ever, and those feelings I used to have for you came rushing back as if they’d never left.”

I blushed. “You hid it well, at least at first.”

“I had to. You terrified me. I felt strong for the first time in years, resigned to a life alone, and then here’s this beautiful angel right in front of me—*kissing* me. Touching me. Accepting me.” He shook his head. “I found myself wondering what if...”

“Me too,” I said. “It wasn’t only you.”

“And the sex.” He exhaled, closing his eyes. “The fucking sex.”

“I know,” I whispered, heat prickling across my skin. “It scared me too, how good it was.”

“I was able to be myself with you, afraid of nothing. It was so incredible. After that, it was a constant battle between my heart and my head—my heart telling me I’d always been destined to be with you, and my head refusing to let me believe I was worthy of it. I’d never brought anything but pain to women, and I wasn’t sure I was capable of letting you in.”

“But you did,” I said softly. “I felt it.”

He nodded. “I did. But the more I loved you, the more I feared the loss of you—when had I ever been able to hold on to happiness? I didn’t know how it would happen, but in my mind I always knew you’d leave, or something would happen to you, and it would be my fault.”

“Oh, Sebastian. I wish you’d have said something.”

“I couldn’t. Especially not once you told me you loved me. Then I felt this need to protect

you even more, but what you needed protecting from was me. I started engaging in all my old rituals, stopped going to therapy.”

My heart ached for him. “I saw it happening. But I didn’t know what to do about it. And some days were so good.”

“They were.” He looked down at my hair twisting through his fingers. “And I should have talked to you on one of those days, I was just too scared to lose you. But the messed up thing is that you were right, you know.”

“About what?”

“That subconsciously I knew I was driving you away with my behavior and continued to do it because then at least I’d be prepared. I wouldn’t experience another sudden, shocking loss and feel blindsided and abandoned.”

It hit me. “Your mom?”

“Maybe.” He kept looking at his hand, and in the firelight I saw his sea-glass green eyes were shiny. “I’m still working through that. I don’t think it *caused* my OCD, but therapy is helping me to see how my fear of loss and abandonment has caused me a lot of anxiety and grief, and maybe that manifests as OCD related behaviors. Who knows?” He sighed. “For as much as science has taught us about the brain, some things are still a mystery. But I don’t think a kid loses his mom suddenly and tragically and remains unaffected—and when I look at the way I chose isolation and emotional distance from people, it makes sense. And this probably sounds crazy, but I felt like I deserved the loneliness. Like a punishment. Whether it was penance for my mom’s death, my violent thoughts, my cold treatment of women, my breakup with Diana...there was always something in my head I needed to atone for. But I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

My throat closed up and I threw my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his. “You aren’t,” I sobbed. “I love you and I won’t let you be alone. You deserve to be happy, Sebastian.”

He gathered me in his arms, lying back and letting me weep against his chest. “Thank you. I can’t say there won’t be setbacks, and I’ll tell you right now there will be good days and bad, but I promise to talk about it with you.”

Nodding, I blubbered for a solid ten minutes as he stroked my hair and rubbed my back. I don’t even know why I was crying so hard—relief? Sadness for the child he’d been? The man he was now? Laying my cheek on his chest, I listened to his heart beat and vowed he would never know loneliness again.

“Will you come to therapy with me?” Sebastian asked once my sobs had subsided.

“Of course,” I said, picking my head up to smile at him. “I’d love that.”

“Good.” He wiped the tears from under one eye with his thumb. “Because this is it for me, Skylar. You’re the love of my life.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’ve spent nearly all my days being dominated by doubt, unable to trust myself—tortured by what my mind says and what my heart knows. But for once, I feel—I *know*—this is right. You’re the one.” He smiled. “And that is the only time the number one will ever sound good to me.”

I laughed. “I want to be the one.”

“Do you?” He arched one brow. “Because you know what it means to be my one.”

“Tell me.”

“It means being the one I’ll kiss good morning and good night—twice.” He grinned. “It means being the one who’ll have to hold my hand when we fly off to our villa in France.” At my

gasp, his smile widened. “It means the forever things, Skylar.”

“I want them.” I scooted up and pressed a kiss to his lips. “I want them all.”

He flipped me onto my back again and looked down at me. “Live with me.”

My heart stopped. “What?”

“Stay here. Live with me.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I’m one hundred percent sure about this, and one hundred is a good number.”

I laughed softly as tears filled my eyes again. “You keep making me cry tonight. What’s with that?”

“I don’t want you to cry. Ever again.” He kissed my eyelids.

“They’re happy tears, Sebastian. Of course I’ll live with you.”

“Good.” He scooted down to rest his head on my chest and we lay together, the fire warming our skin, our breathing slow and deep. “Happy tears are good, I can handle those. And if there are sad tears, I’ll handle those too. I’ll take care of you, Skylar.”

“And I’ll take care of you.” I closed my eyes and inhaled, loving the weight of his head on my chest, the warmth of his skin against mine, the promise of hope in the air. “Forever.”

Epilogue

Skylar

“Are you ready?”

“I think so.” His face told me what a lie that was, but I’d budgeted plenty of time for his nerves into today’s itinerary. After living with him for the past two months, I knew to allot extra time for pretty much anything we did outside the house.

“Come on. You’ve got this.” I tugged on his hand, but he didn’t move. “It’s not like we’re getting on the plane yet, Sebastian. This is the airport entrance.” As I talked, I took his elbow and ushered him gently through the automatic doors. “There are nice people in there who are going to look at our boarding passes and tell us what gate to sit at, and some other nice people are going to overcharge us for coffee and tell us to have a nice flight, and then some more nice people are going to show us how to use a seat belt and thank us for flying with them today.”

By the time I’d finished my soothing little speech, we were inside the terminal.

“See? You’re here, and you’re fine,” I said triumphantly.

“Now what?” he asked shakily.

“Now we’ll check in and find our gate. We don’t even have any luggage to check, so it will be nice and easy. Okay?”

He took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“Good. Because this little weekend jaunt was your idea and you paid for it, so it would be a damn shame if I had to give your ticket to someone else.”

“Don’t you dare.” He caught me around the waist and squeezed. “How long is the flight again?”

I kissed his cheek. “One hour and ten minutes, and I will talk to you the entire time.”

Some color returned to his face as he smiled. “I have no doubt.”

I pulled out our boarding passes, which I’d printed at work, and we got in line to check in. Sebastian seemed more relaxed until we were told that the flight was leaving from gate three.

“Stop worrying,” I told him, taking his hand again. “The gate number does not matter.”

We located our gate, grabbed five dollar cups of coffee, and chose seats near the window. It was a late February afternoon, but the weather was still bleak and dreary, and I was looking forward to getting away. Not that the Chicago weather would be any better, but it would be fun to stay in a luxury hotel together, shop the Magnificent Mile, have dinner in a gourmet French restaurant or maybe a cozy little Italian place. Honestly, I didn’t care what we did—what mattered most was that we’d be there together. Our first vacation.

“Hey.” I tipped my head onto his shoulder. “Thanks for this. I know you don’t really want to do it.”

“That plane looks small. Are you sure it’s regulation size?” He squinted out the window, his right knee bouncing continuously.

I sighed. “Yes, dear.”

“Let me see the boarding passes again.”

“No,” I said, lovingly but firmly. “You’ve looked at them a hundred times. You already know we’re in an even row. Row two, first class.”

His brow furrowed. “Are you sure?”

“You booked the tickets, Sebastian. Now let’s talk about what we’re going to do this weekend. How about massages?” I tried my best to distract him from his own thoughts, but he didn’t make it easy.

When he tried to retrace his steps down the tarmac because it hadn’t felt right the first time, I grabbed his hand and refused to let go.

When he took out the pamphlet explaining how a water landing works, I took it away from him and shoved it back in my seat pocket.

When he gingerly eyed the arm rest where our tray tables were tucked away, I brandished a package of antibacterial wipes. “Come at me, babe. I’ve already thought of everything.”

He looked around. “There’s eleven people sitting in this section. Someone needs to sit in that empty chair.”

From my bag I pulled out a Barbie doll I’d dug out of a trunk in my mom’s attic. “Now there’s twelve in here. A nice even dozen.” I stuck her legs in the seat back pocket in front of him.

“Oh for fuck’s sake.” He grabbed the doll and shoved her back in my bag. “I’m not that desperate.” Cracking a smile, he leaned back in his seat, although he kept flexing and fisting his fingers in his lap.

“Hey. It’s going to be fine.” I stilled one of his hands by placing mine over it. “Say it.”

“It’s going to be fine,” he repeated quietly, eyes closing.

I gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. “Now let’s say it together eight times.”

He opened his eyes and smiled at me for real. “God, you’re adorable. We don’t have to do that.”

“You sure? I don’t mind, if it will make you feel better. I know you’re doing this for me.”

“I’m doing this for us.” He lifted my hand to his lips. “And the only thing I need to feel good is you next to me.”

My stomach fluttered. “You’ll always have me.”

“Say it again, quick.” He grinned sheepishly. “Two is still better than one.”

“You’ll always have me.” I poked his leg. “God, Sebastian, if we ever have kids, you’re going to want twins every time,” I teased.

“It’s funny you say that.” He looked down at my hand on his lap, and suddenly I was very aware of him staring at my ring finger. “I’ve been thinking about it. About a family.”

“Yeah?” I swallowed hard. “Me too.” Being around the happy Fourniers had gotten to me over the last few months. I wanted that with Sebastian, and I thought I might be ready for the next step, but I hadn’t wanted to rush him.

“Maybe we can talk about the future a little bit?” he asked.

I nodded, awestruck by the turn this conversation had taken. “I’d like that.”

He played with my fingers. “You know, this is the first time in my life that thinking about the future doesn’t mean dreading it. We’re going to be happy together, aren’t we?”

I smiled, squeezing his hand. “Say it again, quick.”

Leaning toward me, he pressed his lips to mine before whispering softly against them. “Marry me.”

A Note from the Author

This book and the character of Sebastian were inspired by several things: the heartbreakingly raw and moving performance of “OCD” by poet/writer Neil Hilborn (please look him up, watch the live performance, like him on Facebook...I’m in awe of him), the song “Creep” by Radiohead (listen to the original and the cover by Hailey Reinhart of Scott Bradlee’s Postmodern Jukebox), and my own life experience loving someone who struggles with anxiety. But how does a writer of romantic comedy take on something like Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, especially in the male love interest, do justice to its sufferers, and yet still write a lighthearted romance? I tried very hard to be true to the harsh realities of OCD, which is nothing like what I thought it was, and still write a compelling, sexy character, who is so much more than his anxiety. My heart goes out to anyone who suffers from OCD. Love cannot cure you, but I hope you find it with someone wonderful, and it brings you peace, hope, and happiness—you deserve it.

For more information on OCD, visit <https://iocdf.org/>

About the Author

Melanie Harlow likes her heels high, her martini dry, and her history with the naughty bits left in. In addition to *AFTER WE FALL*, she's the author of *MAN CANDY*, the *HAPPY CRAZY LOVE* series (contemporary romance), the *FRENCHED* series (contemporary romance) and the *SPEAK EASY* duet (historical romance). She writes from her home outside of Detroit, where she lives with her husband and two daughters. Connect with her on Facebook at [Facebook.com/AuthorMelanieHarlow](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorMelanieHarlow).

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SOME SORT OF CRAZY

A Happy Crazy Love Novel

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Now Available!

When a psychic tells Natalie Nixon her life is about to be upended by a mysterious stranger, she laughs it off. After all, she has everything she's ever wanted—a successful bakery, the perfect boyfriend, and the keys to her dream house.

Who could possibly make her want to throw all that away?

Then Miles Haas comes back to town.

But he's no stranger—they've known each other since high school. Plus, he's only around for the summer, he's still a shameless playboy, and he makes a living writing articles for a men's magazine with titles like 'Should You Bang the Boss's Daughter? A Flowchart' and 'Butt Stuff for Beginners: A Field Guide.'

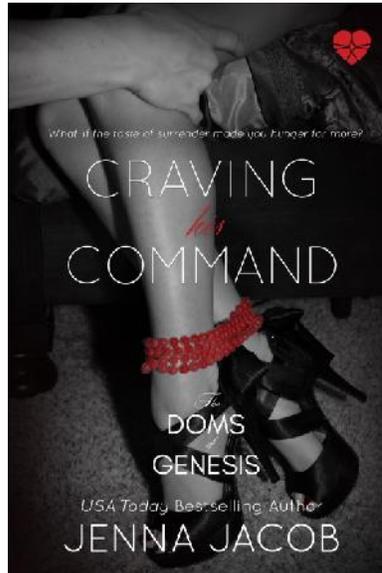
Except he makes her laugh like no one else, smells like heaven, and wears those panty-melting glasses. But he's not the man of her dreams, and she's not about to abandon everything she's worked so hard for just for a little fun.

She's not that crazy...or is she?

Craving His Command

A Doms of Genesis Novella

Jenna Jacob



Dedication

To Sean

CHAPTER ONE

Unable to find a comfortable position on the wooden bench outside the courtroom, Mercy O'Connor shifted her hips. She wouldn't be comfortable until this nightmare was over. The wait was driving her crazy.

This whole mess started three months ago. Davis Walker, a.k.a. Master Kerr, hadn't stopped when she'd screamed her safe word and beat her ass bloody during a BDSM scene gone wrong.

Forty-five minutes ago, Mercy had bravely taken the stand, ignoring Kerr's intimidating glare, and focused on answering the questions her lawyer, Reed Landes, asked. After Jeremy Potts, Kerr's lawyer, finished his cross-examination—hideously twisting her words—Reed did his best to deflect the damage done. Mercy wasn't holding her breath. Her hopes of winning the case had flown out the window when Potts painted her as a kinky, perverted freak instead of the victim. She'd wanted to vomit long before she left the stand shaking with fury. Mercy had bolted from the courtroom and escaped to the ladies' room to gather her wits and calm the hell down. But Kerr's demented gaze still stained her brain.

She knew she'd have to face the abusive prick when the verdict was read. Still, she couldn't find the courage to step inside the courtroom again, so she'd parked her ass on the unforgiving bench and waited to be summoned.

The nervous energy humming inside her threatened to burst free. Mercy rubbed her sweaty palms together and stood. As she paced, the heels of her black-bowed Miu Miu pumps clacked against the marble floor, echoing down the empty hallway like a cap gun.

The door behind her creaked. Mercy spun to find Reed Landes storming toward her. His expression, furious and grim.

“What happ—”

The question stalled on her tongue as Kerr sauntered into the hallway wearing a smarmy, triumphant grin.

The knots in her stomach coiled tighter. She didn't need a psychic to confirm that her efforts to bring Davis Walker to justice had failed. The look on his face was proof enough. Obviously the judge hadn't paid attention as Reed outlined the difference between consensual and non-consensual submission and Dominant ethics versus abusive predatory behavior. That, or maybe His Honor was so repulsed by the lifestyle he decided Mercy had simply gotten what she deserved.

Dammit!

Kerr turned his cold, maniacal grin her way. “Well, that didn't take long. I still have time to make the afternoon munch and share the news about my victory. Should I save you a seat, *Symoné*?”

Bile rose in the back of her throat when he referred to her as *Symoné*—the submissive name he'd given her years ago. Kerr's assumption that she'd go around the block with him filled her with a white-hot rage. The manipulative prick might have fooled her once, but she refused to be stupid enough to fall for his guise again. He could try and lure her in that low, inveigling whisper—that once had turned her on—until he was blue in face. She was learning the true meaning of submission since joining Club Genesis, and it was nothing close to what he'd led her to believe.

Mercy's stomach curdled as memories of surrendering to Kerr rushed in her head. Intimate,

embarrassing visuals flashed like a repulsive slideshow...images of her *willingly* kneeling at the asshole's feet...worshiping his cock with her mouth as he fucked her throat. She could still hear his threats of reprisal if she failed to swallow all of his seed. Remembered him thrusting his pathetic cock inside her pussy and ass. Mercy wanted to bleach every humiliating moment that she'd allowed him to debase her from her memory banks. But she wanted to assuage the self-inflicted anguish and shame for letting him to play her like a damn puppet.

She'd spent the first half of her twenties fascinated by the BDSM lifestyle. Three years ago, after stumbling onto a website geared toward Doms and subs, Kerr friended her. After talking online for weeks, he'd offered to train her. Mercy had been thrilled that a real-life Master was willing to sate her curiosity and teach her to be a submissive. Hindsight being what it was, she'd been ridiculously naïve and so damn gullible. Kerr had been convincing, she'd give him that, but his manufactured rules of the lifestyle and control he demanded she hand over had cost her dearly.

The memories continued to spill inside her brain like acid.

Kneel and open your mouth, slut. Prove you're a sub.

So she had.

You don't have any limits except the ones I give you. Our sessions aren't over until I decide it.

She hadn't opposed.

You'll take my cock up your ass because it's your duty to make me happy, whore.

She'd let him.

You're my property. I'll do whatever I want to you, and you'll fucking thank me when I'm through.

She hadn't protested.

You'll never find a better Master than me.

She'd believed him.

If you can't follow my commands, I'll find a sub who will.

She hadn't wanted to fail.

Kerr had brainwashed her into believing he was the only Master who'd provide her with the ultimate reward: submission. But it wasn't submission; it was abuse.

Mercy had been foolish and trusting. A mistake she wouldn't make again.

Her perception of submissive splendor now lay tarnished and stained in regret.

Humiliation and shame stung the backs of her eyes. She swallowed the greasy lump of guilt lodged in her throat and clenched her teeth. She refused to give Kerr the satisfaction of watching her fall apart.

"What do you say, *Symoné*...wanna hit the munch with me?"

Once upon a time, she'd looked forward to the weekly social outing where members of the BDSM community—well, Kerr's online recruits—gathered and discussed the lifestyle over lunch. To her delight, Club Genesis held munches as well, though work and preparing for the trial had prevented her from attending them yet.

She flashed Kerr a brittle smile. "There are no more munches. You're the only one left of our group because you ran everyone off with that stupid stunt you pulled on me in your so-called *dungeon*."

"Oh, I've made *new* friends...friends who know what real submission's about. Come on...I'll introduce you. It'll be just like old times."

The thought of Kerr luring more innocent subs to the slaughter filled her with dread. But

overriding everything and scaring her senseless was the icy tone of retribution in Kerr's voice. In the past, Mercy thought him a demanding and strict Dom, but the night he'd lost his shit and unleashed his dark side had changed her opinion.

She was terrified of him. If Kerr ever got her alone, Mercy knew the authorities would never find her body.

An icy tremor slid up her spine.

"Why don't you do society a favor and crawl back under the rock you climbed out of, Kerr?" Reed sneered.

"Counselor!" Jeremy Potts—the sixty-something defense attorney, sporting a bad comb-over—admonished with a scowl. He clapped a protective hand on Kerr's shoulder. "Stooping to browbeat my client, now, are you? I didn't take you as the sore loser type, Landes."

"I didn't take you as the type to champion the scum-sucking dredges of the earth, either," Reed countered. "You that hard up for clients these days, Potts?"

The defense attorney's face grew crimson. The roadmap of broken capillaries on his nose and cheeks—suggesting a serious alcohol addiction—turned a mottled purple color. His nostrils flared and his bloodshot eyes narrowed in fury.

Mercy gaped at Reed, wondering where the kind and understanding lawyer she admired and trusted had gone. His usual mild manners had morphed and he'd turned into a battle-ready warrior, armed with a tongue honed like a blade and a take-no-prisoners attitude.

"Let's go, Davis. Our work here is done." Potts kept a seething glare locked on Reed as he gently nudged Kerr toward the elevator. "Until we meet again, Counselor."

It wasn't until the two were out of sight that Reed's palpable anger began to diminish.

"Kerr and his lawyer are a couple of peaches, aren't they?" Mercy drawled sarcastically.

"They're pieces of...work, that's for sure."

"I take it the judge had zero compassion for a woman who willingly allowed herself be cuffed to a cross and beaten?"

Reed's lips thinned to a tight line. "Campbell's a cantankerous old fuck. I knew when the original judge had to recuse himself and we drew Campbell, we were in for an uphill battle."

"Original judge? What do you mean?"

"Judge Graham was first slated to hear your case, but he knew Kerr...conflict of interest. So Graham declined and the clerk assigned Campbell."

"Ah, I see. So...that's it? It's over?"

"I'm afraid so." Reed frowned. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to give you the reparation you deserve."

Mercy shrugged absently. "You warned me from the start this would be a long shot. I'm just thankful that you tried."

Reed nodded dolefully. "I doubt Davis Walker will bother you, but hang on to the restraining order I filed, just in case."

"It's right here." She patted her purse and put on a brave face. "Don't worry. Kerr's nothing but a bully. I won't get close enough to the creep for him to hurt me again. I have a mean right hook I'm not afraid to use on him now."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Would you like for me to walk you to your car?"

"No. Actually, mine's in the shop. My friend Maple dropped me off. I'm supposed to text her when I'm done and she'll pick me up. It's all good."

"Okay. I need to head down the hall. I've got another case in about twenty minutes."

"Thanks for *trying*, Reed, but mostly, thank you for not judging me or the lifestyle the way

Campbell did.”

“You’re welcome, Mercy. I’ve never...I mean, I don’t have any personal experience with...ah...” A light blush stained his cheeks as he stammered uncomfortably. “You’re welcome.”

Mercy bit back a grin. “Good luck with your next case.”

“Thanks.”

As Reed turned and walked away, she descended the stairs to the first floor, where she sent off a text to Maple. Before stepping outside, Mercy darted a glance both inside the lobby and over the courthouse grounds. Kerr was nowhere to be seen. But then, he had a lunch date with *new* potential victims. Mercy was certain the prick would garner a butt-load of sympathy because some crazy sub tried to send him to jail.

She slung her scarf around her neck and tugged the collar of her coat together before she pushed past the heavy glass door. A blustery November wind blew off Lake Michigan, sending brittle leaves of red, russet, and golden yellow to swirl at her feet. The wind bit her cheeks, and she was thankful she’d worn the brushed wool pants of her Dolce suit, instead of the skirt.

Peering up the street, she watched for Maple’s red, sun-bleached Hyundai hatchback while business professionals hurried along the sidewalks, hunched over like trolls, shielding themselves from the cutting wind.

Still discouraged the court case was over, Mercy was also relieved. She could focus on work once more. She’d wasted her creative juices stressing about the trial and only managed to design one new logo for an existing nouveau-rich client. Now that all the ugliness was behind her, Mercy could concentrate on building her client base during the day and learning about *real* submission at night in the dungeon of Genesis.

“You’re going to pay for humiliating me, bitch...pay a real high price.”

Mercy snapped her head toward the savage sound of Kerr’s unmistakable voice. He was standing a mere foot away from her. A ruthless rage blazed in his eyes, sending raw panic to unwind inside her. His crazed expression promised zero remorse if he slit her throat then and there.

Fear swelled to panic.

“You didn’t actually think you’d get away with ruining my reputation, did you, cunt?”

Too petrified to respond, Mercy glanced at the strangers traversing the sidewalk. The bevy of bodies were only a few yards away, they might as well have been miles. If Kerr whipped out a knife or a gun, she’d be dead before anyone could reach her...*if* they bothered to intervene at all.

Mercy thought of the restraining order in her purse, but a piece of paper was useless in a face-to-face confrontation like this. Besides, there wasn’t a cop in sight to enforce the damn thing.

She was on her own.

With her options limited, she did the only thing she could think of...she turned and ran.

Kerr’s demonic laughter followed her on the wind as she sprinted up the stairs and bolted inside the courthouse. When she skidded to a stop, the two security guards manning the metal detectors snapped their concerned looks her way. Mercy’s heart sank. She hadn’t noticed the men were old as dirt, frail, and as intimidating as newborn kittens on her first trip through the checkpoint. A stiff wind could knock the old farts down. Combined, the pair couldn’t provide the level of resistance needed to stop Kerr.

As she watched her purse inch along the conveyer belt and through the x-ray machine, her fear continued to climb. She darted a sidelong glance toward the entrance and spied Kerr walking

with a lackadaisical stride toward the building. Pinning one more hopeless look on the guards, Mercy could all but see the pair fumbling for their guns while Kerr gripped her by the hair and dragged her away.

No, she wasn't putting her life in the hands of two potentially inept men.

Her hammering heart echoed in her ears as she grabbed her purse and raced up the stairs. The second floor yawed in front of her. Mercy pushed off the balls of her feet, clamoring to reach the landing and find Reed.

Once at the top, she made a beeline for Campbell's courtroom. Maybe if the judgmental dipshit saw Kerr in action, he might rethink his decision to let the monster go free. She pulled back on the door handle only to find it locked.

Adrenaline thundered through her bloodstream, making her limbs tingle as she ran to the next door. That courtroom was locked as well.

"Oh, come on!" she growled as she sprinted to the next portal.

"Symoné!" Kerr's voice—a sickening singsong tenor—taunted from the stairwell. Each thud of his shoes echoing on the steps felt as if he were stomping the air from her lungs. "Where are you? I'm coming..."

The prick was playing a demented game of cat and mouse. If she didn't find help, fast, she'd face the unimaginable—torture and a slow, suffering death.

Shaking uncontrollably, she bit back a sob of terror. Mercy sent up a silent prayer as she gripped the door handle and tugged. The slab of polished oak careened open, and she yelped in surprise as she skimmed a quick glance over the empty courtroom. She was grateful to find a safe haven, at least until she saw the brass plaque atop the magistrate's perch:

Judge Kellan Graham.

Judge Graham was first slated to hear your case, but he knew Davis Walker...conflict of interest... Reed Landes' words tumbled through her head as dread rolled up her spine.

"Oh, god," Mercy whimpered. "Of all the lousy luck."

Thankfully, Kerr's judge *friend* was long gone. But his courtroom was not the safe haven she'd first thought. Hopefully, Murphy's Law wouldn't bring his gavel down, and she could hide here undetected by Judge Kellan Graham until Kerr had abandoned his search of the second floor and moved onto the third. Then she could haul her ass home.

Gripping both handles of the door, Mercy pressed her forehead to the wood. She closed her eyes and listened. The echo of Kerr's footsteps grew closer. Enveloped in a feeling of helplessness, Mercy wanted to scream at the madman to go away. Instead, she pinched her lips together as tears spilled down her cheeks. Strangled sobs burned the back of her throat. Squeezing the handles tighter, Mercy wasn't giving up. She'd go down screaming, fighting, kicking, and biting if she had to.

Call Reed.

Call the police...the fucking National Guard...for shit's sake, call someone! her subconscious screamed.

But Mercy couldn't risk taking her hands off the door to retrieve her phone from her purse. She lifted her head and spied a silver deadbolt shimmering above her hands.

Visions of Kerr crashing through the portal before she could engage the lock pelted her psyche, but Mercy refused to cower to him or her fears. Sucking in a deep breath, she flipped the latch with trembling fingers. The snick of the lock sent relief to storm her system. Though she was far from being out of danger, the temporary reprieve filled her with hope. Hope that Kerr might think she'd taken refuge in another room and move on so she could run away from this

labyrinth of fear.

Interminable anxious seconds slowly ticked by while sweat and tears slid down her face.

Suddenly, with what felt like the force of an earthquake, the door shook.

Mercy slapped a hand over her mouth to hold back a scream while a little voice inside her head beckoned her to *run!*

Blinded by a frenzy of fear, she turned and slammed into a wide black wall that nearly knocked the wind out of her. Strong masculine arms gripped her shoulders.

“Whoa.” A deep, whiskey-smooth voice vibrated through her. “Do you need help, miss?”

Mercy didn’t answer. The debilitating terror coursing through her veins had rendered her mute. As she fought to suck air into her lungs, she realized something else was chasing the cyclone of panic racing through her. The stranger’s touch had ignited an arc of heat that tingled down her limbs, up her spine, and gathered between her legs. Bewildering carnal sparks tangled with terror and sputtered through her. She tried to pass off the sensation as part of the enormous adrenaline dump that was taking place inside her, but deep down, she knew the familiar ache was wholly sexual. Confused by the untimely awakening in her panties, Mercy tried to sort the barrage of conflicted emotions as she stared at the crisp pressed pleats of black fabric in front of her face. When she was finally able to gather enough courage, she raised her chin and gasped.

A shudder tore through her as she gazed into the familiar sapphire eyes of Sir Justice. The allusive and intriguing Dom from Club Genesis who’d captured her attention and invaded her dreams for the past three months. For a moment, Mercy wondered if this were simply another frustrating dream. But as she watched a parade of emotions march across his face, she knew this wasn’t another one of her sexually charged fantasies.

“Symoné?” He whispered her name. It felt like a caress.

Tongue-tied, Mercy couldn’t respond. She simply stared, slack-jawed, at the mysterious Dom. Up close and personal with him now, his commanding aura made her want to fall at his feet and satisfy him in every way, even more. He’d watched her for months from across the dungeon...dissecting her every move, and made her wish for things she probably wasn’t ready to handle...*him!*

But Mercy feared her attraction to Sir Justice, a.k.a. Judge Kellan Graham, was one-sided. Not once had he ever approached her...never even spoken to her. Yet every time she laid eyes on the man, her heart rate quickened and her panties flooded—like they were doing now. But that didn’t keep her from fantasizing about him. Each time she pulled the toys from her bedside table, he was there with her—in her mind and in her body—sinking deep inside her slippery pussy until she shattered beneath his imaginary touch.

Unable to find her voice, Mercy stared at the sculpted planes of his handsome face...studied the texture of his full, inviting lips.

He was dangerously sexy.

Demand streaked through her like a meteorite crashing to earth.

Her pussy plumped.

Her tunnel clutched.

Her clit pulsed with an intoxicating throb.

But when the door violently rattled again, the sublime sexual thoughts consuming her instantly turned to panic. Mercy snapped her head toward the sound as she tried to wriggle from the grasp of her fantasy Dom. But Justice simply held on tighter.

This was it.

The end.

Judge Kellan Graham, a.k.a. Sir Justice, was going to offer her up, like a sacrificial lamb, to his *friend* Kerr. Unable to process the overload of terror, Mercy's brain shut down.

The room began to swim.

The sexy Dom's face before her blurred and darkness closed in all around her.

* * * *

What. The. Fuck?

"No!" Kellan barked.

But even his harsh command couldn't keep the sinfully sexy sub from fainting.

He should have known when Symoné's face turned a ghostly shade of white the girl was going down. He'd been too shocked to find her in his courtroom, and so fucking mesmerized by her dazzling aqua-colored eyes—well, until they rolled to the back of her head—that he damn near hadn't caught her as she crumpled to the floor.

He held her soft, warm body in his arms, feeling as if he'd just taken a lightning bolt to the chest. Any second now, he'd spontaneously combust.

"Shit!"

The door rattled once more.

Ignoring the distraction, Kellan hoisted Symoné's unconscious body into his arms. Even before he'd touched her, he'd been humming in arousal, but now...he was boiling.

As he settled her against his chest, her purse slid off her shoulder and caught at the bend of her elbow. The bag swung in a wide arc and caught him square in the nuts. With a grunt, Kellan froze and sucked in a quick breath. Holding the air in his lungs, he cringed and waited for pain to twist his gut. He didn't have to wait long. Air exploded from his lips, and he croaked out a curse. Clutching Symoné tight to his chest, Kellan doubled over.

What the fuck is she carrying in that purse...bricks?

Pain clawed through him. Kellan closed his eyes and tried to breathe as agony assaulted his balls, but his focus was ambushed with questions.

What was Symoné doing in his courtroom, and why was she so frightened?

Suddenly the puzzle pieces aligned.

Kerr.

Memories of the night Symoné came crashing into Kellan's controlled and disciplined world, like a goddamn wrecking ball, flashed in his mind.

It had started several months ago when Mika LaBrache, Owner of the BDSM Club Genesis, revoked Kerr's contract and banned the asswipe for ignoring a sub's safe word. Kellan and several other Doms received the honor of physically tossing Kerr's ass to the curb. It was one of the best nights Kellan had ever had in the club.

A few weeks later, Kerr called and invited Kellan to join the wannabe Dom's new dungeon he'd opened named Control.

When Kellan informed Mika of Kerr's unwanted solicitation, shit went south, fast. Four members of Genesis infiltrated Club Control—or rather the seedy loft with shoddy play equipment—under the guise of wanting a new dungeon to call home. In reality, the four had gone to Kerr's club to warn unsuspecting subs about his abusive reputation in the kink community. The prick had cuffed Symoné to the cross and proceeded to demonstrate his *Dominant prowess* by tearing the poor girl's ass up with a leather paddle. When she began screaming her safe word, Kerr refused to relent. The four visitors, Max, Dylan, Nick, and

Savannah, stepped in. They brought Symoné—who'd bravely filed assault charges against Kerr—and seven other subs back to Genesis that night.

Kellan stared at the limp sub in his arms.

"Today's the hearing. That's why you're here, isn't it?" he asked the still-unconscious woman.

She had to be hiding from Kerr.

Kellan glanced over his shoulder. Though moments ago he'd dismissed the rattling door, he suspected Kerr had been stalking her and attempting to change the outcome of his fate through intimidation. Kellan's emotions were divided. He refused to leave Symoné passed out and alone, but he desperately wanted to satisfy his curiosity. If Kerr was out there, Kellan was ready to beat the ever-living fuck out of him.

Still recovering from the shot to his crotch, Kellan slowly stood and stared down at the alluring woman in his arms. Drinking in her the soft contours of her face, he locked onto the lush bow of her lips. He ached to press his mouth to hers...listen to her purr as he surged inside and explored every nook and cranny...feast on the woman who'd haunted his dreams for three long, frustrating months.

He'd spent too many years denying himself pleasure.

No matter how hard he tried—and he'd tried mightily—Kellan couldn't purge her from his system. Symoné possessed some kind of magnetic pull over him. Her beauty enthralled him—even more so in his arms—resistance was futile. Slanting in close to her mouth, he felt her moist breath flutter against his lips. He dipped his head and closed his eyes.

What the fuck are you doing? Have you lost your damn mind? She's unconscious! This isn't consensual, asshole! Christ, why don't you just lay her on the ground, yank her pants off, and fuck her while you're at it.

At his conscience's scolding, Kellan jerked his head upright. Panic and irritation with himself made for an ugly cocktail. Even when she was passed out, he couldn't resist the minx. He felt like she was trying to steal his soul, test his resolve, and rattle his control. Kellan had to be stronger, or he'd fold like a deck of cards. There was too much at stake for him to lose his fucking spine. Ever since he'd laid eyes on the sassy sub, she'd starting challenging his orderly world.

Symoné was a complication he didn't need. He was struggling enough.

"It doesn't matter," he muttered. He couldn't touch her the way he longed to, not now...not ever.

A tremor of frustration rippled through him.

Biting back a curse, he carried her to his private chambers and grudgingly laid her on the leather loveseat near his desk. His arms felt strangely empty, but Kellan dismissed the absurdity of what that meant and retrieved a bottle of water from the mini-fridge on the other side of the room.

Symoné was still unconscious as he knelt beside her. Brushing a few errant strands of hair from her face, Kellan stared at her long, dark lashes resting against her porcelain flesh. Tears of terror stained her cheeks, making him want to find Kerr and break his skinny little neck once more. There'd be time later to deal with the douchebag. Right now this precious sub needed his help.

"Symoné. It's time to wake up, angel," he whispered.

Her plump, kissable lips taunted him, making his pulse race. Reaching out, he wanted to caress her face...lean in and kiss her awake, but he quickly pulled his hand away. If he touched

her now, he'd never find the willpower to stop until he was balls deep inside her. Annoyed with his surging testosterone, he clenched his jaw. The sooner she woke up, the sooner he could escort her to her car and salvage his precarious control.

"Come on, Symoné. You need to wake up."

She didn't respond. Kellan began to worry that he'd have to call the EMTs and have her taken to the hospital.

No way! If anyone's taking her to a hospital, it'll be me!

"Symoné!" With a firm voice, he gently shook her shoulder.

A tiny moan slid off her lips as her eyelids fluttered open.

"There you are. Welcome back." He forced a smile, hoping to reassure her and erase the confusion from her face.

"Sir Justice? What are you...Where am I?"

"You were hiding out in my courtroom, but you're in my chambers now, safe and sound." He hadn't meant for his voice to sound so gruff and cold.

Symoné wrinkled her brow and lowered her lids, but not before he saw rejection and sadness fill her eyes. He inwardly cursed himself for being such an ass. Biting his tongue to keep from upsetting her more, Kellan twisted the cap from the water bottle. He cupped the back of her neck and raised her head before placing the rim to her lips. When she wrapped her mouth around the bottle, a ridiculous pang of envy punched his gut. She tilted her chin when she'd had enough, the way the subs at Genesis often did while riding the clouds of endorphins. A potent rush of Dominance charged through him. Kellan wanted nothing more than to command this glorious sub's pleasure and pain until the end of time.

Focus, fucker!

"Are you feeling better?"

Symoné nodded. "Yes, thank you. You're Judge Graham, right?"

"I am."

"Now I understand why you couldn't hear my case."

"Reed told you about that, did he?"

Her nape was singeing his fucking palm making it hard as hell to carry on a polite conversation.

Again she nodded and turned a nervous glance toward the door. "Is Kerr still out there looking for me?"

"I don't know. While you were passed out, I put two and two together. I didn't want to leave you alone and go off hunting for the prick."

When he tipped the bottle to her lips again, she reached up with trembling hands and gripped the plastic. Kellan stood and stepped back. He watched her throat work as she swallowed the liquid, wishing instead of water she was guzzling down the seed churning in his balls.

"What time is your hearing?" he asked. His voice came out raspy and low.

"It's...over," she murmured. A grim expression lined her lips as she set the water on the floor. "Kerr's footloose and free. I lost."

"You mean Reed just walked away and left you to deal with Kerr on your own?" Kellan could feel his blood pressure spiking.

"No. He offered to walk me to my... Oh, crap." Her eyes grew wide she and sat upright, wobbling slightly.

"Easy. What's wrong?"

"I need my purse. I have to call Maple. She was coming to pick me up. Ugh. She's probably

outside driving around the building, pissed or worried that I haven't come out yet."

Kellan plucked her combination lethal weapon and designer purse off the floor and placed it in her lap. After wiggling out of her coat, Symoné plucked out the device, looked at the screen, and groaned.

Kellan didn't want to imagine her making that same sound beneath him in a big, soft bed...but he did.

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes...no." She shook her head. "Maple's car has a flat and she's waiting for Triple A."

"Text her back and tell her you have a ride home." Though his tone wasn't as icy this time, he'd inadvertently pulled out his unrelenting Dom voice. But then, if the shoe fit...

"I do?"

"Yes. I'm taking you home." *Unfortunately, not home with me. Dammit.*

"You can't," she protested. Kellan arched his brows and leveled Symoné with a hard stare. "I-I mean...it's...I-I'm sure it's out of your way. I won't inconvenience you like that, Sir. I'll call Uber or catch a cab."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. I'm taking you home and that's final. Kerr might still be prowling the courthouse. I won't risk him finding you. God only knows what he plans to put you through next."

"He wants to kill me." She blurted out the words as the color drained from her face.

"Excuse me?"

"He told me I wasn't going to get away with humiliating him, and trust me, if looks could kill, I'd be dead already."

Her voice quivered and Kellan's heart tripped double time. An internal possessive roar filled his ears.

"Exactly why I'm taking you home." He drew in a deep breath and slowly released it while tempering the urge to murder the bastard. "I don't care how far out of the way it might be, I want you safe, Sym...What is your real name?"

A light blush painted her cheeks as she stretched out her hand. "It's Mercy...Mercy O'Connor."

He smiled and placed his hand in hers as a strange heat warmed his skin. The messy complications he'd been avoiding for months suddenly became even more real. Though he wasn't ready to admit it, Kellan knew he was fucked.

"Oh, my," she gasped.

Mercy's eyes grew wide. She tried to pull her hand back, but he simply held on tight. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mercy O'Connor. I'm Kellan Graham, but you know that all ready."

Her shy smile and darkening blush kicked him in the gut, but he couldn't afford to let lust sidetrack him.

"Before we leave. I need to gather some papers from my bench. You go ahead and lie back and relax...sip some water, I won't be long."

Her compliant nod stroked his Dominance like a caress. Blood surged south as his cock lengthened and grew thick. He was glad as fuck his robe concealed his erection. Still, irritation chewed within. He flattened his lips and strode out the door.

Sitting at his bench, surrounded by the soothing familiarity, Kellan shuffled papers, waiting for his cock to deflate. Angry voices from the hallway grabbed his attention. He hurried across the room and flipped the lock before stepping out to find Judge Dupree looking as if he wanted to bring his gavel down on a stringy blond-haired man who was snarling and cursing. The

vulgar-talking prick didn't even have to turn around. Kellan knew instantly it was Kerr.

"What are you still doing here, Walker?" Kellan asked.

Kerr spun around. His eyes grew wide before a cynical smile speared his lips. "So you're a judge? I'll be damned. *Justice* seems all the more fitting, now."

"Your trial was over long ago. You've got thirty seconds to get your ass out of the building and off government property, or I'll have you tossed in a cell," Kellan warned, looking at his watch. "Twenty-nine, twenty-eight."

"I'll tell you, like I told this idiot,"—Kerr pointed to Dupree—"I ain't leaving till I find someone."

"You're not going to *find* her. I've already made sure of that. Leave," Kellan barked. "Nineteen, eighteen..."

"You can't protect her forever."

"Is that a threat, Walker?" A nasty grin tugged Kellan's lips.

Kerr's face turned red as he darted a glance at Dupree. "No. But I *will* find her."

Before Kellan could issue another warning, the maggot turned and ran away.

"Friend of yours?" Dupree asked.

"No. A rodent who needs to be exterminated."

"I can't argue that."

Kellan nodded, doing the best he could to mask the rage boiling within as he turned and walked away. He bypassed the bench and stormed back into his office. Mercy was now sitting on the edge of the couch, sipping water. She turned her eyes up at him. Though Kellan wanted to get lost in her aqua pools, he strode to his desk, removed his robe, and draped it over his chair.

"Are you ready to leave?" he asked in a dispassionate tone.

"Yes, but I don't want to put you out. I'll catch a—"

"Dammit, Mercy." Kellan slammed his fist on his desk.

She jolted and curled in on herself. He pinched the bridge of his nose with his finger and thumb and sucked in a ragged breath.

"I'm sorry. I had no right to rip into you like that. Kerr's still here. I just had a conversation with him in the hall. He knows to leave or be arrested, but I don't trust the prick to heed my warning. So, I *am* taking you home, and that's the end of this discussion."

Even from across the room, Kellan saw the tremor of fear ripple through Mercy's body. "He won't rest until he's gotten his revenge, will he?"

Probably, but he wasn't going admit that and scare her even more.

"The man's warped. I'll do all I can to keep you safe. You have my word."

Mercy lowered her lashes and focused on the empty water bottle in her hand. "Thank you for your help, but I'll have to confront him eventually. I can't run and hide like a scared rabbit the rest of my life." Her barely audible tone lacked the conviction of her words.

"Does Walker know where you live?"

"Yes." She sighed heavily.

"Do you have a house or—"

"An apartment. I live at Elmhurst Lake in Highland Park."

Kellan was impressed. Even a one-bedroom apartment at the upscale complex cost an arm and a leg. But he was more taken aback by the fact that she lived so close to him. "I have a place in Highland Park, myself. In fact, I'm less than a mile down the beach from you. So, see? Taking you home isn't out of my way at all."

"Small world." She flashed him a smile that made him want to moan. "I guess 'howdy

neighbor' is in order then.”

“Howdy.” He smirked, then turned sober. “Do you own a gun?”

“I’m from Texas. My Daddy taught me to shoot before I was old enough to drive.”

Kellan knew she was trying to make light of the subject, but she couldn’t erase the fear still swimming in her eyes. “What happened to Kerr? He wasn’t like this before he got shot. I mean, he was always an ass, but he was never violent.”

“I don’t know. I do know he died that night on the dungeon floor before the EMTs brought him back to life. Maybe he suffered brain damage from lack of oxygen or something. Hard to say. I do know one thing...he’s not going to give up, at least not today. The best we can hope is that he simply needs a little time to cool off.”

“And lick his wounded pride,” she added dolefully. “I’ll be careful. Don’t worry.”

Not careful enough.

Kellan was two seconds from offering to put Mercy up in his guest room. If he wouldn’t lie awake all night concocting reasons to sneak into her room, crawl into her bed, and fuck her to oblivion, he’d cart her straight home.

But a masochist he wasn’t.

Besides, he had a vow to keep—one that didn’t allow him to bed any sub.

Mercy isn’t just any sub...not by a long shot.

CHAPTER TWO

Kellan's enticing, masculine scent filled her senses and soaked her panties. Mercy was still working to wrap her head around the fact that the standoffish Dom was actually speaking to her. She felt as if she'd won the lottery ten times over. One thing was certain; talking to him was a hell of a lot more interesting than him simply watching her like he always did in the dungeon. At first Mercy had found it endearing that the handsome Dom took an interest in her. His dissecting stare only fueled her fantasies about him all the more. But night after night he never approached her. His scrutiny felt a bit creepy and downright intimidating. Still, his strange behavior didn't diminish her craving for him. The man was—a shiver rippled through her—delicious.

Gazing up at him, Mercy found herself biting back a grin. *Sir Justice* was an actual judge. She'd always assumed his club name was simply a metaphor designed to instill good behavior among the subs. His reputation at Genesis was that of a soft-spoken, gentle Master.

Mercy hadn't seen much of his fabled temperament so far. He seemed irritated, cranky, and on edge. She didn't know if Kerr, herself, or something else was to blame for Kellan's sour mood, but she certainly wasn't going to ask what had crawled up his butt. Instead, she cast her eyes to the floor. Not only was it the proper submissive thing to do but it also kept her from gawking at him like a lovesick puppy.

While she wished Kellan shared the same infatuation for her that she did him, his distance screamed he wasn't interested in Mercy *or* her submission. He was probably only speaking to her now because he was too much of a gentleman to leave her passed out on the courtroom floor for the cleaning crew to discover.

Suddenly, Kellan thrust his capable-looking fingers toward her. Mercy locked a startled gaze on him. "I-I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

"I asked if you were ready to leave." His frown deepened. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Honest...just a bit freaked out."

It wasn't a lie. Kellan put her completely off-balance, but oh, how she craved him.

If she didn't fear him shooting her down like a pheasant, she'd wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him blind. But rejection would be crushing and mortifying. She inhaled a steely breath and slid her fingers into his palm. That familiar and crazy rush of heat enveloped her once again.

Her girl parts started throwing a throb party, like they'd done before she passed out.

"That's completely understandable," Kellan quietly agreed as he helped her to her feet. "But Kerr can only hold the power you give him."

"Yes, Sir, I know," she replied before sliding her coat on.

Heat flared in Kellan's eyes before he quickly banked it and clenched his jaw. Without another word, he plucked a large leather briefcase off the floor and led her out the door.

As they waited for the elevator, Kellan continuously swept his eyes over the hallway, searching for Kerr. An awkward tension hung in the air like a thick fog. When the elevator dinged, Mercy nearly jumped out of her skin.

Kellan sent her a sympathetic smile. "You're safe, angel."

Angel? His term of endearment made her knees weak. She felt small and fragile.

When the shiny metal doors opened, he placed a wide hand against the small of her back and ushered her inside. Heat spread up her spine and down her legs, making her skin tingle and burn.

Sparks sputtered and popped inside her long after the doors closed and Kellan dropped his hand.

He stood ramrod straight, shoulders square, and chin slightly lifted. As he stared straight ahead, Mercy drank in every nuance of the man...from the sexy black scruff adorned with a few gray flecks lining his rugged jaw to his large hands and big feet. If the motto was true, then Kellan was hung like a damn horse.

A rush of heat blasted up her body.

He was several years older than her, a fact that added to the mystique of a mature and experienced man. He'd know his way around a woman's body...around *her* body.

As if you'll ever find out, the little voice in her head taunted.

The mixed emotions he evoked were maddening, but instead of attempting to sort them in the small descending cubicle, she continued to study him.

The slope of his nose was regal like a Greek God and his lips... Lord, she'd give anything to press her mouth to those kissable pillows for weeks...months...years.

A tiny smile kicked up the side of his face. "What are you staring at?" he asked without looking her way.

"You."

"Why?"

"Um, because..." *You're drop-dead gorgeous, and I'm dying to rip that conservative suit off your hot body, slam you up against the wall, and fuck your brains out.* "I've never seen you up close before. You're always hiding in the shadows of the dungeon, watching me."

Mercy issued an inward groan. Instead of calling him out for his furtive behavior at the club, she should have confessed about wanting to fuck him senseless.

His smile broadened as he turned and arched his brows at her. "How do you know I watch you?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not blind."

"Neither am I." His expression suddenly hardened. "How many Doms have asked you to scene with them since you joined Genesis?"

Mercy mentally scrambled to come up with a number. "I don't know. Eight or nine."

"Twelve," Kellan replied in a clipped and brittle tone.

The elevator doors opened and he strode away. For a stunned second, Mercy gaped at his retreating form before marching after him. Her heels clapped on the cement floor of the parking garage.

"You've kept track?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Kellan didn't answer as he paused at a sleek, black BMW i8. When he touched the handle on the passenger side, the locks disengaged. He held the door open for her with an unreadable expression. "Get in."

Mercy had ached to heed his command for months, yet the first one he lobbed her way had made her hackles rise. "Not until you tell me why you've kept count of the Doms who've approached me."

"Get in so I can take you home, angel."

His low, inveigling tone contradicted his imposing glare. Clearly her ultimatum had crawled under his Dominant skin. She'd roused Sir Justice. His big, bad, bold command roared to life and that authoritative mien lit her up like a firecracker. Mentally cursing her gushing hormones, she fought the dizzying wave of demand that rolled from her toes all the way to her scalp.

A soft shiver wracked her body as she slid onto the butter-soft leather passenger seat.

Pride prompted her to keep pushing him, but she knew going toe-to-toe with a Dom was a no-no. While Mercy wasn't privy to the finer intricacies of submission, she knew enough to back down, at least for now.

After he'd climbed in behind the wheel and maneuvered onto the busy street, Mercy turned his way. "What should I call you? Sir Justice or Kellan?"

"Outside the club, Kellan is fine. Inside, Sir will do nicely."

"Does that mean you actually plan to *speak* to me at the club?" She shot him a taunting smirk.

He scowled as an indecisive noise rumbled deep in his throat. "I'll think about it."

"What's there to think about?" she scoffed. "Is my past association with Kerr so disgraceful that I'm unworthy of a friendly hello from time to time?"

"Hell no! Kerr doesn't have shit to do with anything."

"Then what is it?"

"I have my reasons. They don't concern you."

"Obviously they do." She knew she should shut up, but she couldn't keep from poking and prodding. "You don't have a problem talking or scening with any of the other subs...just me. Why is that?"

"So...you've been watching me, too? Tell me something, why haven't *you* ever spoken to me?"

"You didn't answer my question."

"You've not answered mine, either."

I asked you first. The childish retort smoldered on the tip of her tongue. Mercy swallowed it down and lifted her chin. "Because I'm not supposed to."

"Says who?"

"Approaching a Dom is not proper submissive behavior."

"Who told you that?" Kellan's brows wrinkled.

Mercy dropped her eyes to her lap. She didn't want to confess it was one of Kerr's many stupid rules. Based on Kellan's reaction, she assumed it was another lie Davis Walker had spoon-fed to her to keep Mercy from seeking out other more qualified Doms.

"You don't need to answer, I already know...Kerr." Kellan exhaled in disgust. "I'm going to give you a piece of advice. Throw away everything that idiot taught you about the lifestyle and start attending the Saturday morning submissive classes at the club."

"I've been meaning to, but I've been too busy with the hearing and work."

"Find a way to free up some time. If you truly want to learn about the lifestyle, then you need to make the sub meetings a priority." He paused for several seconds. "What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a freelance designer. Corporate branding, mostly."

"An artist, huh? You must be talented as hell to afford Elmhurst Lake."

She was surprised that Kellan knew her apartment complex charged a pretty penny for its units. The fact that Mercy paid more in rent than a lot of urban professionals did a house payment suddenly made her self-conscious. But what Kellan didn't know was that her company had taken off so quickly, she needed the tax write-off working from home provided. Besides, the killer view of Lake Michigan was well worth the extra money.

"Just lucky." She shrugged. "The right doors swung open when I first started my company. Word of mouth has kept me in toothpaste and corn flakes."

“Modest much?” He smirked. “Who are some of your clients?”
She shot him a suspicious glance. “Why do you want to know?”
“Your secrets are safe with me, angel.”

His sexy voice cascaded down her flesh like whiskey poured over velvet. She couldn't keep from naming off her Fortune 500 clients anymore than she could fly out the sunroof.

Kellan arched his brows. “For such a young woman, you've amassed an impressive list.”
“I'm not that young, but thank you.” She blushed.

The wide grin he flashed her way made Mercy's heart skip.

“I own socks that are older than you, girl.”

When she laughed, Kellan's nostrils flared and he gripped the steering wheel tighter.

“You have twenty-eight-year-old socks? I don't believe that.”

“You're only twenty-eight?”

“What do you mean *only*? I'm on the downhill slide to thirty.”

“Oh, you poor baby,” he chided dryly.

“How old are you?”

“Too old.”

“Too old for what?” she asked in a surprisingly sultry tone.

She felt him tense from across the vehicle. He remained quiet, as if pondering her question.
“Skateboarding.”

She laughed again. “Me, too. I mean, honestly...who wants to break a hip?”

“That could easily happen to me,” he chuckled. “I'm practically a dinosaur.”

“Hardly,” she said with a pfft sound. “You haven't grown scales or claws or big scary teeth yet.”

“Yet,” he repeated with a crooked smile. “I suspect any day now, I'll wake up, look in the mirror and...well, it won't be pleasant.”

“I don't think you have anything to worry about for a couple million years or so.”

The excitement inside her glittered. She'd finally cracked his impenetrable veneer. The man within had a dry but witty sense of humor. Mercy realized the prickly pins and needles that had been scraping her flesh earlier had disappeared.

Kellan was an enigma to be sure, but she hoped their playful verbal jousting might be the beginning of a more profound friendship. Of course, it might be nothing more than him chasing silence with nonsensical banter while navigating the congested highway.

“You said you were from Texas, but I detect a hint of something else in your accent.”

“Like what?”

“Like Southern meets East Coast.”

“You have a good ear, Judge. No one else has picked up the gypsy inside me.”

“Moved around a lot, have you?”

“No, but I do love to travel. I grew up a couple hours northwest of Dallas on a ranch in the middle of nowhere. I'm talking *nowhere*. Our nearest neighbor was eighteen miles away. My dad is what you'd call a modern-day cattle baron. He raises and breeds longhorns, well, he and my brothers.”

“How many brothers do you have?”

“Four, all older.”

“I read an article about longhorns once. That can be a lucrative business.”

“Thankfully for Dad it is. That's the only way I could have ever attended Cornell University. I studied there for a couple years, then transferred to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.”

“Was New York too much culture shock for you?”

“It wasn’t so much the culture shock...” Mercy paused and weighed how much personal information she wanted to share. No one but family knew why she’d escaped the Big Apple, but for some unknown reason, she felt compelled to tell Kellan everything. “My roommate committed suicide, and I was the one who found her.”

“Oh, angel.” A pained expression lined his face. “I’m sorry. Did you know she had problems?”

“No.” A fact that still filled her with guilt. “She was always the life of the party...happy...spontaneous.”

“Are you sure it was a suicide?”

“Yes. She left a note. Her boyfriend had dumped her.” Mercy’s anger bubbled to the surface the way it always did when she thought of Mary Jo—the pretty girl from Nebraska with flaming-red hair, freckles, and a fucking heart of gold. “She offed herself over some asshole who didn’t bother showing up for her funeral. I swear, taking your life because of some guy is a stupid and pathetic reason to check out, you know?”

Kellan sent her a nod. His eyes were brimmed in sadness, but he didn’t try to stop her from baring her soul.

“I don’t understand why Mary Jo gave that bastard the right to destroy her. We all screw up. I did when I gave Kerr the power to hurt me, but no man is worth swallowing a bottle of pills over. I’d never give anyone that much control over me...ever.”

“You shouldn’t.”

She sent him a quizzical stare. “I didn’t expect to hear that from the lips of a Dom.”

“There’s a big difference between a sub giving her power to a Dom and some asshole demanding she hand it over to him. That you already know.”

“True. But I don’t know where or when to draw the line? I mean...there’s a part inside me that craves to hand over everything, but at the same time, I have no desire to lose my identity in the process. Submission is such a paradox to me. I was raised to be independent and headstrong, which I am...outside the club. Then there’s another part of me that wants to wrap up the liberated, stubborn pieces of myself into a big ball and hand them to a worthy Dominant.” A scowl wrinkled her forehead. “It sounds stupid now, but when I was with Kerr, I thought I’d found the elusive peace I’d been searching for.”

“That’s not stupid. I’m sure you achieved a level of subspace through all his bullshit. But trust me. There’s a whole lot more out there waiting for you to experience.”

* * * *

“I believe you, but when I found out everything he’d led me to believe was a lie, I wanted to throw my dreams of submission away.”

“Don’t do that. You’ll only be cutting off your nose to spite your face.”

“I won’t.” Kellan watched her cheeks glow crimson. “Sorry about that. I don’t know how I went from Mary Jo to submission.”

“No. Don’t ever apologize for asking questions or trying to sort your feelings,” Kellan softly stated.

If he could take her under his Dominant wing, he’d not only answer all her questions but also set her free to sail higher and farther than she could imagine.

But he couldn’t.

The temptation of her was too great. Kellan knew himself too well. He'd never be able to keep his hands and mouth off her smooth, pale flesh or keep from plundering her ripe lips. He couldn't deny his tongue and cock the pleasure of her sweet pussy and lush ass.

Fuck, even now he wanted to reach out and take her hand...assure her that he'd lead her down that path of submission she yearned for. Instead, Kellan clutched the steering wheel as he'd done earlier when her vibrant laughter nearly sent him up in flames.

"There isn't a one-size-fits-all answer for you, angel. You have to decide what *you* want from your submission."

"I know what I want...I want to find a *real* Dom who'll teach me the correct ways of the lifestyle, not some made-up bullshit just so he can get his rocks off. Why don't you teach me? I'd work really hard to please and never disappoint you."

Mercy slapped a hand over her mouth, clearly horrified by her request.

Before Kellan could swallow the lump of fear clogging his throat, she lifted the hand from her face and held up her open palm. "Don't answer that. I'm such a... I had no right to put you on the spot like that. Please...forget I said anything. I'm sorry, that was way out of line."

His heart drummed wildly and dread hummed so loudly in his ears he'd barely heard her apology. Feeling as if he'd been punched in the gut, Kellan struggled to fill his lungs—that now seemed weighed in concrete—and nearly missed his turnoff. Hitting the brakes, he whipped the steering wheel to the right and took the exit ramp like a race car driver. By the time he'd coasted to the stoplight, Kellan's heart was still racing, but he'd at least managed to suck in a deep breath.

Mercy was wearing a mortified expression that cut his conscience like a knife.

"I'd love to teach you if I could, angel, but I can't. If you'd like, I'll talk to Mika and see if he can match you up with a Dom who's looking to take on a new sub."

"No. I appreciate your offer, but I don't think I'm ready for a full-time Master."

Thank fuck!

"I didn't mean for such a ridiculous request to fall out of my mouth in the first place," she continued nervously. "It must be the stress of the day or—"

"Mercy," he interrupted. "It wasn't ridiculous. If there was a way I could help teach you, I would. Start attending the sub meetings. You'll find your Master in no time."

It just won't be me.

"I'll try. The dealership was supposed to drop my car off at my apartment today, so I should have wheels to get to the meeting in the morning."

"If not, let me know. Mika and Julianna, er, rather, Emerald live nearby as well. I'm sure they'd be happy to give you a ride."

Pussy! You should take her to the meeting.

He couldn't, and the taunting voice in his head knew why...why he couldn't fill her with false hope...why he had to distance himself from the sassy and hungry submissive.

After Kellan entered Elmhurst Lake's complex, Mercy directed him to her apartment. She even pointed out her blue Camry parked under a covered carport.

"Would you like me to walk you in?"

"No. I'm good." She dismissed his offer with a wave of her hand. "Thank you...for everything Kellan, er, Sir."

He couldn't help but smile as she stumbled over her words. "It was my pleasure. If you see Kerr, shoot first, *then* call the police, understood?"

Her lips curled in a wide smile as she climbed from the car. "I will. Thanks again."

He couldn't help but admire the sexy sway of her hips or the ruby-red shocks of color glistening from the sunlight in her hair as she walked away. Kellan wanted to bolt from the car and follow her into her apartment and show her all the reasons he was the perfect Dominant for her. When Mercy disappeared behind the white door, a wave of guilt sliced him. He mentally began listing off all the reasons he couldn't live out his dreams with her. When Kellan turned out of Mercy's complex, he left behind the fleeting hope of living again.

Glancing at his watch, he mumbled a curse. He was late. Speeding down the street, he turned and ate up the next four blocks quickly. Sadness filled his veins while a boulder of guilt and shame pressed down on his chest. He whipped the sports car beneath the shade of a huge Japanese red maple in the lot of Lake Home Village, cut the engine, and slowly climbed from the car.

At the entrance to the facility, he keyed the code into the touchpad, and waited for the grating buzzer to hum before opening the door. When the receptionist raised her head, Kellan sent her a tight smile as the scent of alcohol and cleaning solvents assaulted his senses.

Forcing his feet down the familiar industrial tiled hall, he paused at the doorway. He bit back the usual howl of anguish clawing the back of his throat as he gazed at the blonde woman sitting in bed, absently staring off into space.

Leena Graham, his wife of twenty-five years, didn't know he'd entered the room...didn't know who he was anymore...didn't know who or where she was, for that matter. Her eyes were fixed on the wall, like always. Kellan would give his dying breath if just once, his vivacious wife—the love of his life—would turn and hit him with that megawatt smile that had knocked him off his feet so long ago.

She didn't...and sadly, she never would.

He struggled to tamp down an onslaught of heartache. Kellan didn't know why now—after five long years—this magnitude of sadness and melancholy had slammed through him. He felt raw and overexposed.

You didn't stop and welcome the rage before you came inside.

No, he hadn't.

Kellan hadn't centered himself with the usual scalding anger and resentment toward the drunk driver who'd stolen Leena's mind and soul when he'd plowed her down in a crosswalk. He took little comfort that the animal responsible for decimating his whole world now sat in a prison cell. In Kellan's eyes, justice had not been served, and never would be. The fact that the cocksucker could still talk and laugh with his loved ones filled Kellan with fury. Life was not fair—a fact he knew well. After all, he lived it daily with piercing bouts of anguish and a catatonic wife who couldn't remember a single day of the love and happiness they'd once shared.

The dazzling light of his Leena's life force had been carelessly extinguished.

Kellan would never see her smile at all the silly things he said.

Never feel her loving arms wrapped around him at the end of the day.

Never taste her soft, passionate kisses.

Never hear her whimper and moan as they poured their love into one another in bed.

Never be able to grow old, side by side.

All he had left were memories and photographs, and endless empty nights.

All Leena had left was an eternity of staring into the blank canvas of oblivion.

Kellan swallowed his misery and inwardly told himself to buck up. He'd wrangle his demons later. Now he needed to savor the precious moments he could spend with his wife.

Striding to the side of Leena's bed, he bent and kissed her cheek. He couldn't help but peer up at her face, holding on to the hope that one day she might respond to his loving gesture...but she didn't. Kellan exhaled as he sat down in the chair beside her bed and gently threaded his fingers through his wife's slender hand. With the pad of his thumb, he caressed her wrist, remembering the heated gaze that lit up her eyes when he'd stroke that sensitive spot.

Fuck!

He was drowning in the same inky dark abyss he'd spent years dragging himself out of. No amount of sorrow or tears would bring Leena back to him—a lesson he'd learned years ago.

"How's my gorgeous girl doing today?" Though Leena never answered, Kellan asked her the same question on each visit, without fail. "Guess what? On the way to work this morning, I heard those songs you bribed me to dance with you to at our senior prom. You remember, don't you? That song by Janet Jackson, 'Miss You Much', and Richard Marx's 'Right Here Waiting'?"

Kellan's throat closed up. He could almost feel her body pressed against his as they slow danced to the latter romantic tune.

He tenderly brushed his knuckles down Leena's cheek.

"I'm still right here waiting for you, love. I always will be." His voice cracked.

Blinking back tears, Kellan sucked in a ragged breath.

"I'm sorry, baby. I'm having a rough one without you today."

Because I think I'm falling in love with someone else. I can't have you both, I know. I have to find a way to walk away from her, but it's so fucking hard. I need you to come back to me, Leena...need you more than you'll ever know.

"My emotions are all over the map."

I'm so fucking lost and lonely without you.

"Don't worry, baby. I'll get my shit together soon."

Or drown in a river of guilt.

"Anyway, back to prom. Remember that god-awful white tux I rented? Man, I thought I was one suave bastard in that thing. Of course, you couldn't catch me dead in that butt-ugly thing now. But back in the day...you might not have realized it, but you had yourself a stud muffin."

Kellan knew that if she could, Leena would have laughed at his comments.

"And you...whoa, baby. You were looking all fine and shit in that sexy, blue skintight dress, with all those fluffy ruffles on the bottom, and that one sleeve holding it in place. You were looking like every man's wet dream...especially mine. But you were always my dream girl, weren't you?"

Until now. There's another haunting my fantasies and I have no clue how to block her from my brain.

He leaned in close to Leena's ear. "I know I've always been your rock...your Master, but I need you to come back to me, baby...come back and save me, Leena."

"Well, Mr. Kellan. I didn't think we were going to see you today." Lucia, the day nurse who was as tall as she was round, greeted entering the room carrying Leena's afternoon snack tray.

Slamming a lid on his emotions, Kellan stood and took the tray from Lucia with a smile. "I was held up at the courthouse. Since I missed lunch, I wanted to drop by and make sure she gets her snack."

He looked at the items on the tray...applesauce and some kind of pureed meat paste. Though Leena had lost the cognitive skill to chew, she could still swallow. Kellan tried to arrange his

docket and free every Friday to spend lunch with his wife, and also give Lucia a small break in her daily routine.

"I'm sure she's happy you're here." Lucia smiled as she tucked a long terry-cloth bib beneath Leena's chin. "Your young lady's had quite a busy day. She had her bath this morning and washed her hair. She wanted to look pretty for your date."

Kellan responded with a small appreciative smile while Lucia softly stroked Leena's hair. After the nurse left the room, he peeled the plastic wrap off the food, picked the spoon from the tray, and sat down beside his wife.

"All right, baby, let's dig in."

Softly cupping Leena's chin, Kellan parted her lips, then eased the spoon onto her tongue. He fed her as he would an infant while her gaze remained fixed to the wall, even lightly scraping up the food that had dribbled onto her lips...the same lips that used to make his blood sing, whether she was kissing him or worshipping his cock.

Stop fucking torturing yourself, asshole, he inwardly berated.

"Paul and Mary send their love," he murmured as he patiently attended his task. "I still remember when the four of us went to Branson. We rented that houseboat and found those kids diving off the cliffs. I thought you were going to dive off the damn boat before Paul even dropped anchor. You were so anxious to climb up that ledge and jump into the lake. Those were good times, weren't they, my love?"

"Oh, yeah. Mika sends his love, too. He told me he came by to see you last week. He misses you..." Kellan's voice faded to a whisper. "We all do, girl."

"Daddy? What are you still doing here?" His daughter, Hannah, stood frozen in the doorway. Her face was lined in fear. "Is...is Mom okay?"

His visibly distraught daughter trembled. Kellan quickly set the plate down and wrapped the anxious young woman in his arms.

"She's fine, pumpkin," he assured as he placed a kiss on top of Hannah's head. "I got held up at work and missed our lunch date. So, I came as soon as I could."

Hannah exhaled an audible sigh of relief. Easing from Kellan's arms, she rounded the bed and kissed her mom on the cheek. He watched his twenty-three-year-old daughter brush a tear from her eye as she sat down on the bed beside Leena.

Threading her slender fingers through her mom's golden hair, Hannah smiled. "Hi, Momma. We both came to see you at the same time. I guess we can have a party now. You always loved a good party, right?"

Kellan smiled softly as memories swamped him once more. Unwilling to fall apart in front of his daughter, he pushed them away and resumed feeding Leena. "How are classes going, sunshine?"

"Good," Hannah replied, studying Leena's lax face. "I aced the biology test I'd studied night and day for, which made me happy."

"Excellent."

Hearing his daughter's upbeat voice, Kellan didn't have to force a smile this time.

"I'm...*we're* proud of you, love. Are you still having issues with your lit professor?"

"Ugh," she groaned. "The man's a misogynist. He actually bragged to the class that his failure rate for females was now at ninety percent. I intend to be one of the ten percent who possess a prettier vagina than *his* and pass that stupid class."

Kellan chuckled. "How do you know? Have you *seen* his vagina?"

“Don’t make me puke, Dad,” she quipped. “Just take my word for it, an elephant’s vagina is prettier than his.”

“Well, maybe he’s not a misogynist at all.” Kellan smirked. “Maybe he’s suffering from vagina envy.”

Hannah tossed her head back and laughed the way Leena used to. “God, I love you, Daddy. I doubt any of the other girls in my sorority talk vaginas with their dads.”

“I expect you’ll find out before the day is over,” Kellan said with a chuckle. “You just keep giving that professor hell, baby.”

He didn’t need to tell her that. His daughter would give the sexist asshole a run for his money. Hannah was like her parents, not only in looks, with her mother’s blonde hair and his striking blue eyes, but she was also headstrong and determined with a zest for life that warmed his heart. His beautiful Hannah was Kellan’s pride and joy.

“Oh, I plan to.” Her eyes twinkled with mischief the way they used to when she was small.

Kellan was grateful that Hannah had come to visit Leena. His daughter had preempted his morose journey down memory lane, and he’d been able to push Mercy from his mind the rest of his visit. It was only after kissing Leena and Hannah good-bye and leaving the nursing home that the intriguing sub invaded his brain again.

He’d only made it a few blocks before thoughts of Mercy had his cock stirring to life.

He feared the only way to get her out of his system was to fuck her out of it.

Braking for a red light, Kellan cursed and pulled out his cell phone, quickly scrolling through his contacts.

“Fuck! What the hell is her name?” he spat disgustedly. “Natalie! That’s it.” He punched the number as the light turned green.

One way or another, Kellan was determined to wipe Mercy from his mind.

“Hello,” Natalie answered in her usual soft, seductive voice.

“I’m on my way. Be ready in ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes? But I just got back from the grocery store and—”

“Either be ready in ten minutes or I’ll cancel the lease on the apartment. If groceries are more important to you, maybe it’s time we went our separate ways,” he growled.

“No. There’s no need for that. Are you all right? You sound tense. It’s a beautiful day. We could go for a walk or have a picnic in the—”

“This isn’t a fucking date. Do I need to recite certain clauses of our contract?”

“No. I-I’ll be ready.”

“Good. I have thirty minutes. You can deal with your groceries before or after I’m gone. I’ll be there shortly.”

Kellan hung up the phone as self-loathing squeezed in all around him.

Though Leena had been the love of his life, once he accepted the fact that she was never going to recover, Kellan had to search his soul. His wife might still own his heart, but she could no longer sate his sexual needs. He didn’t want to get wrapped up in some messy emotional entanglement. There was too much at risk—like his reputation and livelihood—to pick up random women in bars, so he’d created a profile on a dating site.

Of the women who responded, Natalie seemed mature enough and pragmatic enough to take part in his unorthodox invitation. She also didn’t have any qualms about signing the contract and nondisclosure agreement he’d drawn up. In exchange for an apartment and a monthly stipend, Natalie agreed to supply an outlet for Kellan’s sexual release.

Right now, he needed that outlet.

As he reached Lake Bluff, shades of calmness began to color his soul, and order and control aligned within before he reached Natalie's apartment.

The late thirty-something brunette with a toned body and dark eyes met him at the door. Kellan stormed in, tugging his tie. After she closed the door behind him, Natalie turned and walked down the hall toward the bedroom. He dropped his gaze to the gentle roll of her hips. Turning off his emotions, Kellan let his primal psyche take over.

By the time he'd reached the bedroom, Natalie lay naked in the center of the mattress, willing and ready. Kellan shucked off his clothes as his cock swelled with blood. He pulled open the bedside table and palmed a condom. Tearing open the foil packet with his teeth, he rolled the latex over himself and crawled onto the bed.

He hovered over her for a long minute. "I'm sorry I was short on the phone..."

"It's okay. Let's make each other feel good."

With a grunt, he drove inside her. Natalie arched and softly moaned. Kellan closed his eyes. He plunged in and out of her snug, hot walls as images of Mercy clutching at his cock filled his mind. A shiver of panic danced up his spine and Kellan quickly opened his eyes. He stared at the pillow beneath Natalie's head and focused on the growing friction engulfing his dick. She wedged a hand between them and strummed her clit until they both orgasmed. A familiar flush lay on her cheeks, and she sent him a soft smile of gratitude.

Natalie's self-esteem had taken a mortal blow when her husband left her for another man some ten plus years ago. Like Kellan, she'd vowed to never love again.

"I'll call you soon," he said over his shoulder as he straightened his tie in the mirror.

"Sounds good," Natalie replied. She rolled out of bed, slid on her robe and tied the sash. "I'll walk you to the door."

Their good-bye was cordial...as usual, just like the recurring emptiness settling deep in his chest as he drove home.

Kellan lessened the void by trying to convince himself that he'd get by with the relief Natalie provided. But he wasn't fooling anyone, not even himself. She was nothing but a stopgap measure...a Band-Aid he kept applying to a gaping, lethal wound that would never heal.

You could have it all with Mercy.

"No," he growled, quickly dismissing the cajoling voice in his head.

He'd already lost his mind around the provocative sub. He couldn't afford to lose his heart to her as well, though in reality, Kellan suspected he already had.

But acting on those feelings was completely out of the question.

CHAPTER THREE

Mercy patiently stood in the foyer of Club Genesis, chatting with her friends Woody and Maple. As the trio waited to be checked in by Dark Desire and his Mistress, Lady Ivory, Mercy kept a tight lid on how she'd passed out in Kellan's arms. There were strict rules about anonymity, so she bit her tongue to protect Sir Justice's true identity. Mercy focused on relaying the disappointing outcome of the trial instead.

"I think Mistress Monique plans to scene with me tonight," Woody announced with glee.

"Really?" Maple smiled. "Are you scared?"

"No. But nervous as hell," he replied quietly. "I don't want to disappoint her."

"Stop. Right. There." Mercy held up her hand. "I didn't want to disappoint Kerr, either, and look what that got me. Be yourself, Woody. If you don't like something she's doing, *tell* her."

"Listen to her, boy," Master Lewis—a Dom who'd been hounding Mercy to scene with him since she'd joined the club—chimed in. "She's right. Open, honest communication is a must in the lifestyle."

"Yes, Sir." Woody nodded.

"Good boy." Lewis turned an expectant smile Mercy's way. "And what about you, sexy Symoné? Are you ready to communicate and negotiate a scene with me yet?"

I'd love to teach you if I could, angel, but I can't. Kellan's words roared in her head, cutting her to the bone with finality she could no longer deny. The Dom she wanted had rebuffed her. He'd done it gently, but he'd refused her all the same. Mercy had to broaden her horizons...start looking at other Doms or her submission could be in jeopardy. She didn't want to be one of the hopeless subs, pining for every Dom who walked by, wearing a *do me* expression.

Lewis didn't hold a candle to Kellan, but sitting around waiting for a miracle, like Justice to cuff her to the cross, was an unattainable fantasy. It was time she started putting her submissive ass into the game.

"Thank you, Sir. I'd be honored to negotiate a scene with you."

Or try. Mercy didn't know the first thing about negotiating a scene.

"Excellent," he all but shouted happily. "I know what that prick Kerr put you through. Trust me. I'll be gentle as a lamb and ease you into subspace slowly. We'll talk more inside the dungeon."

Lewis stepped up to the podium, then with a wink and an even bigger grin, he pushed past the long velvet curtain and was out of sight.

"Did you do that to me on purpose?" Maple whispered tersely.

"Do what?" Mercy asked as Woody presented his driver's license to the couple manning the members list.

"I've been trying to get Lewis to notice me for months," Maple hissed.

"You have?" Mercy blinked in surprise. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew you'd steal him from me, like you did Kerr."

A white-hot rage filled Mercy's veins. "Wait a minute. First of all, I would never *steal* a Dom from you or any other sub. Secondly, if I'd known you were interested in Lewis, I would have refused his offer. I've been turning him down nearly every night since we started coming here. And lastly, Kerr used you as much as he did me."

“Forget Kerr,” she spat. “You’re telling me that Lewis has been sniffing around you this whole time?” Maple huffed as she moved to the podium.

“It’s not like I ever encouraged him. I’ll fix it.”

“*You* don’t have to encourage any Dom. They *all* want you! I don’t need you doing me any favors. Lewis obviously isn’t interested in me. Go on and have fun with him. I’ll find another Dom.” Maple tossed her nose in the air, turned on her heel, and stormed away.

“Welcome to another drama-filled episode of *As the Dungeon Turns*,” Dark Desire, the buff, shirtless sub wearing leather pants and a wide silver collar at his neck, joked in the voice of a game show host.

“Right?” Mercy huffed and handed him her license. Maple’s jealous words swirled in Mercy’s head. The longer they festered, the more pissed off she became.

“Try to have a good time tonight, Symoné.” Lady Ivory flashed a supportive smile.

“Thank you, Ma’am. I will.”

When Mercy breached the curtain, Lewis was waiting and practically crawled on top of her. He clutched her elbow and led her deeper into the dungeon. He zinged a barrage of eager questions at her so fast it made her head spin.

Anxiety crawled up her spine while regret pumped in her veins. Why had she agreed to scene with this dude? A slick film oozed from her pores the longer he quizzed her. Mercy’s eyes darted over the dungeon, desperately searching for Kellan. She didn’t see him anywhere.

“Well? What do you say, girl?” Lewis asked eagerly. “Come on, don’t be shy.”

“I-I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’m really ready to scene after all,” she stammered.

“Of course you are. You’re just nervous. I give you my word, as a Dom, I will honor your safe word during our scene.” Lewis paused only to inhale before continuing. “What is it? Your safe word, I mean. I’ll need to know it before we start.”

Why?

Did he plan to beat on her until she screamed the word, like Kerr used to do? An icy foreboding filled her. The thought of Lewis’ hands caressing her flesh or his cock shoving in and out of her pussy while everyone in the dungeon watched, including Kellan, made her stomach pitch and yaw.

There was only one Dom she wanted to give her submission to, and it certainly wasn’t Lewis.

Mercy guided a slightly panicked glance over the dungeon.

Kellan wasn’t anywhere.

Jerking from Lewis’ grasp, she mumbled an apology, then turned and zigzagged through the members as she raced straight into the ladies’ room.

Trembling like a leaf, she paced until she was nearly hyperventilating. Mercy bent over the sink and splashed cold water on her face as she swallowed huge gulps of air. The door suddenly swung open and in rushed Samantha—the former Mistress Sammie who’d traded in her Domme whip for Master Max’s submissive collar. She moved in behind Mercy and gently rubbed her back.

“What’s wrong, Symoné? I saw you tear ass in here, pale and shaking like you’d seen a ghost. Kerr hasn’t somehow snuck inside the club, has he?”

“No.” Mercy grabbed a handful of paper towels and wiped her face.

“Good. I was in Mika’s office earlier when Sir Justice came in and filled him in on what happened at the courthouse today. It just burns my ass that stupid judge didn’t lock that animal away.”

“Kellan’s here?”

“Kellan, huh?” Samantha smirked. “Yes, but I haven’t seen *Sir Justice* come down from Mika’s office yet. He’s probably still up there. Tell me what happened in the dungeon that upset you?”

“Nothing. Something. I don’t know. I probably freaked out for nothing.”

“Come with me.” Samantha gently urged her toward the door.

Mercy dug in her heels and shook her head. “I don’t want to go out there yet.”

“I wasn’t taking you back to the dungeon but to my room for some girl talk.”

“Oh, that would be nice.”

Mercy followed Samantha out of the restroom and down the long hall of private rooms. As they reached their destination, a warm body eased in alongside Mercy. She tensed, fearing Lewis didn’t want to give up his quest and had followed her to press her to play again. When she looked over her shoulder, it wasn’t Lewis peering down at her but Kellan. His expression told her he was pissed and ready to spit nails.

Before she could even greet the man, he clutched her elbow and scowled. “What did Lewis say that upset you?”

His touch ignited that heated sexual awakening inside her again. The man was like a walking, talking aphrodisiac.

“Nothing.”

“Do *not* lie to me, angel. What did he say?”

“He wanted to scene with me, like always. Lewis has been pestering me since I joined the club. When he asked me again tonight in the foyer, I told him I would—”

“So you’re going to let Lewis scene with you?”

Kellan’s tone was dripping with sarcasm...or was it jealousy? Why did he even care? It wasn’t like *Sir Justice* would cuff her to a cross and play with her.

“I was, but I decided not to.”

Samantha didn’t say a word. She simply darted glances between them before unlocking the door.

“Thank you, Samantha. I’ll take it from here.” Kellan all but dismissed the other sub as he kicked out a foot, keeping the door propped open.

“Stay as long as you’d like, Sir.” A knowing smile tugged the corners of Samantha’s lips. “I’ll be at the bar if either of you need me.”

“Wait. I thought you and I were going to talk.” Mercy hated the tone of panic in her voice.

“This won’t take long,” Kellan drawled.

Samantha nodded. She gave Mercy a supportive wink and walked away.

Kellan led her inside the room and sat down on the bed, dragging Mercy down beside him.

“I take it Lewis berated you for changing your mind.”

“No.”

“All right. What exactly *did* he say that frightened you?”

“He wanted to know my safe word.”

“And?” Justice pressed, wearing a look of confusion.

“And it scared me. I mean, the only reason he’d need to know that was if he intended to whale me until I had to use it. I may be naïve when it comes to certain aspects of the lifestyle, but I’m not stupid. No way am I going to let some Dom I hardly know strap me to a cross and do as he pleases.”

Kellan issued a soft chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Mercy bristled.

“Nothing. I just adore your spunk.” He quickly sobered. “You shouldn’t let *any* Dom do as he pleases. That’s what negotiations are for. As for your safe word, never scene with a Dom who doesn’t know what it is. It’s the only way they’ll know if you’re in trouble and need to pause or stop the scene altogether.”

“I didn’t think of it like that.” She dropped her head and let out a long groan.

“What did you think a safe word was for?”

“Kerr told me to use it when I couldn’t take any more pain.”

“I take it you never negotiated your scenes with him.”

She shook her head. “No. He’d just order me to bend over and to shut up until he was done. I don’t even know *how* to negotiate a scene.”

Kellan closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. His nostrils flared and his lips thinned into a tight line. After several long seconds, he mumbled a curse, then locked on to her with an uncompromising stare.

“I’ll pick you up at seven thirty in the morning so you can attend the sub meeting. We’ll grab breakfast, then come to the club. Understood?”

Mercy nodded. The adamant tone in his instructions slid over her flesh like warm honey. This was the kind of control she ached for him to give her. Her nipples drew up tight and hard, throbbing in time with the growing ache between her legs. The overwhelming need for his Dominance was burning her alive, but it was more than that. She craved this man with a primitive, visceral hunger. Mercy feared that if she couldn’t convince him to put out the submissive wildfire inside her, she’d soon turn to nothing but ash.

What was stopping him? Why wouldn’t he take her out to the dungeon and start teaching her how to please him? Was she not attractive enough? Did he want an experienced sub? Was their age difference too much for him to handle?

All Kellan had told her was that he couldn’t train her. But he hadn’t gone into any detail...hadn’t given her a tangible reason for his refusal. The not knowing *why* ate at her soul.

Mercy had had enough...enough second-guessing her desirability as a sub and as a woman...enough of filling her head with a plethora of questions. She wanted answers, dammit. And she aimed to get them.

Gathering her courage, she lifted her chin and stared him in the eyes. “Tell me why you can’t you train me. If it’s because you have socks older than me, let me assure you, I’m emotionally mature enough to handle your Dominance.”

His expression softened. “It’s not about age.”

“Then what is it? If I’m not submissive enough, I’ll work harder. I’ll learn anything you want to teach me. If you don’t like my hair, my makeup, my clothes...I’ll change. Just *please*...give me a chance to show you what’s in my heart.”

Pride be damned, Mercy didn’t care that she was begging. The submissive within ached to beg longer and harder...to stir his Dominance enough that he would take control and light her dark, confusing path.

Kellan tensed. A savage noise, like a strangled roar, rumbled deep in his chest. His expression hardened, twisting with a look of pain, while fire and hunger blazed in his eyes. He urgently cupped her nape and dragged her to his mouth, claiming her in a passionate kiss.

Electricity shot through her, setting fire to every cell in her body.

His lips were warm, firm, and ravenous as he devoured her.

Mercy fell limp in his arms.

She whimpered and kissed him back, striving to return the blissful, palpable hunger he bathed her in.

Her pulse thundered in her ears.

Kellan dragged his tongue over the seam of her lips.

Mercy moaned and opened, welcoming him inside.

His kiss grew raw...urgent.

Their tongues tangled in slick, wet warmth.

His masculine scent made her dizzy.

Mercy's body pulsed and throbbed beneath tingling skin.

She was lost...lost in the texture and taste of this magnificent man.

Kellan wrapped one broad hand beneath her breast. Through the corset, the heat of his touch singed her skin.

Her clit throbbed.

Her nipples ached and strained.

She clutched his shoulders. Absorbing the heat rolling off him, she held on for dear life.

Arching into his palm, she ached to feel him glide his thumb over her swollen peaks.

She needed something more...needed Kellan to strum the need away...or rev it higher. At the moment, Mercy didn't know which...didn't care.

But Kellan did. He knew exactly what she needed.

He brushed her pebbled tip and swallowed her moan of delight.

Answering her call, he groaned and cupped her breast.

Without warning, he tore from her mouth and jerked his hand back as if she'd burned him with acid.

His eyes widened. Like a kaleidoscope, a million emotions swirled over his face. But it was the blatant look of horror that landed the crushing blow to the bonfire blazing inside her.

Mercy found it even more disenchanting when Kellan vaulted off the bed and rushed to the door.

"I'll pick you up in the morning."

Mercy blinked, and he was gone.

She drew her fingers to her mouth.

The door shut with a brutal finality.

The tingle of his kiss still lingered on her lips.

Shock, disappointment, and confusion pinged through her.

Rage trumped them all and soared like a rocket inside her.

"What. The. Fuck?" she railed. "He kisses me till my damn toes curl, sets me on fire, and then runs out the goddamn door? Seriously? What kind of game is this asshole playing?"

Bolting off the bed, Mercy paced. Desperate to make sense of Kellan's kiss and abrupt exodus, she couldn't. She was too focused on the hot, pulsating throb enveloping her body.

"Argh!" she growled. "What the hell am I doing here?"

Mercy flopped down on the bed and covered her face with her hands.

The night had turned into a complete clusterfuck.

She'd come to the club to spend time with the other subs, watch and learn from the various sessions, and hopefully get a hello from Kellan. While she'd enjoyed his kiss far more than a simple hello, him running out of the room like his ass was on fire completely baffled her.

She looked at the door and heaved a disgruntled sigh. Though the idea of staying in Samantha's room all night held a world of appeal, Mercy owed Lewis an apology. A shiver

slithered through her. Having to be near the man again made her skin crawl. She'd rather spend the evening next to Kellan.

Touching a finger to her lips once more, Mercy closed her eyes and replayed his potent kiss in her mind.

"Dammit! Why did he leave?" she groused out loud. "We could have been sweating and writhing by now. I could have my legs wrapped around him while he fed his fat cock inside me...stretching me...filling me, until we both exploded in screaming ecstasy."

Mercy slammed her fist onto the mattress and stood. Pacing, she tried to work off her mix of anger and lust.

"Oh, fuck this!"

With a snarl, she opened the door and marched down the hall only to be met by several couples heading to their private rooms for BDSM fun. A pang of envy sliced her heart. When she stepped into the dungeon, the sights and sounds of subs finding their contentment only increased her surly mood.

She quickly convinced herself that the night was a lost cause and decided to just go home. A hot bubble bath and a couple glasses of wine sounded far more appealing than waiting, wishing, and praying that Kellan would sweep her off her feet and bind her to a cross or spanking bench.

Dammit!

She was beyond pathetic.

Mercy was well on her way to a full-blown pity party complete with cake, streamers, and helium-filled balloons. The only things missing were the jugglers and clowns.

With her head down, avoiding the members' eyes, she pushed past the velvet curtain only to run straight into Savannah and her two Masters, Nick and Dylan.

Though Savannah had become a trusted friend—after she and her Masters along with Samantha's Master, Max had rescued Mercy from Kerr's club—the fact that Savannah had *two* Masters when Mercy couldn't manage to entice a single one chafed.

"You're not leaving already, are you, Symoné?" Savannah frowned.

"Yeah. I'm just...not feeling it tonight."

"May I have a few minutes to talk to Symoné, please?" Savannah shot her Masters a pleading glance.

The two rugged Doms nodded in tandem.

"We'll meet you inside, kitten," Dylan stated before he and Nick disappeared into the dungeon.

Mercy followed Savannah to a quiet corner in the far lobby away from the members waiting to be checked in. At a small table surrounded by leather padded chairs, the two women sat down.

A look of concern was stamped over Savannah's face. "What's going on?"

"Like I said, I'm just not feeling it." Mercy shrugged.

"I'm not buying it. Spill, sister."

"Fine." Mercy knew she was a terrible liar. "Lewis was all up in my shit again, only this time, I caved."

"You scened with him?" Savannah's eyes widened.

"No. I changed my mind."

Over the next several minutes, Mercy filled her friend in on all the gory details of the evening, ending with Justice's earth-shattering kiss and beeline out the door. When she was done, Savannah sat back wearing a shit-eating grin.

"Sir Justice likes you. But it sounds like he's not sure what to do about it."

“That’s just it. He’s not going to do *anything* about it...ever!”

“Give him some time to figure it out. I have a feeling he’ll come around.”

Mercy shook her head. “No. I’ve done everything but strip off my clothes and do a damn pole dance. He’s *not* interested.”

Then what was that sizzling kiss about?

Mercy didn’t have a clue. She was too obsessed with the depressing aftermath.

“Look, I’ve kept you from your Masters long enough. Enjoy your night. I’m going home.”

Even before Savannah’s eyes drifted over Mercy’s shoulders, she knew Kellan was near. As usual, the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, and a thrill shot up her spine. It was as if he’d hard-wired her body with a silent alarm system rigged to go off every time he drilled her with his dissecting stare. She found the sensation unnerving yet oddly comforting in ways she couldn’t unravel.

“Don’t look now,” Savannah whispered. “But Mister Kiss and Run is standing by the podium behind you, watching you like a hawk. Come back inside the dungeon. You can sit with Masters and me.”

Mercy gave a barely perceptible shake of her head. “Thanks, but it’s been a crazy, confusing, and ungodly stressful day. I should have just stayed home and snuggled up on the couch in my jammies.”

“Oh, my god, that’s right. Today was the trial. What happened with Kerr?”

“I lost. He’s free to trap and terrorize subs to his heart’s content.”

“I’m sorry. Dammit. That truly sucks. If you need to talk or just hang out or anything...call me, okay? I’ll even help you try to sort things out with...” Savannah subtly lifted her chin toward Kellan.

“There’s nothing to sort out there...but I’ll call. Maybe we can grab lunch again soon.”

“Yes. Let’s do it.” Savannah nodded excitedly as she stood. After bending to give Mercy a hug, she hurried away.

Trying to steady her nerves, Mercy stayed in her seat, staring at a blank wall for several long minutes. Kellan’s stare warmed her from the inside out. The clawing ache to feel his lips and hands on her again made her want to scream. Instead, she stood and darted a glance over her shoulder. Kellan was leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his sturdy chest, and blue eyes searing her with a hungry stare. She zeroed in on his lips and her pulse tripled. Mercy wanted to climb his long, sinewy body, like King Kong did the Empire State Building, wrap her arms and legs around Kellan, and kiss him until all the chaos inside her calmed. Though the idea was tempting as hell, it wouldn’t cure her hopeless infatuation only convince him she was pathetic. No, attacking the man wouldn’t change her hopeless situation.

Forcing a weak smile, Mercy sent him a slight nod, then set her sights on the front door. As she weaved her way through the members, Kellan’s stare raked her back, sending goose bumps to explode over her arms.

When she stepped from the club, the cold night air pierced her flesh like needles. Mercy tucked her head and ran toward her car, digging the key from her pocket. From out of nowhere, she felt a hand grip her arm. Before she could process what was happening, she was being roughly spun around and found herself face-to-face with Kerr.

Like a bomb, fear exploded inside her.

“Get your hands off me!”

Her indignant tone only made his lecherous smile widen.

“I don’t think so, sweetheart,” Kerr growled.

He tightened his grip and yanked her toward him. Mercy felt something hard poking at her ribs. She looked down and saw the barrel of a gun pressed at her side.

“My hands on you are the least of your worries. We have some business to settle, you and me.”

Panic swelled like a tsunami. Mercy darted a terrified glance at the camera mounted over the door of the club. At that exact moment, Kellan stepped outside. When he saw Kerr gripping her arm, fury engulfed his face.

Mercy prayed Kellan could see the gun and wouldn't try anything heroically stupid. Whatever Kerr had planned for her, she wanted to believe she could survive. But helplessly watching him kill the man she loved would rip her to shreds.

Loved?

Even in the face of such dire circumstances, Mercy almost laughed. It had taken an ugly act of violence for her to realize she'd fucked up and fallen in love with a man who didn't want her.

It was Murphy's Law at its finest.

“Symoné, I need you to come back inside with me. Now!” Kellan barked.

“She's not going to be able to accommodate your *order* this time, Judge,” Kerr stated flatly. He lifted the gun to Mercy's head and grinned. “If you don't turn around and walk away, I'll splatter her brains all over the sidewalk. That's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.”

Numbed from the cold and fear, her body shook. A whimper leaked from her lips as she silently pleaded for Kellan to follow Kerr's instructions. But before Kellan could move a muscle, the door to the club burst open. Mika and two muscle-bound DMs raced onto the sidewalk.

“Drop the gun, Kerr. You can't kill her now; you've got too many witnesses.” Kellan's voice was as hard as steel and as arctic as ice. “Let her go!”

In the distance, Mercy could hear sirens screaming. Tears slid down her cheeks. She was terrified the madman would kill her before help arrived.

Kerr tensed. Only he wasn't the Kerr she'd once known. This man was a monster. A fact confirmed by the wild look in his eyes. Frozen in fear, she watched as more members poured from the club. Their gasps and murmurs filled her with even more fear.

“You heard the man,” Mika bellowed as he raised a gun of his own and quickly chambered a bullet. “Let her go, or I'll blow your head off, Kerr. Hear those sirens? The cops are coming for you. Put the gun down, or be hauled off in a body bag. It's up to you.”

Fear flashed in Kerr's eyes. His face contorted in hate and fury.

“You're not worth going to jail for, cunt,” he spat in a low demonic voice. “But don't worry, Symoné...I'll be back to drain the life out of you soon.”

With a mighty shove, Kerr sent her sprawling to the pavement. The concrete chewed her shoulder and arm. Pain exploded inside her skull and lights flashed behind her eyes when her head bounced off the cement.

A cacophony of footsteps—running away and racing toward her—pelted Mercy's brain like sledgehammers.

Kellan gathered her into his arms and cradled her to his chest.

“I've got you, angel. I've got you,” he whispered in a voice rife with anguish.

Swaddled in the safety of his arms, she curled in, soaking up the heat of his body. She pressed her head against him as his whispered words rumbled deep in his chest.

“Get her inside, Kell.” Mika's voice shook with rage. Mercy blinked up at the club owner as he stood and turned, then bellowed, “Somebody find Brooks and get him out here, stat!”

She knew Mika was only trying to help, but his yell crashed through her skull like a gong. Mercy closed her eyes and cringed.

“You’re not going to pass out on me again, are you?” Kellan whispered.

Obviously he was trying to lighten the mood, but the worry in his eyes and the grimace stretched over his lips didn’t hold an ounce of humor.

“No, Sir. I’m going to stay awake in hopes that you’ll kiss me again.”

Kellan stood and lifted her off the ground. Mercy pressed a palm to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut.

“I should spank your ass red for leaving the club alone. You scared twenty years off my life...twenty years I don’t have to spare,” he quietly scolded as he carried her inside.

“Please...spank away,” she murmured for his ears only.

“You’re an incorrigible little minx.”

While her sassy plea lessened the fear marring his face, it didn’t completely erase his angst.

“Where do you hurt, Symoné?” physician and Master Sam Brooks—who’d patched her up after her first altercation with Kerr—asked as he moved in alongside Kellan.

“Everywhere,” Mercy groaned. “My head feels like it’s going to explode, and my elbow’s on fire. My hip and shoulder, too.”

“Okay. Let me take a quick look at you. Justice, would you lay her down here on the carpet for a minute? We can move her to my private room if we need to.”

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this, Master Sam,” Mercy hissed as Kellan eased her to the floor. “Your girl’s going to think I’m trying to hit on you.”

“I know better,” his submissive, Cindy, assured with a soft smile. She crouched next to her Master before placing several items on the ground out of Mercy’s sight. “Someone needs to put a hit out on Kerr and end our misery.”

“Mika was ready to do that if Kerr would have pulled the trigger.”

“But then we would have lost you.” Cindy frowned. “That’s not a trade any of us would ever make.”

“No. No. No.” Savannah pushed through the crowd sobbing.

“I’m okay,” Mercy assured, watching tears roll down her friend’s face. “There’s no blood this time. I’m good.”

“I’m afraid there is, angel,” Kellan corrected.

She glanced at Brooks, watching silently as he and Cindy pulled on white surgical gloves. It was then that Mercy realized Kellan was still supporting her neck. Streaks of blood were smeared over his white cotton shirt.

“Is the blood coming from my shoulder or my elbow?” Mercy asked.

“I’m going to sit you up. Let me know right away if you’re going to be sick,” Brooks instructed, ignoring her question.

“Okay.” Mercy pinned Kellan with an anxious stare. “Where am I bleeding?”

“From the back of your head, angel. Don’t worry. Sam will get you fixed up. He’s the best surgeon we’ve got.”

“I’m the only surgeon you’ve got here,” Brooks chuckled.

“That’s why you’re the best,” Mercy chimed in.

“Damn right it is.” Brooks flashed her a wide grin before turning somber and focusing his attention on the back of her head.

She could feel him carefully smoothing back sections of her hair.

“No stiches, Doc. I’m not letting anyone shave my head,” Mercy protested.

“If you need them, Sam will be shaving your head without any argument,” Kellan scolded.

His unyielding tone filled her with a warm glow. If only he would take the initiative, Mercy was ready and willing to heed his every command.

“Kerr did this to her?” Mellie, Savannah’s older sister, asked in a tone filled with shock.

“Yes. He’s gone and lost his fuc...his damn mind,” Samantha bit out angrily. “Was he like this when you were his sub?”

Mercy turned her head to see who the hell Sanna was talking to. When Mellie bit her lip and shook her head, Mercy blinked in utter shock.

“You...you were with Kerr?”

“Years ago,” Mellie explained. “When I lived in Kansas City. He was always an ass, but he wasn’t violent. What happened to him?”

So it isn’t just me who’s noticed a change in him. Maybe he really is crazy now.

While neither woman could explain his bizarre behavior, Mercy found comfort in the fact that his menacing actions weren’t all in her mind.

Sam pressed something cold and stinging against her scalp. “This might burn a little.”

“Ouch.” She dug her fingernails into Kellan’s arm. “A little? Try a lot.”

“Necessary evil,” Sam mumbled. “I need to clean this up so I can take a better look.”

“Easy with the claws, kitten, or you’ll soon have us both bleeding,” Kellan warned with a crooked grin.

Mercy jerked her fingers away. “Sorry.”

“I’m only kidding, angel.” He clasped his hand around her wrist and placed her fingers back on his arm. “I can take it.”

“That’s my line...when you spank me, Sir.”

Her taunting remark wasn’t meant to entice him, not really. She was trying to tame the residual fear thrumming inside her. It wasn’t every day a madman pressed a gun to her head or made her realize that she’d fallen in love...like an idiot.

A look of animalistic lust flared over Kellan’s face, erasing the lines of worry previously etched there. “Damn it, angel,” he muttered under his breath.

Without warning, her stomach lurched and her mouth began to water. “Back up. Back up!”

“What’s wrong?” he asked

“I’m going to be sick.”

Kellan grabbed a towel from the floor, gathered the corners in a loose fist, and held the fabric under her chin. Mercy shot him a wide-eyed *you’ve got to be shitting me* expression as the contents of her dinner began roiling upward.

“Here.” Savannah’s Master, Nick shoved a trashcan between Mercy’s legs.

She clutched the lined bucket and proceeded to toss her cookies.

“Sam?” Kellan’s voice was rife with uneasiness.

“Time to take her to the ER just to be safe,” the doctor replied.

“I don’t want to go to the hospital,” Mercy moaned.

“Too bad. You’re going and I’m driving you there.”

Kellan’s uncompromising tone would have made her shiver if she weren’t blowing chow in a trashcan and her head wasn’t throbbing like a bitch.

Mercy lifted her eyes and glanced around the people hovering around her as Brooks wrapped her head in gauze. Master Lewis had Maple—who was wearing a look of sorrow—clutched at his side.

A tiny, satisfied smile crept over Mercy’s lips.

“I’m sorry,” Maple mouthed. Tears welled in her eyes.

“It’s okay,” Mercy whispered.

“Yes, girl. You’re going to be just fine,” Brooks assured, unaware she’d been talking to Maple. “Once we reach the ER, we’ll get you something for the pain. Can you stand up?”

Mercy nodded, then groaned as a new wave of pain reverberated in her brain.

Before she’d even attempted to move, Kellan lifted her off the floor and back into his arms. Mercy rested her head on his chest, needing the reassurance and comfort he offered. When they reached the foyer, Mika was talking with three uniformed officers. Kellan tensed when the cops looked his way and did a double take. Clearly, they were surprised to see the Honorable Judge Kellan Graham inside a kink club.

“I’m taking Miss O’Connor to Highland Park Hospital,” Kellan stated flatly. “She can answer your questions there, when she’s able.”

“We’ll be there shortly, Judge.” An older officer nodded curtly.

Kellan’s anonymity had been shattered because of her.

A wave of guilt crashed through Mercy as he carried her out the door. He eased her into the passenger seat of his car before sprinting around the vehicle and sliding in behind the wheel.

“Oh, god. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it, angel,” Kellan said.

“How can I not? It’s my fault you were recognized at the club.”

“No. It’s not your fault. I could have sought refuge in one of the members’ rooms while Mika or Sam drove you to the hospital. I outed myself. It was my own choice.”

“What happens now?”

Kellan shrugged. “Nothing. I’ll talk to Officer Amblin at the hospital. He’ll take care of everything. Don’t worry. All I want you focusing on is getting better.”

“As soon as this headache goes away, I’ll be fine.”

Kellan reached down and threaded his fingers through hers as he sped toward the hospital. Mercy wondered if she’d ever grow accustomed to the inexplicable heat that raced through her when he touched her. She hoped not.

When he turned onto one of the busier thoroughfares, the headlights of oncoming traffic pierced her skull like a knife. Mercy closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

“Come on, angel. You have to wake up.” Kellan’s insistent tone pulled her from the darkness and resonated in her ears like a damn foghorn.

“Stop yelling,” she groaned. “I’m awake.”

“Then open your eyes.”

“I can’t. The light hurts.”

“Okay, but you’re going to have to talk to me so you don’t try to go back to sleep.”

“God, you’re bossy,” she grouched.

“Thank you. It’s my job.”

Mercy felt his smile in the tone of his words.

“You pick the topic. My head hurts too bad to think.”

“Tell me about growing up in Texas. Did you have horses?”

“Uh-huh. A pretty tan-and-white mare named Abigail. She was surefooted and fast as the wind.”

“Do you still ride?”

“Around here? Not hardly,” Mercy snorted. She immediately regretted the action and cupped her forehead. “I wish. I miss it.”

“There’s a place in Peoria where I like to ride. It’s called Coyote Trails. I’ll take you there once you’ve healed.”

“Really?” Her eyes flew open wide. She regretted that move as well and quickly snapped her lids shut. “That would be wonderful. How long have you been riding?”

“Years. I love it.”

“Where did you grow up, Kellan?”

“Sun Valley. It’s a small town in Idaho on the southwest edge of the Salmon-Challis National Forest. I spent a lot of time snow skiing in the winter and fishing in the summer.”

“I love to fish. God, I haven’t fished in forever,” she said on a wistful sigh. “When I go home for Christmas, I’m going to do both...ride and fish.”

“That sounds like a wonderful vacation.”

“You should come with me for Christmas,” she blurted out unexpectedly, followed by an inward groan.

The man doesn’t want to teach you submission or probably even kiss you again. He sure as hell isn’t going to spend Christmas with you and your wild family.

“What?” Kellan choked.

“Nothing. It’s the pain talking. Just ignore me.”

“I wish I could, angel, but I can’t,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Can’t what? Come for Christmas or ignore me?”

“Both.”

His confession ignited a flicker of hope inside her. Self-preservation warned to keep the flame no more than a sputter, or she’d be dealing with more than a bitchin’ headache.

When Kellan pulled up to the entrance of the ER, he squeezed her hand. “Sit tight. I’ll get a wheelchair.”

“I can walk.”

“I know you *can*, but you’re not going to. Understand?”

“Yes, Sir.” Though she grumbled her reply, Mercy savored the Dominant command he unknowingly sprinkled over her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Kellan stared at the beautiful sub as she lay, eyes closed, in the dimly lit exam room. She looked so fragile, so vulnerable, but Mercy was a trooper. After answering officer Amblin's questions and filing yet another assault charge against Kerr, she was sent off for a CT scan. He'd been climbing the walls for hours, though he'd somehow maintained a calm outward veneer. He couldn't shut off his brain...couldn't keep from projecting gruesome forms of torture Kerr might have inflicted had Kellan not followed her out of the club.

A crushing helplessness settled deep in his bones.

He didn't know how to keep her at arm's length and safe at the same time.

It didn't help that for the second time today, he was perched next to a hospital bed—first next to Leena, and now beside Mercy—being chewed alive beneath the jaws of powerlessness. Being chained and bound to circumstances beyond his control left him feeling weak and impotent.

He was a fucking Dom! But the goddamn stars kept aligning themselves in ways that tested his command at every turn. Kellan knew it wasn't only his command that was being tested but his resolve as well.

Mercy dented his Dominant armor in ways no other submissive ever had. He had no business harboring such intense feelings for the girl, but again...he was powerless to block her from his brain and his heart.

Of course, if Leena were still with him, mentally, this bloody battle inside him wouldn't be raging. Kellan wouldn't have even looked twice at Mercy.

Guilt stabbed deep.

Everything he wanted to do to the girl was wrong on every moral level.

Kellan bit back a howl of frustration and dragged a hand through his hair.

He shouldn't be here.

Shouldn't be tempting himself with what he couldn't have, and he sure as fuck shouldn't have kissed her. He scoffed inwardly. It was the single stupidest thing he'd done in years. He foolishly convinced himself that if he simply sated his curiosity and tasted those plump, sweet lips of hers, he could purge her from his system.

Idiot.

All he'd accomplished was fanning the embers of desire into a roaring inferno he'd never be able to put out.

Her lips were as soft as velvet, her tongue like silk. He could live to be a million and still not wipe the taste of her from his soul. She was branded in his psyche now, and nothing he could do or say would change that.

Could he live with only the memory of that one incredible moment when he'd claimed her mouth without going insane?

Good luck.

Even his subconscious knew it wasn't possible.

It had been five grueling years since he'd kissed a woman with such mind-blowing passion. Mercy had made him feel alive once more. Kellan wanted to savor that awakening. Strip her naked and drown in her lush body more than he'd wanted his next breath. Remembering the feel of her hard, pointed nipple on his thumb was a hell all its own. But dammit, he couldn't lead her

on and he certainly couldn't continue to keep mind-fucking himself. Somehow, he had to find the strength to fight his overwhelming attraction to Mercy.

It wasn't fair to her, him, or Leena.

He'd made a vow, twenty-five years ago, to love, honor, and respect...until death parted them. The empty years without Leena had made him weak. He'd bent his vow as far as he could. While Kellan wasn't proud that he'd drawn up a purely physical contract with Natalie, slaking his sexual needs with her was worlds apart from the way his soul slipped away when he sank inside Mercy's mouth. He couldn't allow the still roaring blaze inside to consume him.

The realization of how brutally he'd tarnished his promise to Leena terrified Kellan.

He'd all but welcomed Mercy to bring chaos and craving to his rational and orderly world. He had to put the brakes on now, or heaven help him, she'd wreck him all the way to his soul.

"Good news," Brooks announced as he strolled into the exam room. "There's no sign of any brain bleeds or broken bones. That bump on the back of your head will be sore, but no stitches were necessary. I know you're happy about that. You do have a slight concussion, which explains your wicked headache."

"I don't have a headache...not anymore," Mercy slurred. Her eyes were barely slit open. "Whatever you gave me is workin' juss' fine."

Kellan wanted to laugh at the drugged-out crooked smile curled on her mouth.

"I'm afraid when that shot wears off, you'll be singing a different tune." Brooks grinned as he handed Kellan a stack of papers and a small bag. "I raided the drug cabinet. You've got plenty of pain meds to get her through the night. There's a prescription for more in the bag if she should need them. For tonight, though, you'll need to wake her every four hours. If she's in pain, you can give her one or two pills, but no more than two every four hours. Other than that, you're free to take her home."

You'll need to wake her every four hours. You'll need to wake her every four hours.

Brooks' instructions spooled through Kellan's head as a wave of panic spilled through him. His sole focus had been on getting Mercy the medical attention she needed. He hadn't even thought about what he would do with her after they left the hospital...until now.

You didn't suppose you could just drop her off at her apartment and drive away, did you? the little voice in the back of his head mocked.

No. He hadn't supposed *anything!* That was the problem.

The fact that he'd be spending the night, sleeping under the same fucking roof as Mercy, gave new meaning to the word *control*.

He was so fucked.

While his heart tried to leap out of his chest, Kellan nodded to Brooks.

"I'll take her home with me and keep a close eye on her." Though the words rolled off his tongue easily enough, Kellan's gut twisted.

He'd just made the most potentially dangerous decision of his life. Even Mercy turned a glassy-eyed stare at him that screamed, *Are you fucking crazy?*

Probably. But *she* was the cause of his insanity.

"You don't have to babysit me, Kellan. I can set an alarm and take my meds like a big girl."

"I'm sure you can," Brooks replied in a placating tone he probably reserved for children and patients high on pain meds. "But you have no business being alone tonight. You need to be fully awakened every four hours." The doctor then turned a serious expression toward Kellan. "Make sure she wakes up. If you can't—"

“If I can’t wake her, I’ll call 911. I know the drill. Believe me, I’m not taking any chances with her safety. I had a couple concussions playing football back in high school.”

“All right.” Brooks pinned Mercy with a stern and serious glare. “Now for the part you won’t like. No driving, reading, television, computers, or other electronics for at least a week. You need to let your brain and body rest.”

“A week?” Mercy gasped.

“A week...at least,” Brooks repeated.

“Yes, Sir.” She scowled.

Kellan studied her carefully. It might have been the drugs, but Mercy had given in way too easily. If she thought she was going to blow off Sam’s orders, Kellan had news for his feisty live-in—*good god, what have I done?*—patient.

He intended to keep Mercy’s sassy ass on the straight and narrow even if he had to tie her to the bed.

The idea made his cock stir to life; but then she always managed to make him hard enough to pound railroad spikes by just breathing.

Son of a bitch!

The drive to Kellan’s home was...enlightening.

Mercy was so whacked out on pain meds she rambled non-stop. Her lack of filter was educational and amusing as hell. There were times it was all he could do not to laugh out loud, but that might have caused her to be quiet. That’s the last thing Kellan wanted.

“I mean, pepperoni pizza is the bomb, but nothing beats a calzone...if it’s made right, that is. Some places don’t know how to cook ’em. The insides are all doughy and gross. It tastes nasty that way, you know?”

“Uh-huh.” He smirked.

“What’s your favorite food?”

“Steak.”

“Oh, I love steak. Mmm!”

The low, sultry moan that bubbled from the back of her throat made Kellan want to pull over, unzip his pants, and make her fucking scream.

“I love all kinds of meat, actually,” she continued.

I have some hot, hard meat you can wrap your pretty lips around, right here, angel.

Kellan frowned at the pubescent thoughts swirling in his head. Even if he *could* bring to life the images filling his mind, like a kick-ass porn flick, Mercy wasn’t in any shape to play the starring role the way he wanted.

A hot shower and his fist were the only relief to be found for the boner Kellan was sporting...after he had Mercy settled in his guest room and fast asleep.

“How long have you been in the lifestyle?” Before he could answer, Mercy continued. “I bet forever. You’ve got that Dom vibe down pat. It’s”—she sighed wistfully—“intimidating in a deliciously naughty sort of way. But you know that I mean, you know you ooze command, right? I still don’t get it, Kellan. Why won’t you train me? Do you already have a sub you’re hiding?”

Oh, fuck. Not this again.

Kellan didn’t know what to say. He wasn’t going to lie, but this wasn’t the time or the place to start discussing Leena. Hopefully, if he was lucky, Mercy wouldn’t remember any of this conversation in the morning.

“You’ve already asked me why I won’t train you.”

"I know," she replied as if he were thick as a stump. "But you won't answer me. Will you answer me now?"

"No."

"That's it? That's all you're going to say?"

"Yes."

"You're nothing but a big ol' party pooper, judge, jury, and justice, Sir."

Kellan bit his tongue to keep from laughing. When she stuck out her bottom lip in an exaggerated pout, he clamped down even harder to keep from groaning. Christ, he wanted to suck that luscious plump flesh between his teeth and feast on her mouth for days.

Focus! You're driving.

"So how many subs have you had?"

"One."

"Just one?" Mercy blinked in surprise. "What happened? No, never mind. You won't tell me anyway. I should just shut up and stop asking questions." Mercy paused long enough to draw in another breath before she was off again. "Did she leave you? Or did you release her? Does she live here in Chicago? How long have you lived in Chicago, by the way?"

Kellan cracked a smile. She reminded him of Hannah when she was three. His daughter was a magpie who asked more questions than there were minutes in a year.

"Aw, come on. Don't be a poop. You know all kinds of things about me," Mercy drawled.

She twisted in her seat and leaned forward, flashing him a mischievous grin.

God, she was so damn adorable.

"You're quite a puzzle, Kellan Graham, but I'm determined to figure you out...one of these days."

"You are, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. I wanna know what flips your buttons, floats your boat, and makes you tick."

You!

"Why do people say that all the time? I mean, nobody really ticks," she pondered aloud. "And why wouldn't a boat float...unless it had a hole in it? But then it would just sink. Right?"

"It would."

Mercy paused. He could feel her staring at him but kept his eyes on the road.

"Why are you being so nice to me? I mean...you usually act like I piss you off. You're always snarly and grouchy...well, except for when Kerr's around. Then you're like a knight on a white horse."

"I'm no knight, angel."

"Yes you are. You may not want to be, but you are. Guess you're gonna just have to deal with it," she giggled. "I think behind that all that badass Dom exterior, you're nothing but a big ol' cuddly bear." Pausing once more, she gazed out the window. "I haven't cuddled anyone for, well...forever."

Her voice had dropped to barely a whisper and was suffused in so much sadness it stung his heart.

"Why not?"

"Because the guy I dated when I first moved here ended up dumping me for a yoga instructor. I should have been happy. He was a jerk. He actually called me a freak because I wanted him to spank me. That's okay. I'm fine with being a freak. In fact, I'm better off without him, 'cause it never would have worked out, anyway. He was too uptight and really lousy in bed."

That was a serious disappointment, I'll tell you what. He had a decent cock but had no idea how to use it."

Kellan exhaled a soft chuckle. Yeah, if she remembered any of this conversation in the morning, she'd be mortified.

"That's when I started checking out older men, like you," she continued. "I bet you have a decent cock, too. But more importantly...I bet you know *exactly* how to use it. Don't you?"

"I've never had any complaints," he managed to choke out, dreaming about all the ways he'd like to prove that to her.

"I'd be happy to rate you if you want me to," she giggled.

The air stilled in his lungs. A cold sweat broke out over his face. Mercy was trying to seduce him like some crazy reversal of Mrs. Robinson. It was killing him. He didn't know how to respond without crushing her feelings.

Fuck!

"You know, I fantasize about you all the time when I'm...well, you know, masturbating."

Don't...don't ask!

"What do you imagine me doing to you, angel?" His voice came out raspy and low.

Fucking masochist! his conscious barked.

"Everything," she purred. "Every dirty little thing I can think of."

When she let out a low, sensual moan, Kellan swallowed tightly and wrapped his hands around the steering wheel in a death grip. His cock strained against the zipper of his pants while throbbing like a tribal drum.

He needed to steer this conversation in a whole other direction, and fast.

"What kind of bed do you have?"

"Huh?" Kellan asked, wondering where her question was going to lead next.

"Your bed. What kind of bed do you have? Is it a regular mattress? I have one of those foam beds. You know, the memory kind. I need to find someone to share it with me soon, before it forgets what a man's body in it feels like."

Mercy laughed at her own joke as Kellan pulled into the driveway. He stopped at the metal gate and exhaled a heavy breath.

She stopped laughing as she stared at the two-story red brick with cut-marble accents. Her eyes grew as big as saucers. Her mouth fell slightly open. "Jesus! Is this your house?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You're not only sexy as sin but rich as Midas, too? Oh, that's so not fair."

He loved this no-holds-barred side of her. With a silent chuckle, Kellan lowered the window and punched in the code to the gate.

Mercy continued to assess his home, pressing her nose against the passenger window. "How many subs you got locked up inside there?"

"None."

"You don't live here alone, do you?"

"I do."

"Why?" She blinked. "I mean...you could house a third-world country in this...this palace."

Unable to hold it in any longer, he laughed. "It's not that big, angel."

"That's what you think. I could fit my whole apartment in one bathroom of this thing, I bet! How many bathrooms does this behemoth have in it anyway?"

"Five," he answered still grinning.

"Five! You must go through a shitload of toilet paper!"

Lord, man...why aren't you recording this on your phone?

Kellan knew why. Humiliation wasn't Mercy's thing. She yearned for a strong, steady hand, copious amounts of praise, and orgasms...lots and lots of orgasms. She was the exact kind of submissive he ached to guide, claim, and control.

After he pulled into the garage, Kellan killed the engine and gathered up the items from the hospital. "Sit tight. I'll come around the car and help you inside."

Mercy answered with a tiny nod. Frowning, she shielded her eyes from the harsh light inside the garage. Kellan knew then the shot she'd received at the hospital was starting to wear off.

He stepped from the car and adjusted his unruly hard-on, then hurried to help Mercy. As he closed the door behind her, she started to sway. Kellan wrapped his arms around her tiny waist and drew her against him. She fit his body like a glove, a fact he couldn't ignore as he led her into the kitchen.

Her sudden silence worried him. "Are you doing okay?"

"My headache's back."

Even in the dimly lit kitchen, he saw the lines furrowed between her brows. "Hang on. Let me give you some pain meds before we go upstairs."

"Thanks."

He eased her onto a padded kitchen chair at the table, then filled a glass at the sink. She thanked him again when he handed her two tablets and the water.

"I wish Mika would have gone on ahead and shot Kerr," she murmured.

"Me, too. But Officer Amblin and the rest of the Chicago PD are searching high and low for him right now. They'll find him soon and lock him up for good this time."

"I hope you're right."

"Come on. Let's get you into bed."

"Point me in the right direction and I'll take care of myself."

"No. You're going to get all loopy again in a few minutes. I don't want to find you a few hours from now passed out and drooling on the carpet."

"Why not? You've already seen me at most of my klutzier moments. What's one more going to hurt?"

"You're not a klutz. There's a lunatic after you. Big difference." He helped her rise from the chair and felt a quiver ripple through her. "Don't worry, angel. You're safe."

"For now," she mumbled.

Kellan helped her up the long, curved staircase. Mercy paused mid-way and turned her aqua eyes up at him. "If I haven't told you yet...thank you for helping me."

"You're welcome." He sent her a warm smile.

"God, you're handsome." Her words came out breathy, as if she'd accidentally said her thoughts out loud.

"You're stunningly beautiful yourself, angel."

Kellan forced his gaze from her lips before he fucked up again and kissed her. When she stumbled on the next step, he lifted her into his arms. He'd expected her to protest, but she didn't. Mercy simply wrapped her slender arms around his neck and nuzzled her head beneath his chin.

Every step that led him closer to the bedrooms ignited a war of wills within him. Needs and wants battled it out with self-preservation and integrity. By the time he'd reached the second floor, Kellan was all but lost with her body meshed to his. He didn't know which side was winning his internal war, but at that particular moment, he didn't really give a shit.

When he reached the guest room, Kellan tore back the bedding and gently eased Mercy onto the mattress. She'd fallen sound asleep. If he felt more like a gentleman and less like a pervert, he'd remove her clothes so she could sleep more comfortably.

You're not only thinking like a pubescent teen, you're starting to act like one.

Right! No way could he leave her like this.

Memories of Hannah's bout with food poisoning three years ago crept into his brain. She'd gone with friends to check out a new Italian restaurant one night, but when she phoned him the next day, sounding like homegrown hell, Kellan raced to her apartment. He'd found his twenty-year-old daughter lying in soiled sheets, so drained of strength she couldn't muster the energy to roll over and hurl into the trashcan beside her bed. Leena was already in the nursing home, so Kellan had done what any father would do. He'd cleaned up his little girl and driven her to the hospital.

All you have to do is take care of Mercy, as you did Hannah, less the vomit.

Thankfully, he wouldn't have to strip down to his boxers and drag her into the shower with him like he'd done with Hannah. The only flaw with Kellan's theory was that Mercy didn't stir a single paternal feeling in him.

This was going to be a bitch.

Kellan mentally disconnected and focused on the clothing and not the woman as he worked the busk of the corset free. But when the material fell open, Mercy's pale breasts spilled out. Her rosy nipples drew up tight, and her silky white skin glowed in the moonlight filtering in through the window. His cock lurched eagerly against his fly, and Kellan had to stand up to keep from sliding his hands all over her smooth alabaster skin. The lump of lust lodged in his throat was all but suffocating.

Frustration spiked.

He felt like a kid with a pocket full of quarters staring at an empty gumball machine.

Cover her up and get the fuck out!

The voice in his head screamed safe, rational directions, but Kellan ignored logic. He cupped one hand on Mercy's shoulder, the other against her supple hip, and rolled her to her side. The hard peaks of her nipples grazed his thigh, and a surge of pre-come slickened his boxers. Cursing his body's spontaneous reaction, Kellan wondered why the woman made him feel so alive and young. He hadn't been this close to shooting off inside his shorts for a couple of decades.

After tugging the corset from beneath her, he released the zipper of her skirt. Easing her onto her back, he worked the clingy fabric from her hips. Mercy's tart womanly scent filled his senses. Saliva pooled in his mouth. He could all but taste the sweet cream of her pussy pouring over his tongue. His cock stretched impossibly tighter. Kellan sucked in a ragged breath and dragged the material over her legs and off her feet. He then stood and paused, taking the liberty to simply admire the gentle slope of her naked curves. The scrap of red lace that covered her bare pussy drew his gaze like a beacon. Kellan had taxed all his benevolence. He needed to get the fuck out of there. Instead, he tortured himself with one last long look at her supple flesh, full, heavy breasts, and tempting lips. A sigh, fraught with desire, escaped his lungs as he drew the covers over her sinful body, then turned and stormed down the hall.

With each irritated step, Kellan tore at his clothes. He wanted to howl like the wind with the injustice of it all. When he reached his room, he kicked out of his pants, toed off his shoes, and peeled off his sticky boxers.

His cock sprang free. Red. Angry. Leaking like a damn faucet.

Kellan clenched his jaw, wrapped a firm fist around his shaft, and flopped back onto his bed. Closing his eyes, he ruthlessly jerked his cock from stem to tip. He imagined himself in Mercy's room, spreading her supple thighs apart to bite the lacy red fabric from her slick cunt. He wouldn't dive face-first inside her beguiling pussy. No, Kellan pictured himself kissing, nipping, and laving his tongue up her shapely thighs before he buried his tongue deep inside her tight, flooded center. The sounds of her whimpers and moans filled his ears as he tongue fucked her pussy, scraping his teeth over her hard, distended clit.

He squeezed his dick in a brutal hold as he fisted himself faster and harder. Lost in the fantasy of her silken walls clutching his shaft, he envisioned filling and stretching her snug, wet tunnel. He could all but feel her bucking and writhing beneath him as she screamed his name and clenched down tight all around him.

Kellan's balls drew up tight. Tingles of demand raced down his spine. A conflagration of fire exploded behind his eyes in blinding bursts of white light.

"Aarrgghh," he growled as he pumped his cock with frenzy.

Thick ropes of hot, slick seed jettisoned into the air and splattered onto his chest. Moaning, he milked his cock dry. Spent and slightly disgusted, he sat up and grabbed his boxers off the floor, then wiped the seed sliding down his chest and abdomen.

"This is what you have Natalie for, asshole," he quietly chastised himself.

Yes, but the relief he'd achieved with her today did little to curb the hunger Mercy provoked inside him. Kellan felt zero affection for Natalie. A fact he wasn't particularly proud of, but it was the only way he could retain his mistress and live with himself. Natalie was nothing more than a placebo for his bruised and damaged soul.

But Mercy? Well, he'd already come to the vexing conclusion that she possessed the magic to heal him if he'd let her.

Kellan was quickly discovering that the more time he spent with the bold and sassy beauty the harder it became to ignore the feelings she evoked inside him. Trying to shove aside his feelings for her was like shoving a boulder up an icy mountain...impossible.

"I hate to tell you this, angel, but your big, bad-ass Dom isn't so tough after all," he grouched.

Standing, he tossed his boxers in the dirty clothes basket and headed toward the bathroom. Halfway there, Kellan spied the photo of him and Leena on their wedding day. He stopped dead in his tracks. He could still feel the warmth of her love. Still see the light that always danced in her green eyes. Taking Leena's hand in marriage had been the happiest day of his life, paling only in comparison to the birth of Hannah. The photo was a haunting reminder of the perfect life he'd lost.

Tossing a glance over his shoulder, Kellan spied the rumpled comforter on the bed. His gut twisted and a surge of oily guilt sluiced through his veins. The bed he and Leena had spent endless hours making love in was now tainted with his fantasies of another woman. Grief and shame consumed him. Tears he hadn't shed for years pricked the backs of his eyes. Kellan picked up the photo and clutched it to his chest.

"I'm sorry, Leena," he whispered. "I'm trying to stay true to you...true to our vow. But it's so damn hard. I miss you. I miss the life we shared. Miss hearing your voice...your laughter...feeling your touch. Christ, I'd give the world to feel your hands on me...on my face...my chest...my cock. I ache to hold you against me, to wake up with you beside me. Hell, I even miss our spats, because we always made up in bed, nearly busting the headboard in the process. But mostly I miss you...miss my love, my soul mate, my wife, my slave... Fuck, Leena,

you were my whole goddamn world!” A tear slid down his cheek. Kellan angrily wiped it away and sucked in an uneven breath.

“The pictures...the memories, they’re not enough. Not fucking nearly enough! You’re supposed to be here with me, dammit! We were supposed to grow old together. But now...it’s all gone. The future is empty because you’re locked inside that fucking silent fortress. I can’t break through to you, baby... No matter how hard I try, I can’t reach you. I’ll never be able to. You’re gone...forever gone. I miss you, baby. Miss you so fucking bad!”

Before the claws of misery could sink inside him further and drag him down into the hell he’d spent years climbing his way out of, Kellan gently set the photo on the dresser and walked away.

He numbly adjusted the water temperature of the shower, then stepped inside the spacious pale-colored travertine walls. Positioned beneath the spray from the rainforest showerhead, Kellan tried to let the steaming water melt the grief from his flesh and cleanse the misery from his soul, but it didn’t. A level of despondency he hadn’t felt since Leena’s accident—when he could barely drag himself out of bed—had him by the balls. Those horrific days of long ago floated through Kellan’s mind. Hannah had been eighteen—a legal adult—but equally devastated. She’d needed the emotional support of her father. Kellan knew if it hadn’t been for his daughter, he might still be huddled beneath the sheets of his bed, an empty, hollow wreck barely clinging to life.

His dark and dangerous stroll down memory lane was as hazardous to him as the naked sub sleeping down the hall.

Kellan raised his chin and let the thrumming water beat at the consuming loneliness.

Feeling as if he’d aged thirty years in a matter of minutes, Kellan dried and dressed in a pair of sweats and a cotton wife beater. He scrubbed a hand over his face and sucked in a deep breath, then started regaining order and control within once again.

After retrieving his cell phone from his pants that still lay bunched on the floor, Kellan sat on the edge of his bed and sent off a text to Chief Judge Jerry Tauley. He also cc’d the court clerk with his request to clear his docket for the coming week.

He knew spending the next seven days with Mercy by his side would be as painful as taking a baseball bat to his nuts. But it was the only way he could make sure she followed Brooks’ orders.

“I must be the world’s biggest fucking glutton for punishment,” Kellan mumbled.

With cell phone in hand, he left his room and strolled down the hall. Before padding to the kitchen, he peeked in on Mercy, who was still sound asleep. He snagged a cold beer and retraced his steps to the second floor. Nearing the guest room, he heard her softly whimper. Worried that she was in pain, he entered the room to find her thrashing against the sheets. Her face was wrinkled in a tormented scowl.

Kellan sat down beside her and touched her cheek. “Wake up, angel. You’re having a nightmare.”

Her right fist came out of nowhere and cuffed him soundly on the chin.

“Fuck!” he roared. Pain engulfed his jaw as he lurched back and gripped his face.

Mercy’s eyes flew open. She sat up and yelped. Terror was written all over her face. She quickly crab-crawled away from him until her back was pressed against the headboard. Kellan tried not to stare at her naked breasts, heaving up and down while she struggled to fill her lungs, but it wasn’t happening.

“Easy, angel. It’s me, Kellan. You’re safe.”

He forced his gaze to stay locked with hers. Seconds later, her shoulders slumped. Mercy drew in several shaky breaths as she cradled her forehead in her hand.

"I'm sorry if I woke you. I'm okay now. It was just a bad dream." Her voice sounded more sultry than usual.

"You didn't wake me, angel. Were you dreaming about Kerr...about what happened tonight?"

"I don't know...I-I don't remember now."

Kellan nodded, not wanting to prod her into resurrecting the demons who'd come to call. "You're safe here. No one is going to hurt you."

"I know. Thank you."

The need to drag his eyes from hers and skim a hungry stare over her naked flesh rode him hard. Resisting temptation, Kellan lifted the sheet and nodded for her to slide back onto the mattress.

Mercy dropped her chin and gasped. "Who... Why'd you take my clothes off?"

"So you could rest more comfortably," he replied evenly. "I've seen naked women before, angel."

"Yeah, but you haven't seen *me* naked." She scowled.

He wanted to laugh but didn't. "I didn't mean to embarrass you, but you needed to sleep without being bound in a corset. I didn't take a single indecent liberty while you were in a helpless state."

A taunting gleam shimmered in her eyes. "Helpless around you is okay. I trust you, Kellan. And if you ever decide to take any *indecent liberties* with me, just make sure I'm awake so I can enjoy it, too."

"Brat," he scolded with a chuckle. "Go back to sleep, angel. I'll wake you in a few more hours."

She nodded and slid between the sheets. "Kellan?"

"Yes?"

"Would you please stay with me until I fall asleep?"

Her voice teemed with fear, vulnerability, and a hint of shame.

Kellan aimed to piece together her shattered soul as best he could. "Close your eyes. I'll be right here."

"Thank you."

He moved her clothes to the dresser and pulled the chair up next to the bed. Within minutes, Mercy had fallen back to sleep. He finished his beer and dozed off himself. Thankfully he'd set an alarm on his phone and the vibration at four a.m. woke him. He roused Mercy, administered more pain meds, and briefly talked until the pharmaceuticals kicked in and she drifted off once more.

So did he.

Kellan woke to sunlight spilling into the guest room. To his shock, he discovered he wasn't in the chair. No, he was *in bed* with Mercy. Her hot, naked flesh was pressed against his side.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

He peered down to find she had one arm draped over his chest and her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder. His cock woke instantaneously, tenting his sweats and the sheet.

He couldn't move.

Hell, Kellan could hardly breathe.

The only woman he'd ever woken with in his arms was Leena.

Guilt bludgeoned him like a sledgehammer while flames of remorse licked up his spine. Fighting the urge to leap out of bed, Kellan began to slowly and methodically extricate himself from Mercy's deliciously warm body.

Sweat broke out over his brow when a kitten-like moan slid from the back of her throat. The erotic sound made his cock leap and the muscles of his abs grow taut.

Seven days. Seven days, fucker.

Kellan cast a scowl at his traitorous cock. The temptress would either break him or he'd be one layer shy of skinless before the week was through. A glance at his cell on the nightstand told him there was another thirty minutes before Mercy's next pain pill. If he hurried, he could jump in the shower and drop a load before she woke. Coming quickly was never a problem fantasizing about Mercy. Reaching down, he squeezed a fist around his erection, closed his eyes, and bit back a strangled groan.

"I could help you with that if you'd like me to."

His eyes flew open and as she sat up, he quickly dropped his cock. Mercy's voice was as smooth and inviting as the sheet sliding off her pale skin. Her gaze was riveted on the bulge tenting the sheet.

He swallowed tightly and sat up. "I'm sure you're more than capable, but you're not in any shape for that. How's your head feeling this morning?"

"Better than the one between your legs, I suspect," she drawled with a playful grin.

"Yes...well, morning wood is a man's curse," he mumbled as he climbed out of bed.

Mercy dragged her eyes from his crotch, then skimmed a sensual and approving gaze up his body. Her cheeks flushed and her breathing grew shallow.

"My, my...I had no idea such rugged beauty lay beneath all those serious suits you wear," she murmured. Kellan stood there letting her drink him in. "Such wide, expansive shoulders... You really shouldn't hide those beautiful biceps, Kellan."

Mercy reached out to him, but he tensed and took a small step back.

"So you're not going to let me touch you, huh? Why? I won't break you."

Guilt.

"I didn't think you would. My reasons don't—"

"Yeah, I know." She dropped her hand and curled her lips as if something bitter lay on her tongue. "Those reasons don't concern me."

"Exactly," he bit out, unable to hide his frustration. Before tension had the chance to bloom and destroy the morning, Kellan popped out a pill from the bubble pack and held it out to Mercy.

"I really don't want any more of those. They make me loopy. Besides, my head isn't hurting that bad now." She waved his hand away. "If you give me a couple of minutes, I'll put my clothes on, and you can take me back to my car."

"You're not going anywhere, angel. You're staying right here."

CHAPTER FIVE

Mercy struggled to keep from gawking at his rugged body. Sun-kissed skin—something she hadn't expected since Kellan spent his days inside a courtroom—stretched over sinewy muscles. Even his sexy tapered waist called to her in a primal carnal way.

But the mixed signals he kept sending her were driving her batshit crazy.

She couldn't touch him, but he refused to let her leave.

What the hell was that about?

His overbearing parental tone made her bristle. And the dull ache still assaulting her brain—the pain she'd lied to him about—made her feel sluggish and ill-equipped to challenge him to a test of wills.

But what disturbed Mercy the most was that his compassionate demeanor had vanished with the surrender of the moon. Last night he'd been so tender, so...well, loving. But the magic they'd shared in the dark was gone. There were no more shadows for her to hide the weak vulnerabilities pinging through her.

The daylight spilling into the room filled her with resentment.

Disappointment sank deep. A part of her wanted to yank the covers over her head and cry. Instead, she lifted her chin. Mercy was determined to leave Judge Kellan Graham's mansion, go back to her small, homey apartment, and lick her wounds in private.

"I appreciate your offer, but I can't stay here. We both have lives, jobs, responsibilities. I don't need a babysitter. I won't stay here while you play nursemaid over me like I'm some kind of invalid."

She realized her tone had been vehement and ungrateful as she watched the color drain from Kellan's face. His lips drew into a tight line before he turned his head and stared out the window. His terse expression told her he wasn't used to anyone challenging his edict, especially a sub.

Shame made her want to take back her words. After all Kellan had done for her, she'd repaid him by lashing out like an ungrateful bitch. But the hardheaded, independent woman within was irked that he'd taken it upon himself to determine her fate instead of letting her choose for herself.

Of course, if Kellan were her Dom, she'd have reacted much differently. But he wasn't; he was only a friend, a fact that sorely stung her pride.

Mercy's emotions soared and dipped like a wild roller coaster. While Kellan stared out the window, she realized she'd knocked him off-kilter. She'd never seen him like this before and wondered if he was searching for patience or if he was simply working to slide back into his well-tailored suit of aloofness.

She was now somewhat grateful for her concussion; it might be the only thing to save her lily-white ass after turning into such a shrew. Oh, but what she wouldn't give to be taken over his lap right now.

Yeah, that's not going to happen. Instead of spanking it, he'd likely kick your ass to the curb for acting like a bratty, disrespectful sub.

"You won't be working, not on your computer, and I've arranged to take a few days off to make sure you heal up as quickly as possible."

He didn't bother to look at her when he finally spoke, but the clipped, impersonal tone of his voice filled her with *déjà vu*. As she'd suspected, the confusing, disconnected Dom had returned.

Mercy felt sad and rejected. All the inroads they'd made...the playful banter as well as his caring compassion had vanished like a puff of smoke. Kellan had locked himself behind thick lead walls again—the ones *she* wasn't welcome to breach.

Great!

Finally, Kellan looked at her and grimly nodded. “While you shower, I'll go to the kitchen and make us some breakfast.”

And he's handed down another command...priceless.

Mercy had herself to blame. She was the reason Kellan was now brooding on the dark side.

Dammit!

“A shower sounds nice. Thank you.” She forced a polite smile.

He nodded and turned to leave.

Mercy had to fix this.

Ignoring her nakedness, she hurried from the bed and clutched his arm. “Wait.”

He raked a gaze up and down her nearly naked body, not bothering to hide the heat and hunger dancing in his eyes.

“I'm sorry I was so rude. I didn't mean to upset you. You've gone above and beyond for me, and I-I...feel bad that I pushed you away. I'm grateful for what you're doing for me. Please...don't...close yourself off. I can't stand for that cold wall to be between us again.”

He frowned.

“I'm not intentionally closing myself off, angel,” he murmured in a raspy tone. “There are things I need to process that have nothing to—”

“Do with me. Yeah, yeah, I know. You keep telling me that.” The side of her mouth kicked up in a quirky smile.

“Then start believing it.”

He dropped his eyes and ate her up with a carnal stare.

The temperature in the room shot up a million degrees.

Tearing his gaze away, Kellan clenched his jaw and yanked the sheet off the bed before draping it over her.

“I'll leave some clean clothes for you on the dresser. After breakfast, if you feel up to it, we can run by your apartment. You can pick up whatever you need for the week.”

“The *week*?” she choked out in shock. “You said a few days.”

Her reaction brought a hint of a smile to his lips. Kellan shrugged. “A week *is* a few days. Go grab a shower. I'll meet you in the kitchen.”

Whatever ghosts had haunted him seemed to have vanished. Mercy wanted to launch a fist into the air and cheer. She waited until he'd left the room before she spun around excitedly.

A week. A whole damn week!

Mercy had seven days to convince Kellan to be her Dom. Seven glorious nights to try and seduce him as well. The sheets tangled around her legs and she stumbled onto the bed. Pain, like blades, cut through her skull. The room swirled in a sickening roll. Her celebration came to a screeching halt as she clutched her temples and groaned.

“That was a stupid move.”

When her head and stomach quieted, she sat up and untangled the sheet and entered the bathroom. Wide-eyed, she gaped at the opulence of the enormous shower, the glimmering marble floors, and gold-plated faucets.

“All this splendor and he has no one to share it with...now that's sad.”

Mercy could have spent days in the lavish shower, letting the water beat the stiffness from her battered body, but Kellan was making breakfast...for *her*. She didn't intend to make him wait.

After she dried off, she discovered an assortment of toiletries on the vanity. When she'd finished in the bathroom, she found the clothes Kellan had promised sitting on the dresser. Unfolding what was clearly women's apparel, a pang of jealousy sliced deep. She'd expected him to bring her sweatpants and a tee...*his* sweatpants and tee, not something that belonged to *another* woman. But the dangling tags told her they were new...never been worn.

Where did they come from?

Who did they belong to?

And wasn't it ironic, they were her exact size?

Mercy's creeper alarm went off in a flurry of bells and buzzers.

Kellan hadn't had time to go shopping at—she looked at the tags—*Lord & Taylor* while she was in the shower. Did he keep new black Capri pants and pastel green angora sweaters lying around so the random women he brought home didn't have to take the walk of shame?

Suspicious bloomed like weeds. She'd asked him if he had a sub, not if he had a girlfriend. Dear lord...how was Kellan going to explain why she was living under his roof to a girlfriend? If Mercy were dating him, she'd kick the bitch out the door in two-point-four seconds flat.

"But he's not dating *you*. What he does or says is his problem, not yours," she mumbled while sliding on a pair of fuzzy black socks.

She left the bedroom and headed down the hall. Though she didn't know where the kitchen was exactly, a foggy memory of sitting at the table last night skipped through her brain. Following the scent of bacon, she stepped down the hall toward a walkway. Mercy peered over the banister to an open foyer below and gasped. Kellan's mansion was straight out of *Architectural Digest*.

The place was big, breathtaking, and beautiful...exactly like the man himself.

Still gaping in awe, Mercy descended the stairs. Prisms of sun reflecting from the candelabra-styled crystal chandelier above her head dotted the marble floor. On her right, by the front door, she discovered a huge office decorated in rich, masculine mahogany furniture. Leather-bound hardbacks filled the glossy bookshelves that lined two full walls. She stroked her fingertips over the edge of his wide desk and briefly closed her eyes while inhaling Kellan's familiar pheromone-filled earthy, warm scent.

Opposite his office, across the foyer, was a formal dining room. Around the large, ornately carved wooden table, Mercy counted seating for twenty-four. The enormity boggled her mind. Her stomach gurgled and she set out to find the kitchen, admiring several paintings in bright, bold, tasteful colors adorning the walls.

"Yes, if we can postpone the Gallagher trial eight or nine days, that would be perfect. Thanks, Jerry."

Lured by Kellan's voice, Mercy wound her way into the kitchen. Okay, so kitchen was too tame a word. Kellan's *cuisine galley* could put most restaurants on the Food Network to shame. Light-colored granite workspace surrounded top-end stainless steel appliances. Mercy could barely contain the urge to raid the white glossy cupboards, pull ingredients from the oversized refrigerator, and start baking something sinfully fattening. Cooking wasn't a hobby for her; it was therapy. If Mercy had ever needed therapy it was now.

When Kellan saw her in the doorway, gawking, he waved her into the room. Cell phone pressed to his ear, he pointed to the coffeepot on the counter and arched his brows. Mercy smiled

and nodded. He continued discussing court cases and dates as he moved in close and pressed his body against hers, pinning her hips to the countertop. She turned a wide-eyed gaze at him over her shoulder as he reached up and took a mug from the cabinet. Enveloped in his delicious heat, a thrill raced up her spine.

He bent and pressed his face close to her neck, inhaling deeply while still talking on the phone. "Sounds good, Jerry. If there are any other conflicts, give me a call. We'll work them out."

Desire pooled low in her belly as he lifted his head but kept his imposing and decadent torso pressed against her back. Mercy had no trouble visualizing him bending her over the marble surface, instructing her to keep her arms above her head before ripping her pants down to her ankles and fucking her roughly against the counter. She swallowed down the whimper threatening to escape and tried not to spill the coffee with her trembling hands.

"Thanks, man. I'll talk to you soon."

After ending the call, Kellan inched back slightly.

"You're trembling. Are you cold, angel?" The mischievous glint that flickered in his eyes told her he was taunting her.

Oh, he wants to play games?

She was more than ready.

"No. I'm definitely not cold." Mercy peeked inside his coffee cup. "Can I warm you up?"

He tensed. In tandem, his eyes and nostrils flared.

Bingo! Her innuendo had hit its mark.

Kellan swallowed tightly and held out his mug. "Sure. I'll take a little warm-up."

"Not the kind I want to give you," she quipped with a sassy grin.

As she filled his cup, she noticed all traces of humor had left his face. Without volleying a comeback at her, Kellan turned and started cracking eggs into a large mixing bowl. Feeling a bit disgruntled and massively confused, Mercy wondered when or if she'd ever understand this complicated man. She sipped her coffee and studied him as he worked.

"Is there anything I can help you do?"

"Don't think so. I've got it all under control."

The way he liked everything...controlled, she thought with an inward smirk.

"If it were warmer outside, we could eat on the patio, but I'm afraid we'd freeze along with the food."

Following Kellan's gaze, she took in a large family room. The floor-to-ceiling windows along the back wall drew her like a moth to a flame. With coffee in hand, she meandered into the homey and inviting space. Captivated by the wooden deck and kidney-shaped swimming pool below, she drank in the forest of fir trees lining an inlaid stone path that led to the shore of Lake Michigan. The clouds on the horizon were colored in pale hues of pink, blue, and violet...as if an artist's brush had swept the sky.

"What an incredible view," she turned and called over her shoulder, startled to see that Kellan had moved in behind her.

"Isn't it?" A look of contentment lined his face. "I bought the house because of this view."

"Not the five bathrooms, huh?" Mercy softly chuckled, then stopped, suddenly confused. "Why do I think you have five bathrooms?"

A sly grin tugged his lips. "We talked about it in the car last night."

Her brows furrowed. "I don't remember that."

"It's probably best you don't." He chuckled.

“Oh, god. What did I say?”

“Nothing bad.”

“Embarrassing?”

He bobbed his head from side to side with an evasive hum. “Not really.”

Before she could glean any details of their mysterious conversation, he took her hand and led her back into the kitchen. After helping her into a chair, Kellan placed a plate, heaped with food, on the table in front of her.

“Is this for me or a small country?”

“It’s all for you, angel.”

“If you have some rule about cleaning my plate before I can leave the table, I know what I’m having for dinner.”

He didn’t say anything, simply stared into space with a faraway look in his eyes. A slow smile spread across his lips. He flashed her an ubër-Dominant stare that made her tingle. “You know, I could modify that and make it a useful form of punishment.”

Mercy giggled. “That doesn’t sound very fun.”

“That’s why it’s called punishment.”

“What kind of ruckus do I have to raise before you’ll take me over your knee instead?”

He pursed his lips and studied her, then turned his focus on his plate and began to eat. Silence dragged on and draped an awkward pall in the air. Even though she wanted to kick her own ass for annihilating a relatively easy conversation, Mercy was able to glean exactly where Kellan’s lines had been drawn. He was hiding something...something heavy and overwhelming, but she doubted he’d ever open up enough to share the burden with her.

A part of her wanted to walk away and leave Kellan munching on bacon. Yet another part of her wanted to stand up and scream at the top of her lungs. She’d do neither. Acting out her conflicted emotions was as stupid and childish as the way she’d taunted him about spanking her. Unfortunately she didn’t know how else to chip at his walls and force him to take her under his Dominant wing. Oh, well, like they said...no guts, no glory.

Slowly the tension bled away and they began talking again. While their conversation wove through the lifestyle, it skated along the periphery regarding their own D/s desires.

Stuffed to the gills, Mercy leaned back in her chair. Kellan cleared the table, returning with another pain pill in hand. Though she hated the fuzzy feeling, she relented. Her head was throbbing too harshly to refuse.

“Why don’t you go rest on the couch for a bit. I’ll come sit with you after I clean up the kitchen.”

She nodded and swallowed the pill. Kellan helped her to the family room and onto the luxurious leather couch. He drew a soft cotton blanket over her and kissed her forehead before returning to the kitchen. Mercy listened to the clatter of dishes, silverware, and water running in the other room, feeling a bit guilty for not helping him. But soon the pills kicked in and she floated into a dark abyss.

She woke to the sound of voices somewhere far off in the house. She assumed Kellan was in his office, on the phone, but when she heard a distinct female tone, insecurities, questions, and worries pressed in around her.

Mercy pondered retreating upstairs to the guest room, but the thought of listening to Kellan and some other woman getting down and dirty in his bedroom made her want to hurl. Decidedly, she knew it was better to stay on the couch and pretend to be asleep. At least she’d save herself the agony of rejection.

You don't have time to sit around and wait for things to play out. You only have seven days!

Though her plan to charm and persuade Kellan to teach her about submission was fraught with holes, Mercy had to remove all obstacles in her way. He didn't know it yet, but he needed her as much as she needed him. If Mercy had to drive off a million women to convince him of that fact, she would.

Teeming with resolve, she sat up and tossed off the blanket. She stood and straightened both her sweater and shoulders. Striding with purpose, she homed in on the voices and determined them to be coming from Kellan's office.

Mercy entered the room expecting to find Kellan sitting behind his desk. Instead, he was sitting beside a gorgeous young blonde on a leather love seat by the window...holding her hand.

Mercy's stomach knotted.

Kellan turned as if sensing her arrival. A look of apprehension crawled across his face. His lips tightened and the blonde stopped talking in mid-sentence and looked Mercy's way before surprise lifted the other woman's brows.

Face-to-face with her competition, Mercy's bravado turned to bullshit.

Embarrassment flooded her system.

No wonder Kellan wasn't interested in her. Why would he choose a Brooks Brothers suit when he could have Armani?

Mercy felt like a fool.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," she murmured. "I heard your voice and thought you were on the phone."

Liar.

The blonde smirked, her brows still poised high, and slid a sideways glance at Kellan, over to Mercy, then Kellan once more. It was as if the woman didn't know who to begin interrogating first. Her quizzical expression was replaced by a placid smile.

No doubt one she'd practiced a million times, Mercy thought wryly.

"I didn't realize you had...company. Why didn't you say something when I arrived?" the blonde asked.

Kellan's gaze sliced Mercy like a scalpel. A knowing smile tugged a corner of his mouth as he stood and motioned her into the room.

"Hannah, this is a friend of mine, Mercy O'Connor. Mercy...Hannah."

Faking a smile that should have earned her an Oscar, Mercy lifted her hand at the younger, thinner, and decidedly more innocent woman. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Hannah."

Another lie.

She quickly shook the bimbo's hand and dropped it just as fast.

"Last night, when I was out with Mika and some others, an altercation between Mercy and one of her former friends turned ugly." Kellan replayed the violent events, guarding his Dominant proclivities as well as hers and Genesis, as Hannah's perfectly waxed brows inched back up her forehead. "So, you see, Mercy will remain here while she recuperates."

Hannah flashed a sympathetic look her way. Whether the sentiment was real or manufactured, Mercy didn't know. "Oh, my god. That's terrible. Should you be up walking around?"

Nice try, bitch. You are high as Willie Nelson if you think I'm leaving this room so you can hike up your skirt and beg Kellan to fuck you over his desk. But go on. Give it your best shot. I dare you!

"Oh, I'm not bed ridden, but last night, Kellan was beyond amazing," Mercy gushed.

His eyes grew wide for a brief moment as if she'd taken a few too many pain pills.

"I bet he *was*." Hannah softly chuckled, leveling an expectant look at the man.

Mercy, too, dragged a look his way, expecting to see him flustered or at least a bit of sweat staining his brow. Instead, he wore a cocky grin.

"I don't know if I'd go so far as to call it amazing," he refuted. "Waking you up every four hours to give you pain meds wasn't what I'd call a hardship."

"I bet not." Hannah's retort dripped in sarcasm. "I'm sure you were the perfect gentleman all night long."

Yes!

The bottom-feeding bitch had taken the bait...hook, line, and sinker.

"Indeed!" he assured.

"Right." Hannah rolled her eyes. She wasn't buying his innocence for a minute.

"Ask Mercy if you don't believe me. She'll tell you the truth." He grinned.

Tell her the truth? Not on your life.

"Oh, for crying out loud," Hannah chided. "I'm not going to ask her anything, or you, for that matter. I've never thought or expected you to...turn into a monk."

"Thank goodness, because a monk I'm not," he assured with a little chuckle.

Mercy couldn't figure out why Kellan found the conversation so amusing. She expected him to be irked she was behaving like a possessive she-cat.

"Don't!" Hannah held up her hand and scowled at Kellan. "I don't need to hear another word. I love you with all my heart, but please...just stop."

Hannah's vow of love cut Mercy to the core. Like a stone, hope sank deep and fast.

"You've never delved into my personal life; I will respect your boundaries as well," Hannah continued. "Trust me. There are certain things no one wants to hear, especially any detail involving their dad's sex life."

"Dad?" Mercy choked.

Dad? What the... Oh, shit!

She gaped at Kellan. "You mean she's...Hannah is... She's your...*daughter*?"

"Of course she's my *daughter*. Who did you think she was?" The smile stretched across his face, and the knowing twinkle in his eyes all but screamed, *gotcha!*

The son of a bitch set her up!

Mercy's cheeks blazed in anger and humiliation.

The room was suddenly too small and claustrophobic.

Hannah was his *daughter*? Mercy could only imagine what the poor child was thinking...none of it good. *Child*, nothing; she and Hannah seemed close to the same age.

Which then raised the question...where was *Mrs.* Kellan Graham?

Insecurities made Mercy's stomach swirl in a slow, nauseous circle.

Submissive or not, she needed answers from Mr. Aloof and Elusive, but now wasn't the time or the place. After Hannah left, Mercy planned to grill the grin right off his face.

Bolstered by self-righteous fury, Mercy let her courage fly. One way or another, Kellan Graham was going to spill his guts, once and for all.

"Mercy? You haven't answered my question." Kellan's voice held that Dominant edge that kicked her bravery to the curb. "Who did you think Hannah was?"

Like a balloon, Mercy's conviction deflated...sputtering and swirling and landing flat on the damn floor. Kellan knew the green-eyed monster had taken a bite out of her ass...more than one,

and he enjoyed the hell out of busting her...busting her like a crack whore on an episode of *Cops*.

Since the ground refused to open up and swallow her whole like she wished it would, Mercy did the only thing she could do...she pled the fifth with a silent shrug.

Kellan chuckled. "You thought Hannah was my lover, didn't you?"

"Wait...you thought...that Daddy and I were..." Hannah stammered. "Excuse me, but I think I'm going to go throw up now."

"Wait!" Mercy cried. "I'm sorry...I didn't mean... I-I. Shit!" Mercy stumbled. How was she going to dig herself out of the sinkhole that was dragging her under? "Honestly. Your dad and I are just friends, and he *really* was a perfect gentleman last night. I swear."

Changing the subject might not have been the best decision, but Mercy wanted to clear Kellan's name and clear up the misconceptions she'd planted in his daughter's head. And in doing so, if Mercy could repair her own reputation to keep Hannah from thinking her a whore, then all the better.

A smirk tugged Hannah's lips—the same one Kellan wore from time to time. "Dad's a grown man. He can do who and what he wants."

The drama was more than Mercy's damaged brain could handle. Scrubbing a hand over her forehead, she briefly closed her eyes, attempting to will the throb away. "I think it's time I lie down for a bit. Hannah, it was nice to meet you. And again, I apologize for interrupting your conversation with Kellan, and, well...for everything."

"Don't be silly," she replied. "You didn't interrupt anything important. I drop by to bug Dad every chance I get. Don't worry about the other stuff. I've recovered." She chuckled. "It was nice to meet you, too, and I hope you feel better soon."

"Thank you."

"Let me walk you up to your room." Kellan's tone held the same gentle and caring timbre from last night. Mercy's heart melted. "I'll be back in a minute, sweetheart."

"Take your time," Hannah replied.

"You really don't have to. I'm fine," Mercy protested.

"I don't want you tripping on the stairs." Kellan's firm tone was laced with warning.

Not wanting to cause an even bigger scene, she relented.

He didn't say a single word until they'd reached the guest room. When she crawled into bed, he bent and covered her. Mercy wrapped her hand around his wrist. "I'm sorry I insulted you in front of Hannah and made a fool of myself."

"You're actually worried about how your actions reflect on me, angel?"

"Of course. My stupid jealousy insulted you, Hannah, and me. I'm sorry."

He studied her for several long, silent seconds before a smile creased the corners of his mouth. "You rest now. I'll straighten things out with my daughter."

"Good luck! There's probably no way you'll ever convince her that we're not lovers after what I said. She obviously thinks you're quite the stud. Guess I'm not the only woman she's seen wandering into your study early on a Saturday morning."

"Pull in your claws, angel. Your jealousy's caused enough trouble for one day."

"I know," she grumbled. "I just thought that...if Hannah isn't the reason you won't teach me about the lifestyle, then maybe there's another gorgeous woman who is that reason."

"No." He answered.

“Again with the one-word answers. Lovely,” Mercy mumbled under her breath. “Will you at least tell me why? I want to be a better submissive. Is that such a crime? I’m not asking you to date me or get engaged... Hell, I’m not even asking you to collar me.”

“I’ll think about it. Now get some rest.”

“Think about which part?” Mercy pressed. “Actually training me, or telling me why you won’t?”

“Both.”

“Arg!” she growled. “You are the most infuriating man on the planet, you know that? Getting a straight answer from you is like trying to piss up a rope. It’s impossible.”

Kellan grinned. “And training you would be like trying to tame a man-eating tiger.”

“I can be submissive, dammit!”

His grin widened.

Damn, he’s sexy.

Mercy silently barked for her wayward hormones to shut the hell up.

“Then prove it,” Kellan dared.

“Fine. Challenge accepted. I’ll show you that I can be the best submissive on the whole damn planet,” she huffed in a purely un-submissive tone.

Kellan laughed so deep and rich that goose bumps pebbled her arms. Her nipples grew tight. The restless, sexually deprived woman inside roared to life.

“You’re going to have to try much harder than that, angel.”

Yes, Mercy knew that. And the sooner she was better, the sooner she could show him she was worthy of his training and his trust.

“I *will* prove that I’m submissive and not the man-eating tiger you think I am, Kellan...er, Sir.”

“I look forward to that.” A flash of desire darkened his eyes before he pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. “Sleep, angel.”

“Yes, Sir.” She closed her eyes and listened as his footfalls faded down the hall.

A satisfied smile crept along her lips. Mercy couldn’t wait to show him all the desires yearning to break free from inside her. She’d start as soon as she got some sleep so her annoying headache would go away.

Naked, Mercy knelt on the thick carpet. Kellan stood in front of her...silent as usual. With her eyes cast toward the floor, she studied the laces of his polished black dress shoes in her peripheral vision. He had one strong hand cinched tight in her hair, sending prickles of glorious pain skittering over her scalp. A shiver enveloped her when he traced the outline of her jaw with the tip of his finger.

“You...on your knees, ready to please is such a pretty picture, angel,” Kellan whispered. His voice teemed with pride. “You do want to please me, don’t you?”

“More than anything, Sir.”

Peace and serenity filled her.

“Stand, slut!”

Without warning his voice turned angry and impatient. Something was wrong. She’d screwed up somehow. Mercy hopped to her feet, trembling in fear. When he gripped her chin, pinching the flesh between his fingers and thumb, she bit back a yell.

“Look at me when I talk to you, bitch!” Kellan snarled.

No. No. This wasn’t right. He wasn’t right. Something was wrong with him. He’d never made her feel afraid before.

“Are you deaf, cow?” he spat. “Apologize!”

“I’m sorry, Sir.” Though she had no idea what she was sorry for, the response rolled off her tongue.

“Prove it. Bend over the bed.” His face contorted in rage. When Mercy hesitated, an evil smile crawled across his mouth. “You’re not a submissive at all, are you?”

“I am, Sir. I am.”

“Stop wasting my time and show me. Make me believe you want to please me.”

He released her hair and was suddenly holding a long leather crop. Mercy trembled. She hated the crop.

“You’ll take every lash without making a sound, or I’ll beat you bloody.”

He ignored her whimper of fear and narrowed his eyes.

“Why are you acting like this with me?”

Kellan raised his hand and slapped her hard across the face. White-hot pain enveloped her flesh. She pressed her lips together, holding back a scream. She didn’t want to anger him any further especially when she saw a fiery satisfaction flickering in his eyes.

“Who do you think you are to question me, you stupid cunt? I’m going to enjoy punishing you for that.”

The sound of his icy laughter echoed in her head. As if he suddenly possessed superhuman strength, Kellan shoved her face-first onto the bed. Mercy’s throbbing cheek lay against the scratchy surface of the comforter as silent tears spilled onto the fabric.

“Are you crying for me? Aw, thank you, slut. You remembered how much I love hearing you cry, didn’t you, Symoné? You remember all the wicked things I like to do to you, right?”

Mercy’s heart felt as if it were going to explode from her chest. She knew that voice. It wasn’t Kellan’s. It was Kerr’s. Terror seized her. Mercy struggled, but she found the courage to raise her head and peer over her shoulder. Kellan was still standing there. Her brain was warped in confusion and fear. Mercy knew in her heart he would never do anything as vile and brutal as this to her. She was sure Kerr had spoken to her. But he wasn’t there...only Kellan.

“What’s wrong, bitch? Having trouble trying to wrap your head around it all?” The sound of Kerr’s evil laughter tore from Kellan’s mouth. “Maybe this will help you figure it out, you ignorant bitch.”

Kellan reached up and started tearing the flesh off his face. The shock of seeing chunks of skin fall away sent a wave of nausea through her. Mercy gagged on the bile that burned the back of her throat. She wanted to scream...wanted to squeeze her eyes shut, but she couldn’t.

“I took care of your boyfriend. How else did you think I cut his face off and covered my own with it?”

As Kerr ripped the last piece of flesh and dropped it on the floor, he smiled at her. It was the same terrifying, maniacal grin he’d worn at the courthouse and outside the club.

“I told you I’d be back to drain the life out of you, didn’t I, bitch?” he taunted in a chilling tone. “Well, here I am. I always keep a promise.”

He shoved his knee into her back, holding her in place before he waved a huge sharp knife in her face.

“First, I’m going to fuck your nasty cunt and asshole, then I’m going to start cutting...cutting pieces of your fucking body off and laying them right here on the bed so you can see exactly what I’m doing.” Kerr patted the mattress near her face.

She was going to die a slow and painful death.

Seized with fear, Mercy screamed at the top of her lungs.

CHAPTER SIX

After kissing Hannah good-bye, Kellan climbed the stairs to check on Mercy. Relieved to find her asleep and resting her brain, he knew he should have turned and left the room, but his feet...hell, his whole body refused to cooperate. Instead, he eased into the chair beside the bed and drank in her peaceful, delicate features. A smile tugged his lips as he remembered how adorable she'd looked in his study...jealous as hell and twice as sassy.

Her reaction had been quite a boost to his old ego. Of course, if he'd been half a gentleman, Kellan would have introduced Hannah as his daughter from the very start. But he had a sadistic bastard inside him from time to time and was curious to see just how far Mercy would go.

His smile faltered.

Hannah's visit would prompt a million questions from Mercy, none of which he was ready to answer, at least not yet. Oh, Kellan knew he'd eventually have to come clean about Leena, sooner or later, but he wanted to learn more about Mercy. She might be sympathetic to his moral dilemma, but he worried she might be sickened at the thought of...

Of what? Staying friends, or do you think you could actually offer her something more, like...commitment?

He exhaled a heavy sigh. He knew the answer. But as Hannah had reminded him earlier, life wasn't always black and white. If he found the strength to grow a pair and managed to keep his hands off Mercy sexually, he might possibly be able to teach her about the lifestyle. But eventually she'd grow tired of simply scening with him. She'd beg for his collar, and when he was forced to refuse, it would crush her. He couldn't claim her as his slave. Couldn't promise the kind of commitment he craved to give her...the one she, too, craved and deserved. Because in his heart, he was still Leena's Master.

Kellan scrubbed his hands over his face.

Contemplating anything so foolish was a waste of time.

He and Mercy could share a friendship, but that was all.

She'd already burrowed too deeply inside him.

Fuck! He couldn't even walk past the damn guest room without waltzing inside to stare at her enticing beauty.

She weakened him...his resolve...his emotions.

The power she wielded over him was frustrating. He'd never allowed himself to be so susceptible to any woman other than Leena. Kellan didn't know how to cope with his own weakness...the weakness Mercy made him feel.

The conversation he'd had with Hannah in his study earlier wormed its way into his brain.

He'd explained to his daughter that he wasn't sexually involved with Mercy. Of course, he hadn't confessed that he damn well wanted to be. But his daughter wasn't buying it, at least not in the beginning.

"Just friends?" Hannah had scoffed. "Daddy, please. I'm not three years old anymore. I know Santa Claus and the Easter bunny don't exist. Stop, please! I see the way you look at her...the way Mercy looks at you."

"That's not the point," Kellan argued. "I'm married."

“To a zombie.” Pain pinched her features. “I’m sorry, but it’s true. Mom left us a long time ago, and you stopped living, Dad. I’ve watched you. Mom wouldn’t want that. She’d want you to be happy.”

“I am happy. I have you.”

“I’m your daughter. I’m talking about companionship...love. Don’t lock your heart away in the same prison that’s holding Mom.” Hannah frowned. “Does Mercy know about her yet?”

“No. And I intend to keep it that way.”

Hannah shook her head, wearing an expression that screamed he was being obtuse.

“You and Mercy obviously have feelings for one another. Act on them, Dad. You only live once.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “None of us are promised a tomorrow.”

“I’m not going to commit adultery, Hannah.”

“You already are. Natalie. Remember?”

Her words rocked the foundation out from under him. Kellan had no clue Hannah knew about his mistress.

“How did you know?”

Hannah gave him a dismissive wave of her hand. “Last summer, you were out cleaning the pool. When I came inside to get us some drinks, the phone was ringing. I didn’t get to it in time and the answering machine picked up. A woman left a message reminding you it was time to renew the contract for Natalie’s apartment. I quickly put two and two together.”

“I’m sorry you found out.”

“I’m not.” Hannah scoffed. “Are you in love with both of them...Natalie and Mercy?”

“No. Natalie and I have no emotional ties whatsoever. It’s nothing but... No. I don’t love her.”

“But you do Mercy. I see it...feel it. Don’t you see, you’re already committing adultery, Dad...at least adultery of the heart. If you’re afraid I’m going to think less of you for loving someone other than Mom, you’re wrong.” Hannah paused and studied him. “That’s not what you’re afraid of, is it? No, you’re afraid that because you have feelings for Mercy... that you’re being unfaithful to Mom. That’s it, isn’t it?”

Kellan stared at his daughter. She was too observant and way too smart. “I took a vow to her, before God and a whole roomful of people.”

“She took a vow to you, too, Daddy. But either God or Satan or fate playing a sick and cruel joke on us annulled it.” Hannah quickly swiped a tear from her cheek. “She’d want you to be happy, Daddy. She loved you enough to want you to go on without her.”

He couldn’t find the courage to tell his daughter that he’d foolishly clung to the hope that one day Leena would wake from her catatonic prison. That she could come home once again, and they’d spend the rest of their lives happy and hopelessly in love...like some fucking storybook.

Kellan swallowed the ball of emotion lodged in his throat and hugged his daughter fiercely. “I’ll think about it, sunshine,” he choked.

“I love you, Daddy. You’re my whole world. I want you to be happy again. It’s not healthy living alone and isolating yourself the way you do. Like you and Mom always taught me...life isn’t black and white; it’s a million shades of gray. Let yourself love again, fully and completely. It’s time to move on. Really, it is.”

Mercy stirred in her sleep, drawing Kellan back to the present.

Hannah was right. He could easily lose his heart to Mercy. Hell, in many ways, he already had. But could he live with himself? The jury was still deliberating that one. Of course, there was

always the chance that once she learned he was legally still married, she'd loathe him. Mercy possessed a strong moral fiber. He'd seen her display it time and time again at Genesis.

What a goddamn clusterfuck!

"No. No." Mercy's whimper was filled with fear.

Moving in close to her, Kellan watched as her tears spilled onto the pillow.

Fucking Kerr. The prick was still tormenting her dreams.

A long, mournful wail tore from her throat. Kellan couldn't allow her to suffer through another nightmare. Gripping Mercy's arm to keep her from clubbing him in the jaw again, he shook her gently.

"Wake up, Mercy," he commanded in a tone he only used at the club.

She bolted upright, nearly head-butting him, and let out a loud, long, blood-curdling scream. Her eyes wildly searched the room, no doubt looking for the son of a bitch Kerr.

"Mercy!" he repeated in the same firm tone. "You're safe. See? No monsters here...just me."

Her eyes grew wide and her face paled. "Get away from me. Don't touch me!"

The fierceness of her growl and bared teeth told him this wasn't the same nightmare she'd experienced last night. Kellan raised his hands in surrender and inched back into the chair. "It must have been a pretty bad one this time."

Mercy drew her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms around her legs, and nodded.

"Purge it from your mind and tell me about it."

Her chin began to quiver and fat tears slid down her cheeks.

It gutted him to see her so lost, broken, and frightened. The distance he'd purposely put between them to soothe her gnawed him up inside. He needed to comfort her...soothe her and vanquish the terror in her eyes. Slowly, Kellan eased onto the bed. She shot him a sideways look of warning but didn't stop him.

"Relax and take a deep breath. You know I'd never do anything to hurt you, right?"

She looked to be weighing his words carefully. After several long seconds, Mercy finally nodded, then let out a mournful wail as she launched herself into his arms.

Relief flooded his system and he engulfed her tiny frame tightly. He hugged her to his chest and let her sob. Whatever terrifying scene had unraveled in her brain, it had clearly sent her over the edge far more than her actual assault.

"Shh, it's okay, angel. I've got you. No one's going to hurt you while I'm around."

"It *was* you, at least in the beginning," she choked out.

"Me? What did I do? Tell me."

"You... I-I was on my knees for you, and you wanted me to please you."

What she began describing wasn't terrifying at all. In fact, it was one of his favorite fantasies...her on her knees before him. But he knew something more ominous was coming.

"My heart was soaring. I was so ready to show you how..." She paused as a mighty tremor shook her body. "But then you turned mean and started treating me like K-Kerr. I was scared. When I told you that I didn't understand, you got even more pissed and started ripping your face off."

Okay, so he hadn't been expecting anything quite so gory. Kellan squeezed her tight, silently offering encouragement for her to continue.

"But then, Kerr said that he killed you and was wearing your face as a mask. I think he wanted to confuse me, but it wasn't you...it was him. He told me..." She sobbed harder. "He repeated what he told me last night."

“What did he say to you last night?”

Mercy didn't answer. She sucked in several deep breaths, as if trying to regain her composure. Kellan waited patiently for her to answer him.

“He said he'd be back to drain the life out of me.”

The palpable wave of fear that rolled off her nearly flattened Kellan.

Kerr's continued reign of terror over Mercy made him want to punch his fist through the fucking headboard. Kellan couldn't speak. He was too busy biting back his fury as he gently stroked his hand up and down her arm.

“It was so real,” she whispered. “H-He pulled out this huge knife and told me that he was going to cut me into pieces and lay them out on the bed for me to see.”

Mercy inched back. She raised her red-rimmed eyes up at him and Kellan's heart squeezed. He wiped her tears with the pads of his thumbs and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

“I'm scared.” Her confession was whispered so softly he almost didn't hear it.

Seeing this feisty, self-assured woman reduced to a shattered shell of terror made his blood boil. The primal need to protect her and slay her fears consumed him. Though stupid and dangerous, Kellan couldn't help himself; he cupped her cheeks and brushed a featherlight kiss over her lips.

Mercy mewled. She hesitated for one brief second and then melted against him.

Her surrender set his whole world on fire.

Cinching a fist in her silky hair, Kellan guided her head back as he palmed her slender neck. When he stroked his tongue over her petal-soft lips, Mercy instantly parted them, welcoming him inside her mouth. Plunging deep, he swept his tongue over every wet, silky crevice.

Liquid silver shot through his veins.

The kiss turned raw and demanding.

His cock lurched.

Mercy dragged her fingertips up his arm, leaving a trail of sputtering electricity against his skin.

His eager shaft grew harder, hungry to squeeze inside her hot, slick openings, and claim her heart, mind, body, and soul.

His pulse thundered and roared in his ears.

Mercy clutched his shoulders, hanging on for dear life, while their tongues swirled and explored in a sultry, wet dance.

She rocked her hips as she ardently meshed herself against him.

She was so fucking responsive, so alive.

He felt as if she'd awakened him from a century-old slumber.

Molded perfectly to him, her lips...hell, her whole body felt soft, like warm velvet.

Kellan's head swam.

He was lost.

He couldn't devour her fast enough.

Couldn't slake the ruthless hunger she unleashed inside him.

Couldn't keep from touching her silky, hot flesh.

Kellan inched a hand under her sweater. The sensual heat of her body instantly enveloped him. He scraped his thumb over her bra. The feel of her pebbled nipple sent a guttural growl to roll up from his chest. Mercy answered with a needy tone of her own, then arched her back, pressing her heavy breast into his palm.

The sultry little siren was sending him up in flames.

Eating at her like a man possessed, Kellan kneaded and squeezed her supple orb.

He was gone...lost in the raging fire of sweet Mercy.

She started tugging at his tee, lifting it up over his abs and to his chest. He felt her frustration as she struggled to peel it off his body. He broke from her mouth long enough to shuck the material over his head. When he bent to claim her lips, she was gazing with awe at the definition of the muscles etched on his abs. For once, all the hours of sweating and straining at the gym had paid off.

He deftly grabbed the hem of her sweater, pulled it from her body, and sent it sailing over the side of the bed. While he gazed at the swell of her milky-white breasts protruding from beneath the bronze-colored bra, Mercy placed her palms on his chest and dragged them down his torso.

His body hummed and his mouth watered.

When she reached behind her back and began working the clasp of her bra, reality hijacked Kellan's libido.

What the fuck are you doing? She has a concussion! Remember? She's not well enough for all the things you want to do to her. You're supposed to be a responsible Dominant. Start acting like one!

His subconscious' smack upside the head caused the fog of lust to vanish.

Kellan blinked at Mercy. Still mesmerized by the sight of her half-naked body and swollen, wet lips, he wondered how he'd allowed things to get so far out of hand so damn quickly.

Fuck!

He had to put the brakes on...fast.

"No. Wait. Don't do that."

Mercy stilled. Her brows furrowed.

"Your brain needs time to... You're not well enough for us to do this."

"I'm fine. If you think you're stopping now...I'll give *you* a concussion, mister."

While he wanted to laugh at her threat, he'd much rather have taken the sassy hellcat over his knee and set her ass on fire. Kellan couldn't stand it when subs tried to Top from the bottom. Ever since finding her in his courtroom yesterday, Mercy had been consciously or subconsciously trying to manipulate him. Did she even know her behavior was unacceptable for a sub? Kerr probably never bothered to teach her about protocol at all.

She needed education and enlightenment.

Needed a firm, guiding hand.

Needed *him*.

Kellan wasn't ready to shove a stake in the ground quite yet. He needed time to decide if he could actually move on and live happily ever after as Hannah had urged him to do.

Oh, so training this eager sub is suddenly outside your wheelhouse, but stripping her bare and fucking her injured brains out is perfectly fine? Stop screwing with her head. Get your shit together, ace!

Before Kellan could retrieve her sweater and cover up the creamy temptation of flesh, the straps of her bra slid down her arms. The molded cups followed next until she was left wearing nothing but the black pants.

He mutely stared at her breasts. Her rosy-pink nipples drew up before his eyes. He wanted to pluck and suck her succulent berries. Kellan's heart and cock lurched in tandem. Like a rolling blackout, the synapses in his brain began shutting down. All energy was redirected to his cock, now growing impossibly tighter.

With a look of determination lining her face, Mercy clasped his wrist and drew his hand to one soft, plump, and pear-shaped breast.

Oh, this was going way beyond Topping from the bottom.

Submitting to her did not bode well.

Time to take control of the feisty, usurping sub.

Kellan jerked his hand free and pinned her with a warning glare.

“What do you think you’re doing, angel?” His reprimand was low and even. Mercy blinked up at him as a crimson hue painted her cheeks. “You’re not in charge, little one. I’m the Dom. You’re not allowed to control me in any fashion, ever again. Is that clear?”

As he laid down the law, he softly stroked a knuckle over the fiery flesh of her face.

His erection throbbed like a virgin heart and strained beneath his sweats like a goddamn flagpole. Ignoring his body’s incessant demand, Kellan bent and retrieved her sweater from the floor and handed it to her.

“Put this back on.”

A single tear slid down her cheek as she wordlessly complied.

“Look at me, Mercy.”

She closed her eyes briefly and sucked in a deep breath, then raised her chin. She met his gaze. Beneath her unshed tears, Kellan saw a cyclone of emotions swirling inside her: shame, regret, confusion, and desire were the most prevalent.

She was so fucking lost.

He couldn’t *not* help her.

Kellan squared his shoulders, clasped his hands behind his back, and welcomed the slide into the glorious peace and freedom of total Dominant headspace.

“Hands behind your head, angel.” He purposely lowered his voice while infusing his tenor with what Mercy needed: command, control, and direction.

A tremor shook her body as she sucked in a startled breath. Kneeling up on the bed, she raised her arms and clasped her fingers behind her head before lowering her lashes, in total submission.

He let loose an inward roar.

His pulsating cock leaked like a sieve.

He’d lost count of the number of times he’d fantasized seeing her here before him in this way. Like in his dreams, her sublime surrender made him want to gorge on her...fill the empty places inside him with her power, her precious trust. His palms itched to cup her proffered breasts and absorb her yielding energy...let it flow through him and feed the emaciated Dominant inside him.

It was a heady rush knowing that with one simple command, Mercy would willingly hand everything over to him, her power, her passion, her love.

She would beg him to wrap his lips around her pebbled nipples, flick and lave his tongue over her crinkled flesh. Whimper and moan for him as he feasted on one, then the other before tearing her pants down over her hips. He’d direct her to spread her bare, wet folds open and inhale the spicy sent of her cunt, then devour her until she was ready to shatter. Kellan would warn her not to come, and she’d follow his command. Not out of fear but out of the need to please him. And when he hoisted her legs over his shoulders and drove his dripping cock deep inside her quivering core, she’d whisper to him...tell him that she loved him.

“I want to touch you so badly, Sir,” Mercy whispered without raising her head.

Kellan briefly closed his eyes to will away the carnal fantasy uncoiling in his head.

Rescue her with your control and command.

“As I do you, angel. But we can’t always have what we want.”

“I know, Sir.”

“And I hate to tell you this, little one, but you won’t ever have what you want if you continue to Top from the bottom. Do you know what that means?”

“Trying to get my own way?”

“Yes, by trying to manipulate a Dom.”

“I would never do that.”

“You already have, numerous times.”

She raised her lids and gaped at him as if he were from Mars. “When?”

It took all the self-control he could muster not to grin. She was so fucking precious...so intriguingly innocent in the ways of submission.

“Do you actually want me to list them all?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, please.”

“Yes, please *who*?”

“Oh. Yes, please, Sir.”

“Very well. We’ll start at the top. In my chambers yesterday, you argued with me when I informed you that I would take you home.”

“But...but you weren’t Dominating me then.”

“Wasn’t I? My Dominance isn’t a switch, little one. It doesn’t flip on and off like a light bulb. While I can adjust it at will, make no mistake, even when I’m lenient, I’m man and Dom...one entity.”

“Oh,” she whispered. Her lips remained pursed in an inviting O. Christ, he wanted to kiss her again.

“In the parking garage. You handed down the ultimatum if I didn’t answer your question. Do you remember?”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied. Her quiet reply was teemed in remorse.

She was finally beginning to understand. Her awakening filled him with pride.

“Shall I continue?”

“No, Sir. I get it.”

“Do you?”

She nodded, though a bit too pensively for his liking.

“Tell me then, think back...what do you suppose was your boldest attempt to usurp my Dominance?”

“They all seem pretty foolishly bold at the moment.”

“Attempting to blindly find your way is anything but stupid. It takes guts to try and spread your submissive wings without someone there to show you how to fly.” He paused and let her ponder his words. “I’ll help you figure out the answer. It was just now, when you disobeyed me and removed your bra after I instructed you not to.”

“I-I...” Her rebuttal died on her lips as he sent her a frown. She lowered her gaze again. “I thought you didn’t want me...sexually.”

Kellan placed his fingers beneath her chin and lifted her head until she met his eyes once more. “Nothing could be further from the truth. I’ve wanted you since the first night I laid eyes on you. There’s nothing I want more than to release my cock, grip your silky hair, and drag your

mouth to me. Feel your slender fingers slide over my rigid shaft as you part your pretty, plump lips and glide your hot, slick tongue all over me.”

Her whole body trembled. Mercy sucked in a raspy breath. Heat danced in her shimmering aqua eyes. “I’d like that, too, Sir.”

Kellan was in awe of the girl.

She possessed the heart of a true submissive. While that heart had led her to hook up with Kerr and brought a world of shit down around her, she hadn’t broken. Her spirit, her desire, her need to yield and please had survived. Mercy possessed the same brave, sassy spunk that Leena once had.

But it had taken the courage to exert his Dominance, boldly put Mercy on her knees here before him, to realize how he’d missed someone who challenged him the way she did.

“Unfortunately, we can’t. I know from experience that concussions don’t heal overnight. It’s my duty as a Dom to protect you in all ways—physically, emotionally, and mentally.”

“Mild concussion,” she corrected, then quickly bit her lips together as if she’d screwed up.

“Let’s get one thing straight. I don’t ever want you to conceal your feelings. You’re free to always speak your mind, but Topping from the bottom won’t be tolerated. Understood?”

“Yes. Thank you. I was afraid I’d be wearing a permanent ball gag if I couldn’t express myself.”

Kellan chuckled. “You don’t like ball gags?”

“I hate them.”

“I’ll be sure to remember that.” He grinned.

“I bet you will.” She bit back a taunting smirk. “But I am feeling better.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but you’re still not well enough for... Well, let’s just say your physical health supersedes everything for now.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Her reply was no different than all the other subs at the club, but when those two words rolled off Mercy’s lips, his Dominance expanded along with his chest and his cock. Kellan could feel her trust. He could easily see himself gathering up the intricate pieces of her submission and sculpting her precious power into a mind-shattering new world for her. Their shared pleasures would be more than immense.

The image of watching her soar to the heavens under his command unleashed a sizzle of want to sear his balls. Clutching his hands tightly to keep from losing his shit and touching her, Kellan bent and kissed her forehead.

“You may lower your arms now, angel.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Her breathless reply taunted his angry erection. In a perfect world, he’d lift her off the bed and carry her down the hall. He’d strip her naked and put her on her knees in his shower and fill her mouth with every hard inch of him.

But this wasn’t a perfect world...it was a perfect storm, named Mercy. And Kellan was caught in the eye.

“Relax and rest some more if you can. I’m going to grab a quick shower.” *And jack off again, ’cause who doesn’t need a chapped dick? Dammit!* “In a little bit, we’ll drive to your apartment and pick up your things.”

“Thank you for everything...Sir.”

“You’re welcome.”

Her gratitude warmed him all the way to the shower and through another quick but powerful orgasm courtesy of his fist. As Kellan stood at the dresser fastening the button of his jeans, he gazed at the wedding photo once again.

"I don't know if I can move on yet or not, love. Hannah's convinced you'd want me to," he whispered. "It's the guilt that's living, breathing inside me I'm not sure I can overcome."

Confessing his fears, even to Leena's image, seemed to lighten some of the load from his shoulders. If he knew for certain that she would want him to forge ahead, his decision would be a no brainer. He'd not only train Mercy, but collar her, and move her in with him as well.

"No one ever said life was fair or easy," he grumbled before choosing a shirt from the closet.

Dark, ominous clouds drifted overhead as he and Mercy drove to her apartment.

"I'll try to be quick so we don't end up like a couple of drowned rats on the drive back to your place."

"Take your time. A little water won't hurt us." Kellan grinned. "Do you have your keys?"

"No. I have a spare under the mat."

He arched his brows in shock. "That's probably not a wise thing to do, especially with Kerr still on the lose."

"You're right. I shouldn't leave a key there. They haven't caught him yet?"

"No. Before Hannah arrived, I phoned Amblin. He's as frustrated as we are. Kerr seems to have vanished off the face of the earth."

Mercy nibbled her bottom lip as worry stamped her features.

Kellan reached over and clasped her hand. "I'll keep you safe. Trust me."

"I do trust you and I know you'll do everything in your power to keep him from me."

"Damn straight."

As he pulled in and parked in front of her complex and turned off the ignition, Mercy eyed the empty slot where she normally parked. "Oh, I just realized...my car's still at the club. Crap. I have no idea where the key is. I had it before..."

Kellan raised his hand. "Relax. Everything's fine. I, ah, I'm sorry, I forgot to tell you. Things were a bit hectic last night. Your car and key are safe and sound. Mika texted me while we were at the hospital. After things settled down at the club, Woody went outside to make sure your car was locked and found your key lying on the street. He took it inside and gave it to Mika. Max or maybe Samantha drove it to Mika's after Genesis closed to make sure it didn't get towed," Kellan explained while watching the anxiety bleed from her face. "When you're able to drive, we'll go over to Mika's place and pick it up."

"I can't believe this."

"What?"

"Everyone at the club...they've opened their hearts to me. I have no idea how I'll ever be able to repay them...and you."

"You don't have to. We're a close-knit, kinky family. We take care of our own." Far off in the distance, a flash of lightning webbed the sky. "We'd better get inside. I don't want you to be melting."

At least not in the rain.

Kellan preferred her to melt all around him. Before his unruly cock woke again, he hurried from the car and helped Mercy into the complex. He bent and lifted the rubber welcome mat outside her apartment door. A loud clap of thunder shook the building just as Mercy touched his shoulder.

"Wait. It's been moved."

“What?”

“The key. I never place it sideways...always vertical.”

Kellan plucked up the key and stood. “Wait over there until I check things out.”

“What if he’s in there, waiting for me? You might get shot.”

He bent and lifted the leg of his jeans, then lifted the Glock G28 from the holder strapped to his ankle. While this model was only assigned to law enforcement officers, most of the judges were granted licenses for them, just in case things went south during a trial.

“You have a gun?” Mercy’s eyes widened.

“I usually only carry it for work, but after last night, I won’t be leaving home without it.”

She gave a tiny nod before walking toward the entrance near her door.

“I’ll be out in a minute.” He gave her a wink as he slid the key into the lock.

Kellan stepped inside and flipped on the light.

The words: you’re going to die, bitch were painted on the wall above her couch.

His gut and jaw clench simultaneously.

A flash of lightning illuminated the ominous message. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled. Though he wanted to inspect the rest of the rooms, Kellan knew he needed to preserve the crime scene. Frustration ate at him as he eased out of the apartment and let the door close in his face.

“What’s wrong? Why did you come out so fast?” Mercy nervously asked as she hurried in beside him.

Kellan gripped her elbow and led her to the stairwell leading up to the second floor and nodded for her to sit down. Rain pounded against the glass panels framing the main door. Thunder and lightning added to the sense of foreboding that clung to his flesh.

“You’re scaring me. What did you see that made you leave so fast? Was Kerr there?”

As Kellan scanned the entryway, he pulled out his cell phone. “Give me a minute and I’ll answer you.”

As he dialed 911, Mercy gasped and covered her mouth with a trembling hand.

“This is Judge Kellan Graham,” he stated to the operator. “I need to report a 549.”

“In progress?” she asked.

“I don’t believe the perp is still at the location, but I’m not sure. You need to let Officer Amblin know I’ve called this in. I have reason to believe this is connected to one of his ongoing investigations.”

After relaying Mercy’s address to the dispatcher, Kellan hung up the phone and sat down beside her. Placing his gun on the step next to him, he wrapped Mercy in his arms while they silently watched the storm rage outside.

He was thankful as fuck that Mercy was now staying with him. Images of what could have happened if she’d returned to her apartment alone last night spooled through his head.

Kellan knew she’d be horrified by what lay waiting inside, but there was nothing he could do or say to candy-coat Kerr’s ghastly threat. All Kellan could do was try and cushion the blow. While he hoped the vile message would be the extent of the damage, deep down he feared it was but the tip of the iceberg.

“I think Kerr found the key you left under the mat. He, or someone has been inside your apartment.”

“Why? How do you know?”

“There’s something ugly spray-painted on the wall above your couch.”

“That motherfucker! Did you look in my office? Is my gun...my computer... Oh, god. My whole life is on that thing. If he...”

When she tried to stand, Kellan held her firmly in place, feeling the panic that consumed her. “I don’t know. When I saw the shit on the wall, I stepped back out.”

“We have to look. I need to see if he stole my computer...my jewelry... Why are we just sitting here?” Terror strained her voice as tears filled her eyes.

“Because that’s what we *need* to do. We can’t go inside. We might inadvertently mess up the crime scene. If we touch something that held the only fingerprint he left behind, we’d ruin the only chance we might have of adding more time to Kerr’s, or whoever’s sentence.”

“Why do you keep saying *or someone or whomever*? We both know it was Kerr who broke in.” She rested her elbows on her knees and cupped her face in her hands.

“Occupational hazard, I guess. You know...the whole innocent-until-proven-guilty thing?” He shrugged.

“What vulgar words did that bastard paint on my wall? No. Wait. Let me guess...bitch, whore, slut, right?”

“No. It was a threat, angel.”

“Tell me what it says. Please!”

Kellan exhaled a heavy sigh and scowled. “It said, ‘You’re going to die, bitch.’”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Struggling to keep from succumbing to the panic rising inside her, Mercy pressed a palm to her swirling stomach and gritted her teeth. In the past, she might have naïvely let Kerr violate her body, but he didn't have permission to invade and vandalize her home, her sanctuary, and trash all she'd worked hard to achieve. She wanted to hunt him down and beat him to death...put an end to his reign of terror.

Feeling as if she were crawling out of her skin, Mercy shoved at Kellan to get him off her.

“What are you—”

“I know you're trying to comfort me, and I'm grateful...honestly. But I feel like I'm suffocating. I need to get up...pace...work off some of this anger before I explode.”

Kellan chuckled softly and released her.

“What's so damn funny?” She lurched to her feet.

“Nothing. I thought you might fall apart over all this, but I can see now that I was wrong. You're ready to kick ass.”

“Damn straight. That...that...prick has no right to torment me or all the other shit he's doing,” she railed. “He's crazy. Certifiably insane. Off his fucking rocker. And he picked the wrong woman to fuck with. If I have to, I will hunt him down and make him wish he were never born.”

“Settle down, Wonder Woman, you won't be going anywhere without me by your side and until your head has healed. But I'll make you a promise. If Kerr happens to come strolling in the door, I'll hand you my gun and you can blow his head off.”

“Perfect! I'll aim for the little worthless head in his pants first...then finish him off after he's suffered enough. I think a week or two ought to do it,” she growled.

“Remind me never to piss you off, angel.”

The sexy crooked grin on Kellan's face took some of the starch out of her, but the storm inside raged in time with the one wreaking havoc from the skies.

After the police arrived, Mercy was allowed into her apartment. When she saw the damage with her own two eyes, the vortex of rage consumed her once more.

The message painted on her wall made her want to scream.

“You first, asshole,” she snarled.

Though her television and computer were still in the apartment, both screens had been smashed to smithereens. Her gun was gone.

As she and Kellan walked from room to room, inventorying the destruction, her blood pressure spiked and her head throbbed.

She wanted to cry when she saw all the beautiful antique tableware she'd spent months scouring E-bay for, now lying in a heap of broken shards and dust on the kitchen floor. In her bedroom, the brand-new damask bedding ensemble she'd purchased last week had been sliced to shreds. The pretty silver accent pillows were ripped open and flattened, while the white fiberfill littered her room like clumps of snow. Mercy quickly checked the drawer of her nightstand and bit back a scream. The bastard had even stolen all her vibes and sex toys.

Fear took a backseat to anger. Mercy was livid.

“Why? Why did he do this?” she spat. “Does he think I'll be so scared, so intimidated that I'll—what?—go running back to him and beg him to kill me?”

“No, angel. This is a warning.”

She issued a humorless laugh. “Like his threats and pointing a gun to my head weren’t enough?”

She didn’t wait for him to answer. Mercy simply turned and stormed out of the bedroom, past the uniformed officers sprinkling graphite and dusting it away from nearly every available surface, and into the kitchen. Grabbing the broom and dustpan from the pantry, she began sweeping the remains of her dishes off the floor. Tears of anger stung her eyes and traveled down her cheeks.

Even before Kellan’s strong hands gripped her shoulders, Mercy felt the heat of his body enveloping her from behind. She ached for his comfort but loathed it at the same time. She didn’t want to feel weak or victimized. Kerr had stolen too much of her power, her control, and her peace of mind. She refused to crumble and give him even more.

Kellan leaned in close to her ear. “Stop, sweetheart. I’ll make a phone call...we’ll have this all cleaned up in a day or two. Come. Let’s go sit down in the living room. Officer Amblin is here and needs to talk to you.”

Mercy shoved the handle of the broom away, sending it crashing to the floor, then turned and jerked her chin up at him. “Fine. Let’s go.”

He stood like a statue, silently studying the contours of her face. Kellan stroked a finger down her cheek and along her jaw before leaning in close to her lips.

“I’m not the enemy. I know you’re upset and if you need to, I’ll turn you loose on the heavy bag in my gym, let you work the anger from your system. But until then, lose the attitude toward me.”

Though his tone was deceptively placid, his compelling command was bold and strong. For the first time since stepping into her apartment, Mercy felt as if she had a foundation under her feet. Kellan didn’t expect or want her to deal with this infuriating carnage alone.

She briefly closed her eyes and nodded, then lifted on her toes and pressed her lips to his. “Thank you.”

He simply winked and led her to the living room.

After answering a litany of questions and watching officers comb over her apartment like ants, she and Kellan were finally alone. Though she’d slept off and on most of the morning, it was past lunchtime and Mercy was exhausted.

“I’m taking you home and tucking you into bed,” Kellan began. “I’ll also be keeping the spare key to your apartment on my ring. Kerr doesn’t need to redecorate a second time. Tell me what you’d like to take back to the house tonight, and I’ll pack everything up for you.”

With a knee-jerk reaction, Mercy opened her mouth to tell him she’d do it, but quickly snapped it shut.

“Good save, sweetheart.” A knowing grin speared his lips.

“I *am* trying.”

“You’re doing fine.”

His praise warmed her as they started toward the bedroom.

The storm had passed by the time they filled the trunk of Kellan’s car with what few belongings she had left. Gray, dank clouds—matching Mercy’s mood—scuttled overhead. As they made the short drive back to his house, she folded her hands in her lap and tried to relax. Just as she closed her eyes, her cell phone rang. When she pulled the device from her bag, Kellan held out his palm.

“No electronic devices. Remember?”

“But it’s...” She snapped her mouth shut. Without even looking at the caller ID, she slapped the phone in his palm.

Kellan glanced at the screen. He placed the device facedown on his lap and continued driving while ignoring the incessant ring.

“Who is it?”

“Kerr.”

Anger surged as she reached for the phone. As if anticipating her action, Kellan gripped her wrist and shook his head. “Let it go to voice mail, angel. If he leaves a message, it will likely be a threat. Those are admissible as evidence in a court of law.”

Like a firefighter, Kellan’s words extinguished the flames of anger inside her.

“Thank you, Your Honor. I didn’t think of that. With the mess and the cops and chaos, I haven’t had time to check my messages. If we’re lucky, he’s left a slew of them.”

“One would do the job, but if there are more, that’s all the better.”

After arriving back at Kellan’s house, he hauled her things up to the guest room, then they sat together on the couch and listened to the thirty-seven messages on her cell phone. All were from Kerr, except for the one call from her mom. As expected, the tone of the madman’s threats grew exponentially gruesome and violent. Finally, Kellan turned the phone off and set it on the coffee table.

“I want you to rest. You’ve had a rough day. I’ll phone something in for dinner and wake you when it arrives.”

The fact that Kellan was instructing rather than asking didn’t escape her attention, nor did the submissive thrills that shot through her.

“I’d like that. Thank you, Sir.”

She desperately wanted to ask if he’d had a change of heart. If this was the beginning of the Dominance she’d hoped and prayed he’d bestow on her. But Mercy was afraid of jinxing the future...of him deciding instead to scoop up the breadcrumbs she’d been starving to sample.

She eased back on the couch and stretched out. The look of pride etched on his face when he draped the blanket over her was answer enough, for now.

“If you wake before dinner, I’ll be in my office. I need to make some phone calls.”

When he caressed his fingers over her cheek, Mercy captured his hand and placed a soft kiss in the center of his palm. “Thank you, for everything.”

She watched his chest expand as he inhaled a deep breath. His blue eyes flickered with something deep and potent. Like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, a flutter of hope unfurled inside her, and on fragile wings, it took flight.

“You don’t need to thank me for wanting to keep you safe, angel. Now, sleep.”

The house was silent but for Kellan’s deep, rich voice resonating in the distance. Knowing he was near filled her with not only a sense of security but also contentment. She closed her eyes intending to simply rest but drifted off to sleep. Thankfully this time, Kerr didn’t visit her dreams.

She woke to find Kellan sitting in a maroon wingback chair, reading a leather-bound book. When she sat up, he set the book in his lap and sent her a tender smile. Her pulse quickened. Mercy inwardly chided herself for being so ridiculously enchanted by the man.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. Like a rock.”

“I know.” His smile turned into a wicked grin. “You were snoring so loudly, I came in to see if the furniture was moving.”

“Ha ha.” Mercy rolled her eyes. “I don’t snore.”

“How do you know?”

Just as the playful banter started getting fun, the doorbell rang. She shot him an anxious look.

“Relax. It’s our dinner.”

“How did they get through the gate?”

“I opened it from the security panel in the kitchen a few minutes ago. I’ll get the door. Grab a bottle of white wine from the cooler in the kitchen. I’ll meet you there in a minute.” He stood and headed toward the foyer.

Mercy grinned at his retreating form. Oh, he loved giving out orders, but she loved following them even more. She hurried to the kitchen, opened the glass door of the cooler, and selected a bottle of Cape Mentelle Sauvignon Blanc.

Kellan entered the kitchen and she raised a quizzical brow. “Is this one all right?”

“Perfect. Glasses are in the cabinet to your right and the opener’s in the top drawer on your left.”

Mercy opened the wine while he set dinner out on the table. The scent of seared beef, garlic, and other mouth-watering scents filled the room. Her stomach was gurgling as she removed the cork from the bottle. Moving in behind him, she placed the glasses at their plates and the wine in the center of the table.

He turned and gazed into her eyes. “Pour for me, little one.”

As she filled his glass, Kellan sat down. His dissecting stare—the same one he always wore at the club—warmed her to the bone. She placed his glass beside his plate and slid into the chair across from him, anxious to lift the molded aluminum cover crimped over her food.

“Do you know how to perform a proper serve, angel?”

Proper serve?

“No, Sir. I didn’t know there was such a thing, but I’d appreciate it if you’d tell me.”

“Why don’t I walk you through it?”

She could barely contain her elation. He was doing it...training her.

“I’d like that...like it very much.”

When she was on her knees beside his chair, head lowered and thighs spread, thrusting the glass up to him with both hands, Mercy didn’t like it...she fucking loved the peace enveloping her.

“Beautiful,” Kellan whispered, lifting the glass from her fingers. “Simply stunning.”

Mercy didn’t want to move. She wanted to stay right there at his feet, wrapped in the glow of contentment and basking in the bliss of his approval.

She felt his fingers beneath her chin and raised her head. Kellan pressed the rim of the glass to her lips. “Take a sip.”

As his Dominant gaze seared her flesh, the cold liquid flowed over her tongue. Her taste buds awakened beneath the fruity-tart flavor while her soul awakened to a new sense of submission. If Mercy possessed the power to stop time, this would be the one moment she’d want to be frozen in, forever.

“You’ll be serving me a lot from now on, angel.”

“I can’t wait.” She softly smiled.

“You may rise and enjoy your meal now.”

Enjoy her meal? Butterflies were having a free-for-all in her stomach. Mercy wasn't sure she could even choke down a bite. Easing into her chair, she lifted the foil to find a slab of grilled steak, loaded baked potato, and steamed broccoli. Suddenly, she was famished.

"I know how much you love steak." Kellan smirked.

"How do you know that?"

"You told me on the way home from the hospital."

She didn't remember anything until he'd helped her out of his car in the garage.

"Why do I have a feeling that I said a lot of things I shouldn't have?"

"Tomorrow night, I'll order calzone for dinner," he said with a laugh.

"You're an evil, evil man," she giggled.

He shot her a wickedly sensual smile. "Like you can't imagine."

Oh, she could imagine...imagine him doing all kinds of dirty things to her. Mercy only hoped that one day he'd decide to make all her naughty fantasies come true.

* * * *

Kellan woke early the next morning and peeked in on Mercy. She was still sleeping, so he padded to the kitchen to make coffee. He'd hoped that focusing on the mundane task might lessen the perpetual hard-on, determined to split the seam of his sweat pants.

It didn't.

If anything, knowing the intriguing sub would be beside him twenty-four seven for the next six days made him hornier than a sixteen-year-old.

He stood in the family room sipping coffee and looked out over the lake as another dreary, cloudy day dawned. Kellan had gone to sleep with the vision of Mercy on her knees during his impromptu lesson at dinner and had awakened with the same stunning sight filling his brain. While he wanted to dismiss it as nothing more than a passing whim, he couldn't. The staunch desire to guide her further pressed in all around him.

Mentoring her would take a heavy toll on his self-restraint and probably drive him to insanity, but watching her submissive beauty unfold had filled the dark and empty places inside him. The life she breathed into him was addicting.

"Son of a bitch," he muttered in resignation. "I *have* to train her."

Kellan's mind began to whirl with topics he intended to discuss with her. Things like safe words, limits, Dom and sub responsibilities, the sanctity of a collar, and a litany of fetishes. He was curious if the bold submissive had a few ubër-kinky triggers. God, he hoped so.

After last night, he needed to keep her off her knees as much as possible or risk annihilating what little resolve he had left. Of course, the hungry Dominant beast within ached for her to be at his feet as he taught her how to kneel in both formal and informal settings, how to kneel up, how to center herself before a session, and the proper time to lift her head and address a Dom.

Not a Dom...*him!*

But most of all, Kellan wanted to teach her how to find serenity, confidence, and peace inside her submissive skin.

Some of her lessons were going to be downright torture.

Maybe you're a closet masochist, his subconscious taunted.

Kellan scoffed and shook his head.

"Good morning."

Mercy's husky sleepy voice seeped through his pores and sent a jolt to his system more potent than an entire pot of coffee. Kellan turned and smiled. Her eyelids were still heavy and her hair tousled. He knew then what she'd look like after a long night of unbridled sex.

Enticing.

Erotic.

All over again, fuckable.

Mercy dragged her fingers through her hair, attempting to tame the disheveled mass. "I know I look a sight, but I needed coffee before a shower."

"You look beautiful, as always."

A smile kicked up one corner of her mouth. "I bet you say that to all the girls."

"No. Just you, and Hannah, of course."

And Leena.

"Uh-huh," Mercy dubiously answered before disappearing into the kitchen.

Kellan knew he had to tell her about his wife, but not today. They had too much to do. He'd called Mika last night while Mercy was resting. The two men contacted a few others from Genesis. The plan was for everyone to meet up at her apartment in a few hours and clean up the destruction Kerr had left behind.

After they'd showered and dressed, Mercy whipped up a quick breakfast before heading to her place. She seemed hesitant to enter her apartment.

"You don't have to come in if you're not ready yet."

"No. I'm fine. It's just...I'm getting pissed again."

"I have a toy bag in my trunk. Do I need to go out and get a ball gag?" he teased.

She arched her brows at him. "I'll behave."

Surprisingly she did, at least until later in the afternoon, when the pizza arrived and Mercy reached in the freezer to retrieve ice for everyone's soda.

"Oh, my god," she growled.

"What?" He hurried to her side.

A rush of rage pelted his system as he stared at a photo of Mercy bent over a table with a cock shoved inside her ass.

"Don't look at..." Her words died out as she turned to see his eyes pinned to the picture. "I can't believe that bastard took pictures of...this."

"You didn't know he was photographing you?"

"No. Hell no!" Her lips were set in a flat, tight line as she began to tear the paper.

"Stop!" Kellan barked and lifted the photo from her hands. "That's evidence."

"There is no way I'm going to let a judge or jury see me like that. It's too embarrassing."

Kellan worked to tamp down the possessive jealousy coursing through his veins.

"I don't want this photo passed around a courtroom anymore than you do. But I'd hang on to it just in case..."

"In case of what?" she countered in a terse whisper. Mercy darted a quick glance toward the entrance to the kitchen. Either Mika, Drake, Max, Joshua, Dylan, Nick, Ian, James and their subs hadn't heard Mercy's gasp at the discovery of the photo or they remained out of sight, granting them privacy. "There are plenty of witnesses from the club who saw Kerr point the damn gun to my head."

"Yes, but unless Amblin's team was able to lift any of Kerr's fingerprints yesterday, we don't have proof that *he* was the one responsible for the vandalism."

The mighty exhale that gushed from Mercy's lips expelled the bulk of indignation from her system as well. She moaned in defeat and dropped her forehead to Kellan's chest.

"I just wish this whole mess was over instead of beginning."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "I do, too, angel."

It was sometime after lunch that Mercy emerged from her embarrassed funk. Of course, Savannah, Julianna, Trevor, Samantha, Mellie, and Liz were the obvious reason. It somehow helped when Trevor shared his feelings on the abuse he'd endured, and Mellie's experiences with Kerr. At least Mercy knew she wasn't the only victim of an unjust world.

When they were finished removing all traces of Kerr from her apartment, Julianna rubbed her barely visible baby bump and promised to bring her computer by the house in a few days and help order new bedding and dishes.

"No electronics," Kellan reminded with a stern expression.

"I'll get an idea of what she's looking for and limit the time she can look at any images to five seconds." Julianna grinned. "Will that be acceptable, Sir?"

"Welcome to my world," Mika mumbled to Kellan with a crooked grin.

"Subs. I swear!" Kellan rolled his eyes. "Yes, girl. That is permissible, but not a second over five, understood?"

Julianna drew an X over her heart with her finger. "Absolutely, Sir."

"I want to come over and cyber shop, too," Trevor pouted.

"Why don't all of you come over? I'll grill some burgers if it's not raining," Kellan suggested.

"I think he just wants to keep an eye on you, sis," Trevor whispered then started to giggle. "Hide all the clocks and watches you can find tonight after he goes to bed."

"Boy!" Drake thundered in warning. "If you don't stop trying to cause trouble, I'll bring a world of hurt down on you."

Trevor purred softly. "Promise?"

"Like you won't be able to stand, boy. Don't push me, you sassy slut. Or I'll be the only one reading Hope a story before bed."

Trevor paled at Drake's threat to ban him from tucking in their infant daughter.

"Forget I said anything," he whispered to Mercy loud enough for everyone to hear.

Though she laughed along with the others, Kellan could see confusion swimming in her eyes.

After many thanks when the work was finished, and a round of good-byes, Kellan and Mercy drove toward his house. He held her hand as the skies above them grew darker.

"What was bothering you earlier...when Drake and Trevor were bantering?"

"It surprised me that Trevor was so...mouthy," she replied.

"That's Trevor. He never holds back what he's thinking, at least not since I've known him."

"But isn't he disrespecting Drake by doing that?"

"No. Well, I mean, to some it might appear that way. In the simplest terms, it's a cry for Drake to reinforce his command. Trevor's been through a hell none of us can truly understand. They've both been through the wringer. Not only that, but having a baby in the house demands a lot of attention. I think Trevor simply wants the reassurance that he's firmly and irrevocably under Drake's thumb."

"That makes sense, but isn't that a form of Topping from the bottom?"

Kellan shrugged. "Evidently Drake doesn't perceive it that way, or I suspect he'd staple Trevor's mouth shut."

Mercy sucked in a hiss and cringed.

“What I’m trying to say is that every relationship is different. What works for one couple or polyamorous relationship isn’t guaranteed to work for another. That’s why communication is necessary. It establishes the parameters that make a Dom/sub relationship fulfilling.”

Mercy nodded as she sat absorbing his words.

“Don’t worry. I’ll do my best to help you gain a better understanding.”

She turned and pinned him with a look of anticipation. “So, are you saying that you’ve decided to train me?”

Kellan pondered her question for several long seconds. “Yes, I suppose I am.”

Mercy’s chin quivered slightly as a wobbly smile spread over her lips. “Thank you, Sir. I won’t let you down.”

He sent her a gentle smile. “I know you won’t, gorgeous.”

Though she’d be a constant and brutal test of his willpower, Kellan needed Mercy to cast away the shadows within him and draw him out to the light as much as she needed him to do the same.

Another wedge of anxiety melted from his shoulders.

* * * *

Over the next three days, Mercy eagerly approached each lifestyle discussion with an open mind and more questions than Kellan imagined possible. She drank in every nuance of Dominance and submission like a sponge. While Mercy’s headaches had vanished, he still watched for any signs of a relapse.

Every night at dinner, she would slide to her knees in the kitchen and raise a beverage to him with such grace and beauty it shook him to his Dominant core. He wanted to cinch a fist in her hair, drag her up and lay her out over the table, then drive his cock balls deep inside her precious yielding body. Sheer will kept him from it...for now.

Kerr had still evaded capture. The Chicago PD hadn’t been able to locate the prick, and Kellan was growing worried and frustrated. He didn’t let Mercy out of his sight. Not even when Julianna came to visit with her laptop and several other subs and sat out on the deck in the unseasonably warm weather, oohing and ahing over items to replace the ones Kerr had destroyed.

When he heard Mercy lament about buying a new computer to her friends, an idea formed in Kellan’s mind. While she and the others were in the kitchen whipping up lunch, he’d snuck upstairs and wrapped her broken laptop in a small tote bag along with a note to Mika.

Hours later, when the subs began to leave, Kellan gave the bag to Julianna and asked her to return it to Mika. She gave him a strange look but thankfully didn’t ask any questions.

Kellan had thought buying Mercy a new computer and transferring her old files to the new one would be a wonderful surprise. Unfortunately, he’d inadvertently opened Pandora’s box. After seeing the new device, Mercy began relentlessly begging to spend an hour or two “playing” with the new computer. When she refused to stop, Kellan was forced to hand down her first punishment.

After binding her wrists and ankles to the arms and legs of a kitchen chair, he placed her cell phone and computer on the table in front of her. The MP3 player he *found* tucked in the bedside drawer of the guest room remained in his pants pocket.

“You will focus on the items in front of you, angel. You are not to lift your eyes and look at me, or your punishment will begin all over again. You will answer only when I ask you a question. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do you have any questions regarding what I have outlined?”

“No, Sir.”

In pure interrogation style, he placed his hands behind his back and slowly walked back and forth. He watched her intently, making sure her stare didn't stray from the devices he'd placed on the table.

“Why are you banned from using these?”

“Because I had a concussion.”

“You have,” he corrected.

“But I—”

“That wasn't a question,” he interrupted with a low but clipped tone. Kellan couldn't help but smile as a tremor of blatant excitement rippled through her. “You'll keep your explanations to yourself unless I ask for them. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“To make sure that you followed Dr. Brooks' instructions, I rearranged my court cases to keep you here with me. Why do you suppose I did that?”

“Because you were worried about me, Sir?”

“Yes, indeed I was, but there's another reason. Do you know what that might be?”

“No, Sir.”

“Because I know you, little one. I knew you wouldn't last seven days without picking up your phone or logging in to your computer...or perhaps sneaking a listen to some music?”

When he pulled the music player out of his pocket and placed it beside her phone, Mercy closed her eyes and wrinkled her face. She was definitely having an *oh, shit* moment.

“Yes, my devious little minx...you've been busted...busted big-time.” He moved in and stepped behind her. Gently brushing her hair to one side, Kellan leaned in close to her ear as she shivered. “What do you think I should do about this, hmm?”

Long, silent seconds passed as she seemingly weighed his words. “Is that a rhetorical question, or are you genuinely asking for my input, Sir?”

He couldn't help but grin, but Kellan wasn't about to lose the upper hand. He dragged his tongue up the side of her neck, drinking in her silky moan as she tilted her head to the side granting him more access. Unable to resist he sank his teeth into the plump flesh of her earlobe and tugged lightly. Mercy sucked in a quivering gasp and gripped the arms of the chair.

He would never grow tired of the erotic way she responded to him. Without a word, he released the silk ropes binding her ankles and wrists and extended his hand.

Mercy stared at his open palm before lifting her soulful, yearning eyes to meet his.

“Do you trust me, angel?”

“With my life, Sir,” she answered.

She slid her fingers into his waiting hand. An urgent need to crush her to his chest and never let go uncoiled inside him. The looming anxiety that Mercy would soon return to her apartment and her life crept down his spine. He didn't want her to leave. Didn't want to be forced into the dark, empty exile again.

As he drew her into his arms, Kellan closed his eyes and savored the feel of her soft body pressed so perfectly to his. He was powerless to alter his past or predict his future. All he could

do was imprint each life-altering moment he spent with this captivating and sensual sub deep in his soul. Kellan had no doubt each memory would warm his empty nights for years to come.

He buried his face in her soft hair and inhaled deeply as he forced the depressing thoughts from his mind. “Your safe word is now diamond.”

“Diamond?” Mercy repeated curiously.

“Yes. You constantly blind me with your bright and shimmering light, angel.”

She pulled back and studied his face. A wealth of happiness glistened in her eyes. “That’s the sweetest thing any man has ever said to me.”

“Get used to it.” He sent her a crooked smile.

A pensive expression fell over her face. “Are you going to force me to use my safeword, Sir?”

“I don’t plan to. I simply aim to instill the importance of taking care of yourself...doing what you’ve been instructed to do. Dr. Brooks wouldn’t be pleased to discover you’ve ignored his orders any more than I am. Remember our discussion about submissive responsibilities?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Then I shouldn’t have to remind you to eat, sleep, and care for your physical and mental health in order to represent your Dominant in the best light possible.”

“Is that a roundabout way of saying that you’ve assumed the role of my...my Dom now, Sir?”

Hope was written all over her face. It knocked the wind out of him like a punch to the gut. His heart wanted to say yes. But his conscience wouldn’t allow it.

Kellan sent her grim and melancholy smile. “No, angel. I’m not. I’m simply your mentor.”

Mercy lowered her lids and nodded. “I’m ready, Sir.”

“For?”

“My punishment,” she answered bravely.

“Very well. Follow me.”

Kellan led her through the alcove separating the dining room and kitchen. He opened the door to the basement and descended the stairs, hyperaware of Mercy trailing close behind. Striding past his home gym, he drew open the door to a small dungeon. After Leena’s accident, he’d poured his fear and frustration into creating the play space. Foolishly convincing himself that his wife would fully recover, he’d planned to surprise her when she returned home. But his wife was floating between heaven and earth, never to return.

Bringing Mercy to the dungeon he’d designed for Leena sent a tinge of guilt to stain his conscience. But the past five days he’d spent with Mercy, she’d taught him that lumbering aimlessly through life wasn’t living, but merely existing. He found it ironic that the teacher had inadvertently become the student.

Mercy stood in the middle of the room, taking in the sight of the St. Andrews Cross, bondage table, and spanking bench he’d painstakingly sawed, sanded, and stained.

A palpable wave of apprehension rolled off her as she dropped her chin and gazed at the floor. Kellan greedily absorbed her angst and blended it with his power. He aimed to stress the importance of obeying directions as he set her submissive soul free.

“Strip,” he commanded.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Mercy jerked her head up and shot him a deer-in-the-headlights stare. She wasn't embarrassed about taking off her clothes. She'd stripped dozens of times for Kerr. It was the fact that Kellan had commanded her to take off her clothes that blew Mercy's socks off.

"Eyes on the floor, angel." His low, firm tone had her girl parts melting like spun sugar.

After spending the past five days with Kellan in almost constant arousal, Mercy feared that his slightest touch would make her shatter beneath a massive O.

"We've discussed protocol. Have you already forgotten what you've learned?"

She shook her head and lowered her gaze.

Mercy had strived to keep from disappointing Kerr for fear of his punishments.

The idea of failing Kellan and letting him down physically hurt her heart.

He'd tapped into a whole other level of submission she'd never felt before...unlocked some primitive and elemental need to surrender. An arousing hunger began rising inside her.

"When I am in command of you, whether in this dungeon or the one at the club, I expect you to use your words when you answer me. Is that clear?"

Kellan had moved in close behind her. She could feel his breath caress her shoulders.

"Yes, Sir."

"Good. When I give you an instruction, I don't ever want to be forced to repeat myself, angel."

Holy hell!

Mercy had watched Kellan work other subs at the club before, but she'd never been on the receiving end. His Dominance was enthralling...dizzying...captivating. She didn't waste another second; Mercy peeled off her clothes.

"I'll use my words from now on, Sir."

"Yes. Like a sinful bar of candy, I aim to unwrap all the sweet submission inside you, let it melt over your tongue, and let you feast on serenity."

She'd much rather he unzip his fly and let her feast on his cock until it melted all over her tongue, but kept that fantasy to herself.

"Kneel before the cross, girl. Clear your head and ready yourself for a session like we talked about yesterday."

"Yes, Sir."

Lowering to her knees on the thick, plush carpet, Mercy bowed her head and closed her eyes. When she'd entered the small but tastefully decorated dungeon, she'd noticed the floggers, paddles, whips, and crops hanging from individual hooks along the walls. The tools of bliss and torture were displayed the same way at Club Genesis. She wondered what implements he would choose for her punishment. Would Kellan stop if she used her safe word? Mercy didn't have a lot of faith in safe words. They hadn't done much to protect her ass so far.

He's not Kerr. This is Kellan. He isn't punishing you for his pleasure. You fucked up. Remember?

Oh, yes. Mercy remembered the disappointment that sluiced in her veins when he placed her MP3 player on the table.

"Is there a reason you're not trying to clear your mind? I can hear you thinking from here."

She started to lift her head at the sound of his voice across the room but stopped herself in the nick of time.

Dammit. She wanted to clear her head but couldn't shut off her brain. Hearing his words, Mercy was doubly distracted now. She was curious to see what toys he'd selected, making it even harder to remain in her submissive pose.

"I'm trying, Sir, but it's hard."

"Then ask for my help." Kellan knelt down in front of her and gently raised her chin with his fingers. Pride and reassurance glistened in his compassionate stare. "Why are we here?"

"So you can punish me."

"No. We're here so you can make amends for disobeying the rules. Tell me, how do you feel inside knowing that you've disappointed me?"

"It feels lousy."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Why?"

"Because that tells me that you yearn to please. That submission isn't simply something fun and exciting to do, a role to play, but that you genuinely feel the need to make me happy."

"I do."

"Then why did you sneak the device into your room?"

Mercy swallowed tightly. God, she didn't want to confess the reason, but Kellan would sense a lie a mile away. Of that she was sure.

"I didn't pack it from my apartment with the intent to use it. I just tossed it into the duffel bag that day."

"Go on."

She exhaled heavily and cast her gaze back to the floor. "A couple nights ago, I couldn't sleep. So I thought maybe a little music might help me relax."

"Why were you tense?"

"I-I was thinking about you," she mumbled.

"Oh? What exactly were you thinking?"

Mercy could hear the smile in his voice. Yeah, he was going to love what she confessed next.

Shit!

"I wondered what it would be like if instead of telling me good night from the doorway, you...well, you crawled in bed with me."

"I see. Raise your head and look at me, girl. Tell me what you imagined me doing to you then."

Mercy swallowed tightly and gazed into his eyes once more. His supportive expression had been replaced with carnal fire.

"Everything," she whispered on a trembling breath.

"Every dirty little thing you could think of?" He asked with a knowing smirk.

She blanched. Something about the words he chose felt hauntingly familiar.

"I know you fantasize about me when you masturbate. You told me the night I brought you here from the hospital."

Mercy's eyes grew wide. Her stomach swirled. She felt her cheeks catch fire. Good god. Had she blabbed every detail to him that night? Embarrassment pulsed so vehemently through her she wanted to melt into the carpet.

“I’ll share a secret with you, gorgeous. I fantasize about you while I’m fisting my cock. I dream about all the dirty little things I’d love to do to you as well.”

The floodgates between her legs opened. A ripple of hunger made her clit and nipples tighten and throb. A tiny moan rolled off the back of her throat. She ached to wrap her arms around his neck and kiss him...slide her tongue past his full lips and feast on his mouth. Press her naked body against him and writhe all over him until Kellan ripped off his clothes and fucked her hard right there on the floor.

As if reading her mind, he slanted his mouth over hers and took possession of her with a savage kiss. He thrust his tongue deep as he gripped her shoulders in his strong, capable hands. Mercy moaned as she wrapped her tongue around his, gliding up and down as if it were his cock, and swallowed his feral growl.

Kellan cupped her breasts. Squeezing and massaging her aching orbs, he plucked and pinched her nipples until she pulled from his mouth, and tossed back her head crying out in bliss.

A low, sultry chuckle rumbled from Kellan’s chest. He released her breasts, giving one last tug on her nipples, then stood. The bulging erection tenting his trousers, taunted her. Mercy wanted to reach out and release his steely length and suck him down her throat.

“You’re not here for pleasure, my wicked little angel. You’re here for punishment.”

“Beat me. Bruise me. I don’t care. Just please, Sir...fuck me when you’re done...please?”

Kellan’s nostrils flared. His cock lurched against his zipper. A look of indecision fluttered across his face before he clenched his jaw and slowly shook his head. “Who makes the rules, little one?”

“You do, Sir.”

“Exactly. Rise and place yourself over the spanking bench. Keep your ass raised up high in the air for me, girl.”

On shaky legs, she stood and complied. She shivered when she raised her ass and the cool air of the room met her wet and heated core. Kellan moved in close behind her. The air stirred and Mercy could smell the heady scent of her own feminine musk.

“Even prettier than I imagined,” he murmured. “Your pussy is so pink and swollen and wet. You make my mouth water and my cock scream, girl.”

“Oh, god,” she groaned. “Please...oh, yes please.”

“What exactly are you begging for?”

“Your mouth, your fingers, your cock...all of you, Sir. I *need* all of you.”

Kellan hissed out a curse. “Is that why we’re in the dungeon?”

Frustration spiked. A low, suffering moan slid from her throat. “No, Sir.”

“No, and it’s a pity, because there’s nothing I’d love more than to drive my cock deep inside your glistening cunt. But you haven’t earned that reward yet, have you?”

“No, Sir.” Mercy planned to remedy that, and soon.

“Shall we begin and get this unpleasantness over?”

I’d rather begin with you fucking my brains out.

Mercy kept the smartass comment to herself and nodded. “Yes Sir.”

In preparation for the initial burst of pain, she squeezed her eyes closed, clenched her butt cheeks, and held her breath. When Kellan simply skimmed a palm over her ass, she jolted and exhaled. His reverent caress felt as if he were worshiping her flesh. But that was the duty of a submissive, not a Dom. The lines of command and surrender blurred. She had no idea now what to expect with this man. Mercy felt as if she’d been tossed into stormy seas.

“I *do* plan to warm you up first,” he whispered with a hint of amusement. “No transgression deserves brutality.”

His caveat was music to her ears. The tendrils of dread bled away.

The first stinging blow sent a chill racing up her spine, but the intimate contact of his hand to her flesh ignited a slow fire to coil beneath her clit. The punishment Kellan delivered was unlike any she’d experienced. The synapses in her brain didn’t know how to process the delicious combination of pleasure and pain.

“Rules are put in place for a reason.”

To emphasize his words, he landed another slap against her flesh.

“To keep you safe or, in this case, to help you heal.”

Smack.

The biting sting spread out over her flesh in a luscious burn that engulfed her lower back and thighs. The sensation was as confusingly soothing as the indulgent tone of Kellan’s voice.

Smack.

“The only pleasure I gain from punishing you is the feel of your succulent ass on my hand.”

Smack.

“Of course, watching your sinful cheeks turn a pretty glowing red doesn’t suck, either.”

Smack.

“Your quivering gasps will continue to echo in my ears for a long time.”

Smack.

Mercy whimpered and rolled her hips in an attempt to assuage the increasing ache between her legs.

Smack.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous all splayed out before me with your red ass in the air, my sweet sub.”

Kellan continued to praise her as he landed his palm against her searing flesh. No longer cognizant of her surroundings, she focused on his rich, deep voice sliding over her flesh and the rhythmic slap of his hand.

She felt as if she were floating.

Not outside her body but deep inside her mind.

Floating to some foreign place where her conscious and soul melded.

Enveloped in a shimmering white light of peace and beauty, Mercy sailed on in this strange silent serenity. There were no worries fluttering through her mind. No fears. Nothing but the reassurance of Kellan’s wide hand as he guided her into a surreal world of buoyant beauty.

She’d never felt so free...so complete in all her life.

Mercy dipped and soared inside the captivating bliss.

Hours, minutes, or days later—she wasn’t sure—she lifted her heavy eyelids. She was no longer on the spanking bench but cradled in a soft cotton blanket and nestled against Kellan’s bare chest as he climbed the spiral staircase. She didn’t know when or where he’d removed his shirt, and at that moment she didn’t care. Mercy was far too captivated with his velvet-blue eyes locked on hers and the slow smile stretching his lips. Her heart sputtered, and the heat that engulfed her ass seemed to spread through her whole body.

“Welcome back, angel,” he whispered. “Did you enjoy your flight?”

Mercy couldn’t help but grin as she gave him a listless nod. She felt drunk, as if everything were moving in slow motion, especially her brain. She tried to gather the fragmented pieces of

reality, but the peaceful nirvana within beckoned her to sail on a little longer. She closed her eyes once more.

“Oh, yes, but I don’t think I’ve landed yet,” she answered on a dreamy sigh.

“I don’t think you have, either. Sail on, angel. I’ve got you.”

The only response she could muster was a satisfied purr.

Kellan laid her down on a soft surface and she felt him stretch out beside her. Mercy opened her eyes once more to find she was in the guest room and in bed. As her lids slid shut, she snuggled in close to his warm body, laid her head on his chest, and sighed. He stroked her head and combed his fingers through her hair.

The beat of his heart and the rumble of his voice as he suffused her with praise, echoed in her ears. Slowly, Mercy began rising from the dreamy depths, becoming more aware of Kellan and her surroundings. She raised her arm, stunned at how heavy her limb felt, and brushed a whip of Kellan’s charcoal hair from his forehead before breaking the comfortable silence.

“Thank you for...I don’t know how to describe it. I’ve never felt anything like this before.”

“Endorphins. You’ve been riding them for quite some time. Did you enjoy it?”

“Oh, yes. Enjoy doesn’t come close to how incredible I feel.”

Kellan chuckled. “I think I might have created a brat.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...you enjoyed your punishment too much. I’ll have to come up with a suitable alternative next time.”

“If you keep sending me off to heaven like you just did, you’ll never have to punish me again. I’ll be the best submissive on the planet.”

“Uh-huh,” he grunted with a hint of disbelief.

“I will,” she protested. “You’ll see.”

Mercy placed her palm on his chest before skimming it up and down his flesh. Gliding her hand lower, she dragged her fingers over his engorged cock. She felt his muscles tense as he grabbed her wrist and lifted her hand away.

“Did I give you permission to touch me?”

“No, Sir. It’s just that I-I want to make you feel good.”

He slid his fingers into her mane, gathering the strands into his fist. Pulses of pain and pleasure spread over her scalp as he tugged her head back and gazed down at her.

“Don’t you know by now? I always feel good when I’m with you.”

He bent and claimed her lips in a hungry, possessive kiss.

* * * *

Kellan ate her silky mouth as the image of her luscious wet pussy burned in his brain. A lesser man would have caved and fucked her raw over the spanking bench. He still wasn’t quite sure how he’d unearthed the willpower to resist. Lying beside her warm, naked body was taking an even bigger toll on him. His dick had been hard for hours, but teaching her this lesson was necessary. So was providing her with plenty of aftercare. Easing a sub back to earth after a session was as vital as soaring her into subspace. But damn. He needed to come...needed to relieve the pressure stretching the skin of his cock to the point of pain.

Mercy eased from his lips. Peppering his jaw with soft kisses, she slowly inched her tongue down his neck. She slid her hands over his chest, leaving a trail of heat that felt so fucking good Kellan could only close his eyes and bask in her attention. She kissed her way over his

collarbones and down to his nipples. Mercy traced her sinful tongue around each circle of brown flesh and kissed each taut peak. He growled and squeezed the fist in her hair tightly, feeling her tug against his grip to drag her mouth lower still.

When she began to unbutton his trousers, Kellan knew he needed to seize control, but the feel of her wicked mouth roaming his flesh felt too damn good. He hadn't felt the rush of pleasure consume him in this way for too damn long. Mercy carefully eased his zipper down and Kellan groaned when his cock sprang free.

"Oh, god."

The tone of awe in her whisper yanked him from his carnal trance. A wave of panic crashed through him. Kellan sat up and snatched her hand away as she reached for his shaft. Mercy sent him a pleading stare.

"Please don't make me stop," she begged.

The minute she licked her lips, he was a goner. Kellan couldn't refuse her plea to worship his cock anymore than he could fly. But he refused to lie back and let her take control over him.

"Move to the side of the bed and get on your knees." His voice was husky and laced with need.

Her eyes widened with excitement. Mercy scampered off the bed and onto her knees.

With his gaze locked on her, Kellan stood, removed his trousers, and then sat down on the side of the bed. She was the vision of his dreams...pure unadulterated sin.

Her plump lips, level with his cock, were parted invitingly.

Need and hunger glistened in her eyes.

The scent of her pussy clung to every breath he inhaled.

Demand rolled through him, and it took everything Kellan had not to grip her hair and slam his impatient dick straight down her throat. He tempered his fervent lust and dragged a finger down her cheek.

"Take me inside your pretty mouth. Worship my cock."

Dropping her jaw open, she leaned in. Her moist breath caressed his dripping crest.

Kellan bit back a savage roar.

When she wrapped her plump lips around him, he felt as if he'd died and gone to heaven. His nerve endings were on fire and he was going up in flames. The gentle suction of her mouth and glide of her velvet tongue had him nearly losing his load.

Each drag of her lips, flick of her tongue, and scrape of her teeth over his throbbing veins sent him soaring to an even higher level of bliss. He struggled to harness the come churning in his balls. He didn't want to embarrass himself and end this too soon.

"Mercy," he choked out in a strangled whisper. "Your mouth feels like heaven."

As if emboldened by his praise, she cupped his sac, and massaged his heavy orbs in her palm. Kellan watched her lips slide up and down his glistening shaft as she enveloped him with wet, silky heat.

His head swam.

The room swayed.

He knew he wasn't going to last long, but fuck if he'd let go this soon. Clenching his jaw, he reached out and gripped her hair, then eased her off his shaft.

"You'll swallow every drop, little one. Understood?"

"Oh, yes, Sir. It would be an honor." Her voice was low and sultry. A shiver raced up his spine.

"More. Work that eager little tongue all around me."

She opened her mouth, prepared to engulf him again, but Kellan held her head firmly in place. Unable to fulfill her quest, Mercy whimpered and shot him a pleading stare. He simply shook his head. A little pout settled over her mouth before she smiled and extended her tongue, bathing the tip of his throbbing crest with soft, beguiling flicks.

She was going to be the death of him. At that particular moment, Kellan couldn't think of a better way to go than with his cock deep down her throat. Provoked by the thought, he tugged her to his shaft. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as she swallowed him all the way to the base of his stalk. Though he could barely breathe, Kellan guided her by her head, setting a safe tempo at which he could both revel in the feel of her wicked mouth but also keep from exploding all over her tongue.

Mercy rolled her hips from side to side. Kellan imagined her clit, swollen and peeking out from beneath the thin membrane, needy and aching for relief as well.

"Reach between your legs and rub your clit for me, angel. I want to watch you shatter as I fill your belly with my seed."

Her eyes grew wide. The glassy, unfocused sheen reflecting in them told Kellan that she was as desperate to shatter as he was.

"You don't have permission to come yet, sub. Is that clear?"

Her grunted reply sent a vibration to ripple over his dick. Kellan gritted his teeth and hissed.

As she bobbed up and down on his stalk and strummed her clit, he gazed at the glorious, beautiful woman before him. Her thick lashes lay against her delicate face, and her smooth cheeks concaved beneath the mind-bending suction she bestowed. Kellan lost a little more of his heart with each wonderfully wicked lash of her tongue. Mercy wasn't merely worshiping his cock; she was making love to him...pouring out her entire soul for him to claim and protect.

Her tiny whimpers and mewls zapped his system like bolts of lightning.

The thunder of release rolled through him. He gripped her head and shuttled in and out of her mouth in sharp, rapid strokes. His balls drew up and his vision blurred.

"Come hard for me, angel. Come, now!"

She clamped her mouth around him and sucked with all her might. He felt her muscles tense before her muffled scream tore over his blistering length.

Mercy's body quivered as the orgasm consumed her.

Kellan roared as their storms of ecstasy collided.

White-hot lightning engulfed his tightening balls, and Kellan gave up trying to hold back a second longer. His cock expanded and thick ropes of come jettisoned from the head, showering her tongue and throat. Mercy gulped greedily as she swallowed his seed. Reaching up, she wrapped her slender hand around his shaft and milked him dry while she licked and lapped him clean.

Both of them trembled in aftershocks as she released his shaft. Kellan slid a finger beneath her chin and sent her a sated smile.

"That was incredible."

Her cheeks grew pink and a coy smile tugged her lips. "It was, Sir. Thank you."

Kellan lifted her off the floor and pulled her to his chest as he slumped back onto the bed. She fell limp across his chest and issued a contented sigh. He closed his eyes and drank in the feel of her soft, naked flesh meshed against him.

Long minutes later, their silent bliss was interrupted by the ring of his cell phone. The unique ringtone cut through his carnal fog like an ax. It was the nursing home. In one fluid

movement, he rolled Mercy to his side and lurched out of bed. Fumbling with the pocket of his trousers, Kellan finally pulled the device free.

“Hello?” he answered hastily.

“Mr. Graham?”

“Yes.”

“It’s Lucia. You need to come quickly. I’m sorry”—her voice cracked—“but Leena suffered a stroke a few minutes ago.”

Kellan’s gut coiled. His throat closed up and he felt like he couldn’t breathe.

A stroke? God no. This couldn’t be happening. Not yet.

He wasn’t ready to lose her.

Hannah.

He needed to call Hannah.

“Is she…”

“She’s still alive. But we don’t know for how much longer. I’m so sorry. Would you like me to call your daughter for you?”

“No. I’ll do it. I’m on my way.”

Kellan grabbed his pants off the floor and frantically looked around the room for his shirt, but couldn’t find it. He raced out to the hall and sprinted to his bedroom. He ripped a cotton polo from its hanger and yanked it over his head as he slid on a pair of loafers. Patting his pockets, he felt his keys and turned toward the hall.

Mercy stood in the doorway wearing a look of confusion. “I take it you’re leaving?”

Guilt inundated him in a deluge of shame. While another woman had been sucking his cock, his wife had lain alone in an empty room having a stroke.

“Yes. Wait here. I’ll be back… I-I’m not sure when. But I’ll be back.”

“Is something wrong?”

Dammit! There wasn’t time to waste explaining everything to Mercy. He scrubbed a hand through his hair and pinned her with a sorrowful gaze.

“Kellan, you’re scaring me. Is it Hannah? Is she sick? Has she been in an accident?”

“No! It’s my wife,” he blurted as he rushed past her, raced down the stairs,

* * * *

Mercy stood in the middle of the hallway, mouth open, body shaking, and mind racing. She felt as if she’d just been punched in the gut and slapped in the face.

Wife?

Wife!

WIFE!

“What do you mean your *wife*, you son of a bitch?” she screamed.

There was no answer to her cry as it echoed through the empty house. Kellan was already gone… gone back to his fucking wife!

He wasn’t divorced at all. The cheating man-whore had been married the whole damn time.

And just where the hell had the little missus been? she wondered.

Had his wife been out of town on business?

“When the cat’s away, the mice will play.”

And oh, how Kellan had played… played Mercy to the nth degree. Not only had the prick conveniently moved her into his palatial estate, he’d pretended he wasn’t interested in teaching

her submission. No doubt that had been part of the big plan to make her feel as if he was doing her some big-assed fucking favor when he finally relented. Make her feel as if she *owed* him something for his sacrifice. Kellan wasn't a stupid man. He had to know that once Mercy found out he was married, she'd walk the fuck out and not give him a second glance at the club.

"You got some balls, mister...big fucking sick and twisted balls."

She had no facts, only assumptions that zipped through her head so furiously she couldn't make sense of the clusterfuck.

Did he and his wife have an open marriage?

That would certainly explain why Hannah wasn't judging the judge's actions. She probably wouldn't fault her own mother for spending the last week banging the Chicago Bears football team, either.

Talk about dysfunctional.

"It doesn't matter," Mercy spat out loud.

Whatever *understanding* Kellan and his wife had regarding their vows, or rather, the breach of them, didn't change the fact that he was married.

If he'd respected Mercy at all, he *would* have fucking told her.

Maybe they're separated.

"Shut up," she barked at her subconscious. "I will not start grasping at straws or making excuses for the misogynistic prick. I did enough of that with Kerr."

There's only one way to find out.

Yearning to silence the pesky voice in the back of her head, Mercy stormed into Kellan's room. She hadn't stepped foot inside his private domain since she'd arrived. She wished now that she would have started snooping around from the very start.

With long, determined strides, she entered his closet. Mercy had expected to see half of the massive room chock full of designer women's wear. But she didn't. The closet contained Kellan's dark suits, dress shirts, and an assortment of shoes.

Nothing was adding up.

There wasn't a shred of evidence to prove he was married. But he *had* to be. No man on the planet referred to his ex as his *wife*. Well not many. Most referred to their exes as the alimony queen, Satan's succubus, and a whole host of other derogatory terms. *Wife* was far too affectionate for the most amicable divorce.

Fuming, Mercy turned and started to leave his room. As she passed the dresser, she stopped dead in her tracks and stared at a photo of a younger, heart-stoppingly handsome image of Kellan dressed in a dark gray tux. Snuggled up beside him was a stunning blonde—who bore an uncanny resemblance to Hannah—wearing a white lace wedding dress. Their smiles were blinding...glowing with happiness and a love so profound it ripped Mercy's heart in two.

Tears burned her eyes.

"You asshole!" she cried. "Why did you do this to me? Didn't we...didn't *I* mean anything to you? We shared something special. I felt it! Is this all a game to you? Or was it some twisted, heartless kind of joke? Well, guess what, cocksucker? I'm *not* fucking laughing!"

Angrily swiping her tears, Mercy ran to the guest room. The wrinkled comforter on the bed mocked her and the intimacy she'd shared with Kellan. Howling with rage, she picked up the lamp from the dresser and heaved it across the room. The ceramic base exploded into a million pieces while the shade bounced and landed on its side, bent and battered.

“You fucking prick! I can’t believe you played me. I should have learned my lesson after Kerr. All men are gutless pigs!” Succumbing to the anguish clawing inside her, Mercy crumpled to the floor and sobbed.

Long minutes passed as she tried to pull herself together and will away the pulsing undertow of pain. She vacillated between rage and regret as she nursed her wounded pride.

Kellan would be home sometime...but Mercy had no intention of being here to greet him. She’d formulated an escape plan as she sat sobbing like a child.

Get your ass off the pity pot.

Pack your shit.

Leave.

Drying her eyes on the sleeve of her shirt, Mercy dragged herself off the floor and began packing. When she’d finished collecting her things, she hauled the duffel bag and box to the foyer. As she made her way into the kitchen, a lump clogged her throat as she gazed at her electronics spread out over the table and the strands of silky rope Kellan had used to bind her, still lying on the floor.

“I refuse to cry another fucking tear for that man!” she bit out angrily, willing the tears back that filled her eyes.

Mercy palmed her phone and shoved it into the pocket of her jeans. She grabbed her computer and MP3 player, then stomped to the foyer and placed them with the rest of her things before tapping the Uber app on her phone. When she stepped outside, the icy wind stole her breath. Mercy darted back into the house and swiped a winter coat from the closet. She’d mail the damn thing back to Kellan next week. After hauling the box and duffel outside, Mercy groaned when she saw that the security gate was closed.

“Best-laid plans and all that shit,” she hissed as she placed her belongs against the fence.

A few minutes later, a dark blue SUV pulled into the driveway. Mercy waved her arm through the bars, motioning for the driver. A big, burly man with colorful tattoos adorning his thick arms strolled toward her.

“Am I part of a prison break or something?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Something like that, yeah.” Mercy turned on the charm. “My boyfriend went out for a while, probably to go bang some nasty skank. We haven’t been getting along so well. He changed the damn code on the gate, and now I’m stuck. Do you think...if I lifted my stuff over the fence, you could maybe...um...”

“It’s been a couple weeks since I helped a damsel in distress. Let’s do this.”

After hefting her things over the gate, she climbed the brick face and jumped into the prickly shrubs lining the outside perimeter.

In a matter of minutes, she was heading home.

Home.

Her once safe haven had been ransacked and vandalized. Mercy wondered if she’d ever let her guard down inside her apartment again. She didn’t know how or why, but in a few short days, Kellan’s place had felt as much like home to her as the family ranch in Texas.

“I’m sorry that douchebag didn’t treat you right. Rich guys think they can act like idiots and get away with it. But I gotta tell ya, breaking you out like that...well, that shit was fun.” The driver grinned.

Mercy flashed him a *shit happens* grimace, while inside she was dying. Each block melted into the next until the distance from Kellan’s house made her feel as if she were traveling to

some other planet in the solar system. The driver continued talking, but she blocked him out. She was too wrapped up in the unrelenting arms of hurt and anger.

She wondered what Kellan would do once he found her gone. Would he be pissed that she'd left...forced an end to his game? Or would he eagerly begin seeking out his next victim? Did anyone at Club Genesis know he was married? No. They wouldn't condone that type of behavior...would they? Was cheating on your spouse accepted in the community?

It doesn't matter since you won't be going back to the club...ever!

Unfortunately, she would have to return, at least to talk to Mika. After all, she had to retrieve her car and tell him to cancel her membership.

She closed her eyes and exhaled in defeat.

Suddenly a light bulb went off in her brain. She could find a quiet booth in the back of Maurizio's—the Italian restaurant not far from the club where members liked to meet up and enjoy dinner before play—and simply wait for Mika to arrive. Showing her face to a handful of members versus a whole dungeon was easier to swallow. The chance of running into Kellan at the restaurant was fifty-fifty—the chance of seeing him at the club...one hundred percent.

Maurizio's it is.

Directing the driver to her building, Mercy paid her fare and extracted her key. The man chivalrously carried her belongings inside and left them next to her apartment door.

“Thank you for all your help. You've been a lifesaver.”

“You're welcome. So...what's your answer?”

“To what?”

“You know...what I asked you about in the car...you and me. I'd treat you tons better than that rich prick.”

“Oh.” She blanched wishing she'd paid more attention. “Uh, well...you're offer is sweet, really, but I need a break from relationships for a while.”

“I get it. Yeah, I'm not interested in being a rebound guy. But...” He fished a business card out of his pocket and shot her a seductive smile. “If you need any help licking your wounds, give me a call.”

Startled by his innuendo, Mercy was even more stunned when the guy quickly kissed her on the cheek, then turned and walked out the lobby door.

Ewww! One stalker is more than enough, thank you!

Standing in the open, alone, she felt as if someone was watching her. An uneasy chill spread through her, and Mercy quickly unlocked her door. She glanced at the sidelight windows flanking the main door but didn't see anyone. Shaking off her paranoia, she shoved her belongings past the portal and flipped on the lights. Mercy half expected to see another ghastly message splashed across her walls, but thankfully, the fresh smell of paint was the only unusual thing to greet her. She quickly closed and locked the door behind her, then dealt with unpacking. Mercy figured the fewer memories of Kellan staring her in the face, the better.

She toted the duffel bag to her bedroom and sighed when she saw the bare mattress. After drawing out a set of clean sheets and several blankets from the linen closet, Mercy made the bed and unpacked her clothes.

When her chores were done, she donned her favorite flannel pajamas. She then poured a glass of wine, set her phone on the docking station, and turned on some mellow music. Sitting on the couch with her feet tucked beneath her, Mercy stared at the dark splintered television screen.

“That thing looks just like my heart...a broken, fractured web of nothing.” The words rolled off her tongue in a humorless scoff. “I still can’t believe the bastard’s married. What. The. Fuck?”

Mercy drained the merlot in two gulps. Twirling the stem between her fingers and thumb, she stared at the circling rim. Memories of the night Kellan taught her how to kneel and serve him danced in her head. She could still taste the wine’s fruity flavor exploding over her tongue as he shared the first sip with her.

A tear slid down her cheek.

Mercy absently brushed it away.

CHAPTER NINE

Kellan anxiously punched in the code, cursing the lost seconds before the annoying buzzer sounded. He yanked the door open and sprinted down the hall, ignoring everyone and everything around him.

Please, God. Don't let me be too late. He sent up a silent prayer as he darted into the room.

"You rest easy, Miss Leena. Your man is on his way to see you," Lucia murmured softly as she stroked his wife's hair.

No longer sitting up to stare at the wall, Leena lay on the bed, eyes closed as if sleeping. The left side of her mouth sagged in a deep frown, while the other side seemingly now lifted in a semi-peaceful smile.

Tears burned in his eyes.

A lump of emotion swelled in his throat.

His feet felt like cement.

And guilt continued to eat him alive.

If Kellan had been with Natalie when he'd received the frightening call, he could have easily compartmentalized his shame...locked it away in a cold and meaningless vault. But he had been with Mercy. His feelings for her were far from meaningless, and Kellan had carelessly given in to that love.

You knew...you fucking knew! his subconscious railed.

Yes, he *had* known...known the first time he laid eyes on Mercy, that his orderly, disciplined life would eventually go up in smoke. Still, Kellan had foolishly continued reinforcing the walls of his heart, hoping to maintain his restraint and distance. But as he watched her at the club, dreamed about her night after night, the ache to guide her to her knees and claim her fucking soul had annihilated his almighty control.

Mercy owned *him*, and there wasn't a fucking thing Kellan could do to change that fact.

"Oh, Mr. Graham," Lucia's tone dripped with sorrow.

"What happened?" He forced the words past his lips.

"An hour ago, her blood pressure began to spike. Poor thing started to seize. Dr. Weaver gave her an injection to break down the blood clots, but..."

Kellan nodded trying not to fixate on the image of Leena having another seizure. He'd already witnessed three over the past five years. He knew, from previous diagnoses, the unstable synapses in her brain could easily trigger strokes, but this one was by far the worst Leena had endured.

"Go on and tend to your other patients, Lucia. I'll stay with her."

"All right, but you ring me right away if you notice any changes in our girl."

"I will." He forced a smile.

Kellan took Leena's hand and stared at her while remorse shredded his soul. He wanted to crawl in bed with her, hold her in his arms. Instead, he sat beside her and started to confess his sins.

When he was done, tears stained his cheeks. His temples throbbed as he wiped his nose and exhaled a heavy sigh.

"I'm sorry, baby. I love you...I'll always love you, but I'm so fucking empty inside. She fills me up, the way you used to. I know...I know. I'm being a selfish prick, but goddammit, I've

locked myself away all these years, just like you.” He sniffed. “I keep thinking...what if our roles were reversed? God, Leena, I wouldn’t want you to stop living. The love inside you...fuck...it’s vast and beautiful. I’d never want you to let it wither away because of me.”

“She wouldn’t. Leena wouldn’t want yours to wither away because of her either.” Mika moved in behind him and gripped Kellan’s shoulder. “Hannah called me. She’s on her way.”

“Thanks for coming, man.” Kellan sniffed and wiped his eyes.

Mika stared at Leena for several silent minutes. “This is the hardest thing life will ever throw your way, brother. I know you don’t think so...especially now, but you will survive it.”

“I know,” Kellan answered lowly. “Every time I think I can’t take another day of this...the pain you went through with Vanessa comes crashing in my head.”

“I’m not inviting you to drink the grape Kool-Aid or anything, but I need to tell you something. I haven’t talked about this with anyone other than Julianna and my dad. The night that Dennis McCollum shot me, I died. Flat lined...lights out...end of the road. But before the EMTs revived me and brought me back...” Mika scrubbed a hand over his bald head. “I went someplace...someplace beyond this earth. My mom and Vanessa were there. They told me things that changed the way I thought about life. Their...*insight*, I guess you’d call it, gave me the courage to let Julianna inside my heart.”

Kellan silently listened, studying his friend. Mika wasn’t filling him full of hopeful clichés about life and death, but relaying firsthand experience and the lessons he’d learned.

“I was fighting my feelings for Julianna and Dad was fighting his for Sarah. Mom and Vanessa were pissed that we were both too hardheaded to let the women they sent us into our hearts. The people who love us...well, all they want is for us to be happy. That’s what I want for you, too, brother.”

Kellan stood. He wrapped Mika in a manly hug and clapped him on the back.

“Thank you for sharing that with me. It means...a lot.”

“Don’t let guilt eat you alive. I’ve been there, done that, and wasted a lot of precious time.” Mika sent him a sympathetic look. “I’m going to head out. Just wanted to stop by and let you know I’m here for you. If you need anything, give me a call.”

“I will.” Kellan nodded soberly.

“Is Mercy...”

“She’s still at my place. Shit! I flew out of the house in such a rush I’m not even sure what I said to her.” Kellan pinched the bridge of his nose in an attempt to ease his pounding head.

“When you touch base with her, give her my number and tell her to call if she needs anything, all right?”

“Will do. Thanks again. You being here is a huge help.”

“I’ll be back again to see you soon, sweet girl.” Mika leaned over the bed and brushed a kiss on Leena’s forehead. He turned and a ghost of a smile kicked up a corner of his mouth. “In reality, we’re fucking lucky. We get to carry the love of two incredible women in our hearts every day. Lucky bastards, for sure.”

Mika left and Kellan sat by Leena’s side, talking to her about life and love and the happy times they shared. A short time later, Hannah ran into the room, her pale face blotched in red as tears poured down her cheeks. Kellan scooped up his grown-up little girl and placed her on his lap. Hannah curled up against him as she’d done as a child and let him hold her as she cried. Sometimes age and independence took a backseat to the soothing unconditional love of a parent.

Kellan watched the skies lighten as dawn began to break. Hannah slept with her head resting on Leena’s bed, holding her mother’s hand. There had been no change in his wife’s condition

throughout the night. He wanted to breathe a sigh of relief but knew she wasn't out of the woods yet. Even with the anticoagulant injections, there were no guarantees her damaged brain would withstand yet another stroke. It was the same slow, agonizing waiting game that Kellan had been forced to play before.

When Hannah woke, he sent her to the cafeteria to get some breakfast. She returned a half an hour later and shooed him out the door to eat as well. As he drew closer to the dining hall, the scent of food made him nauseous. He continued walking and he pulled out his phone.

Mercy didn't pick up and his call went to her voice mail. A tiny smile tugged his lips. The punishment he'd handed down yesterday had left the impression he'd wanted. Still, he hadn't come home last night and wanted to alleviate any anxiety or worry. He thought about calling Mika to drop by and check on her, but Hannah's frantic cry from the opposite end of the hall had Kellan sprinting toward his daughter instead.

Darting back into the room with his heart in his throat, he watched Leena's chest rise and fall and exhaled a heavy breath.

"She squeezed my hand," Hannah sobbed joyfully. "Mom...just squeezed my hand."

Kellan held his daughter and closed his eyes. Yes, Leena had squeezed his hand once before as well. He now had to dash his daughter's hope, as Dr. Weaver had done to Kellan's, and explain that it was nothing more than a spontaneous muscle twitch. Of course, Hannah didn't want to believe him—hell, he hadn't wanted to believe the doctor, either—but Kellan managed to talk his daughter off the ledge. Cursing this heartbreaking hand life had dealt them all, he held her once more as Hannah fell apart.

By afternoon, the city was blanketed with a light snow. Kellan had tried to raise Mercy several times, but she still did not answer. Anxious and edgy, he paced Leena's room, then the halls. His restlessness only increased.

"You're driving me nuts, Daddy. Go home and check on her. I'll stay with Mom, okay?"

He was torn between the love he'd lost and the new love he'd found, and the indecision warring within was maddening. Kellan wasn't the wavering type, yet there he stood, vacillating and unsure.

"I might be awhile, sweetheart. I need to explain...I don't know if she'll even understand all this."

"You won't until you try."

"Sometimes you're smart beyond your years, you know it?"

"I had very good teachers." She sent him a bittersweet smile. "Go."

Kellan returned to the house, entering from the garage into the kitchen. The ropes he'd used to tie Mercy lay on the floor. A rush of comfort...familiarity coursed through his veins, followed by confusion when he noticed her computer, cell phone and MP3 player were no longer on the table.

Why would she put her things away but leave the rope on the floor?

"Mercy!" he shouted, listening intently for her reply.

When none came, he bounded up the stairs, two at a time, telling himself that she was taking a nap. He rounded the doorway of the guest room, but Mercy wasn't there. The dresser drawers were open and empty. So was the closet. Turning, he saw the lamp, or what was left of it, smashed to pieces on the floor.

She was gone. Packed her things and left.

Kellan sucked in a deep breath and expelled a mighty roar.

He'd been so stunned and panicked when Lucia had called, he couldn't remember what he'd said to Mercy. He closed his eyes and struggled to recall his movements...and more importantly, his words.

"Wait here. I'll be back...I-I'm not sure when. But I'll be back."

"Is something wrong? Kellan, you're scaring me. Is it Hannah? Is she sick? Has she been in an accident?"

"No! It's my wife."

"Fuck!"

As he had done hours before, Kellan turned and ran down the stairs and into the garage. This time he wasn't speeding toward the nursing home fearing what he would find...this time he was racing toward Mercy's apartment with the same gut-churning dread. Driving too fast on the slushy roads, he skidded through a stop sign and kept going. Working to keep his car on the road, Kellan struggled to align the words he wanted to say to Mercy. He knew he might have but one chance to make things right. He wasn't going to fuck it up.

He pulled into a parking space near her complex door and nearly landed on his ass exiting the car. With a muttered curse, he hurried into the foyer and raised his hand before pounding on her door.

"Mercy, open up. We need to talk."

"It's a little too late for that, Your Honor," she scoffed from the other side of the portal.

"Look, I know you're mad—"

"Oh, I'm not mad, Kellan." *Liar*, he thought at the icy tone of her voice. "I'm quite fine, actually. Please leave and don't come back."

"You know that's not going to happen...not until we talk."

"Talk all you want...to the door. I'm going to take a shower. Bye-bye."

Her smartassed dismissal burned like acid.

Break the fucking door down, the angry beast inside encouraged.

No. Kerr had inflicted enough damage to her pride and property. Kellan wasn't going to destroy any more of her than he probably already had. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he dropped his chin and exhaled as he pondered the best way to reach a plausible compromise so she would at least unlock the fucking door.

He slid the ring of his keychain between his finger and thumb as a slow, evil smile drew across his lips.

"Mercy. Open the door, angel."

"Go away, Kellan, or I swear I'll call the damn cops."

Going to take a shower, huh? No. She was probably peering at him through the peephole, watching his every move.

"Don't make me repeat myself, girl. You know what will happen."

"Yeah. I do. Not a goddamn thing. You don't have a say in what I do anymore, mister. So fuck off!"

Oh, yeah...she's not mad at all. Bullshit!

"Fuck off, huh," he stated, lifting the spare key to her apartment in front of the tiny glass circle of the door.

"Don't you dare! This is *my* apartment and that's *my* key. Put it under the mat and leave!"

Though technically it wasn't breaking and entering...after all, he did have a key, Mercy could file charges against him that even *he* wouldn't be able to wriggle out of.

A newspaper headline flashed in his head: Circuit County Judge Kellan Graham Arrested!

Was forcing Mercy to talk to him worth potentially ending his career?

Yes! Hands down!

“Sorry, angel,” he softly replied. Sliding the key into the lock, he turned the metal. “I can’t do that.”

He tried to open the door, but Mercy had her petite frame pressed up against it. Though he didn’t want to hurt her, Kellan lowered his shoulder against the wood and shoved his way inside.

She stumbled back, mouth agape, eyes rimmed red, then let out an ear-piercing scream. “You bastard! Get the fuck out of my apartment.”

Before he could open his mouth to speak, Mercy grabbed a heavy-looking statue off the console table beside the door. Kellan dropped his keys and grabbed her wrist before she could knock him the fuck out.

“Take your hands off me,” she spat.

Fire blazed in her eyes, but there was a world of hurt mixed with her fury that damn near took him out at the knees. He’d put it there. Made her think he was nothing but a low-life cheating sleazeball. In a way, he was, and Kellan knew then that words weren’t going to be enough. He glanced down at her feet.

“Good. You’re wearing shoes. Get a coat. I need you to come with me.”

“In your dreams,” she hissed. “I’m not going anywhere with you. Why are you even here? Your little game is over, asshole! Go home to your *wife!*”

Exhausted. Stressed. Pissed as a lion with a sore paw, Kellan’s patience had reached its limit.

“Get your coat, or I’ll toss you over my shoulder and haul you out to my car without one.”

“You touch me and I’ll slap you with assault so fast it’ll make your head spin,” she countered angrily.

“Go ahead,” he shrugged. Fast as lightning, he plucked her off the ground and tossed her over his shoulder.

Mercy yelped and kicked as she pummeled his back with her fists. He felt as if he were trying to contain a Tasmanian devil.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Put me down. Goddammit, Kellan put me down. I’ll get my fucking coat.”

“I don’t believe you, sweetheart. See, I think the minute I put you down, you’re going to try and either kick me in the balls or run to the kitchen and draw a knife on me.”

“Argh!” she growled.

“That’s why you’re going to stop screaming, kicking, and fighting and let me carry you out to my car.”

“In case you didn’t get the memo, I am *not* your submissive.”

“Oh, I figured you’d taken back your control when you told me to fuck off.”

“Wrong. I took it back the second you told me you had a *wife!*”

“Fair enough...for now.”

“Where is it you’ve got such a hard-on to take me, anyway?” She asked. “I’m not going back to your house, so you can forget that.”

“I’m not taking you there.” He couldn’t mask the sorrow in his voice.

“Kellan? Please put me down. What’s happened? What’s going on?”

Her combative tone had vanished, replaced with worry and concern. Hoping he wasn’t making a huge mistake, Kellan bent and set Mercy back on her feet.

“It’s not good. It’s something I should have talked to you about days ago, but I-I couldn’t bring myself to tell you...”

“Tell me what?”

“No, love. It’s better if I just show you.”

* * * *

Kellan’s cryptic reply confused her, but it was the pain in his eyes that pierced her heart. No matter how badly she wanted to refuse him, turn him away, and block him from her life...she couldn’t.

She loved him.

“I’ll get my coat.”

A million questions rolled through her mind as Kellan silently pulled out of her complex. The snow was falling harder now. Wet and heavy, it clung to the trees. She was glad for the heat blasting from the vent above her feet and the warmth of her own coat. Mercy paid attention to the street signs as he slowly maneuvered the slick roads.

Several blocks later, Kellan pulled in to the parking lot of Lake Home Village Nursing and Assisted Living Center. She shot him a quizzical look, but he simply turned off the ignition and took her hand.

“We need to go inside.”

She didn’t reply, simply nodded at his staid expression. Mercy stood beside him as he punched in a code for the front door. A loud buzz sounded and he pulled the handle, allowing her to enter first. As he followed in behind her, she caught sight of several elderly people slowly walking the halls. Some leaned on their walkers as they smiled and talked. Some waved to Kellan sadly. He acknowledged their greeting with a nod of his head, then gently slid a palm to Mercy’s back and led her down a long hallway.

She felt a spiritless pall rolling off Kellan and wondered if his father-in-law or maybe mother-in-law lay in one of the rooms, possibly dying. His anguish was palpable. Its weight pressed in around her. She wanted to ease his pain but didn’t know how.

When he stopped at the doorway of the last room, Hannah stood, eyes rimmed red, wearing a trembling smile.

“I saw you pull in. I’m going to go sit in the lobby and give you two some privacy.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” He kissed his daughter’s cheek.

Hannah hugged Mercy and whispered in her ear, “Try to keep an open mind. Daddy needs you.” Then she turned and walked away.

“Step inside, please.” The devastation etched in his face filled her with shame for lashing out at him and trying to turn him away.

With a nervous nod, she walked beside him and into the room.

Tears filled her eyes as she gazed upon the once vibrant woman she’d seen in the photo in Kellan’s room.

“This is my wife, Leena. I know I should have told you about her before now, but...” He turned and drilled Mercy with an almost pleading stare. “I was afraid. Afraid that you’d tell me to...well, to fuck off, and you did. I’m not a misogynistic prick who fucks around on his wife. I love her...love her very much. I always have and always will. We shared an amazing life together.” His voice cracked.

He paused and stared down at his wife. A bittersweet smile graced his lips.

“The phone call yesterday... Leena suffered a stroke.” Kellan settled his gaze on Mercy once more. “I’m sorry I didn’t explain the situation before I lost control, and... I’ll take you back home.”

Mercy’s heart ached for Kellan and the guilt he was obviously struggling with. She gazed back at Leena, remembering the happy glow of her face in the photo...the depth of love they’d shared. The jealousy Mercy had embraced was gone, replaced by a feeling of loss and sadness that broke her heart all over again. Not for herself but for Kellan and Hannah.

Numbly, she let him lead her out of the room and back down the long hallway. Kellan stepped away and spoke to Hannah briefly, then escorted Mercy out the front door. An awkward silence hung in the air as he drove. She stared out the window as a million questions swirled through her mind, like the fat, heavy snowflakes that were floating to the ground.

When they reached her apartment, Kellan walked Mercy inside.

“Would you like to come in? I can make some coffee.”

“Coffee would be nice. Thanks.”

Mercy shucked off her coat and hurried to the kitchen. As she filled the coffeemaker, she watched Kellan glance around the family room.

“I haven’t had time to check with Amblin today, to see if they’ve picked up Kerr. Please be careful and...” His voice cracked again.

Mercy watched as tears filled Kellan’s eyes. She rushed to him and wrapped her arms around him.

“I’m truly sorry. Sorry for everything. I should have been stronger and held on to the discipline I’ve been clinging to for the past five years. But...every night at the club I spent watching you, I let you crawl a little deeper inside me. Dammit. I didn’t just break my own rules, I broke every Dominant rule with you as well. I wasn’t honest. Didn’t communicate. I failed you on every level, angel. I’m sorry for that as well.”

“Stop. You don’t have to apologize.”

“Yes. I do. I’ve made a mess of things. I had no right to touch you. The past few days I’ve spent with you have made me feel alive. *You* brought me back to life.” He pulled away, cupped Mercy’s cheek, and gazed into her eyes. “Being with you has made me want to start living again. Yes, I’m married, but Hannah was right, it is time for me to go on. To make a new life...new memories. Though I’d never ask you to throw away your morals or change your beliefs—God knows I’ve spent years struggling with that myself—I’ve fallen in love with you, angel. I want to build a new life...with you.”

The ground beneath her feet began to crumble.

Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Mercy covered her mouth to hold back a sob.

Kellan pulled her against him tighter, and she could feel him trembling. “I’m sorry I brought you into this mess, but I’m not sorry for loving you.”

His voice was thick with emotion.

The aloof and elusive Master was gone. In his place was a man...a mortal man with fears and flaws and all things human. He’d shed his protective walls and allowed her to see his weaknesses. Still, Kellan’s potent Dominant command—the same demeanor that had drawn her to him from the start—wrapped her in warmth and surety.

“I love you, too,” she confessed in a whisper.

* * * *

Kellan sat with one arm extended, clutching his dying wife's hand, and holding his weeping daughter with the other. Leena had suffered several minor strokes over the past five days, but Dr. Weaver sadly revealed the one that assaulted her hours ago would claim her from this earth.

"You'll always be in our hearts, baby," Kellan choked out as her breathing slowed. Tears flowed down his face. "I love you, Leena."

When she stopped breathing, Hannah cried out in anguish. She buried her head in Leena's lap and sobbed.

"Good-bye, my love," he whispered.

Kellan kissed his wife's cheek for the last time, then gathered Hannah into his arms.

They held each other and cried for a long, long time.

While he and Hannah sat at Leena's side, waiting for the director of the funeral home to arrive, memories marched through Kellan's mind.

Though racked with grief, he found solace reliving the happy times that had brightened his world. The love he'd shared with Leena was as unique as the growing love between him and Mercy. Both women were intriguing, rare, full of sass and humor and fiery passion. Kellan was a lucky man to be sure.

He'd come to terms with the guilt of living and loving again; saying good-bye before they wheeled Leena away was hell.

Kellan dried his eyes and led his crying daughter out of the nursing home. He held her hand as they drove back to his house through the gently falling snow.

When he and Hannah stepped inside the kitchen, Mercy met them at the door. Tears streamed down her cheeks and she wrapped Hannah in a warm embrace. Mercy turned her glistening aqua eyes up at him, silently asking if he was okay. Kellan nodded and placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

"There's hot stew on the stove and fresh coffee in the pot."

"I think I need something stronger than coffee," Kellan replied.

"Macallen," Hannah sniffed. "Make it a double."

After drinks and stew, they spent the rest of the afternoon sitting by the fire while he and Hannah reminisced, telling stories about Leena. At first, he worried Mercy would be uncomfortable with the funny and melancholy memories, but she laughed and cried right along with them.

Hang on to her. She's one in a million.

Startled at the sound of Leena's voice inside his head, Kellan swallowed tightly as tears stung his eyes. *I will, my love.*

The following Saturday, surrounded by more than a hundred friends, with Hannah and Mercy at his side, Kellan buried his wife. He'd known for five long, agonizing years this day would come, but he hadn't fully prepared for the emotional impact.

It was the hardest and saddest day of his life.

Kellan sat on the couch, sipping a glass of scotch, absorbed in his own thoughts.

Finality.

The word circled through his head. He'd not only buried his wife but had found a private moment to terminate his contract with Natalie.

Kellan had found the respite and fire he'd barred from his life right beside him.

Mercy silently curled up against his chest. Without a second thought, she'd extended her love, support, and understanding over these past heartbreaking and tumultuous days.

Kellan was finally at peace with himself.

It was time to give back to her.

“Go upstairs and draw us a hot bath in the whirlpool, angel.”

She sent him a smile, then kissed him softly. “I know you didn’t give me permission, but I couldn’t help myself.”

Kellan gazed into her eyes, feeling a different kind of warmth seeping into his system. He gripped her waist and dragged her onto his lap. Cupping her nape, he pulled her to his lips and kissed her hard. The heat of her body surrounded him. He let the warmth of her love melt his sorrow.

Straddling him, she ground her pussy against his erection and grinned. “We may not make it all the way upstairs.”

“Maybe not, but we’ll definitely be making something...making love.”

He kissed her, sliding his tongue into her silky mouth, and then cupped his hands beneath the cheeks of her ass. As he stood, he lifted her with him, never breaking the kiss that had grown raw and passionate. Mercy wrapped her legs around his waist as Kellan carried her up the stairs.

Anticipation mounted, sizzling and crackling in the air around them.

While he’d spent his days and most of his nights by Leena’s side, Mika and the Genesis gang had moved Mercy into Kellan’s house. The nights he did return home, he was too emotionally spent to do anything but gather her into his arms and fall asleep.

His past was now gone...buried in a patch of ground near a sprawling oak tree.

It was time for Kellan to start a new life...here and now.

He grinned against Mercy’s lips as she clung to him like a crab while he crawled onto the middle of the bed.

She pulled from his lips and narrowed her eyes. “What’s so funny?”

“You,” he teased before turning decidedly sober. “Thank you for...being you, Mercy.”

“You don’t have to thank me for anything...I love you.”

“I love you, and I aim to show you just how much, too.”

“Not if I show you first.” The mischievous grin tugging her lips melted his heart.

Reaching between her head and the pillow, Kellan fisted her hair and gave a little tug.

A flare of hunger flashed in her eyes. Her pupils widened.

Mine!

“Who’s in charge, girl?”

With a coy smile, she softly moaned. “You, Sir...always.”

CHAPTER TEN

Mercy had waited what felt like a lifetime for Kellan to hover over her like this...like her fantasies. But was he emotionally ready to make love to her? The sliver of worry that Kellan was moving too fast zipped through her head.

After he'd revealed that he loved her, he'd explained what had happened to his wife...the hopes and dreams they'd had. Mercy assured him she had no qualms loving a married man. Some might view her a whore, but she didn't care. No one could call her a home wrecker; the drunk who'd run Leena down held that title.

Kellan worried Mercy would think him an adulterer. Of course, she *had* thought that very thing, at least until she'd learned the truth. It broke her heart that he'd locked himself away inside a self-imposed prison for five long years. Still, she'd almost turned him down when he invited her to move in with him, but if they were going to survive in any aspect—be it friends or lovers—she had to trust him.

Mercy let him set the pace those few short days ago; she'd trust his decision now.

She closed her eyes as Kellan brushed his lips along her jaw, down her throat, nipping her flesh as he worked his way to the sensitive spot behind her ear. Tingles turned to goose bumps that peppered her arms. A whimper seeped from her lips while the ache between her legs grew and soaked her panties.

After slowly peeling off her clothes, Kellan dragged the pads of his fingers over her skin. His touch ignited that familiar warmth, the awakening of the man who owned her heart, sank into her soul. His masterful fingers circled the crinkled flesh of her areolas like a blind man reading braille. Lifting, she arched, scraping her stiff peaks against his palms.

Gliding his tongue down her neck, he pressed it flat against the pulse point. "Your heart is racing, angel. Are you excited about all the wicked things I'm going to do to you?" His voice was sinfully deep and whiskey smooth.

"Yes," she answered breathlessly. "Please, show me."

"I'll do more than show you. I'm going to draw every ounce of pleasure from your wicked body, over and over."

Kellan flicked his tongue at her taut nipple. Mercy gasped and softly raked her nails across his back. Unrelenting, he feasted on her breasts, one after the other, until her swollen peaks grew tender. Each scrape of his teeth followed by the swirling lave of his tongue melded the shards of pain into blissful pleasure.

He commanded her body, but not for his own sadistic pleasure. Even when he scraped his teeth over her inflamed nipples, Kellan heightened the pleasure with a blissful sweep of his tongue...melding the two opposing sensations in spine-bending harmony.

The torture was exquisite.

"Your skin tastes sweet...addicting." His voice was a raspy murmur.

A trail of fire ignited her flesh as Kellan skimmed his lips and tongue down her body.

Anticipation multiplied as Mercy lay trembling in complete surrender.

Inching lower still, he nipped the thin skin covering her pelvic bones. Her pussy clutched at the strange erotic sensation. She rolled her hips, unable to contain her mounting need or the moan that slid off her tongue when he settled his warm hand over her bare mound.

Her swollen clit throbbed in time with her pounding heart. Mercy ached for his thick fingers to part her folds and slide deep inside her weeping core.

Kellan had other plans.

Raking a hungry gaze down her body, he lightly slapped the fleshy bow between her legs. The vibration teased her needy clit.

“Oh, god,” Mercy moaned.

He replied by increasing the tempo and strength of each swat. Burning heat enveloped her flesh and Mercy slightly parted her thighs.

“That’s it, angel. Yes...wider for me,” he encouraged. “Wide so I can see your pretty wet folds.”

Bending her knees, she spread her legs.

Kellan dragged his fingers through her dripping folds and then landed a wet slap atop her mound. A surge of pain spread up her stomach and down her pussy, rolling beneath her skin to meld and coil at her clit. She stretched her legs so wide the insides of her thighs grew taut.

“That’s it, little one. Proudly show me what’s mine. I enjoy inspecting every slick pink fold...the ripples and ridges inside my sinfully beautiful cunt.”

“Kellan,” she whimpered.

He landed a quick but brutal wet slap across her pussy. Mercy let out a howl and immediately started to close her legs.

“No!” Kellan gripped her thighs and spread her open once more. “How do you address me?”

“Sir,” she gasped, riding the blistering wave cresting through her.

“I think it’s time we move past Sir, now. Don’t you? Call me Master, angel.”

“Yes, Master,” she replied with a quiver of delight.

The teacher had now become the Master...her Master, claiming her as his own.

Tears of happiness slid from her eyes.

“Good girl,” he praised low and lovingly.

Supporting himself on his elbows, Kellan stretched onto his stomach and began tracing his finger along the outline of her swollen, wet folds. Mercy mewled. Her hungry core clutched the empty air.

“Yes, just like I’d dreamed. Your cunt’s ripe like a peach.” He leaned in close and inhaled a deep breath. “Mmm, smells sweet like one, too.”

He smiled up at her and extended his tongue. Mercy watched, whimpered, and quivered as he slowly dragged it up her center. His chin glistened and he closed his eyes and moaned.

“Much better than a peach,” he growled. “Juicier. Sweeter. Oh, yes, angel, you taste much, much better.”

He gave her no warning before he lunged his mouth over her cunt. Lapping, sucking, scraping, he devoured her with his teeth and tongue. Kellan soon added his fingers into play, driving deep inside her as he suckled her clit. The roar of release thundered in her ears, but Mercy knew she couldn’t let go, couldn’t fragment into that explosive bliss without permission. A permission she feared was light-years from rolling off his tongue.

With his lips wrapped around her clit, he batted his tongue back and forth over the sensitive nub. The room was spinning, or maybe it was her mind, but soon she was going to go down in flames.

She sank her fingers into his thick, dark hair and held on for dear life.

But when he began spreading her hot cream over the puckered rim of her ass, sparks of lightning shot through her and she clutched his scalp.

“Oh, please...no,” she cried. “No. I can’t hold back if you do that...please, Master. Don’t.”

Kellan lifted from her clit and sent her a wicked smile as he pressed the tip of his finger through her gathered rim.

Mercy rocked her hips. Taking his digit deeper, she let out a lusty moan.

“Oh, angel. I’m going to love tormenting your tight little ass.” To emphasize his words, Kellan wiggled his finger as she tightened around him. “But I’m going to love fucking your sinful little hole, claiming you here a whole lot more.”

“Master!”

“I am...and I’m never going to let you forget it.”

The love and promise in his eyes melted her heart.

Without another word, Kellan dipped his head and began devouring her once more.

The lash of his tongue, the thrust of his fingers filling and stretching her was too much. She dangled at the edge of release by sheer will alone. Her body and mind fused, and Mercy’s keening cries echoed all around her as she melted beneath his salacious assault.

“Come for me, angel. Come hard!” Kellan bellowed.

He shoved his fingers deep and sucked her clit between his lips.

“Master!” she cried as the thunder consumed her.

Lights flashed behind her eyes.

Her muscles gripped tight around him. Mercy bore down beneath the weight of release.

“Jesus,” he hissed as she seized his fingers.

Blinded in bliss, Mercy shattered.

Kellan continued to thrust through her clutching tunnels, riding the waves of ecstasy with her as she screamed and writhed. Slowly, he brought her back down and eased from inside her. He crawled up the bed and gathered her boneless sated body into his arms.

Mercy felt his rigid, throbbing cock pressed against her thigh and whimpered.

She lifted her leg and shifted her weight until her folds enveloped the length of his heated shaft.

Kellan groaned and claimed her in a raw and urgent kiss.

Mercy ached to rise up and slide onto his cock. To feel him fill and stretch her as she rode him to the same oblivion he’d granted her.

“I need a condom.” His voice was tight, strained.

“I’m on the pill. I’m clean,” she explained breathlessly before kissing him again.

Mercy could taste herself as Kellan plunged his tongue into her mouth. He gripped her hips and lifted her off his pulsating erection. As he aligned the crest to her cunt, she clutched and softly kissed his wide, wet tip.

With a feral roar, he pulled down on her hips as he thrust all the way inside her. She tore from his mouth and cried out beneath a sublime and wicked burn that consumed her core.

“So tight. So hot...”

“Yes. Oh, god...yes,” she panted.

Kellan drew her against his chest and rolled, pinning her beneath him. He pulled back and dragged his cock through her fiery passage. Mercy wiggled, working to relax her muscles.

“Am I hurting you?”

“Yes, but it’s divine agony,” she mewled.

“Will you suffer for me?”

If this was his idea of suffering, she’d gladly take all the agony he’d give.

“Always, Master.”

“Arms above your head, slave.”

His declaration that she was his *slave* filled her with joy and pride.

All Mercy’s dreams had come true.

She raised her arms and gripped the base of the headboard, then stared up at him.

Love flowed from his deep blue eyes and surged into her veins.

“Use me, Master...use me to fulfill all your needs,” she whispered softly.

Kellan cursed beneath his breath. Bending low, he kissed her as he dragged his thick cock in and out of her snug core. He strummed her sore nipples with a featherlight touch, then laved and kissed the peaks, all the while thrusting in and out, teasing the tightly knit bundle of nerves deep inside her.

Like a conductor, he played her body, heart, and soul masterfully, building her senses to a blinding, beautiful crescendo, only to thwart her with a demand not to come. Mercy fought every primal urge inside her to stave off her release.

For a brief moment, she wondered if he would leave her suspended and suffering for infinity. But as she watched pleasure and determination play over his face, she knew his almighty control was crumbling as rapidly as hers.

Sweat dripped from his brow; his labored breaths mirrored her own. As he shuttled in and out of her, the friction of his passion and demand blazed her insides like fire. His shaft swelled impossibly larger, lighting up her G-spot and sending pulses of lightning to numb her limbs.

She was going to come. Even the fear of failing him couldn’t keep her from holding back to the tide within.

“Help me! Master...” Her plea-stained cry reverberated in her ears.

He gripped her hips and buried his cock to the hilt. Staring down at her with such unconditional love and devotion she wanted to cry, he jerked his head.

“Come!” Kellan bellowed.

They sailed to the heavens united in the blinding light of love and shattered into a million shards of ecstasy...together.

* * * *

Kellan kicked the snow off his boots, hung the shovel on the hook in the garage, and stepped inside the kitchen. Mercy stood at the stove and raised her eyes to him.

“What?” he asked. Quickly glancing down, he saw the melting snow puddling on the floor. “I’ll clean it up.”

She laughed. “It’s not that.”

“Then what is it?”

“I used to hate the fact that every time I looked at you, my heart rate doubled and my pussy ached.” She set the wooden spoon in her hand on the stove and sauntered his way with a bold, suggestive sway of her hips. “I don’t mind it so much anymore.”

He laughed and tugged her to his chest before wrapping his arms around her.

“Brrr.” She shivered and tried to wriggle free. “Your coat...it’s freezing cold.”

He grinned and held on to her even tighter. “What’s wrong? You don’t like the cold?”

“I can’t stand it. I’m from Texas, remember?”

“Why did you move to Chicago, then?”

“School...work...it sounded good at the time,” she said with a shrug.

“I’ve got some chains in the dungeon. I could lay out in the snow for an hour or so, and then drape them over your—”

“What? I’ve been a perfect sub for weeks. I haven’t tried to Top from the bottom. I’ve been working hard to learn all that you’ve been teaching me. Why are you talking about punishing me?”

“I wasn’t. The icy chains aren’t for punishment, angel...they’re for fun...*my* fun.”

Her eyes grew big. Her mouth opened and closed several times. It was all Kellan could do not to laugh.

“What’s wrong, little one? Doesn’t that sound like fun to you?”

“I think it sounds like the worst abusive torture on the planet...Sir.”

“Then I guess you’d better continue being the *perfect sub*, huh?”

“Oh, I will.” She swallowed tightly.

Kellan tugged her in close to his ear. “Not too perfect, angel. I kind of like your sassy attitude...within reason.”

“That’s good. Because it’s not often I can bite my tongue.”

“I’ve noticed,” he drawled.

God, he loved teasing her.

Mercy rolled her eyes, then kissed him quickly before glancing at the growing puddle beneath his boots.

“Feel free to grab a towel and wipe that up,” she quipped before heading back to the stove.

Kellan arched his brows, shucked off his coat and draped it over the hook by the door, then descended to the basement.

“Where are you going?” Mercy called down to him.

He didn’t reply as he stepped into the dungeon and snagged a long length of chain. He rattled it noisily as he made his way back up the stairs. Watching the doorway, he wasn’t disappointed when she appeared. Staring at the chains, a look of horror lined her face.

“I-I was only playing around with you, Master. I already wiped up the water. I was just joking. Honest.”

Oh, yeah...keeping this little minx on her toes is going to be fun...a whole lot of fun.

Kellan reached the top of the stairs and brushed past her. Mercy followed on his heels, trying to backpedal her way out of trouble. Pausing at the door to the deck, he turned and coiled the chains in a tight circle.

“I think I’ll leave those there for the time being, but watch yourself, angel. You never know when I might change my mind.”

Mercy cocked her head and studied him intently. “You’re messing with me on purpose, aren’t you?”

He shrugged and shot her a wicked smile. “Want to find out?”

“No thank you.”

Mercy quickly turned on her heel and scurried back to the kitchen.

Kellan stood in the family room and stared out at the ice covering the lake, then turned and watched Mercy stirring something on the stove. He made his way back to the kitchen and eased in behind her. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he buried his nose in her hair and inhaled the scent of soap and the citrusy lotion she used on her body.

“Smells delicious,” he murmured in her ear.

Mercy tilted her head to one side, granting him access to the soft flesh of her neck. “It’s a maple spicy mustard glaze for the pork roast I have in the oven.”

“I’m talking about you.” He lowered his voice, adding the edge of command that always captured her attention.

He smiled as he felt a shiver ripple through her.

“How much longer on the glaze?” he whispered dragging his tongue over the shell of her ear. Mercy moaned and stopped stirring. Purposely dragging his lips down the column of her neck, he knew she wouldn’t answer. She never did when he drew her focus away in such a manner. Kellan stepped back and landed a harsh smack on her ass with his hand. “Answer me, slave.”

“Five minutes.” Her voice quivered.

“In seven minutes, I want you upstairs.” He caressed the sting from her lush orbs with the palm of his hand. “Naked. On your knees with your luscious thighs spread nice and wide for me.”

“Yes, Master,” she replied in a breathless sigh.

As he left the kitchen and took the stairs to the second floor, Kellan could hear Mercy furiously tossing pots and pans behind him. A wide, satisfied smile spread across his lips as he yanked his sweater off over his head and stepped inside the bedroom.

Kellan passed the dresser and paused. A photo of him and Mercy, laughing at the Club Genesis Christmas party, now sat in a gilded frame where the photo of him and Leena once rested.

The conversation he and Mercy had had after Leena passed away came rushing back.

“I should go back to my apartment. I don’t want to be in your way. You need time to mourn.”

“Stay, please. I want and need you to stay. I started mourning the loss of my wife five years ago and stopped the day I met you. I can’t lose you, too, Mercy. I love you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Kellan.” She wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his chest. “I thought all I ever craved was your command, but I know now...I crave you...all of you.”

Kellan sucked in a deep breath, his chest expanded. From down the hall, he heard Mercy running his way. He had to bite back a laugh as she entered the bedroom, hopping on one leg as she yanked the knit yoga pants off the other. Finally freeing herself from her clothes, she slid to the floor, lowered her head—breathing heavily—and spread her legs with grace and flair. His cock instantly grew hard.

He silently circled her several times, drinking in her lush, heavy breasts, the straight line of her spine, and the sensual flare of her supple hips.

Mine!

Yes, she was his...in every way...heart, mind, body, and soul. Kellan was the luckiest bastard on the planet, and he damn well knew it.

“Are you hungry today, angel?” He stroked his hand over the top of her head, dragging his fingers through her hair.

“Famished, Master.” She raised her head and flashed him a greedy stare.

“What is it that you’re craving, my sweet slave?”

“You.” A coy smile tugged her lips. “Your cock.”

“My command?”

A flicker of delight danced in her eyes.

“Always, Master,” she purred. “I’ll always crave your command.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Jenna Jacob paints a canvas of passion, romance, and humor as her alpha men and the feisty women who love them unravel their souls, heal their scars, and find a happy-ever-after kind of love. Heart-tugging, captivating, and steamy, Jenna's books will surely leave you breathless and craving more.

A mom of four grown children, Jenna and her alpha-hunk husband live in Kansas. She loves reading, getting away from the city on the back of a Harley, music, camping, and cooking.

Meet her wild and wicked fictional family in Jenna's sultry series: *The Doms of Genesis*. Become spellbound by searing triple love connections in her continuing saga: *The Doms of Her Life* (co-written with the amazing Shayla Black and Isabella La Pearl). Journey with couples struggling to resolve their pasts and heal their scars to discover unbridled love and devotion in her contemporary series: *Passionate Hearts*. Or laugh along as Jenna lets her zany sense of humor and lack of filter run free in the romantic comedy series: *Hotties of Haven*.

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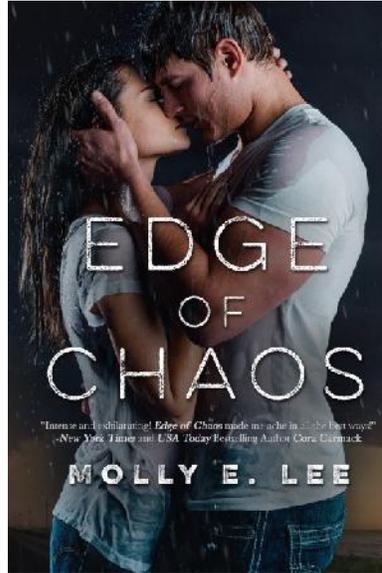
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Edge of Chaos

A Love on the Edge Novel

Molly E. Lee



Dedication

For Daren. The moment I met you I finally started living.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people I have to thank for helping me with this journey, but first, I want to thank *you*. Thank you for taking a chance on this book. You are what fuels the lifeblood in my characters and make the story possible. So thanks for that, dear readers!

Thank you, Daren, for waking me up. For enduring a life married to a writer, it isn't always easy. Thanks for being my best friend, an incredible father, and one surprisingly awesome plot-hole demolisher. I shudder to think where some of my characters would've ended up without you. My dreams wouldn't be possible without your support and willingness to supply me with coffee and double-cheeseburgers.

Thanks must be given to my amazing family. To Dad, for the years of encouragement. For always reading multiple versions of my stories, even the really awful ones, and telling me they were awesome. For the endless emails where I needed a pep-talk, and for the unflinching faith that I'd have my name on a book someday. Without your support, this book wouldn't be where it is now.

To Mom, for constantly telling me I could be anything I wanted when I grew up. I think I've figured it out now. And to my sister, for being a writer first and making my five-year-old self think it was the coolest thing ever! Naturally I would want to be like you.

I also need to give a HUGE thank you to these amazing ladies:

To Rebecca, the Golden Goddess, you make me want to be a better writer, better mom, and better person all around. You are my hero and there is no amount of words for how much I adore you. Thanks for the countless advice, guidance, and willingness to talk about proper names for naughty parts.

To Mindy, for your sharp eye, your amazing encouragement, and awesome friendship. For reading it twice (including the time your iPad froze on the naughtiest scene in the book and had to be repaired with it staring the poor tech-kid in the face) And for making my lines stronger. You are simply the best.

To Sam, the one who catches all the things :) You are a rock star and I'm really sorry I made you cry on the subway. Hugs and all the chocolate to you!

To Kimberly Lovell-Chase, Prerna Pickett, and Aimee L. Salter, you ladies rock and continuously make my work stronger. I'm beyond lucky to have such a talented band of critique partners like you!

To Esther, the Hot-Mama I can't live without. You're my constant cheerleader and my soul-sister. Thanks for always being there, despite how many miles we live apart. Without our hour-long conversations, I'd lose my sanity. And speaking of losing, the boys are *still* behind in our never-ending Cranium tournament :)

I have to thank Cora Carmack, for not only reading the book, but blurbing it too, as well as offering me so much guidance in the profession of our dreams. And for finding me first. You're the absolute best.

To Kimberly Derting, thank you for providing an endless supply of inspiration and advice. It means the world to me. And for the cupcake.

To Jamie Bodnar Drowley, thank you for choosing my book when I thought all was lost.

Thanks must also go to my awesome PR Team over at Sassy, Savvy, & Fabulous. Linda you are my Obi-Wan and Yoda rolled into one!

A giant thank you to my editor, Karen Grove, without your sharp eye and amazing vision this would not be in the shape it's in. You are a delight to work with!

To Regina Wamba and Yuli Xenexai over at Mae I Design, thank you to the moon and back for giving me a cover intense enough to carry my storm chasers. You're beyond talented and there aren't enough ways to thank you for how stunning it is! And to the models, Ripp and Mackenzy, for making the characters I love real.

Thank you to Nichole and Christine at Perfectly Publishable for sharpening the inside of the book and making it sparkle! You are all so seriously talented!

And once again I'd like to thank you, the reader. Don't ever underestimate the power you have to bring life to the stories you love.

Prologue

A storm brewed in Justin's eyes, a ferocity that threatened to shatter everything in my life. He leaned against the wall near the small kitchen with his long arms crossed over his chest, staring at the threadbare carpet like he wanted to set it on fire.

Damn it. I'd been gone *two* minutes. What could've happened in the time it took me to check out the closet in the master bedroom to piss him off?

I paused in the hallway and tested the atmosphere. I knew everything about Justin, had every look memorized. His ultra-short black buzzed hair, brown eyes, and trimmed goatee usually conveyed a mysterious charm, but when he shaped his face the way he was now, I knew we were only minutes from a blowup. He probably would've already erupted—what about, I still didn't understand—if the apartment leasing agent wasn't standing a few feet away in the kitchen pretending to go through paperwork.

I sighed and racked my brain. He'd been quiet on the drive out here, sure, but nothing indicated he was angry. Only two months until my freshman year of college and this apartment was one of the most popular among Tulsa students. We jumped at the opportunity to snag a place so near campus—well, I jumped, Justin kind of strolled.

Two things in my life were certain.

One, I would attend the University of Tulsa. My mother had attended, and all my friends had been accepted and were picking out dorm rooms or apartments, too. I hadn't even applied anywhere else because it just wasn't an option.

And two, Justin.

We'd met when I was ten and he was thirteen during a neighborhood kickball game. He was my first everything. First childhood boyfriend. First real date. First long-term boyfriend. First lover.

"Will you put the deposit down today?" The leasing agent, a blonde woman in a black skirt and blue blouse, asked, and grounded me to the present.

My eyes shot to Justin. He was a statue except for his clenching jaw. My heart plummeted into my stomach, stirring up the two Dunkin Donuts I'd eaten for breakfast.

I swallowed. "Could we have a minute to talk, please?"

"Of course." The agent walked toward the front door. "I'll just leave this folder here for you. It includes the floor plan, estimated water and electric, and the rent is listed at the bottom."

"Thank you," I said as she shut the front door.

The tension in the air mounted. I was so familiar with the sensation. A rough texture, like choking down a Brillo pad. A signature Justin blowup would occur in the next five minutes—he merely waited for me to initiate it, as was his pattern. After years of these, I'd almost rather eat the Brillo pad.

Oh well, fuck it.

"What's up, Justin?" I decided to mirror him and took up my own firm lean against the opposite wall, but opted to put my hands on my hips as opposed to crossing them over my chest.

He finally looked at me, the fuse lit. His brown eyes were sharp enough to cut me as he shrugged, the motion rippling the muscles in his arms.

My heart rate kicked up. A silent start was way worse than an instant outburst.

"Seriously, what is it?" I kept my voice even, not wanting to fan the flames.

He clenched his jaw again, and I almost lost it. I'd been tiring of these blowups for a while now, but I assumed once we lived together they would stop. He'd be happier.

Justin uncrossed his arms and took two strides to the kitchen, flipping open the folder the leasing agent had left on the counter. He scanned the papers and shook his head before meeting my gaze again.

"This is ridiculous," he said.

"What is? The rent? It's very reasonable considering how close it is to campus, and you know it'll be good for me to be able to walk to class."

"Me, me, me," he said, mocking my voice. "What the hell am I supposed to do, Blake?"

I opened my mouth to respond, but the air caught in my lungs. He had a stack of job applications in my car. We'd picked them up while waiting for the apartment office to open. There were over ten mechanic positions available in town, and two of the managers had even said they were interested in seeing what he could do.

"I thought..." He'd been excited about the prospect of getting our own place. Finally living together after all these years. He'd said he was looking forward to the move, a fresh start.

"Yeah, *you* thought. Why'd you have to pick a college that is so far away, huh? Why should I have to leave my friends because you suck at picking schools?"

"Are you serious? It's only two hours away! It's not like I'm asking you to move to Canada." I rolled my eyes.

Huge mistake.

Justin slammed his fist against the countertop, making me jump.

Tears formed behind my eyes, but I didn't let them drop. I'd seen him more pissed off than this at least he wasn't drunk. Something would've already been broken if he was.

He shook his head. "I'm not doing this. I've got a good job back home. There is no point in me moving here."

A knife slipped into my chest, his words searing.

He absolutely hated his job. Complained about it on almost an hourly basis called it mindless factory work. "I thought your dream was to work on cars? There is plenty of opportunity for that here."

He walked across the living room, and his six-foot-three frame towered over me. "I will do that, someday. But never here."

I looked up, searching for the man I thought he was, the man I knew he could be if he wanted to. He didn't reach out to me even though he stood only inches away.

"I've always wanted to go to school here. You've known that since you met me."

"Well, I'm not moving here."

"Are you scared of the change? Because that's understandable. We've lived in the same town our entire lives, but this will be an experience for both of us." I tried to touch him, but he flinched away, branding me with a menacing look that made me regret asking.

"I don't know why I let this idea go on this long. I'm not moving. End of story."

"You're making me choose between my future and you?"

"Your future? You don't even know what you want to do with your life. You honestly think you're ready to be on your own? You can't even pick a major!"

"I don't have to decide right this second," I said. "There's time to explore."

Justin rolled his eyes. "You don't have a clue what it's like out in the real world. When I was sixteen I was already supporting myself." He said it like he had decades-worth of experience over me.

Tears finally trailed down my cheeks, the pressure of the world building around me like a supercell.

“Please don’t do this. Don’t make me choose.”

“Are you really going to throw away our relationship for a bullshit school? Abandon me the same way everyone else has?”

“I...” The words stuck in my throat, my heart breaking at his mention of abandonment. The word triggered a memory, one I’d tried to bury but never really could.

“You’re an incompetent bitch!” my father screamed at my mother from the dining room. Five seconds later came the shatter of glass. It sounded like Dad had knocked a serving dish off the dining room table.

We’d only made it halfway through dinner before I’d lost my appetite and bolted to my room.

“You’re a selfish bastard!” my mom shouted back.

Grabbing the phone, I called Justin in a panic.

“Justin, can you come get me please?” I’d asked when he’d answered the phone at his aunt and uncle’s. Having a sixteen-year-old boyfriend when I was only thirteen made my parents crazy, but the fact that he could drive was a sweet perk at times like this.

“Blake, I—I’m not sure if tonight is a good idea,” he said.

“Please? I’m losing it over here. If I hear one more dish break, I’m going to slam my head into a wall,” I said, shutting my bedroom door to prevent him from hearing the fight going on just outside it.

He sighed, his hesitance evident in the weight of it.

“You don’t give a damn about either of us!” My mother’s muffled yell came through my closed door.

A part-groan-part-cry ripped from my throat.

“Just hold on, Blake. I’m coming,” Justin said and hung up.

I tossed the cordless phone on my bed and wiped the tears from my face, counting the seconds until he arrived. I met him in the driveway, not giving my parents the chance to see him, not that they even bothered to look.

He wrapped his arms around me. He smelled like leather and spice, and instantly his nearness lifted the boulder on my chest. He glanced down at me, smiling. “How about a movie?”

I nodded, conveying my thanks with a quick peck.

Two hours in a darkened theater had helped clear my head, but when we got back to his truck, I dreaded going home.

“Let’s go back to my place. I can always take you home later.” Justin started the truck.

“Thank you,” I said, not giving a damn about curfew.

It was a short drive from the theater to where he lived with his aunt and uncle. His mother had dropped him off there when he was six and never returned. They’d taken him in, but lately they’d been riding him pretty hard. Always on his case about breaking curfew or his slipping grades. Justin never had seen the value in school.

I tilted my head the second we pulled into his driveway. “What is that about?” I asked, eyeing the pile of boxes on the porch. I returned my focus to Justin, who killed the ignition. Even in the dark I could see his face crumple and his Adam’s apple bob up

and down slowly. A muscle in his jaw ticked, and if it had been brighter in the cab of the truck, I would've seen moisture hit his eyes.

"No fucking way," he said and jerked the truck door open, stomping to the front door.

He kicked a pile of boxes out of the way and shoved his key in the front door's lock. The porch light illuminated his shock when he'd turned it three times and it didn't work.

"What's going on?" I asked, gently touching his forearm.

He didn't answer, instead he pounded on the door.

I held my breath as I heard the lock click and then watched the door slowly open. His uncle stood with his arms crossed in a pair of blue flannel pajamas and his aunt sat on the stairs behind him, her hair disheveled and her eyes red. Normally this is where I'd make small talk, but the lump in my throat didn't allow for it.

"Uncle Kyle?" I'd never heard Justin's voice so shattered, so vulnerable.

His uncle shook his head. "We told you, Justin. You had one last chance. You break our rules one more time and you're done. And you had one thing to do tonight. One. To stay here and prove to us that you were capable of being part of this family."

Justin took a step back, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

The look in his eyes, complete and utter hurt, forced me into action. "Mr. Hobbs, it was my fault. I called him in a panic tonight. I'm so sorry. I didn't know—"

"He did," his uncle cut me off, his tone sharp. "He's known for months now that we weren't going to stand for this much longer."

I swallowed hard. I knew Justin had stayed with his friends on occasion for the entire weekend without checking in, even got caught drinking a few times, but what teenager hadn't? I never thought they would kick him out over it. I looked down, surveying the boxes. Some of them weren't even taped up. His clothes were wadded and tossed in there like they'd been packed in a hurry. "It was my fault," I said again.

His aunt sighed from the stairs but remained silent.

"No, Blake. It wasn't. Justin knew the consequences of his actions tonight. He has disrespected us for the last time." He fixed his gaze on Justin. "You hear me, boy? You've been so ungrateful after everything we've done for you, and I've had it. Take your stuff and get out of here."

Justin's mouth opened and closed a few times before he managed to get any words out. "Where am I supposed to go?"

My chest tightened. They were the only family he had left.

"Why don't you go to one of those deadbeat friends of yours? The ones who are so much more important to you than us." His uncle shut the door.

The sound the lock made could've had a microphone next to it. The click was so final.

Justin turned and sank to the porch, his head in his hands. I sat next to him, squeezed between his tall, lanky frame and a stack of boxes. After several agonizingly long minutes with nothing but our breath coming out in cold huffs, he looked at me.

Lost and broken. That was the only way I could describe his eyes.

"I'll make my parents let you stay with us. This was all my fault," I'd said and placed my hand on his back.

He'd shook his head, the weight on his shoulders sinking them lower around his

frame. "No. I'll figure it out on my own."

Justin's fist came down on the kitchen counter again, the sound snapping me to the present.

"How selfish can you be, Blake?" He glared at me. The look was so different from the broken eyes I'd seen that day five years ago. And though my heart shattered all over again for the boy who had lost everyone in his life, my anger over the word *selfish* burned my sympathy to ash.

Instinctively my mind conjured up scenarios in which I too had sacrificed things for him over the years. Like the time I'd used the money I'd saved for a down payment on a newer car to bail him out of jail because he'd neglected to pay three speeding tickets. How I never forgot his birthday and had to continuously remind him of mine. Or the fact that for years I had tried my hardest to patch things between him and his family, and when that didn't work, I'd done everything in my power to make him happy every day since.

"If you feel that way about me, maybe we really shouldn't be together," I said, my voice cracking.

Justin's eyes went from slits to as wide as saucers. He opened his mouth but shut it quickly. He looked me up and down. There he was, the broken boy. And again, I was the cause for his pain. Guilt clenched my stomach, but the battle between us seemed never ending.

"You want to break up?" he asked, his voice softer.

"I want us to make a new life here." I sighed. A life without the constant, exhausting fighting and making up we did.

"You want to leave me over this?" Justin was back to practically growling. "You can't leave me. You're all I've got. I can't *live* without you."

"You're not even willing to move two hours away for me. You obviously could live without me, Justin." I pinched the bridge of my nose to stop the tears. I'd been contemplating this for a while now. We'd been clashing more and more, the once easy camaraderie we had when we were kids faded with each passing day.

I heard a small click of metal and returned my gaze to him. My heart stopped as if I'd fallen through a frozen lake.

He had the tip of his pocket knife pressed against the soft part of his wrist.

"What are you doing?" My stomach plummeted like the floor had disappeared beneath my feet.

His eyes were wild as they locked on mine. "Live without you?" he screamed. "I *won't* live without you, Blake. Won't!" He glanced down at the knife and flexed the hand holding it. He hissed as the blade nicked his skin and blood slowly welled from the cut.

"Stop it!" I yelled, rushing to him. I gently grasped his forearm and tugged away his hand. I held my thumb over the wound, his blood warm and slick against it. I used the end of my shirt to wipe the blood away, thankful the cut wasn't deep. Cold fingers clutched my spine and icy pinpricks made my skin tighten.

"You see what you do to me?" He yanked his wrist away and held it to his chest. "You can't leave me, Blake. I'll die without you."

Chapter 1

Three Years Later

My childhood home smelled somewhere between chocolate chip cookies, freshly baked cinnamon rolls, and a hint of something spicy. I walked through the entryway, allowing the familiar scents and sights to soothe the anger pulsing inside me.

Justin had forgotten about me. Again. He'd promised to take me out on my lunch break since it was the first day of a new semester. I'd waited on campus half an hour. He hadn't even called.

I heard Mom in the kitchen and I turned down the hallway. She stood in front of the stove stirring a huge pot of homemade pasta.

Everyone said my mom and I looked nearly identical—with long brown hair and the same dark brown eyes—except for our height. She was a foot shorter than me and often was mistaken for my sister as opposed to my mother. I gave her a side hug. "Smells great."

"Thanks, honey. I figured after classes you'd head over here since you never keep any real food at that apartment you insisted on renting."

"That apartment has the sweet perk of being right across the street from campus." In fact, before heading over here I'd walked home to let my English bulldog, Hail, outside and then grabbed my car. After the blow-off by Justin, I craved Mom's company and comfort food. That and she was right about the "no real food" comment. All I had at my place was turkey and crackers. I seriously needed to go to the store, but I'd worked all week.

Mom scraped the pasta from the skillet into a large pale-green bowl and set it on the table. She returned for the bread as I grabbed our plates. She filled them before she sat down.

"It's not that I'm not grateful you decided to go to college closer to home," she said, handing me a full plate, "but I really wish you would've at least stayed with me. Think of all the money you could save."

I sighed, shoving a huge bite of pasta into my mouth. This was a commonly repeated conversation, but I never budged. "Do you feel like you don't see me enough? Because I'm over here every week."

"Yes, here or with Justin. You never go out and do anything else."

"I work."

Mom stirred her pasta. "Sure, you're really living it up."

"So are you upset that I'm over here too much or too little? Because it sounds like both."

"Neither, honey. I'm trying to express the need to explore things outside of your norm, but I'm not sure Justin would ever let you do that anyway."

Mom usually hit the mark closer than she ever realized. I'd never told her the real reason I'd decided to attend Oklahoma University instead of Tulsa. That the threat Justin made on his life had made my decision not to move. But he didn't control everything I did; I simply didn't have much time between studying, classes, work, and him.

"Anyway," she continued, taking a sip of her iced tea, "how are your classes looking?"

"Great. I'm finally getting into the upper level meteorology courses. I'm really excited about this semester."

"And I'm guessing since you're here, Justin didn't meet you for the date he'd promised?"

I huffed, making a mental note to stop divulging all my plans to her in the future. “No, Mom. He didn’t. And *I’m* guessing you bet on that, since you cooked enough food for me as well.”

She glanced down at her plate. “I told you not to fall in love with that boy.”

Those were the first words out of my mother’s mouth after she’d met Justin all those years ago. Her opinion of him hadn’t changed.

“Where is all this coming from?” I asked.

“Nowhere. It’s the start of a new semester for you, and each time you start something new I have the hopes that you’ll *experience* something new. I’m your mother. I want you to be happy. I don’t want you going through what I did.”

I pressed my lips together. My father had cheated on my mother after years of struggling with their marriage. Justin had been my rock during that time, allowing me to cry into his shoulder, making me laugh when no one else could. The comfort of that stability had vanished over the last three years, but the memory conjured up the evidence that those feelings were real at one point.

“I am happy, Mom,” I said, smiling in an attempt to reassure her.

“Are you really?”

I swallowed the piece of garlic bread in my mouth harder than I’d meant to. Sometimes I swore the woman could zero in on the days I was questioning my relationship better than a heat-seeking missile. I don’t know how she managed it, but I knew it wasn’t something I wanted to get into. Ever.

“Thanks for lunch. I’ve got to get back to campus,” I said, standing quickly and kissing her on the cheek.

“Anytime, honey,” she said.

I closed the door behind me, hoping the next time I returned she’d let the subject drop. I was grateful I had a mother who cared and was perceptive to my moods, but that didn’t mean I wanted to defend my relationship at every meeting. And lately, defending my choices when it came to Justin was becoming harder and harder.

* * * *

I leaned my head back against a bench on campus. Students shuffled to and from classes, filling the area with chatter. I tuned the voices out and gazed at the slate-gray sky with storm clouds rolling in from the west. The scent of rain misted the air. The grass on campus looked ten times greener with the gray backdrop, and I found myself smiling. From the look of it, a thunderstorm would hit in a little under an hour.

I dug my cell out of my pocket and pulled up Dash Lexington’s website. He was a professional storm chaser and the foremost opinion on local weather. I hit his site up more often than checking the news stations. He usually nailed it, and he had awesome chase videos as a bonus.

A late afternoon thunderstorm watch west of campus will be in effect until nine p.m. tonight. #weatherupdate #buybeerearly

I laughed at his most recent tweet displayed at the top of his site. Underneath it was a shot of the current Doppler Radar tracking the storm I had already spotted in the sky.

A picture of Dash sat just off to the side of the storm tracker, his credentials listed beneath it. The image always conjured up a giddy sensation within me, like some high school girl with a

celebrity crush. But it wasn't just because he had green eyes and strong features. I liked that his smile wasn't forced. It looked so natural, as if any inkling of a storm could fill him with an uncanny happiness—a feeling I understood well.

Pocketing my phone, I rose and headed to my first day of Physical Meteorology—this one focused on cloud physics and atmospheric dynamics—and found my sour mood from Mom's prying giving way to excitement.

I loved starting a new class because, like Mom had so adequately felt the need to point out to me *again*, my life was one big routine. Wake up, go to class, come home, study, go to work, come home, possibly see Justin, sleep, wake up, and do it all over again. Sometimes, if I was lucky enough, Justin would surprise me and take me to a movie or dinner, giving me a much-needed break from the full schedule of classes I had.

Anticipation soared through me as I neared the science building, something that only happened when heading to a class that pertained to my major Meteorology.

I'd learned early my freshman year that I got the same thrill when combining weather data to make a prediction that normal people got from doing extreme sports, like skydiving or swimming with sharks. And it wasn't just the excitement factor, either. Interpreting data came easy to me and allowed me to be the first one to know about approaching storms. It put me in a prime position to warn people about what to look for and when to take cover—and I enjoyed that sense of power. I wanted to track supercells and relay coverage on their progress. Submerge myself in storms where I'd always felt happiest.

Only two more years to go and I'd achieve that dream. Well, hopefully. I'd have to find an opening for a meteorologist on a network, but I'd have the degree that would get me there. The only silver lining from Justin's refusal to move to Tulsa and his threat if I left him was the fact that Oklahoma University had a highly respected meteorology curriculum. The prospect filled me with a sense of accomplishment. Like all the studying and working for minimum wage at the electronics store to pay for books and rent was worth it.

The classroom consisted of three rows of long black-topped tables, a large projector screen at the front, and a computer system to the left. I took a seat in the front, pulled a notebook out of my oversized shoulder bag, and opened it to a fresh page. Three guys were the only other students in the room, and they all huddled around one table near the back. They chatted with excited voices and sounded like they were discussing a past road trip, but I tried not to eavesdrop. Their easy camaraderie and banter made my chest tighten—the aching fingers of loneliness wrapped around my heart and squeezed.

Between classes, work, and Justin, I hadn't had much time to make new friends, unless you counted my bulldog, Hail, which I did. She'd been my best friend for the past two years. I had some acquaintances that I talked to in class or at work, but outside of everyday chit-chat, the only person I spoke with was Justin.

I supposed the boyfriend being the number-one priority was natural, though. It's definitely how he wanted it. There had been fewer blowups from him which resulted in less tears and less broken furniture since all my friends went off to college. And the few times I'd thought seriously about integrating myself into a new group of friends, Justin would remind me of the sacrifice I'd be making—the little time we had together.

Checking the time on my cell, I noticed the professor was a few minutes late. I tapped the Facebook app and scrolled through my feed. I'd lost touch with all my high school friends, but I still checked out their photos. Shots of party scenes dominated the newsfeed, each one with a string of comments about how awesome the event had been. A sting of jealousy bit my insides as

I shoved my cell back in my pocket.

I hadn't been to one party since I started college.

Justin had promised me a huge one for my twenty-first birthday, but when I'd shown up at his place it was instantly clear the party wasn't for me at all. He'd invited all of his friends because I didn't have anyone outside of him to ask, and he'd blared *his* favorite music—heavy metal—from the huge speakers he'd rented, as opposed to my preferred alternative rock. Keystone Light was the only drink option, not even cheap champagne or a bottle of wine for me. Not a scrap of chocolate in the place, either—didn't matter if I turned twenty-one or fifty-one, the best part of the birthday would always be the cake part. And I may have been able to overlook all of that, if he'd remembered to get me a card. Hell, I would've taken a *Happy Birthday* note written on scrap paper. Anything to show he'd thought of me in the process and not just him.

I shook the memory off and glanced around the classroom. I studied the pictures of different storm cell formations that papered the walls. An intriguing shot of a roll cloud caught my eye, so I crossed the room to take a closer look.

A fat, cylindrical, dirty-snow-white cloud stretched horizontally across green pastures that were broken apart by a strip of road. The sky surrounding it was dark gray with the orange sun attempting to break through the storm from behind. The sheer power contained within those slowly churning wisps of elements took my breath away, and a hunger to see something as extreme in person bloomed within me.

“Ever get a look at one of those in the field?” a deep voice asked, practically in my ear, making me jump.

I turned to answer but stopped short. My mouth dropped open. Oh my God.

Dash Lexington. The freaking gatekeeper to all my weather fantasies.

He stood less than a foot away, a few inches taller than me, with short sandy-blond hair and the greenest eyes I'd ever seen—clear and sharp like bottle glass. A wave of heat crashed inside me, sending my breath in a zigzag pattern. Damn, the pictures on his website didn't do him justice.

“No,” I finally answered and swallowed the lump in my throat, stopping myself from fan-girling about how much I adored his site and that he was in *my* class.

“We'd chased all day. Struck out each time. Then we caught this bad boy. It made up for all the busts.”

“You took this?” I asked, looking from the picture and back to him. I resisted the urge to face-palm myself. Of course he had.

“I'm Dash.” He held out his hand.

I took it and sparks shot across my skin with the connection. “Blake,” I said, releasing him before I combusted.

“How'd I do?” he asked, glancing back at the incredible photograph.

I grinned and shrugged as heat rushed to my cheeks. “You did all right.” I walked back to my seat in an effort to hide my own surprise at my boldness. Dash chuckled as he walked behind me and went to sit with the boys in the back. I swear the air crackled with electricity as he passed.

I looked down at my notebook and laughed under my breath while writing down the date. My thighs hadn't heated up like that since the last DiCaprio movie.

My quiet amusement died when I thought back to the last time Justin had awoken that excited flutter within me. He'd surprised me one night with flowers and a trip to my favorite

restaurant. That night we made love and it didn't hurt—most of the time he was rough, but he'd gone a little slower and I'd actually gotten close to having an orgasm. The last one was so long ago I could barely remember the feeling. It hadn't been mind-blowing. Not in the way I'd read about or even seen in the movies. Something I would never admit to Justin.

We'd lost our virginities to each other, and after the first couple of times, it wasn't so bad. He'd been more tender with me back then.

Over the years, things changed. I'd told myself it was due to all the stress he'd undergone—losing jobs, overdue bills, car wrecks, never reconnecting with his family—and I'd stayed quiet, wanting to give him the time to return to the more gentle man I'd fallen in love with.

After things evened out for him and the sex didn't change, I expressed my willingness to explore and find a better rhythm, but Justin wouldn't hear of it. It was either his way or no way, and he'd been set on turbo-doggie-style mode for years, probably from some god-awful porn he'd watched one too many times.

I racked my brain. When and why had Justin pulled out that surprise? It clicked after a second. He'd gotten drunk the weekend before and called me a C U Next Tuesday for not going out at 3:00 a.m. to buy him a pack of cigarettes. That was over a year ago.

I wrote the name of the class on the paper a little harder than I needed to.

"I know, I know, I'm running late!" A man with a bushy gray beard and balding head bustled into the room, toting a leather satchel and a cup of coffee. "I got caught up examining the atmospheric pressure in Starbucks. A terribly unstable situation there. The air has a scent to it that leads me to believe a supercell could erupt at any given moment. You can't be too careful when studying these things, you know?"

I laughed out loud this time, as did the band of boys behind me. Dash had taken a seat with them, not that I'd checked. I was left alone in the very front.

The professor set down his things. "Now let's get serious and take a look at who the victims are this semester." He trailed his brown eyes over each of us. "I'm Professor Ackren, and I see we have an upright bramble of students dying to take my course." He widened his eyes in exaggeration while scanning the many empty seats in the room. "No matter, only the strong of heart will come out of here victorious and set forth unto the unknown and chaotic profession of attempting to explain, define, and understand weather."

I liked him instantly.

He clapped his hands together. "Now. Who among you is an aspiring meteorologist?"

Only my hand shot in the air. I let it drop slowly, and sank a little deeper into my chair.

Professor Ackren approached my table. "Why, my dear, do you want to be a meteorologist?"

"I want to be the first one to know about the storms and relay the info to the public." The answer rolled off my tongue. It was one reason on a long list.

"You want to predict and track storms?"

I nodded.

"Well, then, your first lesson is that weather is never predictable and anyone—"he eyed the gang behind me—"who thinks it is, plays a very dangerous game. Storms are like poker, just when you think you have the game beat, someone deals you a bad hand and bam! Game over. Money isn't at risk in this profession; it's people's lives. Could be your own, could be those of an entire town. And that is why we must appreciate the nature of weather and its unforgivable unpredictability. You storm chasers should know a thing or two about that by now, right?" He eyed the group of guys behind me. I spared a look, and their faces were more serious now than minutes before.

Professor Ackren segued beautifully into his lecture then, and I had three full pages of notes by the end of class.

Walking across campus toward my apartment, I stopped short. Justin stood in the main quad, smoking a cigarette. He wore his oil-stained blue jeans and a black cut-off shirt, clearly marking him as a non-student, unless he was headed to a shop class.

“You’re extremely late,” I said, though I’d nearly forgotten about our missed lunch date earlier. I reached up and hugged him.

He returned the gesture with his free arm, smelling of sweat and smoke. “I got caught up in a Call of Duty match. Sorry. I’m here now. Wanted to see how you’re doing.”

“Really?”

He took one last drag off his cigarette and dropped it, crushing it with his scuffed work boot. “Yeah, what, you don’t want me here? Planning on meeting up with someone else?”

“No, of course I want you here.” I knelt down and picked up the crushed butt and dropped it in the trash can that rested a few feet away.

“Good. Let’s get out of here,” he said, grabbing my wrist and tugging me across campus toward his beat-up white truck.

I climbed in, electing to hold my bag in my lap as opposed to setting it on the floorboard littered with fast-food bags and twenty-ounce bottles.

“Where are we headed?” I asked, hoping he planned on taking me out for a late lunch to make up for the one we’d missed earlier.

Justin quickly turned his truck into my apartment complex and parked in front of my unit. After the Tulsa fiasco, we’d agreed there was no rush on moving in together, and it helped that Justin already had his own place. I’d gotten lucky scoring this one so close to campus.

“Your place,” Justin answered and killed the ignition.

I eyed the floorboards and shuffled my feet, my sneakers crunching the paper bags. “Unless you’ve got some groceries hidden under this mess, we’re eating turkey and crackers.”

“No big deal. I ate earlier.”

Of course he did. I held back my smart response of *thanks for asking if I wanted anything*. After all our years together, I’d decided we were both happier if I avoided arguments—no matter how small—at all costs. It was so instinctive I barely noticed it anymore.

Justin hopped out of the truck and I followed, trying not to pout. I dropped my bag in its usual spot on the floor next to the couch and scratched behind Hail’s ears. She lifted her head slowly and slunk off the couch to lean into my legs. Her butt wiggled as I scratched harder.

Justin shut the front door loudly behind us. Hail snorted when she looked at him and then waddled down the hall to my bedroom. The loud thunk from her jumping on my bed sounded a few seconds later. She’d never been fond of Justin. When I got her as a pup two years ago as a birthday present to myself, she’d growled and barked anytime he came near her. Now she merely tolerated his presence, retreating to my room with a grumble only bulldogs are capable of.

“You could’ve called, you know. Avoid me thinking you blew me off,” I said, turning toward him. My annoyance over him bailing and then showing up just to take me across the street mounted.

“I told you I was busy with the game. Anyway, you can’t be mad at me. I got you something.” He reached into his back pocket and held his hand out to me.

I took the two pieces of paper from him, examining them. “Blue October tickets?” I squealed.

“They’re coming next month. I knew you’d want to go,” he said, smiling.

“I thought you hated concerts?”

Blue October was by far my favorite band, and I’d seen them every time they came to town or anywhere within driving distance. Justin had always dropped me off and picked me up. He never came in. He’d always said concerts were overcrowded and lame, but he wanted to make sure I made it home safe—like he thought I’d get kidnapped by the band or their crazy fans. I’d laughed at the notion but never argued because if I got to go to the shows without a lecture or a guilt trip over it taking time away from us, then it was worth it.

Justin shrugged. “I’ll just drink through it, and besides, it’ll make you happy, right?”

“Yes.” Maybe he was finally putting forth that effort he’d been promising me for years now. “Thank you!” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him. “I can’t wait.”

He smirked and my muscles coiled out of reflex. I knew that look too well. He’d given me a gift and now it was time for his reward.

I barely had time to enjoy the spontaneity before I was hurtled onto the couch, my back hitting the cushions with an audible thud.

I gasped and looked up at Justin as he hovered over me.

His dark eyes held me for only a moment before his lips crushed mine. My mouth opened automatically underneath his, the pattern of his tongue familiar as it jutted against my own. He’d kissed me a thousand times, and it was always the same. His mouth moved hungrily, and he shoved frantic hands underneath my shirt. His intense desire was enough to stave off my resistance, and I tried to mentally switch gears as quickly as possible.

Justin never wasted time, and my jeans were quickly on the floor, followed by my underwear. I wanted to tell him to slow down while he slipped on a condom, that I needed a little more time, but I bit my tongue. It would only lead to an argument over how real men make love, so I took a deep breath in preparation as he turned me over and thrust himself inside of me from behind.

It stung. Not enough for me to cry out but enough for me to dig my nails into the couch cushions. He interpreted the scratching of fabric as a go signal and clutched my hips and pushed himself deeper inside.

“Justin,” I whispered.

He moaned in response.

“I’d really like it if I could be on top this time,” I suggested, and not for the first time. Despite my many attempts to take the reins and try another position, he’d never once made love to me face to face, and I thought perhaps I might enjoy it more from another angle.

“This is how *I* like it. Relax. I’ve got this under control,” he said, his voice shaking by his quick breathing.

I opted for another tactic. I reached behind me and grabbed his thigh, slowing him down. I closed my eyes and tried to control his movements by rocking forward and backward, but his death grip on my hips made it pointless. He quickened his pace within seconds, and I released a breath of frustration. He never let me be in control, not that I knew much more than him, but I believed my body and understood what it wanted. And this wasn’t it.

I breathed deep and let go of my frustration, knowing this would be over in minutes and I could escape to a warm bath—a tradition of mine since we started having sex.

In the movies they never showed the girl jumping into the tub for a good soak after she made love to her hero. Guess they didn’t want to show the reality of how painful sex could be if paired with a selfish lover in bed, and how the only cure is a good length of time under warm water. I wished at least one movie would, to warn girls like me.

He pumped his hips harder and grunted. I sighed in relief when his body relaxed. He pulled out and retreated to the bathroom for a few seconds before returning. Yanking up his pants, he grabbed my underwear off the floor and tossed them at me. I slipped them on gently, not wanting to increase the soreness already throbbing between my thighs.

“I’ve got to go. I told the guys they could have a re-match before work.”

I kept my face even when he mentioned COD again. I hated the video game because it usually won when the choice came to going out with me or staying in and playing it.

“Will I see you Friday after I get off?” I asked. My shift ended at nine—easily early enough to go out on a real date. One that didn’t involve delivery pizza and a marathon Xbox session.

Justin held the door open and paused. “Don’t think so, babe. It’s double XP points, and I’m having the guys over to pull an all-nighter.”

I rolled my eyes. More video game crap.

“You need to study after work anyway, right?”

“Sure.”

“Call you later. Enjoy your bath,” he said and walked out, shutting the door behind him.

I cringed. He was well aware of my after-sex habit and why I needed it, but he never asked if there was anything he could do to help prevent it.

And every time I’d tried talking to him about it, his response was the same—there was something wrong with me. I wasn’t able to handle how endowed he was.

I locked my door and filled Hail’s bowl with food. She waddled into the kitchen a few seconds later and inhaled the contents as I scooped the concert tickets off the coffee table to pin them on the fridge.

This was the coolest gift he’d given me in years. In fact, it just topped the geode he’d given me for my twelfth birthday. I’d been a huge rock hound that year—back when I’d found the ground more interesting than the sky—and he’d waited until the very end of the party my mom had thrown me to pull me aside.

I’d followed him to the middle of my driveway.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I want to give you your present. Close your eyes.”

I clenched them shut.

“Okay, open them.”

He held one hand behind his back and the other gripped a small hammer.

My eyebrows rose. “Um, thank you?”

He laughed and brought his other hand around, revealing a speckled gray rock the size of a softball.

I gasped, excitement soaring through me. “Is that what I think it is?”

Justin nodded. He sat the rock on the ground and handed me the hammer.

I gave him a spare glance before I brought it down on top of the rock with as much force as I could muster. It didn’t even crack. My shoulders drooped.

Justin took the hammer from me and let the rock have it.

It cracked like an egg under his strength.

I’d scooped up the pieces and treasured the white crystals sparkling inside.

He’d nailed the present, and over the years I’d often compared him to that rock. Rough on the outside, but so much more underneath. Though, lately, he’d been closer to the sharp points the crystal held as opposed to the beauty.

I took a deep breath and focused on the tickets in my hand. I could only hope the boy who’d

given me the geode was slowly returning.

Chapter 2

I eyed the tiny clock on the upper right-hand corner of my register screen. Only an hour left to go. Don't know why I was so excited to get off, wasn't like I had a fun date to get ready for, just a mountain of reading from the first week of classes.

Justin had called and said I could come over to his place if I wanted to, but the idea of watching him and four of his closest friends play Xbox and drink beer all night was less than tempting. He wouldn't even know I was there anyway, not with COD on the screen.

Scanning my next customer's three DVDs I tried not to be bitter, but it was hard. Routine smothered me, and I desperately craved to do something, *anything*. I handed the customer his bag of movies. Maybe I'd skip class reading and color my hair tonight, something wild like red or blonde.

"Hey there," a familiar deep voice said, snapping me to attention.

Heat rocketed to my core, and my heart stuttered.

Damn. Dash Lexington. He was gorgeous, but he had an approachable air, like it'd be easy to carry on a conversation with him.

"Hi," I said, grabbing his CD and scanning it. I held the CD up before putting it in a bag. "You like Blue October?"

His eyebrows raised. "Hell, yeah. They're incredible. You know them?"

"Been to six of their shows. They're even better live."

Dash smiled, and it lit up his chiseled features. "Agreed. I've only been to a few shows, but I'm going next month. You?"

"I'll be there."

He swiped his card and signed the pad with the cheap plastic pen. "So, Blake, who likes to answer every question in class, when do you get off?"

My mouth dropped for a moment. "I don't answer every—"

"Yeah you do, but it's all right," he cut me off, "gets me and the boys off the hook."

I handed him his bag as he stood there eyeing me. I glanced behind him, but there weren't any customers waiting in line since the store would close soon.

"What?" I finally asked, and hoped if I had ink or something on my face he'd have the decency to at least tell me.

"What time are you done here?"

I blinked a couple times. "Oh, less than an hour."

"Perfect, it'll still be happy hour over at Bailey's. You know where that is?"

I shook my head.

"It's a bar the guys and I hang out at near campus. Total dive, but they've got rated burgers and cheap drinks."

"Sounds nice," I said.

"You want the address so you can meet me there, or do you want me to wait so you can follow me?"

My eyes widened for a second, realization setting in. "That's really sweet, but I have a boyfriend."

He tilted his head. "And I have a girlfriend. Overconfident much?"

"I'm sorry! I just thought..." Blood rushed to my cheeks.

Dash chuckled. “Relax, I’m just teasing. I get it. You probably have guys asking you out all the time. In my case, though, it’s strictly a friendly invite because I wasn’t joking about the girlfriend part.”

He smiled at me again. The gesture was so genuine it calmed my embarrassment and tugged on my intense desire to shatter the routine I was stuck in.

“In that case, I’d love to.” My answer came quick and I swallowed hard. Usually I weighed the pros and cons on whether an event was worth fighting with Justin over. He didn’t like it when I went off script, but something in me didn’t want to say no to Dash.

“Awesome, I’ll hang around till you get off. Be easier if you follow me.”

“All right,” I said, the butterflies resuming their flapping in my stomach. I told myself this was because I was thrilled at the prospect of actually making some friends before I graduated college and not at all to do with how his lip quirked when he smiled.

“You should text your boyfriend and tell him to meet us there,” he said while walking toward the exit. He had his cell phone out and typed as well. “I’ll be out here when you’re done closing up.”

I watched him walk through the automatic doors. I saw the outlines of defined, but not bulging, muscles through his snugly fitted red T-shirt. I blinked and forced myself to snap out of it. He literally just told me to text my boyfriend!

I pulled out my cell phone from underneath my register and stared at it for a few moments, contemplating the right way to invite Justin. I knew he wouldn’t come out, not with his boys’ night in full force, but I also knew he’d want me to go home and study. Not go to a bar. The idea of getting to know Dash—a person I’d admired and respected, who also shared my field of study—filled me with a confidence I hadn’t experienced before. I finally shot Justin a quick text, and then proceeded to do my closing duties.

Forty-five minutes later I clocked out and headed to my car. I glanced at my phone for the first time since I’d texted Justin. Six missed calls. My heart pounded a little harder in my chest. Six calls on a COD night was unheard of.

“Hey, you ready?” Dash leaned against his black F150, his hands in his jeans pockets.

“Sure,” I said, stopping at my car parked a few spaces away.

He gave me a nod and hopped in his truck. I dialed Justin’s number while following Dash out of the parking lot.

He answered after the first ring.

“What do you mean you’re going to a bar?” he snapped.

“Hello to you, too.” A loud mixture of male banter and video game gunfire boomed in the background.

“Don’t get cute with me, Blake. Why in the hell are you going to a bar?”

“To hang out with some people from class. What’s the big deal? You’re with your friends tonight,” I said, sighing.

“That’s different.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I’m not getting drunk with a bunch of college assholes.”

No, you’re getting drunk with a bunch of drop-out assholes. “I’m not going to get drunk, and they’re not assholes. What’s the problem?”

“I know you. Ten to one you’re not meeting a bunch of sorority girls.”

“They’re guys from my class and their girlfriends. You could meet us there, you know.” I continued to follow Dash’s truck, which took me on the familiar route toward campus.

“I shouldn’t have to do that,” he said, the anger in his voice mounting.

“You’re right. You shouldn’t *have* to come out with your girlfriend on a Friday night. You should want to,” I snapped and instantly regretted it. Where had my fight-filter vanished to?

“I can’t believe you’re choosing to do this over your responsibilities. You should be studying, and if not that then you should be here.”

I gripped the steering-wheel harder, waiting for the guilt that normally hit me when he pulled those lines. It didn’t come. “My classes are under control, and you don’t even notice me when COD is up.”

“Whatever. This is bullshit. Hope you have a great time tonight. Try not to get roofied.” He hung up.

My mouth dropped, and I scoffed at my cell phone, resisting the urge to throw it out the window. I opted instead to shove it in my purse and crank up my stereo.

Going out with a storm chaser from class who had arms that tornadoes would change course for wasn’t wrong. I was an aspiring meteorologist. It was networking. Despite repeating this to myself, I was still fuming when I parked next to Dash’s truck in front of the bar.

The small brick building had a lone neon sign hanging out front. Posters with specials plastered the windows, and Dash held the door open for me as we walked in. The smell of cigarettes and fried food instantly hit me as we entered. Music blared from speakers in the corners of the small room, and a wooden bar took up most of the space. To the left were a few round-top tables with red leather bar stools and a shuffleboard pressed against the wall behind them.

The place was packed with people, most in OU shirts. Chatter joined the music bouncing off the walls, drowning out the angry thoughts in my head. Dash gently touched my lower back, sending another spark soaring through me. I tried not to freak out that the creator of the website I practically stalked guided me to a tall, round-top-table in the back next to the shuffleboard.

The other two guys from class sat there with giant frosty mugs in front of them.

“Whoa, who invited the meteorologist?” the dark-haired one asked. He wore an OU T-shirt and jeans, his brown eyes looking me up and down.

“I did,” Dash said and turned to me. “Blake, this is Paul Whitmore.” He pointed to the dark-haired boy.

“Hey.” Paul leaned toward me. “What do meteorologists get after a night of tequila and bad tacos?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, what?”

“Rear-flank downdrafts,” Paul said and burst out laughing. He stopped only long enough to take another swig of beer.

I chuckled. “That’s so corny it’s almost funny.”

“Don’t mind him, he’s an idiot.” Dash pulled out a barstool for me to sit on. He pointed to the boy sitting next to Paul. “And this is John Langston.”

“Wondered what took you so long,” John said, eyeing Dash. “Where’d you have to pick this one up?” He had a perfectly mussed natural red faux-hawk and kind blue eyes.

“I followed him here,” I answered and took a seat.

“Worried about me, John?” Dash asked and sat next to me.

I glanced at Dash. “I’m guessing your close friends call you Ringo?”

The two boys laughed while Dash pressed his lips together to stop his smile.

“Nice! We should start calling you that,” John said before taking a swig of his beer.

“No way, man. I’d be Ringo if anyone in this group was Ringo.” Paul shook his head.

I turned to Dash. “Confession time. I’ve known who you were since the first day of class. I love your site.”

“Whoa, stalker alert.” Paul arched an eyebrow.

“I knew we should’ve put our pictures on the site, too! You get too much attention, man.” John punched Dash on the shoulder.

He rolled his eyes. “Glad you like the site. It’s always a work in progress.”

“Well, I think it’s great. I have to ask, though, how’d you get such an interesting name?” I shifted in my seat and fiddled with a cardboard coaster.

“Don’t let it lead you to believe he’s cool or anything. It’s not his real name,” Paul said.

I glanced at Dash. “What’s your real name?”

“Ha! You’ll never know, sweetheart. He never tells anyone. Not even us.” John clanked his beer against Dash’s before taking another gulp.

“Why does everyone call you Dash then?”

“He’s always making a mad dash for shelter because he stays in the field way too long!” Paul answered before Dash could.

“I can speak for myself, you know.” Dash shook his head.

“In the field?”

“Well, technically it isn’t always a field, though I have had to sprint through several after a tornado changed its course unexpectedly.”

I couldn’t help but picture Dash running through a wide open field as a movie-worthy tornado chased him, hungry for his life. The image actually sparked a flare of terror in my chest. “How long have you been chasing storms?” I asked.

“All my life really. When I was eight I stole my dad’s video camera and stood on the back deck in the middle of a severe thunderstorm. A piece of hail ended up cracking the lens. I was grounded for a month.” His eyes shot downward for a moment. “That same year our neighborhood got hit by an F-3.”

I gasped.

“We were out grocery shopping when it hit,” he continued. “My parents had no idea what to do. Dad frantically drove toward home, like if he got us there we’d be safe. I remember looking out the back window and seeing nothing but a gray-white beast rotating and flinging debris all over the place. We made it to our street, but our home was destroyed. It took a dozen other’s homes, too.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, resisting the urge to reach across the table and squeeze his hand. “Was anyone hurt?”

“Seven people were killed. Two of them were our neighbors.” Dash didn’t blink for a few moments, as if he wasn’t at the table anymore but in front of his destroyed home. “I knew from that moment on I’d never let another tornado chase me...that it’d be the other way around the next time. And I knew I’d do everything in my power to learn as much as possible, so I could help people be more aware.” He swallowed hard and shrugged, like he could force the memories away. “Anyway, I’ve been chasing professionally since freshman year.”

“Wow, I bet that’s incredible,” I said, amazed at how he could take such a devastating experience and turn it into a passion.

“It is. You should come on a chase with us sometime. It really puts all those reports you’ll be doing into perspective,” he said.

“I’d love to, but I don’t know the first thing about chasing storms.”

“You know storms, Blake. We’ve all heard you in class. It’s like you were born predicting.

You see things in the sky others don't."

I parted my lips to respond, but my breath caught in my throat. I didn't know he'd paid me that much attention. "Still, I've never been in the thick of it. Not like you guys."

"Well, we'll change that," he said.

"Yeah, it'd be nice having someone else to listen to other than these two!" John said. "They think they know absolutely everything, and they never stop at the good gas stations. Pretty girl like you, I bet they'd stop where the clean bathrooms are just to be polite."

I couldn't help but laugh because I never would've guessed a guy with a faux-hawk would care about bathroom cleanliness. "So, what are all of you majoring in then? I thought all storm chasers were meteorologists."

"Common misconception," Dash answered. "Atmospheric sciences is our field. Though I'm minoring in videography and photography as well." He motioned his head toward John. "So is he."

John shrugged. "They really like me for my skills driving the Tracker Jacker."

"Fan of The Hunger Games?" I asked.

"Don't get me started!" John set his beer down. "These two give me so much crap for reading the books."

"I love the series, too," I said.

"Nice." John stuck his fist toward me.

I gave it a bump and asked, "What is your Tracker Jacker like?"

Dash patted John on the back. "A beat-up pickup with instruments hooked to the top that follows my beast of a truck."

John cut his eyes at him. "Yeah, act like you'd get anywhere without me." He turned his attention back to me. "I navigate the paths and am constantly connected to Doppler to help us get ahead of the storms. Can't always rely on Dash's 'instincts.'" John framed the last word with his fingers in the universal quotation mark sign.

Dash motioned to Paul. "He's a double-major, alongside engineering."

"Wow, that's a ton of work."

Paul shrugged. "These two have to have someone who can build useful and working equipment if they want to be the top chasers in Oklahoma."

"It's nice that you all have an important role."

"Still missing a tried-and-true meteorologist though." John eyed Dash.

He smiled at me. "Don't worry. I'm not planning on forcing you to join the team...yet."

I grinned, enjoying the thought of being part of anything outside my boring routine. "Does the University pay you guys to chase?"

Paul grunted. "Nope, all the funds come from Dash's website. We did just get a grant to build some probes—mobile devices with instruments measuring wind velocity, atmospheric pressures, and temperature—"

"She knows what probes are," Dash interrupted him.

"Oh, yeah, of course she does." Paul tapped the side of his near empty beer glass. "Well, ours won't be fully operational until next season."

John set his mug down. "We just have the tools hooked up to the Tracker Jacker for now. That and Dash's abilities to get the best footage out there," he said. "It's going to be a killer season."

"It better be!" Paul interjected. "We've spent the whole winter planning for it. I swear if I look at another map for more than five minutes at a time I'm going to set it on fire."

“Dash!” a high-pitched voice squealed above the bustle of the crowded bar and cut through our conversation.

Dash jumped up and grabbed an empty barstool from the table next to us, dragging it to the other side of him. A few seconds later a blonde who barely came up to my shoulder wrapped her arms around his waist. She wore a blue-jean miniskirt with a white tank top and her lacy red bra peeked through the fabric. Dash kissed her quickly and offered her the barstool.

Something sharp stung my chest. I chalked it up to jealousy of the tiny girl who had a boyfriend who liked to hang out at fun bars and pulled her chair out for her. Justin would never do that.

“This place is always so crowded, Dashy. It took me forever to find a parking spot.”

“That’s because it’s so good.” Dash sat back down.

“It’s crazy I never noticed this place before. My apartment is only a block away,” I said, glancing around.

“Oh, is that an invitation?” Paul asked, wagging his eyebrows.

“Negative,” I answered.

“Denied!” John shouted.

The girl eyed me from across the small bar table with an intense territorial look.

“Lindsay, this is Blake,” Dash introduced.

“Nice to meet you. How did you and Dash meet?” I asked, knowing acknowledging their relationship and her claim on him was a smart play in getting her to stop looking at me like I crashed her private party.

Her tiny pink lips curved into a smile. “I met Dashy about a year ago at an Alpha Chi Omega party. He’d asked the DJ to play some awful rock band—”

“They are not awful,” Dash interrupted.

“Anyway, I put a stop to that and the rest is history.”

I wondered if Blue October was the band she claimed was awful. “So you’re a member of that house?”

Lindsay touched her perfectly wavy blonde locks. “No, but some of my best friends are Sisters. Luckily one of them invited Dash to the party.” She hugged his arm. “How did you and John meet?” she asked, her eyes jumping from me to John.

“Just officially met him tonight.”

“Oh, well, then how did you and Paul meet?”

I shook my head. “Met him tonight, too.”

Lindsay cut her eyes to Dash.

“Uh oh! Busted!” Paul said, drowning his laughter with the rest of his beer.

“Blake is in our atmosphere class,” Dash said.

“I see.” Her voice was a pitch higher than a moment ago.

A young waitress with long black hair picked the perfect moment to sashay up to our table.

“Finally, I’m starved,” Dash said, eyeing the girl. “Seriously, Diana, could you have taken any longer?”

“Don’t start with me, Dash. I’m the only server tonight. Stacey called in sick.” The waitress took a grease-stained pad from her apron and pulled a pen from behind her ear. “Ladies first,” she said, her eyes landing on Lindsay.

“Salad, with Italian dressing on the side.”

Diana glanced at me. I quickly grabbed the tiny menu smashed between the napkin holder and the ketchup in the center of our table and scanned it. “I’ll do the BBQ burger with everything

and fries.” I slid the menu back in its place.

Dash stared at me with his mouth hanging open.

“What? I worked all night; I’m starved.”

He grinned. “You just made the perfect order my favorite actually but you made one big mistake.”

“And that was?”

“You didn’t order a beer with it.” He turned to the waitress. “I’ll have exactly what she’s having, plus a Native Amber. Bottle, not tap. Bring her one, too, will you, Diana?”

“Whatever you say.” She trotted off, quickly disappearing among the crowded tables.

I eyed him. “First-name basis with the staff?”

“I come here a lot.”

“I figured.”

Our food and beers came not long after, and I devoured every bit of it. The beer complimented my burger perfectly. Dash wasn’t joking when he said this dive had great food. No wonder it was packed.

We talked supercells and Blue October between bites while Lindsay pecked at her bowl of lettuce and pouted. She wasn’t obsessed with storms like the rest of us, but she was clearly obsessed with Dash. She hung on every word he said and desperately sought his attention grabbing at his hand even if he was using it to eat or rubbing his back while he told a chase story. I only noticed because I knew the gestures all too well. I used to paw at Justin that way, desperate for any kind of confirmation that he loved me as much as I loved him. That desire faded after time, natural after being together as long as Justin and I had been.

The thought of him returned the simmer in my gut. My earlier anger had been blissfully forgotten, lost among my new friends and their endless stories about storms I’d kill to see. I reached in my purse and checked my phone. No missed calls. He was really being an ass. I huffed and finished the last of my second beer.

“You all right?” Dash asked, leaning closer to me.

He smelled like Irish Spring soap and pure man. Heat from his body so close to mine landed on my skin. I backed away slightly before noticing Lindsay’s absence. She must have snuck off to the bathroom while I revived my anger.

“I’m fine,” I said, glancing around for Diana. Once she locked eyes with me, I held up my bottle. She gave me a nod from across the room.

Dash raised his eyebrows.

“It’s nothing.”

Diana set my third beer down in front of me, and I quickly took a long swig. My head was already fuzzy and my tongue was thick. I really needed to build up a tolerance to this stuff, but it wasn’t like I got a ton of opportunities to drink. The disconnected sensation was extremely welcome.

“Want to talk about it?” Dash asked, his green eyes never straying from mine. He put his hand on my back and tension I didn’t know I held uncoiled under his touch. He seemed like someone I could trust.

Maybe it was the beer.

I took another gulp. “It’s my boyfriend, Justin.”

He nodded, allowing me to continue at my own pace.

“He’s just so…” Where to begin? “Well, he’s super pissed I came out tonight.”

“He wanted you to be with him instead?”

“He said he did, but I know better. I’d be nothing but an extra body in the place.” I took another drink. It was probably a bad idea to talk to Dash about Justin, but I needed to talk to someone, anyone. And he was here, willing to listen. “He’s having an all-boys COD party.”

“Call of Duty, nice.” Dash smiled, but the grin dropped when I gave him a stern look. “Anyway,” he continued, “I’m confused; why is he pissed?”

“Because he’d rather me be at home alone than out with friends.” I went ahead and used the word, hoping that after tonight I really would be able to consider them all friends.

“That seems unfair.”

I shrugged. “He’ll find some way to apologize for everything tomorrow.”

“And you’ll let him off the hook?”

“It’s what I do. After eight years, there isn’t anything else to do.” Every time I even mentioned taking a break he threatened to kill himself—the last time he’d grabbed a bottle of pain pills he’d recently been prescribed after a small hand injury on the job, and said he’d swallow them all. My chest tightened at the thought, the rope he held me with constricting around my heart.

“Holy shit, eight years. You’re practically married.”

“Oh no I’m not,” I said, my words dragging slightly. Justin had brought up the idea of marriage more times than I could count, but I’d constantly squashed the idea. I always blamed my parents’ divorce, but really I couldn’t see myself walking down the aisle with him. I already felt bound enough. “It has been a long time,” I said and looked around the room for Diana. She handed Paul and John two more frosty mugs where they played shuffleboard. She saw me and nodded. “All my life really,” I continued, twirling my third empty in front of me. “It’s hard to remember anything before him.”

“That must get difficult. Not experiencing anything outside of him,” Dash said, his words terribly close to the ones my mother had lectured me with last week.

“Yep.” I nearly launched into the University of Tulsa fiasco. Maybe I’d had too much to drink, or maybe it was just Dash, but talking to him made me want to confess all my life’s wrong turns and have him tell me they were just detours. I tried to sharpen my fuzzy focus and grinned at Diana’s perfect timing as I took my fourth beer from her. “Thanks, this is helping loads.”

She eyed Dash. “She isn’t driving is she?”

“No. I’ll get her home.”

My eyelids were heavy, and it took me forever to lock on to him. “Where’d your tiny friend go?” I asked, happy to change the subject from my relationship to his.

He chuckled, the throaty rumble quickly becoming a sound that soothed my insides. “She already left. Never stays here long. Isn’t really her scene.”

“I get that,” I said. “You’re so nice. To her...you’re so nice to her.”

“How do you figure?”

“Just a thing a girl can tell.”

“A thing a girl can tell when she isn’t used to it,” he said, his voice growing softer.

“You could say that.”

Two more beers later and the crowded bar was on a permanent tilt. The floor swayed underneath my feet as I walked toward the exit, but luckily I had the strength of Dash to lean on. In the back of my mind I knew I’d regret this all tomorrow and be terribly embarrassed, but those things were hard to focus on—especially with the edges of my vision blurring.

I heard Dash say, “Whoa,” before I blacked out completely.

Chapter 3

Gravel filled my head—tiny pebbles that rolled around and caused sharp pains to burst throughout my brain. The smell of hot coffee hit me, and in the back of my mind I figured Justin had come over with it as a peace offering for acting like such a jerk last night. He had a spare key and could easily have let himself in.

The thought triggered my curiosity. I let go of the heavy blanket of sleep, and peeled apart my eyelids.

I saw blond hair instead of black.

The guy leaned over my nightstand only inches away. Adrenaline coursed through my veins. Sleep totally forgotten, I leaped up and hurled a right hook at his face.

He caught my fist a second before it hit him square in the nose.

“Whoa! Easy, woman!” he yelled and let go of my fist, backing up a few feet.

His voice and a clear picture of his face had me instantly sighing in relief.

“Dash?”

He held his hands up in the air as if I pointed a loaded gun at him. I glanced down. I still had my work clothes on from last night. I couldn’t remember how I’d gotten home.

Looking at Dash I made an easy guess.

My relief was followed quickly by sheer embarrassment. My very unsexy beige bra hung off my bedroom doorknob, and I had other equally unappealing clothes strung across my floor, plus an array of stuffed animals with their insides spewing out of their eye sockets and earholes, courtesy of Hail.

Between classes, work, and Justin, cleaning was always the last thing on my mind. Of course, if I’d known Dash Lexington would be standing in my bedroom right now, I might’ve made an attempt.

I relaxed my attack stance—which had to look absolutely ridiculous standing barefoot on my queen bed—and hopped to the floor. Had he taken off my shoes and socks?

Blood rushed to my cheeks, and I swallowed the lump in my throat.

“Sorry,” I said.

Dash smiled and dropped his hands. He eyed a tall white paper cup on my nightstand.

“Coffee. Figured you’d need it. Hope you like it black.”

“Only way I drink it,” I said, scooping up the cup and taking a careful sip. The richness soothed the pulsing ache between my eyes.

“Me, too.” He put his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight.

I took another drink, swallowing hard. “Can you give me a minute to change?” I decided it’d be easier to ask him about last night in a fresh pair of sweats.

He nodded and turned out of my door. I shut it behind him and quickly ripped off the smoky clothes. I tossed them in the corner next to my small black desk and kicked the other clothes littering my floor toward it.

After slipping on my softest gray sweats and a maroon T-shirt, I yanked my hair into a ponytail and walked down the hallway.

Dash sat on my couch, Hail practically in his lap. She leaned her massive white head into his chest as he rubbed under her neck. Her long pink tongue dangled out of her mouth, and I swear the bulldog smiled.

“What?” he asked, noting my open-mouthed stare.

Hail spared me a glance, her butt wiggling.

I took a seat next to them. “She’s never reacted like that to a guy before.” Technically Dash was only the second male to enter my apartment, but she’d never once acted like that toward Justin. She barely tolerated his presence. “Are you a dog whisperer or something?”

Dash leaned down and planted a kiss on top of Hail’s head. “Nope, but obviously I’m good with the ladies.”

I licked my lips, unable to stop my eyes from trailing his body. He looked unbelievably good, despite his slightly wrinkled clothes. I noticed he only had socks on and glanced around, spotting his shoes near the door.

“Did you sleep here last night?” I blurted out. My heart pounded in my chest. How much had I forgotten?

He tilted his head. “Wow, you really are a lightweight. You don’t remember me bringing you home?”

I shook my head.

“You were a challenge.”

Heat swept across my skin. Like, hard to get me into bed challenge? Had I been that drunk? I mentally searched my body for any sensations that would let me know if we’d had sex.

“You had a hard time giving me directions. Luckily you live so close to the bar. That is a sweet perk. You could walk if you wanted to.”

I sighed. Of course. I was terrible with directions—even sober. That *would* be a challenge.

Hail sighed and dropped across Dash’s lap. Apparently she decided he was staying for a while.

He rested his hand on top of her back. “I crashed out here since it was so late. I went out and grabbed us some coffee and came back. Didn’t want you to wake up alone and confused. Sorry, was that crossing a line?”

“No. Of course not...” I bit my lip. I’d gotten wasted and let a stranger take me home—well, a somewhat stranger. His website *was* bookmarked on my laptop, surely that had to count for something in my way of judgment. Thank God Dash was a perfect gentleman, too. A shudder ripped through me with the thought of what could’ve happened if he hadn’t been.

“It’s all right, Blake. I wasn’t going to let anything happen to you.” He reached across the couch and touched my knee.

My muscles uncoiled. Damn he was good at reading my moods. “How are you so...perceptive?”

“I’ve got two sisters, a great mom, and an amazing grandmother who lives right next door to my parents’ place. I never stood a chance.” He cracked a half grin. “I had to develop a sharp eye to spot all the mood swings you girls have.” He winked at me.

“Well, thanks, for everything. I’m sorry I got out of control.”

Dash laughed. “If that’s you out of control, then I almost feel bad for you.”

I sighed, finally at ease for the first time since I woke up. The possibility of relaxation surprised me, with Dash sitting on my couch, petting my dog, and offering the kind of friendship I’d craved for years.

I leaned back and took another sip of my coffee. Hail snored on Dash’s lap, not quite loud enough to cover up the sound of keys jingling outside my door.

Ice shot through my veins.

I jumped up and yanked furiously on Dash’s arm. Hail toppled off him with a thunk.

“What the—”

“Shh!” I shoved Dash down the hallway, Hail on our heels, toward my bedroom. I pushed him into my opened closet and gave him a panic-stricken look. I mouthed the words *please* and *sorry* before shutting the door in his face.

By the time I came out of my room, Justin was headed toward it. I closed my bedroom door behind me, cocked my hip to the side, and fastened an angry look on my face. It was harder than I thought, because while I was still pissed at him, I panicked on the inside. If he found Dash here there would be blood, and I couldn't put Dash in that position.

“What are you doing here, Justin?”

He dropped his eyes. “I wanted to stop by before work and apologize about last night. You know how I am when I drink...”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I know.”

The sound of nails scratching against wood scraped behind me. He craned his head in that direction. “What the hell is that?”

“It's just Hail.” Trying to get to Dash. I swallowed a lump in my throat.

“Dumbass dog.”

“No one asked you to be here,” I snapped.

His eyes turned to slits. “Stop being so defensive of your fucking dog! It's an animal, not a baby. God, sometimes you are so fucking sensitive. Look, it took a lot for me to come here. I *should* be at work already, but I wanted to say I was sorry. Now are you going to hear me out or what?”

My heart pounded against my chest, but I took a deep breath to slow it. Justin's arms were still loose at his sides so I knew his anger was at a safely low level. No need to heighten it. “I'm listening.”

“Like I said, I was drunk and pissed off because my truck got towed and Mark had to take me to pick it up. We'd just gotten back to my place when you texted.”

My mouth popped open, the question of where he'd parked in order to get towed on my tongue, but I stopped it. He often parked in the covered area of his apartment complex despite not paying extra for the space. I reached for his hand, noticing he wasn't wearing his watch. “Why didn't you tell me?”

He pulled his hand back. “Because I stopped needing a mother years ago, Blake.”

The way he said my name hit my chest with guilt, as if the jab was directed at me and not his estranged family. I swallowed hard, now understanding his outburst last night. I'd been the direct catalyst for his family kicking him out, and even though I'd tried for years, I'd also failed to reunite them, and he had no one to help him in tough situations like that.

“I'm sorry I took it out on you, but you going out with a bunch of science-geeks only made it worse. They don't have your well-being as their first priority like I do. You shouldn't have sprung that on me.”

“I hadn't planned on going out...” I rubbed my palms over my face. Explaining all the reasons he didn't need to worry about me as much as he did was too long a conversation to have while Dash was locked in my closet.

“Where's your watch?” I lightly grazed his wrist, shocked that he didn't have it on. He'd worn the gold piece every day since we were sixteen. It'd been his aunt's father's and she had slipped it into one of the boxes that Justin's uncle had left on the porch the night he'd kicked him out. I'd always believed the watch was her way of saying goodbye and that he wore it as his way of saying he still needed her. In my darker moments, I looked at it and only saw a golden

reminder that I was the reason for his abandonment.

He held his wrist out, gazing at the empty spot for a few seconds too long, before shrugging. "I sold it to get my truck back."

I sucked in a breath. "Justin, you could've—"

"Don't. It wasn't a big deal. Thing was a pain in the ass to wear anyway."

I opened my mouth to tell him I knew that wasn't true, but the look in his eyes quickly shut my commentary down. He wasn't in the mood.

"About last night," he forged on, returning to the original reason he came over. "Can we both agree that we're sorry?"

I glanced up at him, his tall frame made his head nearly touch the ceiling in my small hallway. For some reason I *did* feel an urge to apologize, but not because of going out with Dash and the guys. More to make up for the fact that he had no real family outside of me, but somewhere in the far back of my mind I knew it wasn't entirely my responsibility.

Before I could respond he pulled me into his arms and pressed my head against his chest.

"You're all I've got, Blake. I can't stand the idea of what could happen to you when you get reckless."

"I wasn't reckless," I said, despite knowing I could hardly remember last night. I was about to make a case for being able to handle myself just fine, but the angle he held me in gave me a clear view of Dash's shoes by the door, and I jolted within Justin's embrace.

"What's wrong?" he asked, looking down at me.

I took a step back and pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to hide my panic. If he saw those shoes... "Nothing. I just don't feel well."

"You see what I mean? You shouldn't hang out with that type of crowd." He shook his head.

"Weren't you already running late?" Anger came to keep my panic company.

He glanced at his cell. "Shit. You're right. Call you later."

Justin headed for the door quickly, and I thanked God he rushed out without looking down. I locked the door behind him, and waited until the sound of his footsteps disappeared before turning around.

I was surprised Dash hadn't bolted out of my room and left, never to speak to me again. I was clearly more drama than any ultra-new friendship could handle. He probably thought I was a lunatic, shoving him in there like that.

My cheeks flamed as I walked into my room, imagining all the horrible things he could say about me—like how I was so insecure in my relationship I had to hide a boy in my closet even though nothing had happened between us. Or the fact that I was such a lightweight, I blacked out half the night. And then he could always bring up the point that I'd let him, a near stranger, bring me home.

Hail sat in front of the closet, her hips swinging back and forth rapidly. I nudged her aside with my foot and cringed while sliding the closet door open.

Dash held my black sequined camisole over his muscled chest. He glanced down at it before pinning his green eyes on me. "Do you think this top is too much?"

A laugh ripped from my throat. I had to cover my mouth to stop it. "No, it brings out the color of your eyes," I said after gaining my composure.

The tension in my chest burst like a hundred tiny balloons. Dash slipped the cami back on the hanger and stepped out of my closet. Hail got under his feet so fast she nearly tripped him. He righted himself and took a seat on my bed, Hail jumping up beside him.

Dash looked at me then, and the light joking had left his eyes as he glanced toward the

hallway.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“You say that a lot, don’t you?”

“What?”

“*Sorry*. I swear, I’ve only spent one night with you and you’ve already said it ten times.”

My mouth dropped. I didn’t think I said it that much. I shrugged. “Well, I am. I know that must’ve seemed crazy, but if Justin found you in here...he wouldn’t wait for me to explain. He’d just start throwing punches, and I didn’t want you to get mixed up in that.”

“Guess it’s good I stayed put then. I almost didn’t.”

“What?”

He stroked Hail’s fur. “I was seconds away from shutting Justin’s mouth for him. I mean, I know I just met you, but that’s no way for a man to speak to a lady.”

I felt like I’d been punched in the chest. Justin had always spoken to me like that. I’d never thought of it as anything but normal. “Really?” I asked, imagining the brawl that would’ve ensued if Dash had followed through with his plan. “You seem like the type of guy who keeps a level head.”

He shrugged. “There are exceptions, but most of the time I am. It kind of comes with the job. You have to stay focused when you’re out in the field or you can wind up hurt, or worse.”

“True.” I sighed.

I wished Justin kept calm under pressure, but it wasn’t in his nature. Anytime the situation got a little intense, he’d resort to act first think later, and usually that led to me getting hurt at least emotionally. My belongings were the only things he’d actually physically harmed, and himself. I pushed the thought away.

Dash pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and glanced at it. “Ten thirty. You want to go get some breakfast-lunch?”

“You mean brunch?”

He patted Hail’s head before standing. “No. I meant breakfast-lunch. Men don’t eat brunch.” He smirked.

A thrill ran through my center, but it quickly fizzled. Justin was clear on where he stood when it came to me going out with anyone other than him. I gazed at Dash, a hollow feeling in my stomach—I’d regret it forever if I didn’t get to know him better. I thought about how angry Justin would be if he found out, but I reminded myself he hung out with his friends all the time. This was no different than that.

“Sure,” I finally said. “You want to call Lindsay? We could pick her up on the way.” I rummaged through my closet for some jeans.

Dash took a step closer as I turned around with my favorite pair in my hand.

“You know it’s all right to be yourself around me. I think it’s safe to say we’re friends. And my girlfriend doesn’t have to be there in order for it to be “acceptable” to hang out with you. I’m not sure if he makes you feel that way, but that isn’t how I operate, okay?”

The sincerity in his green eyes nailed me to the floor.

“All right,” I whispered and swallowed the lump in my throat. “Sorr—”

“*Don’t* say sorry,” Dash cut me off. He shook his head. “You’d think you never had a real friend before.” He chuckled on his way out of my bedroom.

I shut the door behind him to change but didn’t laugh. He was right.

* * * *

“These are incredible,” I said after I swallowed another bite of the best Belgian waffles I’d ever eaten. “How do you know all the best places?”

Dash cocked an eyebrow from where he sat across the table. “I’m on the road a ton during storm season, and most of our food comes out of a paper bag. So when I’m home, I only eat where it is exceptionally above par.” He took a drink of his iced tea before tackling a massive panini on his plate.

The quaint restaurant had a classic southern appeal with sleek wooden furniture and plenty of painted longhorn skulls hanging from the walls. The place’s spread for brunch was stacked with classics from buttermilk biscuits and gravy to chicken fried steak. There were small stations next to the buffet—one cranked out fresh waffles or pancakes, and the other had the made-to-order panini press.

“Are you ready for this season?” I asked, drowning a piece of waffle in the restaurant’s special pecan syrup.

“Absolutely. Nothing like the start of it...so many possibilities.” His green eyes lit up like he could see an endless line of tornadoes begging for capture.

“How does Lindsay take you being away?” I asked, considering the freedom in having a valid excuse for a two-month break.

Dash shrugged. “We only had just gotten together a couple months before last year’s season, so she’s only been through one with me. And she handled it all right, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“Well, she called...a lot. And she couldn’t really grasp that if we came back for a weekend we might leave again at a moment’s notice. One time we decided to track a supercell in Plano, Texas, and she lost her shit over it. Wanted me to take her to a foreign film festival instead. When I got back, she gave me the silent treatment for three days.”

“I’d relish a silent treatment.” I took a drink of orange juice.

“You’re telling me the way he talked to you earlier today is...normal?”

“Actually, this morning was his good side. He has an ultra-short fuse. Anything can set him off, and the blowups are horrendous.”

“And you stick around because...” He let the question hang there.

There were several reasons, but the main one I wasn’t ready to tell him. I sighed. “We’ve grown up together. He’s had a hard go of it. His family cut him out of his life at sixteen, and ever since he’s kind of lived his life like the world is out to get him. He doesn’t really have anyone else besides me.”

Dash crunched down on a french fry. “Everyone has hard times. Doesn’t give them the excuse to treat other people poorly.”

My stomach clenched with the thought that there might be another way relationships worked. One without blowups or threats. Or one where I didn’t have to keep an innocent outing like this a secret. “It’s not an excuse...it’s...just the way Justin is.”

“Has he always been that way?”

“No. When we were kids, he was funny and sweet. Charming even.”

“Well, surely he has some of those moments now. Right?” he asked.

I tried to conjure up the last time I’d found Justin charming. The day he’d given me the Blue October tickets came to mind, but the horribly selfish sex afterward squashed the charm right out of the memory. I hoped the kid I’d fallen for was still in there. Justin had lost himself somewhere along the way, and I’d tried to help him find it again for years.

“What keeps you and Lindsay going strong?” I asked instead of answering him. “Magic? I mean, she’s obviously not into storms like you are.” I challenged him to take the spotlight off my relationship. Speaking about it out loud made me analyze it in ways I never had before, and the result knotted up my stomach.

“Honestly, I don’t know. We met at that party and then we just kind of happened. I’m not normally a serious relationship type guy.” A flush swept across his cheeks, and he glanced down.

“You played the field,” I said. He was smart and gorgeous. He could play all his life and never run out of partners.

“Yeah, you could say that. I’d never been in a relationship longer than a couple months. Thought I’d give it a try.”

“Something must’ve worked since it’s been a year,” I said.

“She cares for me. It’s a little intense at times, but I just got tired of the dating scene after a while, you know?”

I looked down at my nearly cleaned plate.

I had no idea what it was like to be single and have the freedom to browse. I glanced up at Dash, his bright green eyes holding mine. He was fully engaged in our conversation. He didn’t check his phone or have that glazed-over, tuned-out look.

If I *could* browse, I’d look for something in his section. My heart stuttered with the thought and heat rushed to my cheeks. Not that he’d ever notice me in that way; Lindsay and I were starkly different. I could never be the girl he wanted, an ultra-pretty, social butterfly, like her.

“You want anything else?” he asked.

I laid my napkin over my plate. “I’m throwing in the towel.”

He snatched the paper check the waitress had left at our table. “You did good. I would’ve had to leave you here if you’d only grabbed a fruit plate.” He winked at me and headed toward the counter.

“Don’t you want my share?” I asked, placing my hand on his forearm. His skin was warm stretched over the hard muscle. A hot tremble ran through my fingertips.

“No. You can get the next one,” he said and slipped out of my grasp.

My heart soared. The next one—and I hadn’t even had to beg.

Chapter 4

“I’ve got to meet Paul and John at the lab before we head out on our chase later. You want to come with?” Dash asked as we exited class.

“Absolutely,” I said, stopping myself from asking to go on the chase with them. It had only been two days since Dash took me to brunch, and I was still a new girl to their tight-knit group so I didn’t want to push.

Dash motioned for me to follow him. We walked a short way to the neighboring brick building where a string of labs were used by students for interpreting data. He turned into the third door on the right of a long hallway. John and Paul were already inside and hovered over a table against the back wall. It had four computers spaced evenly on top of it and there were more scattered throughout the room.

Various maps and pictures of supercells lined the walls, not unlike our Physical Meteorology classroom. The boys had three of the computer screens up and running, each one showing a different image from a weather satellite and a station model weather map beneath it.

I hung back a ways, allowing Dash to join them, but couldn’t help smirking a little. I’d learned my freshman year of college that I was sharp when it came to interpreting weather maps, especially station models. The combined data displayed—air pressure, temperatures, wind velocities, cloud cover, and precipitation measurements—gave some people trouble when adding them all together and predicting the outcome. But to me, all the numbers and patterns aligned in my head quicker than if I was doing basic math, and the outcome clearly presented itself in my mind. That is one reason I knew I’d be a great meteorologist, because I could interpret this data on the fly and hopefully provide the most up-to-date and accurate report possible for the people in the path of a storm.

“Hey, Blake,” John said over his shoulder.

Paul gave me a nod while talking to Dash in hushed conversation.

“Hi,” I said, trying to focus on one of the images of a supercell hanging over some small-town water tower, but my eyes kept shifting back to the screens the boys stared at, begging me to calculate, predict.

“Come here a second,” Dash said after a few moments.

I set my bag on the table in front of me and quickly headed over. “Yeah?”

“We need you to settle something for us,” he said, eyeing Paul. “We’re about to head out on a chase, but there are two locations primed for tornado activity. I think this one with the squall line”—he pointed to the screen in the middle—“has more of a shot.”

“And I disagree,” Paul said, pointing to the screen on the right. “This one has a better chance.”

Dash sucked his teeth. “You see our problem.”

I leaned over Paul, who hadn’t moved from his seat in front of the screens. I glanced at each image of the sky the weather satellites provided for the two locations and then studied both station models beneath them. I had my answer within two minutes.

“I agree with Paul,” I said.

“What makes you do that?” Dash asked.

“Because”—I placed my hand on Paul’s shoulder with one hand and reached over to point at the middle of the screen with the other—“while you are correct about this awesome line of

organized storms, they'll most likely only produce damaging winds. Intense, sure, but not as likely for tornado activity as this one." I pointed to the screen on the right with the collection of large gray bubble-like clouds covering the sky. "This combination of mammatus clouds and the warm temperature are primed for producing a tornado. Check out the wind velocity already," I said, pointing it out on the surface map. "In fact"—I glanced at the clock in the upper right-hand corner of the screen—"hit refresh on the image. I bet you in the time we've been discussing this there is already an updraft developing."

Paul clicked refresh.

Dash smacked him on the back once the image reloaded. "She's right. Time to go." He turned to me, placing his hand on my shoulder. "Nicely done. That was fast."

"Wicked fast," John said, scooting away from the table and gathering his gear.

Paul flashed Dash a knowing grin before glancing back at me. "Yeah, you did all right." He smiled and walked toward the door.

"I'll give you a call tomorrow," Dash said. "And thanks."

"Anytime," I said, stopping myself from adding a *be careful* to the end of that statement. They chased for a living and knew what they were doing, but the concern for their safety was hard to ignore. I hung back to check out the other images pulled up on the screens, but turned my attention back to the boys as they exited the room.

Dash nudged Paul with his elbow as they walked through the door and whispered, "Told you she could do it."

I sank into the seat Paul had once occupied, my heart swelling. They'd given me a test and Dash had been the one to believe in me. The sensation was new and totally blissful as I turned back to the screens, staring at the location where my prediction sent them.

* * * *

"You ready?" Justin asked once I'd opened the door for him.

I smiled and nodded.

"Great, let's go," he said and swung around.

I climbed into his truck, my stomach twisting in anticipation. Justin had called last night and told me to be ready to go out at noon; he had a surprise for me. My jaw had nearly dropped to the floor, and it had taken me a good thirty seconds to respond. I couldn't even remember the last time he'd been spontaneous.

I'd seen Dash every day since we'd had brunch last week, whether it be in class, hanging out in the weather lab, or going out to eat, and he more than fulfilled the intense longing I had for a true friendship.

But Justin didn't know that.

I'd battled with myself ever since the first night I hung out with Dash, but in the end, I'd decided it was better if Justin believed I was studying on campus or working when I wasn't with him. I didn't like hiding it from him, but I also couldn't stand another ultimatum, and I was sure he'd give me one if I confessed how close Dash and I had grown as friends. Even if it was innocent, Justin would find a way to make me feel guilty about it. So, if I was going to feel guilty anyway, at least this way I got to keep Dash's friendship. And I hoped one day, possibly after I figured out how to get the two of them to meet so Justin could see how awesome Dash was, that I wouldn't have to be so secretive about it.

"Here we are," Justin said after a short drive. A genuine smile lit up his sharp-angled face.

He navigated the truck into a parking spot in front of a bookstore connected to the mall.

“What’s the occasion?” I asked, stepping out of the truck.

He reached for my hand. “I feel like I never see you anymore.”

“I told you my last two years in school would be heavy,” I said. It was the truth, if not absolute. Sure, I’d spent some extra time with Dash and the guys but never when I was supposed to be with Justin. When Justin would call, I was there. It wasn’t my fault he assumed I’d just sit at home and wait by the phone until he did. It was better this way. The blowup wouldn’t be worth the full-truth, and it wouldn’t be merited anyway.

“I guess I didn’t realize how engrossed you’d be with it all. You missed my call yesterday. I’d wanted to take you to lunch.” He tugged me toward the entrance to the bookstore.

I let the confusion show on my face. I’d had my cell on me the whole day, which I’d spent in the weather lab with the boys. He hadn’t tried to call.

“So where were you, Blake?” he asked, as he held the door open for me.

“On campus. Studying. Where else would I be?” I swallowed hard, the sharpness in his eyes making my chest tight. That look was exactly why I couldn’t let him know every detail of my free time.

He was silent for a few moments before he nodded. “Next time text me if you’re going to stay on campus on your breaks, okay? I go crazy when I don’t know where you are.”

I forced a smile, wondering why his words irked me more today than normal. He’d said the same things to me since I started school and I’d never questioned it. He’d always wanted me to check in once I got home or went to work, that wasn’t a big deal. But now that I had to hide my newly-formed friendships from him, I wondered how much his need to know where I was constantly was out of love or out of the need to control every facet of my life.

The smell of fresh paper and hot coffee wafted over me as we walked deeper into the store, the scents grounding me in the present. I shook my head, tossing the thoughts off as the over-analyzer I was.

“Pick out a couple. Any you want, I’m buying,” Justin said and released my hand. His tone was even and he smiled, helping to shove my earlier concerns and irritation down.

“Thank you.” I turned down an aisle, gazing at the variety of beautifully covered books.

His gesture made a flood of memories rush through me, like the tide of the ocean that had drawn so far away from my toes in the sand I thought it’d never come back.

Memories of when we were younger—our walks around the neighborhood that seemed endless and yet always ended too soon. Where we would let the moon and lampposts guide us as we walked and talked, discovering each other.

The special expanse of black walnut trees where he’d told me about his mom abandoning him, how he’d never known his real father, and how his aunt and uncle treated him like an inconvenience. I’d held his hand for the first time that day and told him about the screaming matches between my mom and dad, how Dad constantly had to buy new dishes or appliances because he’d break them during a fight, and how the arguments were increasing in frequency. He’d rushed to meet me in that spot, no matter the time, whenever I’d called him, frantic after another fight between my parents.

The phone calls that carried on late in the night—well beyond the warnings from Mom to end the conversation for bedtime—after his aunt and uncle had moved him across town.

The Justin I remembered brought a warmth to my heart and a longing for him to be that compassionate again. He’d lost the sweetness somewhere between high school and now. The blowups started his sophomore year, the same year he’d been kicked out of his home and had to

fend for himself.

Now, as he followed me down the adult paranormal section, that sweet side of Justin didn't seem as far away. I'd often hoped one day I'd be able to help draw out a balance in him, one where the boy I fell in love with would merge with the man he could be if he allowed his motivations to go beyond that of Xbox points and most beer cans collected. As he trailed behind me, I thought perhaps this was a small step toward that balance. Maybe he wouldn't care if I told him about Dash and the guys, maybe he'd actually want to meet them.

"I know you'll be a while, so I'm going to look around. Come find me when you're done," he said, cutting through my thoughts.

"All right," I answered, watching him turn and walk away.

I lost myself then, amongst the books and memories of Justin. Like the times he'd show up outside my high school after classes had ended, a new DVD and a sack full of glorious junk food in his truck, and nothing but time to watch it and laugh and simply be together. If I'd known then that those moments would disappear over the years, I may have treasured them a bit more.

I finally settled on a couple of novels, clutching them to my chest as I took a slow stroll through the store, scanning the aisles for Justin. First the Blue October tickets and now this. My chest tightened a fraction, and ice settled in my stomach with the thought of the reward he'd expect when we arrived home.

I pushed the thought away, allowing his sweet spontaneity to take over, and contemplated sashaying through the erotica novels. Perhaps a quick skim of one and I could find the answer to our problem—or my problem as he'd so often put it.

A vibration in my pocket distracted me and I pulled my cell phone out.

Want to grab a late lunch? Dash texted.

A warmth bloomed inside my chest. This was my chance. Justin was in a great mood, and it would be the perfect time to introduce them—put an end to hiding my new friends.

I searched harder for Justin. The thought of the two meeting made me a little anxious. I wanted them to like each other, but they were polar opposites.

When I didn't lock on to his tall frame anywhere in the store, I deflated. I know I'd taken a little over a half an hour in the overwhelming obstacle of choosing just two books, but I thought that was pretty reasonable.

After two unanswered calls to his cell—guess it was perfectly fine for *him* to ignore *my* calls—and twenty minutes of waiting, I gave up and bought the books myself. I grabbed my bag with the novels nestled inside and headed toward the exit leading into the main area of the mall. I had an easy guess where he was.

A short walk and two turns later, I entered the video game store. Huge neon signs reading *One Day Only, 60% Off Store Wide* bombarded the glass windows at the entrance, hung on the walls, and stood on stands throughout the aisles. The store was packed, too, people crowding the rows of games separated into which console they went with, and a line snaked out the exit.

I spotted Justin in the 360 section, four games tucked under one arm as he scanned another with his free hand.

"Justin," I said, weaving through five boys just to get to him.

He glanced up from the game he held. "Some sale, huh?"

"You knew about it." It wasn't a question or an accusation, just a fact.

He shrugged. "I may have heard about it last week."

I sighed, eyeing the games in his hands. "Don't you already have that one?" I pointed to the one I recognized under his arm.

“Yeah, but this is a special edition. You get four exclusive maps with it.” He grabbed it and showed it to me.

My stomach tied into knots. I glared at the games, sizing up my competition. Sadness slithered through my blood when I realized how many times they’d beaten me.

“You found some books?” Justin asked, glancing at the bag in my hand.

“Yeah,” I said, holding the bag up and shrugging.

“I’ll get the next ones for you, okay?” he said and went back to browsing the games on the shelf.

I pressed my lips together and nodded.

“Actually, I’m going to need to borrow some money.” He gave me puppy eyes, but he looked more desperate than charming.

I gripped the bag I held a little tighter. “How much?”

Justin eyed the games in his hands, then looked over the endless array before him. “A couple hundred should do it.”

My mouth dropped and I scoffed. “You’re joking!”

“This is a once-a-year sale, Blake.”

“Why didn’t you save up for it then?” I asked. An image of the new stereo he’d bought for his truck last week popped into my mind. Followed by a visual of the subwoofer he had on hold to go with it.

“Oh, come on, it’s not like you ever buy anything with your paychecks,” he whined.

He knew most of the money I earned went to rent, books, and food. Whatever I had left I saved, other than treating myself to the occasional book or movie.

“I know you’ve got plenty in your savings. I’ll pay you back,” he urged.

He had yet to pay me back for the money he’d borrowed last year for a new set of fishing poles. I sighed. The money wasn’t what really bothered me.

“This is why you brought me here today, isn’t it?” Anger simmered in my gut, setting the tight knots on fire.

“What is the big fucking deal, Blake? This way we both get what we want.”

What I really wanted was time with him that didn’t come with conditions or arguments or lectures on where and how I spent my time. I swallowed the lump in my throat. His actions today had nothing to do with me. God, I was stupid sometimes.

“Not this time, Justin.”

“Why the fuck not?”

I glanced down. “If you have to ask, then it’s not even worth explaining.”

“I had to sell my watch for you!” he snapped.

I flinched, as if he’d physically stunned me. “What? You sold it to get your truck back.”

“But I wouldn’t have had to do that if I hadn’t just bought you those Blue October tickets.”

My heart sank. I stood there, floundering in my own guilt for a few moments, contemplating pulling out all the extra cash I had and shoving it into his hands. Then I saw the games he held and the guilt turned to a burning anger. “No. I don’t buy that, Justin. You could’ve easily sold your collection of video games and Xbox to get your truck back. Hell, you could’ve sold that big-ass TV, too, or even asked me then to borrow money. But you didn’t. *You* made the choice, so don’t you dare put something like that on me.”

His eyes popped before narrowing. I saw the shock. It’d been too long since I’d called him on his bullshit. He stomped off without saying a word to contradict me.

Normally I would’ve followed him and given him the money just to avoid the fight, and

being left behind without a ride—which he'd done to me twice in the past.

Not today. I grabbed my cell phone again.

Can you pick me up at the bookstore in the mall? I shot Dash another text, my fingers shaking with adrenaline. Justin blew up all the time, but today it struck a new chord, like a tap to a freshly exposed nerve.

Of course. I know a great Mexican place a block away from there. See you in ten.

* * * *

An hour and a half later, I set my napkin on my half-cleaned plate and leaned back in food defeat.

Dash sat across from me and shoveled another chip with a heaping pile of salsa on it into his mouth. The restaurant smelled of peppers and fried chips, and the food, of course, had been delicious.

“Did he say anything when you left?” Dash asked after taking a gulp of iced tea.

“I didn’t wait around to hear it this time,” I said, still shocked I’d walked away from Justin in the video game store. I’d told him I found another ride home and just...left. Never, in our entire relationship, had I had the nerve to do that. I glanced across the table at Dash, knowing our friendship contributed to my new boldness.

“Good job. That was a jerk move, even by guy standards.”

“Thank you.” I sighed, the relief of being understood was so intense it was almost unnerving. I hadn’t been able to unload my fights with Justin on anyone before—Mom, the only other person I really talked to, didn’t care for him and would never hear me out.

“Does he do that a lot?”

“What? Act like he’s doing something for me and then I realize it’s really about him? Or ask me for money?” I fiddled with the sugar packets on the table.

“Both.”

I brought my gaze back to him.

He leaned back in his seat and shook his head. “Can’t help you there. Lindsay has got more money than she knows what to do with.”

“It’s all right. You help just by listening. Sorry I talk your ear off all the time,” I said. How much personal history *had* we covered in the past week? Nearly all of it, I realized. Talking to Dash was just so easy. He listened and actually tuned in, like no one else existed outside of our conversation. A stab of jealousy hit me, thinking this is how he must treat Lindsay all the time.

“I enjoy it. Honestly, who else could keep up with me about storms and Blue October? And that’s not even mentioning our similar taste in movies.”

“You’ve got a point,” I said. Yesterday we’d had an hour-long conversation about why *The Departed* deserved to be in the top ten best movies of all time list. And then a thought that hadn’t occurred to me popped into my head. “Do you talk to Lindsay about us?”

His eyes widened.

“That came out wrong.” My cheeks flushed. “I meant, does she get upset about the time you spend with me?” I rubbed my hands together underneath the table, wondering if he had to hide our friendship as well.

“No. We’re friends and we have nearly the same career plans; of course we’re going to spend time together.” Dash nodded at the waitress at the table across from us.

“Oh.”

“Does he give you a hard time about it?”

I broke our gaze, staring down at the table. “I haven’t told him.”

He stayed silent so long I finally glanced up. Damn it, he looked at me with pity in his eyes. I never wanted to see that from him. “I’ve gathered, from the stories you’ve told, and what little I heard from him that first day I hid in your room, that he is the kind of man who wouldn’t approve of us getting close. Regardless of us just being friends?”

“It’d be a battle, and I’m so tired of fighting. Do you think I’m an awful person for hiding this? Is it...crazy?” The more I thought about it the more it felt like I was having an affair minus the whole sex part.

“You’re an amazing person, Blake. Never think otherwise. You know him better than anyone. And if you need me to pop the brakes I can—”

“No.” I cut him off, hoping he didn’t hear the desperation in my voice. My happiness had increased tenfold since he’d come into my life. “This is all on me. It would be fine. I’m just not ready to have that argument yet.”

Dash bit the corner of his lip. “Sounds like he gives you too much grief over everything. Do you want to talk about it?”

I did. “No. It’s just me. Over analyzing is what I do.” I paired my answer with a full smile, trying to shrug off the serious turn the conversation took.

“Well, you do have a talent for it.” He leaned a little closer over the table. “But if you ever do want to talk, about anything, you know I’m here, right?”

I nodded because I was afraid my voice would crack if I responded. A warmth soothed the confusion and guilt that bit my insides.

The waitress set down the check and cleared our plates, completely breaking the tension that I had brought to lunch. I reached for the paper, but Dash snatched it from me.

“It’s my turn.” I tried to grab it from him.

He held it out of my reach. “I know, but you’ve already had one man hitting you up for money today. I will not be the second.” He winked at me.

Heat rushed through my core and kick-started my heart. “This is different. It’s lunch, not a stack of video games.”

Dash dug in his back pocket for his wallet, the corded muscle in his forearm flexing with the motion. I grabbed my iced tea and took a good long drink.

“I’m well aware of that, Blake,” he said, planting his green eyes on mine and daring me to argue. “Just consider it my attempt to show you not all men are self-centered video game addicts.” He handed his credit card and the check to the waitress who’d returned to our table.

My eyebrows shot up at his not so backhanded rip on Justin.

“Thank you.” I hoped Dash knew I encompassed his kindness and mad listening skills within the phrase.

Chapter 5

I'd watched countless thunderstorms from my back porch and seen clips on Dash's site, but I knew neither of those things could prepare me for a real chase.

My eyes darted between Dash behind the wheel of his truck and the gray sky that filled his windshield. I had a hard time choosing whether to focus on the gathering storm or Dash weaving in and out of traffic.

My heart pounded in my chest, adrenaline pumping to each of my nerve endings. Dash had shown up at my place a little over an hour ago, offering my first chance at a chase. A severe thunderstorm with tornado-producing capabilities was accumulating just an hour outside of town, and when he prompted me to get ready in a hurry, I leaped into action.

"Where's my exit, John?" Dash spoke into a black walkie-talkie, his voice tight.

"Three miles. Exit and then head southeast," John's voice blared from the device. I glanced behind me, easily finding the Tracker Jacker—a beat-up nineties model Toyota 4x4 with long antennas sticking out of the top and two large yellow lights attached to the back corners.

Dash set the walkie-talkie down, and I raised my eyebrows at him when he snuck a glance my way.

"What?" he asked, returning his eyes to the road.

"That's the extent of planning?" I asked.

"We've got tons of routes mapped out already from the grueling prep work we did in the winter, but you can only plan so much before you have to make the call yourself."

"So you don't depend solely on the radar?" I asked, shocked that he hadn't checked one station model before picking this location.

"No. I catch a lot of flak for it, but I use it more like a guideline. Once I set eyes on the storm..." His eyes sharpened, focusing on the dark clouds gathering in the distance.

I loved when he got lost in the thoughts of a storm. It proved I wasn't the only crazy one who found beauty in chaos.

"What?" I finally urged him to continue.

"It's hard to explain. I just get a sense of where it'll tighten into something bigger and head that direction."

"Why do people give you crap about it?" I asked, remembering how Professor Ackren had it out for him and the guys since day one. He always harped on them about the technical and scientific side of weather. I tried to answer most of the questions as quick as I could to take the heat off them.

Dash shrugged. "I use more instinct than science, and to some people that's reckless. Also, I've got more up-close images than some veteran chasers, and despite us working toward the same goal, it irks them. Some chasers say I'm only in it for the thrill and for selling my shots."

"I see," I said, but it was hard to really grasp his lifestyle. "Does it bother you?"

"Not really. I mean, sometimes it's annoying because we take the same measurements others do. And next season we'll have the probes to deploy, which will increase the data." He changed lanes to pass another car. "Plus, the most useful area of study is where the tornado touches the ground, and because so many people are afraid to get that close, I'm one of the only people getting that information. If another chaser wanted the data collected from it, it's not like I'd charge him for it. But I can't deny the rush I get from capturing a storm, and I'm not ashamed of

the money I make for it, either.”

“Good, you shouldn’t.” I swallowed a lump in my throat. I’d always assumed from Dash’s shots he’d just had an expensive camera with an excellent zoom option. From his words, I had been sorely mistaken.

“Thanks, but can I be honest about something?” he asked, glancing at me for a moment.

“Always,” I said, focusing on him.

“It would give our group a lot more credit if you became a stable part of it.”

“Me? How?” I asked, shocked. “You all have way more experience than I do.”

“You always sell yourself short, Blake. The way you interpret data in half the time it takes even me to do it, paired with the natural instinct you have when the sky darkens? It’s incredible. And the fact that you are more prone to check the science and use it to back your predictions like any good meteorologist would do could garner us more respect from those in our field that continue to question my tactics. We’d make a great team.”

I swallowed hard, a flush dusting my cheeks. I smiled, not exactly sure how to convey the importance of his words to me. “Thank you. I’d love to be more involved,” I said and for a split-second thought about how much more involved I could be with *him*.

Heat rushed to my cheeks and I quickly glanced out the window, wondering where in the hell that had come from. I took a deep breath and assured myself it was due to the gratitude swelling in my chest. Though he’d continuously noticed my abilities with storms and my passion for them, I was still getting used to being recognized for my talents, let alone praised for them.

“Check it out.” He pointed at a gray wall cloud to the right. He took the next exit faster than I could blink. Once I laid eyes on the full expanse of the supercell—thick tufts of black cloud with the sun blinding behind it—I was hooked. The power of the storm drew me in, the potential written all over the dark, churning mass.

I pressed my fingertip to the window, pointing at the lower right side of the cloud. “There is rapid circulation,” I blurted out, thrilled with the catch. If I hadn’t been looking for it I may not have seen it, the solid color made it hard to see the movement.

Dash squinted, zeroing in on where I pointed. “You’re right.” He grabbed the walkie-talkie. “Blake spotted some rotation in the western portion of the cell. I’m heading that way.”

A few seconds later John’s voice crackled over the radio. “Nice. Follow this road and take the third right. That should give us the best vantage point.”

“On it,” Dash said. “Good eyes, Blake.”

The compliment added to my already-pumping heart. I forced myself to focus solely on the storm. Lightning crackled, followed by the roar of thunder, loud enough to vibrate my chest. I jumped slightly, admiring Dash’s calm and unflinching control of the truck. The closer we got, the stronger the winds pushed against the vehicle, threatening to throw us off the road. Rain pelted the windshield, and the splattering bursts made visibility of the developing funnel difficult.

“Dash,” I gasped, as if I chased the storm on foot. “It’s transitioning into lower rotation. See the funnel?”

Dash slowed the truck on the rural road leading us closer to the storm. He set eyes on it and nodded. “It has potential. Here, take the wheel,” he said, as if he were asking me to hold his phone.

I gaped for a moment, but then blinked twice and reached over him, wrapping my fingers around the steering wheel. He kept his foot steady on the gas as he shifted in the driver’s seat, reaching behind him. The motion made his hard chest graze against my bare arm, and another

flush raked across my skin. I swallowed and focused on the rain-soaked road ahead of us.

The minute felt like an eternity until he finally righted himself. With a video camera in his right hand, he retook the wheel with his left, and I scooted back to my seat.

Dash turned on the camera and pointed it at the developing funnel in front of us. Judging from the length of road and the growing mass ahead of us, it was only a mile away now. "It's organizing!" Dash hollered as if we weren't sitting right next to each other, and my heart leaped into my throat.

Another crack of lightning struck the ground underneath the cloud, the bright light leaving an impression on the back of my eyelids. Thunder roared even louder than the first time. The hair standing on the back of my neck confirmed we were well under it now.

"The tail is lowering," Dash shouted into the walkie-talkie. "Paul, I will throat punch you if you miss these shots!"

I would've laughed if I hadn't been so focused on the fact that Dash had just confirmed the tail of the funnel was about to touch down, causing a mixture of ice-cold panic and pure excitement to shoot up my spine.

"I already gave him my camera!" John shouted back, grounding me.

The energy was high in both vehicles; I could hear it in their tense voices through the line. My heart raced and the adrenaline expanded within me, begging for release.

A thicker string of cloud snaked out of the rotating portion of the storm, creating a more threatening funnel. Ice filled my veins. I'd never been this close to a tornado before, and despite the slender size, if it touched down, it would be powerful enough to rip trees from their roots. For a split second I had the urge to take the wheel again and spin us in the opposite direction, instinct shouting at me to flee, but it passed in a blink.

An exhilarating thrill sped through me, replacing the momentary fear, like reaching the top of a roller coaster just before making the first drop.

The grayish-white cloud churned and snaked horizontally to the left, like a long bone-white finger reaching to press a button. The wisps of cloud spiraled in and out of focus, switching from semisolid to see-through, revealing the thundering sky behind it.

"Come on!" Dash yelled at the sky, his impatience with the funnel's horizontal trend evident in his tone.

Static crackled from the walkie-talkie before Paul's voice sounded in the cab of Dash's truck.

"It's roping out," Paul said, his voice dejected. I glanced behind me, seeing the Tracker Jacker and Paul's eyes on his laptop opened before him.

I whipped back around, focusing on the storm again. He was right. The spinning cloud slowly dissipated little by little, shedding pieces of atmosphere like sloughs of snakeskin. The broken sections of cloud wouldn't reconfigure, not with the predominant cloud breaking apart, too.

My stomach sank, the disappointment heavy. We'd been so close to seeing a tornado on the ground I could taste it, but the potential was gone now. My building anticipation shattered, like I'd shown up late to a concert and missed my favorite band. We'd gotten to the top of the roller coaster but weren't allowed to fly down it.

"Damn it!" Dash yelled, finally setting his video camera in the space between us.

We both sighed and then then truck filled with silence.

"We had the perfect vantage point," John said after a few minutes, the disappointment clear in his tone as well.

Dash took a deep breath before pushing the button on the walkie-talkie. “You’re right. We couldn’t have asked for a more prime spot. Just wish we could’ve gotten ahead of it in time to pull off-road and film better. Paul, anything on Doppler?”

“Nothing, man,” Paul shouted across the line. “A strong gust of cold air must have just blasted through here, killing all potential.”

Dash set the radio down. We didn’t need Doppler to tell us that, not for this location anyway. I could easily tell just by looking at the broken clouds in the sky and the lessening rain that this storm cell was done.

My hands trembled from the adrenaline slowly leaving my body. “I know that was probably nothing for you, but I’ve never seen something so incredible.”

Dash sighed. “Yeah, but I really wanted you to see one touch down today. It’ll change you.”

I already counted the minutes until another chase opportunity presented itself. It wouldn’t change me, though...it already had.

Chapter 6

“You’re not seriously bailing on me again, are you?” I held my cell to my ear and tried to stop my hands from shaking.

“I actually worked all week! I didn’t just sit in a comfortable classroom and read books all day, or check out customers looking for the newest DVD.”

“But you promised—” After the video game store fiasco a couple of weeks ago, Justin had promised he’d make it up to me for being a jerk. I’d seized the opportunity to test the waters, explaining to him about the new “study-friends” I’d made and wanted him to meet. In the moment, he’d agreed to anything to get back in my good graces, but in the time since he’d failed to deliver.

“This is bullshit! I have *two* days off. I’m exhausted and want to relax.”

Tears stung the backs of my eyes, but I pushed them away. I paced the concrete walkway outside of Bailey’s. This was the second weekend in a row Justin had flaked on that promise. Last week’s excuse was he didn’t feel well, which I would’ve totally understood if he hadn’t spent both nights drinking with his boys while watching a Die Hard marathon. He’d invited me over, but I wasn’t in the mood. He’d texted me throughout, giving me crap over studying with the guys over watching movies with him. The way he harped on me about it only reaffirmed my decision on not fully disclosing just how much time *not-studying* I did with Dash and the guys.

“It’s not like I’m asking you to run a 5k, Justin,” I said, returning to myself. “Just come out for a couple hours to meet my friends.” I stopped mid-pace and leaned against the outside of the bar. People went in and out, ignoring the girl close to losing her cool.

“Your friends? God, Blake, you’ve known them for a week.” He scoffed.

Over a month now, actually. And I’d spent nearly every day with Dash. After class we’d go to lunch and rehash the lectures or he’d tell me one of his countless storm-chasing tales. Sometimes he and the guys would drop by my work before I got off and then hang at my place after.

John and Paul loved Hail, and she surprised me with her acceptance of more males, but she doted on Dash. I hadn’t been out this much or had more fun in my entire college career. Possibly high school, either. And I wished Justin could be a part of that, but he wasn’t. I couldn’t even be honest with him about it, because if he knew how happy Dash made me he’d squash it. Twist it and make me the bad guy. Maybe I was. Or maybe Justin really didn’t want me to have any source of happiness outside of his control. I didn’t know what made sense anymore.

“You know they only want you around to help them get ahead in class or chases or whatever the hell it is they do. They don’t like *you*, Blake. They only like where you’ll get them.”

It wasn’t true, but his words stung. He made the idea of someone else actually liking me for who I was sound ridiculous.

“Fine. You have fun playing video games,” I snapped.

Stupid of me.

“You’re being an immature bitch, and I won’t stand for it. I’m a grown man, and if I want to drink beer and play COD on the weekends, then I will.”

“Funny how that is more appealing than spending time with your girlfriend.” Grown man my ass.

“You’re always welcome over here. You know that.”

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. I hated Justin's apartment. The normal state consisted of wall-to-wall Keystone Light cans, half filled with chew-tainted spit, and the other half crushed and thrown across the room sporadically. Fast food bags, empty dip cans, cigarette packs, and dirty laundry rounded out the decor. The only pristine thing in his apartment was his fifty-inch flat screen and the fully loaded entertainment center beneath it. When he first got the place I'd made a habit of going over there on Mondays after school when he was at work and cleaned. I did it for months and the place always smelled fresh and looked like a real home afterward. Though, after months of never getting so much as a "thank you", I'd given up and had him over at my place instead.

"Come on, Blake. I'm sorry I snapped before. It's because I need to see you so bad. Just ditch those guys and come over. We'll watch a movie. Just you and me." His voice had softened.

I glanced at the bar, picturing Dash and the guys inside.

"Just you and me?" I asked, wondering if the time alone would give us the opportunity to find a common ground again. It *had* been two weeks since he'd seen me. Maybe that was why he was in such a mood. He needed me. I could make him happy and set things right.

"Yes, just us."

"All right. I'll be over in half an hour."

"See you then."

I gave him a little time, hoping he'd clean the place up a bit before I got there.

I walked back into the bar and slid my fresh frosted mug of beer toward Dash. Lindsay eyed it but quickly looked away when I glanced at her. "You can have this. I'm heading to Justin's."

"I thought he was coming here?" He scanned the bar as if Justin would magically appear. I wished.

"He's beat from work. We're going to do a movie night." I made it sound like a normal thing we did.

"Your loss, Meteorologist. We're about to engage in an epic shuffleboard battle," Paul said.

"I'll catch the next one."

"Hey, wait," Paul stopped me before I could turn to leave. "What do meteorologists call a row of martinis?"

I rolled my eyes but indulged Paul's need to crack a corny weather joke every time we saw each other. "What?"

"The Dry Line!" He laughed at his cleverness, and I released a small chuckle.

"Good one," I said.

Dash shook his head. "Paul, man, where do you get this crap?" Paul just smirked as Dash hopped up from the table. "Hold up, Blake. I'll walk you out."

We cleared the crowded bar and stepped into the cool night air. I stopped before my car and glanced at Dash who was awfully quiet. "What's up?"

He shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. After spending so much time with him, I knew that meant he was holding something back. I'd seen him do it with the guys plenty of times, especially when they argued the wrong side of a debate regarding why tornadoes occurred predominantly in the afternoon. Honestly, I think Paul only said it was due to atmospheric pressure as opposed to the more likely reason of temperature and moisture levels to get a rise out of Dash.

"Come on, just tell me."

"I don't want to upset you," he finally said, meeting my eyes.

The notion almost made me laugh. We agreed on almost everything. "I highly doubt there is

anything you could say that would upset me, Dash. Out with it.”

He shrugged again. “You let him off too easy.”

A rock lodged itself in my throat. Dash normally avoided speaking his mind in regards to Justin and settled on eye rolls when I relayed stories to him. It was nice, to just talk about things with him without being judged. I knew it could only last so long.

“What do you mean?”

“This is the hundredth time he’s flaked on you.”

“He’s only done this twice.”

“To meet us, yeah, but to you...”

I took a deep breath. Maybe I’d been too liberal when sharing past stories with him.

He took his hands out of his pockets and raked them through his hair. “You don’t have to cater to his schedule, you know. If he wanted to see you...he’d see you.”

A sharp pain twisted in my chest. Dash was right. Damn him. Of course I knew that, but I couldn’t change Justin. He’d been this way since the beginning. All I could do was take what he gave, no matter how little he offered.

“Well, he’s about to see me,” I said angrily and dug my keys out of my purse.

“So you’re just going to run to him? Let him dictate how you spend all your time?”

“He doesn’t decide how I spend all my time.”

“Oh really? Why are you going to school here? Not that I’m not happy you are, but really? Why is it that you haven’t been to one party since you started school? Or why do you feel the need to lie to him about all the time we spend together?”

Shame clawed at my stomach having the fact that I had to lie about my friendships thrown in my face. “It’s easier if he thinks we only study together—”

“You’ve got to be joking.” Dash jerked his hands in the air. “Tell me you can at least see that he isolates you for a reason?”

My heart pounded anxiously. Dash didn’t know the truth. He couldn’t understand I was the only person in Justin’s life who hadn’t abandoned him. My presence kept Justin from slipping into that dark place where everyone else in his life who was supposed to love him had pushed him. A place where his life hung in the balance. “You don’t know him—”

“I know *you*, Blake,” he interrupted me. “I know that you can’t stand tomatoes but are too nice to ever ask the waitress to leave them off. I know that the only other artist you blare as loud as Blue October is Elvis. I know the look in your eyes when you see the sky darken and you hear that first clap of thunder. And I know that every time he hurts you, I want to introduce his face to the curb.”

My mouth dropped open. Dash continuously shocked me with how well he understood me in such a short amount of time. The sensation of completeness was new and almost jarring. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Dash...if you only knew—”

“I’d still probably think he was an asshole,” he cut me off.

Why were the men in my life picking fights with me today? My stomach boiled. “Fine.” I shrugged. “Think what you want.” I opened my car door and sank inside. Dash stomped toward the bar, and I drove off before he’d made it in.

I gripped the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turned white. My insides trembled and I screamed.

I took a few deep breaths to calm down, eased back in my seat, and focused on the road. Even Justin hadn’t pulled a reaction like this out of me from a fight in a long time. Maybe because I avoided fights with him at all cost. Dash had blindsided me, though.

Why had he chosen tonight to speak his mind? He'd had plenty of opportunities in the past month when I'd basically relayed Justin's and my entire history to him. Instead he'd just made his faces and given his own war story involving him and Lindsay. We'd laughed about it.

I let myself in to Justin's apartment, excitement replacing the anger within me. Justin and I were about to have a much-needed quiet night together, just the two of us. Dash couldn't possibly understand the need because Lindsay was at his beck and call. He had no idea what it was like to have to fight for time with your partner or to get to a place where you were so lost you didn't even know where you stood anymore. I had to find solid ground again.

My heart sank a fraction as I made my way to the living room. I stepped over opened stereo boxes, their wires and cords strewn everywhere, and then tiptoed across the room to avoid crushing empty beer cans with my boots. The place smelled faintly of smoke and fried food, but not in a good way like at the bar. This was more of a stagnant scent that had hovered who knows how long. It'd been a while since this place had a good cleaning. Probably since the last time I'd done it, months ago. I glanced at the kitchen on my way and cringed. A tower of dishes filled the sink, some moldy, others cracked, and the countertops were littered with McDonald's and Wendy's bags. My fingers itched to give it all a good scrub down, but I squashed the urge.

Justin sat in the middle of his couch, his Xbox controller in hand and his eyes fixed on his massive flat screen. The living room fared no better, and I sighed.

"Just a minute," Justin said without looking up.

I continued to stare at the mess he lived in, a wave of unease sweeping over me. This was worse than I remembered. Was work riding him so hard he couldn't manage the effort to keep the place even the slightest bit tidy? Or had I never realized it was always this bad? Kind of like I never noticed there were men in the world who actually listened, and got excited about things other than video games? Damn it, Dash's challenge tonight shook up my thoughts so much I couldn't see straight.

I took a seat on the edge of his couch, noticing the sunken-in form underneath Justin had molded even more to his body than before. My stomach simmered this is where he'd rather be than out with me.

He clicked off the Xbox and laid his controller gently on the entertainment stand. He turned to me. "Glad you came over," he said and stood, taking my hands and pulling me to him.

The simmering stopped. Maybe I wasn't seeing things differently. Perhaps he didn't even realize how bad the place was. Work had to be exhausting him. I'd help him get the place back to livable again. Maybe tomorrow.

I wrapped my arms around his middle.

Before I could speak, he swooped an arm underneath my legs and held me against his chest. He rushed us to his bedroom, crunching beer cans as he went.

"Whoa, where is the fire?" I asked when he tossed me on his twin-size mattress. It laid on the floor, which I was thankful I couldn't see because he'd neglected to turn on the light. I heard the clanking of his belt and then his pants unzipping.

"Right here," he whispered and tugged at my jeans.

"I thought we were going to watch a movie?" I said as he frantically kissed my neck.

"We will after."

After the argument with him and then Dash, all I wanted to do was spend some time having a real conversation with Justin. I didn't want another fight, though. He was right, we'd have good quality time after. And he'd definitely be in a better mood.

My jeans scraped against something cardboard as he tossed them on the floor and my

underwear followed two seconds later. He didn't bother with my shirt. He kissed me hard, his tongue meeting mine with a jarring thrust before he turned me and gripped my hips from behind.

I held my breath as he entered me, trying to think about something that would get me in the same mood as him.

"What is it?" he asked when I hadn't moved to meet his thrusts.

"Hurts a little," I whispered.

Justin pushed himself inside again. "You'll warm up in a minute."

After a few minutes I slowed him down by moving forward and said, "Justin, kiss me."

"What?" He grunted, trying to maintain his speed.

"Kiss me," I said again, this time glancing over my shoulder. My eyes had somewhat adjusted to the darkness, and Justin's face was easier to see. I wanted him to look at me, to see the plea in my eyes to make this more enjoyable for both of us. I wanted him to kiss me, thinking perhaps a little more time would change things.

He didn't look at me, though. He just arched his head back.

"Nope. I'm almost there," he said, clutching me harder and picking up the pace.

I turned back around, a combination of sadness and disappointment curling around my chest and squeezing.

He gave one final thrust and groaned, his body slackening behind mine, then he jumped off the bed and dressed in a hurry. "I'm gonna get a drink," he said and bolted out the door before I could ask for something myself.

I winced getting off the bed. Justin had gone faster than normal tonight.

I took my clothes into his tiny bathroom and attempted to clean up. I slipped on my underwear carefully, desperately craving a warm bath. I glanced at his tub and shuddered. A dirt ring wrapped around it and orange stains clung to every corner. I'd rather take the pain than climb into *that*. We needed to have a serious talk about the state of this place if he ever wanted me to come back over.

After gathering myself, I made it back to the living room, totally prepared to take a spot next to him on the couch and try to start a conversation, one that would help us find each other again, and one, I hoped, that would bring balance back to my life. I froze two steps in.

Justin's best friends Mark and Andy sat on either side of him on the couch, a beer in each of their hands. His flat screen had the COD menu up.

"Hey, Blake," Mark said, and Andy gave me a nod.

"Hey?" I said, but it sounded like a question. The earlier simmering heated to a roaring boil now. This was why Justin had hurried. He'd probably told the guys to meet him at a certain time. "Justin, can I talk to you for a minute?"

He glanced up at me and handed his controller to Andy. I turned and stopped in front of his closed bedroom door with him following behind me.

"What is it?" he asked.

I put my hand on my hip. "Are you kidding me?"

"What?" he snapped.

I flung my hand in the direction of the living room. "I thought it was going to be just us tonight."

"It was just us. Now I want to hang with my boys and play COD. What's the big deal? You can watch."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. I would not cry. Not here. Not with his friends only feet away. "I really needed this tonight."

He scrunched his face up. "Needed what?"

"To be with you."

"You just were with me."

"Not like that!" I scoffed. "I needed to just..."

"What, Blake? You always need me to do something. To talk or to go somewhere or to meet people who won't matter after school is done. Why can't you ever be happy with just me?"

"I am! But it's not just you tonight, is it? Don't you play games with these guys all the time? Couldn't you give me one night?"

Justin crossed his arms over his chest. "I am. I have! God, you act like playing video games is worshipping the devil."

"I do not."

"Yeah, you do. I don't know why you can't get that this is my downtime. It's like you and your books."

"I don't ever blow you off to read a book, Justin."

"Whatever."

I sighed and took a step toward him, opting to take a different approach. I pried his hands away from his chest and took them in mine.

"Please. Can you tell the guys to go?" I couldn't walk out of this door, discarded once again for a game. Maybe telling him outright would make the outcome different.

Justin arched his head back, staring at the ceiling.

Good. He at least considered it.

He yanked his hands out of mine and slammed his foot into the bedroom door. The force of the kick knocked the door back so hard it hung crooked on one hinge, and I flinched as the air whooshed past my face from the momentum.

"No. I shouldn't have to choose!" he yelled.

I jumped and took a few steps away from him, eyeing the broken door. I crossed my arms to hide the fact that my muscles trembled.

"I shouldn't have to turn my boys away," he said, more of a hiss than a yell. "If you want to spend time with me, then this is what we're doing." He turned and stomped back to the living room.

I stood there for a moment as my heart plummeted into my stomach. How many times would I let him do this to me?

Chapter 7

Hail sat beside my bathtub with her big head leaning over the edge as I soaked and cried my eyes out. No amount of scrubbing my face could stop the tears. I didn't *want* to cry over this. This wasn't new behavior from Justin. I knew how he operated, knew how this relationship worked. What was wrong with me?

I submerged myself completely under the warm water and stayed there as long as I could. Dash's face popped behind my eyelids. I came up slowly, inhaling the steaming air. It was *his* fault. If he hadn't said anything, I wouldn't think I deserved any more than Justin gave me. He didn't understand the loyalty that came with years of being together, of growing up together. But his words rang in my head and made me expect more from Justin.

And damn him if he wasn't right. At least in tonight's situation. I'd let Justin off the hook, and what had it got me? A blowup and blown off, once again.

I dried off and slipped into my softest T-shirt and sweats combo, pulling my wet hair back in a ponytail. I sank onto the couch, welcoming Hail and her fifty-pound butt into my lap. She licked my chin and pouted at me. She could always tell when Justin and I had fought. I scratched behind her ears and leaned my head back, contemplating hunting for the remote and staring at the TV all night until my brain stopped working.

A knock on my door startled me. Hail slid off the couch and waddled to the door, her butt wiggling. I peered through the peephole, my heart pounding.

Dash stood on the other side. I quickly touched my face, wishing I'd tried to hide the redness surrounding my puffy eyes, but I hadn't expected anyone to show up outside my door.

Damn. Oh well.

Dash's green eyes went wide when he got a look at my face. He stepped past me without an invite in. Hail jumped and wiggled at his feet. "What happened?"

I sighed. "What are you doing here, Dash?"

He knelt to pet Hail. "I drove by on the off-chance you'd be home already and saw your car. I felt bad about earlier and wanted to talk."

My heart lifted. We'd only argued a few hours ago and he already wanted to talk it out? Normally I had to wait a whole twenty-four hours, sometimes more, for that.

"It's all right. Really, you didn't have to," I said and shrugged. I was used to arguments and on the fight scale, Dash's and mine wasn't even a blip.

"No, I do have to. I'm sorry. I should've kept my mouth shut. I have a problem with that in case you haven't noticed." He smiled, and I automatically returned it. "I can't judge a guy I've never met. I just hate seeing you get walked all over...but again not my place. It's just..."

He focused his gaze on Hail for a moment.

"What?" I finally asked.

Dash shook his head. "I shouldn't..."

"It's fine. I promise."

He sighed and stood up, meeting my eyes. "Don't tell the guys, all right?"

I raised my eyebrows and nodded.

"You've become the closest friend I've ever had. I know that sounds crazy after only a month, but I've never met anyone like you before. We're the same in so many ways. And it's made this annoying urge to protect you crop up inside me and I can't stop it. That's why I ran my

mouth off earlier. Can you forgive me?"

My heart swelled and then instantly deflated. The nicest and most sincere thing anyone had ever said to me in my entire life came from someone I'd only known a month. Not from the man I'd been more or less dating for eight years. The reality of that hit me like a punch to the chest, and what happened earlier tonight replayed in my head all over again.

Tears streamed from my eyes before I could stop them. I quickly covered up my face with my hands.

"Whoa, woman," Dash said, and a second later his arms wrapped around me. "What did I say?"

He smelled like the air just after a rainstorm. How had I never noticed that before? Butterflies flapped inside my stomach uncontrollably. I had the undeniable urge to slip my hands underneath his shirt to touch his skin, to find out what his body would feel like against mine. I wondered if he'd take his time with me. I shook my head against his hard chest, but it did nothing to push the involuntary thoughts away.

"I'm so...sorry," I stuttered.

"For what?" He stroked the top of my head.

"For crying like this. I'm so stupid."

"Hey." He tipped my chin up toward him. "No you're not. Talk to me."

I sucked in a shaking breath and wiped my eyes with my palms. I took a step back, unable to concentrate with his strong hands rubbing my shoulders and his green eyes offering such honest sincerity.

"You were right. Justin totally bailed on me. He only wanted me to come over for..." I shut up real quick. Dash didn't need to know. "Anyway he chose the Xbox over me again. A fucking console wins every time. Am I really a needy psycho chick because I ask for some alone time every now and then?" I sank on the couch and Dash took up the spot next to me. Hail made herself comfortable on his foot.

"No. A psycho chick would've taken a baseball bat to the Xbox long ago and probably his head, too. Trust me, you're far from one of those."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"I can't imagine you ever doing that. You're too nice."

If I adopted a bitch attitude, would I get more out of my relationship? Lindsay snapped at Dash over little things like ordering the wrong drink or whining about the music he picked out. And Dash still treated her well, pulling out her chair for her or attending parties he had no interest in just because she wanted to go. Why couldn't Justin be like that?

Dash smacked my leg and jumped up. "Come on." He opened my front door.

"What?"

"Get up. We're going out."

"No. I'm in my sweats."

"I don't care. You're on the verge of crying again and I really don't want to see that. You need chocolate. I've got two sisters, remember? I know when to arm myself with the good stuff."

I grinned despite my efforts not to and met him at the door. He whistled at Hail. "You, too, girl."

She waddled over to him excitedly.

Dash opened the passenger door of his truck and lifted Hail into the center seat. He waited until I'd climbed in before closing the door. I scratched Hail's ears as she panted and wagged her little curl of a tail.

Hail tried desperately to squeeze between Dash and the steering wheel to talk to the girl at the drive-through window of my favorite all-night ice cream place. Dash won the battle, but watching it made me laugh so hard my sides hurt.

Dash was right—like he often was—the heavenly, creamy, crunchy, chocolate-Oreo mixture was exactly what I'd needed.

He parked in the near empty lot and munched on his chocolate-Kit-Kat combo. Hail panted between us, her tongue hanging out, happy we didn't leave her behind.

"One time Lindsay called me from this frat party," Dash said, twirling his spoon. "She was so drunk, she'd thought she had called one of her girlfriends to come pick her up. I showed up and she flipped. Had a screaming fit in the middle of the packed house, said I was keeping tabs on her. That I didn't trust her. She smashed an almost-empty Vodka bottle by throwing it against the kitchen wall."

My eyebrows rose. "What did you do?"

He shrugged. "I talked some sense into her and drove her home. Put her to bed. She barely remembered the scene the next day."

I shook my head. "One time, Justin and I were playing Monopoly. He'd had a few beers, but he wasn't drunk. I made a crack about his total lack of property buying skills and he turned the whole table over. The game flew against the wall and the pieces went everywhere. He stormed out of his place. Went and drank all night at one of his friend's houses."

"All over a game?"

I nodded.

"Tell me you didn't clean it up," he demanded.

I gave him a weak smile.

"Of course you did." Dash sighed. "Don't hate me, but I honestly can't figure out why you've stayed with him for so long."

I swallowed the bite of ice cream in my mouth a little too quickly. The freezing burn almost made me choke. I'd never lied to Dash, so why start now? My chest tightened as I tried to formulate the words.

"You remember how I told you about Tulsa?"

He nodded and waited patiently for me to continue, like he always did when listening to me.

"Well, that day I actually suggested we break up. He wasn't willing to move a couple hours away for me, so I honestly didn't think he loved me like he used to." I took a deep breath, forcing myself to continue. "He grabbed his pocketknife, put it to his wrist, and cut himself. Threatened to end his life if I ever left him. Said he'd die without me. And though that was the first time, it wasn't the last. It's happened a few more times, whenever I've broached the subject of even taking a break."

The weight that had taken up a home in my chest for the past three years lifted. The simple act of confiding in Dash released tension I didn't realize I'd had.

"It's really fine though...I'm the last person he has...I—"

"Stop," Dash cut me off. "You don't have to cover yourself with me, Blake. Never with me." He sat up straighter, setting his ice cream on the dashboard. "Tell me how you really feel about it."

I stopped breathing for a moment, thinking it over. "I feel...trapped...sometimes. Other times, I don't know, he reverts back to the boy I fell in love with. It's complicated. I can't leave him, he'd have no one left, no reason to continue living."

Dash pressed his palms together, the tips of his fingers touching his lips as if to stop himself

from saying more. His shoulders coiled with tension, but after a few long moments, he sighed and glanced at me with a mixture of pity and anger in his eyes. “It makes more sense now, all the shit you let him get away with, and why you can’t be completely honest with him. But, Blake, you have to realize you deserve so much better—”

“Why did you stay with Lindsay after her irrational outburst?” I cut him off, wanting desperately to change the subject. Each time Dash and I talked about the serious side of my relationship it was like cracking open a previously locked box and revealing a truth I wasn’t ready to handle. It was one thing to hold myself responsible for Justin’s happiness, his life, when I thought he loved me just as much, but if he didn’t...if he was just using me all these years...

“She hasn’t done it as many times as Justin has.” Dash’s voice stopped my dark thoughts in their tracks.

I shoved another bite into my mouth.

“Things with Lindsay are...I don’t know. In the beginning she was different. She found the fact that I was a storm chaser interesting. Supported it. Now, it bothers her. Everything bothers her.” He glanced at me before quickly looking down at Hail. “I keep waiting for the day she’ll ask me to choose between the storms and her.”

I completely understood the sickening trapped sensation an ultimatum like that could conjure up. “What would you choose?”

“I’ve been in love with storms all my life. I think the perfect woman would be one who’d never ask me to choose. Does that make me an asshole?”

“Of course not,” I said. “It makes you a man who knows exactly what he wants.”

He scooped up his ice-cream again before holding my gaze. “So, what does Blake Caster *really* want?”

Heat rushed across my skin as I stared at his lips and the way they shaped themselves around the blue plastic spoon. The thoughts from earlier about him shirtless and what all *he* would do to me made my heart race, and suddenly the cab of the truck shrunk ten sizes.

“I...” I couldn’t think straight. An ache pulsed low in my belly.

Hail took the opportunity to shove her massive face in my lap, begging for a lick of my treat, and the tension broke immediately.

Dash patted Hail’s butt and started the truck. “All right, girls. Let’s get you home.”

Ten minutes later Dash hefted Hail out of his truck without a complaint about the mess of white dog hair she’d left behind. He kissed the top of her head and watched her waddle inside.

“I love that dog.” He shook his head.

“The feeling is mutual. You know it’ll break her heart if you ever decide to stop coming over.”

“Good thing that won’t happen anytime soon.” His quick declaration shot another burst of warmth through my heart.

“Thanks for tonight, Dash. And sorry about earlier.”

“I’m going to start charging you every time you say you’re sorry. Seriously, woman, you’ve got a complex.”

I smirked. “So, if I really am the best friend you’ve ever had...”

“Yes?” he asked.

“What’s your real name?”

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “Never.”

“Seriously?”

He shook his head.

I squinted at him. “I’ll get it out of you one day.”

He took a step closer to me. “You won’t”—he said, and pushed some hair that had fallen out of my ponytail over my shoulder, causing chills to shoot across my skin—“but it’ll be fun watching you try.”

Chapter 8

“I know something that will cheer you up,” Dash said as he walked into my apartment.

I’d just opened the door for him, surprised at his visit. It felt like he’d just left. I’d slept half the day, and still had on my sweats. I hadn’t even brushed my hair yet. Fabulous.

Dash rubbed Hail’s ears and patted her wiggling butt before looking back at me. “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

I blinked a couple of times, not quite awake. I’d slept hard last night, a shocker since usually after a fight with Justin I couldn’t sleep worth a damn. I’d spend the whole night analyzing what I could’ve done differently to make the situation better. I suppose Dash’s ice cream therapy had worked.

“Of course,” I finally answered him.

He stood up, looking entirely too good in a pair of jeans and vintage Blue October tee. “We’re heading out for another chase.”

My eyebrows raised.

“You want to come?”

“Of course!” I said instantly. “Do I need to pack anything?” Now that I’d shaken off the shock of my first chase, I was able to think more clearly about important things, like extra clothes and if someone would need to watch Hail. Last time I hadn’t given those details a spare thought I’d been so excited.

“No. It’s only a couple of hours away. We’ll drive back after.”

“Awesome!” I stood there smiling like an idiot, anticipation filling my veins.

Dash eyed me up and down. “You might want to change, though.”

I snapped out of my thoughts, glancing down at my sweats and oversized T-shirt. “Right. On it,” I said and sprinted down the hall. I returned in less than five minutes wearing jeans, a snug black tee, and my boots. I threw my hair back in a ponytail.

After a quick text to Mom, asking her if she could stop by and let Hail out in a few hours, I poured enough food in her bowl to last her until later tonight, and told her I’d be back before heading out the door.

I climbed into Dash’s truck with nervous energy coiling around my muscles, the image of the horizontal tornado that roped out before it could touch down fresh in my mind. The visual was intense enough and I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to actually see one hit the ground.

“You can relax, you know,” Dash said, glancing at me from the driver’s side before returning his eyes to the road. He drove well above the speed limit, passing cars with the ease of someone who didn’t worry about getting a ticket.

I let out a breath and sat back against the seat, only then realizing I’d been sitting on the edge of it, the seatbelt stretched to capacity. “Sorry, just nervous.”

He shook his head. “Always sorry.”

I shrugged and bit my lower lip. At the rate Dash drove, we’d make the two-hour trip in an hour and a half easy.

A burst of static blared from his walkie-talkie. A few seconds later John’s voice sounded from it. “Tracker Jacker has caught up and has team leader in its sights.”

Dash scooped up the radio and clicked the button down. “About time. What’d you do, stop

for Red Bulls?”

“Burritos,” John answered.

“Did you get us any?” Dash asked.

“Negative. We’re approaching you now.”

“Jerks.” Dash chuckled.

I spun in my seat to look out the back window. Sure enough, the Tracker Jacker changed lanes and slid in behind us.

“What’s the best route?” Dash asked.

“There are two possible locations with potential. One is more toward the east...”

I could see John behind the wheel and Paul in the passenger seat looking at his opened laptop.

“I think the one farther west has the best chance,” Dash said.

“In that case, you need to stay on this until we reach 136th. We’ll follow that until we get sight of the storm. Doppler has it converging near Owasso, but you’ll have a better idea once you see it.”

“All right. Thanks, John. Keep me updated if anything more develops.”

“Roger that.”

Dash set the walkie-talkie in the empty cup-holder.

The ride continued in charged silence as I kept my eyes trained on the sky and my thoughts firmly on the chase. I wanted to be a part of this team, to help spot anything that a computer might not be able to. I couldn’t do that if I worried about what would happen if Justin knew what I was doing—regardless if I was still furious with him—or if I thought too hard about the uncontrollable desires I continued to have about the man sitting next to me.

John’s voice crackled over the radio again, refocusing my attention. “Take the next exit and then head down 136th.”

“Got it,” Dash replied and pulled off the highway.

My heart beat a little harder as buildings gave way to farmland. Once we caught sight of a fair-sized wall cloud hovering to the west, Dash hit the gas even harder.

The closer we got, the more massive the thing looked, like a bottle of ink had been upturned, blotting out huge chunks of blue-gray sky. Dash reached behind him and withdrew his video camera case from the back without asking me to take the wheel again. With one hand he managed to get the thing out, turned on, and handed it to me.

“Point and shoot. You’ve got the better vantage point,” he said.

I took the camera from him and rolled down my window. I’d never captured a storm on film before and was surprised Dash even wanted me to since he was the expert.

“Why don’t you ever ride with John so you can film while he drives?” I asked, keeping the lens focused on the dark wall cloud as Dash took a hard right turn down a graveled road.

“I used to.”

“What changed?”

“He always wanted to book it when I wanted to stay. I drive myself now so they can bolt if they want.”

“Is that safe? Staying behind by yourself?”

“I always manage,” he said and winked at me.

Dash picked up the radio again and clicked the button down. “Pulling off about a mile ahead.”

“Right behind you,” John answered.

Dash pulled the truck off the road next to a freshly plowed piece of land. Rolling green pasture bordered a few acres of upturned red earth, which was sectioned in evenly spaced rows. He threw the truck in park, grabbed the camera from me, and hopped out. I followed him, John and Paul meeting us in the middle of a patch of flat packed dirt separating the road from farmland.

The sky was light behind the dark-gray storm cloud, which made the green grass and red dirt below it seem more vibrant. Dash's eyes fixated on the storm before us, their green shining with an intensity I now realized he only held when a storm was in sight.

"It's got potential," he said with a wicked grin on his face. "Maybe you'll see one touch down today, Blake."

I swallowed hard, both excited and scared of the prospect.

"I wish it was more organized," John said, letting his camera hang against his chest.

"Me, too," Dash said, pointing at the northeast portion of the wall cloud. "Look, there's a little rotation."

I focused on where he pointed and saw the slightest bit of movement within the cloud, shocked he'd spotted it so quickly. Nothing as extreme as last time, but I knew it would only take seconds for a tornado to develop out of a rotating wall cloud. My nerves stood on end waiting in eager anticipation.

A crack of lightning bolted from the sky and thunder rumbled a few seconds later. The wind speed around us increased, enough to whip my ponytail back and forth and spray our jeans with red dust. My heart rate spiked with the wind and an excited but terrified sensation shot throughout my body.

"Tighten up!" Dash hollered as if commanding the sky. His eyebrows were drawn as he watched the too-slow churning rotation in the cloud.

The light broken-wisps stemming from the edges of the cloud made me think it was losing steam, but I didn't want to say anything to jinx it.

Chill bumps erupted across my arms, the air turning a few degrees colder. The excited and hopeful energy coursing between the four of us instantly deflated.

Cold air killed the chances for a tornado.

"Damn it," Dash snapped, his shoulders dropping. "It's fading."

Paul booked it back to the Tracker Jacker and leaned over his laptop.

The wall cloud still hung low and was ominous enough with its dark broken sections looking like jagged claws reaching to tear up the earth, but it wouldn't produce anything more than a thunderstorm. The sky rumbled once again as if to prove to us it held all the power. Lightning flashed several moments later, the wicked zigzag bolt striking only a few hundred yards away.

"Shit!" Paul yelled and slammed his fist on the hood of the Tracker Jacker.

"What?" John jogged over to him, took one look at the laptop screen, and dropped his head.

"Don't tell me..." Dash's eyes jumped back and forth between them.

"Yep," Paul answered through clenched teeth.

"Damn it." Dash jerked the camera to his side and stomped to his truck, shoving the camera in its case.

I walked slowly toward him, completely baffled.

He read my utterly confused face. "Where at, Paul?"

"Twenty-five miles east of here." Paul shut his laptop with an audible click. "It's weakening like crazy, though. No chance of catching it now, and there will probably only be scattered thunderstorms for the rest of the night."

Dash sighed. All his previous intensity and excitement completely vanished. He looked at me, his eyes completely defeated. “Tornado touched down at the other location east of here. We missed it because I thought this cell’s chances of producing were higher.” He eyed the clouds behind me like they’d played a cruel trick on him and slid behind the wheel of his truck.

“You know where we’re headed,” Dash hollered at John before motioning for me to get in.

I gave the underdeveloped storm one last look and sank into the passenger seat. Dash spun the truck around and headed toward the highway. The energy was completely different from minutes ago, our spirits crashing from the high hopes we’d had to capture the storm. The sensation was sickening, knowing a tornado had touched down so close and we’d missed it, knowing the last two chases had technically been busts. The sheer disappointment resembled how I’d felt the day I’d given up my dream of going to the University of Tulsa and went home with Justin instead.

And this was only my second chase. I couldn’t imagine how Dash felt, who did this regularly throughout the season.

“Sorry, Dash,” I said, even though I knew it wouldn’t help.

He shrugged. “It’s part of it. Sometimes you get lucky, others not. I should’ve had you look at the images before we chose a location. I won’t make that mistake again. You probably would’ve told us to go to the other site.”

“Maybe not. It really looked like it would tighten up there for a second.”

He smiled. “You’re starting to sound like me.”

“When it comes to storms, you’re the expert, so I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.”

“Where are we headed now?”

“The only place that can make a bust better.”

* * * *

Dash led me inside a bar three times the size of Bailey’s. It was after seven p.m. by the time we made it back to town—thanks to the late start on the chase day and the dinner we stopped for on the trip back. Loud top-40 music blared from massive speakers stationed against the walls, and a huge dance floor took up the entire right half of the place, a bunch of college kids moving to the beat of the music underneath a flash of colored lights. The rest of the place was darkened, only lit by low-hanging lights covered in red-colored glass. A huge bar made up the center, and over a dozen pool tables occupied the left half of the room.

John and Paul headed straight to the tables while Dash pulled a stool out for me at the bar. I took the seat with a thank-you and grabbed the drink trifold that rested against a small container of cardboard coasters.

A beautiful red-headed bartender walked over to us. She wore a tightly cinched black vest with only a bra underneath, a small strip of her flat stomach exposed above her tight red jeans. She smiled brightly, and I tried not to hate her for making me feel plain in my dust-covered pants and wind-warped ponytail. Sure, my snug tee showed off my nicely sized breasts, but the bartender’s vest made hers look like they were on their way to a red-carpet event.

I hadn’t even contemplated asking Dash to take me home so I could change once we rolled into town. I sighed and reminded myself it didn’t matter. Dash had seen me in the same clothes all day, and Justin wouldn’t be caught dead in this place. Luckily I had no guilt about not telling him where I’d been all day. He’d picked the awful fight last night so I didn’t owe him any

explanation today, and could rest easy until he decided he was ready to talk.

“What can I get you two?” Her voice had a husky quality, and the same sexual prowess radiated from her skin. She reminded me of Lindsay, not in looks—except they were both equally gorgeous—but they had a sexual spark that buzzed around them. Every time I met a girl like them I wondered how they did it. Did they learn something I didn’t in school, or were they born with it?

My shoulders sank a fraction remembering the many times Justin had told me I lacked that sexual bombshell edge, but he always backed it up by saying he loved me regardless.

“I’ll take a Briar Patch Ale,” I answered after scanning the micro-brew section of the menu.

Dash grinned at me, and I wondered why he wasn’t using that charm on the bartender to get us free drinks. “I’ll take a 405 Oklahoma Lager,” he said without looking at the girl. I glanced down at the list in my hand.

“Copycat,” I said. He’d chosen a beer made by the same brewery as mine.

“Please, woman. You wouldn’t even know what a micro-brew was if it wasn’t for me.”

“Touché.” Before he came along, the extent of my alcoholic adventures had been cheap champagne and Keystone Light.

The Megan Fox-worthy bartender hurried back, placing our brightly labeled bottles in front of us before rushing off to tend to other patrons. I took a fast drink, the taste of pear and apple bursting on my tongue and zinging me in a sweet way. A few more swallows and I didn’t worry about my attire anymore. Red dirt covered Dash’s clothes, too, though it made him look more rugged than worn out.

Halfway through our beers, bombshell bartender smacked two shot glasses full of an amber liquid in front of us.

“We didn’t order these,” I said.

She motioned toward the pool tables. “Those two did.”

Dash and I followed her gaze to where Paul and John stood in front of a pool table, cues in one hand and raised shot glasses in the other. They nudged their shots in the air before swigging them down and returning to their game.

Dash scooped up his shot and held it toward me. “To the next chase.”

I tentatively picked up mine. I’d never taken a shot before, but I’d done a lot of things I’d never done before because of Dash.

“We’ll catch it next time!” I said.

Dash clinked his tiny glass against mine before throwing it back.

I did the same, filling my mouth with the entire contents of the glass and swallowing a few seconds later. The burn was instant, but not unpleasant. A sweet and near smoky taste hung on the back of my tongue and made my jaw tingle. The liquid warmed my belly, and I hissed once I could breathe again.

Dash chuckled, adding to my already unwinding state. The tension that my muscles had held like a live grenade since we started the chase melted away with each deep breath.

“Got to love bottom-shelf whiskey.” He set his glass back on the bar.

My head instantly buzzed. “I think I do. Let’s get another one.”

His eyebrows rose for a spilt second before returning to his normal relaxed expression. “Whatever you want.” He motioned at the bombshell, and she sauntered over to refill our glasses.

I lifted mine and turned toward him, my knee brushing against his leg. “What should we toast to now?”

“How much fun lightweights are?” He raised his glass.

“Ha, ha,” I snarked back. “How about to a night with no drama besides a missed storm?”

He nodded and we threw the drinks back. I didn’t hiss as loud this time.

“He hasn’t apologized yet, I take it?”

“Nope,” I said, setting the glass down with a smack. “But it’s only been a day. He’ll most likely call tomorrow and all will go back to normal.”

“Just like that, huh?”

I shrugged. “It’s the pattern.”

“That’s”—Dash sucked in a breath and let it out slowly— “understandable after so many years, I guess.” He said the words through clenched teeth. I could tell it had taken a huge effort to bite his tongue.

My tummy simmered with a whiskey warmth and my head buzzed with bursting bubbles. I blissfully slipped into a sweet place where worry didn’t exist, and I *so* didn’t want another fight with Dash over how I let Justin off too easy—especially since every time he pointed out the flaws in my relationship, I questioned it more and more.

I quickly finished the rest of my beer.

Paul put his hand on my shoulder, materializing directly behind us and startling me so much I nearly fell off my seat. “Whoa,” he said, steadying me. “Someone cut the meteorologist off.”

“Oh, please.” I rolled my eyes but thought about ordering a water before my next beer.

“What happens when a male meteorologist forgets his anniversary?”

“Nothing,” I said, thinking of all the times Justin had missed our anniversary. Not that he was a meteorologist, though.

“Wrong,” Paul said. “An approaching cold front with explosive storm development.”

I smacked him on the shoulder. “Clever, as always.”

“Can’t help it. Anyway, I lost so John could play a sophomore chick. Want to dance?” He offered his hand to me.

I reached out to take it happily, but Dash stood up and stepped between us. “I’m not leaving her in your incapable hands. You have near nonexistent rhythm.”

Paul pretended to look offended while Dash grabbed my hand. “Why don’t you save our spots and talk to the redhead,” Dash suggested, wagging his eyebrows from Paul to the bombshell serving bright green drinks to a group of girls a few seats down.

“Nice. Thanks, bro,” Paul said and took a seat.

I stifled a giggle at the thought of him stealing her heart away with bad weather jokes as Dash tugged me toward the dance floor.

The music rose to an exceptionally loud level as we zigzagged our way through the throngs of grinding couples and into the middle of the floor. The song transitioned to Awolnation’s “Sail” as he found a clear spot and stopped.

Dash nodded to the beat and moved his hips back and forth, pulling me closer with a wicked smile on his lips. I moved effortlessly toward him and didn’t even flinch when he wrapped a strong arm around my waist. He swayed us to the rhythm of the music, the sweet drawn-out beat thumping from the speakers and into the floor, vibrating my bones.

He spun me out with a simple flick of his wrist, and I arched my head in a slow circle before he drew me back in quickly, the momentum causing me to crash against his firm chest. He didn’t miss a beat, steadying me with his hands on the small of my back. Heat flushed under his touch, a spark of tingles shooting across my skin.

The music and my buzz created an awesome sense of floating detachment. I hadn’t felt this

great in months. Years maybe.

He twirled me again, and this time I had more grace when he tugged me back. I moved in sync with him, and his strong lead made me feel like a puppet helpless to his direction. A combination of sheer blissfulness and a twinge of guilt hit me.

Justin hated to dance. I'd nearly gotten him into a club once, but he'd had a classic blowup and bailed before we'd even made it to the parking lot. I sighed, swaying where Dash directed me, and forced myself back to the present.

And then I realized how close we were. Heat from his skin radiated beneath my thin tee, my breasts grazing his hard chest, and I was once again overcome with wonder of what Dash would do to me in bed. My core hummed with an aching need and I sucked in a sharp breath. Had I crossed a line dancing with him like this?

As Dash grinned down at me, moving me so easily to the steady thump of the music, I shook my head. No, this was fine. More than fine—it was completely natural for me to be curious after only being with one person my entire life—and everyone had fantasies. I was allowed to enjoy a night out with my best friend, especially since my boyfriend hated doing pretty much anything that involved separating from his Xbox and hated it even more when I did anything beyond study.

“What are you shaking your head at?” Dash pressed his cheek against mine and spoke into my ear so I could hear him over the loud music. His breath on my skin made my heart stutter involuntarily and I wanted to shower in the sensations he awoke in my body for a little longer, despite knowing actively enjoying it took it one step closer to not being a harmless fantasy.

“Do you have to be so great at everything?”

He pulled back for a second, arching an eyebrow at me before returning his lips near my ear. “Of course. It’s what I do.”

I laughed again and thought about how half the time I was with Dash we spent it laughing. I would have killer abs if we kept it up. “You know what would make this even better?”

“Justin being here instead of me?” he quickly replied.

My stomach sank with my instant internal denial. Not that he'd ever be up for anything like this, but if he were here, he'd be sulking at the bar and lecturing me on the immaturity of dancing. “Sorry Lindsay didn’t come,” I said, my train of thought broken. He'd texted her on the way in, but she'd never responded.

“Not what I meant.” He gently rocked me backward before bringing me up against his chest again. “What would make it better?”

The notion seemed silly now. “Never mind.”

“Tell me, woman!”

“If I knew your name!” I relented.

“Of course, anything for a friend,” he said in a mocking tone. He tugged me closer, inching his leg between my thighs until our bodies were flush. My pulse quickened, and I swallowed hard. His lips grazed my ear. “It’s”—he held me in agonizing anticipation—“Lexington, Dash Lexington.” He burst out laughing.

“Ha, ha.” I smacked his chest.

One song faded into another, and we danced until my legs were on fire. Dash never faltered, and damn it if he didn’t show me a good time. When he finally carted me off the dance floor, sweat popped from both our foreheads.

We found Paul chatting up the bombshell where we left him. She actually had a genuine smile that lit up her eyes as he said something funny. I found myself hoping he'd score her

number as I took a seat next to him, Dash standing close behind me due to the lack of available space.

Once they took a breath from their in-depth conversation about why the best tequila chaser was the lime, I ordered Dash and me two more beers. They were cold and so refreshing after the vigorous dance session.

“Not a bad way to mend the wounds of a bust.” I held the tip of my bottle toward him.

“Can’t remember ever having more fun after such a letdown,” Dash said and clinked his bottle against mine.

Chapter 9

Justin sat across from me at our regular high-top table at Bailey's. I couldn't freaking believe it. He'd showed up as a way of an apology for being a complete asshole last weekend.

I wrung my hands out underneath the table, my knee bouncing uncontrollably. I wanted Justin to like Dash and enjoy being out of the house, but I was equally hoping Dash or Lindsay wouldn't slip up and say something about all the non-educational outings we had. I'd grilled Dash on the reasons why that would be a bad idea even though he already understood and I could only hope Lindsay would respect it as well. Of course, I wanted everything out in the open, but on my terms. After tonight, I prayed I could tell Justin how close I'd grown to Dash and the guys without any problems. Once he saw how awesome Dash was he couldn't scold me for the friendship.

John and Paul played shuffleboard as Dash told me about his latest idea for the design of the probes they were working on. Lindsay sipped her cranberry and vodka, sitting next to him with a dazed look.

"You're really into all this weather shit, too, huh?" Justin interrupted Dash.

Dash cut his eyes to Justin. "Yeah, you could say that."

Justin finished off his third IPA. "Don't you think it is a little cliché?"

"What?" Dash asked.

I swallowed hard. Arrogance colored Justin's tone.

"Oh, come on! We live in Oklahoma and you're a storm chaser? Technically isn't every other person in this place one? At least being a meteorologist is a *real* job. Chasing isn't very original," he said and took another drink.

I opened my mouth to defend our shared passion, but Dash was quicker.

"There's a little more to it than standing on your back porch and snapping a photo with your iPhone."

Justin shrugged. "Whatever. You ride around in a car and point a camera out the window. Hardly rocket science."

I placed my hand on top of Justin's wrist. "There is actually a ton of science involved." He'd understand that if he ever paid attention to any of the weather maps I brought home or the station models I studied.

Lindsay giggled and nearly spit her drink all over the table. How many had she had?

"Dashy, he's right; you do point a camera out the window. It's not like you're in a lab conducting experiments or anything. Though the way you and Blake talk about it, you'd think you were." She patted Dash's shoulder like he was a silly puppy.

I ground my teeth together and stopped myself from smacking my forehead. Dash and the guys worked in the weather lab on campus almost every day, and I'd been joining them more frequently, helping them interpret the tons of data they gathered. They also designed probes, tested instruments, plotted courses, and ran through preparation scenarios. Hell, all three of them were up to date in first responder training, too, just in case they were the first ones on a damaged site after a storm. They spent the entire winter preparing for the storm season, and Lindsay had the nerve to brush it off like it was as easy as buying a video camera and driving to the nearest pasture.

"You know, actually—" I started with a snark in my tone before she cut me off.

“What do you do, Justin?” she asked, her voice sickly sweet.

Justin lifted his chin a fraction. “I work over at SprayGoods.”

“That huge warehouse off 77?”

“That’s the one. I’m on the line every day. Using my hands to build things. You know, actually making a real contribution to the world.”

I stifled a snort by taking another swig of my Native Amber. Lord, he made it sound like he built solar panels for industrial companies or high-grade water filtration systems for the ocean. He pressed a button and watched the line to make sure the machinery didn’t back up while it assembled the nozzles that went on squirt bottles. He hated it, but tonight he acted like it was an honor to work there.

Dash chuckled. “Nothing like assembly work to really make a man feel more...manly.” He finished off his beer and signaled to Diana for another one.

I raised my bottle, too, though I hadn’t even finished it yet—the tension between the two men was palpable. I’d wanted tonight to be a fun, easy way to introduce them, not a competition for who has a bigger piece in their pants. The thought made me ponder Dash’s equipment for one second too long, and heat rushed to my cheeks. I couldn’t lock those thoughts down even if I had a safe.

I took the last few gulps of my beer quickly. Why had I even bothered begging Justin to come out? He was obviously pissed about it and being rude as a punishment.

“This coming from someone who sings in the rain?” Justin laughed, and to my shock so did Lindsay.

“Dashy doesn’t sing! But that would be funny.” She stroked Dash’s arm. “You could narrate your little clips by singing!”

“Have you even seen his site?” I snapped, my filter growing smaller with each beer I drank. The videos on Dash’s website were all up-close footage of tornadoes in their strongest capacity. Little clips my ass.

“I’ve been on there...once.” Lindsay shrugged. “Dashy knows I don’t believe in that stuff anyway,” she said, smiling at him.

Dash pressed his lips together, and I could tell he held back a laugh with difficulty. I eyed him with an *are you serious* look.

“Believe in it? Are you saying extreme weather is something you can choose not to believe exists if you don’t see it in person? Like ghosts or unicorns?” Whoops, I’d blurted that out a little too bluntly.

Dash sprayed his last sip of beer back into the bottle as he laughed.

Lindsay rolled her eyes. “Of course not,” she snapped. “Unicorns definitely don’t exist.”

I sighed, and Dash wiped his mouth off with a napkin. Diana brought the next round to our awkwardly silent table. *Damn it, could this night get any worse?*

“This place is lame.” Justin broke the silence.

I cringed. He’d declare his undying love for his Xbox in three...two...

“We should all go somewhere else,” he suggested, shocking the hell out of me.

“You’re so right,” Lindsay agreed. “Where did you have in mind?”

“Blake, you mentioned ghosts. How about the Ponderosa bridge?”

“You’re not serious.”

“Why not?” Justin asked.

“Because that was fun when we were kids...”

We’d made the trek there on our bicycles numerous times when we were younger. It was an

old wooden bridge still intact over Black Bear Creek and legend had it Ms. Ponderosa was supposed to meet her fiancé there to elope in secret when her parents denied him her hand in marriage. He'd either never shown and she'd jumped off the bridge, or he *did* show and threw her off in a fury at being denied her inheritance. Either way, we'd never encountered anything, just royally freaked ourselves out.

"Making the trip out there now sounds like a pain in the ass," I continued. Now that we had cars instead of bicycles, we'd have to park blocks away and make the rest of the trip on foot. A less than desirable idea in the dark and buzzed.

"Yeah, man, people stop doing that around age twelve." Dash backed me up.

Justin scowled at him before shrugging. "If you're a scared little bitch, then just say so."

My mouth dropped open. "Justin!"

"What? I say we take a six-pack out there and have a little fun. The two of you are acting like I suggested we run a half marathon. Sounds more like an excuse because both of you are scared."

Lord, he *acted* like a twelve-year-old.

"It sounds fun to me!" Lindsay chimed in, and Dash and I shook our heads at the same time.

"Fine." Dash sighed. "Let's go." He swished back the rest of his beer and slammed it on the table.

After my invite was received with a laughing decline from John and Paul, I left a ten dollar bill on our table for Diana. Dash stopped Justin outside the door by placing a hand on his chest. I held my breath as Justin's eyes turned to slits.

"Just for the record," Dash said, "you may not want to call a man who chases tornadoes for a living a scared little bitch. It could come back to haunt you." He walked to his truck, and opened the door for Lindsay.

I grinned despite myself, but it instantly faded when Justin caught my eyes.

"What a fucking tool," Justin said. "I can't wait until this semester is over and you don't have to study or run in the same circle with this guy anymore." He brushed past me without a second glance and climbed into his truck. My heart sank at his words. He'd never approve of my friendship with Dash, and if I admitted the truth now, he'd force me to choose between them.

I opened the door of Justin's truck, the conditions revolving around my relationship smothering me, and I wondered what it would be like to be Lindsay for just one night.

* * * *

The moon shone bright silver against the night sky and a cool breeze made chill bumps burst on my arms. I rubbed my hands back and forth on them, wishing for my jacket. The grass nearly came up to my knees as we made the long walk to the bridge. Dash had a flashlight he'd brought from his truck, but other than that the stars and moon lit the path before us.

Justin carried a six-pack he'd picked up at the gas station on the way over. He'd already cracked open a beer, and every time he took a drink my stomach churned. A fine line rested between a fun Justin and a blowup-worthy Justin on a normal day. When he drank too much that line disappeared. I prayed by us actively doing what he'd suggested that Dash wouldn't have to see it.

"You know," Lindsay said, "I heard that the lady was pregnant and that's why he pushed her off the bridge." She clutched Dash's hand and giggled.

"That's awful." I had no clue how she could find that notion funny.

She whipped her head around. “You’re so sensitive. Lighten up.”

Justin tossed an empty bottle on the ground. “She really is! God, Blake, you need to learn how to let things go.”

I hung back a beat and picked up the bottle to throw in the trash on our way out. Whenever that would be. Lindsay and Justin may be enjoying themselves, but both their attitudes were borderline juvenile and I found myself exhausted at the high-school feel of it all. I seriously considered turning around and driving myself back to Bailey’s to enjoy another Native Amber and a big-ass burger. I smacked my forehead when I remembered I hadn’t driven and I’d most likely have to drive Justin’s truck home with the way he tossed the beers back.

“Not that any of the stories are true,” Dash said, suddenly beside me. “But that one is particularly gruesome.”

I spun the bottle slowly in my hand. “Right? Thank you.” I shook my head. “You’d think I cried over a puppy commercial.”

He motioned his head to the side. “Come on, I’ve never chased a ghost before. You’ll have to show me how.”

“Ha! I haven’t, either. Well, not since I was little. And back then we basically stood around and made each other jump at random times.”

Lindsay giggled from several yards ahead of us, drawing our attention. Apparently Justin was a riot. Funny, he hadn’t made me laugh in a long time. Maybe I’d just heard all of his jokes.

Oak trees bordered the land across the old bridge and there were a few scattered amongst the tall grass on the side we approached from. The railing was made of rusty old metal spaced out in large Xs with a flat piece on top, and wooden planks connected the walkway. Black Bear Creek trickled underneath it more than forty feet below, a slow and steady stream that added to the crickets chirping in the night.

Despite the dark rumors surrounding it, I’d always enjoyed the bridge as a kid. Probably because I’d watched a thunderstorm roll in from the west one time. The afternoon sky had lit up with white-hot lightning strikes and illuminated the thick cumulonimbus clouds—which back then I’d called “the big scary ones.” Everyone else had grabbed their bikes and hauled ass home, but I’d stayed behind and watched the storm unfold until it rained so hard I had to walk my bike home.

Of course I had. How had I not known from the beginning I was born to study storms?

The shattering of broken glass cut through my thoughts, and Dash and I picked up our pace, catching up to Justin and Lindsay who stood in the middle of the bridge.

Justin peered over the railing. I followed his gaze and sighed. He’d tossed an empty over, and it’d smashed on a huge rock sticking up out of the creek. Another beer down quick. I swallowed hard instead of chastising for the broken glass.

“Nice,” Dash said sarcastically, and I sucked in a breath. He was unaware of the lengths I took not to trigger an eruption from Justin.

“Something wrong, chase-boy?” Justin turned toward Dash, his eyebrows drawn.

Dash smirked. “Not a thing. So where is this ghost of yours?”

Justin motioned toward the railing. “A girl has to stand where she did in order to draw her out.” His words bordered on the thick side, and I tried to do a mental recap of how many he’d had tonight.

“Course. Makes sense,” Dash said and tossed me another *are you serious* look. I grabbed two beers out of the pack Justin had set on the bridge. I handed one to Dash and shrugged. Living in the moment, plus if we drank them then that made two more Justin couldn’t.

“Ew, I’m not doing it! I’ll ruin my heels, plus my skirt isn’t really climbing material. Blake, you have to! You can’t mess up those old boots any more than they already are.”

The hack about my boots only stung a little. I glanced down at the scuffed black leather, my jeans shoved into them. They were well broken in, just the way I liked them, and they were damn sure more comfortable than the four-inch red pumps she wore. How did she even make it through the grass without falling or at least getting mud on them?

“No thanks.” I took a generous pull on my beer, then scrunched up my face and glared at the bottle. Justin had picked the cheapest, skunkiest beer he could find.

A light mist fell around us, and Dash and I both instinctively looked at the sky. No storm clouds indicating anything major would drop down on us other than the light sprinkle.

“Oh, you’re no fun!” Lindsay whined and stomped her foot, drawing our attention back to earth. Did she really just do that?

“Come on, Blake. You used do it all the time,” Justin said.

“When I was ten!”

Justin threw his head back. “Ugh, you were more fun back then. Now, you’re just...”

A hot anger simmered in the pit of my stomach. Him and Lindsay were a perfect pair tonight, and I wanted to tell them both to go to hell.

“Boring,” he finally finished.

Dash flinched beside me, and Lindsay’s mouth dropped.

The anger soared to a roaring boil. “Boring? Your idea of excitement is not getting killed in a COD match,” I snapped, my thoughts traveling to the bedroom and how he’d only make love to me one way—flipped over and fast.

Justin’s face turned a dark shade of red, and the muscle in his jaw flexed. “Don’t be a bitch.” His eyes dared me to take his bait for a fight.

I shook my head.

Fuck it.

I smacked my beer down on the wooden plank and walked to the railing. The metal was slick against my palms with the light mist of rain but I ignored that. I was *not* boring, and maybe it was the fact that I had three beers in me, but I was damned if I’d let him call me that.

“Blake, don’t,” Dash said as I hitched my foot within the X shape, climbing up until I straddled the wet beam. I completely ignored him and the cold wet metal soaking through my jeans.

I pushed onto my feet and tried not to think about plummeting off the railing. Instead I assured myself that the wonderful air barrier between me and a forty-foot drop to the creek below would be sufficient protection. Rolling my eyes, I slowly turned my back toward them and looked outward, not down.

The air flowed past me in a steady not-at-all-threatening breeze, and the fine spray of rain kissed my cheeks. My heart pounded against my chest as I held my arms out horizontally, and it wasn’t from fear of a damned ghost, either. It was exhilarating being up this high, the night sky laid out before me with crystal stars shining through the broken string of rain clouds.

“Blake!” Justin screamed so obnoxiously his voice cracked the silence worse than a clap of thunder, and I startled—clearly his intention.

The railing, slick beneath my boots, seemed to tilt, and I quickly lost my footing. My heart in my throat, I windmilled my arms until I somehow managed to fall backward instead of head first into the creek far below.

Where I expected the hard, wooden bridge to break my fall, a warm body sank beneath me.

My head knocked back against Dash's chest, his arms gripping me as the momentum from my fall jerked us to our backs. I heard the thunk of his body take the full impact, but all I felt was...safe.

Then embarrassed. And then pissed off.

Justin and Lindsay roared with laughter, but Dash's lips were at my ear, his breath warm on my neck.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his arms still held me against him.

I did a quick internal check and, besides my pride hurting something fierce, I was practically melting in his embrace. God, could I be more of a damsel in distress?

"Fine," I said over Justin and Lindsay's laughter and rolled off Dash to kneel beside him.

"You're the one who took the hit, are you okay?" I eyed him, but he'd already jumped up, his T-shirt didn't even have a wrinkle in it.

He kept his mouth shut, the fire in his green eyes so hot they were molten.

"I'm sorry I nearly crushed you," I said before I could stop myself.

He shook his head and brushed some dirt off the side of my thigh before he cut his eyes to Justin.

"You're too easy, Blake." Justin smacked his thigh as if my falling was the funniest thing he'd ever seen.

Dash walked toward Justin, stopping an inch from his face. "She could've been killed, you fucking idiot!"

I gasped and reached out for him as if I could pull his words back. It *so* wasn't worth it.

Justin's happy face quickly turned to a scowl I knew all too well. "She's fine. You didn't have to be the hero-boy and catch her either. Don't be such a tool."

"That's hilarious coming out of your mouth," Dash snapped.

Justin crossed his arms over his chest and lowered his voice to where I just barely made it out. "You should stop worrying about Blake so much and focus on yourself."

"You have no idea who you're threatening."

Lindsay clicked up between both of them, swishing her hips as if she were going to ask one of them to dance. I didn't understand how she could be oblivious to the severity of the situation, but perhaps it was because I knew Justin better. "We're out of beer," she practically purred. "Can we stop this testosterone match and get a girl a drink? Blake's fine, right?" She eyed me and I nodded, stepping closer to them.

The tension in Justin's shoulders melted and my heart slowed a fraction. He turned and looked down at Lindsay. "I've got another six-pack in my truck." He motioned his head and walked back the way we'd come.

"All right! Come on, Dashy!" Lindsay didn't wait for Dash but hurried after Justin in the short-stepping way one can only do in pumps like hers.

I stood frozen, shocked that Justin hadn't taken a swing at Dash. Maybe he wasn't as drunk as I'd thought, or maybe he knew how upset I'd be if he did.

"Blake are you coming?" Justin called, looking over his shoulder.

I pointed at the empty beer bottles on the bridge. "Just want to gather these first."

He kept walking. I didn't move until he and Lindsay were barely shadows through the darkness.

I let out a long breath and knelt to pick up the bottles. Dash helped, grabbing two from the other side of the bridge. "Thanks," I said as we stood and walked slowly back to the trucks. I stopped in the middle of the tall grass. "I'm so sorry."

Dash craned his head back to the sky. “You know I hate it when you do that.”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Take the blame. Say sorry for things out of your control.”

“I just wanted tonight to be fun. I wanted you two to like each other.”

“He’s a complete dirtbag, Blake. The way he treats you...” He clenched his eyes shut. When he opened them again, he registered my completely defeated expression.

He took a deep breath. “I don’t think I’ll ever like this guy. But I’m willing to try.”

I swallowed hard to stop the tears from reaching my eyes. Justin wouldn’t be as courteous of my wishes. Dash was too good a friend, and I put him in a situation—again—where he could’ve been the subject of Justin’s rage. The morning I’d hidden him in my closet flashed in my eyes. I seriously didn’t deserve him.

“Thank you, for breaking my fall.”

He took a step closer to me. “Someone has to save you sometimes, since you’re constantly doing it for someone else.”

He looked past me then, to where I knew Justin had to be, and my chest tightened. I didn’t regret telling him the truth about Justin’s threats every time I tried to leave, but when Dash said things like that it made me question...everything. And my mind was overrun with the guilt and the worry and the curiosity of how different things could be if Justin wasn’t the way he was, if he was more like Dash. If he *was* Dash. The thoughts raced together in a jumbled mess of a traffic-jam and I had no idea which way was straight anymore. So instead of trying to talk it all out with Dash, I simply gazed at him, and admired the ease of his presence next to me.

“How’d you adapt this stoic calm you possess?” I asked as we continued our walk. The trucks came into sight, Justin’s headlights and music blaring.

“Please, woman. Think about what I do for a living.”

“Right, duh,” I said, but my laughter died as Dash and I stopped a few feet away from Justin’s truck.

Lindsay leaned against the driver’s side door, her hip cocked against one of Justin’s thighs as she peered over him, sipping on a beer as he talked.

“Just installed these myself,” Justin said and pointed to something near his dashboard. Most likely the new stereo he’d bought recently.

I shook off the shock of someone as gorgeous as Lindsay so close to Justin rather quickly and wondered idly if it should bother me more. I glanced at Dash. He stared at the two with a distant gaze, more inside his head than standing in the tall grass next to me.

“What’s up?” I nudged him with my elbow.

He blinked a couple times and gave me a half smile. “Nothing...” He chuckled quietly to himself. “Absolutely nothing.”

Chapter 10

I slipped my black calf-high boots over my best skinny jeans and tugged at my sleeveless black lacy top. I wanted to look hot tonight. Blue October only came to town once or twice a year and I looked forward to it more than my birthday. I'd even dyed my hair an espresso brown a couple nights ago for a fresh look. Not much darker than my natural color, but the change lifted my spirits, and with the concert only hours away I was practically flying. And despite Justin's outburst over the tickets a few weeks ago, I was determined to have a good time.

I finished my look with some red lipstick—choosing to go bolder than I ever had before—just as I heard the jingle of keys outside my front door. My heart galloped. Justin was here. I half expected him to call and bail on me after the disaster of his meeting Dash last week. I told myself tonight would be different. Who couldn't have fun at a concert?

I heard Hail growl from the couch and him hiss back at her.

"Stop it, both of you," I yelled from my bedroom.

"She started it," he said.

I shut my door and caught Justin staring at the large tub of Nutella brownies my mom had dropped off the day before. She had the habit of coming over to my place when I had a long day of classes to "drop things off" and ended up cleaning, too. I'd continuously tried to get her to stop, but the baked goods were beyond hard to turn down.

The look in Justin's eyes as he skimmed over the sweet note she left on top of the tub made my chest clench.

Longing, wonder. Anger, regret.

Each emotion flashed in his eyes in the span of a few heartbeats before he decided to stick to one. He shoved the tub away on the kitchen counter, like it had personally offended him.

I gulped down the guilt, letting it settle in its usual spot in the center of my chest. These moments weren't completely unheard of. Moments when I'd catch him longing for that special bond only a family could provide.

Holidays. Tough times. Each could've been an opportunity to try to reconcile after all these years, but he never tried. And from my many phone calls in the past, I knew his aunt and uncle wouldn't try if *he* didn't, so I'd given up on the idea long ago. Justin knew all this, of course, but it didn't change things. He was set in the way his life worked and wouldn't budge. That left me set with my guilt, and the constant overwhelming urge to fill that gap for him, despite it never being enough.

He finally registered my presence, catching me watching him.

"You look nice, Blake," he said, his eyes distant, gentler. He blinked and the rare tender moment was gone. He stepped away from the counter quickly, scrunching his eyebrows. "Are you ready? I want to get there and get a spot near the exit so we're not stuck in a logjam when this thing is over." He swung his keys back and forth between his fingers.

I sank a fraction, wishing his default mood wasn't anger. "Yeah, I'm ready."

"Good. Let's go."

I climbed into his truck, shocked it'd been cleared of food bags and other trash.

"We'll do breakfast tomorrow, too. And then maybe a movie?" he said as he navigated the roads.

I had to shut my mouth it had dropped so fast. "I'd love that."

“Good. I’ve been wanting to see the new Bruce Willis movie for a while.”

I wondered if the moment I’d caught him having earlier was the reason for his long-lost sweetness. I kept my hopes in check, though, knowing that those kind of promises usually came with a price. I sighed with the thought, wishing I could just enjoy his spontaneity and focus on the fact that maybe he was finally, if not slowly, changing into the man I knew he could be when I’d fallen in love with him as a boy.

The line outside The Starlite wrapped around the brick building’s corner despite Justin’s insistence to rush. I’d told him we would’ve had to arrive two hours early to be the first in line, but he didn’t believe me. He’d been so sure he hadn’t even let me grab something from the drive-through and I was starving. It’d be hours before I could eat now.

Excited butterflies flapped in my stomach, helping distract me from my hunger. Each time I saw Blue perform was like the first time—the eager anticipation, the rush of adrenaline, and then the release after an incredible high—something I savored.

“Holy shit. This is ridiculous.” Justin looked over the line as we took our places in the back.

“Told you.” I shrugged. The minimum hour-long wait didn’t bother me because I knew that after it my favorite band would be two opening acts away from taking the stage and performing the music I loved.

Justin cut his eyes to me. “You didn’t tell me we’d be standing here for hours just to get inside and stand for another four hours listening to a band you can hear on your iPod.”

“Geez, loosen up. Concerts are a blast.” I tried to hug his arm, but he pulled away.

“It’ll be fun when I can get a beer.” He grabbed our tickets out of his back pocket. “I bought these weeks ago. I should be able to get in before all these jokers paying at the window.”

“You can’t—”

“Stay here.” He took off toward the front of the building.

I didn’t try to stop him. Maybe it would take up half the wait time for him to figure out we’d have to stand in line like everybody else. Glancing across the street, I noticed several people wearing Blue October shirts crowding around a small display. The guy behind it also wore the band’s gear. Since we were still the last ones in line, I decided to give in to my curiosity and headed over.

An array of baked goods, from cookies to brownies, sat on the display. One girl shoved half a dozen cookies in her purse as she walked away. A small neon sign read: Support Local Artists.

My stomach growled. “What artist is this for?”

The guy behind the display had blond dreads covered partially by a Blue October beanie. “My band and a few others. We’re raising money for new instruments. We have a similar sound to Blue.”

I grabbed an individually packaged brownie the size of my hand and over an inch thick. “Awesome,” I said and handed him a ten dollar bill. “Keep the change. Good luck with your music.”

I hurried back to the line only to find someone had taken my spot. “Hey, jerk, this was my spot!” I yelled in my best high-pitched whine.

Dash whipped around, his eyebrows scrunched together. “You want to fight over *this*?” He eyed the very end of the line we occupied. “And that was a terrible voice by the way. Knew it was you.”

“Sure you did,” I said and unwrapped my brownie. “Where is Lindsay?” I glanced around, shocked she wasn’t attached to his hip.

Dash cleared his throat. “Well, she and I—”

“They won’t let us in.” Justin’s voice cut off Dash, and I turned to see him behind me. “Even though I bought *you* these tickets way ahead of time.” The mention of buying the tickets for me turned my stomach. I knew he’d just been delivering a low blow when he’d blamed this present as the reason he had to sell his watch, but it was hard to take, and I resisted the urge to apologize for something I knew I wasn’t responsible for. He had plenty of things he could’ve sold and more so, his truck wouldn’t have been towed if he’d simply parked in a space that wasn’t restricted.

Instead of saying anything along those lines I shoved a huge bite of brownie in my mouth. Not the best I’d ever tasted, kind of dry actually, but I was starving so I didn’t care. I slowed down, nibbling it as Dash filled the tense silence with one of his awesome chase stories. Nearly an hour later the line moved forward inch by inch and we finally reached the front. Justin had been glued to his phone the entire wait, and I glanced up at him, wondering how I could make him enjoy this night more.

“I just noticed you changed your hair, Blake. It looks amazing,” Dash said, regaining my attention.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “I colored it. Thanks,” I said before taking another bite of the brownie, which was now more than half gone.

“You colored your hair?” Justin finally pried his eyes away from his phone, looking at the hair framing my face. He glanced at Dash before returning to me. He didn’t smile. “You know I liked it the way it was.”

My chest tightened and I shook my head. Why did anything involving the slightest hint of change have to irk him so much? I wracked my brain, wondering if he’d always been this way or had I just started to notice it because Dash was so starkly different? *His* notice of me was so welcome I had the urge to wrap my arms around him.

The idea made my entire body tingle, and then I laughed so hard I shook.

“What the hell, Blake?” Justin asked after I couldn’t stop the giggles for two minutes straight.

I sucked in gulps of air and wiped under my eyes, finally reeling myself in as we moved into the lobby of the building. “Sorry,” I said. “Don’t know where that came from.” “Where did you get that?” Justin eyed the half-eaten brownie in my hand.

“From the guys across the street raising money for their instruments,” I said, motioning toward the building’s doors.

Justin raked his hands across his buzzed head. “You idiot!”

I burst out laughing at the sight of his scowl. He really had that look down. He needed a beer quick. I thought about getting a drink, too, but I suddenly realized I felt like I’d already drank four.

“What?”

Justin lowered his head. “That brownie is laced. Probably with a whole bunch of different drugs. Now look at you.”

My laughter died instantly and I froze, staring at the brownie in my hand like it would bite me. “Drugs? Like cocaine? Meth? Oh my God, did I just eat meth?”

“Probably,” Justin said. “You shouldn’t buy shit off strangers like that.”

Dash gently grabbed my shoulders and looked me in the eye. “It’s just a pot-brownie. You’ll be fine, Blake.”

“No, no no no. It’s meth. I’m going to freak out like that guy on *Breaking Bad*...”

“You are not. Relax.” He chuckled, and the sound cut through my terror.

“How can you be sure?”

“Always a first for everything.” Dash grabbed the remaining half of the brownie from me and shoved it in his mouth.

“Better?” he asked after swallowing. He flashed me a huge smile, tons of brownie still stuck between his teeth.

Justin’s eyes jumped between the two of us again and he shook his head. “You’re both fucking idiots.”

It wasn’t at all funny but I laughed again, and this time I didn’t stop until we’d found our spots on the floor.

* * * *

Blue stage lights sparkled off thick layers of smoke in the air. My head buzzed with a wonderful mixture of loud music and floaty-sensation. My muscles had never been so relaxed as I swayed rhythmically to the sound of the electric violin and closed my eyes as the lead singer crooned the first note of my favorite song. The music touched me, soaked through my skin, and hummed in my bones. The pleasure built inside me until I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I let out a scream and threw the rock sign up. Dash followed suit, and so did a bunch of others in the crowd.

Dash stood next to me, nodding his head to the music. I glanced around at Justin, who was behind us with his hands crossed over his chest. He stared at the stage but remained still. I couldn’t fathom how he could be surrounded by such awesome music and not move.

I turned my attention back to the stage and nudged Dash when the band segued into his favorite song. He let out a holler of his own. We both mouthed lyrics at each other over the next few songs and banged our heads to the beat. I’d never been to a show with someone who loved the band as much as I did, and I instantly decided it was the absolute best way to experience it. Blue slowed down to a soft tune and my heart jumped when Justin left the bar and pulled me closer to him. My shock of him asking me to dance quickly vanished when he continued to tug me toward a clear space closer to the bar where I could hear him easier.

“We have to go,” he said.

“What? No. They’re not even close to finished yet.”

“Look, I’m sorry, but the guys have this major tournament up. They can’t finish it without me. Our team will forfeit.”

I freed my wrist from his fingers as an angry response churned itself up in my stomach. “I can’t—”

“I can take Blake home.” Dash cut me off, and I only then realized he stood next to us.

Justin’s eyes went to slits, looking Dash up and down. Of course he didn’t know that Dash knew exactly where I lived and had hung out with me—John and Paul as well—plenty of times. The battle in his eyes was clear, but I couldn’t tell where he’d land.

“Fine.” Justin took my hand again. “We will do breakfast tomorrow though. And the movie. I promise. Be at my house at eight. Okay?”

I nodded. “Thanks for bringing me,” I said as he walked out of earshot.

Dash grabbed my hand and guided me back to the dance floor before I could contemplate how, or *if*, I was even upset.

I quickly focused on the band who launched into a fast-paced number that I knew by heart. The sweet, bubbly sensation still popped underneath my skin, and chased away any thought I’d

have given to Justin's departure. Instead, I let loose the moves I normally saved for my kitchen. Bouncing from side to side, I grabbed Dash's hand and spun myself around, the night from our failed chase fresh in my mind. It wasn't anywhere near club music, so Dash didn't take control and draw me close like he had before, but he twirled me a couple times before letting go and matching my steady bounce.

Soon we each played an air instrument in perfect synchronization. Caught up in my mad air-guitar skills, I didn't see a man the size of a linebacker making his way toward the bar and stepped right in his path. The sheer mass of his movement knocked me off balance, and I toppled hard into Dash.

I gripped his shoulders, and he steadied me with one strong arm wrapped around my lower back.

"Sorry!" the man shouted and continued to the bar.

I glanced up at Dash, my lids slightly hooded.

"You all right, woman?"

"Couldn't be better." The truth rang clear in my voice and I don't know why I was surprised at the notion. Justin had left, had bailed once again, and I just...didn't care.

Dash raised his eyebrows but didn't break our gaze. I stared back at him, enjoying the hard press of his body against mine. My eyes trailed to his lips. I wondered what he tasted like? I imagined something sweet and intense, like dark chocolate and cayenne. I blinked a couple times and realized I hadn't let go of his shoulders. I slowly pulled away. He unwound his arm from my waist, and my heart raced.

He winked at me, and my limbs melted. I quickly bounced up and down to the next song, desperately grounding myself in the present and forcing my mind to stop fantasizing about Dash. I blamed the brownie.

The band did an encore, but it still ended too soon. I'm pretty sure I could watch Blue perform for well over their normal two-hour limit.

We funneled into the line of a hundred or so other people exiting the building at a slow crawl. There were only inches between me and the person in front of me, but Dash's chest pressed against my back as he stood behind me. I couldn't deny how safe I felt with him there. And I couldn't stop my body from reacting the way it did, or my mind from trying to make the friendship I had with Dash into something more. I focused my thoughts on Justin and our breakfast date tomorrow, instantly deciding I'd use the time to talk and find common ground again. I assured myself that is all it would take to end the madness filling my head.

Then Dash shifted his weight behind me, his hand accidentally grazing my hip causing an electric current to run through the center of my body and crackle.

* * * *

Hail sat on the floor, resting her head on Dash's knee, the perfect pout plastered on her face. We were devouring the two pizzas we'd brought home after the concert, and she was in a mood since I wouldn't let Dash give her any. She already weighed fifty pounds and didn't need any more jiggle. I told her she was perfect the way she was, but she continuously begged for food like I starved her.

"Did you get a good look at Ryan's new violin? It was badass!" Dash said, stuffing another slice of pepperoni in his mouth.

"Yeah, it was wicked! I loved the bright blue flames." I finished off my fourth slice and

carried the empty box to the kitchen. I set it on the counter and grabbed two more beers from the fridge, twisting off the caps and tossing them in the box. I stopped when I turned back around, finding Dash petting Hail as she leaned against his legs. I swear both of them were smiling, and the sight warmed my insides.

“You going to drink both those beers, woman, or are you sharing?”

I handed Dash one of the bottles and sat back down.

“So, Dash Lexington, what’s your real name?” I asked, hoping the abrupt shift in conversation would shock him enough to tell me.

“Nope.”

“Seriously? Beer and a pot brownie and you still won’t let it slip?”

“Never going to happen, Blake.” He took another swig from the bottle.

I sank further into the couch and fake-sulked while nursing my own longneck. The beer tasted unusually good tonight, as did the pizza. The credit could go to the brownie, but I suspected it was because the night had been utterly awesome.

“So, are you upset that Justin bailed to play video games...again?”

“No.”

“Really?”

I shrugged, unable to convey the battle of thoughts raging in my head. “He promised breakfast tomorrow. What more can I ask for?” The question sounded much more depressing than I’d meant it to.

Dash sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t know. Just seems like he should be here and not me.”

My stomach sank. “Do you not want to be here?”

He glanced at me, his green eyes intense as ever. “Not what I meant. I love being around you, Blake. You know that if the choice came down to it, I’d rather be with you than do almost anything else in the world. But I also want you to be happy.”

“I’m happy—”

“Tonight,” Dash cut me off. “And it’s not due to him because whenever he does something for you, it’s *still* about him.”

He was right; I couldn’t deny it. A slow, familiar dull ache surfaced in my chest. “I know that, but what would you have me do?” He knew the reasons I stayed.

Dash set his beer down and gently clutched my shoulder, pinning me with those damn green eyes. “I’d have you realize that the woman you are deserves better than the man he is.”

“But...” It wasn’t that simple. “Who’s to say I deserve better than what Justin gives me? It’s been like this forever. I don’t know anything outside of it.” I chided myself, because I *did* know better. Because of Dash.

The warmth from his hand slid across my skin as he moved it to my neck. “Don’t think that. You deserve more, Blake. And you need to understand that you are so much more than how you see yourself and a hell of a lot more than how he treats you.”

My breath caught in my throat, and I tried to ignore the sparks erupting low in my belly from Dash’s words and touch. I licked my lips, my mouth suddenly dry. He studied me, gauging me for a response, but I didn’t have the words.

“Do you...” I inhaled sharply. “Do you want another beer?” I asked instead of opening the door he knocked on.

He let out a long breath, like he’d been holding it. I glanced at him and his eyes were on me. Really on me, with a deep, almost magnetic stare I’d never seen before. It made my heart race.

He reached his hand up and touched the ends of my hair where it lay on my shoulder. The light caress sent a wave of heat throughout my entire body.

“You deserve to be free.” His voice was soft and low and different, like I was hearing it for the first time.

I parted my lips, but only air escaped.

Dash sighed. “I better go before I have too many and have to crash here again,” he said, standing from the couch. The playful grin he sported set my nerves at ease but didn’t erase the seriousness of his earlier words.

“Yeah, my couch isn’t much to sleep on,” I said and couldn’t stop the blush that flooded my cheeks. The first night Dash and I hung out he’d ended up sleeping over. And look how far we’d come. My best friend—I couldn’t imagine life without him.

Dash took a step closer after kissing Hail goodbye. He looked down at me, his eyes hopping from mine to my lips and back again. My hands trembled.

“I didn’t mind it.” He winked before he turned and walked to my door. “See you later.”

I stared at the door long after he’d left, desperately trying to ignore the shockwave of heat pulsing throughout my entire body.

Chapter 11

I stood outside Justin's door, thirty minutes after eight a.m. I'd wanted to give him some extra time—knowing mornings weren't his strong suit—to start our day on the right foot. I heard laughter from the other side of the door, followed by insults and playful shouting. The boys were over and still playing COD. Had they even slept?

Done with the idea of knocking, I pushed open the door and walked inside.

Justin's focus was intently on the flat screen in his living room, but Mark and Andy saw me. All their eyes were rimmed in red. So they'd been up all night, and from the look of the amount of beer cans strewn across the floor, they were probably still drunk.

Wonderful.

"Hey, Blake," Andy said, rubbing his eyes before grabbing the controller sitting next to him. I gave him a closed mouth-smile, trying to keep the adrenaline in my veins from fully unleashing. Justin hadn't officially bailed on me...yet. I took a deep breath.

"Justin?"

He finally noticed I stood in his living room. His eyes grew wide, recognition flickering behind them. "Oh, yeah, sorry. I meant to text you."

My heart sank, the sensation so familiar it made me angry. I think I'd already known he would do this.

"Why?" I managed to ask.

He glanced around the room and then at the screen. "Isn't it obvious? We're still playing."

"But you promised. We were going to..." The fight went out of me. The main hope I'd had for today was a good talk with him to clear the air but it quickly vanished.

Justin glared, visibly upset by my plea. He stood up, coming closer and lowering his voice. "Damn it, Blake, was the concert not good enough for you?"

"What?"

"Seriously, I took you, played nice all night. That should've bought me time. I shouldn't have to do anything for a while now."

My mouth dropped. "You only took me because you were...buying me off so I wouldn't ask you to do anything with me?"

"Well, it sure as hell wasn't because I liked the band." He had the audacity to laugh then, turning to fist-bump Andy.

The laugh, paired with his nonchalance about blowing me off, for the umpteenth time, broke something within me. The last piece of my heart that cared about him, ached for his attention, his love, died. With it came a rushing sensation of clarity, and it was like my eyes were open for the first time in years.

Justin would *never* change.

And I was done being afraid to leave him. I chased tornadoes for God's sake—I could do this, and I wasn't waiting one more second. I would not be treated like garbage. Never again. I don't know if it was Dash's words last night, the fact that I *could* chase down a tornado and barely flinch, or the culmination of one too many emotional blows from Justin, but I was so fucking done.

I took a deep breath. "We need to talk," I said, not letting my anger seep out. I would end this maturely. I glanced at Mark and Andy, suddenly grateful for their presence. Hopefully they

could keep him calm and rational, prevent him from hurting himself...*if* he resorted to that again. Even if he did, though, I couldn't take it anymore. Dash was right; real love wouldn't place that on someone, and Justin's actions made it clear he didn't love me anymore.

He walked past me toward his bedroom. I followed him, pausing in the entryway, the door having disappeared from the last time he'd kicked it in. I shook my head at the memory, and it was like I saw it from a different angle—how the hell had I let it go on so long like this?

"What is it now?" Justin stood in the middle of his room, arms crossed.

Icy fingers curled around my heart, the image of him grabbing the nearest knife flashing in my mind. My fingers trembled, but I pushed on. "We have to stop this."

Justin's jet-black eyebrows scrunched his forehead. "Stop what?"

I motioned between us. "Us. All we do is fight—"

"Yo!" Mark called from the other room, cutting me off. "Justin, man, you're up!"

Justin made to return to the living room, but I stepped in his way, placing my hand on his chest to stop him.

"This is really important, Justin," I said, pinning him in place with my eyes.

He sighed. "So is this tournament we're in."

"No. Not now. We need to finish this conversation."

Justin jerked away from my touch and nudged me out of his way. The ice melted, damn near evaporated with the rush of anger that flared within me.

"Justin," I snapped, sharp enough to get him to stop before he made it to the living room.

"I'm done," I said as he turned around.

He tilted his head, giving me a look like he doubted my seriousness.

I walked toward him, stopping only a foot away. "I'm done. Now, we can talk about it like adults or you can go play your game. Either way, I'm sorry, but I'm done. I can't do this anymore."

His eyes cleared and he focused them more fully on me, as if he just realized I'd shown up at his place. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we're through. And since we've been together so long, I thought you deserved a rational explanation, but if you're more concerned about your video game tournament, then I don't think it'll make any difference."

He glanced over his shoulder at Mark and Andy who were failing at acting like they couldn't hear everything I'd said. He then turned back to me, grabbing my hand. "This is all over me not going to breakfast?"

"This has nothing to do with that. This has to do with the fact that we aren't right for each other. That I've been drowning for the past few years and you haven't even noticed."

"Don't do this now, Blake. Just...can't we talk about this after the tournament is over? They need me."

I jerked my hand away, his declaration of need for an online tournament sealing in my anger like a pressure cooker. I huffed and reached in my bag for my keys. "There is no later, Justin. There is now." I gripped the cool key fob in my hand. I felt the need to explain myself, to even say I was sorry to leave him like everyone else had in his life, but he looked over his shoulder again, toward his friends, toward the game, and the words died in my throat.

"If the game is more important than hearing the end of us, then go. I don't care. Honestly, you've done it to me so many times it doesn't even sting anymore. But, Justin? Don't hurt yourself, all right?"

He focused on me again, his eyes turning to slits. I was aware that Mark and Andy heard my

plea, and I was fine with that. I wanted them to keep him level if he went off balance after I left.

“This is that asshole Dash’s fault.” He flexed his hands into fists at his sides.

“What the hell would he have to do with it?” I took a micro-step back, like his accusation had physically pushed me.

“Don’t play dumb! I saw the way you acted around him. He’s more than a fucking study-buddy and you know it.”

I opened and closed my mouth a few times before sighing. “You’re right. He’s actually become a really close friend, one I couldn’t tell you about—not because of anything awful like you assume—but because I knew you’d make me choose. You’ve *always* made me choose. You put your life in my hands every time I had an inkling of becoming someone other than your girlfriend, and I can’t do it anymore. I just...won’t.”

“I only force hard choices on you to keep you safe...which is with me. I’ve loved you since we were kids.”

The words stung, and maybe in some twisted way he believed them, but I didn’t. Not anymore. Not after realizing the way he treated me was no better than a doll he used to fuck. I sucked in a deep breath and shook my head.

He unclenched his fingers before balling them into fists again. “You’re really ending this? You’re leaving me after everything?”

“Yes.” Guilt threatened to swallow me whole. My worry over his safety had been a constant for years, and I couldn’t change that right this second. But the anger was there and the pain and the now crystal-clear knowledge things would never change. “We aren’t right—”

“Don’t,” he cut me off, raising his hand. “Don’t bother with the excuses.” He gave Mark and Andy a sideways glance before returning his focus on me. “And just so we’re clear, I only ever made that threat to keep you.”

An ice-cold bucket of water doused the fire burning in my veins. The cold was so instant my stomach rolled. “What?”

He shrugged, smirking at his friends. “Worked for a while.”

My mouth dropped, and I couldn’t find the right words. There weren’t any. Wait, yes there were. *Blake you’ve been a fucking idiot.* Those fit me to a T. I swallowed hard and steeled my nerves. I’d seen the blood drawn from the knife. Maybe he had done it to keep me, or maybe he only said that now to save face in front of his friends. Either way, I wasn’t sticking around to find out.

I gave him a slight nod, holding back tears.

“We’re done.” I turned on my heels, not bothering to shut the door behind me.

* * * *

No sleep and a knock on my door before ten in the morning. I rubbed my palms against my cheeks, trying to restore life into my face. I swallowed hard, assuming I’d find Justin on the other side of the door.

Instead I found Dash holding two white paper cups. “I was hoping you’d left something in my truck after the concert so I’d have a legit reason to come over here this morning, but you’re annoyingly non-forgetful. Figured coffee was the next best excuse.”

I chuckled, the sensation breaking the sour fear that still churned in my stomach. “You know you never need an excuse to come over.”

“Good to know,” he said, setting the cups on the coffee table and petting a sleepy Hail.

She'd agonized with me last night, despite not understanding what it was about.

I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, a fierce headache throbbing like an ice pick lodged in my brain.

"Hey," Dash whispered, suddenly standing so close I could feel the heat coming off his body. "What's wrong?" He pried my hand away and forced me to look in his eyes.

I pushed past him, sinking onto the couch and grabbing the coffee he'd brought. After a quick hot gulp, I found my voice. "I ended it."

His eyebrows shot up before he smoothed his expression and took a seat next to me.

"Are you all right?" He didn't need to ask why I'd done it.

"I'm more all right than I thought I'd be."

"Why don't I believe you?"

I glanced at him, my eyes squinting. "I hate it, but I'm worried about him. He didn't give me a chance to explain or talk it out."

"And you think that would've made a difference?"

I shrugged. "I thought it would. It meant something to me. To explain myself. To get closure. I was so angry with him because he was more concerned with his video game tournament. And the fact that he said he'd only ever threatened suicide to keep me with him. But I don't know if that's the truth or if he was just playing the tough man-card in front of his friends. I just left him there yesterday morning. Anything could've happened to him."

"I've always thought it was a trap for you."

A cold chill ran through me. "I know, but after all the threats and what I've seen him do... You can't blame me for still being worried."

He placed his hand on my back. "I don't blame you. It's natural you'd worry, but I don't think you need to torture yourself over it."

"Don't I? I was all he had left. Everyone else left him, too, because of me."

Dash shook his head. "Not possible. No matter what event led up to them kicking him out, their minds were already made up. It wasn't your fault. And if you were really all he had left to hold on to in the world, he would've treated you differently."

I pressed my lips together, the truth in his statement making me feel better and worse at the same time. "I'm so torn. Happy to be free, but terrified of bad news just around the corner. It's like in a horror movie, you know something is about to jump out and scare the crap out of you, but it just hasn't happened yet."

Dash rubbed his hand up and down my back. After a few moments he stood up. "All right, you need distraction. That's the key. So, you want me to go grab food or you up for a breakfast-lunch outing?"

"I think I'm up for a little distraction. I'll go get dressed," I said and stopped on the way to my room. "Thank you, Dash."

* * * *

Brunch turned into a two-hour event, followed by a trip to the weather lab on campus. After four hours of checking forecasts and mapping routes for the next week's upcoming storm cells, we'd landed at Bailey's for dinner and much needed beers.

I smiled at Dash over my half-eaten basket of chicken fingers. I had to give him credit. He'd successfully kept me busy all day and my thoughts well accounted for. My enthusiasm vanished as I set my beer bottle down on the table. Now that we weren't moving, or talking, the thoughts

I'd managed to keep at bay crept back inside.

Glancing at my cell, I sighed. Still no missed calls. This could be a good thing, but my mind conjured up the worst possible scenario for Justin's silence.

"Blake," Dash said, touching my forearm.

I blinked a couple of times, focusing on his knowing gaze. "Yeah?"

He placed a barbecue-stained napkin in the empty basket before him. "You're really testing my distraction skills. I was doing so good, too. Maybe I need to pull out the big guns?"

"And what would those guns be?"

He cocked an eyebrow, leaning closer over the table. "Well, first off I'd—"

His words were cut off by Awolnation's "Sail" blaring from his cell phone resting on the table next to him. The night we danced to that song flashed in my head. He answered it, and I tilted my head when his gaze turned fierce.

He slowly brought his hand down without saying anything and ended the call. He stared at his phone, contemplating something.

"What is it?" I touched his arm, and he finally snapped out of it.

"It was Lindsay..."

"And?"

He worked his jaw back and forth. "We need to go somewhere." He laid two twenties on the table and headed toward the door. I followed him without hesitation and climbed into his truck.

Dash looked at me, his hands pausing on the keys in the ignition. He opened his mouth, nearly saying something, but started the car instead. He hit the gas, taking the usual route toward campus. I held onto the bar above the window, heart pounding.

"What's going on?" I asked, noting his hardened expression hadn't changed since the phone call.

"Not sure, but we're about to find out."

"What did Lindsay say?"

He cut his eyes toward me and they softened.

I reached across the cab and gently clutched his forearm, which was rock hard with tension. "Talk to me."

He slowly let out a held breath through his nose. He made a hard right into the parking lot of the Alpha Chi Omega house.

Dash jumped out of the truck and hurried around to open my door for me. He took my hand and led us up to the giant front porch. The frustration came off him in waves, filtering through our joined hands and finding a home in my stomach. Guys in OU shirts and girls in sparkly tops and tanks littered the porch, all drinking beers or other beverages out of red plastic cups. The large doors were wide open, and people strolled in and out of them as they pleased. Loud, thumping music spilled from the house, and I wondered if all college house parties were the same. We got a nod from a few of the guys parked on the porch.

Dash glanced at me, all the anger in his eyes melting into a sea of hurt. He battled with himself—over what I had no idea. He sighed and something settled inside him. I could see it in his eyes, the anger slipping to a stoic calm.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he already stomped through the place.

The only bright light came from the kitchen, the countertops near invisible due to the wide variety of half-empty liquor bottles covering the area. The rest of the house was coated in muted colored lights and a strobe light flashed in a large room to our right, where throngs of students ground against each other to the music.

Liquor, beer, and smoke hung in the air, so potent I thought I'd get drunk just from inhaling it. My heart raced as I followed Dash helplessly as he pulled me through crowds of people, his eyes sharp as a hawk and tracking.

I didn't know what to do other than follow his lead. I'd never been to a party like this before, but clearly we weren't there to meet Lindsay for drinks. He was on the hunt, and I sort of hoped we wouldn't find her.

Dash led me upstairs once we'd finished searching the main floor and the basement. We walked down a long hallway lined with four doors on each side. Most of them were open, some filled with people playing video games or shamelessly making out.

He stopped in front of the only closed door and glanced at me apologetically. Dash reached out his hand, hovering over the doorknob. Clutching it, he hesitated and pressed his ear to the door.

I put the pieces together and anger flared in my gut. If he opened that and we found Lindsay cheating on him, I might punch her in the face. Surely there was a mistake, though. How could she ever cheat on someone as great as Dash?

Dash startled, hearing something I couldn't, and yanked the door open.

I stood next to him, frozen.

Lindsay was on all fours in a bed that took up most of the small room. Her skin practically glowed in the dark, and her bare breasts flopped back and forth as she got pounded from behind. I quickly averted my eyes as if witnessing a car crash.

Her high-pitched moaning didn't stop, indicating the two hadn't heard the door.

"I fucking knew it." Dash didn't yell, but his tone was absolutely lethal.

Lindsay gasped.

Dash made to step farther into the room, but I yanked on his arm.

"Oh shit."

I recognized the voice but didn't immediately make the connection.

Dash tugged out of my grasp. The motion forced my line of sight back into the room, and the floor fell out beneath me.

Justin was naked, a sheet barely covering his lower half.

Lindsay quickly scrambled for her clothes strewn out on the floor.

"Why would you bring her here, Dash?" Lindsay whined, slipping on her skirt.

What an odd thing to ask.

She'd cheated. With my boyfriend...my ex-boyfriend. My hands trembled, and hot tears welled beneath my eyes, but the sight of Justin in that fucking bed stopped them. The anger raged hot and irrational in my chest. I was livid with Justin but equally pissed at Lindsay for doing this to Dash.

Before I could mentally arrange the barrage of emotions exploding inside me, I stomped across the room and shoved Lindsay so hard she tumbled backward, her ass hitting the floor next to the bed with a thunk.

"Stupid bitch!" I yelled and pulled my fist back, adrenaline surging through my veins, readying to punch her.

"Blake!" she screeched, putting a hand up defensively. "Dash, stop her!" She focused her wide eyes on Dash.

Dash's arms slipped around my midsection, and a fraction of the anger pounding against my chest cooled.

"What the hell are you doing, Lindsay?" he snapped as he tugged me away from her. Only a

portion of me wondered why he didn't sound as mad as I was. The other part thought up ways to slip his grasp and beat the shit out of both of her and Justin.

"You have no right to be mad!" Lindsay yelled and sloppily finished dressing.

"Are you serious? You're cheating on him!" I screamed. Somehow that pissed me off more than anything in this entire situation.

Lindsay's mouth dropped, and she cocked her head to the side. "You didn't tell her?" She laughed a high-pitched laugh. "Oh, that's priceless, Dash!"

"Tell me what?"

"Shut up, Lindsay," Dash said, raked his fingers through his hair.

She sucked through her teeth. "He dumped me the day after we went to that stupid bridge. I can do whatever and *whoever* I want!"

"You have to know they just broke up yesterday!" Dash snapped.

"I'm so sick of hearing about *Blake*," she whined like I wasn't standing right there.

I turned to Dash with questioning eyes. "You didn't tell me..."

Justin moved, garnering my attention. He'd gotten dressed in his signature jeans and a cut-off shirt when my focus had been solely on Lindsay.

"Blake, I'm drunk...I'm sorry," Justin said, his arms reaching out to me. Funny, he didn't sound drunk.

My eyes were slits as I stared up at him. "You're sorry? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Justin took another step toward me as if to wrap me in his arms. "I was mad at you for ending it, but I still love you, still want to be with you. Let's talk this out."

"Don't touch me," I said, taking a step back. My heart pounded furiously in my chest. "And you want to talk *now*?" I shook my head. "All these years you threatened to *kill* yourself if I ever left you. You literally drew blood over it! And you pushed me down until I was a shell of the girl I should be...I still am that shell—and now what? It's been less than forty-eight hours since we ended things, and this is what you do?" I raked my hands through my hair. "How could I be so stupid? I've done nothing but worry about you since yesterday, thinking you may just follow through on the threats you never let me forget..."

"Blake, I'm hurt. I can't live without you..." Justin placed his hand on my shoulder and I lost it.

I pulled my right hand back and slapped him across the face as hard as I could. His head snapped to the left and he stumbled back a couple steps. "I said don't touch me!"

Dash laughed, the warm sound so out of place in this fucked-up room. "That's what you get, asshole," he said, placing a hand on the small of my back.

I flinched away from his touch, too. "You knew," I said, realizing that Dash had brought me here for a specific reason. A new wave of hurt crashed over me.

Dash's green eyes softened as they met mine. "You were torturing yourself. You needed to see..."

Something jerked in the corner of my eye, but I couldn't react in time.

Justin slammed his fist into Dash's jaw while Dash was focused on me. He pulled back to do it again, but I hurled myself between them and took the full force of the hit on my back.

A white-hot pain burst beneath my left shoulder and the air whooshed out of my lungs. I dropped to my knees at Dash's feet.

"Blake!" Each boy screamed my name. Only Justin's made my skin crawl.

I sucked in the air as my lungs slowly opened back up.

"You're fucking dead!" Dash yelled, and I swore the room shook.

“Why’d you step in front of this tool, Blake? Babe, I’m so sorry,” Justin spoke, but the words didn’t find a place in my heart.

Dash swung next, and Justin’s head snapped back, stopping his pathetic attempt at apologizing.

Justin recovered quickly, and before I could blink the two wrestled on the floor next to me like two wild dogs. Fists hit flesh, the sound sickening.

Lindsay gasped and bolted barefoot from the room, clutching her red pumps to her chest.

Icy cold fear doused my red-hot anger. I’d witnessed too many of Justin’s fights. He never played fair and wouldn’t hesitate to pick up the heaviest object in the room and use it to bash Dash’s head in. It took everything in me to stand up, the pain in my back pulsing.

I reached for Dash, who’d gained the upper hand for the moment, pinning Justin to the floor. The pain from the action was so much I thought I’d crumple to the floor again. I sucked in a deep breath and grabbed Dash’s shoulder. It jerked under my grasp as the two tried to rip each other’s head off. I squeezed harder and Dash snapped out of it, quickly glancing behind him.

“Not. Worth it,” I said, each word hard to get out because I was still trying to remember how to breathe. I let go of him and clutched my side where the pain had made its way down.

Dash glared at Justin for another moment before jumping off him.

Despite my anger, I let Dash slip my free arm over his shoulders and bear most of my weight. He walked me slowly toward the door.

“Blake, wait—”

“Stop,” I said, looking at Justin with tears in my eyes. All the anger and guilt twisted inside my chest until I thought it’d burst and spill my heart onto the dirty floor of the sorority house. “I’m almost glad this happened. Now I have no guilt whatsoever walking away from you.”

Dash led me out into the hallway and down the stairs. With each step an explosion of pain screamed in my back. I swallowed the pain as we made it to the front porch. I looked at Dash, a sharp sting in my chest, and withdrew my arm. “I wanted you out of that room,” I said, taking a few shaky steps away from him, “but I’m walking away from you, too.”

Tears coated my eyes, blurring the image of Dash standing on the porch, speechless. My apartment was at least two miles away, but I couldn’t handle being next to Dash, who’d put me in that situation on purpose.

Chapter 12

The white-hot pain in my back and side had made the walk home seem endless, but finally I turned the keys and made it inside. Hail jumped off the couch and wiggled her butt back and forth vigorously as I walked in. I winced as I knelt down and rubbed her head. I wished love was as simple as Hail made it—unconditional and uncomplicated.

I limped to my bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. I pulled my hair back, changed into some pajamas, and took three Tylenol.

Thank God I had plenty of beer at my apartment because I needed more than my fair share. I cracked one open, preparing to down it on the couch, when a knock on my door stopped me dead in my tracks. Ice filled my veins, thinking of Justin being outside the door.

“Blake, please,” Dash pleaded from the other side.

I sighed, the ice retreating and anger returning.

“I’m not ready to see you, Dash,” I said, even though it wasn’t true. I placed my hand on the door, knowing I could never really shut him out.

“You said I never needed an excuse to come over.”

Especially when he said all the right things. I huffed and opened the door.

He looked defeated, his shoulders drooped and his eyes were filled with pain.

Damn it. I was still outraged and yet the urge to comfort him overwhelmed me. I resisted the need to wrap my arms around him and instead backed up a few spaces.

He stepped in and pet an extremely wiggly Hail. He took a seat, and I eyed the gash on his face from Justin’s sucker punch. I handed him my freshly cracked beer and headed to the bathroom, returning with an alcohol-soaked cotton ball and a bandage. I gently wiped at the cut, shocked when he didn’t flinch. I slipped the bandage over the wound and sat back, only wincing a little, the Tylenol taking effect.

We sat there with Hail’s panting the only sound between us.

“Why didn’t you tell me you two had broken up?” I finally blurted out.

Dash jerked up from the couch so fast it startled Hail and she whined. He quickly patted her, but then paced the length of my living room. Finally, he shrugged. “I don’t know. I thought it might sway your thinking, and I wanted you to leave that asshole on your own. Then you did, but I didn’t want to shove it in your face that I was single, too. I mean, you *just* broke up with him yesterday.”

Justin and Lindsay. How long had it been going on? Since the night at Ponderosa Bridge? “She didn’t accidentally pocket-dial you. She meant to hurt you, or both of us. And you *knew* what we’d find when we went there.” I knew this for a fact, but a part of me wanted him to deny it. Even if it was a lie, I could get past it easier.

“I didn’t think about her doing it on purpose. I heard...them, and I lost it. I thought if you saw, you’d stop torturing yourself with worry and guilt and finally realize who he really is,” Dash said, his voice soft. He’d stopped pacing and stood clutching his longneck at his side.

“You could’ve handed me the phone. Let me hear. Or told me. I would’ve believed you.”

I caught his eyes, and pain coated his normal fiery emeralds. “I thought this was my chance to free you from the guilt he’s held you in for years.”

Dash’s reasoning was sound, but it still hurt like a bitch. “Pretty painful way of getting free.” I shrugged and crossed the room to get my own drink.

“I see now I shouldn’t have taken you there. I didn’t think of the pain it’d cause you to see that. All I could think about was you realizing who he was and what he was doing to you.” He jerked his bottle to his lips and chugged.

Tears welled in my eyes. “Eight years. All the bullshit. All the blowups and the threats...” I sighed. “There must be something wrong with me.”

“No there isn’t.”

“Yes there is!” I yelled through my tears. “I gave him everything, and it was never enough. I wasn’t enough...” I let my head fall into my hands and cried harder.

Frustration and anger whirled inside me, threatening to bring the beer up. The bitter sting of betrayal was raw, like pouring salt in an open wound, but the realization that the last eight years of my life had been wasted hurt worse. I couldn’t be angry over this. It was my fault. I should’ve ended it sooner. “How could I have been so stupid?”

“You’re not stupid, Blake. You’re the one with the incredibly huge heart who sees the best in everyone. *He’s* the asshole.”

I glanced up at him, wiping the tears from my eyes with the back of my hand. I sniffed and took a deep breath. “You’re right.”

There were more bad memories than good, and despite what Dash said, I really was stupid. Justin and I hadn’t been right for each other for a long time. We were toxic. It had taken Dash entering my life to realize how lost I really was. I just wished it hadn’t erupted like that, that we could’ve ended things on a mature note. There was no chance of that now.

I crossed the room and stopped before Dash, realizing how selfish I’d been. I was letting my anger over the situation get in the way of comforting my best friend, who had seen his girlfriend with another man. He had to be hurting over it, too. Dash and I may not have love for our exes any more—but it still wasn’t something we should’ve had to see.

“Even though they technically didn’t do anything wrong—unless Justin had started it up before I broke things off—it *feels* wrong,” I said. “I’m so sorry about everything.”

“There you go again. Apologizing for something completely out of your control. I’m the one who fucked up and took you there, and still you’re trying to comfort me.” Dash shook his head. “I don’t know if that’s something I hate about you or one of the reasons why I love you.”

I nearly choked on his use of love and hate in the same sentence. Wait...what? I looked up at him, my tears stopped short from shock.

Dash’s green eyes filled with the intensity he reserved for chasing storms. He set his beer down on the coffee table behind me, cupped my cheek in his hand, and crushed his lips on mine.

I gasped and held my hands out horizontally as if to back away from a loaded gun. His lips were warm and fierce, and the sensation of them against mine ignited a fire in the pit of my stomach. My eyes closed automatically, and before I could stop myself I clutched the back of his neck and pulled him closer.

He sighed and grabbed my hips, pushing me backward until we hit the wall. My back screamed in pain but quickly drowned in a tingling hunger as his hands slid down the sides of my thighs. His tongue slipped between my lips, making my heart soar like it had wings. He pressed his body against mine, and I could feel his hunger for me through his jeans.

“Blake,” he groaned and nibbled at the spot behind my ear.

I raked my hands through his hair and brought his lips back to mine, kissing him harder, losing myself in him, his touch, his scent.

Dash grabbed behind my knee and hiked my leg around his hip. He leaned into me until a pulsing ache throbbed between my legs and I could do nothing but rub against it. He slipped his

free hand underneath my shirt and explored my bare skin. When he went for the string on my sweats reality struck me harder than a lightning bolt.

“Wait. Wait, wait, wait.” I unhooked my leg from around his waist and gently nudged him away.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, eyeing around me toward my back.

“We can’t do this.” I wanted to punch myself in the face. My body screamed at me to grab Dash’s hand and yank him to my bed, but my mind conjured all the reasons why we shouldn’t do it. “We just caught our super-recent-exes having sex...”

“I know that,” he said, taking a step closer. “Why do you think she’s my ex?”

I put my hand up to stop him, sure that if he kissed me again I wouldn’t have the willpower to stop. “I’m not sure. You never explained it to me. You didn’t even bother to tell me you’d split.”

“You should know the reasons why I left her.”

“Because you had nothing in common?”

“That and the fact that I couldn’t rightfully stay with her when I’m completely hung up on you.”

The floor seemed to drop beneath me I was so stunned. The kiss wasn’t about revenge on our exes? “Why...why haven’t you said anything?”

“I didn’t want you to leave him for me. I wanted you to leave that asshole on your own. And to choose me when you were free to think clearly.”

There was no way. Dash was out of my league, and we were best friends. “You’re not thinking straight.”

“Yes I am—”

“No, you’re not.” I cut him off. “Dash, you’re my best friend. If we do this, it’ll change everything.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“I don’t know!” I couldn’t wrap my head around anything. My eight-year relationship had only just come to a crashing end yesterday, and the way Dash touched me had my head spinning. What if we went through with it and tomorrow he decided it truly *was* a mistake?

“Blake,” he whispered my name again and caressed my neck. I shut my eyes, and his lips were against mine in seconds. I kissed him back, my resolve weakening. His lips worked over the skin of my neck before returning to my mouth, their power the only thing strong enough to erase tonight’s memory.

Almost.

The image of Justin pounding Lindsay from behind flashed in my head and I flinched away from Dash, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Damn it!”

“What?” he asked.

“I can’t get tonight’s visual out of my head! I never will! Why did you have to take me?” I yelled, the memory running on repeat in my mind.

He reached for me. “I said I was sorry.”

“No. You can’t do this to me.” Another apology for something that hurt like hell, despite the deliverer, was too much. I couldn’t take it.

“Do what? I’m finally doing what feels right. Tell me this doesn’t feel right to you.” He trailed his lips to my collarbone, making my eyes roll back in my head.

“It’s incredible, but I can’t get over the fact that you put me in that situation tonight! What

did you expect to happen? That I'd get over it in two seconds and then hop into bed with you? I won't be a revenge fuck." The words came out harsher than I'd intended, and Dash jerked away from me.

A new wave of hurt coated his eyes before they turned sharp. "So that's what you think of me."

"Dash, I—"

He raised his hand, stopping me. Then he grabbed his keys off the counter and paused as he opened the door. "I know taking you tonight was a mistake. I acted on impulse and I'm sorry for that, but, Blake, I've never once given you a reason to think I'd use you to get even with them. I thought you knew me better than that." He slammed the door on his way out.

The words stung like a knife slipping into my chest. I stood there staring at the door, desperately wishing he'd come back and let me apologize. Let me work through my anger and think rationally. Figure out where my heart was. But I didn't even know where to start.

Chapter 13

My cell buzzed on my nightstand. I glared at it through squinted eyes. I'd worked till closing last night and was dead set on not budging from bed until well after nine a.m. The home screen blared brightly with Dash's number. I picked up instantly.

We hadn't really spoken in days. Not since the disastrous night at the sorority house. I'd tried to flag him down after classes, but he'd rushed off claiming he had tons of research to do and neglected to invite me. I tried to be understanding, but it stung. I wanted to talk about what happened, but he clearly wanted to avoid it. I was sure I'd lost him as a friend forever—the one thing I had tried to avoid. If I'd known this was going to happen I might as well have gotten in bed with him. Heat flushed my cheeks, and I blinked hard to snap myself out of the fantasy. I sucked in a deep breath and decided to act completely normal.

"It's six thirty in the morning, Dash," I groaned despite the building elation that he'd called.

"Beautiful morning you happen to be missing, Blake." He was way too happy for this hour and way too normal for our first time speaking since the night we nearly slept together.

I wondered if he felt the same as I did every time I thought about it, a mixture of insane sensations that hummed beneath the skin.

"Ugh." I rubbed my eyes in an effort to get them to open more. "What do you want?" I asked, ready to play the whole let's-act-normal game.

"If you keep giving me attitude, woman, I'm not going to tell you."

"Dash," I whined, but internally relaxed for the first time in days. Maybe I hadn't ruined things. Maybe everything would be all right.

"Fine. Doppler is predicting a string of supercells just north of Bartlesville. Tornadoes are highly likely. You in?"

My eyes popped wide open and I shot up straight. "Are you serious?"

"Now look who's happy at six thirty in the morning."

Adrenaline coursed through my veins. I'd wanted to go on another chase the second the last one had ended.

"Are you in or not?"

"I'm so in! Just tell me when and where." I hopped out of bed. Hail grunted but didn't budge.

"I didn't know if you'd want to after..."

"I've been wanting to talk to you about that night, to apologize—"

"Don't," he cut me off. "We both said and did things we didn't mean. Let's leave it at that, okay? I don't want to lose my best friend over one bad decision."

Did he mean kissing me or taking me to the party or both? My chest tightened, but I focused on the bridge he'd rebuilt just for me. "You'd never lose me, Dash."

"All right then. I'll pick you up at ten. You should pack a bag this time."

I hung up and scrambled to get ready, even though I had plenty of time. Excitement built inside me, making my nerves feel like firework fuses, and successfully pushing all other thoughts away.

I managed to wait an hour before dialing my mom and asking her out to breakfast. She agreed and met me at a local cafe near campus.

Mom arrived before I did and picked a table near the back. I hugged her once I reached the

table.

“You look great,” she said as she sat back down.

“Thanks, Mom.” I took the seat across from her. I hadn’t even put makeup on, but she was always ready to tell me I was beautiful. I kind of loved that about her.

We ordered our breakfast, and I caught her up on everything that had happened in the last few weeks. Minus one breakup and a night involving my new best friend and his body pressed against mine. Damn it, every time I stopped thinking about it, the scene popped into my head and replayed in high-def.

Focusing extremely hard on normal chatter with Mom helped cool the fiery thoughts, and I quickly arrived at the reason I’d called her after filling her in about the storm chase.

“Could you watch Hail for me?”

She sat her half eaten egg-and-turkey-sausage sandwich down. “You know I will, but do you have to do this?”

“Yes. Going on chases is an amazing experience. I can probably use it to write a paper for my Physical Meteorology class.”

She reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “I just worry about you.” She shuddered and pulled her hand back. “Chasing tornadoes. Honestly, I should’ve known you’d do something like this.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked and finished off the last bite of my chocolate croissant.

“When you were a baby, the only way I could get you to sleep was by playing a cassette recording of a thunderstorm.”

“I didn’t know that.”

She shrugged. “You about wore that tape out. Listened to it almost every day when you were seven, too. After you got caught in that thunderstorm on your way home from riding bikes.”

The image of a small cassette case with a lavender sky, dark clouds, and white lightning striking the ground popped behind my eyes. “I remember I found it in one of your old boxes of photos.”

“If I would’ve known I’d be sparking inspiration for a dangerous career I might have chosen to play ocean waves instead.”

“Then I’d be studying oceanography and flying to the coast for deep-sea diving excursions.” I took her hand and squeezed. “I’ll be fine, Mom. Dash will be there. He won’t let anything happen to me.”

Mom dabbed at her lips with a napkin. “How are you and Justin doing?”

Damn. I knew I couldn’t get away with her not asking.

“Well,” I said and took a deep breath before relaying the short version of the breakup. “We just weren’t right for each other,” I finished.

I expected her to do a victory lap around the table, but she only smiled. Of course she’d tried to tell me this numerous times over the years but it had never sunk in for me. I wished it would’ve. If I had listened to her I could’ve saved myself a hell of a lot of hurt and even more embarrassment over staying with him so long.

The tightness in my chest loosened as I took a sip of my orange juice.

Mom raised her hands and set them back down on the table. “I just want you to be happy, honey. You know I’ve always wanted that.” She reached for her drink. “This Dash must be really something.”

My eyes widened and I almost choked on my juice. Could she see the lust in my eyes every

time I said his name? “Why do you say that?”

“All throughout breakfast it’s been Dash this and Dash that. I’d really like to meet this fellow.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least she hadn’t shoved an *I told you so* in my face.

“He’s my best friend. And we spend a lot of time together.” Time I now realized I didn’t have to hide from anyone anymore. A hot hunger flared within me. Dash’s lips on mine, me grinding against him, the delicious weight of him against me all flashed red in my mind. My hand trembled as I scraped a smear of chocolate off my plate.

“Plus we’re going on a chase in”—I glanced at my cell—“an hour!” I squeaked and stood up. “I’ve got to go.” Mom reached out to me, and I hugged her. “You remember how much to feed Hail every day?”

“Yes, honey. Goodness, you’d think I was incompetent.”

“You know it’s not that!” I had to measure Hail’s food out on a daily basis or she’d gain weight. Extra pounds on a bulldog equaled added breathing problems and heart stress. Something I didn’t need my only other best friend going through. “Thanks. Love you, Mom,” I said before power-walking to my car.

* * * *

I gave Hail a brand-new bone and kissed the top of her head before grabbing my duffel and waiting outside for Dash. My excitement bordered on insanity, but I really couldn’t handle him coming inside—the couch wasn’t far from the door and part of me wasn’t sure if I could see him on it again without wanting to rip his clothes off.

I focused on the sky to stop the train of thought. A normal clear blue stretched above me, but I knew when we made it to Bartlesville we’d see a whole lot of action. I’d checked out the predictions online and Dash was spot on. A supercell headed that direction—much larger than the last two chases. My knee bounced up and down, the uncontrollable energy working its way out of my body.

Dash’s truck pulled into the parking lot. He honked the horn four times, hung his head out of the window, and whooped like a maniac as he parked. I practically sprinted to the passenger side, tossing my duffel in the small space behind the seat.

“You ready for this?” he asked, flashing his damn smile that melted my insides. I swallowed hard and tried not to think about his hands on me.

“Yes?” I was ecstatic, though I couldn’t deny the cold hands of fear clutching my spine. I thought since this was my third chase I wouldn’t be as nervous, but the idea of actually seeing a tornado up-close produced an undeniable combination of anxiety and excitement within me.

“Awesome, let’s get to it!” He pulled out of my complex and broke the speed limit once we hit the highway.

The entire hour and a half drive Dash talked about everything but *that* night. I was sure by the time we stopped at a local motel that he’d decided kissing me really was a mistake and didn’t merit further exploration. Which was good, right? Our friendship was more important than seeing just how far we could push each other over the edge...physically. My heart sank. Yeah, I’d just keep telling myself that.

Paul and John stood outside of a room with the door open. Dash and I walked inside and set our stuff down. Four laptops were up and running. Two on one of the double beds and two on the small round table near the window. Each one had a different image or map up, showing the

locations for the string of storms forming across the area.

The energy inside the room was palpable, like someone had pumped vaporized Red Bull into the AC vents. John's faux-hawk wasn't as perfectly put together, like he'd run his hands through it too many times. He and Paul were busy watching radar and tracking the storm. Dash worried over all the camera equipment.

"Paul, tell me you didn't forget the shutter trigger for the Olympus! If you forgot it again and we miss getting the lightning still-shots I'm going to ice you."

"Relax, bro, it's in the other bag." Paul glanced at me sideways once Dash turned his back. "You see the way he treats me?"

I laughed and rocked back and forth on my heels near the doorway, too excited to sit down. Since I wasn't a cool storm chaser with a special decked-out laptop I elected to watch the sky.

It was slate-gray and moving. No funnel formations yet, but the dark clouds hung low and wide, and wisps of their structures swirled slowly as they migrated east. The rain hit a few minutes after we arrived and it plinked off the asphalt in tiny bursts. A few people got out of cars, dragging luggage to their rooms. A wave of icy fear crashed inside my chest and I whipped my head around.

"It isn't predicted to hit the town is it?"

Each of them glanced up at me.

"It shouldn't," John said. "Doppler is placing it farther east where there's mostly farmland. But you know we can't pinpoint it, Blake. It could happen."

My shoulders dropped. Of course it could. I glanced at Dash, who stared into the distance lost in thought. He knew all too well what a tornado could do to a town. I swallowed hard. Did he see the destruction and devastation from his past every time he went on a chase?

I crossed the room and leaned over John's shoulder, eyeing the satellite images he had pulled up on both his laptops.

"Don't worry, Blake," John said, turning his head to look up at me. "I'm sure the news is on right now, warning people about this."

I sighed and nodded. He was right. Meteorologists would be showering the locals with information. The same data we were accessing now. Of course, they'd be warning people away from the storm as opposed to searching for ways to get in front of it.

I pointed to the screen on John's left, noting the surface map's data. "The air pressure on this location is increasing along with the temperature. Keep an eye on this one. It looks prime to fire." I returned to my spot in the doorway, eyes trained on the sky. I wrung my hands out, the anticipation coiling inside me like a spring.

"This will help you relax," Paul said, glancing at me over his opened laptop. "What does a meteorologist cry before she tees off?"

I rolled my eyes. This was not the time for one of his jokes.

"Fore-cast!" He dragged the punch line out without me baiting him.

I laughed despite my efforts not to.

Paul gave me a sincere smile and went back to staring at the laptop screen.

"You were right!" John hollered. "The cell is about to fire. We need to head north on 75 if we want to get ahead of this thing." He slammed his laptops shut.

Suddenly the room was in a frenzy. Dash shoved the cameras and recorders inside their bags, and John slipped all the laptops into their cases. Each slung bags over their shoulders and scrambled toward the door. I quickly jumped out of the way.

Dash stopped outside the door and turned to me. "Blake, we have to move!" He bounced on

the balls of his feet.

My heart surged with adrenaline and excitement fluttered inside my stomach. And if I was being totally honest, I couldn't decide if the thrill was from the storm we were chasing or the look in Dash's eyes.

Chapter 14

If I'd thought Dash drove fast on the way here, I was totally wrong. He was now close to breaking the sound barrier and John was right on his tail in the Tracker Jacker. I gripped the handle above the window so hard my fingers ached.

Dash had both hands on the steering wheel but continued to push himself over it to look up at the sky. Each time, his green eyes flashed with an unmistakable passion that made me feel like I was spying on an intimate moment between him and the clouds.

Rain came down in sheets, slapping the windshield as if someone tossed giant buckets of water at us. Thunder roared above, so close it shook the truck. We sped past other cars and trucks that had parked on the side of the road. Several were from local news stations identified by the logos on their vehicles and others were chasers like us, cameras in hand and laptops sitting on the seats of their cars.

"We're pulling off soon," Dash said into the walkie-talkie before glancing at me. "Stick close to me and follow my lead. I know you predicted this location, but this is bigger than the last two times. And if I tell you to get in the truck and drive, you do it. Understand?" He slowed the truck and took a turn down a rural road that ran next to a flatland of green pasture whose grass rolled in waves from the wind.

"Yes." I swallowed the rock in my throat, noticing that no other chasers had chosen this path.

He pulled the truck to a stop on an even piece of grassy land off the road. Thick wooden posts lined the pasture, barbed wire snaking between them. The prickly wire trembled in the strong blasts of wind.

Dash reached behind him and grabbed one of his video cameras. He fiddled with some complex buttons and the lens. His chest rose and fell rapidly. "You ready?"

"Yes," I said, letting my breath out slowly.

He tossed me a still-shot camera and hopped out of the truck. After getting the lens off and the strap around my neck, I jumped out, instantly soaked by the rain. John and Paul were already behind us, each holding their own cameras and pointing it toward a large wall cloud about six hundred yards to our right. I followed suit and snapped a series of shots.

Outside of Dash's video clips he'd posted on his site from past chases and other weather channel shots, it was the scariest wall cloud I'd ever seen. It stretched at least three hundred yards wide and hung so low to the ground I was sure it would touch down with a spinning tail any second. The dark gray color clashed with the smooth bright sky behind it, and the upward rotation quickly gained momentum.

I stood close to Dash, thankful I'd worn my flat leather boots because the ground was squishy with grass and mud. Somehow Paul had thought it a brilliant idea to wear flip-flops, but he didn't seem to notice his feet were caked with slimy dirt and water.

"Look at that updraft! Can you believe it?" Dash hollered over the rain.

I hadn't been able to take my eyes off it since we arrived. "It's going to come down any second!"

Dash let out a whoop, and John and Paul screamed with him. They were like a pack of wolves howling at the moon. My heart raced and instinct told me to run in the opposite direction and take cover, but I fought the urge and let out a holler of my own. Dash locked eyes with me,

and in that moment the world dropped away. Nothing else existed but me and him and the purely primal violence of the storm.

The rain instantly died, grounding me firmly in the present. The abrupt silence nearly deafened me. I glanced at John and Paul, their clothes stuck to their bodies in a soaked mess. Their eyes locked with the formation before us, not even blinking.

Dash held the same intense stare. His wet blue T-shirt clung to his carved stomach, outlining the defined ridges in his skin. Heat rippled through my body, and I shot down the image of me running my hands over his abs. I trembled but assured myself it was from the rain coating my skin.

Sirens blared in the distance, a faint sound of warning. I hoped it was early enough for everyone to get to safety, and then I prayed the storm would stay out of populated areas. I realized, for the first time, how extremely close we were to it, and every nerve in my body sparked with ice.

“Here it comes,” Dash said, his voice excited as he held the camera up.

He was right.

He was always right.

A funnel cloud snaked downward and spiraled until it touched the ground, instantly transforming into easily an F-2 tornado. The ground beneath the tip of its tail swirled in a brown dusty mess, turning the once grayish-white beast black. It roared and screeched louder than a freight train, the sound a kind of terrible awesome. Every inch of my body trembled, but I couldn't pry my eyes away. The tornado mesmerized me, twisting and turning sporadically like a caged animal that had finally been freed.

A magnetic force throbbed within me, and I stepped closer to the wired posts we stood outside of. Life had never been so clear or real as in that moment. I'd never been more in the present, been more aware of each sensation soaring throughout my body—fear, excitement, awe, and wonder. I watched one of God's miraculous creations—a terrible and fascinating thing—and knew I was where I was meant to be. Storms had always been a part of my life, always filled me when I was hollow, but now they were in my blood.

“Dash, Blake!” I heard John scream over the roar of the tornado. I turned to him. He stood halfway in the Tracker Jacker, Paul already buckled into the passenger seat. He waved at us with a hurried hand and then pointed to the tornado.

It moved closer to us. How had I missed the change of direction?

I tugged on Dash's arm, who still hadn't taken his eyes off it. “Dash, we have to go!”

He held his position as if he couldn't hear me.

I whipped my head around. John swung his arm, beckoning me to hurry to his truck. I shook my head. I wouldn't leave Dash. Paul yelled something at John. He gunned the Tracker Jacker a few seconds later, reversing onto the road before spinning it around in retreat.

“Dash!” I screamed and yanked on him so hard the camera moved in his hand.

He finally looked at me, his green eyes wild. “This is amazing!”

“We need to move!”

He glanced back at the tornado heading closer and closer to our location. He blinked a couple of times before he tossed me his keys. “You drive!”

I caught them and we both turned toward the truck. A crack of lightning struck so close the hairs on my arms stood on end and a bang of thunder quickly followed. We jumped and I shrieked before finally making it inside the truck. I jerked the camera strap off my neck and gently set it down in the space next to me.

Dash instantly rolled down his window as I hit the gas. I swung the truck around too fast and we fishtailed on the road.

“Easy, woman!” he yelled but didn’t look at me. His eyes and camera were fixed on the big black spiraling snake cutting through the field. Dirt clods hovered around its base and the pressure from the wind threatened to take control of the truck. I floored it and didn’t let off the pedal until we were a couple of miles away. John and Paul had parked and were snapping still shots with their cameras. Dash jumped out of the truck before I could pull the emergency break.

The tornado looked smaller from this distance but equally terrifying. I watched Dash stare it down like he wanted to wrestle with it, and a cold fear seeped into my bones when I thought about how long he would’ve stayed if I hadn’t yanked him away.

Only ten minutes had passed since the tornado touched down, but it felt like hours. Slowly the end of its tail dissipated and the body shortly followed, fading upward in dark gray wisps until nothing was left but a broken nimbostratus cloud—a thick wet gray blanket covering the sky.

Dash finally lowered his camera and capped the lens. A mischievous smile crossed his face and he ran at me.

“What a monster!” He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed me so tight I could feel his rapid heartbeat against mine. I clung to him, too, relishing the sparks that ignited beneath my skin as he held me tight.

We released each other after a few moments, and Dash whooped as he bumped fists with John and Paul. “We got wicked footage for the site. We need to upload it quick. John, did you call the local station and let them know we saw a confirmed tornado on the ground?”

“Yeah, I got the call in right before it touched down.”

“Nice!” Dash patted him on the back and handed the camera off to Paul who had his laptop open on the hood of the car.

“What do you think, Meteorologist?” Paul asked.

I jumped at the sound of his adopted nickname for me. My hands shook as I caught my breath, a new addiction dominating my senses. “When’s the next storm hitting?”

Dash came over and high-fived me. “Yes! That’s my girl! I knew you could handle this.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Dash never doubted me. The feeling was incredible but completely new. Justin had constantly told me I wouldn’t make it in this field because I didn’t have the instincts to handle myself under pressure.

I replayed the storm in my head, and it was like a bolt of lightning hit me. I’d never felt more sure of my place in this world than I did in that moment. Dash and I were the same, pulsing with a calling in our blood to stand on the edge of chaos.

He tugged on my hand. “Let’s head back to the motel. You can double check if you want, Blake, but Doppler isn’t predicting another one until early morning.”

“I’m sure Doppler has it right, but thanks,” I said and sank into the passenger seat. Sharing this passion with Dash was effortless. I didn’t have to battle with him. He understood the feeling, the need. I gazed at him as he drove and another bolt hit me. Fuck. I was in love with him.

* * * *

No. No, no, no. My earlier revelation hadn’t eased up on the drive back to the motel.

“You can have the first shower.” Dash interrupted my thoughts as we walked into the room.

“Bro, are you serious?” Paul whined. “Just because she’s a girl?”

“Because that’s the way it is. Learn how to be a gentleman.”

“Like you’ve ever been a gentleman!”

“Thanks,” I said softly, grabbing my bag and locking the bathroom door behind me.

The shower was tiny and the hot water setting was more lukewarm, but I was grateful for the privacy. It gave me more time to get my head on straight.

My eight-year relationship had just ended. I didn’t even know who I was outside of being Justin’s girlfriend. I could *not* already be falling for Dash. I groaned, raking my hands through my hair. Thinking back, I’d had feelings for him long before I’d like to admit, but now that I was free it was beyond clear. I couldn’t deny the heat or the sheer *rightness* of me and Dash. We just made sense.

I squeezed my eyes shut and leaned my head underneath the running water. None of that mattered, though. Our friendship did. As did the importance of the storm chasing group we were both a part of. But most of all, I couldn’t possibly think about another relationship right now. I needed to figure out my own heart before giving it away again, no matter how easy it would be to give to Dash. And besides the epiphany of my own feelings, it was clear Dash’s interest started and ended the night we’d kissed. I focused on that fact to keep my head straight.

I turned the water off and patted dry with a towel that was a relative to sandpaper and slipped on some wonderfully dry and comfortable clothes. I hadn’t thought to bring a hair dryer so I pulled my wet hair into a ponytail.

The room was empty except for Dash sprawled out on his back on the bed closest to the door. He’d changed into dry clothes, and the white T-shirt he wore was hiked up slightly, exposing a strip of his skin and defined abs.

A rock lodged itself in my throat and my heart thumped erratically.

“The guys went to grab food after the videos uploaded. You want to check them out while I shower?” he asked, sitting up and opening the laptop on the table.

“Sure.” I gulped as images of nothing but water covering him burst involuntarily in my head. What the hell was wrong with me?

I took a deep breath and sat heavily in the chair at the table. Dash leaned over me and clicked a few things on the screen. He smelled like rain and his skin was warm as his arm brushed the back of my neck. A spark rocketed through my middle and I bit my lip.

“Here they are. We’ve already got a hundred hits.”

“That’s awesome.” I said, genuinely happy for him. I knew the more hits he got the more funds he received.

“Yeah, we do all right, huh?” He straightened and walked toward the bathroom.

“You really do,” I said as he shut the bathroom door. Maybe I’d feel better if I talked to him. Surely getting everything out in the air would make the situation much less dramatic. I shook my head and resisted the urge to slap myself.

John and Paul returned a half hour later with burgers and fries from a local mom-and-pop shop down the road. The brown paper bags were half soaked in grease, but I’d never eaten a better burger. We talked over updrafts and rain-wrapped tornadoes between bites and rehashed the F-2 we’d watched.

The footage Dash caught was incredible, as were most of his videos, and the up-close shots offered real perspective on the tendencies of a tornado, which were less erratic than one might think. As Dash put it, “there are patterns to everything, even chaos.”

My nerves continued to fray as the night wore on. A constant battle raged inside me. In an attempt to squash the uncontrollable sensations that flared every time Dash spoke to me or even

touched my hand softly, I drew upon the many reasons we couldn't cross the line. Best friends. Colleagues. Me, with no clue how to be in a non-toxic relationship.

"Blake," Dash whispered.

I raised my head from where I'd been pinching the bridge of my nose while seated at the table. The room was dark with only the silver light of the moon slipping in from the window and the neon green glow from the alarm clock lighting it. John and Paul had crashed on the bed closest to the bathroom sometime during my mental cold shower.

Dash touched my shoulder and motioned toward the bed. "You take the bed." He kept his voice hushed. "I can sleep in this chair." He eyed the one I sat in, which wasn't any better than a steel folding chair.

"Are you serious?" I asked.

He sighed. "I'm sorry we couldn't get you your own room. You know the videos only pay so much."

"It's all right. I understand. You take the bed."

"No, I want you to be comfortable."

Paul groaned from across the room. "Ugh. Grow up. Both of you sleep in it and shut up."

Dash rolled his eyes.

We stared at each other for a few moments. Dash shrugged and slid underneath the covers. I stood up but hesitated at my side of the bed.

How could I climb in there and *not* touch him? I sighed, the battle raging inside me was beyond ridiculous. A week ago the idea of Dash's skin on mine was a super-secret-locked-up fantasy that only entered my mind in the lonely hours late at night. After knowing what he tasted like, though, it was all I could think about, despite the logical reasons not to.

I contemplated sleeping on the floor, but I was beyond exhausted now that the adrenaline from the chase had left my system. My muscles ached from the tension I'd held during the storm and clung to since we got back. Sleeping anywhere but the bed was just dumb.

"I'm not going to bite you," he whispered and then lifted the covers on my side of the bed.

And with that, all my nerves and worries and doubts slipped away. I climbed under those covers and forced myself to relax. The mattress was horrible, hard and thin, but for some reason I'd never been more comfortable. I fell into a deep sleep listening to the sound of Dash's even breathing.

* * * *

Justin's arm slipped over my hip and pulled me across the bed. He pressed his chest against my back, spooning me. My eyes were heavy with sleep, but I could feel the heat from his body as it radiated onto mine. I sighed as his hand trailed under my shirt and touched the soft skin beneath my ribs. Tingles erupted and raced up and down my body, causing a deep yearning in the pit of my stomach.

I rolled over and hooked my leg around his hip and tugged him closer. His fingers clutched my back and he squeezed me tighter. I took a deep breath, loving the way he touched me, like he savored me as opposed to rushing things like usual. His desire was evident through the thin cover of his shorts, and for the first time in a long time, I wanted him too. I nuzzled his neck, still trying to pry open my eyes. He smelled like rain.

Dash's smell.

Strong enough to remind me Justin and I were no longer together.

Well, if I was dreaming I may as well go with it.

His warm hand slid down my side and gently clutched my hip, pulling me tighter against him. The ache between my legs roared with his agonizing, leisurely movements, but it was more than a want. I *needed* him. My hands moved on their own, reaching down to explore what I desperately wanted inside of me. Every inch of my skin flushed with heat. Either this dream broadcasted on high-def or...

My eyes popped open and I jolted. The motion fully woke Dash, who I happened to have my leg wrapped around, my hand resting between our nearly joined hips. His mouth dropped as he took in our tangled mess of a position.

His eyes hooded, mirroring my own in sheer lust factor. He raised an eyebrow, gauging my reaction before pressing his lips to mine. The kiss was gentle, until I relented, and then it escalated to a powerful need. I opened my mouth, letting him in, relishing his taste.

He shifted, encasing me in his strong arms. Still gripping him, I moved my fingers in a come hither motion, loving the groan that tore from his throat.

His breath was ragged as I moved my fingers underneath his shirt, trailing them down his perfect abs. God, I'd never felt muscles like this before, or craved someone so much. Dash slid his hand down my side and pulled his lips away from mine just enough to catch my eyes as he moved lower. He must've found the answer he wanted because he slowly slipped his hand inside my sweats.

He covered my moan with his mouth as he rubbed his fingers against me in a slow circle, drawing out a delicious tingling tension.

"God, Blake." He sighed and slid a finger inside me with perfect ease.

He stroked me with a gentleness I wasn't used to, and the aching within me climbed to an almost unbearable level. Every inch of my insides coiled and pulsed, begging for release. My toes curled as he expertly moved his fingers around my warmth, like he was made to touch me, and I was on the brink of what I knew would be the sweetest release imaginable.

A cell phone from across the room blared Imagine Dragons' "Radioactive" yanking me out the moment.

John grabbed the phone and shut off his alarm. Seconds later he and Paul groaned awake.

Reality crashed over us both. We were so not alone in the motel, and we so shouldn't be doing this.

"I'm sorry!" I whispered, drawing away from him. I covered my face with my hands to try and hide the heat coating my skin.

"It's all right," Dash's voice was coated in early morning husk. He glanced down and quickly yanked the covers up higher.

A new wave of heat rushed over me, and I shoved my face in my hands again.

Dash chuckled, which made me want to punch him.

"This is so not funny!" I glared at him.

He continued to laugh. "It's pretty hilarious if you ask me."

A fierce hungry ache pulsed in the pit of my stomach. I hadn't felt something like this...well, since the first time Dash kissed me.

He finally stopped laughing and raked his hands through his hair. He sighed and his eyes turned on me with the serious look he got right before he said something important.

"Blake..." He whispered my name, and damn if my heart didn't stutter.

"Whose turn is it to get coffee?" Paul arched his back and stretched his arms.

Dash closed his mouth and swung his feet off the bed. He slipped on a pair of sweats over

his basketball shorts before he stood up.

“Mine.” I ran to the bathroom to brush my teeth and then bolted out the door. I couldn’t be in that room anymore. I needed to get the scent of Dash out of my nose and the sensation of his body against mine out of my system.

The local coffee shop was empty, so they made our drinks entirely too fast. I decided to grab a dozen donuts from the gas station near the motel just to take up more time. Despite dragging my feet, I couldn’t make sense of the emotions boiling within me, and as I lugged my haul into the room I assumed I never would.

John grabbed two donuts and his drink. “I like having you around,” he said, taking a chomp out of a donut. “These two never think about breakfast.” He motioned to where Dash and Paul sat on the edge of the bed, a laptop perched on each of their knees.

Radar filled one screen and Dash’s site took up the other.

“How many hits we get?” John asked around his coffee cup.

Dash turned around and startled when he saw me, as if he hadn’t heard me come in. He quickly glanced away. “Twenty-four-hundred.”

“That’s amazing,” I said and handed him and Paul their drinks. Dash took his from me timidly, like I could snap at him any second.

My shoulders sank. I didn’t want him to feel awkward around me. The constant state of confusion finally hit a breaking point and I gave up my resolve.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” I asked him. He swallowed a gulp of coffee before nodding.

I walked outside the motel room and leaned against the building. Dash followed me a moment later.

“What’s up?” he asked, a grin shaping his slightly swollen lips. Had I done that?

“I’m sorry about this morning. Seriously, I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

Dash shook his head. “Always apologizing. What have I told you about that?”

“Well, I think the situation definitely calls for it.”

“No it doesn’t. I told you how I felt that night.”

“You...you still feel that way?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you’ve had time to process everything. Realize that we’re best friends—”

“That only makes me want you more. Blake, we’re a match—”

“Stop, please, Dash. I can’t. I just got out of the worst and only relationship I’ve ever known. Even if I was willing to risk our friendship, I have to figure out who I am before I can give myself to anyone else.”

His eyes filled with heat. “You were pretty close to letting me have all of you this morning.” He took a step closer, entwining his fingers in my hair.

My lips parted, betraying my brain’s plea to not want him. “I swear I’m not trying to lead you on.”

Dash shook his head. “I want more from you than that, Blake. I want every piece of you, because I know who you are, and I’ve never loved anyone as intensely as I do you. But I also understand you need time. Take it. Just know I’ll be here waiting.”

I shook my head, still unable to believe he could care for me like that. He was too good for me, and way more than I deserved.

Dash moved to go back inside but glanced back at me. “It might be hard to take time for yourself if we keep ending up in each other’s arms. Not that I’m complaining, but like I said that

night, I want you to choose me when you're completely free. And that means waiting until you've figured out who you are and what you want." He smiled and turned into the room.

I stood outside, shell-shocked, and with an ache pulsing lower than I'd like to admit. My heart threatened to fly out of my chest and present itself to Dash, but I slapped the bitch down, reminding her it was still broken.

Chapter 15

“Blake, get to the truck, now!” Dash screamed, the roaring wind threatening to steal his voice.

“Not without you!” I yelled back, fighting with my hair. It whipped back and forth vigorously, slapping me in the face.

The tornado had touched down faster and closer than we’d calculated. John and Paul luckily hadn’t made it to the site when we did and were able to spot it farther away. They’d booked it in the opposite direction and had most likely stopped in a safer spot to catch the massive beast on film.

It wasn’t any bigger than the one yesterday, but the muddy brown swirling mass screeched with the sound of a train derailing, and it ripped up the trees beneath it like they were made of matchsticks. A huge branch crunched off the tree trunk, spinning in the tornado’s outer flanks and soared over our heads. It landed with a loud crash next to the truck, only missing it by inches.

Dash held his camera steady, the same fiery passion in his eyes as yesterday. He was completely mad. As much as I loved watching storms and experiencing them up close, I wasn’t prepared to die for it. And death felt much more real today, like I could reach out and touch it. One wrong move, one shift in course, and...lights out.

My heart pounded against my chest and my hands trembled. I should’ve left like he’d told me, but the need for Dash safely at my side overpowered all of my survival instincts.

Anger flared in my stomach as he cracked a wild grin. I yanked on his arm. “This isn’t worth your life!”

He tilted his head, like the thought had never occurred to him. A sharp gust blasted a bunch of leaves at us, their tips nicking the skin on our necks and arms. He held his position for a few moments longer and aimed the video recorder at the monster perfectly. He could’ve been filming a babbling brook for how effortless he made the job look.

Tiny pebble-sized hail pelted the road around us and the little bastards stung something fierce when they made connection. I flinched but held my ground. The tornado shifted course, thankfully, in the opposite direction. The motion was beautiful, a sky-high twist of brown that swayed back and forth like it was swinging its hips. A calm stole over me with its retreat, and once again the certainty of my place filled me.

Sheer terror leading to pure amazement. Clearly loving the chaos as much as Dash did made me as out of my mind as him.

The tail of the tornado roped out after another two minutes and the rest kind of folded in on itself and drew upward into the afternoon sky. Another few minutes and all the evidence of the beast that was left was the trees ripped up by the roots scattered across the wide opening of land. Dash’s shoes crunched on the tiny pieces of hail coating the road as he made his way over to me, his eyebrows drawn.

“What did I tell you about listening to me?” He pointed at me. “I told you to go. You should’ve gone!” He turned on his heel and stomped toward the truck. He set the camera in its bag and placed it behind the driver’s seat.

“You asshole!” Steam could’ve come out my ears I was so pissed. I shoved him once he turned around. He stumbled back against his truck.

He righted himself. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me!" I pushed him again, but this time he was ready and it barely phased him. "You *told* me to run? And you expected me to just leave you here? You could've gotten hurt or killed! Why? To get the shot for your site? Are you serious?"

"That's the job, Blake! You know it is. Capturing what occurs at the tornado's base where the most damage happens is what we desperately need in order to predict them better. Understanding what happens within that fifty to a hundred-foot range will help us increase warning times. That way people aren't blindsided like we were when I was a kid." He took a deep breath. "We lost so much that day. We were lucky to get away with our lives. Preventing that from happening to others is worth everything."

My stomach shrank, picturing an eight-year-old Dash going through the destroyed remnants of what was once his home. "I want that, too, but it's not worth your life."

"I was fine. I always am. The guys never freak out this much. They just leave me to it."

"They don't care about you the way I do." I blurted out the words and then swallowed the rock in my throat.

Dash locked eyes with me. I could tell he wanted to say something because his lips were tense, but he fought it. Most likely he wanted to tell me to make up my damn mind or to let me know he'd rethought his decision to add me to this group.

Tears threatened at the thought. Why did I have to ruin everything? Why couldn't I just stand quietly by while Dash faced down a tornado like it was a simple dust storm?

"Blake..." he whispered, and again my heart stuttered.

"Forget it," I said. I couldn't take hearing the words. Couldn't face the idea of never chasing again because I'd been too emotional or because Dash and I had an undeniable heat coursing between us. I stomped toward the truck, prepared to climb in and not say another word.

Dash grabbed my arm and spun me around. "Blake, stop. What did you mean by that?"

His eyes held me more than his fingers gently clasping my arm. My breath caught in my throat, the truth stuck somewhere between my heartbeat and the last rumblings of the storm above us.

Dash inched closer, his lips only centimeters away from my own. I froze, unable to meet him despite the aching hunger begging me to. He registered my hesitance and sighed. He drew back and shook his head.

"All that asshole did was emotionally drain you until you were blind to what an incredible, strong woman you are."

Tears welled in my eyes.

He reached out for me, and I fell into his arms, wrapping my own around his waist.

"He ripped you apart, Blake. And I know this sounds horribly...*guy* of me, but let me help put you back together." He pushed away to look down at me.

I pulled out of his embrace. "I can't do that. Then *you'd* define me. I need to figure this out on my own. I'm sorry."

* * * *

Dash only drove ten miles over the speed limit on the highway that took us home the following day. I kept my eyes planted on the passing expanses of red dirt, pastures, and small towns. I couldn't look at him, because every time I did a huge bubble of awkward rose in my chest and threatened to burst all over the cab of his truck.

Even though Dash and I had slept in the same bed again last night, we'd hugged the edges like our lives depended on it, and I found the small space between us on the mattress more vast and painful than I'd ever experienced before. I'd barely slept, and I couldn't deny the fierce desire that pulsed within me all night, begging me to cross that line and touch him again. "Dash," I said, still not taking my eyes from the window.

"Yeah?" He sounded hopeful.

"I'm—"

"If the word *sorry* follows that, I swear, woman, I will leave you on the side of the road." He checked his rearview mirror before changing lanes. I gazed at him, finally, and even though it'd only been an hour, hearing his voice refreshed me like a glass of ice water on a hot summer day.

"I wasn't going to say that," I said, though it was a lie.

"Oh really? Then please do go on." He chuckled, which let some air out of the awkward bubble in my chest.

"I was going to say, before you interrupted me that I'm..." There were a million things I wanted to say, but my mouth wouldn't form the words. "I'm really glad you brought me." At least that was the absolute truth.

Dash glanced at me for a moment before returning his eyes to the road. He pressed his lips together in a poor reflection of his normal infectious smile.

The truck fell silent for longer than I could stand, not a comfortable silence but one filled with all the things we weren't saying, and it was enough to construct a wall between us.

* * * *

Hail's butt was extra wiggly when I walked into my apartment. I dropped to my knees, instantly giving in to her more-than-warm welcome. After several good licks from her and more than enough butt pats from me, I stood up and let out a heavy breath. The events of the chase plus what happened with Dash had exhausted me. While I was elated to realize that I could and would chase storms the rest of my life, I was equally disappointed in my heart. Latching onto Dash before I'd even had time to adjust to being out of a relationship wasn't right, but of course, I couldn't stop the feelings I had for him.

Time.

He'd promised me time. And once I figured out who I was outside of the hellish life I'd lived the last eight years, then I'd know what to do with Dash.

I stood up, looking for any kind of distraction for my mind.

All my laundry had been washed and folded or hung up in my closet, and my kitchen was more spotless than when I'd moved in.

Mom.

I shook my head and read the note she'd left me on the fridge.

Made your favorite cookies, they're on the counter. And I picked up a few other things at the store for you. Please text me when you're home safe. Love You. P.S. Hail was an angel.

I opened the fridge. Mom hadn't picked up a few things, she'd fully stocked it. The gesture nearly made me cry.

Instead I popped the lid on the Tupperware on the counter, grabbed three triple chocolate chip cookies, and sank onto my couch. After one bite the taste of home filled me so much I

debated calling Mom and begging her to come over. She could hold me and tell me where to go from here, much like when I was little and struggled with the next step in a complicated word problem.

Hail jumped up beside me, her floppy lips in the perfect pout.

“No. I’m sure you’ve been spoiled enough the past two days,” I told her and finished off my cookies. I leaned my head back and stroked her fur. I couldn’t put this on Mom. This was my life...*finally* mine. I just had to figure out how I wanted to live it.

Chapter 16

A week had gone by and I still hadn't spoken to Dash. He'd nod to me during classes, but nothing more than that. He was giving me space and time, like I'd asked, to figure out who I was and to sort out my relationship drama. I respected him more for taking me seriously, but I also kind of hated him for it. I missed him on a daily basis—he was the first person I wanted to talk to in the morning and the last person I thought about at night. I knew this meant my feelings for him ran bone deep, but I still wasn't ready. It wouldn't be fair to either of us to dive into a relationship, so I sucked it up and let him stay away from me.

My phone vibrated on the coffee table. I peered over my *Climate Change and Agroecosystems* book and instantly sank back into the couch. Hail snored peacefully next to me, her thick body keeping my feet warm. Justin had called several times a day, every day, since that night at the sorority house. And I still refused to answer. The night I broke it off I'd thought Justin deserved a serious conversation to give us closure, but after seeing him with Lindsay so quickly afterward, I knew I didn't owe him a thing.

I stared at the words on the pages in front of me, but they blurred into a one big blob of white and black. I couldn't stop thinking about him.

Dash.

Justin's loss should be the one I mourned, but I couldn't force the feelings any more than I could force my body to react to him the way it did to Dash.

Every time I closed my eyes our kiss burned behind my lids. I'd never felt more alive or desired in all my life.

My cell beeped with a new text message. I snatched it off the table, hope rising in my chest. I instantly deflated. Justin—he was getting desperate.

We need to talk. You can't ignore me forever.

My fingers shook. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly before texting back.

What's done is done.

I tossed the phone back on the table and heaved myself off the couch. Hail grunted but sprawled out to her full length, taking up the important job of keeping my spot warm. A few minutes later and I sank into a scalding hot bath, completely prepared to soak for an hour before bed. I'd even broken out my special bottle of lavender oil to help me relax, because sleep had been nonexistent lately.

Every time I laid down my mind whirled, mixing the past and present together. Memories of Justin and I in high school battled more recent events, and each time I found myself less and less upset about how things ended. His quick betrayal stung more than losing him, and I knew Dash played a huge part in that.

Thoughts of the future—of what Dash and I could be—consumed all others until I was so worked up and shredded inside that I'd have to abandon the idea of pleasantly drifting off to sleep and instead study until I couldn't hold my eyes open anymore.

Dash's friendship had come effortlessly. Being with him was as easy as opening my eyes. And now, after everything, they truly felt open for the first time. Like I'd spent the last three years of my life in a constant dreamlike state, where everything was shaded in gray, and Dash had been the one to wake me up and show me colors I didn't even know existed.

I sank my head under the water. I'd been so blind. I was mad for him. I think I had been

since the moment he walked into my work that first night. Still, I couldn't do anything about it. The timing was off.

Keys rattling in my door startled me to the surface. Hail's bark followed and I hopped out of the tub and dried off as best I could before slipping into my robe and tying it tightly around my waist. I padded barefoot down the hall and peered through the peephole.

Justin grunted outside and pounded on my door, the vibrations making me jump.

"Really? You changed the locks?" he yelled. I took a deep breath. I'd asked the apartment's maintenance crew to change it the day after we'd caught him with Lindsay. *I hadn't wanted any surprise visits, like now.*

"Blake, I know you're home! Open up." Desperation colored his voice and he had a slight slur to his words.

My heart thudded against my chest and a rock lodged in my throat.

"I just want to talk. Just hear me out and I'll leave."

I closed my eyes.

"Lindsay told me Dash's crew had gone on a lot of out of town chases recently. I just need to see that you're okay. Please, Blake," he begged.

Anger boiled in my gut, and I clenched my jaw. I took a deep breath in an attempt to calm down. Perhaps if we got closure we could both move on with our lives and stop dwelling on the past. I raked my fingers through my wet hair and opened the door.

Justin flew past me, and I shut the door with a thud.

Hail gave her usual growl but elected not to move from her position on the couch. I loved her willfulness and understanding that we no longer catered to this man's needs.

Justin looked horrible. His stained jeans were even more grimy than normal and he hadn't shaved in days.

"I'm perfectly fine, Justin. I only went on one overnight chase with the crew anyway," I said, trying not to let the disappointment ring in my voice. I knew they'd continue chasing while Dash gave me space, but I missed the action almost as much as I missed him.

"Why haven't you answered your phone?" he asked, coming closer.

The sour smell of tequila coated his breath, and I backed up toward the kitchen.

"Do you seriously want me to answer that?"

"No." His head dropped. "Blake, I'm so sorry. I don't want to lose you. Please, give me another chance."

I shook my head, astounded that he launched into one of his standard cut-and-paste apologies. "Justin, what you did..." There was no fight to my voice. "I understand why you did it. We've been broken for a long time. It's not your fault. It's just...it's over. All right?"

"Just like that?"

"No. Not just like that. We've been growing apart. You know that."

"No we haven't!" He slammed his fist onto the counter, and I retreated farther into the kitchen.

Noticing the sheen over his eyes and the clench in his jaw, I kept my tone calm. "We'd been together so long, it was bound to happen. People change. I grew up."

"You can't say we're over. I don't want to live if you're not with me."

I swallowed hard. I'd prepared for this, but I didn't believe him. Not anymore. I couldn't. Not after he'd so quickly hopped into another woman's bed after we'd ended things. The act had brought to light all the ways in which he'd manipulated me over the years and isolated me from friends. "You said yourself that was just a ploy to keep me. It won't work anymore."

Justin hadn't wanted me to know anything outside of us. Maybe he knew if I did, then I'd wise up and realize the way he treated me wasn't how real love worked. It had taken finding myself—through chasing storms and becoming friends with Dash—to realize that.

"We aren't right for each other," I continued. "We don't fit. Maybe we used to, when we were younger, but not anymore. You need someone different than me, and that's all right. Someone else can make you happier. Maybe Lindsay can, because I know I haven't been."

And in my heart, behind the massive hole of realization of all that he'd done to me over the years, I really wanted that for him. I didn't want him to suffer. I could still see the potential of the boy I'd fallen for long ago becoming the man I knew he could be, but I wasn't the one to make him find that man inside. I hoped someone else could.

Justin looked back up at me after a few moments, his dark eyes slits. "You aren't the girl I fell in love with."

"I'm not. I grew up, Justin."

He scoffed. "You didn't grow up! You're still an immature little girl playing at the real world. You want to know the real reason I went to Lindsay? Because you could never give me anything in bed. You know how hard it was, getting it up for you time after time?" His voice heightened, and he stalked toward me. I backed up as far as I could against the kitchen counter, until he towered over me. "You couldn't even come with me, Blake! You know how messed up that is? You're so fucked-up you couldn't even get yourself off. It was disgusting, knowing that every time I was inside you, you were going to be as dry as the fucking desert!"

With each stinging word, the memory of all the painful, foreplay-less sex flashed in my head. All the times he'd told me it was my fault or denied my suggestions for alternate positions. All the times he'd laughed at me for wincing. It pierced me until I couldn't take it anymore. "I'm perfectly capable of getting wet. Just not with you."

He flinched as if I'd hit him and grabbed my shoulders. "Oh yeah? Who with then? That tool, Dash?"

His fingers cut into the soft fabric of my robe, and I suddenly felt extremely vulnerable with nothing underneath. When I'd let Justin in, I hadn't even thought about it, we'd been together so long he'd seen me in every manner of dress. Now, with him towering over me, the smell of alcohol on his breath, and the anger coming off him in waves, I felt terribly exposed.

Justin took my silence as confirmation, and his mouth dropped. "Wow. I fucking thought so! I knew the second I met that douche bag he'd weaseled his way into your pants."

"It's not like that," I said, but my voice came out a whisper. His hold on me bordered on a death grip, and I tugged at his hands. "Justin, let go. You're hurting me."

His focus sharpened through the glaze in his eyes. "I couldn't hurt you as much as you've hurt me! You're throwing us away for some blond douchebag!"

I pulled harder on his wrists.

"No!" he yelled. "I won't let you! I'll make you love me again!" He released his grip and the blood rushed back to my shoulders so fast it stung. His fingers yanked at the fabric of my robe.

I pushed him backward. "Stop it!"

Justin came at me again, this time pressing his full body against mine so hard my back snapped against the counter. A white-hot wallop of pain erupted on my spine. I sucked in air through my teeth and shoved him harder. He barely stumbled backward this time.

He ripped part of my robe open, exposing the top left half of my body. He grabbed my breast and bit at my neck. "You'll understand again..." he slurred against my skin. "How it feels to be with a real man." He dragged his tongue across my ear and shoved his hand lower. "Is this

what Dash did? Huh? Did you give it up to him on that first night?"

I trembled, the cold hand of fear clutching my heart. "Justin, please!" I yelled and pounded on his chest with my fists.

A loud growl broke through my plea and Justin flinched.

"The fuck?" He whipped his head back and looked down.

Hail jumped up, pushing her front paws against Justin's thigh. She lost her balance and stood on all fours again, barring her teeth and growling like I'd never seen before. The fur on her back stood on end. I took advantage of Justin's distraction and quickly slipped to the left, holding my robe closed with my hands, my heart pounding furiously against my chest.

Hail growled, a low snarling sound. Justin sucked his teeth and swung his right leg out. The connection his foot made with Hail's side was sickening, but her loud yelp was worse. She instantly fell to her side, whimpering.

Something snapped inside me. Broke completely the fuck off.

I reached for the first thing I could grab—an empty longneck of Dash's from last week I hadn't been able to throw away—and hit Justin over the head with it. The bottle didn't smash into pieces like I'd always seen in the movies. Instead, it made a horrible thunk sound and the vibrations from the action reverberated through the glass and into my fingers.

Justin stumbled backward with his head in his hands. My chest heaved and I held the bottle over my head, ready to hit him again.

"Get out!" I screamed.

Justin dropped his hands, revealing a red lump already rising on his forehead. I took a step toward him with the bottle and he moved to the side, until finally he stumbled out of my door. I slammed and bolted it behind him and grabbed my cell.

My knees hit the hard kitchen tile, shocking my already frayed nerves. I used one shaking hand to dial the only number I could remember at the moment and the other to stroke Hail, who lay whimpering on the floor.

She kept raising her head as if to try to get up, but would yelp and lay it back down. Hot tears welled in my eyes and I trembled as I ran my free hand over her side. A knife pierced my heart when I felt a distortion in her ribs.

"Please, please, pick up..." I keened, unable to control my sobs.

"Hello?" A gruff voice finally answered.

"Dash! Look, I know things are weird between us right now, but please come as fast as you can!" I stuttered through my plea, sobbing and out of breath.

"Blake, what's wrong?" he asked and I heard his truck door slam.

"Please, Dash. Just get here."

"Already halfway there."

Thank you, God. I glanced at the ceiling and hung up. He must've been at Bailey's.

I put my face close to Hail's. "It's going to be all right, baby," I whispered, sniffing loudly in an attempt to pull myself together. She rolled her eyes toward my face and looked at me like she wished she could move to comfort me. I shook my head.

By the time Dash knocked on my door, Hail's breathing had grown ragged.

He walked in, looked me up and down, saw Hail, and sprinted into action.

"Get dressed faster than you can think. And grab a blanket while you're at it," he ordered, sliding next to Hail and running his hands over her fur. Her tiny tail wiggled, but she whimpered again, and I ran down the hallway so fast my feet barely touched the floor.

Dressed in who knew what, I hopped to Dash's truck while yanking on my shoes. He

carefully loaded a blanket-wrapped Hail into the center seat and flew down the street before I'd buckled in.

"There's an emergency vet clinic not far," he said, making a quick right turn.

"Thank—"

"Don't thank me yet," After a short ride, Dash slammed on his breaks in front of a building with a bright red neon sign that read "Moore Emergency Vet Clinic."

I silently thanked God again, because Hail's normal vet wasn't an all-hours and I'd had no idea about this place. Dash carried her in with strong steady arms, and they rushed her to the back before I could squeeze out the words "she got kicked in the side."

We weren't allowed to go with her, despite my desperate pleas, so I reluctantly took up a seat in the waiting room, my knees bouncing anxiously. Dash gripped the arms of the chair he sat in and swallowed hard.

"Now, tell me," he said.

Tears welled up in my eyes again, and his arm instantly wrapped around my shoulders. I winced, a sharp pain pinching the area he touched. He lifted his arm and gently moved my shirt to the side. I glanced down when his eyes turned to slits.

Fingernail marks and the dusting of red and purple sat on each shoulder from where Justin had clung to me.

"Explain," he said, his voice tense.

I leaned further into him, pulling his arm down around me, ignoring the pain. He smelled like rain and comfort, and I spilled the night's events into his shirt along with some more tears.

"If anything happens to Hail, I'm going to kill him," I said, finally reeling in my sobs.

Dash clenched his jaw and stood up, pacing the area in front of me. "I'm going to kill him for touching you."

The scene replayed in my head and I shuddered. I wondered if I could've done anything differently to avoid the outcome. Maybe if I'd just let him do what he wanted, then Hail wouldn't have needed to intervene, and she wouldn't have gotten hurt.

"Don't." Dash sank to his knees in front of me and placed his hands on either side of my face.

"What?" I asked.

"You're blaming yourself. I can tell. Put this blame where it belongs. On that asshole."

"I already did." The sound the bottle made as it hit Justin's head rang in my ears. I didn't feel bad about doing it, and anger seethed below my worries for Hail, threatening to burst out, and track him down, and bash him over the head some more.

"I'm proud of you for that, but you shouldn't have had to." Dash raked his hands through his hair.

After a few deep breaths I realized we were alone in the waiting room. The only attendant behind the massive counter had gone to the back to check on Hail. The place smelled heavily of fur, disinfectant, and urine.

Dash looked at me, his eyes softening.

"Thank you for coming," I whispered.

"Blake..." He sighed. "Look—"

"Ms. Caster?" A tall woman in a white coat stepped out of the swinging door that led to the back.

"Yes." I bolted to her and Dash quickly followed.

"Hail is going to be fine..."

I let out the breath I'd been holding since Justin had knocked on my door.

Chapter 17

Dash carried Hail inside and set her gently on her oversized pillow in the corner of the living room. She normally never used the thing, electing to dominate the couch, but she wasn't allowed to jump up and down for at least two weeks. Her eyes were heavy from the painkillers they'd given her at the vet clinic, but she still managed to give Dash's hand a slow lick as he pulled away.

"I'm so sorry about all of this," I said again, setting Hail's three prescription bottles on the kitchen counter. She had a broken rib, and the doctor had given me anti-inflammatories and antibiotics to stave off infection, just as a precaution. I knelt to pick up the beer bottle I'd left on the floor and rolled it between my hands. I heard Hail sigh from the other side of the room and I clutched the bottle with a fierce grip.

Dash uncurled my fingers from around the neck and slowly set it down. He didn't let go of my hand, and warmth radiated from his body so close to mine. He tilted my chin up so I had to meet his eyes, which were as green and intense as ever. I swallowed hard, my heart racing.

"I'm getting sick of you saying that, woman," he said and slipped his hand around my hip to the small of my back. Tingles erupted under his touch, and he pulled me to him. He pressed his cheek against the top of my head. "None of this is your fault," he whispered.

I melted into him, hugging him close to me. "You're wrong," I said, and it was probably the first time in Dash's life that he was.

"None of this would've happened if I hadn't let Justin in my apartment. None of this would've happened if I would've listened to my heart that summer before my freshman year of college when he'd made me choose between him and my dream school." I sighed. But if Justin hadn't, I wouldn't have met Dash. I made to step out of his embrace, but he stopped me.

"Don't," he whispered, and then his lips were on mine.

I opened my mouth willingly under his, my eyes closing automatically. He massaged my tongue with his own, and with each caress my heart beat faster. I grabbed his hair and kissed him deeper, suddenly needing to close the tiny space that separated our bodies. He ran his hands up and down my back and sides, every graze igniting a trail of internal fire that made me weak. His breath was ragged against mine, and he gently pushed me backward.

My back tapped the kitchen counter, enough to make me wince. I flinched out of the kiss, and the scene from earlier tonight filled my eyes so quickly I had to squeeze them shut. The icy fingers of fear gripped my heart again, as if I were reliving the moment, and the cold froze the fire within me.

Dash stepped back. "Did I hurt you?"

I shook my head, realizing for the second time he'd had to ask me that after kissing me. And he hadn't done anything wrong. Justin had. Again.

The shock of the situation returned, and I trembled despite my efforts to take a deep breath and push past it. I would never know how far Justin would've taken it, thanks to Hail. If she hadn't intervened... I clenched my eyes shut again and refused to think about it.

"I'm so—"

Dash put his finger on my lips.

I saw the tension in his eyes, the confusion, and all the space we'd put between us crashed down on me like a tidal wave. I wanted to curl up in bed with Dash's protective arms around me,

but I couldn't ignore the exhaustion settling into my bones. The adrenaline slowly crept from my body, and the reality of tonight punched me in the face. No matter what my body wanted—which was all of Dash's—I couldn't jump into bed with him. I couldn't jump into anything with him. Not with everything so fresh.

He must have seen the hesitance in my eyes because he put what felt like an ocean of space between us.

“Dash...”

“You don't have to explain, Blake.” He shrugged and walked toward the door. “I get it. You still need time.”

“After everything tonight...I can't even think straight,” I said.

Dash had his hand on the doorknob and I put mine on top of his, stopping him.

He stared at the floor for a few moments before glancing back at Hail, who snored loudly in the corner. “I'm glad she's all right. I'm glad you both are.”

I pressed my lips together, wanting to say a million things, but coming up blank.

“Do you think he'll come back?” he asked, his eyes hard.

I shuddered. “I really hope not.”

Dash turned toward me and took his hand off the knob. “I could stay.”

Heat simmered low in my belly with the thought of lying in bed next to him again. It would be so easy to let Dash put me back together.

“Would you?” I was still resolved to fix my issues on my own, but that didn't mean I couldn't take him up on his offer to make me feel safe. “Even if I'm not ready to—”

“Of course,” he said and slid his fingers in my hair, gently stroking. “I'm not him, Blake. I'd never force you into anything. Ever.”

I bit my lip, wondering how on earth I could possibly deserve Dash's kindness. “Thank you.” I sighed, the tension leaving my body knowing Dash was there for me in whatever way I needed. That kind of stability was new and refreshing and put another kink in my stay-away armor.

I showered, despite having taken a bath earlier in the night. I pressed my loofa so hard against my skin I was rubbed raw by the time I got out, but I couldn't help it. I'd felt the intense need to scrape away all traces of Justin, all eight years' worth. Patting dry, I looked at myself in the mirror and realized that I'd never really be rid of him...not unless I shut him down completely, once and for all.

Walking into my bedroom, I sighed. Dash lay sprawled out, taking up more than half the bed. He'd argued with me earlier, saying he'd take the couch, but I didn't want him there. I wanted him in my bed, next to me, where I could smell him and hear his breathing, even if we'd agreed not to have sex.

I tried to climb in as gently as possible, but he shifted regardless.

“You were in there a long time,” he said, his voice soft with sleep.

“I had a lot to think about,” I said, slipping underneath the covers he held up for me.

“Did you figure it out?” he asked as I sank into the crook of his arm, resting my head against his chest.

“Not everything, but, yes, I figured something important out.”

“What was that?”

“Something vital in order for me to be free.”

“Want to clue me in?” He traced his fingertips lightly against my arm. The sensation gave me chills and made my heart beat faster.

“Not tonight,” I said, taking a deep breath. The scent of rain filled the bed, and my muscles turned to jelly.

I glanced up at him, his eyes barely held open, and smiled softly. This felt too natural to ignore. We fit. Effortlessly.

“I gave Hail her last dose before coming in here,” he said, stretching. The motion forced more of his body to graze mine and the fire in my veins had me wishing I’d opted for shorts over sweats.

“Thank you,” I said as he settled himself again.

“Always, Blake.”

The touches he gave me were featherlike and completely innocent, but each time his fingers met my skin or his leg slid against mine, I melted. And yearned.

I slid my arm across the hardness of his abs, holding myself to him. A steady electric current buzzed between us, a low pulse aching with need. It would be so easy to let go and give in to the urges consuming me. To take things with Dash to the next level. To be *that* girl. His girl.

I sighed. That would leave me being defined by nothing but a relationship for as long as I could remember. No. I would figure out who I was first, then I would ask him to be mine. And tomorrow I would take the first step to reclaiming my identity—but Dash wouldn’t like it.

* * * *

My fingers trembled as I gripped the keys in my purse with one hand and my cell in my jeans pocket with the other. Ice-cold dread settled in my stomach, despite the warm air and gentle breeze blowing on campus.

It had taken me two whole days to work up the courage to ask Justin to meet me. I wanted to close the door on him for good, but on my terms.

Public place. Campus quad.

Dash hadn’t slept over again after that first night, but I had my thumb hovering over the call button on my cell, his number already up. I’d told him what I planned to do. He’d nearly talked me out of it; he was so against me going through with this. Asked me to simply never speak to Justin again. But I didn’t budge. If I didn’t see an end to this, then there would never be closure, and Justin would harass me for the rest of my life.

My teeth threatened to chatter with the adrenaline coursing through my veins. My heart plummeted to my stomach when I saw Justin crossing campus toward where I sat on a bench. Seriously? I’d faced down tornadoes from a hundred yards away without this much fear. I needed to suck it up and fast. This was nothing compared to chasing one of God’s most deadly creations. I could do this.

“Blake,” Justin said when he’d reached me. His face was a purple and blue mess, a black eye, swollen cheek, and busted lip all accented the noticeable lump I’d given him two nights ago.

“What happened?” I blurted out, but instantly regretted it. I could easily guess who’d given Justin the beat down and suddenly understood why Dash hadn’t checked on me or Hail in person in two days.

“That’s not really any of your business anymore, is it?” Justin took a seat on the bench, and I instinctively moved as far away from him as possible. He noted the action and ducked his head, like a beaten animal. The thought made my blood turn to fire, picturing Hail at home, nursing her wounds. Good, the fire was better. I could cling to that with a stronger grip than the stupid icy fear.

“You’re absolutely right, Justin. You’re no longer a worry for me.”

He huffed. “I don’t remember everything,” he said after a few moments. “But I’ve been told it wasn’t good.”

Hot tears welled in the back of my throat, the night replaying in my mind. “Wasn’t good? Are you kidding me? Justin, you nearly...*raped* me.” I whispered the last two words, weary of the students walking by.

His eyes popped wider and then he looked up, as if trying to recall the worst night of my life.

“And you broke Hail’s rib. You’re lucky only a beer bottle was within my reach and not a knife because I swear to God I would’ve stabbed you.” He opened his mouth, but I cut him off. “Don’t you dare say you’re sorry. I don’t want to hear it. I only came here to see to it that you knew what you’d done to me. To *me*, the girl who stood by your side for years. I can’t believe you took things that far. It proves how toxic I am for you, and you for me. But no more. I’m done. And after what you did, I don’t ever want to speak to you again.”

“I *am* sorry. Not that it counts for anything. I got wasted, listened to Lindsay go on and on about how she thought you and Dash were together now, and I fucking lost it. I didn’t go over to your place with an idea in mind, it just happened. I don’t even remember driving there. And, for the record, in my mind, you were still mine. You’ve always belonged to me.”

I jerked my head to the side. “No. That isn’t how relationships are supposed to work. One doesn’t *own* the other. And Dash and I aren’t together.” Not in any sense he needed to know about. My personal life was no longer his concern.

“I never thought I’d be this guy.” Justin he stared at his scuffed work boots. “I really didn’t, Blake. But I’m pretty sure it’s your fault.”

I shot to my feet, clutching my keys so hard I felt them nick my skin. “Excuse me?”

“You’ve driven me crazy for years. In love and lust, and sometimes I hated you because I knew I was never the man you wanted...the man you deserved. Who could live up to your standards?”

“My standards? I stayed with you after all the hell you put me through. The selfish sex, the suicide threats, everything. I didn’t have any standards until I realized how a real man treats a woman.” I practically spat the words. There was no more fight filter in me. I was free and would not spare him any ounce of pain.

“You mean Dash.” Justin stood, too, but kept his distance.

“Yes. He’s shown me more kindness in the short time I’ve known him than you have your entire life. Don’t you get it, Justin? We only brought out the worst in each other.”

“He’s only trying to get into your pants.”

I glared at him, not bothering to respond.

He put his hands up in defense. “Not that I blame him. Not that it matters anymore. You’re right. I hated the person I was with you. Every day, I hated him. I still do. I don’t know if I can come out of it, but now that we’re done, I’ll try.” Well, finally, an instance of brutal honesty. For once he wasn’t spouting bullshit.

“We *are* done. I mean it. Really done. I don’t want one text, one call, or so much as a drive-by from you. Do you understand? I’ll call the police and bring up charges. I should’ve done that already, but the only thing that stopped me is our years’ worth of history. I can easily forget that if you bother me again.” My voice didn’t waiver like I thought it would with my heart pounding against my chest so hard.

“Understood,” he said, not bothering to look me in the eye.

With each word, I took a sledgehammer to the chain he'd had wrapped around my heart for years. "Goodbye, Justin."

Crack, I'd given the final blow and was absolutely, finally free.

Chapter 18

“How is Hail?” Mom asked, sliding a third homemade cinnamon roll on the plate in front of me. I sat at her dining room table, spilling my heart out between bites.

“She’s almost completely healed,” I said, smearing the bite on my fork in the melted icing on the plate. It’d taken three weeks, but Hail was back to the normal lazy and loving dog she’d always been.

“That’s good, honey.” Mom took a seat next to me, squeezing my wrist. “I’m so sorry about what you had to endure. I wish you would’ve talked to me. The way he treated you wasn’t right, and sex shouldn’t be like that. It should be about mutual satisfaction. It can be incredible...mind-blowing with the right person. I can give you some pointers, so you can tell the next man in your life how to move to get you—”

I jerked my hand up to stop her, color rushing to my cheeks. “No! Please don’t.” Obviously I knew my mother had sex before, but I did *not* need the visual, or the embarrassment that she knew infinitely much more about the subject than me.

“All right, honey, but I’ll be here if you want to talk about it. I’m always here for you.” Her eyes shot down to the table, and the slight hurt in them registered in my heart.

“I know I should’ve come to you. I honestly didn’t even realize how toxic our relationship was until I met Dash.” I’d been blind. Or in denial. I couldn’t decide which was worse—my utter cluelessness on how healthy relationships functioned or the fact that I’d never once questioned if I deserved better.

She squeezed my wrist again before she pulled back and took a sip of her iced tea. “Have you heard from Justin?” She said his name through clenched teeth.

“Not since I shut the door on him forever. Not to mention I threatened to call the cops. We’ve heard the last from him.” I shoved another gooey bite in my mouth.

“I’m so proud of you. You’re finally embracing the strong woman I’ve always known you were.”

She was right; I was strong. And I had a passion that burned hotter than the sun for storms. I hadn’t been able to acknowledge either of those aspects when I’d been blinded and buried in my relationship with Justin. I knew myself better now. The last three weeks had been a revelation where I relished in the freedom and took the time to figure out what I really wanted.

And I knew what that was now. But I couldn’t deny that I’d have baggage for a long time. I couldn’t just blink the past eight years away, or that awful night Hail got hurt, no matter how badly I wanted to. I’d actually contemplated seeing someone to help me work through it, but as of right now I wasn’t ready to dive that deep. If the time came where I needed even more clarity on why I’d stayed with him so long then I wouldn’t hesitate, but for now I was just happy to be...me. Really me, with no chains, no expectations, and most of all, no disappointments.

Well, maybe one. I still hadn’t been able to bring myself to cross the line with Dash. I knew I wanted to. Knew my life without him wasn’t nearly as bright as it was with him in it, but he’d given me my space like I’d wanted, and I hadn’t pressed unpause on that yet.

“How is Dash?” Mom asked, as if reading my mind.

I snapped to attention before quickly returning my focus to the plate. I hadn’t told her about what had happened between us.

“He’s fine.” I thought. I’d only heard from him a couple times since I broke things off with

Justin.

Once when he called a few days after the incident to check on me and Hail. He'd asked if I needed anything, offering to bring me food or chocolate or whatever would make me happy. I'd wanted to say, *you...I need you*, but I couldn't shape the words with my tongue. Regardless of his acceptance of my need for time, I couldn't get past all the drama I'd caused him. I didn't even know how to begin to apologize for it. And when I returned to classes, we kept our distance there as well.

The second time we spoke I'd called to give him my new cell number—I'd changed it for a new start. He hadn't bothered using it in the days since and really I couldn't blame him. I'd brought so much drama to his world, he probably needed an infinite vacation.

"Some coincidence, huh?" Mom's voice cut into my thoughts as she rose from the table and took my cleared plate to the kitchen sink.

I followed her, leaning against the counter with my arms crossed. "What is?"

She scrubbed the plate with a washrag. "That the two of you broke up with your partners in the same month." Mom arched an eyebrow at me while she grabbed a towel to dry with.

My lips parted and heat rushed to my cheeks, the images of all I wanted to do with Dash pulsing behind my eyes. I clenched them shut, but that only made his body pressing against mine play on HD in my mind. "He's my best friend, Mom..."

She put the dish up and reached for me. I hugged her, sighing into her shoulder. "You know what they say the definition of true love is, honey?" she asked, placing her hands on either side of my face.

I shrugged.

"True love is friendship set on fire." Mom pushed some hair out of my face and gave me a too-knowing grin. I hadn't told her everything, but she'd understood regardless.

Chapter 19

I straightened up at my register trying to focus on the task instead of analyzing the events that occurred since the start of last semester. In that time I had rid myself of the heavy weight of Justin and I could finally do whatever it was I wanted without fear. And yet, his absence wasn't what left a hole in my chest. It was Dash's.

I'd grown used to all the time we spent together, and these last three weeks where he'd given me more than enough space, I missed those times more than I missed any moment with Justin over our entire relationship.

The kisses Dash and I had shared burned the back of my eyelids and a flush raked over me. I tried to hide it with my hair as my next customer approached, a young man with brown hair and evidence of a five o'clock shadow. He had pretty blue eyes and was handsome enough. I was a single woman for the first time in...well, ever, but no urge to flirt tickled my insides. No curiosity on how his skin would feel against mine.

I handed him his bag of video games and sighed. How could I be newly single and already completely in love with someone else? And why did it have to be Dash? My heart was twisted, locking on to the only person in the world I'd ever considered my best friend—human wise anyway.

Despite my best efforts and all the space and time I'd taken, I'd still come to the conclusion that I loved him. Loved him with every piece of who I really was, and I couldn't deny that I'd learned more about myself through our friendship than I had any other time in my life. He pulled the best out of me, encouraged me, supported me, and believed in me. And he did this without asking for anything in return, except for a chance at my heart.

I sighed, looking at the clock. The second I got off I would call him and see if he'd meet me. See if he still wanted to take a chance on us. Part of me feared he'd changed his mind, that our time apart had let him realize how damaged I was, or that we were better as friends. I swallowed the fear and reminded myself that I wasn't that girl anymore, the one who let fear control her life. I was a girl who went after what she wanted, whether that be a tornado or a man.

"Blake!" John called, snapping me out of myself. He walked into the store, his laptop tucked under his arm and his brick red faux-hawk clashing terribly with his bright yellow T-shirt. Paul jogged after him, catching up to him with a strained look on his face.

My excitement over seeing the pair almost hurt. I shook my head, not realizing how much I'd missed my friends. "Hey," I said as they stopped in front of my register. "What are you two here for? Music or video games?"

"Neither. I've tried calling you, but the line said your number was disconnected." John squinted his dark eyes.

"Long story. I thought Dash would've passed the new one on to you guys." I studied his and Paul's expressions, and it was like a punch in the stomach. "What's wrong?"

"It's Dash—"

"Don't, man." Paul cut him off, shaking his head.

All the air around me disappeared and my stomach hit the floor. "What happened?"

John glared at Paul before returning his eyes to me. "Nothing, yet."

"What do you mean, *yet*?"

Paul grabbed John's arm like he could hold his words back with the motion. "I'm telling

you, man. Don't."

"She's the only one who can help us." John jerked his arm away. "All right, look, Blake, he said he'd kill me if I told you. In fact, he made me promise not to, but he took off earlier today for a storm near Broken Arrow."

Paul groaned and shoved his hands in his pockets.

I sighed, relieved at first and then it quickly turned to aggravation. "So what? That's what Dash does. Damn it, John, you made me think he'd been in an accident or something."

"No, you don't get it. No *one* is going after this storm." He set his laptop on my counter and opened it. "Doppler has been tracking it for hours, and it's going to drop something so nasty tonight, we were all warned off it. The locals are already preparing."

I swallowed hard, glancing at the radar images aligned next to the weather map that filled John's screen. My heart kicked up in speed, I didn't even need to be good at compiling this data to see it would produce something awful. "Dash knew all this?" I asked, returning my focus to the boys.

John shrugged. "Course he did."

"And he went anyway?"

"He's been acting weird the past few weeks. Distant, but more reckless than normal. He almost totaled his truck last weekend when we tracked a mesocyclone in Shawnee. He snagged an incredible shot, but the hail damage was ridiculous."

He must've registered the hurt in my eyes because he sighed. "I wanted to call you for the chase, but Dash told me you needed a break."

I nodded, knowing it was my fault for pushing him away.

"Damn, bro, why don't you go ahead and tell her everything," Paul snapped.

"There's more?" I asked.

"Yeah," John said. "A few weeks ago he showed up to the lab with a black eye and scraped-to-hell knuckles after a fight with J—"

"Shut up, John!" Paul cut him off and punched him in the shoulder.

John flinched. "What the hell? She's one of us; she needs to know."

My stomach sank, the visual of Justin's beaten face the last time we spoke clear in my head. I'd assumed as much but had never confirmed it since I'd known from the two times we'd spoken that Dash was fine as opposed to hospitalized. I shuddered and piled on another load of guilt.

"Anyway," John continued, "you're the only one who has ever been able to pull him off a storm. I've never seen anything like it. We've both tried for years when he's gotten too close, and he never once left when we did. You join the team and the man finally listens."

I took a deep breath. I hadn't gotten Dash to leave as early as them, but apparently it had still been earlier than he normally would have. Dash had always lived on the edge with storms, but I never believed he'd be this careless. "Has he left already?"

"About an hour ago. But it's a three-hour drive and then the storm isn't predicted to hit until late tonight, between ten and midnight. We could make it and you could call him off, at the very least keep him from getting too close. Paul and I would go alone, but like I said, he's never listened to us before."

It was only two o'clock. I could get there before nightfall. I flipped off the bright yellow number above my register and practically sprinted to my manager's door. I pounded on it till he opened.

"Dustin, I've got to go. Emergency," I said and whipped around, rushing to my car.

John stopped me before I opened my car door. “Blake, I hate to do this to you. I never would put you in this kind of danger if I wasn’t honestly worried about Dash. You know how rare and ugly cells like this can get, especially after dark.”

“I know.” I held my cell to my ear willing Dash to answer, hoping I could talk some sense into him sooner rather than later. I pocketed the phone after two more attempts. “How are we going to find him?” I glanced at Paul climbing into the passenger seat of the Tracker Jacker across the lot.

“Just follow us,” John said, reaching in his back pocket and handing me a walkie-talkie. “We’re all linked to the same hot spot for our laptops, so when we get within a five-mile radius, we’ll know his exact location.”

I gripped the radio and arched an eyebrow. “What if we don’t get in that radius?”

He set his laptop on the trunk of my car. “He’ll most likely be near where the storm is predicted to drop down. You’ll probably be able to predict the location better than me at this point.”

I eyed the data carefully. After a few moments I had a better handle on the storm. “Everything points to a section off of 51,” I said.

He quickly clicked the data to the side and pulled up his go-to site for maps. “Got the routes. We’ll check the back roads surrounding that area. 209 E Ave is the where I would’ve taken him if I’d been tracking, so you can start there while we try to get a hit on the network.” He eyed the radio in my hand. “We’ll have ours on. Stay in touch.”

I gave him a firm nod and opened my car door. John held it as I sank inside.

“And Blake?” He looked down at me.

“Yeah?”

“Be safe.” He shut the door and jogged to the Tracker Jacker.

* * * *

Luckily I had a packed bag in my trunk. I’d stuffed a duffel with a couple sets of clothes, a pair of flat leather boots, and a disposable toothbrush in my trunk after the last chase. I’d wanted to be ready at a moment’s notice if Dash ever asked me to go again—knowing that he kept the same stocked bag in his truck, too. Of course, he hadn’t asked me to tag along on this one, and with good reason. He knew I would’ve tried to stop him.

I changed out of my work clothes quickly when we all stopped at the halfway point to fill up our tanks. I’d ridden John’s taillights the entire way. I had called my mom on the road and asked her to take care of Hail. I’d never been so thankful that I’d given her the new key when I’d had my locks changed. Guilt bit my insides over not telling her the exact storm I was chasing, but she would’ve flipped.

My knuckles were white I gripped the steering wheel so hard. I broke the speed limits, as John did, but neither of us was bold enough to push it as fast as Dash would’ve. He’d probably made the three-hour drive in an hour and a half. I could clearly picture him already set up on the side of some back road, sitting on his truck bed, camera in hand, just waiting to catch the biggest storm predicted in years.

I knew we were close before John radioed saying we were only a couple miles outside of the storm. The color of the sky told me everything I needed to know. Night hadn’t taken over yet, but the sky was a dark gray, almost black, and had a green sheen to it. It stretched for over a mile before running into the lighter evening tones of blue in the distance. The contrast settled eerily

over the small town, casting the buildings and homes in an odd mish-mash of dark and light. The streets were deserted and stores had closed early. This town knew what headed toward them and smartly took cover.

“This is where we split up,” John said over the walkie-talkie. “We’re going northwest to see if we can get a signal. You go southeast to the area you predicted. Keep your cell on in case we get too far apart for the radios, all right?”

I clicked the button down. “Got it. If you find him before I do...” I took a deep breath. “Just tell him I’m here.”

“I will.”

I set the radio in my empty front seat and a few miles later took a hard right on the road John had suggested. It was a lonely road bordered by farmland and rolling green pastures with tall grass that buffeted back and forth in the steady wind. A chill crept across my skin as the sky grew darker the farther I drove. Normally I would’ve seen at least a few other chasers setting up their gear on the sides of the road, but no one was here. Not for this one.

After a mile a sliver of hope slipped into my chest. I hadn’t spotted Dash’s truck. Maybe he’d thought better of it and had turned back. I pulled over and grabbed my cell, hoping he’d answer this time. He’d already ignored four of my attempts, but reception out here was finicky, and this time the call cut off after only two rings. I stared at the one lonely bar on my screen before looking at the road ahead. I couldn’t spot anything, no sign of a truck in either direction as far as I could see.

I shoved my phone back in my pocket and a cold sweat popped from my forehead. The sky moved now. The black wall cloud stretched over a mile wide and had a wicked updraft that slowly churned its way into what would be a terrible beast of a tornado. Two small funnel clouds peeked out of the bottom of the cloud, and their rotation was like two ominous dentist drills preparing to split open someone’s teeth.

I swallowed hard and threw my car in reverse. This storm would hit earlier than predicted, though when had storms ever really been predictable?

Dash was here somewhere. I could almost sense it—the passion building in him as he watched the sky with hawk-like green eyes. The wild excitement as he planted his feet on the trembling ground and pointed the camera toward the production. He wouldn’t miss the opportunity to be the only one with real footage of a monster like this, not even if it cost him his life. The data collected would be invaluable to him—and I knew people would benefit from his in-depth research in the field—but I couldn’t justify that as a reason to try to capture a supercell like this. It was too risky. Too much at stake.

I swung my car around and scanned the area surrounding the fields. Another road led southeast and would allow him to get ahead of the storm. It definitely would be the better vantage point to film, though it was a dirt road and therefore the more dangerous choice. If it rained, which it almost always did, then even a truck like Dash’s could get stuck. And without a vehicle to get him out, he’d just be more potential debris for the tornado to project.

As much as I prayed he didn’t pick that road, I turned and drove down it.

A strip of sky lit by the sunset peeked below the pitch-black wall clouds that stretched farther than I could see. It hovered over the massive field like a slowly lowering velvet curtain, but this wasn’t the end of an act...no, the show was about to begin, and way ahead of schedule.

Just as I made out a black truck a mile down the road, a loud crash of thunder boomed and rain fell in sheets as if the thunder had burst the massive balloon holding it. I turned my wipers on to full blast and stupidly kept my speed. I grabbed the walkie-talkie. “I found him!” I shouted

into it.

“What’s your...cation?” Static crackled over the line, causing John’s voice to cut in and out. I repeated my location twice while gaining ground on Dash. The static grew louder, so I tossed the thing aside.

Dash stood on his truck bed, pointing the camera toward the wall cloud. His chest puffed out slightly as if he taunted the storm. His gray T-shirt clung to his carved abs like a second skin and his jeans were so soaked they looked black.

I skidded to a stop next to his truck. He glanced in my direction and instantly threw his head back, eyes clenched. He stomped his foot before leaping off his truck. I’d barely made it out of the car before he was within inches of my face, his green eyes practically on fire.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he screamed. “I’m going to kill John!” Dash darted his eyes around the area behind me, like he was searching for the Tracker Jacker. I spared a second to hope they’d heard my location before anger flared in my stomach.

I shoved him backward and flung the wet strips of hair out of my face. “What the hell are *you* doing here, Dash?”

“This is what I do!” He jerked an arm in the air, the camera steady in the other and still pointed expertly at the clouds, like it wasn’t even a thought.

“No, Dash, this is what *we* do, and even I’m not this stupid!”

He scrunched his eyebrows together. “Did you just call me stupid?”

I smacked his chest. “Yeah! I did! This is the dumbest thing you’ve ever done!”

Dash didn’t try to fend off my attack. “Have you ever seen an entire town wiped out, Blake? Homes destroyed, sucked into the sky and spit back out like shredded junk mail? This needs to be studied. You’ve got to understand that. No one has captured a storm like this. It will help!”

“It’s not worth your life!”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I know these storms and how to handle them.”

“You can never know storms, Dash. And the minute you think you do, it’ll turn on you.”

“Well, I’m used to that, aren’t I?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I yelled at his back as he walked toward his truck.

“Nothing,” he said and flung his truck door open, leaning over an opened laptop.

The rain continued to dump buckets on us, and it thundered so loud I flinched every time. I gripped his shoulder and forced him to look at me. “What did you mean?”

His shoulders dropped. “You! I know I said I’d give you time, and I still will, but it took me all of five minutes to realize I was crazy about you. That’s why I can’t be around you until you’ve made up your mind. It physically hurts to be near you and not touch you.” He grabbed at his chest like the lightning cracking the sky had hit him.

I looked toward the sky and raked my hands through my soaked hair. “I’m so sorry. But I couldn’t be *that* girl.”

“What girl?”

“The relationship girl or the broken girl. I had to figure out who I was outside of him before I could even think of giving myself to someone else.”

“I know that. Did you figure it out?”

I took a step forward, the rain drenching my entire body. The move felt like a leap. No going back. “I’m the girl you saw, even before I could see her myself. I’m the girl who always eats three cookies instead of one and who thinks Nutella belongs in the dairy food group. I’m the girl who chases tornadoes, interprets weather maps on the fly, and senses when it’ll downpour.” I glanced up, my eyes stinging with the rain. “I want to save lives someday, and I want to be an

asset in weather reporting and tracking. So, which girl am I?" I took a deep breath, my revelation pouring out of me harder than the rain. "Yours."

Dash's eyes widened. "Truly?"

"If you'll have me as is. Baggage and all."

"Took you long enough, woman." He lunged at me, pinning my back against his truck, his lips crushing mine.

I opened my mouth, letting him in, relishing the feel of his warm tongue mixed with the cold rain that drenched us both. We were only getting wetter, but I didn't push him away; instead I yanked him closer, our hips pressing against each other. He explored my body everywhere his hands could reach—and with total abandon. I'd finally lifted the restraints on the passion we'd bottled up for way too long. I felt like I was about to burst like the storm that had gathered around us to shake the world.

I shook now, trembled with delight as I sucked Dash's tongue into my mouth. His fingers slipped into my jeans, and he pressed against my warmth with his rain-soaked fingers. I gasped, his mouth still on mine as he rubbed against me, drawing out a delicious tension that made my thighs quiver. A deep pulse throbbed low in my belly, and all I wanted to do was drop to the ground and have Dash on me, in me, consuming me.

Dash jerked his head back, his green eyes sparking with matched lust. We were on the same page as usual. I tucked my hand low between us, exploring the length of him, and smiled when he growled. He moved to my mouth again, an inch from my lips, and then the sky screamed.

Thunder clapped so loud and close it shook my chest like a hit with a sledgehammer.

Reality crashed down all around us, harder than the downpour.

We'd been careless getting caught up in the moment like that.

Dangerous.

The storm had arrived, on top of us like I ached for Dash to be on me.

And it was show time.

The funnel clouds I'd spotted earlier had dropped lower and combined sometime in our distraction. In seconds it met the ground, forming a tornado, at least one hundred and fifty yards wide. It quickly churned up a massive amount of earth. The horrible roaring sound of a freight train screeched through the sky.

My heart jumped into my throat. I'd never seen a tornado so big or so beautiful. Even over five hundred yards away, the wind soared past Dash and I, flapping my hair back and forth wildly. I glanced at Dash, shocked he'd had the presence to get his camera out when I could only stand in awe.

The tornado moved with an elegant fierceness that both mesmerized and terrified me. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, pumping my heart against my chest so hard I thought it would bust. My limbs shook—the fight or flight instinct battling within—and my brain called me an idiot for not taking cover.

It was spectacular the way the beast snaked from the clouds in the sky and pierced the ground beneath it. And in that moment I understood why Dash was here, why he didn't want to miss this. I clutched his free hand.

Dash went rigid and jerked his hand away. He tossed the camera in his truck and grabbed my waist, pulling me around to the other side of it.

"It's changing course!" he yelled and shoved me into the passenger seat.

My fingers trembled as I fumbled with the seatbelt, all the giddy sensations leaving my body quicker than a blink. As I looked out of the windshield at the massive monster headed toward us,

I remembered the *stupidity* of being out here.

Dash slammed the door, buckled up, and spun his truck around. The tires splayed mud all over my car, and I only spared half a thought as to what would become of it. He peeled out, speeding down the way I'd come in, but not fast enough. The wet earth sucked on the truck's motion and threatened to stop our retreat all together.

The back end of the truck jerked suddenly, as if the Hulk had grabbed ahold of Dash's tailgate. The force slammed us against our locked seatbelts. A wallop of heat burst in my chest from the abrupt halt. The back wheels squealed, Dash's foot placed firmly on the gas. We looked at each other and then backward.

We were entirely too close. The massive churning beast stalked right behind us, stretching across the road and field. The truck's back end was caught in the outer suction vortex of the tornado, but the primary would swallow us whole in seconds.

I grabbed Dash's hand, which gripped the steering wheel. "What's your real name?" I shouted and clenched my eyes shut.

"What?"

"We're about to die, Dash! I love you and want to know your real name!" I screamed over the rushing sound of the wind threatening to consume us. I thought of my mother and Hail. I hoped they knew how much I loved them.

"No! We're not going to die!" he shouted back.

The tires screeched and the smell of hot rubber filled the cab before the truck suddenly took off. I popped my eyes open, shocked that Dash gained speed and fishtailed all over the dirt road.

I spun in my seat and scanned the area behind us. The tornado let us go, but kept chasing *us* in a terrifying role reversal. Dash sped down the road, taking a hard turn onto the paved road that led toward the town. We gained a tiny bit of distance, but the beast took up the entire back view of Dash's truck. I couldn't tear my eyes away, and once I separated sheer terror from duty, I reached down for Dash's camera.

I'd barely pressed the record button before Dash took another fast turn.

"Fuck!" he screamed, the tires squelching in the background, Dash losing control of the truck as he tried to slow our momentum.

I whipped my head around just in time to see us crash head on into a telephone pole. The sound of metal and glass crunching broke through the roaring wind and pouring rain, and I was jerked so hard forward and back my head slammed into the back of the seat.

Stars burst behind my eyes, but the adrenaline quickly cleared the stun of the crash.

"Are you all right?" Dash already had his seatbelt unbuckled and reached over to me.

"I'm fine," I assured him with a gasping breath, my heart racing.

He turned the key over and over, but the truck was dead. He glanced behind him. "We've got no time. I was heading to that gas station." He pointed to where a gas station sat empty only a parking lot length away. "Run. Now!"

He didn't leave room for a discussion. Neither did the screeching beast behind us. I bolted out of the door, my feet shaking with adrenaline as they hit the pavement. Dash stuck close behind me as the wind whipped my hair back and forth, suctioning my clothes to my body. It was like running against an ocean current, and the short distance to the station became an Olympic event. Dash pushed at my back the entire time, forcing me to go faster, until we finally made it.

The lights were off inside and the doors wouldn't budge.

"Damn it!" I screamed, yanking on the handle as if my strength and determination could

break the locks.

Dash was two steps ahead of me, grabbing a huge rock that held down a fat, three-foot-high stack of newspapers left out for what I assumed was recycling, and smashed the glass door. He kicked the rest of it in, and we clambered through, rushing toward the back of the store where the access to the large cooler stood.

I jerked open the door, chills instantly covering my wet skin as we entered the cooler. Dash slammed the door shut, pushing me to the farthest back wall, the only spot in the station that could be considered the most interior.

I dropped to my knees in the corner, Dash kneeling next to me, and hoped the three walls made of strong metal would withstand the tornado. The wide variety of soda bottles rattled in their cases, the doors on the outside opening and closing frantically. The energy pumping through my veins made my entire body tremble, and I locked eyes with Dash, an apology on my lips.

He shook his head, opening his mouth to speak, but was cut off when the roaring sound outside reached an epic high.

It was here.

And it would swallow this place.

The heavy weight of Dash's body fell on top of me then, pinning me to the ground as I heard the glass from the cooler doors break, and the thumping sound of hundreds of plastic bottles hitting the ground. I felt Dash jerk above me, but couldn't hear if he said anything. I could only lay there, praying for the sound of the wind to go silent.

After an eternity—or a few minutes—it finally did. Dash rolled off me, and hissed as he grabbed his leg.

I quickly jumped up as he yanked a four-inch piece of glass out of the back of his thigh with a yelp.

“Dash!” I instantly covered the wound with my hands. His blood pooled beneath my fingers, warm and sticky.

“It's fine, Blake.”

“No it's not! You're hurt. Because of me!” Damn it, he wouldn't be hurt if he didn't feel the need to protect me.

“It's not your fault I chose to take shelter in a fucking glass box.”

I shook my head, pressing harder on the wound. “You wouldn't have even chased this storm if I hadn't pushed you away.” Tears filled my eyes, knowing his more-than-reckless behavior had been a direct result of me.

He cupped my cheek, forcing me to look him in the eye. “Stop. You can't keep taking the blame for everything, woman. You know I would've chased this every time.”

I sighed. Maybe. We'd never know, because I'd do everything in my power to talk him off monsters like these. Or at least get him to compromise to chasing from a safer distance. Fuck we'd been too close. I peeled my hand away from the wound to look closer. If this had been the same spot on the front of his thigh, instead of the back, Dash could've bled out in my arms.

The injury wasn't life threatening, but the danger was real. We'd been lucky.

I couldn't lose him. Not now. Not ever. And I knew that didn't make a difference because we would never stop chasing and the storms would never stop chasing us back.

I yanked off my T-shirt, leaving me in the spaghetti-strap tank top I wore beneath it, and twisted and wrapped it tightly around the wound. Dash flinched as I secured it, but then he reached for me.

“Blake.” He sighed my name like it was a prayer. Like after nearly being eaten by a tornado it was the only word he ever wanted to say again. And I melted. Fell into his open arms, pressing my chest against his, and kissing the hell out of him.

I kissed him hard enough to convey my love, hard enough to show him my anger at his recklessness, and hard enough to take the blame for not being able to talk him out of this storm. He tugged on my hair, yanking me closer, and I gasped against his lips.

The heat between my thighs had me aching to let him in, let him be as close as humanly possible, but the realization of where we were stopped me. I slowly pulled back, my chest heaving.

Dash gave me a look that was both disappointment and understanding. “We have to search the damage. See if there are any victims.”

“Can you walk?” I asked, standing up and offering him a hand.

He took it and stood, wincing but able to walk with a limp.

I forced his arm across my shoulder, bearing as much of his weight as I could. Together we walked out of the cooler—careful not to trip on the hundreds of soda bottles littering the floor—into the gas station, which no longer had an entrance. The tiled floor, covered in candy, napkins, boxes, drinks, and broken glass, simply gave way to the parking lot outside, the glass and metal front of the building had been completely wiped out.

Chapter 20

We stopped at his truck first, shocked it still stood, if not crashed against the telephone pole. Dash reached underneath the driver's seat, pulling out a small first-aid kit.

"There's one on the other side, too," he said, motioning with his head for me to go grab it. I did and forced Dash to stand still as I ripped open the tear in his jeans a bit more, giving me room to swipe the cut with an alcohol wipe and seal it with a butterfly bandage. I forced myself not to linger, holding his muscled thigh in my hand, and he gave me a small smirk when he saw the heat in my eyes. I tossed my now ruined bloody T-shirt in the cab of his truck and then we slowly made our way into the residential part of the town, which wasn't far from the gas station where we'd desperately taken shelter.

It was almost too quiet after the thunderous noise the storm had made. Now the only sounds that broke the calm settling in the sky were distant sirens, wood snapping, and the occasional bark of a dog. I'd expected screaming or cries for help. This was worse. I scanned the area for the Tracker Jacker, coming up empty.

I punched John's number again on my cell, cursing the busy signal I received. "That's the fourth time. Same damn signal."

"They're smart. Probably on the other side of town already helping with the search," Dash said, reading my worried gaze. "If we get separated, we meet back here, all right?" He pointed to his truck. "You have your cell," he eyed me clutching it. "Who knows if you'll get through, but if we find anyone hurt we'll need to notify emergency personnel. And watch for fallen power lines."

I nodded. "All right."

A toppled tree blocked our path to the first group of residential houses. The roots twisted out in all directions and black dirt clods clung to them like the remnants of torn flesh. Dash placed a palm on the thick trunk and climbed over it, trying to hide his wince when his feet hit the ground on the other side.

I followed suit, climbing over it before Dash could turn around to offer me help. He surveyed the area with sharp eyes. I was jealous of his stoic calm demeanor and made a mental note to take the same first-responder courses he had as soon as possible. My hands trembled while holding the first-aid kit to my chest. He must have done this dozens of times, but this was completely new territory for me.

He pointed toward a group of homes that had been hit to our right. Some of the structures were still easily identifiable, but the insides were gutted. What had once made these buildings homes were scattered about the area, spilling out like someone had reached in and ripped out a handful of organs.

"We start there and spread out to cover more ground," he said as he limped in that direction. I kept pace with him, my heart racing. "Be careful where you step. People may be covered with debris."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and slowed several yards past where Dash stopped.

I approached the walls of a concrete basement, which without the house sitting on top of it, looked like a giant trap for a massive animal. Broken wood with wickedly jagged edges covered the surrounding area, some long pieces sticking up out of the basement as if someone were about to light the biggest bonfire ever known.

Careful where I stepped, I tried to find the ground between the debris and make myself lighter than air. I navigated my way over dirty dish towels, a broken dog bowl, and a mangled bed frame. Ripped-up magazines, busted baby-blue dishes, and dirt-covered pillows also littered the area. I scanned past these items, so out of place in the shredded pieces of this home, and searched for movement.

I glanced back at Dash, his eyes trained on the ground as well. A low whine snapped me to attention and I whirled my head toward the noise. Behind an upturned cedar hutch I found a shaggy dog with soaking wet brown fur. Its back leg was caught underneath a chunk of wood that looked like it could've been an attic beam.

Tiptoeing to it, I gently shimmied the wood until its leg came free. The dog instantly headed a few feet away, limping across two couch cushions with the stuffing spewing out of them. He stopped next to what I could now see was a toilet, though broken bits of wood half covered it as well. I made my way over quickly.

The dog pushed its nose deep into the pile of wood, whimpering more than when I had freed its leg. I gently nudged him away and my heart leapt into my throat.

A dirt-covered hand clung to one side of the toilet. Adrenaline filled my veins and I hurried to scoot the wood off the person, checking the surrounding areas for other people before I let the beams fall in the other direction.

Pitch-black hair plastered to the woman's forehead and she wore a pair of gray sweatpants and a purple hoodie. Blood streamed down the right side of her face.

I lifted the final beam off the toilet and stepped closer to where she lay curled up with her arms around the base. Glancing down as my boots crunched on glass, I noticed at least a dozen picture frames of various sizes. Half were broken and their pictures ripped, others remained intact. I knelt down and carefully placed my hand on the woman's neck and breathed a sigh of relief when a steady thumping met my fingers.

The dog limped around to the other side and licked the woman's face furiously before I could stop him. She jerked hard and her eyes popped open. The panic in them was evident, but when she took in her surroundings, pain filled them enough to break my heart. She tried to move, but I stopped her with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Ma'am, you shouldn't move." I flipped open the lid of the first-aid kit and rummaging through it. "Everything is going to be all right," I assured her, though I knew that was stupid to say when her entire house was a pile of broken pieces that couldn't possibly ever fit together in the same way again.

"I waited too long," she moaned.

I shook my head and ripped open a disinfectant wipe and cleaned the blood off her face. "You got to the bathroom. That was smart." I found the source of the blood. An inch-long gash near her hairline. The cut was clean so I assumed a shard of glass from one of the picture frames had been the culprit. I dabbed at the wound and sealed it as best I could with a butterfly bandage from the kit.

"No." She sighed. "I should've been in the basement. I'd gotten everything down there me and my dog would need. Food, water, flashlights, and radio...but I forgot my pictures." She clenched her eyes shut. "Stupid. I thought I had enough time to grab them and get back downstairs. I told George to stay down there, that I'd be right back." Her eyes landed on the dog dutifully sitting by her side despite the pain I imagined it caused his leg. "You should've minded me."

From where I'd found him he was only a few feet away from getting to her in the bathroom

before the tornado hit. Amazing he'd survived at all. I lifted the woman's hand and placed it on his back. "Thank you," she said. "Did my pictures make it?"

I looked down and tried not to crunch any more glass as I searched for one. I found a small unbroken frame with a picture of two little blond girls who couldn't be over the age of three. Their faces filled the frame, both grinning widely. I held it above her face. "Looks like most of them survived."

The woman's eyes lit up with hope as she gazed at the picture. "Those are my grandbabies."

I set the picture gently on her chest. "You keep them close while I try to get ahold of an ambulance, all right?"

"My legs are tingling," she said, "is that normal?" She gulped hard and her chest rose and fell faster than it had seconds before.

I patted her shoulder and held my cell to my ear. Nothing but a repetitive beeping—either bad reception or busy circuits. I tried again without any luck and whipped my head around.

"Dash!" I hollered across the distance. He jerked his head up from searching. I waved my arms at him and pointed toward the woman. "I can't get through on my cell!" He hobbled as fast as he could down the road we'd come from. I was glad he knew I needed an ambulance without me shouting it in front of the already scared woman.

I scanned the surrounding area until I spotted a half-crushed cardboard box a few feet away. I tiptoed to it, scooped it up, and hurried back to the woman. "Were you here all by yourself?" I asked while brushing some dirt out of the box. It was half-soaked, but it would have to do.

"Just me and George. Thankfully I didn't have my grandbabies this weekend." A shudder ran through her, and I almost cried in relief when the action twitched her legs.

"I'm going to put as many of these as I can find in this box, all right?" I said, holding up another picture frame. This one had a photo of what looked like a much younger version of the woman holding an infant.

"Thank you," she said, and George went to licking at her face again.

I picked up as many frames as I could, scraping my hands slightly on the shards of glass scattered around. The action gave me something to do when I felt helpless. I wished Dash would get back with help faster. Putting the last picture I could find in the box with the others, I smiled at the woman with what I hoped was a reassuring look. "There. Now you don't have to worry about them getting lost."

"Blake!" Dash yelled, and I snapped my eyes to him.

He jogged—a kind of skip-like run that favored his good leg—toward me with two men on his heels, each one wore a light blue button-up and black pants. The two carried an orange gurney with thick black straps and large square zip-up bags hung over their shoulders.

Dash touched my shoulder when he reached me, and I glanced down at the woman. "Help is here," I said, and Dash and I took a step back to let the men do their work.

After assessing her vitals, they strapped her to the portable gurney, all the while poor George whimpered and worried at her side. One of the EMTs looked up at Dash.

"You think you could help us carry her back to the ambulance?" he asked, positioning himself on one side of the gurney.

"Absolutely," Dash answered without hesitation and no mention of his wounded leg.

The EMT nodded and, once Dash had gotten his hands underneath the gurney, counted to three. They hefted her up and made it look easy.

"George," she called, and cut her eyes toward him since she couldn't move her head.

"I'll bring him," I said and lifted the box of pictures. "And these, too."

* * * *

After we managed to get the woman, George, and her pictures to the safety of the ambulances stationed just outside the main road, Dash and I split up again and went right back to searching.

As the hours passed, we found more and more people. Some crawled out of shelters unscathed and took up in the search for those who weren't so lucky—using flashlights and lanterns and whatever else we could scrounge up. The people who could help did so without question, and an instant trust formed between us, a cosmic understanding that we were needed and could count on each other for anything.

We didn't stop until dawn broke the night sky. I stood next to Dash after helping a teenager find his mom where all the EMTs had set up. My feet screamed at me, my muscles seared, and my lungs threatened to burst from the constant running back and forth and lifting, but I still felt it wasn't enough.

I took a long gulp from the water bottle Dash offered me and watched as the sun broke through a section of puffy white stratocumulus clouds and shook my head as its rays shed new light on the wreckage the storm had left in its wake. Crumbled houses, broken support beams, and every manner of debris from teddy bears to boxes of cereal to sheets of house-siding wrapped around half crushed cars.

And yet, in the middle of all of this chaos, were *people*.

They stood in groups, comforting one another or walked out in teams to continue searching. EMTs bandaged up the wounded and medevac'd the seriously injured. Young children handed out water bottles and strangers wrapped blankets around shocked neighbors. The camaraderie was infectious and awe-inspiring. I never thought I'd see anything more devastatingly beautiful in all my life.

John and Paul found us shortly after the sun had fully risen. The relief I felt was so strong it nearly robbed me of what little energy I had left.

"We've been helping the other side of town, there is total damage over there," John explained, wrapping me in a hug.

Paul's mouth dropped as he took in the scene. "You two all right?"

I glanced at Dash and we both nodded. We were lucky. We'd been so close to the tornado and got off scott-free, where others hadn't.

"You got a joke for me, Paul?" I asked with a soft voice.

"Not today," he said, shaking his head. "I'm glad you're both all right. You look like hell though. Go get some rest. We'll take your spots."

I opened my mouth to protest, but John shook his head. "No arguing, Blake. You won't be able to help anyone when your body starts to crash."

They were right. The adrenaline slowly left my body and a sinking sensation took its place. I'd never been more tired and yet the thought of going to sleep seemed selfish.

"My truck is dead against a telephone pole," Dash said, glancing at John. "Can we borrow the Tracker Jacker?"

John instantly handed Dash the keys. "It's parked a few blocks back that way," he said, pointing behind a line of ambulances.

"Thank you, guys," Dash said. He placed his hand on the small of my back and guided me to the Tracker Jacker.

John and Paul were already coordinating with a police officer before we'd even got the truck started. At least they weren't losing numbers with us leaving.

After about fifteen minutes, Dash pulled the truck off the road and onto a flat patch of grass just outside of a massive pasture. Tall green grass rolled in the light breeze and cows grazed a few miles away. The scene was so normal. The storm had left this area untouched and pristine when only miles away a town had been turned upside down.

"Nearly the whole town is without power and I doubt the motel is even open. Almost everyone is out searching or clearing debris. Sorry," Dash said and turned off the engine truck. "This is the best we have."

I shook my head. "It's all right. I want to get back soon anyway."

He gave me a soft smile, and I noticed the purple bags under his eyes. I wondered if I looked as drained as he did. We'd been so lucky. He'd been hurt, but it could've been so much worse.

He shifted his back against the driver's side door and I scooted up so he could stretch his good leg out behind me. I leaned back against the seat once he'd gotten situated and tried not to think about how his shin dug into my back.

Dash sucked his teeth and I glanced at him. He opened his arms and flicked one of his hands in a come-hither motion. My heart galloped and I swallowed hard as I moved to lay my head on his chest. His arms encased me instantly and I breathed him in, his scent rushing to each of my nerve endings and mending them.

I absently traced my fingers over the back of his hand, my attention awakening when I felt a line of scuffed, newly healed skin. I turned my head to meet his eyes, darting them from his, to his hand, and back again.

Dash sighed. "You don't want to know."

"I already do, and again I'm sorry," I said, remembering the fight Paul had mentioned. "Especially because that's my fault, too."

"You've got to *stop* taking the blame for everything, woman."

I knew Dash was right. I'd learned more about myself in the past couple months than I had in years, thanks to him and the storms, but it was hard to let go of the responsibility for every bad thing Justin did after years of holding on to it.

"I sought him out," he explained.

"The day after Hail got hurt?"

He tensed for a moment before relaxing underneath me. "Yes. He won't bother you again."

"You didn't have to do that. You may have gotten to him before me, but I ended it with him for good. I wanted to handle it on my own."

"I know and for that I apologize. But I couldn't think straight. I'd held you the entire night and listened to you whimper in your sleep. Every time you moved your shoulders, you cried out. And then Hail was hurting in the next room...I had to find him and make him pay for what he'd done."

A shudder ran through me. I hadn't remembered crying out, but I did remember the pain and the overwhelming desire to dole out some of my own to Justin. I sighed, such drama I was so happy to be rid of. "I understand, but from now on, if I say I want to handle something on my own, let me, all right?"

Dash ran his fingers through my hair. "Deal."

I relaxed against him.

"It's time for you to stop worrying," he said and held me tighter.

Chapter 21

The tornado took three people when it left this earth and injured dozens of others. Despite the town's efforts to prepare for it, the storm had surprised them with its sheer ferocity. Dash and I had stayed for three days helping with the cleanup and took damage measurements. During that time I learned the harsh reality of the true reason for chasing storms.

Study.

Not for the thrill. Not because reading weather maps and interpreting data came so naturally to me. Not for the awe factor and not because being so close to them made me feel complete.

The incredibly close images Dash captured on film of the tornado's mannerisms provided us with invaluable information regarding its habits, wind speeds, velocity, tenacity, and offered insight into its construction. Studying the data collected on each chase allowed us a better perspective into the tornado's process from cloud to ground, and the more we understood about them, the better we could predict them, and hopefully prepare people more adequately, too.

It had been a month since that devastating storm—I'd just gotten my car back from the shop after it had been thoroughly roughed up when we left it on that dirt road—and still reports aired on the news about the reconstruction of the town. It would take a long time to rebuild all that they'd lost and I wished we would've been able to do more, but we had to come home. We had classes and work and the world had to continue spinning.

I looked at the sky outside of my window now and marveled at its gorgeous slate-gray. Radar predicted a light thunderstorm tonight, but nothing serious enough to merit a chase.

Hail wiggled her butt furiously as my front door opened after a quick knock.

"How are my girls?" Dash asked as he let himself in.

Hail ran over to him so fast her lips flapped up and down. He knelt to pet her and had to dodge her massive tongue aiming for his face.

How I looked at storms wasn't the only thing that changed the night of the biggest tornado to hit in years. The morning I'd woken in Dash's arms, in the terribly uncomfortable cab of the Tracker Jacker, I realized I was home. He was my safe haven. And despite that one night of sleep, Dash and I hadn't spent the night together since.

The pace didn't bother me so much as the anticipation. If sex was anywhere near as much fun as kissing him, I knew I was in for a wickedly delicious treat, but he'd insisted from the get-go we take it slow. He wanted to show me how much he cared by waiting for the right moment, and all I wanted to do since he'd asked me to officially be his girlfriend was tie him to my bed.

"Nice out, isn't it?" I asked as he gave me a quick kiss.

He glanced out my opened window. "Glad you think so. We're going out."

I glanced down at my jeans and T-shirt combo. "Do I need to change?"

"You're perfect." He kissed me again. Butterflies flapped in my stomach each time his lips met mine, and I knew I'd never tire of it. I shook my head, heat rushing to my cheeks. I didn't think I'd ever get used to the compliments, either.

"Don't think about arguing, woman," he said and turned around, tugging me toward the door.

"Please, you wouldn't know what to do with me if I ever disagreed with you." I followed him.

Dash stopped short with his free hand on the doorknob. He craned his head around, flashing

me a devious gaze. “Blake, *you* have no idea what I’d do to you if you did.”

“I wouldn’t mind a bit if you wanted to punish me for it.” I arched an eyebrow at him.

“You want to be punished?” He grabbed ahold of my butt with two strong hands and lifted me to his level with ease. My heart raced, pressed against him, and the intensity in his eyes nearly stopped it. He crushed his lips on mine, kissing me so deeply I forgot everything outside the boundaries of his mouth.

He pulled away sooner than I wanted. “That’s me going easy on you.”

Twenty-five minutes later Dash pulled his new truck—insurance had ruled his old one totaled—off onto a dirt road and parked underneath a huge oak tree near the lake. The tree’s branches stretched out over the calm water’s surface like they reached for something just outside their grasp. The sky was still a smooth gray and a soft breeze whispered through the air.

“This is one of my favorite spots,” Dash said, hopping out of his truck and grabbing a stuffed duffel from behind his seat. “I sometimes bring my gear out here and plot our courses or do research in preparation. Somehow I can think clearer here than in the weather lab on campus.”

I gazed at the lake. “I understand that.” The place was beautiful and secluded despite the openness of the area. The water stretched over a mile wide and more trees bordered the opposite side. Without any other cars or people around, it appeared to be a private and wonderfully untouched slice of land. No distractions other than the occasional chirp of a bird or the steady lull of crickets.

Drawing my attention from the lake and back to Dash, I found him laying out the last of what looked like at least three huge blankets in the bed of his truck. He returned to the cab and came back with two Native Amber longnecks. I took the offered bottle and sat on the edge of the truck bed, the blankets offering a nice cushion.

“I brought you out here to ask you something, Blake.”

My eyes widened and I swallowed hard. “Yeah?”

Dash raked his hands through his hair. “I know it’s a little soon in our relationship...”

Holy shit. “What is it, Dash?”

He sighed. “Would you like to come with me down Tornado Alley?”

I let out my held breath in a gasp. “Of course!”

A smile spread across his lips. “Are you sure? Because we’ve been incredibly lucky so far. This is our end of the season blitz. A three-week trip filled with a ton of driving—and usually more misses than catches. And you know the funds we have, so it’ll mostly be cheap motels and fast food.”

“What about classes?” I asked.

“As long as we do the make-up work and have it in by the end of the semester, the professors don’t care. They understand that there is only a small window of opportunity to catch these things.” Dash dropped his eyes for a moment before returning them to me. “You think you can stand me for three weeks straight? No breaks? I understand if you think it’s too soon—”

“Stop it,” I cut him off, knowing full well I wouldn’t tire of him that easily. I doubted I ever would. The thought of sharing the same bed with Dash every night sent tremors rocketing through my core. “I’d love to.”

He clanked his bottle against mine. “Can’t wait,” he toasted and we each took a drink.

I studied the label on the longneck.

“What?” he asked after taking a swallow.

“This was the first drink you ever bought me,” I said.

He tilted his head.

“That first night at Bailey’s.” That night seemed ages away instead of months. So much had changed. *I* had changed.

“Right. The night you thought I was trying to pick you up.”

Heat filled my cheeks at the memory. “Crazy, I know.”

Dash focused his signature look on me—the one where he thought I was being ridiculous. He set his bottle down on the grass and took mine, too.

He cupped my face and softly kissed the corner of my mouth, then the space underneath my jaw. He worked his way down my neck before returning to my lips. “Does that feel crazy to you?” he whispered.

I let out the breath that had caught in my throat. “No, it feels ama—”

Dash cut me off with his lips, crushing down on mine with a sweet force. He slipped his tongue in and gently massaged my own. My heart raced as I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

He wound his fingers in my hair with one hand and held the small of my back with his other. He slowly navigated us further into the truck bed, laying me on my back without ever breaking our kiss. He hooked my leg around his hip and ran his hand up and down my thigh.

The fire only Dash could ignite inside me flared to a roar and I shoved my hands underneath his shirt, tracing my fingers along his rigid abs before pulling his shirt off altogether. Lord, he was glorious to look at, and the gray sky that filled the backdrop made him look more like a Greek warrior than my storm-chaser boyfriend. He arched up enough to grab the ends of my top and slipped it over my head. I’d never been so glad I’d passed up my usual beige bra that morning for my black bra and panty set.

His emerald eyes lit up like lightning when I reached around and unhooked it, letting it fall to the side. Butterflies flapped in my stomach and heat rushed to my cheeks—Dash had never seen me naked and there was no light switch to flip out here. I was completely exposed and yet, somehow, I felt a level of intimacy I’d never experienced before.

Dash kissed me again, deep and long, and the feel of his bare chest rubbing against my breasts uncurled delicious warm tendrils throughout my body. He drew back, his breath as ragged as my own, and grinned deviously at me before leaning down to kiss my breasts. I closed my eyes and moaned when he lightly bit my nipple.

He worked his way lower, trailing his lips down the length of my stomach until he reached my jeans. He unbuttoned them, and I lifted my butt up so he could easily slide them off. I waited in terrible anticipation for him to take my panties off, too, but he stalled. He pressed his lips against my hips before slowly bringing his mouth to hover a centimeter above my underwear, the heat from his breath fueling the aching pulse between my thighs.

Dash lightly kissed the fabric, from the hem of the thin cloth to my center, before returning. I gripped a handful of his hair, wanting to scream at him to take them off already. He unhooked himself from my grasp long enough to rip off his pants.

“Oh, finally,” I said with a sigh, about to burst with the need for his skin on mine.

Dash smirked and shook his head. “Not yet,” he whispered and gently inched my underwear down my legs.

I half expected him to flip me over and I hated myself for the breach in my mind. Luckily Dash trailed his tongue across a small bundle of nerves and I completely forgot...everything. My eyes rolled back in my head and I thought of nothing but his tongue, working its way up and down, slipping inside me quickly and then out, repeating in agonizing circles until I was sure the sparks erupting underneath my skin would consume us both.

“Oh, God, Blake,” he practically growled as he worked his way back up to my face.

The sound of my name from his mouth curled the pleasure throbbing inside me and I knew I couldn't handle much more. I gripped the sides of his briefs and yanked them down. He quickly shimmied them off.

His body fit perfectly between my legs, and he brought his mouth down on mine while rubbing his tip between my thighs. “Mmm,” he moaned. “Blake...you feel so incredible.”

The freaking Amazon could have been running through my thighs I wanted him so badly, but he continued to tease me, pulling away from my attempts at lifting my hips and taking him in. I kissed him harder and clutched at his strong back with desperate fingers.

“Dash,” I begged. “Please.”

His eyes caught mine and they were molten green. “Say it,” he commanded.

My heart leaped into my throat, but my need for all of him overpowered my shyness. “I want you.”

He groaned and put his tip inside a fraction before bringing it back to the outer edges. “Say it again.”

“God, Dash, I want you,” I complied.

He kissed me before slowly slipping inside. The motion drew a loud moan from my lips and sparkling tingles brushed every inch of my body. I bucked my hips and squeezed my legs around his, rocking back and forth to the speed Dash controlled until the pleasure mounting within me hit a crescendo.

He broke our kiss to catch my eyes again, and his lips moved against my own as he groaned, “Come with me, Blake.” And he pushed himself further and harder against me until my eyes rolled back in my head and my toes curled.

I gasped with the sweet release of a thousand tiny explosions erupting and didn't stop bursting for what felt like an hour. My body trembled underneath his as the pulsing ache slowed to a sweet and steady speed like a heartbeat. Dash moaned and clutched me closer before he slackened slightly.

Our chests heaved against each other as he brushed some hair out of my face and kissed me lightly before resting his head against my shoulder. I smiled, unable to contain the giddiness soaring through me. The sky had darkened and gray wisps of clouds only allowed a few stars to shine. A crack of lightning lit up the sky and twenty seconds later we heard the distant rumble of thunder from the north.

Being outside, with Dash still inside me, was more perfect than I could've ever imagined, and for the first time ever, I instantly wanted to make love again.

I turned my head and nibbled at his ear.

He lifted himself, his rippling arms on either side of my head.

I rubbed my hands up and down his back. “More,” I whispered before slipping my tongue between his lips.

Dash kissed me, then chuckled as he drew back an inch. “Don't you hear that storm coming, woman?”

I wiggled underneath him, satisfied when he arched his head back and his eyes hooded. “You're the only thing worth capturing tonight,” I whispered.

“Then I better give you one hell of a chase,” he said and gently slipped out of me. His lips trailed to my breasts and the teasing torture started again.

Another white spark of lightning lit the sky above us, bathing Dash's incredible naked body in light for three glorious seconds before returning us to darkness. Thunder clapped, closer than

before. I tugged Dash's head up, squeezed my legs, and rocked to the side until I straddled him.

I flipped my hair over my shoulder and glanced upward before leaning over to kiss him. "You've gotta see this," I whispered against his lips and motioned my head upward.

The next lightning strike illuminated Dash's green eyes, and the passion in them usually reserved for chasing storms doubled. I reveled being the object of that much desire.

I ground against him until he was so hard I had to take him inside me. I rode him slowly, the sounds of thunder accompanying our moans. He made me come again and again, and I knew without a doubt I'd let Dash catch me whenever he wanted.

After another hour of sheer pleasure bordering on torture, I snuggled up under his chin. I had everything I'd ever wanted...almost.

"What's your real name, Dash?" I asked, knowing he'd never tell. A tornado nearly swallowed us whole and he hadn't told me.

"Alfred," he said, interrupting my thoughts.

"What?"

"I won't say it again." His arms tightened around me.

"Like..."

"Yes, like from Batman, and if you tell anyone outside of Hail—"

My laughter cut him off as I thought about how starkly different he was from the old butler. "Why now? The tornado had us and you didn't..."

Dash shifted so he could meet my eyes. "Giving you my heart is the most dangerous thing I've ever done, Blake," he said and then parted my lips with his tongue.

The sky trembled again, but I ignored the call. Thunder and chaos could remain within the chase. The only thing I needed were the sparks between Dash and I, which crackled brighter than a lightning bolt, and the home we'd built between us, strong enough to withstand any storm.

About the Author

Molly Lee is an author, editor, and mentor best known from *Pitch Wars*, a program that connects promising writers to established authors in the community. She writes NA contemporary and YA urban fantasy with strong heroines who are unafraid to challenge their male counterparts, yet still vulnerable enough to have love sneak up on them. Throw in high-octane action or any kind of supernatural element and she'll be hooked. A military spouse with two children and one stubborn English bulldog, Molly enjoys watching storms from the back porch of her Midwest home and digging for treasures at local antique shops.

Visit my website at www.mollylee.com

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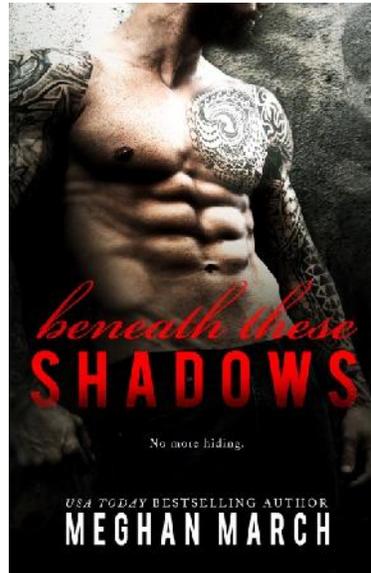
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Beneath These Shadows

Beneath Series
By Meghan March



Acknowledgments

Every time I go back to New Orleans with a Beneath book, it feels like I'm going home. Not because New Orleans has ever been my home, but because this Beneath world is one I love so dearly. Without the most amazing readers on the planet, I wouldn't have the opportunity to keep revisiting that world. Thank you so much for taking a chance on me and picking up this book. You allow me to have the best job imaginable, and I'll endeavor never to take it for granted.

And like with every book I write, *Beneath These Shadows* would not be what it is today without the help of a fabulous team of people.

Special thanks go out to:

Pam Berehulke and Angela Marshall Smith, for once again being everything I needed at all stages of the editing process.

Angela Smith, Jamie Lynn, and Natasha Gentile, for your enthusiasm and insight.

Danielle Sanchez, for being straight-up awesome. I love having the privilege to work with you and the Inkslinger team.

Golden Czermak, FuriousFotog, for a kick-ass cover image.

Sarah Hansen, Okay Creations, for another fabulous cover.

Stacey Blake, Champagne Formats, for going above and beyond in your work every time.

My Runaway Readers Facebook Group, for being my home on the interwebz. You're not only my cheerleaders, but a huge part of the reason I keep writing. With your enthusiasm behind me, I feel like there's nothing I can't accomplish.

My crew of fabulous bloggers, for tirelessly spreading the word about books simply for the love of books. You deserve all the thanks in the world.

My family, for supporting even my biggest dreams.

And last, but certainly not least, JDW, for being my rock and an amazing inspiration for the sexy-as-hell alpha heroes I write. I'm the luckiest freaking girl there is. I love you.

Author's Note

Thank you so much for purchasing *Beneath These Shadows*! Have no fear, this book can absolutely be read as a standalone, but because it is the sixth book in a series of standalones, there will be some appearances by characters who have been in other books in the Beneath series. If you have any questions about other characters, here is where you can find their stories:

Beneath This Mask (Simon and Charlie)

Beneath This Ink (Con and Vanessa)

Beneath These Chains (Lord and Elle)

Beneath These Scars (Lucas and Yve)

Beneath These Lies (Rix and Valentina)

This is also a book where worlds collide. If you're wondering whether Dom Casso has appeared elsewhere, you can find him in the Dirty Billionaire Trilogy and the Dirty Girl Duet.

None of these books are required reading before *Beneath These Shadows*, but if you want to dive deeper, that's where you'll find more on these characters and back stories.

Happy reading!

All my best,
Meghan March

Chapter One

Eden

My office. Now.

The text appeared on the screen of my phone with a sharp ding, and I dropped my mascara wand on the counter, narrowly avoiding smearing a black streak down the front of my white blouse.

I reread the text three times to make sure I hadn't misunderstood. Three words. Impossible to misunderstand. Impossible to ignore.

I ran down a mental list of anything I could have done that would have drawn his ire, but came up with nothing. I went to work—the job he allowed me to have. I came home. Everywhere I went, I was chauffeured by a man with a gun in a big black SUV with armored doors and bulletproof windows.

But that didn't mean my father texted me. Actually, he rarely remembered I existed.

A knock sounded on my front door, and I shoved the mascara wand back in the tube. A summons from Dom Casso, head of one of New York's most notorious crime families, didn't allow for any delay.

I hurried toward the door, catching my stockinged foot on the handle of a bag I'd left next to the couch. My toe slammed into the table leg, sending pain rocketing through my foot.

"Shit."

The knock turned into pounding as I winced.

"Eden, hurry up."

The voice belonged to Angelo, my regular babysitter. *Excuse me, I mean security.*

"Just a second."

"Don't got a second. We need to move."

I shook off the stubbed toe and rushed across the room, avoiding any more potential tripping hazards. I peeked through the peephole as I'd been taught, ensuring that Angelo was alone and not being held hostage at the end of someone's gun.

It appeared all clear. And for the record, I thought that rule was ridiculous. I probably ranked in the triple digits on Dom's list of priorities. Illegitimate daughter fell just below resoling shoes and remembering to pick up a new black golf umbrella.

"I'm hurrying. I swear."

I slipped into a pair of pale pink Tori Burch flats I'd left in a haphazard pile of shoes by the door and snatched a black trench coat from the whimsical iron hooks I'd screwed into the wall with my very own drill—and it wasn't a pink drill either. Don't mind the few pieces of patched drywall where I missed the studs.

I unlocked the four dead bolts and pushed back the security bar. Angelo, who looked just as tall, dark, and Italian as his name suggested, stepped inside.

He surveyed me from the top of my golden-blond head, which definitely didn't look Italian in the least, to the soles of my less-than-practical flats. But it wasn't like I was walking the streets of New York.

God forbid I should do such a thing.

I shoved my arms into my coat and tied the belt around my waist. "That was me swearing

when I stubbed my toe. Don't worry. I'm good."

I stepped out of the apartment, and he waited impatiently while I locked and checked the door before leading the way to the elevator.

"What's the hurry? What's going on?"

Angelo pushed the call button and stepped inside first when it came. "You know I can't tell you nothing. It ain't fair for you to ask me shit like that."

This might have been true, but I also knew that Angelo had a soft spot for me, which was why he'd finally brought me dinner from The Halal Guys's cart on 53rd and Sixth last week after months of me begging him to take a detour during our drives to and from work. Even though I hadn't actually gotten to have the whole experience like I was craving—standing in line, avoiding making eye contact with strangers, yelling my order as loud as I could over the noise—I still appreciated the gesture all the same.

Regardless, it also meant I kept pushing for an answer as the doors slid shut and he became a captive audience.

"It has to be something big. Dom never wants me in Hell's Kitchen. Why now?"

Angelo shrugged and leaned against the mirrored wall. "I'm sure he woulda rather come to your place, but he just don't have time."

I needed the reminder like I needed another credit card in my wallet.

"Just tell me so I know what I'm walking into."

"E, I swear, even if I knew what he was going to say—which I don't—I couldn't tell you. All I know is that bad shit is happening and we're on the defensive on every front. Dom sure as fuck don't like being on defense, so he's gonna hit back and hard."

Chills traveled up my spine despite my black trench coat, because even living in the little bubble that made up my world, I had an idea of the brutality that Angelo alluded to. Well, at least I imagined I did. I'd seen *The Godfather* movies, after all.

"So, what does that have to do with me?"

Angelo met my gaze as the elevator door opened in the lobby. "Wish I knew, Eden. Really wish I knew."

* * * *

Twenty minutes later, Angelo and I stood outside the doors to my father's office on the top floor of a brownstone on the edge of Hell's Kitchen. Angelo knocked, and from inside, someone barked the command to enter.

I hadn't exactly spent hours and hours committing Dom's different vocal pitches to memory, but it didn't sound like him.

Angelo pushed the door open and gestured for me to enter first. As I always did before entering this office, I steeled my spine.

Normally, Dom sat behind his big wooden desk, doing whatever it was mob bosses actually did during the day. I wasn't quite sure what that was because there hadn't been a *take your daughter to work* day for organized crime. Today, the desk sat empty.

I scanned the office and my eyes locked on Vincent Francetti as he turned from the window. Dom's second-in-command had dark hair slicked back from his face in a style I swore came right out of Hollywood. It might as well be called *the mobster*.

He'd always made me uneasy for a reason I couldn't articulate. I'd never been in a room with him without Dom present, and trepidation crept into my veins like a tiny team of

commandos.

“Where’s Dom?” I hoped he couldn’t hear the tremor in my voice.

“Dealing with more important things.” Vincent snapped out the words, and the slice of his insult hit the mark.

I shoved my shoulders back and lifted my chin, determined not to let him see how much his words stung. Just because I knew my father didn’t care, didn’t mean I wanted it shoved in my face.

“I can come back at a time that’s more convenient for him.” I kept my tone crisp and my statement pointed.

“He needs you gone now.”

“Gone?” I choked on the word.

Vincent looked at me like I was a child, and a developmentally delayed one at that.

“Yes. Gone.” He strode to the desk and grabbed a thick manila envelope off the leather blotter before holding it out to me.

It seemed like a dare, as if he knew I didn’t want to get any closer to him than I had to, but he was going to force the issue.

Digging deep into my stores of poise to appear unaffected, I crossed the room and reached out to take it. Vincent jerked it out of my reach, toying with me.

Now that I was close, he lowered his voice so that not even Angelo could hear. “You’re going to take this envelope and you’re going to disappear. Don’t tell anyone where you’re going, especially any of your little friends.”

If there had been any room for awkward humor in this situation, I would have laughed at that. Friends weren’t exactly part of Dom’s policy of enforced isolation.

“There’s a number in here to a line you call only in an emergency. If you’re not bleeding to death or being held at gunpoint, think twice before using it. Only use the ID, credit cards, and cell phone in here. Don’t even fucking take yours with you. Leave it all at home. Do you understand me?”

I dipped my chin a fraction of an inch, indicating that I understood what he was saying, even though I didn’t. “I’m just supposed to leave?”

“Lay low. Don’t attract attention. And for fuck’s sake, don’t tell a goddamned person who you are.”

“How long?” The question came out a whisper.

“Until you get a text from the number in here telling you to come back.”

The orders he issued repeated in my head over and over until they began to sink in.

Disappear. Don’t tell anyone where you’re going.

He finally held out the envelope again, and I reached to snatch it from him, praying that my hand didn’t shake. But Vincent didn’t let go as I tugged.

“Don’t fuck this up, Eden. You’ve been a liability to Dom since the day you were born, so for once in your life, do something to make yourself less of a fucking burden. Don’t call Dom. Don’t bother him. Just get the hell out of here.”

With that verbal slap to the face, I yanked the envelope from his grip and turned away from the distaste stamping his features.

The words sliced at my insides as they played on a loop in my head. *Make yourself less of a fucking burden.* I wanted to scream as Angelo followed me out the door and down the stairs.

I never asked to be a burden. Why can’t they understand that?

We walked in silence until I slid into the backseat of the SUV.

“I’m supposed to take you home to pack and then to the airport.” Angelo glanced at me in the rearview mirror, and his tone carried an apology.

I nodded, but my brain was already moving forward.

Where will I go? What will I do?

As much as I’d chafed against the restrictions I lived under, I never realized that they also acted as a security blanket until the moment they were ripped away.

It was one thing to paper the bulletin board in my office with pictures of places I wanted to see with thoughts of *someday I’ll go*, but all of a sudden, someday was now.

The freedom to go anywhere, all by myself, should have been heady and intoxicating, but instead unexpected anxiety invaded my every breath.

Angelo had spent more time with me than any of Dom’s other soldiers, and he recognized the change in my mood.

“It’s going to be okay, E. Just pick somewhere, check into the nicest hotel in town, order room service, get a massage, do girly spa shit, and pretend you’re on vacation. You wanted a break from all this, so now you got it.”

I inhaled a deep breath and let it out. *I can do this. I’ll be fine. This is what I’ve wanted for years.* Regardless of how uneasy it made me that it was being shoved upon me, I vowed to embrace the opportunity. The proverbial door to my gilded cage had been flung open, and it was time for me to explore.

But one piece of this whole thing continued to elude me. “Why is he doing this? What happened?”

Angelo’s gaze dropped away from the rearview mirror and fixed on the road. “I thought Dom would be there and he’d tell you what’s what.”

“Apparently he couldn’t be bothered.”

“I’m sure it’s not like that.” Angelo’s words came out stiff because we both knew it *was* like that, at least for the last decade, with no signs of changing anytime soon.

“Just tell me.”

He stopped at a light and turned around to look at me. “You can’t tell anyone I told you any of this.”

I lifted the manila envelope. “And who am I going to tell while I’m in exile? Hell, who would I tell *here*?”

“Cash houses got hit this morning, and so did some of the businesses.”

Unease bloomed in my belly. “Which businesses?”

As much as I wasn’t supposed to know that the spa where I kept the books—clean, legit books—was a front, I wasn’t dumb enough to ignore the comings and goings of Dom’s people, and the briefcases and duffels they carried.

“The spa. It . . . it was bad. That’s why you gotta go. They don’t know if it got hit because you work there or if it was just part of the overall plan. Either way, I’d get you out of town too.”

The dozens of questions I wanted to ask were wiped away in the wake of the most important one. “Was anyone hurt?”

Angelo glanced up at the rearview mirror, his face apologetic for a beat before taking on a hard cast. “They threw a Molotov cocktail through the front window before they shot up the place from a car out front. Four of the girls went to the doc to be treated, but no one died.”

Oh, thank God there were no casualties. But still, the thought of any of the girls being injured twisted my gut in knots.

“Do you know who? What kind of injuries?”

His eyes back on the road, he shook his head. "Didn't get any details."

"Then why am I going to some undisclosed location and not a safe house somewhere?"

Angelo's shoulders tensed. "No fucking clue. Not like Dom and Vin explain themselves to me. But if I had to guess, I'd say they're worried the organization has been compromised. If no one knows where you are, no one can tell."

You've been a liability to Dom since the day you were born.

I stayed silent for the rest of the drive to my apartment.

"You've got twenty minutes to pack, and then we need to be on the road before it gets leaked that you're leaving town."

Angelo's words started my internal clock ticking down as soon as we stepped into my apartment. My mind chaotic, I strode into my room and stared at all the clothes in my closet for a full minute before I realized I couldn't pack anything until I decided where I was going.

Spinning around, I headed for my office and the bulletin board of all my *maybe someday*s. Clippings from magazines, printed articles, postcards, and pictures of skylines covered it. *Must Do* lists for each city hung along the bottom.

Just pick one, I told myself. But decision paralysis set in. What if this was my only chance to see a piece of the world?

"Can I leave the country?" I yelled to Angelo.

"Are you fucking nuts? No, you can't leave the fucking country."

Disappointment slammed into me, but I shoved it down. *Good-bye, Paris, Rome, Dublin, and Barcelona.*

Focus on the positives. It narrowed down my choices. I paced my small office, my gaze flicking to the bulletin board with every pass.

"You got fifteen minutes, and I don't hear any fucking packing," Angelo called.

"Stop rushing me!"

"I'm not fucking around, Eden. We gotta move when your time is up."

"Fine. Now stop yelling at me."

Just pick a place.

Pictures of San Francisco, Nashville, Seattle, and Miami all hung there, but my gaze zeroed in on something else.

New Orleans.

I'd seen ads on top of cabs for the last two weeks, advertising an upcoming Mardi Gras party at a club, and wished that someday I could see a real Mardi Gras parade.

I'm taking it as a sign.

I was going to New Orleans. I reached out to grab the *Must Do* list, but snatched my hand back. If someone came into my apartment and noticed it was the only one missing . . . wouldn't that be giving away my location?

I reached out again, grabbing the lists for both New Orleans and Nashville off the bulletin board.

Spinning on my heel, I ran for my bedroom and stuffed my carry-on with all the clothes I could possibly make fit before exchanging my ID, phone, and credit card for five thousand dollars in cash from the safe bolted into the back of my closet. I stripped out of my trench coat, skirt, blouse, and pantyhose, and tugged on jeans, a polo shirt, and a lighter jacket.

When I wheeled the bag into the living room, Angelo was staring at his watch.

"You ready?"

Ready to leave the tower and experience life without a bodyguard dogging my every step?

“Yes. I’m ready.”

When we pulled up to the curb at JFK, I gave Angelo a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Take care, big guy.”

“Be safe, Eden. If you need anything—”

He cut off his offer because he knew I couldn’t call him.

“Thank you for everything.”

When I got to the ticket counter, I pulled my new ID and credit card from my wallet. When I laid them on the counter, I got my first look at my new name. *Elisha Madden*.

“I need a ticket on the next flight to New Orleans. One way.”

Chapter Two

Bishop

Wiping blood and ink from the smooth, pale skin beneath my tattoo machine should have been calming, but today, the fine lines of the butterfly mocked me. I wanted this tat over and done with. I should have made Delilah take the girl, but we were taking turns on the flash work that got so much action during Mardi Gras season.

The girl, whose name I couldn't remember, kept glancing up at me from beneath her fake lashes in a way that was probably supposed to be sexy, but didn't stir my interest in the least. I'd had enough party-girl pussy thrown at me in the last week to put me off the species completely. If it wasn't a challenge, then what the fuck was the point?

"How much longer do you think? I can't wait to get back out and grab a drink."

Even her voice annoyed me. Too breathy and high pitched.

"Ten minutes," I said, trying not to breathe in the cloud of vanilla perfume wafting off her in clouds.

"Is it cool that I'm going to go back to party after it's done? I've never had a tattoo before, so I don't know the rules."

I lifted the needle away from her skin as she shifted for the fiftieth time in half an hour.

"You can do whatever you want. Care sheets are on the counter out front if you want to do it right."

Her lips twisted into a pout at my answer, but it didn't deter her for long.

"You wanna come?" Her glitter-slicked lashes batted again as she twisted around to face me. "My friends and I would show you a real good time."

"You quit moving and we'll be done a lot quicker."

She returned to the position I'd asked her to take with a huff.

What in the hell would make this girl think I was remotely interested in joining them? I'd done nothing but shut her down over and over when she tried to start a conversation. Customer service at its finest, right? My boss would probably kick my ass, but then again . . . maybe not. He had as little patience for this shit as I did.

"Just think about it." She didn't move this time, but the plea came through loud and clear.

"Got plans."

My short answer finally did the trick. She let me finish my work in silence, and the minute I taped the clear plastic over the tat and snapped my gloves off, I stood.

"You can settle up with Delilah."

I had to get the fuck out of the room before her heavy perfume suffocated me, so I strode out into the main area of the shop. My sister's laughter followed me as I headed straight for the front door and fresh air.

"Can't get any peace, can you, Bish?" Delilah tapped a pencil against her sketch pad as she grinned at me.

It was her running joke that four out of five female clients would hit on me, and the fifth would hit on her. I wouldn't have been surprised if she actually kept track of it. But she was the only family I had, and I loved the shit out of her.

"Don't go too far, hot stuff. I'm heading out to pick up our food in a few."

I flipped her off and ducked outside to suck in a lungful of fresh air. Well, as close as I was going to get in this town. Pockets of smokers congregated among the crowd, clouds wafting away from them, but the urge to light up didn't hit. *Damn, maybe I've actually outgrown that shit.*

I leaned against the window and cracked my neck on both sides as I watched the crush of people waiting for the parade to turn down Canal Street. I didn't know or care which parade this was; I only cared that I was out of the shop and the next piece of flash that someone wanted inked on their body was Delilah's problem.

It made me wish my boss didn't have a policy about blocking off time that appointments could otherwise have filled during these three weeks of the year. So instead of challenging artistic pieces, I had tourists wanting shamrocks on their asses and names on their arms.

I scanned the crowd, trying to pick out the next one who'd walk through the door. I didn't actually care who it would be. I only wanted the distraction.

But I had no idea how big of a distraction I was about to find.

Chapter Three

Elisha

I'd picked the Roosevelt because I figured I couldn't go wrong with a Waldorf hotel, even though I'd never actually stayed at one. When the cabbie dropped me off, excitement warred with anxiety as I climbed out of the cab. Sucking in a deep breath as the bellman opened the door, I walked into the lobby covered with gold gilt and intricate tile work.

I can do this, I told myself.

But apparently I couldn't. At least, not here.

After I waited ten minutes in line, the front-desk clerk stared at me like I was an idiot when I asked for a room and informed him I didn't have a reservation.

"We don't have any vacancies. I'm sorry, ma'am, you're unlikely to find anything close to the French Quarter with Mardi Gras coming up next week." His words, in that condescending tone, seemed to carry an extra punch to crush the excitement I'd been feeling.

Mardi Gras. How could I have forgotten?

"Do you have any suggestions where else I could try?" I asked, trying to keep a positive attitude.

The front-desk clerk was already looking over my shoulder and waving the next person forward. "I'm sorry, I really have no idea. Maybe someplace out near the airport?"

Dismissed.

I forced a smile and thanked him as I dragged my suitcase across the lobby. When I'd pictured all the traveling I would do while tacking things to my bulletin board, it had never occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to find something so simple as a hotel room.

Making my way through the brass-framed doors, I stepped out onto a sidewalk that swarmed with people. Screams and cheers came from half a block away, and it seemed like that was the direction everyone was heading. Canal Street, the sign in the distance read. I heard the music next, and my frustration at the hotel clerk's lack of assistance faded away when I realized I was going to see my first Mardi Gras parade.

A wide smile tugged at the corners of my mouth. For the first time in my life, I'd be able to check something off one of my *Must Do* lists. *This was living.*

With my suitcase trailing me, I tried to see what was happening in the street, but at five foot six, I didn't have a height advantage on many. All I could see was the back of people's heads as I reached the crowd.

"I see a better spot across the street. Wanna go?" a girl dressed in a neon-green bikini top, tiny black shorts, and fishnet tights yelled to her friend who was similarly dressed. The other girl nodded, and I made a snap decision to follow them as they pushed through the mass of people. Nothing was going to stop me from seeing this parade.

Avoiding elbows and shouts, I plowed through, lifted my suitcase, and ran across the street.

My first clear view of the street showed the parade still a good hundred yards away. I dodged the people gathered on neutral ground and crossed the next lanes without incident. The crowd swallowed me up on the other side, and a shaft of claustrophobia speared through me when I realized I couldn't see over them either.

"Show us your tits!" The raucous calls came from every direction, and beads were tossed

through the air like confetti.

The *Must Do* list also mentioned catching beads on Bourbon Street (without showing my boobs), but before I could decide whether catching beads on Canal Street was a suitable substitute, a body crashed into me, catching me off guard. I lurched sideways, tripping over a woman wearing a pair of snakeskin boots that stretched up to her thighs.

“Whoa, watch it!”

I started to apologize, but her elbow flew out and caught me in the ribs, and sent me stumbling further.

Holding on to my suitcase with a death grip, I reached out to catch my fall with my other hand, but my palm connected with something fleshy. My gaze zeroed in on my fingers, and I yanked my hand away.

Oh my God, you cannot be serious.

A penis, painted gold. Connected to a man who was completely naked but for the gold, purple, and green glittery stripes covering his soft body.

“I gotcha, darlin’.” Slurred words accompanied the hands that gripped my arms and pulled me upright.

The naked painted man is touching me. Ewww.

Why couldn't he at least be hot? Seriously, would that be so much to ask?

Abort mission. Abort.

Holding on to my suitcase, I barreled through the crowd and didn't slow until I reached a break in the chaos at the mouth of an alley, once again behind the crowd blocking the oncoming parade. *Crap.* Focused on finding another place to stand that would give me a view, I didn't see the man who reached out and grabbed the back of my pink-and-white polo shirt.

“Hey! You don't have any beads.” He jerked me around before a huge guy wearing a leather vest with nothing under it yanked me toward his hairy chest.

“I can fix that for her,” the man in a similar vest said from beside him.

“I'm not interested in any beads. I'll thank you to take your hands off me now.” I twisted, trying to get out of his hold, but the other man grabbed my arm as beer splashed between us, splattering my shirt.

“Hey, you need a place to stay, girl? I got room for you in my bed.” Hairy Chest released me to grab his crotch.

I reared back, latching onto my suitcase as the other guy lunged toward me. I opened my mouth to scream, but a deep voice ripped through the crowd behind me.

“You're late for your appointment. I don't like to wait.”

Both men's attention broke away from me as they turned in the direction of the voice.

What the hell? Appointment?

The voice came closer. “I haven't killed anyone in a long fucking time, but I'm happy to change that if you don't get your hands off her.”

Immediately, both men released me, and apprehension crawled up my spine.

“Sorry, man. Thought she was someone else.”

“Fuck off. If I see you assholes around here again, they'll find you floating facedown in the Mississippi.” Heat met my back, and the voice rumbled low in my ear. “Come on, cupcake, let's go.”

My gaze landed on the two men who were now raising their hands and backing away, tripping over themselves, actually.

I didn't want to turn around. If they were afraid of the voice behind me, how much scarier

did the body it belonged to have to be?

Then again, he'd run off two guys on the pretense of some appointment. *What was that about?* The wall of heat dissipated behind me, and I found the courage to turn around.

The blue-and-red neon lights of the sign attached to the marble building on my right read Voodoo Ink.

A tattoo shop?

Immediately, my attention caught on the back of the man striding toward the door.

A tattoo appointment?

People stepped out of my unlikely rescuer's way as though he were a force of nature unto himself.

His brown-and-gold-streaked hair was twisted up in a knot at the back of his head, and broad shoulders stretched the back of a black T-shirt with the same logo on the back. Ink covered every inch of his visible skin.

He was a man-bunned, tattooed giant.

A man-bunned, tattooed giant who had saved me from being assaulted by drunk, grabby men.

The space he'd left on the sidewalk filled with people, threatening to swallow me up again, and I made my decision based on nothing more than a shred of instinct.

I followed him.

Chapter Four

Eden

This is a bad idea. No, not a bad idea, a terrible idea.

Misgivings of every shape, size, and volume buzzed to life inside me as my hand landed on the doorknob. I didn't have a tattoo, and more than that, I'd never even thought about getting one. Girls like me, the kind who watched the world from the outside looking in, didn't go to places like this.

Before I could decide whether to twist the knob or walk away, the door flew open and I jerked back. A brunette stormed out, wearing only ripped jean shorts and a push-up bra with enough padding to turn her boobs into cannons.

"What an ass. Who turns this down?" She wasn't talking to me, at least not until she almost collided with me. "Good luck with that prick. Maybe he goes for the good-girl vibe you got going on. His loss."

My gaze lifted over her shoulder to see the back of the man-bunned giant inside the shop, and no one else.

I didn't bother to reply that I wasn't trying to get him to touch me because she was already melding into the crowd that I was trying to escape.

But she did make my decision easier. The chime jangled as I slipped through the open front door and shut it behind me. The giant didn't turn around for several long seconds.

One look at his face, his arms, his hands, his . . . everything, and I knew I should walk right back out that door.

If there could be a universal picture of *dangerous as hell* embodied in the male form, the man-bunned giant would be it. Muscles rippled beneath the black T-shirt as he lifted a hand to his beard-covered face.

The world had apparently decided to throw me a bone. He was gorgeous, and I hadn't accidentally grabbed his penis. *Go, me.* I could definitely see why she was pissed he wouldn't touch her.

Unfortunately, the world had bestowed all that . . . *man* . . . on me. Also known as someone who needed to start at the beginner level, not the *more man than you could ever handle in three lives* level.

I'd had two crushes in my life, and one of them didn't count. Gianni was replaced as my security when he "accidentally" grabbed my ass as he helped me out of the car, and Angelo had seen him and reported the incident to my father. It was the closest any guy had gotten to third base, and I'd gotten a cheap thrill. Unfortunately, that thrill had been killed when it had come out he'd stolen some of my panties. *Ick.*

Before Gianni, there was my aunt's yard guy, Marcello. For three years, he'd trimmed and mowed and edged while I drooled from the window. Compared to this guy, Marcello was a gangly child, and my lady parts were sending out an SOS from disuse.

My brain snapped back into the present as my rescuer's green eyes, almost emerald, scanned me from the soles of my Sperrys to the top of my blond head.

"Where the hell were you headed? The country club?" His voice seemed even deeper and louder in the confines of the black-walled tattoo shop.

“I wouldn’t wear jeans to a country club.” My response was instinctive, yet ridiculous. It wasn’t like I’d spent much time at the club, but even I knew they wouldn’t let you in wearing jeans.

His lips quirked as if he might smile, but they smoothed back into a lush line.

Lush? Wow, Eden. Simmer down.

Why had I thought following him in here was even a fraction of a good idea? Scratch the fact that my body thought he was the most delicious thing it had seen since that piece of triple-chocolate Almond Joy cheesecake Angelo had brought me last week when he picked me up from work. Apparently my body was waiting for the notification from my brain that this guy was beyond out of my league.

“I can just go.” I made a lame gesture toward the door. Getting a tattoo in New Orleans wasn’t on my *Must Do* list, anyway.

His expressive mouth turned downward. “You go back out there and you’re gonna get more of the same. You look exactly like the fucking tourist you are carrying that bag around. Makes you a target, if you haven’t figured that out yet. Why the hell didn’t you leave it somewhere?”

“Because the hotel didn’t have a room for me, and told me no one else would either. I didn’t exactly plan this.”

“Which hotel?”

“The Roosevelt.”

He didn’t roll his eyes, but it was a close call. Maybe he was staring up to the ceiling for divine guidance?

“You just showed up there thinking you could get a room a few days before Mardi Gras without a reservation? You fucking serious?”

I bristled at his tone. I was so freaking sick and tired of being scolded like I was a child.

“Hey—” I started, having no clue what I was going to say, but I was going to say *something*, dammit, and it was going to be good. But the giant interrupted me.

“Did you have a plan? Walk all over town looking for a hotel? Probably get fucking mugged, if not raped, in some dark alley too?”

The brunette who had stormed out of the shop had been right. He was a prick, even if he was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen.

I propped a hand on my hip and injected confidence into my voice. “I’ll find something. Not every hotel can be booked.”

He shook his head. “Any hotel room within ten miles is booked. Even the ones that rent by the hour.”

My very first chance to venture outside the insulated world mandated by Dom Casso, and I manage to pick the one city with no vacancies. *How is this fair? Maybe I am just a liability.* The negativity welled up, but I shoved it down. I would not fail at this.

Straightening my spine, I gripped the handle of my suitcase tighter. “Then I guess I better start looking somewhere else.”

He pointed to one of the chairs lining the wall beside me. “Sit. Don’t go anywhere. I have an idea.”

I dropped into a seat at the authoritative command and froze as he turned his back to me.

How long had I been blindly following orders? And from some random stranger, at that? My judgment was clearly faulty.

I started to stand, but an inconvenient thread of curiosity kept my butt in the chair. If he had an idea, maybe I should stay. What other choice did I have right now? Run back outside and

fight my way to a taxi to take me and have it take me to the airport Holiday Inn? That would be giving up my one shot at this adventure, and I wasn't ready to admit defeat.

Besides, even if he was a jerk, his first instinct had been to protect me. That said something, right?

I stayed seated while he pulled out his phone and tapped something on the screen. When he was done, he leaned back on the counter and shook his head.

"You've got no business wandering around this city alone, and I don't have time to be your keeper."

Before I could retort that I didn't need a keeper, the door chimed, and I jerked my head around to see a blue-and-black-haired woman in a retro neon-green leopard print dress, complete with black petticoat fluffing out the skirt, strut inside.

"Working during Mardi Gras season sucks." She held up a brown paper bag in one hand and a drink carrier in the other. "But I got the food. And coffee. So hopefully we can get through tonight and worry about tomorrow, tomorrow."

Her gaze landed on me as she lowered the bags and drink carrier onto the counter. "Well, well. Don't you look like a little lost lamb? You here for some ink, sugar?"

The man-bunned giant let out some kind of half laugh, half scoff. "She look like she's here for ink?"

"Guess that means she doesn't fall into your hands-off rule then, Bish."

What did that mean?

The dark glower that took over *Bish's* face had me poised on the edge of my seat to run. Man-bun plus beard plus all those tattoos plus angry scowl finally tipped the scale from dangerously gorgeous to just flat-out dangerous.

"I think I should get out of your way."

The woman cocked her head to the side, and her inspection sealed my decision to take my chances on the street. I'd be fine. Probably.

I shoved out of the chair but only made it a few steps toward the door with my bag in tow before long fingers wrapped around my wrist. Fight-or-flight instincts burst to life as I turned with my hand balled into a fist.

"If you actually knew how to throw a punch, you wouldn't tuck your thumb under your fingers." He dropped his hold on my wrist to pry my thumb out of my fist. "Otherwise, you're liable to break it."

I tucked the knowledge away in case hand-to-hand combat came up in the near future. His scowl had lessened, but I didn't like the patronizing expression.

"You shouldn't just grab people," I said, tugging to release my hand from his grip, but Bish held fast.

"If you hadn't jumped out of your chair so damn fast, I would've told you I'm trying to get you a place to stay."

I looked from him to the woman who watched us like a zoo exhibit. Her black eyebrows rose so high, they disappeared behind her blunt-cut Bettie Page bangs.

"You're . . . you're trying to find me a room?"

"During Mardi Gras?" the woman interjected. "Damn, Bish. If I didn't know you better, I'd think she already blew you in the back to get that kind of help."

I stiffened at her insinuation. I wasn't the kind of girl to . . . blow a guy in a tattoo parlor. Although now that she'd put the idea in my head, I couldn't keep my gaze from dropping to the level of his belt buckle.

Whoa. There's a bulge.

"Shut it down, Delilah."

I jerked my head up to look at both of them, hoping no one had caught where I was staring.

The woman, Delilah, smirked rather than replying, and heat burned up my cheeks. She'd definitely caught me. The wink she threw me sealed it.

A quiet buzz sounded from Bish's phone, and he tapped out something else. When he looked up, he nodded. "I got a place for you to stay for a couple days, but I need to clean up before I can take you."

"I can go myself if you tell me where. I'm not completely helpless."

He shook his head. "Not fucking happening."

Delilah followed him as he disappeared into one of the small rooms toward the back of the shop where they must do the tattoos. It was actually a really cool place. The interior said gothic voodoo plus a touch of heavy metal and rock 'n roll—at least, that was my interpretation of it. Regardless, I could see why Delilah had given me such an odd look. It was way too cool for me and my polo shirt and Sperrys.

Part of me wanted to take a closer look at the pictures of their work on the walls, and maybe even stick around to watch them give someone a tattoo, but I knew that wasn't in the cards. Instead, I stayed by the door, one hand wrapped around the handle of my suitcase as part of my brain told me to grab the door handle and run.

Delilah had plenty of questions for Bish, and her voice carried well enough for me to overhear.

"What the hell are you doing? You don't get involved and try to help people *ever*. Where the fuck did you find a room, anyway? You taking her home?"

My fingers grasped the knob. There was no way I was going home with him. But before I twisted the knob, he replied.

"Fuck no, I'm not taking her home. A friend saved me a balcony room at the Royal Sonesta for a few days to party. I wasn't in the mood to party tonight, so I was gonna let it go. Now I'm not. Simple as that."

I released my grip on the door handle with a rush of relief. *A hotel.*

"You're gonna give up a balcony room on Bourbon during Mardi Gras to help some girl you've never met? What the fuck happened while I was gone, Bishop?"

Bishop. I rolled the name around on my tongue, surprised at how much I liked it—and how well it suited him.

"Nothing happened. But you know as well as I do from one look at her that she doesn't have a fucking clue what she walked into."

"And since when do you care?"

"Leave it alone."

Delilah backed off, and I dropped my gaze to the black-and-white-tiled floor and pretended like I wasn't exercising mad eavesdropping skills.

Bishop strode toward me, his face impossible to read. "Let's go."

Decision time. Based on Delilah's shock, this wasn't something that was in character for Bishop. My hesitation must have been obvious, because he stopped in front of me.

"Your choice, cupcake. Hotel room or take your chances on your own. We both know the smart move here."

Delilah followed behind him, her heels clicking on the floor. She propped a hand on her hip and her gaze swung from him to me.

“He’s not gonna hurt you, sugar. He might be an ass, but he’s the kind of ass you can trust with your life.”

What choice did I really have?

I forced my lips into an imitation of a polite smile. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

He grunted in response before peeling back my fingers to release the death grip on my suitcase.

“What—”

My question was cut off when he lifted the carry-on and strode out the door.

“Would you look at that . . .” The words came as a whisper from Delilah. Her eyes cut from the doorway Bishop walked out of to me. “Better catch up with him, because at this rate, who knows what he’ll do next.”

Chapter Five

Bishop

I didn't get involved. I never got involved. So, why the fuck was I carrying a suitcase that had to cost more than a month of my rent to the Royal Sonesta with a girl trailing after me who had *prim, proper, and helpless* written all over her?

Because I couldn't let her fend for herself in this mess? Since when did I care about random people off the street?

I glanced back to see if she was keeping up, and slowed when I realized she was lagging more than a few steps behind me.

Pink-and-white polo shirt with no doubt some fancy logo on it. Dark skinny jeans. Fucking Sperry Top-Siders. And then that face and those eyes. Like a sucker punch to the gut.

I wasn't the kind of guy for women like her. The kind that fell into the category marked off with caution tape that read Good Girls – Proceed At Your Own Risk. But for some reason, my brain and my dick couldn't get on the same page.

Not that my dick was going anywhere near her. Fuck, she probably had some kind of force field to keep guys like me away from her pristine self. *Then why does she look at you like that?* I saw the fascination in her eyes when she looked at me, and I was going to fucking ignore it.

She finally caught up, and I shortened my stride so she could keep pace. Questions burned on the tip of my tongue, but I shut them down.

I don't get involved.

But seriously, what the fuck was she doing in New Orleans with no hotel room during Mardi Gras? That didn't scream *sophisticated world traveler* to me. Something wasn't adding up.

Doesn't matter.

I kept my eyes straight ahead, scanning the streets, moving to dodge people and glancing down at her no more than once every thirty seconds to make sure she wasn't falling behind again.

But that excuse was bullshit because I never let her out of my peripheral vision. Still, that was how I saw her drag her gaze up to my face as though she was trying just as hard to figure me out when she should have been keeping track of the pavement beneath her feet.

"Fuck," I bit out as she caught a toe on the uneven cobblestone and pitched forward toward a girl in a silver bikini top and not much else. Cupcake's arms shot out to brace her fall, but before her hands could make contact with the girl or the ground, I wrapped an arm around her waist and yanked her up beside me.

The cry of surprise I'd expected to hear when she was falling didn't come until she was flush against my side and the scent of something beachy and citrus invaded my nose. *Of course she has to smell better than any woman I've ever gotten close to. Fuck me.*

"Thank you." The words were hushed, probably because her face was buried in my shoulder.

I stilled and waited for her to unwrap her fingers from around my wrist and disconnect us.

As soon as she became aware of how she'd clung to me, she jumped away like she'd just learned I was a leper.

"Watch yourself."

“Sorry. I’m not usually this clumsy.”

I wasn’t sure I could believe that so I started walking again, and she hurried to keep up. When the door on the side of the Royal Sonesta finally came into view, relief and disappointment punched into me.

I just needed to get the key, get the girl in the room, and get the hell back to the shop. My good deed for the day—more like for the year—would be done, and I wouldn’t have to worry about what would happen to her on her own. *And I’ll never see her again.*

The crowd parted ahead of me, and I tugged on the knob of the side door. It didn’t budge. *Fuck.*

“I . . . uh, I think you have to have a keycard to get in.” She gestured to the gold plaque and the card reader beneath it.

Shit. This was why I only agreed to party in a hotel room if someone I knew was already there or I already had the key. Dealing with front-desk managers wasn’t my thing.

“Come on.” I wrapped a hand around her arm and pulled her toward the service door that led into the parking garage under the hotel. She stiffened but followed.

I inhaled the combination of exhaust, brake fluid, and gasoline that finally drove her scent from my nose. *Better that way.*

Inside the garage was a door that led to the hotel, and I reluctantly released my hold on her before pushing it open and gesturing for her to enter ahead of me. We made our way through a maze of hallways until we reached the lobby.

The desk clerks looked overworked and underpaid as they dealt with drunken partiers and answered the nonstop ringing phones.

I caught sight of Leon and joined his line. The girl hung back, which was fine by me.

Leon, a client of mine whose ink was completely hidden by his uniform, smiled when he saw me. “Hey, man! Didn’t think you would actually take me up on the room and let me pay off a little of what I owe you.”

“I appreciate it, brother. How many nights did you block this one off for?”

His eyebrows went up and he checked the computer. “It’s blocked until Wednesday morning, but only comped for two nights. I can’t comp it the whole time without getting fired.”

“That’s no problem.” Her voice came from beside me as she slid a credit card across the counter. “You can use this for whatever you need to charge.”

Leon looked from the girl to me and then down at the card before swiping it. “That works for me. Thank you, Ms. Madden.”

Ms. Madden. Now my curiosity was beating at me because I needed to know her first name but I wasn’t about to ask in front of Leon.

After he returned the credit card and slid two room keys across the counter, she stepped away. Leon smiled and winked at me. “Enjoy your night. I know I would if I were you.”

“Thanks, man. Consider us even.” I didn’t address his comment because I was sure he figured I’d be fucking *Ms. Madden* six ways to Sunday in the room tonight, but that wasn’t on the menu.

As I followed her to the elevator, I got my first good look at her from behind. Long blond hair tumbled over her shoulders to the middle of her back, and her ass filled out those jeans in the best way possible.

If she were on the menu, I’d fucking devour her.

My dick jumped in agreement, and I had to force myself to think about something else. Like the fact that hooking up with a girl like her would lead to nothing but trouble, even if she had

been throwing out the signals that she was interested, which she wasn't.

Even better. I was picturing her ass cupped in my hands while I lifted her up against the wall of the elevator we stepped into, and she was trying to pretend I didn't exist.

Heavy silence hung in the air as she stared at the floor and I pressed the button for the third floor.

The mirrors told the truth, though, and she sneaked more than one glance at me before we stepped out.

Ms. Madden started down the hall ahead of me.

Ms. Madden. Way too frigging proper. Gave me all sorts of ideas about teaching her just how improper she could be.

Not happening.

"What's your name, girl?" The question came out more like a bark, fueled by frustration with my inability to lock my shit down.

She jerked around at my harsh tone and nearly tripped over her own feet on the carpet.

"Uh . . . E-Eden," she stuttered, and then shut her mouth so quickly her teeth clacked together.

Once again, I reached out to steady her, but was slow to drop my hand from her hip.

"Watch yourself." It was as much a warning to me as it was to her.

"Sorry. It's been a long day." Her gaze met mine for a moment before dropping away.

I reached up, and she froze as if expecting me to touch her again, but I pointed at the wall behind her.

"Looks like we found your room."

Chapter Six

Eden

Wow. I suck.

The first time I needed to give my name on my new ID, and I totally choked. I was the worst mobster's daughter in the history of mobsters' daughters.

I spun around and faced the door to the room, hoping to hide the panic at my mistake.

Bishop reached around me to slide the keycard into the reader, and the heat from his body radiated against my back. I held my breath, wondering if he'd press against me, and then gave myself a mental slap for even considering it.

He was a perfect stranger. A *dangerous* stranger. *Who found me a place to stay when I would have otherwise been out of luck.* It didn't add up.

But the puzzle of Bishop poofed into a cloud of smoke when he pushed open the door, and I took in the scene before me.

Two women. Naked. One spread-eagle on the bed, and the other licking and sucking a path down her body as her fingers pumped in and out between her legs.

Oh my God. Live porn. Right in front of my face.

I tried to back away but slammed into Bishop's chest. "Uh, wrong room?" I turned toward him, desperate to get out.

His arm wrapped around my waist, stopping my attempted flight. His chest rumbled as he murmured, "Fucking Leon."

"Hey, baby. We were wondering when you were going to show up. Don't worry; I'm getting us both fired up for you."

My gaze darted up to Bishop's face but all I could see was the hard set of his jaw, which didn't look very excited at what had to be most men's fantasy laid out before him.

"Did Leon tell you I wanted you here?" His tone didn't sound welcoming, rather the opposite.

I turned slightly, as though I couldn't hear her answer just fine without seeing her. *Mistake.*

The girl on top withdrew her fingers from the other girl and sucked them between her lips.

Oh. My. God.

"Of course. Who wouldn't want us here?" Her attention landed on me and the arm Bishop had around me. "You don't need her, baby. We'll take care of you all night long."

The girl on the bottom finally opened her eyes and spoke. "I've been waiting for that big cock of yours, Bish. Kitty's fingers just don't fill me up."

Kitty scooted off the bed and stood. She was built like the girl who'd slammed her way out of the tattoo shop. Tall and slim, with legs that went on forever and boobs that defied gravity. The girl beneath her looked to be of a similar and equally unfair build.

Where did all these girls come from? He'd turned down the one, but what guy would turn down *this*? Another thought followed. *Is this his type?* If it was, there was no way I could ever compete.

Why was I even worried about competing?

"Not tonight. You need to go." Bishop's tone was devoid of hesitation.

Kitty—what the heck kind of name was that, anyway?—looked at me with derision.

“Because of her? She looks like she’s got a stick shoved so far up her ass there’d be no room for you in her cunt.”

My mouth dropped open at her rude and incredibly coarse words. *Wow. Just . . . wow.*

Bishop’s entire body stiffened behind me and his arm around my waist tightened. “Get your clothes on and get the fuck out. I don’t know what made you or Leon think this little party of yours was a good plan, but you were both dead wrong.”

She huffed, and the girl beneath her sat up. “Don’t talk to her like that.”

“Both of you. Go. Now.”

“You’re a dick.” That came from Kitty.

“Don’t make me tell you again.”

Bishop unwrapped himself from behind me and strode forward to scoop tiny scraps of clothing off the floor and toss them on the bed. Looking back at me, he said, “You want to go try to find a housekeeping cart to get a clean set of sheets? I doubt you want to sleep on those.”

He was right. It also gave me an excellent excuse to get the hell out of the room as quickly as possible. Five minutes later, I’d raided a linen closet at the other end of the floor that hadn’t been shut all the way, and headed back to the room, hoping the girls would already be gone.

I should have taken a little bit longer, because they were just leaving when I returned.

Both girls looked at me with daggers in their eyes. “Fucking bitch. You better believe we won’t forget this. You wouldn’t even know what to do with a guy like him.” Kitty’s tone was pissed. “No one else ever gets a second shot with Bishop, and you fucking stole mine.”

Second shot? I didn’t even want to think about the fact that she’d had a first.

“She does not exist for you,” Bishop said, anger threading through his voice. “Not another goddamned word. Get the hell out.”

I slipped into the hotel room, desperate to get away from them. Actually, right this moment, I wasn’t too keen on being around him either.

Anger and disappointment rolled through me, and I didn’t want to think about why that was. I didn’t know him. Didn’t care who he screwed or how many at the same time.

I stalked across the room and froze before I could drop the fresh linens on the desk. A room key and four lines of white powder lay across the glass.

“Whoa. Is that—”

Bishop was behind me before I could finish my sentence. “Fuck.” He grabbed the trash can and swept the powder into the bin.

I’d seen the movie *Blow*; I’d just never seen cocaine in real life.

Bishop dropped the trash can back on the floor, strode to the bed, and tore off the sheets. When he was finished, he balled them up and tossed them in the corner before snatching a clean sheet from the stack I still held in my arms.

I didn’t know what to say, so I rounded the foot of the bed and helped remake it in silence.

When the job was done, Bishop backed toward the door. “You should be good. Room is comped tonight and tomorrow, but after Saturday morning, it’s on you. Room service and anything like that is on your card too.” He tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Look, I’m sorry about Kitty and her friend. I wouldn’t have—”

I held up my hands, palms out, hoping he’d stop right there. “It’s okay. You don’t need to say anything. I mean, I might have to burn the garbage—wait, would that get me high?”

He choked out a laugh and shook his head. “Hold on.” He crossed the room and grabbed the trash can before disappearing into the bathroom. The next thing I heard was a flush. He came out and dropped the can back in place next to the desk.

“You’re all set. I’ll make sure Leon didn’t give out any more keys. If he did, I’ll have him rekey the room and call you to come down to get a new one.”

More than anything, I wanted to ask him why he’d bothered to help me, but I couldn’t find the words to put together. Instead, I went with my sincere thanks.

“Thank you. I really do appreciate everything. I’m not sure what I would’ve done without your help.”

Bishop shifted, looking uncomfortable at my words. “Thank me by staying out of trouble.” He turned, pushed open the door, and disappeared.

Chapter Seven

Bishop

I kept thinking I saw her. *Eden*. Fucking mind was playing tricks on me.

But it wasn't the blond cupcake coming into the shop when the door chimed today. No, she should still be tucked away at the Royal Sonesta—or long gone.

I told myself it didn't matter which, but I was full of shit.

Last night when we'd walked into the hotel room to find Kitty fucking her friend, I'd expected a full-on meltdown from the girl who had surely never seen anything like that before. But she'd barely missed a beat. She didn't make any shitty comments about the fact that two girls were about to get it on in the bed I'd told her she could have that night. She just brushed it off and did what she had to do. Even when she ran across the lines of coke on the desk, she hadn't freaked completely. She'd been shocked and confused, but didn't blink twice after I swept it away.

I hadn't expected resilience from her, but that's what I saw. Now I couldn't help but wonder how long she was staying, or where the hell she was headed next.

Footsteps neared my room, and I finally looked up at the new arrival. Another familiar face.

"Hey, Bishop." The smile in JP's voice was impossible to miss, as was the hero worship in her stare.

The girl was relentless. I'd done work on her sleeves and shoulders, and she'd been trying to get me to take her out since the first sitting. Besides the fact that my dick wasn't interested, she was too young, and I would have been breaking my rule about not touching any female who walked into Voodoo wanting a tattoo. But JP couldn't or wouldn't take the hint.

"What do you need, girl?" I couldn't find it in me to be mean to her because she was just a kid with a crush, no matter how irritating it was becoming.

Her entire face lit up when I stood from my chair and set my book on the counter behind me. "What do I always need when I come to see you?"

She was an ink junkie, a feeling I understood well. "What do you have in mind this time?"

"Maybe a picnic on the riverbank followed by dessert at my place?"

I suppressed a frustrated groan. One of these days, she was going to have to learn to take a hint. "I meant for your ink. You know the other ain't happening."

Her cute smile fell into a frown. "I'm not too young. I swear it."

"You don't get to decide that for me. I call the shots. So, what do you want for your ink? Or you just here to shoot the shit?"

"Fine."

Her huff was cute, but that's all she was. Cute. Before I'd thought she was too innocent for me, but even JP came off as more worldly than Eden, and my dick didn't seem to mind that.

Stop fucking thinking about her, you little bitch, I reprimanded myself mentally, and forced her from my mind.

"Will you draw me a piece for my back? I'm ready to start it. I was thinking something with skulls and flowers. Like girly voodoo stuff."

At the mention of designing a tattoo, my mind went to Eden again. The first time I saw someone, especially someone without ink, my brain instantly snapped into *create* mode. With

Eden, I pictured the ink I'd put on her shoulder blade as soon as she'd followed me into the shop and it was clear she'd never been inside one before.

Even the thought of tattooing her virgin skin had my dick taking notice. I shifted on my stool to readjust, not wanting JP to notice.

Pushing Eden out of my head and willing my dick to go down, I turned my attention back to JP. "What are you thinking?"

"The magic Bishop touch. Whatever you think. I just want it big, and covering the top half of my back so it ties in just under my epaulets."

Now that, that I could do. I loved it when clients let me have free rein to design. The best work always came when someone wasn't dictating every little detail and let me flex my artistic muscles.

"Let me think about it. I'll start drawing it up today. I might be able to fit you in for a sitting next week. I think I have someone who's going to cancel."

"Awesome!" JP clapped her hands, her enthusiasm impossible to ignore. "You sure you won't change your mind about the date? Just give me a chance. I'm not a kid."

"It's my rule. No touching the clients. You'll find a guy. It just won't be me."

Her expression fell and hurt flashed across her features. Even if I felt guilty, it was better that way. I didn't get involved. That wasn't my thing.

Then why did you help Eden? Fuck if I knew the answer to that one.

Tearing my gaze from the hope lingering in JP's eyes, I looked out toward the front window—and caught a glimpse of the back of a blonde with curves in all the right places.

I shook my head. No way it was Eden.

And why the hell did I keep looking for her? She wasn't coming back here.

End of story. Time to put her out of my head.

Chapter Eight

Eden

Sunlight streamed through the gaps in the drapes, dragging me from a sleep that was more like a coma. I'd lain awake for so long last night, I thought I'd never doze off with the raucous noise from the never-ending party on the street below invading my room.

But apparently I was wrong.

I rolled out of bed and walked to the French doors to pull back the blinds. I needed to make sure this morning was real and not a dream.

The iconic buildings that lined Bourbon Street stared back at me from beyond the balcony, and a rush of feelings invaded.

Anxiety. Excitement. Nerves. Anticipation.

I was a girl forced from my home because of whatever messed-up stuff my father was involved in, and I'd proven yesterday that I wasn't nearly as street-smart as I thought I was. Reading about adventuring to new places wasn't exactly the same as doing it in real life. The confidence I'd had when I stepped on that plane at JFK had faded when I'd nearly gotten assaulted.

But today was a fresh start. The city didn't seem quite so intimidating with the morning light, and I could pretend I was a normal girl on vacation. I could start on my list and do all the things I'd dreamed about doing.

I remembered Angelo's orders—*stay in your room, get room service, get a massage.*

Sorry, Angelo. I couldn't pass up this opportunity.

And then Bishop's words as he left last night popped into my head. *Stay out of trouble, kid.*

I certainly wasn't going to go looking for trouble, but I wasn't going to let yesterday stop me. Today I wasn't going to be carrying around a suitcase like the target he'd told me I was. Today I could blend in.

When would I ever have another chance?

Staring into the mirror, I gave myself a pep talk. "I can do this. I don't have to go far. I can just walk around the French Quarter and be *normal*. I'll be fine."

Rationalizations in place and confidence buoyed, I showered and got ready for the day. Obviously, I hadn't had the luxury of time to deliberate over what I packed, so I pulled some of the mishmash of clothes from my suitcase.

Jeans, a white cami, and a pale pink cardigan wouldn't stick out during the day, right?

I slipped into my Sperrys and headed out of my room, feeling like today was the beginning of something completely new. My first taste of real life and the uncertainty of how my choices would play out. No safety net or security here. Just . . . me.

It was long overdue.

* * * *

I found the green-and-white-striped awnings of the famous Café du Monde about the time my stomach was grumbling to be filled. Once I was seated at a little table, I devoured the delicious powdered-sugar-covered confection that was their famous beignet and guzzled a cup of

coffee while I people-watched. It was a habit of mine honed from years of living on the sidelines and watching life go by.

I refused to acknowledge that I might have been scanning the crowd for a certain man-bunned giant. *Maybe I should walk by the tattoo shop . . . see if he's there.*

I didn't know where that idea came from, but it was a terrible one. I would do no such thing. Even if he had been the most intimidatingly beautiful man I'd ever seen, I had no business seeking him out. It wasn't like he seemed eager to stick around and get to know me either.

Which was good because *no one* could get to know me here. I was still kicking myself for giving him my real name. How could I possibly screw up something so basic and important?

You're not going to see him again, so it doesn't matter.

It wasn't like we would cross paths. New Orleans was a big city. And we especially wouldn't cross paths if I stayed away from a certain tattoo shop. Not that I had a reason to walk by there, anyway. It wasn't like I wanted a tattoo or something.

Right?

It wasn't something I'd ever considered. Getting a tattoo hadn't made any of my lists because it had literally never crossed my mind. Until now . . .

Pushing the ridiculous thought away, I left my seat at Café du Monde and stepped onto the sidewalk. It was terrifyingly exciting to know that there would be no security trailing me through the streets. Tendrils of freedom wrapped around me, and I savored them.

At least until I remembered that if something happened to me, like yesterday when those guys grabbed me, I'd be completely on my own without any way to defend myself. Except now I knew how *not* to throw a punch.

Why hadn't Dom insisted on self-defense? Oh, that's right, he never expected me to be outside the bubble I'd existed within.

Deciding that I'd keep a close eye on my surroundings, I walked toward Jackson Square and watched street artists create their works as jazz from a brass quartet filled the air. I stood for long minutes, letting the music sweep me up, and inch by inch, I began to relax.

This city had its own rhythm, and I was feeling it in my blood.

I tossed the handful of change from Café du Monde in the open trombone case and continued to explore. I made my way around the Square, soaking up every detail of the architecture, the vivid colors, the eclectic street performers and artists, until a decadent sweet scent hit my nose. Letting my senses lead me, I turned in a slow circle to figure out where it was coming from. A woman stood in the window behind a hand-painted sign that read Fresh Pralines.

Just because I'd stuffed myself on beignets didn't mean I couldn't enjoy more of what New Orleans had to offer. I stepped toward the door, but a familiar voice caught me off guard.

"Hey, sugar. Didn't expect to see you again."

Coming out of the store right in front of me was the black-and-blue-haired woman from the tattoo shop. Delilah. Apparently New Orleans wasn't nearly as big of a city as I'd thought.

"Delilah. Remember me?"

I shook off the momentary surprise at running into someone who wasn't a stranger. "Yes, sorry."

"No big deal. It's good to see you looking a little less lost than last time." She adjusted the bag over her shoulder. "So you decided to stick around, I see."

"How could I not? This city seems to be a pretty special place."

The smile that stretched across Delilah's face was sincere. "It certainly is. I came with friends in 2005 for a weekend and never left. Definitely more my speed than Omaha."

One look at her blue hair, retro Hawaiian print dress, tattoos, and vintage yellow Mary Janes would tell anyone that Omaha wasn't exactly where Delilah was meant to live.

"So, now that you're sucked in by the lure of this awesome place, are you ready to get a little wild and crazy like the rest of the Mardi Gras partiers? Maybe tattoo that virgin skin of yours?"

My earlier thought slammed into me. A tattoo meant seeing Bishop again, and as much as I wanted to deny it, the idea was tempting.

Maybe he could be one of your New Orleans experiences . . . That thought had to be from an inner troublemaker playing devil's advocate, but I pushed it away.

"I should probably start with something a little less drastic." I nodded at the door I'd been about to go in before she came out. "Like pralines."

Delilah lifted her bag. "I got you covered. I had a major craving today and this is the only place I'll buy them. And . . . if you want to get the inside scoop on all the non-touristy must-dos to check off while you're here, I'm your girl."

My inner list-lover surged to life at her tempting offer. "I'd love that."

"Then come with me and prepare to be wowed. We'll eat pralines until we're sick, and see if you can get Bishop all stirred up again." She winked at me, and I immediately regretted my hasty acceptance.

"Maybe that's not such a good idea."

Delilah's dark eyes shined with mischief. "I think it's the best idea I've had in forever. Come on. I won't take no for an answer."

And that's how I ended up allowing myself to be dragged back to Voodoo Ink within a half hour of deciding I wasn't going to walk past the tattoo shop ever again—no matter how badly I wanted to.

"Dirty Dog is my absolute favorite for clothes. Some of their vintage stuff is a little pricey, but not overpriced, you know what I mean? It's just good stuff. For eats, you have to check out the Cookery and Desire. I could literally give you a list as long as your arm. If you want to get out of the Quarter, it gets even longer."

My anxiety rose with every step we took toward the shop, but Delilah's cheerful monologue about awesome restaurants and shops helped drown it out, even if I didn't think I'd recall the name of a single place. Before too long, we stood in front of the door I remembered all too well. When she yanked it open, I wasn't ready.

My gaze scanned the vicinity for any kind of delay I could grasp.

The sign on the building next door read Your Favorite Hole with a giant donut as the O in *hole*.

Coffee. They liked caffeine.

"Do you want me to grab some coffee from next door to go with those pralines?"

Delilah paused with her hand on the door as the chimes tinkled. "I sure wouldn't turn it down."

Grateful for the momentary reprieve to get my thoughts in order, I stepped away from the door of Voodoo like someone had put some kind of spell across the entrance specifically designed to keep me out.

As soon as I walked into Your Favorite Hole, I realized my mistake in running away from the inevitable.

Because there he was. Standing in line one person ahead of me. He was unmistakable with that mane of brown-and-gold hair wrapped up in a man bun. At five foot six, I considered myself

average height, but he had to have at least eight or ten inches on me.

I wonder what else is eight or ten inches. Where the thought came from, I had no idea, but I silenced it . . . although not before dropping my gaze to the worn jeans that cupped his ass below the hem of his black Voodoo Ink T-shirt. The memory of yesterday's bulge stepped onto the center stage of my brain.

Bishop turned around, coffee cup in one hand and a brown paper bag in the other.

First the single-take. Then the double-take. Followed by the fleeting look of surprise.

"Eden."

A stupid thrill ran through me when he said my name. *I shouldn't be impressed that he hasn't forgotten it in twelve hours.* And yet, I kind of was.

"Uh, hi?" I waved awkwardly, my wristlet dangling from my waving hand.

Wow. Smooth, E.

He backed away from the counter and came toward me. The woman in front of me in line turned and dragged her gaze from the thick black soles of his boots up to the top of his man-bunned head, all but salivating at the sight.

"How was the room?" he asked.

"Good. Fine. Great. Really nice. Thank you. I appreciate it. Really."

He stayed silent after my word vomit.

The woman in front of me paid for her coffee and donuts and moved toward the counter, where the barista would undoubtedly set up the drinks.

"Ma'am, what can I get for ya?" the woman behind the cash register asked, providing the interruption I needed.

Bishop's attention stayed on me and his feet remained planted on the floor. I opened my mouth to order before realizing I had no idea what kind of coffee I should order for Delilah.

Chancing another glance up at Bishop, I found him still watching me. "Do you know what Delilah drinks?"

His brows knitted together. "You're coming to the shop?"

"Oh, hon, that's all you had to say," the cashier said. "We'll whip her order right up. You want anything else?"

I turned from Bishop to the cashier. "Two of whatever Delilah gets is fine."

"No problem."

The heat from Bishop's stare dissipated, and I glanced over my shoulder.

He was gone.

No good to see you again. No stay the hell away from the shop. Nothing.

The cashier read the confusion on my face when I faced the counter again. "Ah, don't worry about Bishop making a quick exit. He don't talk to many people, no matter how much they might want to talk to him."

Her description echoed what I'd gathered yesterday.

"Do you know him well?" I asked as I handed over a twenty.

"As well as anyone, I guess. He comes in twice a day like clockwork, getting his caffeine fix and ignoring the ladies." She jerked her head toward the woman waiting by the barista, whose eyes were fixed on the door Bishop had just exited. "And don't forget those two." She nodded toward the comfy seating area in the corner where two other women sat, their expressions disappointed and wistful all at the same time.

"They come in here at least three times a week to stare. He's like our own little attraction drawing in customers 'round here, because they sure as hell don't come for the donuts."

I believed it. They didn't exactly look like they ate a lot of donuts, given the way their knit blouses clung to their thin frames. Actually, I kind of wanted to buy a few donuts and drop them in front of the two women and walk away slowly.

Once the image evaporated from my mind, I turned my attention back to the cashier, whose name tag read Fabienne. "This place is amazing. I can't imagine you need an attraction to get people to come in here." The wall of donuts behind her tempted the crap out of me, even though I'd already had beignets and planned to devour pralines.

If I work up the courage to go into Voodoo.

Fabienne smiled back at me. "It ain't Starbucks, but we do all right. You want a donut to go with that order?"

"I've got some pralines waiting for me, but I'll definitely take a rain check."

The barista set two cups on the end of the counter. "Delilah's order is ready."

I moved toward the end of the counter and thanked her.

"Make sure to come back and try one."

"I will, definitely."

I refused to acknowledge that my promise meant that I'd be so close to Voodoo.

I collected the coffee and decided that regardless of what or who was next door, I would be back.

Chapter Nine

Bishop

The door chimed, and I jerked my head around to see if she'd actually come back.

Who the hell else would walk into a tattoo shop wearing a pink sweater?

Play it fucking cool, man. Lock this shit down.

I didn't react to women like this. Certainly not ones who were as innocent and naive as Eden. I needed to treat her like any other customer. Except she wasn't even a customer, so I didn't know what to do with her. Dragging her into the back to find out if her lips were as sweet as the cupcake she made me think of when I saw her wasn't an option.

Delilah strolled out of the employee break room and met Eden as she crossed the black-and-white-checked floor of the shop.

"Caffeine. Lifeblood of the gods. Thank you. I'll repay you with all the pralines you can eat before you puke. But you have to clean up your own puke. Shop rule."

Eden's brows went up. "I'll try not to puke." She held out a cup to Delilah. "I asked for your order, and the woman at the counter said this was it."

"Four-shot skinny latte with a dash of cinnamon. The only thing that keeps me going some days."

"I got the same, so it's good to know you don't drink black-tar coffee or something." Eden sounded hesitant, like she had no idea why she was here.

That made two of us.

Delilah dropped the open box of pralines in her hand on the counter, and I pretended I wasn't watching as Eden studied them and pulled out a candy.

Now I'm a fucking creeper. What am I going to do? Watch her eat it?

"Hey, Bish, you want one?" Delilah called to me. "Might sweeten you up a little."

I sucked back a too-big mouthful of coffee, burning my tongue.

"I'm good." Almost as an afterthought, I tacked on, "Thanks."

Delilah's eye roll was almost audible.

"Don't mind him; he's just cranky. Bish is still recovering from the girl who committed the cardinal sin after he dropped you at the hotel last night—she touched his beard *and* she grabbed his ass."

People who talked about you like you weren't there were fucking fabulous. But Delilah was the only family I had, so she got a pass.

"Oh wow. That's pretty . . . forward." Eden's surprised gaze finally landed on me, and I held it for several long moments before it dropped to the floor.

"It gets way worse, and sad to say, he gets the brunt of it." Delilah glanced back toward my station. "I don't know what it is about a guy with tats and a beard that makes them think they should just grab on to whatever they want."

"That's enough, D. I can hear every word."

She turned around with a smirk. "Obviously. Why else would I talk about you?"

Eden's gaze darted back and forth between us like she didn't know what to make of this kind of banter.

"Because you're a pain in my ass."

“And you love me anyway. Get out here and say hi to Eden. You know you want to.”

Eden’s face flamed red, but Delilah didn’t seem to notice she was embarrassing the hell out of the girl.

“It’s okay. I don’t mean to bother either of you. I was just . . .”

I rose from my stool and came out into the main area of the shop as Eden’s words trailed off.

“You were just doing what?” I asked.

“Exploring. And trying new things.” Her dark eyes met mine after a beat of hesitation, and I could think of a dozen new things I’d like her to try.

Why did corrupting her innocence seem like the best idea I’d had in years? I should feel like a piece of shit for even considering touching her, but something about her called to my most basic instincts.

Protect. Defend. Claim.

I hadn’t felt that fucking primal in years—and I needed to *lock that shit down*. My life was simple, and this girl had *complicated* written all over her.

“She’s about to try her very first praline,” Delilah said. “You sure you don’t want one, Bish?”

“I’m good. Have at ’em.”

Eden, looking grateful for the interruption, lifted it to her lips. When she bit into the praline, a quiet moan escaped her mouth and echoed in my balls.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. She shouldn’t be bringing out this kind of response in me, and I needed to get it under control before I did something I wouldn’t be able to take back.

I turned my attention away and walked behind the counter to check the appointment book, even though I knew exactly what was on the schedule for the day.

“Oh my God, these are delicious,” Eden whispered after she swallowed.

“Best in the city, in my opinion. So, what really brings you to New Orleans if you aren’t here for the craziness of Mardi Gras?”

It was a question I wanted to ask too.

“I always wanted to come here?” Eden’s reply sounded a hell of a lot more like a question, but before she could say more, the door swung open and chimed again.

I swung my focus to the entrance, ready to glare at whoever came inside, but I couldn’t.

“Charlie! It’s been way too long, stranger! Where have you been hiding, girl?” Delilah’s excitement sent her voice into the next octave.

The women hugged, and Charlie smiled over Delilah’s shoulder at me. “Hey, Bishop. How’s it going?”

“He’s cranky as usual,” Delilah said. “Tell me, what’s new? This place isn’t the same without you around. I know you’re up in Simon’s fancy-schmancy place doing all that noble charity stuff, but we miss you down here.”

Charlie was the shopgirl before I started here. I’d only met her a few times when she’d come in for touch-ups on her tats. Full sleeves graced her arms, and her back was fairly covered. She was notorious in her own right, the daughter of the man who committed the biggest fraud to ever hit the investment world.

I wondered if Eden would recognize her. Most people didn’t, given that she’d made a one-hundred-eighty-degree change from the days she spent as a society princess.

“We’ve been so crazy busy. Between Simon taking over the CEO position from his dad, and me running the nonprofit, I swear, we barely get to sleep anymore. But I had to get down here to say hi and see if you could squeeze me in for a quick touch-up.”

“Anything for you, girl. Anytime.”

Charlie turned to Eden and held out a hand. “Sorry to be rude. I’m Charlie Duchesne. I used to work here.”

“Best damn shopgirl we’ve ever had. And we haven’t found a new one who would stick since. Sad state of affairs.” Delilah motioned to Eden. “This is our new friend Eden, who up and decided to come to New Orleans on Mardi Gras but didn’t know what she was getting into. I’m just waiting for the real story.”

Eden stiffened, and my guess was that she didn’t appreciate being put on the spot.

“Umm . . . there’s really no story.”

Charlie sized her up. “You sure? Because that’s what people usually say who have the best stories.”

“I really just always wanted to come here. That’s basically it.”

“How long are you staying?” This question came from Delilah.

Eden shrugged. “I don’t know. I haven’t decided.”

“Where are you staying?” Charlie asked.

“A hotel, for the moment.”

Eden’s answers were vague enough to raise more than one question in my mind, but for some reason, I didn’t like seeing how uncomfortable the interrogation made her.

“What do you need touched up?” I asked Charlie, trying to change the subject. “I can take care of it right now, if you want.”

All three female heads swung in my direction.

Charlie smiled. “Only if it’s not too much trouble.” She held up her arm and flipped it over. “When this healed, some of the line work flaked. Considering it’s my tattoo for Simon, I want it to be perfect.” She glanced at Delilah. “And I wanted a reason to come hang out. I miss this place.”

Delilah studied her. “Are you sure everything’s okay uptown?”

Charlie nodded. “I’m just feeling nostalgic, and I had some free time on my hands.”

“Come on. We can get you fixed up.” As I headed back to my station and Charlie followed, I could feel Eden’s attention on me.

It only took ten minutes to fix the lines on Charlie’s eternity tat, and by the time we finished, she was ready to spill.

She dropped into one of the waiting-room chairs and pulled her knees up in front of her. She looked all of twenty years old. “We’re talking about trying to have a baby, and I’m kinda freaking out.”

Delilah’s eyes widened. “Wow. That’s a big one.”

Eden, who’d been talking about pralines and places to eat in the Quarter with Delilah while I worked, released a breath. “That is big.”

Charlie tucked her hair behind her ears. “I love Simon more than I knew I could ever love another human being, and I want to have a family with him. It’s always seemed so far off in the future, you know? But now it’s getting real. It shouldn’t scare me, but it does.”

“Change is hard. Especially that kind of permanent change.” Delilah’s voice was soft.

“Yeah, and I know it’s going to be the kind of change that flips our entire life on its head, and I’m trying to figure out if I’m ready for that. I like our life. It’s good. It’s amazing. What if this screws everything up?”

“What does Simon say about it?” Delilah asked.

Charlie shook her head. “I haven’t told him any of this. I don’t know how. I don’t want him

to think I'm not excited for a family, but I'm . . . I'm just worried."

"You've gotta talk to him about it. He's a man; he can't read your mind."

Again, all three female heads in the room swiveled around to face me. Even I was surprised to hear myself offer up the words.

Delilah offered a small smile to Charlie. "He's right. You have to tell Simon what you're thinking. That's the only way you're going to be able to figure out if right now is the time to do this."

"I know. But he wants it so much, and I feel like there's something wrong with me because I need to really think about it."

"There's nothing wrong with that. It's going to affect you both, so you both have to be ready."

Charlie inhaled and released a deep breath before uncurling herself from the chair and standing. "Okay. I'm going to talk to him today."

"Everything's going to be fine. That man loves you like crazy." Delilah hugged her tight. "Now, don't be a stranger."

Charlie hugged her back. "You know I won't be." Then she looked at Eden. "If you need a place to stay for longer than a couple days, let Delilah or Bishop know. My old landlady is crazy as hell, in the best way possible, but she's got a place she keeps empty most of the time. It was exactly what I needed when I was new in town and trying to find my way. Something tells me you might need the same thing."

Chapter Ten

Eden

The way Charlie looked at me, studying my features, made my heart hammer.

I recognized her. She'd been on the front page of every newspaper in New York for a couple of months while the FBI was trying to track her down. But she hadn't looked like this then—no tattoos and purple-and-red hair had made the front page. She was the privileged daughter of the biggest investment swindler to hit New York since Bernie Madoff.

Just knowing she was from the same city made me worry about being recognized. But I'd never been in the papers. We'd never crossed paths. It was impossible.

Still, Charlie's offer made it seem like she saw too much.

"Thank you for the offer," I said. "I appreciate it."

She smiled at me again before she left the shop.

I had to be more careful. I couldn't risk being identified. I was supposed to be laying low, and here I was acting like a tourist.

Dumb, Eden. Why do you have to be so dumb? Maybe because my life hadn't exactly prepared me for this.

As soon as the door chimed behind her, Delilah turned her attention back to me.

"So, what are you going to do with yourself while you're here?"

I knew what I wasn't going to do—stay holed up in my hotel room and not get to experience anything. I could go back to New York and do plenty of nothing.

The thought hung in my head like a punishment. *Why would I want to go back to that?*

Then my next thought. *It's not like Dom would give me a choice.*

Realizing I'd let the silence go too long without answering, I met Delilah's gaze. "I think I'd just like to do some living." It was as honest of an answer as I could give.

"Well, sugar, I think you've come to the right place for that. Between me and Bishop, we can show you almost everything this city has to offer."

Bishop didn't offer his support for her suggestion, and I filled the awkward silence that followed.

"That's okay. I'm sure I can figure it out. I've got a list. My plan is to work my way through it."

"A list? How very organized of you. Do tell."

Bishop pulled out his cell phone and frowned down at it. He turned and walked down the back hallway without a word.

Delilah and I both watched him go before she turned back to me.

"Look, I don't know if you've got your sights set on the big guy, but he's tough to read. I've never seen him react to someone the way he did with you, so I have no idea what to make of that. I probably shouldn't interfere, but . . . that's kind of what I do. So, you want the scoop?"

Do I? I almost snorted at my own stupid mental question. *Of course I do.*

Chapter Eleven

Bishop

I breathed in stale smoke until it clogged my lungs as the pain from my broken ribs threatened to take me to my knees again. I'd crawled all the way from the alley, where they'd left me broken, to find everything that mattered to me had been burned away.

Rage filled my veins as I vowed revenge.

I jerked awake from the nightmare, sweat coating my skin, sheets sticking to my body, and my lungs heaving for breath. It had been months since it had ripped me out of sleep and tossed me into a past I couldn't run far enough from to forget.

I sat up in bed for a few minutes, letting my racing heart calm down enough to assure myself I wasn't having a heart attack, before accepting that there was no way in hell I was getting any more sleep tonight.

After splashing my face with water, I stared into the mirror. The long hair, the beard, the tattoos. Behind them was the punk kid who'd thought he knew how to fix everything and hadn't considered what his actions could cost him.

Everything.

Whiskey. That was the only thing that would drive the smell of the smoke from my nose and chase the memories away. I stumbled into my kitchen for the bottle on top of the fridge, but as soon as my hand wrapped around it, I couldn't stomach the thought of sitting at my table drinking alone.

Too much silence to dwell on the past. I needed noise. People. Not to interact, but to distract.

I headed back to the bedroom to grab a pair of jeans off the floor. I shoved my legs into them before reaching around in the darkness to find the nearest shirt.

After I dragged my boots on, I tied my hair up into a knot at the back of my head and shoved a knife in my pocket. Old habits die hard, even though most people would think twice about fucking with a tatted-up guy my size. But then again, tweakers and drunks didn't always care.

Maybe that's what I needed tonight. When I left my apartment above Voodoo and headed toward Bourbon Street and the perfect distraction of nonstop partying, I was more than ready to take on a fight, if that's what found me.

I didn't admit to myself that I was going to walk past one specific balcony, hoping to catch a glimpse of a girl I knew better than to think about.

Chapter Twelve

Eden

I tried to find sleep again, but tonight it wasn't happening. Too many thoughts and possibilities made it just as impossible as the dull roar coming from outside.

Fear kept me in my hotel room. Fear that I'd attract the wrong kind of trouble and wouldn't be able to defend myself. Fear that I'd be recognized somehow. Fear that I didn't know how to live, even when given the opportunity.

How pathetic is that?

Twenty-four years old, and I was completely clueless about life and scared to take the first step to living it. Maybe it hadn't just been the gilded cage keeping me trapped, maybe it was *me*.
So, get out there. Live.

I peeked out the curtains of my balcony window and watched as the partiers milled about in the streets with drinks in hand, or exited one bar only to enter another.

I could go down there and have a drink. Step a few inches outside my comfort zone. Finally have a life experience not dictated by someone else.

Did I really want to do it? No. It would be easier to stay here, in my bed, where I could find another book to hopefully hold my attention. But something inside me told me I had to do it. I owed it to myself.

As I pulled back the duvet, a vision of the two naked girls who had been on this bed before me entered my mind—along with the guy who'd tossed them out of the room.

If I hadn't been here, would Bishop have taken advantage of what they'd been offering? The one girl, Kitty, had made it sound like she'd already been with him once and wanted seconds.

Not that it mattered. The fumbling loss of my virginity with a hotel bellboy in a beach cabana when I was eighteen and on a trip to Spain with my aunt didn't exactly put me into the category of women who would attract a guy like Bishop.

Why am I even thinking about this?

Probably because everywhere I looked in this room, I felt or saw his presence.

Well, that was one more reason on the "pro" side of getting out of here for a couple of hours.

Decision made, I crossed to the closet and considered my options. I hadn't packed anything that screamed *night out on Bourbon Street*. Probably because I didn't own anything like the girls wore out there.

I'd brought exactly one dress, and it was simple and black with cap sleeves and a square neckline. Otherwise, my choices were jeans and camis and cardigans. I couldn't wear a cardigan on Bourbon Street, could I? It seemed like one of those offenses that could get you escorted out of the French Quarter.

But a dress? That seemed like too much.

Out of your comfort zone, E.

Without thinking any further, I stripped off my yoga pants and T-shirt and slipped the dress off the hanger.

As I stepped into it and zipped up the side, I examined my shoe options. Leopard-print flats would have to work because wearing my Sperrys with it would definitely get me laughed out of town.

A makeup touch-up followed, and after I clasped a necklace around my neck, I was done. Ready.

I left my room before I had a chance to change my mind.

* * * *

When I pushed open the doors of the hotel and stepped onto the sidewalk, I couldn't decide if I'd made the best decision of my life or a horrible mistake. I'd convinced myself that I could handle myself out here, but the noise was three times as loud as it had been in my room, and being on the street level made it seem more foreboding than it had from the balcony window.

Revelers dodged around me as I stood like an idiot in their way. One man knocked into my shoulder as he walked backward. His apology was muffled as he tripped over his feet, and I followed his line of sight to see a dozen women lifting their shirts for men on a balcony across the street.

The best description I could give it—tits and ass everywhere.

And I looked all prim and proper in my just-above-the-knee-length dress, flats, and understated jewelry. *Terrible mistake*, I decided.

I was two seconds from turning back to the hotel and retracing my steps to my room when I saw a group of girls around my age laughing and walking down the street. Greek letters were printed on the front of their T-shirts, and from the smiles on their faces and the drinks in their hands, they weren't worried about their safety. I didn't have numbers on my side, but I could get off the street and into a bar with a corner stool that would allow me to people-watch without being right in the thick of it.

That's stepping out of your comfort zone? my inner voice said, mocking me.

"One step at a time," I whispered to myself. "Small steps."

Now, which bar? I turned and surveyed my options. So many of them looked alike. I let instinct be my guide and picked the one with music coming from open doors and windows only a few dozen feet away.

It seemed as good a choice as any, and I didn't have to walk by any dark alleys.

Making my way inside the dark room lit mostly by neon beer mirrors and signs, I snagged a seat at the end of the scarred bar where it curved around and met the wall as a couple left.

The bartender wasted no time before stopping in front of me.

"What can I get you, hon?" Her blond hair was pulled up into a messy bun on the top of her head, and a deep vee cut in the black shirt showed off her generous cleavage.

I looked around the room to see what everyone else was drinking, and spotted a woman with a plastic cup of what looked like some kind of purple punch.

I nodded at it. "I'll have one of those purple ones."

"Ten dollars."

Pulling some cash from my small wristlet, I handed it over and she turned to make the drink.

See, that wasn't hard.

The drink was before me in less than two minutes, and I lifted it in a silent toast to this new chapter in my life. *Salut.*

It was grape deliciousness in a plastic cup. I had no idea what kind of alcohol or how much the bartender used because I couldn't taste it. Someone could seriously put this drink in a sippy cup, and I would have thought it was for toddlers. Well, not quite. But that explained why it went down so fast.

The heat from the crush of people in the bar flushed my cheeks, and I officially decided that this was a good decision.

When I laid another ten on the bar and lifted my cup toward the bartender, she nodded, grabbing the money before going to work mixing another drink.

The second one I sipped a little more slowly, mostly because of the cute guy who took the stool beside me.

“Hey, I’m John.”

“Eden.”

“You here by yourself?”

Instinctively, I knew I should lie. Smart Girl Bar Rules 101. “My friends are dancing. I’m taking a break.”

“Yeah, it gets pretty wild here, especially during Mardi Gras.”

We yelled to each other over the music and the noise for a few minutes while he ordered a drink and told me stories of some of the crazy stuff he’d seen tonight. I ordered my third drink and he insisted on paying. I insisted right back that I could buy my own drinks. It started going down just as quickly.

He pointed out another drunk idiot, and I turned my head toward the street.

And that’s when I saw him. Bishop. Like an avenger just inside the bar, his tattoos lit almost neon by the lights, he shoved through the crowd toward me in the corner of the bar. His eyes locked on the guy next to me as I lifted my cup and sucked down another swig.

Before I could lower my drink to the bar, Bishop grabbed the cup from my hand and dumped it down John’s shirt.

“What the fuck, man?” John jumped off his bar stool as the purple liquid stained his blue-and-white-striped polo.

Rage. That was the only emotion I could make out on Bishop’s face.

“I saw you drop something in her drink. Don’t fucking tell me I didn’t.”

My eyes darted everywhere. From Bishop to John and then to the bartender, a wooden club clenched in her small fist. She looked between the two men, as if unsure who she should be threatening.

“All of you. Get the hell out of my bar.”

Bishop didn’t say another word before wrapping a giant hand around my upper arm and pulling me off my stool. As he dragged me toward the door, he turned back to John, who was now patting his shirt down with napkins.

“Get the fuck out of this town before I can track you down and show you what I do to guys like you. Piece of shit.”

The bouncer, probably attracted by the commotion, stepped to Bishop and looked down at me.

“You okay, miss?” He had to yell so I could hear him.

I nodded because I couldn’t think of anything else to do. Was I okay? I thought so. My head was swimming and my legs were unsteady, but that was just the alcohol, right? I hadn’t been drugged. Had I?

“That piece of shit dosed her drink. I don’t think she had much, though.”

The bouncer immediately spun around and stalked across the bar toward John.

Bishop didn’t wait to see what the bouncer did before tugging me onto the street. Thankful for my flats, I stumbled along after him.

“Slow down. Please.”

I tripped on a crack in the sidewalk and pitched forward toward Bishop's side.

Shit.

He didn't let me land on my face. Apparently, he was good at that. His strong arms wrapped around me, and he caught a handful of boob.

Holy shit. Bishop is touching my boob, was the only thought in my alcohol-soaked brain. My nipple peaked into his hand, which he yanked away before setting me upright again.

"What the fuck are you doing out here by yourself?"

I blurted the only answer that came to mind. "Living."

That's when my knees gave out, and I pitched forward into Bishop's chest.

Chapter Thirteen

Bishop

Living. The word echoed in my head as Eden's body collapsed into mine.

Fuck. I scooped her up into my arms.

"Shit, you're hammered. How much did you drink?"

Her head lolled against my shoulder. "Enough. But only a little of the last one. You spilled it."

"No shit. Because you were getting fucking roofied. I thought you learned your lesson when someone tried to grab you in front of Voodoo. You need to smarten up if you're going to spend any time alone in this city."

"Sorry I'm not doing a good enough job for you."

I stepped in the direction of the hotel. She needed a keeper, and it wasn't like I was in the market for another job.

"Where's your room key?"

She lifted her arm to show me a little purse dangling from her wrist.

When we reached the door to the lobby, I set her on her feet and she wrapped her arms around my neck. "Don't let go."

"You smell good." Her face buried in my neck as I unzipped the purse and fished out the keycard. "Really good."

I shook my head, trying to tell myself that she was just drunk and had no idea what she was saying.

"Come on. Let's get you inside."

Eden untucked her face from my body and looked up at me. "Are you coming inside?"

"You think you can get up there yourself?"

Her brows drew together as she considered it. "I don't know. What was in those drinks? They didn't taste like anything but grape."

From the way she was stumbling, I had to guess it was the Purple Circus Punch, made with Everclear. And I also had to imagine that Eden didn't have a clue what that was.

I slid the keycard into the reader and pushed open the door to the lobby. Keeping her tucked in tight to my side and helping her walk, we avoided too many strange looks in the lobby before we reached the elevator.

Thankfully, I remembered exactly which room she was in, because Eden was already on the edge of passing out by the time the elevator stopped on the third floor. I lifted her into my arms and carried her down the hallway.

"I've never been like this before . . . not even when I raided my aunt's wine collection when she spent the weekend at the spa."

If I needed any more clues to figure out just how sheltered the girl in my arms was, that would have done it.

Adjusting my grip on her again, I used the key to open the door to the room and pushed inside. She hadn't taken it over like most women would—tossing clothes everywhere and covering every flat surface with something girly. She'd kept her suitcase neatly packed, and the only thing disturbed was the bed. The sheets were tangled and a tablet sat on the nightstand.

I lowered her to the bed and she flopped backward on it.

Rage heated within me again at the kid who'd dosed her drink. I wanted to go back and beat the fuck out of him. But if I knew bouncers in NOLA, the kid wasn't getting off unscathed. We didn't take kindly to that shit here.

What the fuck would have happened if I hadn't ended up on Bourbon? If I'd gone to one of my normal places?

I didn't want to think about the alternative. When I'd stepped into the bar, my instincts demanded I scan the entire interior before ordering a drink. Even at the end of the bar, Eden hadn't been able to hide. In a sea of drunken mindlessness, she stood out. I didn't know what it was, but there was something.

And now, seeing her nearly unconscious, I couldn't stop thinking about how fucking vulnerable she was on her own.

She kicked her shoes off and struggled to sit up and reach behind her. "I can't reach it. Can you?"

She had to be talking about the zipper to the dress. I sat down on the bed beside her as she turned her back toward me. But there was no zipper.

"What are you trying to reach?"

"I just want out of this dress."

"Well, how did you get into it?"

Eden released a noise of frustration before stalling. "Crap. Side. Forgot." She lifted an arm but fumbled with the tiny tab.

"Stop. I got it." I tugged it down and the sides fell free beneath the sleeve.

Shit, her skin was just as smooth and white as I'd imagined when I pictured tattooing it.

I needed to step away, but she continued to struggle with the dress. This had to be punishment for something I'd done in the past. My hands itched to touch her, but I knew I had no right.

Then again, I couldn't keep watching her struggle, so I lifted her to her feet and slipped the dress up and over her head. I told myself I'd keep my eyes on her face, but even I knew I was a shitty liar.

Her tits were fucking perfect. Her bra was pale pink with white lace around the edges and completely sheer. Her nipples were a shade darker, and she looked as sweet as I'd imagined.

I had to stop.

I dragged my gaze to hers and she stared up at me. Her expression wasn't horrified but heated.

She liked that I looked. Her tongue flicked out to wet her lower lip, and the combination of lust and innocence made my dick harder than anything I could ever remember in the past. That's when her gaze dropped, and I knew she couldn't miss my reaction.

She swallowed, and after long moments, brought her attention north, but she couldn't quite meet my eyes. I lifted a hand to her chin and tilted it up the last few degrees.

I shouldn't have touched her. Her skin was even softer than it looked. She leaned into my touch, and that's what fucked me over.

Just a taste, I told myself. That's all.

I lowered my lips to hers and her hands landed on my chest, her fingers gripping my shirt and pulling me closer.

So goddamned sweet. She moaned and my cock pulsed, reminding me that it was ready to go.

I tore my mouth away and stepped back.

What the hell am I doing? She was drunk. Could have GHB running through her system. I wasn't going to take any more fucking advantage because that would make me just as shitty as the guy who'd dumped it in her drink.

Before she could say anything, I turned and crossed to her suitcase. Yoga pants and a T-shirt sat on top. "Here, put these on." I tossed them to her.

I waited a full sixty seconds, hoping like hell she would have covered herself by now, and then I turned.

Mistake.

She must have been struggling with her bra like she had with the dress, because now she was naked from the waist up.

"Christ, woman. Put on some clothes."

Hurt tinged her features, but I forced myself to push down the urge to tell her that she was fucking perfect and the edges of my control were fraying.

Eden tugged the T-shirt over her head and dropped onto the bed again before curling onto her side.

"Just go. I know you don't want to be here."

The hurt was in her voice too, and it pissed me off that my shitty judgment had put it there.

"Someone's gotta babysit you tonight, and I'm sure as hell not letting anyone else do it."

Part of me expected her to tell me to get the hell out, but the only response I got was a soft snore. *Out.*

I lowered myself into the desk chair, her taste still on my tongue. It was going to be a long fucking night.

Chapter Fourteen

Eden

“Fuck me, cupcake. I gotta eat you up.”

Palms landed on my thighs and spread my legs.

“This is going to be the sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted.”

I moaned and my eyes snapped open. I expected to see my fingers buried in brown-and-gold hair, but instead all I saw was . . . tangled white sheets and an empty hotel room.

No sign of the man who invaded my dreams.

I yanked the covers up over my head to hide the embarrassment burning my cheeks, and rolled over to smother myself in a pillow. A piece of paper crumpling against my face halted my movements. I peeled it off my cheek and forced my eyes to focus as the pounding in my head ramped up.

Had to go to work. Take the Advil on the nightstand and drink the water. If you think you’re dying, call.

A phone number was written beneath.

There was no doubt who had left the note. His handwriting was bold but crisp. No fifth-grader man-scrawl for Bishop.

He’d been here. It hadn’t all been a dream.

But which parts were real?

Laying the note aside after reading it another dozen times, I rewound the timeline in my brain and stumbled onto the most important fact—I’d been drunk and he’d rescued me, *again*.

Because I’d needed to be rescued. *Again*.

With a groan, I hugged the pillow and began the process of beating myself up.

I failed at following Vincent’s orders to stay out of sight. I failed at stepping outside my comfort zone. I was failing at everything.

All I’d wanted was to experience a slice of life outside my little bubble, and I’d ended up with drugs in my drink. A shiver of apprehension rolled down my spine, followed by the prickle of cold sweat. What would have happened if Bishop hadn’t been there?

I could only imagine how ridiculous he thought I must be. How naive. How *stupid*.

The women he was used to probably would have seen that guy drop something in their drink and would have slapped him across the face. Or maybe punched him with brass knuckles. What they wouldn’t have done was keep drinking like an ignorant idiot.

Why did I care about the women he was used to? I shouldn’t. But for some reason I couldn’t stop thinking about him. Maybe because he was so completely different from anyone I’d ever encountered.

That’s why I need to put him out of my mind. If there was ever a guy I could point to and say “he’s totally out of my league,” Bishop was him.

I lay in bed for another thirty minutes, torturing myself by cataloging all the reasons I would never wake up to Bishop saying dirty things to me like Dream Bishop had this morning.

Not that I was carrying some kind of torch for Bishop. I didn’t even know him. At most, I

had some weird fascination with him. That was all. It was never going anywhere. It was the same as having a crush on some unattainable celebrity.

Oh God, I said crush. I do not have a crush.

I rolled again, this time to the edge of my bed so I could sit up and make my next stop the shower, where I could drown any misplaced feelings I might or might not have about Bishop.

I spent the next hour alternatively trying not to throw up and trying to talk myself into leaving the hotel again rather than staying in this room until I was old and wrinkly and someone had to carry my body out for my funeral parade.

God, that's morbid.

Although, seeing one of those jazz parades would be cool. I wondered if they had them for reasons other than death? I needed to look that up.

I swiped on mascara and lip gloss before adding some blush to make me look a little more human, and stepped out of the bathroom.

I would not stay in this room all day. I would see more of the city. I would not go drinking. I would not do anything else that would require being rescued. Today I was truly starting over.

A glance at the clock revealed it was already one in the afternoon, and I blanched. *Jeez*. Had I ever slept until noon before? Even in college? Not that I could remember.

When I gathered my purse up off the desk, the room-service menu stared back at me, reminding me I didn't ever need to leave. I could stay hidden up here until they booted me out.

And how would that be any different from the life I lived in New York, watching the world pass by from the window of my apartment or the window of an SUV?

I wasn't going to waste this opportunity. I was going to *live*.

I looked down at my jeans, Sperrys, and rose-colored cardigan. First things first. I needed to go shopping so I could fit in here a little more. Then, it was time to check some things off my list.

Chapter Fifteen

Eden

I focused on the excitement humming through my veins as I pushed open the lobby door and stepped onto Bourbon Street. The concierge had written down a list of shops that I should try if I wanted to get a true New Orleans shopping experience, along with a map. Thankfully, the list jogged my memory. The place Delilah had mentioned was included—Dirty Dog. I had to resist the urge to pump my fist in the air at the familiar name. Small victories.

In the light of day, Bourbon Street was a completely different experience. It wasn't empty, by any means, and given that Mardi Gras was right around the corner, that didn't surprise me at all. Obviously, there were still the obligatory partiers who either hadn't quit from the night before or were getting an early start, but it seemed that the crush of people from last night had moved on to sleep it off.

The concierge had also been so kind as to let me know that there were several other parades today, each put on by a different *krewe*, groups that organized parades and parties for Mardi Gras. I tucked the information away for later.

The first stop on the concierge's list was only a block and a half away, and I breathed a small sigh of relief when I saw the black sign with red letters on a brick building. Hell's Angel. I reached for the door handle and turned.

Locked.

I checked the hours on the window and groaned. It didn't open until two. Well, that was disappointing. I peeked through the windows to see what exactly I would be missing if I skipped to the next place.

Everything looked either black or red or covered with skulls or spikes—or all of the above. Like the black-and-red corset with skulls on each boob that were covered in spikes.

"Oh wow," I mumbled. "Maybe I should come back to this one later." I caught my reflection in the mirror. Eyes wide, looking like I'd discovered an alien planet.

Maybe I could find something a little more . . . practical. That wasn't unreasonable, right? I mean, how often would I really wear a spiked corset?

Dirty Dog had to be more promising, especially given Delilah's personal seal of approval. Decision made, I twisted the map around to match the configuration of the streets ahead of me. It wasn't far, only a couple of turns and a couple of blocks. Even I couldn't get lost in this perfect grid of streets. I hoped.

The map also noted where I could find Anthropologie and H&M, but I wasn't looking for the same kind of clothes I could buy in New York. I wanted something local. Something that wasn't mass produced and sold in a thousand locations.

I set off down the street, only to be distracted by the delicious scent of coffee and fresh yeasty bread. My feet practically directed themselves as I stepped inside the tiny little café and selected a fresh croissant and the largest coffee they sold.

Nectar of the gods, I thought as I devoured the croissant in three bites and nearly burned my tongue on my sweet praline latte. *Totally worth it.*

Coffee cup in hand, I returned to the street and kept walking.

Distracted by the fabulous architecture, I made it a solid four blocks before I realized I had

to be lost.

The pedestrians that wandered the streets of the Quarter had disappeared, and in front of me was a boulevard and a park. Thankful for the easy-to-find street signs, I pulled out my map again and twisted it around to try to figure out where I'd gone wrong.

The freaking café. It had been on a corner, and I'd gone in a door on one street and come out the door on the other street and kept walking. *Honest mistake, right?*

Not willing to let my minor detour get me down, I turned back around and walked in the direction of the café so I could find my way again.

Thirty minutes later, I found myself in front of a big teal-and-white sign with Dirty Dog wrapped around the outside and a white bulldog in the middle. The front of the building was painted a cheery yellow, and the old dress forms in the window sported the cutest retro dresses I'd ever seen. One was pink with white paisley print and a white belt around the waist, and the other was the same dress, but in deep purple with black paisley.

Immediately, I wondered if I could get away with wearing either of them. Or both.

Please be open. Please be open.

My thoughts were answered when the door chimed and a girl poked her head out. "Hey! I'm JP. Are you coming in?"

"If you're open, I'd love to find a dress or two." I gestured down at my jeans and cardigan and Sperrys. "Actually, I need more than just a dress."

The girl smiled at me. "Well, honey, you've come to the right place. Me and Yve will get you all set up. She's got the cutest stuff in the whole city."

I followed JP into the store. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

She nodded and clapped her hands. "Yve! We've got a live one!"

Her high-pitched voice screeched without warning, and another woman peered out from what looked like a back room, her arms full of dresses.

"Knock off the yelling about customers, girl."

"It's only one customer, and she doesn't mind."

Shifting the dresses to one arm, a gorgeous woman with golden tanned skin and dark hair stepped across the floor toward me.

"Ignore her. She still doesn't have any manners. We're working on it." She unearthed a hand from beneath the dresses and offered it to me. "Welcome to Dirty Dog. I'm Yve, and this is my shop."

"Eden. I'm . . . new in town. Delilah from Voodoo Ink sent me your way."

Yve's tawny gaze lit with recognition before sizing me up. "Ah, you're the one she mentioned might be coming by. She said she hasn't seen Bishop act like that . . . ever. He's turned silence into just as much of an art form as the ink he puts down on skin."

JP gasped. "Oh God, don't tell me you're the one who's going to be responsible for breaking my heart and killing all my bearded and man-bunned dreams."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't mind JP. Her crush is a thing of legend."

"And Bishop keeps shooting me down. He won't touch any clients. Who knew the best artist I'd ever meet would be the man of my dreams with such a stupid rule?" JP's tone was distraught, but clearly overdramatic.

I hoarded the little pieces of information about Bishop like a junkie. *Because that's normal.*

"We've only met a couple times." I didn't want to bring up the fact that he'd rescued me from being possibly raped last night. Today was too nice and new to be focusing on that. Instead,

I changed the subject. “So, I was hoping you could help me find some dresses. Actually, for whatever won’t make me look like a tourist. I just . . . I need a change.”

Yve appraised my outfit and nodded. “I can see what you mean. Let’s get started.” She spun away, her sunny yellow dress, the color of the outside of the building, swishing as she turned to a rack.

JP was already ahead of her. “As much as it sucks knowing that you can pull this off in a way I never could, and Bishop will probably fall all over himself when he sees it, you have to try it on.” She holds up a white dress with pink polka dots. “We have the perfect shoes to go with it too, if you’re not on too tight of a budget.”

I thought of the credit card in my purse. I had no idea what the limit was, but knowing my father, it couldn’t be less than five figures.

“Can I try it on?”

“Absolutely. I’ll start putting stuff in the fitting room. You’re going to want to try on way more than just one.”

“Let’s try the teal and the red too. Both of these are fun.” Yve held up a hanger in each hand. The teal dress had a boat neckline that managed to look both sexy and classy, and the red dress had a wide vee that would show a little more without making me feel overexposed.

She carried the dresses toward the fitting room, and I followed. Or I tried. I only made it three steps before a lavender leopard-print dress caught my eye. It reminded me of the one Delilah had worn the other day, but this color was softer and quieter but still fun.

“Oh, I love that one. Delilah has the neon version. She said this was too tame for her inner kitty cat.” JP followed the statement with a *rawr* and a clawing motion with her hand, and I could picture Delilah doing exactly the same thing.

It wasn’t like I’d be wearing it at the same time and place as Delilah, so . . . “I’ll try that one too, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not. Try on anything you want. We’ve got cute lingerie, and some awesome skirts, and vintage tops and tees too.”

Yve slipped out of the dressing room to take the lavender dress from JP. “Don’t overwhelm the girl, just funnel some of it into the fitting room and she can try whatever she likes.” She checked her watch. “I’ve got a lunch date at noon, so I’ll let y’all get started while I fix my makeup.”

“Ooh, is that sexy hubby of yours coming to take you somewhere he can have you for lunch instead? And by *have you for lunch*, I mean bang you over a table for your nooner.”

A hint of a blush stained Yve’s cheekbones, and I couldn’t help but grin at JP’s unfiltered comments.

“I should fire you.” Yve narrowed her eyes. “Tell me again why I haven’t fired you?”

“Because I’m irreplaceable.”

“You’re lucky I love you, kid.”

JP puckered up and blew Yve an air kiss. “Love you too, Yve.”

Yve straightened and looked to me. “Right this way. And get ready to put a dent in your credit-card limit, because I know you’re going to fall in love with these.”

Fifteen minutes later, I knew she was right. All four dresses were on the fitting-room hook I’d designated as the *yes* pile. The lingerie that mysteriously made it into the dressing room, by JP sliding it between T-shirts and skirts, also fit and hung on the *yes* hook.

The only things I didn’t plan to leave the store with were the three packs of pasties she’d included and the T-shirts that had the names of bands on them I’d never heard of. They were

cute, but if someone started a conversation with me about them, I'd feel like a total poser because googling them to learn their history and songs didn't seem quite right.

I stepped out of the dressing room with my arms full and ran smack into the side of a tall man coming into the shop through the back hallway.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

"Looks like you could use some help." He lifted the dresses from my arms and carried them to the counter, and hung them on the decorative hook beside it.

"JP, you want to ring these up so I can steal that woman of mine away?"

The man wore a perfectly tailored suit. Everything about him—from his casually styled hair, tanned skin, and French-blue shirt to his heavy watch and designer shoes—screamed *money*.

"Lucas, you're early." Yve looked down at her watch. "I've got seven minutes."

"And what makes you think I've suddenly developed a streak of patience?"

Goose bumps peppered my skin at the hungry look in his eyes as he stared at Yve. JP was probably right—Yve was on the menu for lunch. If he picked her up, tossed her over his shoulder, and carried her out of here, I would have trouble acting surprised. It seemed at complete odds that a man in such a civilized suit could give off such a primitive vibe.

"Give me five minutes to get Eden rung up."

"Do you want me to carry you out of here?"

My eyebrows shot up as my thoughts came out of his mouth.

"See, that's all I want. A man who wants to carry me out of places because he can't wait to get me alone. But noooo. Bishop has the hots for Eden instead."

Lucas's attention shifted from Yve to me. "I'd apologize for being rude, but I'm not sorry I'm stealing my wife away. Good luck with the lumberjack."

"He's not a lumberjack!" JP jumped instantly to Bishop's defense as my body shook with unexpected laughter.

"Close enough. Yve, I'm giving you five seconds to back away from the cash register before the entire block hears you scream as I carry you out."

He started his countdown, and Yve turned to me with a smile that told me she wasn't all that upset about the idea of being carried out.

"I'm so glad I got to meet you, Eden. You'll have to come back and let me know how those dresses work out. And if you're going to a parade tonight, make sure you let JP set you up with a fascinator. You absolutely need a fascinator."

Lucas finished his countdown, wrapped an arm around her waist, and pulled her toward the back door. "And it's time to go."

JP and I were both staring down the back hallway when the door shut behind them.

"Well, that was interesting."

JP sighed. "That was alpha." She spun around to look at me. "Now, let's get you a fascinator."

"What exactly is a fascinator anyway?"

"Think Princess Kate's cute little hats that aren't really hats. You've gotta have one."

I pictured myself in the retro dress with a cute little non-hat. *Totally New Orleans*.

"Let's see 'em."

* * * *

I returned to the Royal Sonesta with two giant bags with the Dirty Dog logo on the side, and

a smile on my face. I'd been determined to find my way back without carrying the map in my hand the entire way, and I'd only taken three wrong turns. I considered it sightseeing and was pretty pleased with myself.

The streets were already beginning to crowd with people who were intent on getting started early on their hangovers, but no one bothered me.

See, I can do this. No big deal.

The Royal Sonesta lobby was bustling, and the concierge was handing out maps with the route of the next parade and a coupon for a ghost tour of the Lafayette Cemeteries by horse-drawn carriage afterward.

Score.

I officially had plans for the day and night. I was going to check two things off my list—watching a Mardi Gras parade without getting manhandled or lost, and then a tour of the famous cemeteries. *And* I was going to wear a fabulous new dress and a fascinator while I did it.

Perfect.

Chapter Sixteen

Bishop

“This parade is going right past Valentina’s place, so they’re throwing a party. You gotta come out and have some fun.”

I finished cleaning my station and turned to look at Constantine Leahy. “You’re my boss. You’re supposed to tell me to get my ass back to work, not try to drag it out of here.”

“We’re closing the shop for the rest of the day. I’ve had you and D working every night since the season kicked off so we could scoop up those tourist dollars, but you both need a fuckin’ break. Consider this your newest assignment. We aren’t taking no for an answer, and Delilah already agreed.”

We, I assumed, had to mean Vanessa. “Your wife isn’t trying to set me up with anyone, is she? Because I’m out if that’s the case.”

Con glared at me. “I’m not into any kind of matchmaking shit. Who the hell has time for that? Whatever Van is doing is on her, and I’ve got no clue what that might be. I just know there’s food and booze.”

I put the last piece of my machine away and stood. “Fine. I’m in. Where am I meeting you?”

He eyed me. “You’re coming with me. If I leave here without you, we both know you’ll never come.”

Fucker was right, and I wasn’t getting out of this. “All right. Let’s go.”

“Not that I give a fuck, but don’t you want to change your shirt?”

I looked down at the black Voodoo Ink logo T-shirt and back up at Con. “Are you really fucking asking me that?”

Con laughed. “Never mind. I’ll lock up and we’re out of here.”

I followed him out the back door of the shop into the alley behind the building. “I can’t wait until Mardi Gras is over. Is it just me, or do these tourists get more obnoxious every year?”

I watched a group of kids who didn’t even look old enough to drink tromp across the alley wearing their Stupid 1, Stupid 2, Stupid 3 shirts and giant neon sunglasses. Beer cups hung around their necks with their beads.

“Every fucking year. Because they get younger, dumber, and drunker.” Con started off down the sidewalk, and I followed.

Con pulled open the door of his sweet-as-hell Chevelle. My bike was tucked into a small half garage built into the back of the building.

I made myself comfortable in the passenger seat and we headed toward the Garden District via the back roads to avoid the bulk of the traffic.

“Anything I need to know about the shop?”

After Con had stopped working there, I’d taken up the reins as the unofficial manager. Delilah hadn’t wanted anything to do with “being management,” even though she’d worked there longer than me. Even with her aversion to anything non-artistic, she picked up more slack than she let on. It was the title that gave her hives.

“No, we’re good. Money keeps coming in, so hopefully you’re good too.”

Con nodded. “No worries on that part.” He waited for pedestrians to get out of the road before turning another corner. “You think you might want to buy the place someday?”

Buy the place. The words echoed through my head, and visions of sitting in my uncle's tattoo shop in Hell's Kitchen followed. It was where I'd learned and honed my trade. Where everything that had mattered had been centered until he'd gotten strapped for cash and made a bad decision—borrowing money from a loan shark.

When a payment came up he couldn't make, the loan sharks started coming around to collect with threats and heavy hands, so I'd put my knack for blackjack to work earning extra money to cover the interest. Who the fuck was I kidding? I'd counted cards, and I'd been good at it.

Until I got too cocky and destroyed everything . . .

"If you're not interested, just tell me."

I blinked, forgetting I was supposed to be answering Con's question. "Sorry, I was just trying to wrap my head around your question. I've never thought about it."

Con probably didn't realize that even though my sister was here, I never considered New Orleans a permanent stop for me. I had to be ready to move at any time. It might have been ten years since that shit went down, but that didn't mean my demons weren't still hunting for me.

"Think about it and let me know if you've got any serious interest. If not, we'll keep doing what we're doing."

Con's words hung with me as we pulled up to a wrought-iron fence that swung open, and he parked next to his brother's Hemi Cuda. Lord ran Chains, the most badass pawn shop in town, with his feisty redheaded girl, Elle.

"Damn, you got the whole crew to come out for this?"

"You think Elle would let Lord miss it to work instead?"

"Good point."

The door to the house opened and Vanessa stepped out, clearly waiting for us to show. "You coming in? Elle's already pouring shots, so we're all screwed."

"We're coming, princess," Con called.

I pushed open the car door. "Guess we're all going to be walking home."

Chapter Seventeen

Eden

Take a tour, they said. You'll learn amazing history, they said. It'll be fun, they said. Well, spoiler. *They lied.*

I was standing in the middle of Lafayette Cemetery No. 1 in the dark without a single flashlight beam from my other tour companions visible.

They couldn't have left me here. Seriously?

We were supposed to stay together and follow the tour guide. And I did. Until he bypassed one of the coolest-looking crypts in favor of telling a ghost story about a child who'd died on the other side of the cemetery. I'd stopped and checked out the crypt myself and lost track of time. I'd been operating with a false sense of security because of the tour, but the creepy silence surrounding me ripped it away.

The battery in my cheap flashlight dimmed as I worked my way along the path to the entrance where the carriages should still be waiting.

Seriously, world?

Every tiny noise amplified in my head as I tripped down the path, whipping my head from side to side to make sure the boogeyman wasn't going to jump out and get me.

My *I'm going to lose my shit* meter was edging into the red zone, but I sucked in one deep breath after another. *It's going to be fine. I'm going to be fine. I'm not going to end up cemented inside a crypt by some psychopath.*

Shivers ghosted down my arms, and I broke into an awkward jog in my pink peep-toe pumps.

All I have to do is get out of the cemetery and find a cab. No big deal. I can do this.

"Who dat?" a deep voice called from somewhere behind me.

Oh God. I'm going to die here. Reports of people being mugged or killed while in the cemetery *during the day* ran through my mind.

I flicked my dying flashlight off, not wanting anyone to be able to follow my light, and ran faster.

"You ain't supposed to be in here after dark, girl." The deep voice was right behind me now, and adrenaline shot through my veins.

Run! my instincts screamed, and I sprinted for everything I was worth. The cemetery gate was up ahead, and all I needed to do was get out. The horses had to still be there. The guide had to do a count. They wouldn't leave without me.

Tripping over an uneven chunk of pavement, I stumbled forward, hands flailing. I caught the edge of a crypt and cement abraded my palms, but I didn't fall. Three more steps and then freedom.

Footsteps pounded behind me, but I reached the gate and shoved it open. Heart pounding and lungs heaving, I paused to scan both directions for the carriages, but saw nothing.

Did I come out the wrong side?

I darted around the corner and that's when I heard it—the *clip-clop* of hooves and jangling of the harnesses. The reflective triangle on the back of the last carriage flashed under the street lights.

No. No. No. That's not possible.

The orange-tinged streetlights lent an eerie glow to the empty street devoid of cabs as I jammed a hand in my hair.

I'm such an idiot.

A few people gathered at the next corner, but I wasn't going to approach them and ask for help. If I were going to do that, I might as well pin a sign that read Hopelessly Lost Tourist to my chest.

No. I was going to find my way back by myself.

My cemetery pursuer hadn't followed, but still I hurried, walking in the same direction the carriages had taken, hoping against hope that the street lights and my no-nonsense pace would deter any unwanted attention.

A sweet wave of relief washed over me when I saw the sign for Saint Charles Avenue up ahead.

Thank you, universe.

The revelers who had watched the parade earlier hadn't all cleared out. The porches and small front yards of the houses on the street were still full of people drinking and talking and enjoying the night. Instead of fearing the crowds as I had before, I welcomed them. They meant it was less likely I'd end up cemented alive in a crypt in an empty cemetery.

"Hey! You!" The call came as I walked by a large yard surrounded by a wrought-iron fence.

Not talking to me, I thought as I kept my head down and continued walking.

"Eden! Where are you going? Come party!"

At the sound of my name, I looked up and tripped over a crack in the sidewalk.

"Whoa, watch yourself!" Delilah hurried down the path from a beautiful house toward the fence. When she reached the gate, she unlatched it and pushed it open. "Come on. Gang's all here. Where the hell did you come from?"

I didn't have a chance to answer her questions before she pulled me inside the fence and around to the side yard where there were more people gathered.

"Bishop, did you see who I found? She was just walking down the sidewalk. That's like serendipity or some shit."

Even with his back to me, I knew it was him before she said his name. Bishop's wide shoulders tensed as he turned to face me.

"What do you mean, *just walking down the sidewalk*? By yourself?" The questions were split between me and Delilah, and his tone demanded answers.

Embarrassment stained my cheeks again. "Uh . . . I was with a group taking a tour of the cemetery at night . . . and I got separated."

It was impossible to miss the glower on his face with the light coming from the back of the house and the paper lanterns hanging in the trees.

"You got separated from a tour. In a cemetery. At night." He ground out each piece of the statement in its own separate little sentence as if I didn't know exactly how stupid I sounded already.

"Whoa, girl. That's not cool. You could've been—"

Bishop held up a hand. "I think we all know, D."

Another woman joined the circle. "Hi, I'm Valentina and this is my place. Welcome. Can I get you a drink?" She looked from me to Bishop to Delilah and then back to me.

"No, thank you. I was just stopping to say hi because Delilah saw me walking home."

"Walking home? In this town? By yourself?" She shook her head. "That's not a good idea."

Let me see if I can't scare up a ride for you."

"Oh, that's not—"

"She doesn't need a ride," Bishop said. "I'm taking her back."

"You don't have a car, and you've been drinking for six hours." This came from the woman who'd introduced herself as Valentina.

"I'll just call a cab. It's fine."

Bishop practically growled at me. "And have them drop you off at the barriers the police have set up a couple blocks away from your hotel where you have to walk through the shit show that's the French Quarter tonight? Do I need to remind you what happened last night?"

Crap. I hadn't thought about the fact that a cab couldn't bring me right to the door. Even so, I didn't appreciate Bishop's tone.

"You don't need to throw that in my face. A cab will be plenty close. It's fine. Just freaking fine. You don't need to worry about me being a bother, Bishop. I don't need you to leave your party for me. I can take care of myself." I smiled at Valentina and Delilah. "If you could give me a number for a cab, I'll be on my way shortly. I'm sorry to barge in."

Valentina returned my smile, but one eyebrow lifted. "I'll get that cab for you. Hold on a moment."

When she stepped away, Delilah started talking. "Sweet dress! I love it. It reminds me of something you'd get at—"

"Dirty Dog," another voice finished as Yve stepped out of the shadows and into the light. "And it looks great on you." She reached up. "Mind if I fix your fascinator? It's a touch crooked."

Automatically, I reached up to touch the small non-hat made of silver netting, and sure enough, it was askew. *Great. Check the box next to Hot Mess.*

Yve adjusted and repinned it before standing back. "Perfect."

"Does everyone in this town know each other?" I asked, trying to get the attention off me.

"A few of us," Yve said.

"And all of us agree that you've got no business walking around after dark by yourself." Bishop's statement left no room for contradiction, but Yve tsk-tsked him anyway.

"She's a grown woman. She can do whatever the hell she wants."

Bishop mumbled something else under his breath that sounded like *she needs a keeper*, but Valentina returned before anyone could pounce on it.

"Cab is on its way. It should be here in ten. Have a drink while you're waiting. We've got plenty of food too. The guys haven't managed to clear it out yet."

Chapter Eighteen

Bishop

I wanted to pick her up and shake some sense into her. Maybe then Eden would realize that this city wasn't safe for her to venture out in alone. How the fuck does someone lose their tour anyway? And in a fucking cemetery? At night? Someone was going to lose their job when I tracked down the tour company and reported that they'd left her behind. They should lose their goddamned license too. She could have ended up dead.

At Eden's request, Valentina got her a water, and the girls talked and introduced her to the crew. I fucked with my phone and googled *night cemetery tour companies*. Finally, a car honked from the curb.

"That'll be the cab. You sure you're good to go alone?" Valentina asked.

"I'm taking her." When Valentina opened her mouth, I didn't wait to find out if she was thanking me or protesting. "I'm not leaving it to chance that she gets there in one piece."

Eden crossed her arms over her chest and pushed her tits up close to the neckline of the pink-and-white dress. *Does she own any clothes that don't make me want to strip her naked and eat her for dessert?*

"I'm perfectly capable."

"No shit, you're perfectly capable. But that doesn't change the fact that I've watched more than one person put their hands on you, and I'm not letting it happen again. You think someone's gonna fuck with you if I'm walking you to your hotel? No chance."

The horn honked again and she dropped her arms.

"Fine." Eden turned and the skirt on her dress flared.

Lord stepped up next to me. "Man, you're so fucked."

I swiveled my head around to stare at him as he swigged his beer. "What do you mean?"

"I mean you're gonna go down like the rest of us." He nodded at Eden. "And that girl is going to be the one to do it. I got a feeling about her. She's already under your skin."

"Fuck," I muttered before striding after her. No way was I going to let her have the cabbie leave without me.

Lord's words dogged my every step. *What is it about this girl?*

The cabbie already had the cab door open and was about to help her inside when I shut the gate behind me.

"I got this, brother. Thanks."

The cabbie, a guy on the younger side of thirty, held both hands in the air as he saw me stride toward him. "Sorry, man."

Eden's eyebrows were almost to her hairline when I finally slid into the seat next to her. "Was that necessary? He was being nice."

"You can't assume everyone is being nice. You have to be on the defensive. Life isn't all cute kittens falling from the sky landing in big piles of cotton candy."

I didn't know where those words came from, but Eden's laughter drowned out the hip-hop playing on the radio.

"Is that what you really think about me? I'm completely and totally naive and live in some kind of bubble?"

It took me less than two seconds to answer. “Yes.”

Eden crossed her arms under her tits, again making that little bit of cleavage turn into a hell of a lot more cleavage.

“Seriously? You’ve got to give me more credit than that.”

“Then don’t put yourself in situations where you’re alone in a cemetery at night in New Orleans.”

The cab driver piped up and added his own opinion. “Oh shit, you were in Lafayette at night? No fucking way, girl. That shit ain’t cool. You won’t last long ’round here if you keep that shit up.”

Eden frowned into the rearview mirror. “It was an accident, and I won’t be doing it again.”

“You’re right, because if you decide you’re going to go exploring this city at night, you’re calling me first.”

I didn’t know where the offer came from, but it was out before I could take it back. Did I want to take it back? If the alternative was Eden out wandering alone, hell no.

She laughed again, but this time it was harsher and a little fake. “Like you’re really going to make time in your schedule to help me explore anytime I want.” Eden flashed a forced smile at me. “I’ll just limit my exploration to the daytime, thanks.”

The cab driver turned into the Quarter and within a few minutes, slowed to a stop at a police barricade. “This is as far as I go.” He craned his neck around to face us through the Plexiglas window as he told her the total for the ride.

Eden slipped cash through the divider and thanked him before opening her door and stepping onto the sidewalk.

“Thanks, man,” I said.

“Keep that girl on a leash. It’d be a safer choice.”

“Only if I had a death wish.”

The cabbie’s booming chuckle faded when I slammed the door and strode after Eden, who was already fifteen feet ahead of me.

“Wait up, cupcake. I didn’t ride all the way over here for you to just walk off on your own.”

She spun around on the sidewalk and faced me. “You think I’m ridiculous. That I can’t fend for myself. I hate knowing that.”

With a grimace, I chose my words carefully. “I don’t think you’re ridiculous. I think you’ve gotten into some situations that you should’ve avoided.”

“You wish I would’ve avoided them because then you wouldn’t have to deal with me.”

She started off again but I was quicker. I wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back against me. “Don’t start putting words in my mouth. I never said I didn’t want to deal with you. Just the fucking opposite.”

Eden’s entire body stilled, and I wasn’t even sure she was breathing until she responded. “But all I do is cause you trouble.”

I thought of the sweet taste I’d gotten of her and how fucking badly I wanted more.

“Who said I didn’t like trouble?”

Chapter Nineteen

Eden

Oh. My. God. My heart hammered as Bishop's soft breath coasted along my ear and sent chill bumps all over my skin and heat blooming in parts due south.

Who said I didn't like trouble?

If this were some kind of date-night movie, I'd turn around and lean up on my tiptoes and kiss him, but I didn't have the lady balls to do it.

"Are you gonna walk a little slower and let me actually see you home?"

I nodded, but then realized I should verbalize my response. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

Bishop released his hold around my waist, but reached down to grab my hand.

He's holding my hand. He's holding my hand! Why is he holding my hand?

My brain struggled to understand exactly what was happening. Basically, I was having a meltdown like a middle-school girl when the cute guy I had a major crush on held my hand.

I wasn't sure whether I should laugh at myself for being pathetic or fist-pump the air because I was *awesome*.

I opted to not go for the fist pump. Playing it cool would work better, I assured myself.

As we walked the two and a half blocks to the Royal Sonesta, Bishop guided me around people and dogs and puddles of things I didn't want identified. When we got to the corner of Bourbon Street, he pulled me in front of him and we walked as one.

The crowd parted before us as we made our way to the lobby door, but all I could think about was the heat against my back and the swirling questions in my brain.

Would he come up to my room? Did I want him to?

All my questions were answered when we reached the entrance and I pulled out my keycard to open the lobby door.

"Are you going back out tonight?" Bishop asked.

I shook my head. "No, I think I've had enough adventure for today."

"Good. Take it easy. You decide you need more adventure, call me."

I remembered the number he'd written on the note when he left this morning.

"I wouldn't want to bother—" I started, but he cut me off.

"Call me. I wouldn't say it just to say it. I'm not that guy."

My heart thumped harder. "Okay. I'll call."

"Goodnight, Eden." He turned and walked away, not melding into the crowd but drawing every eye as he made his way through it.

Goodnight, Eden.

That's it? That's all?

I got all the way up to my room, cursing the man-bunned giant, and pushed open the doors to my balcony. I dropped into the white chair and watched the people in the street.

That's when I saw him. Across the street, leaning against a building. As soon as Bishop saw me, he nodded and pushed away from his perch to walk home.

He waited to see if I made it up to my room. The frustration that built as I'd made my way up the elevator and down the hall faded, and something warm filled my chest.

Unexpectedly sweet.

With happy thoughts filling my brain, I wasn't prepared for a slap in the face from reality.
The phone in my purse buzzed across the table.

A text.

I pulled it out and stared down at the screen.

Unknown number: Lay low. Shit's heatin up.

Chapter Twenty

Eden

If I were going to let the text control my every waking thought, I would have stayed in my room and had room service for breakfast. Maybe if I were smarter, I would have. But I couldn't let the off chance that something was going to happen keep me inside this hotel room.

So after an amazing breakfast at Stanley near Jackson Square, I slipped into the lobby. My heart rate sped up when I saw two men in suits speaking to a front-desk clerk. One of the men sported a bulge that reminded me of Angelo when his shoulder holster hadn't been adjusted to fit well under his jacket.

The men with guns have nothing to do with me, I told myself as I hurried to the elevator before they could turn and see me. I'm just paranoid because of that text.

But that didn't stop me from rushing to my room and locking the door behind me. I pulled my phone from my purse. There'd been no more texts and no calls. Wouldn't there be a more specific warning if they thought I was in danger?

I forced myself to act normally and pulled out my list to decide what I was going to tackle today, but the loud ringing of the hotel telephone startled me back into *paranoid as a crazy person* mode. Against my better judgment, I answered it.

"Ms. Madden?"

It took my brain a second to click into gear at the mention of the alias used on the credit card I'd given them for the room.

"Yes?"

"This is James at the front desk. We've had an issue with the authorization on your credit card."

"What kind of issue?"

"A fraud notice. I'm afraid we're going to need another form of payment."

Fraud notice? Trepidation pooled in my belly, but I kept my tone confident. "I'm sure there's some mistake. I'll check into it and be right down."

I hung up, dug the credit card out of my purse, and flipped it over to the number on the back.

Five minutes later, it was my stomach flipping. *This card has been canceled due to fraud concerns*, the helpful representative on the other end had informed me. *However, we are unable to issue another card until certain issues have been fully investigated.*

The second part sent my mind racing toward possibilities of what could be happening. The card was obviously tied to Dom's business. Someone reported it as being suspected of fraud. Who? The FBI?

I pulled up a web browser and tried to log in to my bank account. *We apologize for the inconvenience, but you are currently unable to access this account. Please call for further details.*

What the hell?

I had to call the number Vincent had given me. I might not be bleeding or being held at gunpoint, but something felt totally off.

No one answered. I tried four more times and got the same generic voice-mail message.

A dark feeling of foreboding crept over me. Pulling up another window in the browser, I

searched for New York City news.

I'd only had a bank account frozen once, and that had been courtesy of the FBI. My identity as Dom's illegitimate daughter apparently wasn't a secret with the Feds.

I didn't have to scroll far to see the headline.

Dominic Casso Under Grand Jury Investigation

Holy. Shit.

Racketeering, conspiracy, money laundering . . . the list went on and on. I read the article word for word until I got to the line that explained everything. *Inside sources tell us that all assets associated with Casso and his businesses have been frozen pending the completion of the investigation.*

Jesus. H. Christ.

I dropped back onto the bed. What the hell was I going to do? If they'd canceled the credit card under my alias, undoubtedly the credit cards under my real name were also canceled, not that they'd do me much good in my safe in New York. Dammit, why did the FBI take such pleasure in making life as difficult as possible? *Probably because my dad's a criminal.*

Shit. The guys in suits at the front desk.

Are they FBI? Are they looking for me?

The room phone rang again, and I froze.

Do I answer? Ignore it?

The obnoxious ringing continued, and I made a snap decision.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Madden, I'm sorry to bother you, but we really need you to come down and handle this credit card issue as soon as possible." The front-desk clerk's voice was sympathetic but firm.

"Uh, of course. I'll be right down."

"Great. We'll be waiting."

We'll be waiting.

The hotel clerk . . . and the FBI?

Shit. Shit. Shit.

What do I do? Or an even better question—what would Dom tell me to do?

Get the hell out of the hotel and away from law enforcement.

I dashed to the bathroom and gathered up my makeup before shoving it in my suitcase along with all my clothes.

I have to get out of here. I wheeled the suitcase out into the hallway and headed for the stairwell that would exit nearest the side door. I wasn't taking a chance with the front lobby and the desk clerk.

Yes, I was going to run out on the bill they couldn't charge to my credit card. I would have felt guilty if I wasn't more worried about being taken in for questioning by the FBI.

What if they were expecting me to bolt? What if someone was covering each exit? Yes, my imagination was running wild, but what if I was right?

As I stepped out of the stairwell into the hallway, I looked to my left and froze.

Fire Alarm – Pull Down Here.

Oh Jesus. I was going to hell.

I grabbed the white handle and pulled.

Chapter Twenty-One

Eden

With my suitcase thumping against my thigh, I ran down the streets of the French Quarter away from the Royal Sonesta. I didn't know where I was headed, but I turned the corner and kept running.

My arm and shoulder burned at the weight of my bag, and my lungs began to protest soon enough for me to realize that I was way out of shape. A glance over my shoulder told me I was probably attracting more attention with my running than if I'd just walked like a normal, sane person.

Well, excuse me for feeling the need to flee as quickly as possible.

I slowed to a walk, more out of necessity than anything, and turned another corner.

Canal Street. A red-and-blue neon sign hung from the marble building.

Really, world? Why? What was it that kept drawing me back here?

Well, I wasn't going to waltz in there and announce I'd run out of the Royal Sonesta without paying what I owed.

Shit. Would Bishop's friend come after him for the money from the night I stayed that the room wasn't comped? With that horrific thought on my mind, I turned my back on the tattoo shop and slipped into Your Favorite Hole next door.

What a freaking mess.

The same woman was at the front counter as the day before, and her smile widened as soon as I crossed the threshold. *Fabienne*, I was reminded by her nametag.

"Hey there, darlin'. You back for more of Delilah's special?"

The coffee had been delicious, but my lungs were still burning. What I really needed was water and a private place to figure out how much cash I had left, so I could work out some kind of a plan. I was officially homeless and on the run.

"Coffee and water?" I asked, trying to sound less out of breath.

"Comin' right up."

I wheeled my suitcase over to a cozy chair in the corner before lowering into the seat and dropping my face into my hands.

What am I going to do now?

I only allowed myself a few moments of beating myself up before I stood and returned to the counter with money in my hand.

Fabienne nodded at my suitcase in the corner when I reached the cash register. "You leavin' town?"

"No. I . . . I'm just changing locations."

Her eyes narrowed on me, and her scrutiny gave me the sense that she was seeing right through me.

"You in trouble?"

I shook my head, even though it was a lie. I ran out of a hotel without paying my bill, and there were people with poorly fitting shoulder holsters who might have been waiting for me.

Who were they? FBI? Dom's people? Dom's enemies? The possibilities multiplied in my brain while Fabienne waited for an answer.

“I just had some things not work out like I planned,” I mumbled as I held out a ten-dollar bill.

She looked down at the cash. “Keep your money. This is on the house. You look like you could use a break.”

I looked down at the money and then back to her. “But—”

“Sometimes you gotta pay it forward, hon. So you do the same when you can.”

The unexpected kindness clutched at my heart. “Thank you. Really, thank you.”

“You’re welcome, hon.”

While I was waiting for my coffee, I glanced around the interior. I loved the cozy seating areas, tables, and mismatched chairs.

It felt so happy and homey. Like you could make someone smile by simply handing them coffee and a donut. My gaze landed on the Help Wanted sign that hung in the window. If I were wearing an apron and a hat, would anyone really notice my face? Would Fabienne even hire me?

I decided the best way to find out was to dive in headfirst. “Are you . . . I mean, what position are you hiring for?”

There was no judgment on her face when she smiled. “Do you know anything about working an espresso machine?”

I had one in my apartment that would rival most coffee shops, so I could answer that question with confidence. “I do.”

“How about a cash register?”

“I can learn quickly. I’m really good with numbers anyway.”

She nodded. “I need someone to fill in shifts for now. It’s not ideal because the hours aren’t regular, but I need someone to plug into my schedule where we’ve got holes. You want to give it a try for a week or so and see if it’s a fit?”

“Yes, that would be great.” Excitement zipped through me, and then nosedived. I had to find a place to stay too. Preferably a safe place that took cash and didn’t ask questions.

“When would you want me to start?”

“How about Monday? I’ll get you the hours and you can see.”

“My day is wide open, so I promise I can make it work. Thank you for the chance; I appreciate it.”

The door chimed and Fabienne’s gaze lifted over my shoulder. “Bishop’s usual, if you would please,” she called down to the barista.

Really, universe? How is that fair? I had no idea how I was going to explain about the hotel and that I wasn’t staying there . . . so for now, I wasn’t going to mention it.

But I couldn’t avoid Bishop completely. I glanced over my shoulder to look at him. The line between his brows deepened as he stared down at me.

“What are you doing here?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bishop

Eden grabbed her coffee and a bottle of water as I reached into my pocket for my wallet and slid a twenty across the counter.

Fabienne took it and tucked it away in the cash register before making change. But she didn't drop the change in my hand like I expected. She tightened her fist around the bills before whispering, "You take it easy on that girl. I think she's run into some trouble and probably doesn't have the first clue what to do about it."

We locked eyes, and her deep brown ones were as serious as I'd ever seen them.

"Thanks. I got it from here."

I waited for my coffee before crossing the room to sit in the seat across from Eden. Her suitcase was tucked behind her chair.

What the hell? "You leaving town again?"

I didn't know why the thought pissed me off so much, but it did. Nothing about this girl made sense to me, including the pull I felt toward her.

"No."

"Then why the hell is your suitcase with you instead of at the hotel?"

Her gaze dropped to the floor, but I waited her out. Pink tinged her cheeks when she finally looked back up at me. "I couldn't keep racking up the cost of the room. I need something less expensive."

I had to believe her pride took a beating with that answer, but she sure as hell hadn't seemed to be worried about money when she'd tossed down her credit card the night I checked her in. Something had changed, and I took a guess.

"Daddy cut off your credit card?"

All color drained from her face. "Something like that."

Fuck. Now she was broke and alone in a city that didn't have a hell of a lot of spare mercy.

"Bishop, your coffee's ready," the barista called.

Before I turned back to collect it, I stared down at Eden. "Bring your shit over to Voodoo when you're done here. Remember what happened the last time you dragged a suitcase all over town?"

She bit her lip but didn't reply.

I stalked to the counter and grabbed my coffee.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Eden

I drank my entire bottle of water and all of my coffee as I considered Bishop's order to bring myself and my stuff to Voodoo. I didn't want to keep relying on him for help because it highlighted how unable to help myself I was.

What would happen when his friend called about the hotel? I didn't have answers that would satisfy him. But maybe I could give him cash and ask him to pay the hotel?

And how would I do that without explaining why I ran? Yeah. No.

Why am I such a failure at this? One day I think I've got it all handled, and the next it falls apart. Maybe that meant tomorrow would be better. I had to keep pushing forward. There was no other option.

Ten minutes later, I'd gathered my courage. With my suitcase in tow, I stepped through the door of Voodoo Ink for the third time in less than a week. For a girl with no tattoos, that had to be unusual.

I hoped to see Delilah inside, but there was no sign of her. Instead, I saw Bishop standing behind the counter with a redhead leaning over it.

"Come on, you know you wanna."

I assumed her tone was supposed to sound sultry, but instead it came out whiny and obnoxious. From Bishop's crossed arms, rigid posture, and definite scowl, it appeared that he really didn't *wanna* whatever it was she was offering.

His gaze, rife with annoyance, flicked up to mine as I rolled my carry-on inside. I didn't know what possessed me to do it, but I dropped my bag and ran across the shop before slipping around the counter and throwing myself at him. It was pure instinct, but it was my turn to rescue him.

Bishop dropped his arms quickly enough to catch me as I wrapped my legs around his waist.

"Baby, I missed you so much!" I buried both hands in his hair and crushed my lips to his.

His muscles tensed beneath my hold, and then he did something completely unexpected—he lowered one hand to my ass and slid the other up to the back of my head to tilt it a little to the side. I opened my mouth, intending to pull away, but his tongue slid inside and he kissed me like . . . like I was exactly who I was pretending to be. A girlfriend away for too long and desperate to get her hands on her man.

"Should've figured." The redhead's voice was a distant murmur, barely audible over the buzzing in my ears.

Bishop was kissing me. Holding me. Pulling me closer until I could feel a ridge beneath his jeans pressing against my center.

Holy. Hell.

I lost track of everything but the kiss.

The door chimed, but it was another long moment before Bishop pulled his lips away and lowered me to my feet.

I blinked twice, my hand going to my mouth as it registered what the hell I'd just done.

Mauled him.

In front of a customer.

What in the world possessed me?

Bishop ran a hand through his now disheveled hair and stared at me like he'd never seen me before in his life.

I scrambled for something to say. Anything to dispel this awkwardness. "You looked like you could use rescuing . . ."

His brows rose at my mumbled excuse.

More words tumbled out.

"So . . . I guess that makes us closer to even in the rescue department."

I waited for a response. Any response at all. But I got nothing. Bishop turned and walked away, down a back hallway until he shoved open a door and slammed it behind him.

Well, crap.

Nice going, E. Really. Nice.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Bishop

What in the ever-loving fuck?

I dropped onto the couch in the break room and stared at my hands.

Hands that had been wrapped around Eden's curvy ass.

Fuck. Just like that kiss the night I carried her out of the bar, it shouldn't have happened. I should have held her off and set her right back on her feet as soon as she launched herself at me, but I didn't think. I just . . . fucking reacted. The sweet taste of her hadn't changed, and my cock was just as rock hard as it had been that night.

I wanted more.

Shit.

I knew better than to get mixed up with her, but fuck if it wasn't sounding like the best idea I'd had in a long damn time.

You looked like you could use rescuing . . .

When was the last time anyone had ever given enough of a fuck to want to rescue me? I hadn't let anyone get that close. That's what moving around every couple of years did for you. Kept you light. No roots. No cares. No one to pry into your past and try to dig out your darkest secrets. Nothing to lose. And that was the way I'd always liked it.

So why was I letting myself get sucked in?

I had absolutely no fucking clue.

The door to the employee break room opened and smacked against the wall. I jerked my head around to see if it was Eden, shocked that she might follow me in here.

But it wasn't. It was Con.

"I know I was drunk, but that's the girl from the Mardi Gras party, right? She here for some ink?"

"Yeah, that's her, but negative on the ink. She look like the type to you?"

He tilted his head at me. "That don't mean shit. You've seen Van. Wouldn't think she'd be the type either, but you'd be wrong."

"True."

"So, what's she doing here if she's not here for ink? Waiting for you?"

I jammed a hand into my hair. There was no way in hell I was going to explain what had just happened. Fuck, I didn't even know myself.

"I don't know yet. I'm working it out."

"And?"

"And nothing."

Con's eyebrow rose. "You really expect me to believe that you're not sitting back here avoiding her because you're fucking terrified of getting sucked into the classy-broad trap? Been there. Done that. Never want out."

From outside the break room, I could hear a female voice.

"Van out there talking to her?" I asked.

Con nodded. "Yeah, and they're probably best friends by now. If you were trying to get rid of her, you're probably screwed."

I dropped my head back until it smacked against the wall. “She’s running from something, and I don’t have a fucking clue what to do with her. I can’t leave her to fend for herself because the next place I’d see her would probably be on the six o’clock news.”

“Well, shit. Can’t let that happen. She need a place to stay?”

“Yeah.” I remembered Charlie’s offer from the other day. “But I think I have an idea.”

“Charlie?” How Con knew that’s what I was thinking, I had no clue.

I nodded. “She was in here the other day and offered up her old place, but Eden was staying at the Sonesta until today.”

“Why’d she bail on that?”

“Money, I guess.”

Con’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. “She sure doesn’t look like she’s hurtin’ for cash.”

“I guess looks are deceiving in this situation. I don’t know what the real deal is, and she won’t tell me shit.”

“Then maybe you need to do your own digging.”

Heels clicked down the hallway, and Vanessa stuck her head through the doorway before I could decide how to respond to that.

“You guys want me to go pick up something for lunch while you sit back here and brood?”

Con reached out and snagged her hand to pull her closer. “I thought we were grabbing something.”

“That was before I realized Eden hasn’t had jambalaya, étouffée, or oysters yet. Someone needs to help that girl get a true taste of New Orleans before she leaves.”

“She ain’t leavin’.” The words were out of my mouth before I even thought about speaking them.

Vanessa’s appraising gaze landed on me. “I’m pretty sure that’s not up to you.” She shifted to look at Con. “He sounds like just as much of a barbarian as you do.”

Con laughed and lifted her hand to his mouth to press a kiss to it. “You like it when I’m a barbarian.”

“True, but I also like showing off my city to people who will appreciate it.”

“Fine, but watch yourselves. The city’s still lousy with tourists.”

Van pressed a kiss to his cheek. “You’re starting to sound like a grumpy old man. We’ll be back in an hour or so. Is that enough time to go over the books?”

Con nodded. “Yeah. Have fun, princess.”

She kissed him again and waved at me. “See ya, Bish.”

Van closed the door behind her, leaving Con and me in the office.

“When’s your next appointment?” he asked.

“Two thirty.” I glanced at the clock. “Should be here any minute.”

“Then I guess you better get to it.”

I pushed off the couch and stood. “Yes, sir.” I gave him a mock salute and he punched me in the arm when I neared the door.

“Don’t fucking salute me, you asshole.”

I laughed, but my brain was firmly fixed on Eden. Maybe Vanessa would get her story out of her, and then I’d have some kind of clue what I was dealing with.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Eden

Even though I'd met them last night, seeing the blond couple come into the tattoo shop still flipped all my accepted stereotypes on their head. Vanessa was wearing a skirt and blouse and heels, and Con was wearing ripped jeans and a T-shirt with a chain hanging from his front pocket to his back. Both of his arms were covered in even more tattoos than Bishop had. Objectively, Con and Vanessa looked like the oddest couple I could imagine putting together, but the way his arm wrapped around her waist and how his eyes softened when he looked down at her told me there was nothing odd about them.

What did people think when they saw Bishop and me together? *Except we're not actually together.*

Con hadn't spared me much more than a chin jerk before striding in the direction of the room Bishop had retreated to, but Vanessa stopped in front of me.

"Hey! Eden, right? What are you doing here?"

"I'm . . . waiting for Bishop, I guess."

Curiosity lit her blue eyes. "There are a lot of girls who wait for Bishop on any given day, but from what I saw last night, you seem to be different."

I thought of the girl who'd been flirting with him before I'd literally thrown myself at him. "I'd like to think I'm different. But . . . it's not like that."

She smiled. "Oh, I know how that goes. Trust me."

With Vanessa's easy response, I felt this strange and instant kinship with her. I could only imagine what it had been like when she and the tattooed blond giant had gotten together. The entire time I'd been in New Orleans, I'd had this feeling that by some strange design, the universe was dropping people into my life at the exact moment I needed them. Bishop, Delilah, Fabienne, Yve. Maybe today was Vanessa's day.

She dived right into a series of questions, asking me what I'd seen and eaten. When she discovered that I hadn't gotten a full New Orleans experience, she vowed that she would change it for me before striding off down the hall to follow Con.

When Vanessa returned, she adjusted her purse—Prada, if I wasn't mistaken—and smiled again. "I know we just met last night, and I promise I'm not psycho, but I really would love to take you out for lunch."

I had to go with my gut. "I'd like that." I looked at my suitcase beside my chair. "What do I do with this?"

She reached for the handle and pulled it behind the counter. "No worries. It'll be here when you get back."

As we walked to the front door of the shop, I heard the creaky door open behind us. I whipped my head around to see Bishop standing in the back hallway, his arms crossed over his chest. He said nothing, just watched me leave.

Was he thinking of the way he'd kissed the hell out of me? Because I was. The unreadable expression on his face gave me absolutely no clue. As I pulled the door shut behind me, his gaze stayed locked on mine through the glass until I turned away.

Vanessa must have noticed because once outside on the sidewalk, she said, "Bishop is

intense. If it's not *like that* between you two, you'll have to learn to ignore it."

I choked out a laugh. "He's pretty impossible to ignore."

She tilted her head and looked back through the window. "From the way he's still looking at you, I would say definitely impossible."

It took everything I had to keep walking rather than turn around again to see what she was talking about.

"So," she continued, "you've intrigued the stoic Bishop. It's a feat many have tried to accomplish and failed."

This time my laugh was genuine. "I wouldn't go that far. I think I'm more of an annoyance at this point than anything else."

"Oh, hon, I think you're completely wrong about that. If he considered you an annoyance, he'd grunt and tell you to back off. I've seen it firsthand. You, he watches like he's dying to know what you look like naked."

My mind skipped back to the night I woke up to a note on my pillow. Had he seen me naked? I'd woken up wearing a T-shirt and the same panties I'd worn the day before, and if he was in my room . . . yeah, he had to have seen me mostly naked.

Why had I not realized that? *Oh my God.*

Vanessa noted my quiet and her eyebrows rose. "I know we're still closer to the stranger side of the spectrum than the friend side, but sometimes you need another woman to spill to when it comes to stuff like this."

I'd never had that kind of confidante before. And even more than that, I'd never had anything like this to share.

I decided to speak in vague terms. "I'm totally out of my league with him. He's all tough and tattooed and way too sexy for his own good, and I'm over here practically wearing a nun's habit for all the experience I've had in my life."

Vanessa stopped mid-stride and grabbed my arm. "Are you a virgin?"

"No. God, no." *But close enough*, I added silently.

She pulled me toward a little restaurant with a giant oyster for a sign. "This is it. We're going to need wine for this."

Even now, two days later, the thought of alcohol still made my stomach flip. "Can I pass on the wine? I sort of had . . . an incident that wasn't so great."

"I'm sensing a story there. I'll have wine, you eat the bread they bring to the table, and we'll call it even."

For the first time in my entire adult life, I felt the kind of solidarity with another woman that I'd seen in movies. *Should I tell her what happened with Bishop?* What did I really have to lose?

A host seated us at the only empty table in the restaurant, and I let the entire story of the last few days loose, minus the part about why I left the hotel in such a hurry.

By the time I finished with how I quite literally jumped him at Voodoo this afternoon, Vanessa had drained her wineglass and was fighting back a laugh.

"This is the best thing I've heard in way too long. God, I can only imagine how shocked he was when you threw yourself at him." She held a hand over her mouth. "I don't know why I love the idea of Bishop off-balance, but it makes me so happy. He's turned aloof into an art form since the day he showed up and Delilah made Con hire him."

"Aloof is one way to describe it."

"You've definitely shifted his world out of order, and sometimes that's exactly what we need in order to remind us that we're alive. I think Bishop has just been existing for a long time,

so this could be the best thing that has ever happened to him.”

I eyed the empty wineglass in front of her. “I’m not sure I’d go that far.”

“You’d be surprised. Sometimes what we need is the opposite of what we expect. I’m living proof. I never expected to find everything missing from my life in that big tattooed Viking of a man, but I did. It scares the hell out of me to think how different my life might be if I hadn’t accepted his dares.”

“It sounds like there’s a story there too,” I said.

Vanessa’s smile widened. “Absolutely, but that’s for another day and another glass of wine. Let’s order some lunch for the guys. Con should be done with the books in a half hour, I hope, and you need to get in touch with Charlie about that apartment so you have somewhere to live.”

“Con’s working on the books?”

“Yes, his least favorite task of all.”

“I can help with that,” I offered. “I mean, if he needs or wants a bookkeeper.”

“I thought you said you were taking a job at Your Favorite Hole?”

“I can always be busier. It’s not like I’ve got a wild social life taking up a lot of my time.”

“You never know how quickly that could change.” Vanessa tapped her lips with two fingers. “But I’ll mention it. Con’s always grumpy as hell when he’s dreading, doing, or forgetting to do books. I wouldn’t be sad for that to disappear.”

“Let me know what he says. My offer stands.”

On the way back to Voodoo with the food, Vanessa pointed out more landmarks and things that weren’t to be missed, and I shocked myself by actually recognizing a few of them from my earlier wanderings. Without too much effort, New Orleans could feel more like home than New York.

But with that thought came the reminder of the burner phone sitting like a lead weight in my purse. All it would take was one text or call, and I’d be sucked back into the colorless life I’d led before. It solidified my resolve to soak up every moment of my time here.

Before we turned the last corner back to Voodoo, I saw a neon sign in an old window that looked like the panes were due for a wash and the frame had been painted dozens of times. It read Fortunes Told Here with a pair of hands beneath it. Goose bumps rose on my skin, and I slowed. Vanessa followed my gaze.

“Have you ever had your fortune told?”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure I even believe in that kind of stuff.”

“What’s the harm in hearing what she has to say then? Madame Laveau is practically a legend in the Quarter.” She lifted the bag of takeout she’d ordered. “I need to take this to the guys, but maybe you should step inside and see what happens.”

“Laveau? Like Marie Laveau? The voodoo queen?”

Vanessa smiled. “She claims to be a distant relation but there’s nothing to substantiate that. Personally, I think it’s just smart marketing.”

“Is it . . . safe?”

At my question, Vanessa’s laugh echoed. “Absolutely. You can meet me back at Voodoo when you’re done and tell me all about your future.”

With another genuine smile, she patted my hand and strode off down the sidewalk, leaving me to stare at the glossy black-painted doorway.

What could it really hurt?

I crossed the uneven pavement and climbed up the single uneven step. A shiver skipped down my spine, but I shook it off.

None of it was real anyway. Right?

I pushed open the door and tiny brass bells tinkled above my head as the wood floor creaked beneath my feet.

“Come on in, child. I could feel your curiosity from outside.” The woman, tall and thin with skin the color of café au lait, greeted me from behind the counter.

“Hi?” My greeting sounded more like a question than anything else.

“What can I do for you today?”

She folded her arms on the glass in front of her and studied me. I wondered if she could see everything.

No way. That would be impossible. I chided myself for letting my imagination get the better of me.

I cleared my throat and pulled myself together. “My fortune. I’d like to know what you see.”

“Ah. We all want to know our future, don’t we? Luckily, you came to the right place. Come on back.”

She pushed away from the counter and gestured to the gap between it and the wall. I followed her as I soaked up the ambience of the shop. The lower shelves were lined with books and boxes of tarot cards, and the upper shelves were filled with glass jars of different teas and herbs.

Rather than spooky, it felt only slightly unnerving. She led me to a table and indicated that I should sit. Hands folded tightly in my lap, I waited for her to speak.

“Do you have a preference? Tea or tarot?” She nodded to a cup and teapot. “I read the leaves at the bottom. My grandmother taught me when I was a child.”

I’d seen the fortune-tellers with their card tables and tarot decks near Jackson Square, but it hadn’t occurred to me to stop. But tea . . . that sounded intriguing. What could someone actually tell you from reading tea leaves?

Somehow, it seemed safer too.

“Tea.”

She nodded. “Very well.”

She set about brewing a fresh pot and placed the teacup on the table. I waited, wondering if this whole process was drawn out to give more authenticity to the supposed fortune-telling.

But my doubts drained away when she started to speak.

“You’ve felt trapped. Kept away from the things you truly want.” Her gaze flicked up to mine. “And now you’re finding freedom because that’s what your future holds. Freedom . . . but at a price. You face a very tangled web where nothing is as it truly appears, and when it untangles, you will have to make a choice.”

Although her words were generic and perhaps could have applied to anyone, they struck a chord inside me.

Trapped. Freedom. Tangled.

“What . . . what’s going to happen?”

“I can’t see specifics. I only know that you will be tested and when you think you have failed, you must look deeper.”

This last part was cryptic, and apprehension curled through me at the word *failed*.

Failed at what?

I wanted to continue to ask questions, but she rose from the table. “If you have more questions, come back and see me again, child. I’d be happy to tell you what the next cup says.”

I stood, with more questions than answers swirling through my brain.

When I followed her out to the front of the shop, I dug into my wallet and pulled out enough cash to pay for the reading and a tip. I knew I should be watching my finances more closely considering I only had cash to rely on now, but one indulgence wasn't going to break me. I handed over the bills, and she tucked them in the register.

"Thank you," I said before turning toward the door. I was already telling myself that the generic fortune she'd read me didn't necessarily have anything to do with my future.

"Consider this my free advice. That inked man is more than what he appears. Guard your heart."

My hand froze on the doorknob and I whipped around.

"Excuse me?"

Her smile took on a decidedly feline quality. "Ah. You were wondering if I could truly see anything. Now you know for certain. Take care now."

My hand shook on the doorknob, but I managed to twist it hard and burst out of the shop onto the street.

How could she possibly know that? *Inked* man. There was no way. Fortune-tellers weren't real. Were they?

A cold gust of wind sent more shivers racing across my skin.

This town was a way more eerie than I gave it credit for, and Madame Laveau was either a first-class guesser or she saw something when she looked at me.

I hugged my arms around myself and made my way back to Voodoo.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eden

When I pushed through the door of the tattoo shop, everyone turned to stare at me. Immediately, I dropped my gaze to my shirt to see if I'd spilled food on it during lunch and Vanessa had failed to mention it.

Not seeing any stains, and after surreptitiously checking to make sure the zipper of my jeans was in place, I glanced back up at Con, Vanessa, Delilah, and a girl I remembered from Dirty Dog—JP.

Most notably absent was Bishop.

The inked man.

I tried to inject humor into my voice when I asked, "Did Bishop eat and run?"

Con's elbows rested on the counter with his fork hanging midair over his takeout container. He held off on shoveling the bite into his mouth before answering me.

"He had to take care of something. He'll be back. He took your shit."

Took my shit?

I bolted toward the counter and looked behind it. "He took my suitcase?"

It was quite literally the sum total of everything I had to my name at this moment, excluding my purse.

"Where did he go?" My tone crept up two octaves and Delilah held out a hand.

"Whoa, simma down, girl. He's taking care of shit for you."

"He's got it bad for you. I see it now." JP was back to her melodramatic self, looking heartbroken.

Delilah laughed. "JP, I told you that you needed to lose that schoolgirl crush. Bishop wasn't ever gonna touch a girl ten years younger than him anyway."

"Not even a full ten. I'm going to be twenty-three in a month." Her pixie-like features narrowed. "Just let it be known that if you and Bishop get married, I'm not coming to the wedding and I'm sure as hell not going to be a bridesmaid. You'd pick some godawful dress in revenge for me having a crush on the groom and it would just be petty revenge, so let's just get all that out in the open, m'kay?"

What. The. Hell?

"Wow, she skipped right to the wedding," Vanessa whispered. "Did the fortune-teller mention a wedding? You might as well put JP out of her misery right now. She's going to give up on ever finding herself an alpha of her own, and retreat to her apartment with seventeen cats and eight subscriptions to different wine-of-the-month clubs."

My gaze darted from Vanessa to JP to Delilah to Con. None of them seemed fazed by JP and her crazy little monologue.

"There's no wedding. There's not going to be a wedding."

"I wouldn't speak so soon, sugar. I know Bishop doesn't seem like the marrying type now, but then again . . . you never know." Delilah winked at me. She needed to not do the winking thing anymore. It was starting to freak me out.

"You're all crazy." My voice was rising higher, but the clang of the door chime drowned out part of it.

Con nodded toward the door. “Thank fuck, man. Get in here before your bride decides to leave you at the altar before you’ve even proposed.”

I spun around to face Bishop in the doorway, and pressed the pads of my fingers to my temples. “They’re crazy. Certifiably crazy.”

He walked toward me slowly, his green gaze glued to mine rather than sliding to the nutty peanut gallery behind me. I expected him to demand an explanation or to tell everyone to stop acting so insane, but instead he shocked the crap out of me.

“You gonna leave me at the altar, cupcake?” He didn’t even crack a smile, and his tone was completely deadpan.

I shoved my fingers into my hair and barely resisted the urge to pull it out. “We’re not getting married. We’ve only kissed a couple times. I’m not sure if you actually saw me naked or if I imagined that, so yeah, definitely no wedding in our future.”

His lips twitched at that.

“Wait, you don’t know if he saw you naked?” JP asked. “How did that work?”

“Uh, yeah, you skipped over that minor detail with me too,” Vanessa said meaningfully.

“She wasn’t totally naked.” Bishop took another step toward me. “And I couldn’t give a fair opinion on the subject because I haven’t gotten the whole picture yet.”

Oh my God. The way his eyes burned over my body, all of a sudden I felt naked again. I had to change the subject before I completely lost my mind and did something insane, like throw myself at him. Again.

“How much is not totally naked?” JP asked.

Bishop didn’t release my gaze to answer her. “Not your business, JP.”

“Just asking.”

This time Bishop did look away, and I turned my head to watch the interaction. “Enough.”

From behind me, Vanessa’s heels clicked on the tile. “It’s okay. We’ll find you a big, bad tattooed guy too. There are plenty of them floating around in this town. Practically a dime a dozen.”

“Thanks, princess. That makes us feel so special.”

Vanessa crossed back to Con. “You’re one in a billion, babe, and you know it.”

The heat from Bishop’s side melted into my skin, and the fortune-teller’s words came back to me. *Guard your heart.*

“You ate?” his deep voice rumbled in my ear.

I nodded. “Vanessa brought yours back.”

Speaking of bringing stuff back, I needed to find out what the heck he did with my suitcase because he was empty-handed.

“Where’s my bag? I need my bag.” I reached out, closing my fingers around his forearm. “I can’t lose it. It has everything.”

Bishop stared down at me. “It’s in your new place that’s being aired out.”

New place?

“What are you talking about?”

He shrugged. “Called in that favor from Charlie. Got you set up a few blocks away. You’ll have to go talk to the landlord to get the final approval and pay the deposit, but the apartment is as good as yours, and she’s cutting you a sweet-as-hell deal and giving you time to come up with the money if you need it.”

“That place is fucking tiny. Barely qualifies as an apartment,” Con said.

“But it’s safe, and Harriet doesn’t want much more in rent than what the maintenance on it

costs.”

They had to slow down because I wasn't keeping up. Harriet? What apartment? I was so confused that I didn't even know which questions to ask first. I started with the most basic of the lot.

“You got me an apartment?”

Bishop's gaze dropped to mine. “You have somewhere else to stay for tonight?”

“You could've had her stay at your place.” There was a smile in Delilah's voice.

“Low blow. Stop, I don't want to hear any more.” JP held a hand over each ear like she was a toddler. “I have to go back to work anyway before y'all crush my hopes and dreams permanently.” She hurried to the door, not dropping her hands until she turned and said, “Remember, I'm not going to be a bridesmaid.”

The entire town had gone insane. I truly didn't know what else to say.

“Your food's got to be cold by now, but you can pop the po'boy into the microwave and warm it up if you want.” Vanessa nodded to the other takeout container on the counter beside the one that Con just emptied.

“Or I'll fuckin' eat it right now,” Con said. “I don't care. That shit was awesome. Even the friggin' cole slaw, and we all know I don't eat that shit. You shoulda brought me two, princess.”

“I want to hear more about the fortune,” Delilah drawled. “Especially if there's wedding bells involved.”

“She didn't say anything about a wedding,” I blurted. “It's not important. I need to get my stuff.” I had to get out of the craziness that seemed to pervade this entire shop.

But Delilah wasn't done. “Did she say anything about tattoos? Because I don't think I need a fortune-teller to see that in your future.”

The inked man.

This entire world was going crazy. I wrapped a hand around Bishop's arm. “But my stuff is there? It's safe?”

He looked down at my hand on his forearm for a long moment before replying. “Of course. Harriet's place is solid. I wouldn't let you go somewhere that wasn't. Now, I've got an appointment coming. Can you hang tight for a while?”

“Yes. Thank you. I . . . I really appreciate it. But I would've figured out something for tonight.”

He pulled his arm from my grip. “You needed a place, and I knew of a place. It's no big deal.”

But it was a big deal. And as much as I knew I should have solved this problem on my own because I was done letting people call the shots in my life, the help Bishop offered didn't seem to come with strings. He just did it, and did it in a way that didn't make me feel caged.

Guard your heart. I'd definitely have to take the fortune-teller's advice.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bishop

“Oh my God. This is amazing.” Eden’s eyes went wide as she turned in a circle in the courtyard.

“Charlie called it her garden oasis, and she and Huck were very happy here.” Harriet sounded wistful about missing her one-time tenant. Her normally steel-gray hair was teal, pink, and purple, like that mermaid look girls who came into Voodoo rocked. It wasn’t exactly what you expected on a woman heading toward seventy. But then again, Harriet was one of a kind.

“Huck?” Eden asked.

“Charlie’s dog. He’s a big bastard. You’ll have to meet him one of these days,” Harriet explained. “Well, I guess you’ll do, girl. If you have any questions, just let me know. I’m downstairs most of the time, and I’ll leave a note on the back door if I leave the country unexpectedly.”

She leaned in closer and added in a whisper, “Sometimes I have to dodge the Feds. They’re always watching.”

Eden’s face paled, and Harriet laughed. “Just kidding. Mostly. You can slide the rent under the door whenever you feel like it. I’m not too fussy on what day you get it to me.”

“Thank you so much. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this.” Eden’s voice was quiet, but Harriet waved off the thanks.

“Ha. You need to thank this guy here. Probably owe him a few sexual favors too.”

She sent me a wicked grin, and I choked out a cough when the sheet-white color of Eden’s face was replaced with burning red. This was Harriet being true-to-filterless form.

“I don’t just open up this place for everyone,” she said, “especially on short notice. I’ve been having the cleaning girl keep it up just in case Charlie needed to run away from Simon for a night. But that hasn’t happened, so someone might as well enjoy it.”

“Well, thank you all the same.”

“No problem, dear. Now, I’m off to the opera tonight. I’ll be going home with a certain gentleman who knows his way around the clitoris, so don’t wait up.” Harriet turned away and readjusted the champagne bottle cradled in her arm before disappearing inside.

Eden looked at me, her face even redder than before. “Well . . . she’s a character.”

“That’s one way to describe it.” I shook my head to get rid of the mental picture of Harriet getting down with some old dude. “You need anything else before I take off? I gotta get back to work.”

“No.” She looked up at me with something in her eyes I hadn’t ever seen before. “But I really appreciate this. So much. I don’t know how I can ever really thank you. First the hotel, and then this. Most people wouldn’t put themselves out for someone they don’t know.”

It wasn’t just gratitude staring back at me, it was . . . awe. Almost . . . hero worship.

But I wasn’t a fucking hero even on my best day, and having her look at me like that made me realize all the things I wasn’t and never would be.

My reply came out gruffer than I intended. “Don’t worry about it. You don’t owe me shit. Just stay out of trouble.”

A little of the awe fell away, and I had to tell myself I didn’t care, even as disappointment

slid into its place.

“I’m sorry to cause so much trouble.” Eden wrapped her arms around herself in what I was coming to realize was one of her protective gestures. “I’ll be fine. Thank you again.”

A mask of absolutely fucking nothing slipped over her features. The words sounded final, like I wouldn’t be seeing her again, and it would probably be a hell of a lot better if I didn’t.

But if that were the case, why did it feel like a rock had been dropped in my gut?

* * * *

Street after street, I kicked myself for not handling every encounter I had with Eden better. She threw me completely off-balance and made me want to be more than what I’d become—which didn’t make any fucking sense because I didn’t even know her.

But you want to know her.

That voice spoke the truth, even if I didn’t want to admit it.

She was keeping secrets, and if she were anyone else, I wouldn’t care. Wouldn’t bother to dig. But for some reason, I wanted to know what was hiding behind those layers of innocence that kept drawing me in.

And it pissed me off. Because this wasn’t me. Besides, how could I demand answers from her when there was no way in hell I’d be sharing the shit from my past with anyone? Outside of Delilah, I’d kept it locked down for years and wouldn’t be changing that anytime soon.

I was a block from Canal when my cell rang, ripping me out of my impending trip down memory lane. Leon’s name popped up on the screen.

“What’s going on, man?”

“Damn, Bish. Were you trying to cost me my job? What the hell?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your girl that threw the card down for that room I kept for you? Her card got flagged for fraud and she skipped out without paying for the extra night she stayed that wasn’t comped. Just straight-up fucking bailed, according to my manager. Didn’t even check out.”

“What the fuck? Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.”

“I’ll make sure you get paid. I’ll cover it if I have to, and I’m sure as hell going to find out what happened.” The anger burning through me came out in my voice.

“You can pay me back since it’s coming out of my paycheck. My manager was talking about turning it over to the police, and I told him it was my mistake. I’m lucky he didn’t fucking fire me.”

“Man, I’m sorry I brought that shit to your door. I’ll make it right. I’ll get you the cash, and your next sitting is on me.”

“You don’t have to do that. Just promise me you’ll teach that bitch a lesson.” Leon’s voice dropped low. “Let me know if you want me to handle it.”

A shaft of protectiveness shot through me regardless of how fucking pissed I was at what Eden had done—and not bothered to mention.

“Not a fucking chance will you ever lay a hand on her. You’ll get your money, and if you want the sitting, it’s yours for the inconvenience. Leave her out of it.”

“All right, all right. Sorry, Bish. Didn’t know it was like that. Figured you’d be done with the bitch by now. By the way, Kitty was pissed that you tossed her ass out. Ain’t gonna get another shot at that.”

“I’ll talk to you later, man.” I didn’t bother to wait for his reply before I hung up.

I couldn’t give a fuck less about Kitty right now. I wanted to turn around and go back to Eden’s new place and shake the truth out of her. Shit wasn’t adding up. Was that innocence she wore like her pink fucking sweaters just a front? Was she running some kind of con?

I hadn’t been played in years, and I couldn’t believe some naive girl had done it.

Why would she bail on the hotel bill but shell out money for rent? None of it added up, but you’d better believe I was going to get to the truth somehow.

I checked the time. If I didn’t have an appointment in ten minutes, I’d be back beating down her door for some answers.

She couldn’t be that good of an actress. I could smell a con a mile away, thanks to my younger years, and Eden didn’t give off a hint of that vibe.

I turned it over and over in my mind all the way back to the shop, and through my whole appointment. Fuck it . . . I’d be going back tonight.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Eden

I wandered around my tiny new apartment, which took all of approximately ninety seconds. There was a small bedroom, a minuscule bathroom, and an open area that served as a living room and eat-in kitchen. But the small size didn't bother me. My apartment in New York, one that I'd fought for the right to live in for years before Dom had allowed it, was at least quadruple the size, but I'd never used every room. I hoped this place would feel more like home than that one did.

Harriet had left a bottle of wine on the counter, and I debated opening it, still wary of alcohol.

Leaving it where it sat, I unpacked my suitcase and hung up my limited wardrobe before pulling out the envelope of cash I'd stashed in the lining of my bag. I might not have learned a lot of the *how to be a gangster* rules from the mobsters around me, but at the end of the day, it seemed like there was only one that truly mattered—cash is king.

For the last several months, every week when my paycheck was deposited into my account, I'd go to the bank and withdraw cash. If someone had asked me at the time, I would have said it was rainy-day money, or some kind of response like that. In all reality, it was because my bank account had been frozen once before when Dom was investigated by the FBI. I couldn't even buy myself lunch because I'd always relied on plastic and never carried cash.

As soon as the accounts had been unfrozen, I'd started my stash in case it ever happened again.

I pulled out the burner phone and checked the Internet browser for news. There'd been nothing new the last five times I'd checked today, and I wasn't holding my breath now. The only article I could find was the same one that had been there this morning.

I'd love to think no news was good news.

Once I'd put the money in the safe in the bedroom closet and organized the rest of my few belongings, I sat down on the small sofa. The TV didn't work, and none of the five books I started could hold my attention. Restlessness wasn't a familiar feeling for me, but tonight I had it in spades.

I looked out the window to the fairy lights hanging in the trees and the blue water of the pool that looked almost tropical with the lights coming from beneath the surface.

Is it heated? I hadn't thought to ask Harriet because it wasn't like I'd packed a bathing suit when I was rushing out of my apartment to leave the city.

Deciding to find out for myself, I opened the door and padded down the wrought-iron spiral staircase to the path that led to the pool. It was a magical little courtyard, and I could see why Charlie had called it her garden oasis. I kicked off one shoe and dipped a toe in the water.

Perfect.

Harriet said she was leaving. The pool couldn't be seen from the gate . . . did I dare take a dip sans suit?

I'd never skinny-dipped in my life, but I was turning over a whole new leaf in New Orleans. Daring filled me. *Why not?* I stripped out of my jeans, cardigan, and cami before pausing to decide if I really wanted to go all the way. I could just jump in with my bra and underwear on . . .

Screw it. For once in my life, I was exercising the *go big or go home* mentality. I shoved my panties down my legs and unhooked my bra before stepping into the pool and slipping my entire body into the water. Definitely heated. From water level, I could see the small tendrils of steam rising into the cooler night air. It was so peaceful. Everything about this night seemed perfect.

A new beginning. Maybe a new place to belong. I was filled with hope, and every day that burner phone didn't make another sound, I convinced myself a little more that maybe they'd forgotten me.

My quiet reverie didn't last long, however. The iron gate clanged with someone's entry, and I slapped a hand over my lips to hold in the shriek that threatened to escape.

Harriet? Charlie? Who?

I sank lower into the water, wanting to be completely covered, but sucked in a breath when a tall, broad form entered the courtyard.

No way.

Bishop started up the stairs but paused when the spiral caused him to face the pool. He couldn't miss me.

"What the hell are you doing?" His deep voice carried across the courtyard as he came back down the stairs and toward me.

I slipped to the front edge of the pool, pressing my body against the cement wall. I reached out, intent on grabbing my cami or my sweater, but both were just out of reach.

Bishop stopped a few feet away from the pile of my clothes, and I stared at the thick black soles of his boots. If he came another step closer, there was no way he could miss how well-lit my naked body was by the pool lights.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me." The words were uttered low and hoarse, as if he weren't talking to me at all.

"Please toss me my shirt," I whispered.

The last thing I expected Bishop to do was shake his head. "Nah. I don't think I will. Because this way, I've got a captive audience and you're going to answer my questions."

Goose bumps rose along my shoulders, and I slipped further beneath the surface so that my chin touched the edge.

"What are you talking about?" I tried to sound nonchalant, but my heart hammered harder with every beat.

"You bailed on the hotel. Stuffed them on the bill for what you said you'd cover. Why?"

Oh shit. I knew that was going to come out sooner or later, but I'd naively hoped for later. Of course his friend would tell him as soon as possible. And of course I didn't have a story to give Bishop . . . yet.

He stared down at me, clearly waiting on an answer.

"I . . . forgot?"

His eyes narrowed. "You didn't forget shit. You ran. What I want to know is why? I have to assume you have enough to pay rent to Harriet, or are you going to skip out before you pay her too?"

"No! Of course not. No way would I do that to Harriet."

"But you thought it was okay to fuck over the hotel?"

My fingers curled around the concrete edge of the pool. "I'm so sorry. Really, I am. I got spooked and bolted. It wasn't planned."

Bishop's stare intensified, as if he were trying to take me apart layer by layer. "You're not going to tell me the real reason why, are you?"

I broke away from his gaze and stared out into the darkness that had settled over the courtyard. "I can't. I . . . if I could, I would." My voice was quiet, but at least my words weren't a lie.

"I heard all the stories about when Charlie was working at the shop and she was on the run, and I gotta say, I see a whole lot of similarities with you. No one can help you if you won't tell someone what the fuck is going on."

A bitter laugh escaped my lips. *Help me? The bastard daughter of a mobster being investigated by the FBI and a grand jury? Yeah, right.*

"No one can help me. But I'll pay for the hotel. Just let me get out and I'll get the money."

He scowled down at me, clearly unhappy with my answer. "We're way beyond you just handing me some cash and calling it good, cupcake. I want answers. You need me to fuck them out of you? Is that what you're waiting for?"

The words came out in a growl, and I jerked away from the edge of the pool, not thinking about how plainly it would put me on display.

He reached for the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head.

"What? No. What are you doing?"

My voice was so high-pitched that I didn't recognize it. I also didn't recognize this even-rougher-than-normal Bishop before me. It was like someone had flipped a switch. I could practically feel the anger radiating off him.

"I'm coming in. Don't want to get my clothes wet."

I wrapped my arms around my body. No man had seen me fully naked . . . ever. I'd lost my virginity in a beach cabana with my cover-up still on, and he'd barely done more than unzip his khaki shorts.

Bishop crouched and unlaced his boots before kicking them off and removing his socks.

I should have been filled with fear, but when he reached for the button of his jeans, my mouth dried and any trace of apprehension disappeared. Heat flowed through me like the temperature of the pool water had been increased another twenty degrees when he lowered the zipper.

Was this the moment I was supposed to look away? Because there was no way I could do it. I wanted to see everything.

I thought of Kitty and how she'd practically licked her lips when she'd seen Bishop enter the room. I'd known what she wanted then, and apparently my body was on board for that same thing right now, even if my rational mind was screaming at me to cover my eyes.

He shoved off his jeans, and I expected boxers or briefs or even boxer briefs beneath them. Instead, there was just . . . Bishop.

A whole lot of Bishop.

Oh. My. God.

I'd seen porn; I wasn't completely unacquainted with dicks. But I was also under the impression that dicks in porn were way larger than the average man. Apparently, I'd been misinformed, because Bishop was . . . big.

He was also totally shameless as he came toward the steps and walked down into the water.

"You're really fucking quiet all of a sudden, cupcake."

The word *fucking*, regardless of the context he used it in, sent my imagination tumbling into the gutter.

"Why . . . why are you doing this?"

"Because I can't seem to get answers out of you any other way, and if we're both naked, I'm

a hell of a lot less likely to pick you up and shake them out of you—unless it's going to make you come.”

My insides clenched.

“I would tell you if I could, but I swear it's better if you don't know.”

He stepped closer to me as I shrank back against the opposite wall of the pool from where I'd stood before.

“That's just too fucking bad, because I'm not leaving without answers.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Bishop

It wasn't like I had a plan when I came back to Harriet's. All I had was the extra set of keys I'd purposely kept, and the knowledge that I wasn't leaving until I knew whether the Eden I'd thought I was getting a feel for was a fraud.

When I saw her in the pool and realized she was naked, I decided to take the prime opportunity presented to me.

If she was running some kind of con, I figured she'd use her body to distract me from getting the answers I wanted. If she wasn't . . . I guessed we'd see how she'd react.

I stalked her as she paddled backward to the wall and waited until she had nowhere else to retreat.

"What do you want from me?" she whispered.

"I want the truth."

But that wasn't all I wanted. My cock was rock hard and not afraid to remind me that I wanted her body too.

"Just let me get the money. I made a huge mistake. I freaked out over something stupid. I'm so sorry." She looked away as she spoke.

I released the concrete edge of the pool and lifted my hand to her chin to force her dark gaze to mine. "Not enough. That's bullshit, and we both know it."

Indecision warred behind her gaze, and I wished she'd just fucking spill so I could quit wondering if I was drawn to someone who was a con or just on the run.

She swallowed, her eyes on mine when she finally said, "They told me my credit card was canceled because of fraud, and I thought I saw cops at the front desk and I got scared that maybe they'd arrest me or something. So I ran."

Her explanation sounded sincere enough to be the truth, but my radar didn't seem to operate flawlessly around her, so I needed more.

"Did you steal the credit card you used?"

Eden's eyes widened. "No. Of course not."

"Then why would you think the cops would arrest you if there was an issue with it?"

Her gaze dropped away from mine. "I panicked."

Something wasn't adding up, but I didn't have a fucking clue what it was. "So you're just afraid of cops?"

For a girl like Eden, I couldn't imagine that she'd have any reason not to think cops were the most helpful people on the planet. For a guy like me, I avoided them as much as I fucking could, even though it seemed half the NOPD had decided that I was the guy who needed to do their ink.

"I don't particularly like them," she said quietly.

"You ever broken the law before this, Eden?"

I expected a quick and unequivocal no, but it didn't come as fast as I thought it would.

"I don't think so. I mean, I'm sure I have by accident sometime. I've jaywalked. But I'm not some kind of criminal."

Well, that makes one of us, I thought.

My anger from earlier started to fade and be replaced by the heat of the knowledge that

Eden's naked tits were only inches from my chest, separated by water I could see right through. Last time I'd seen them under her pink bra, she'd been too fucked up for me to take advantage . . . but tonight she was completely sober.

I raised my gaze from her chest, expecting her cheeks to be red when she realized I was staring at her nipples, but she wasn't watching my face. She was staring down at my body.

"Like what you see?"

That got her attention.

Eden jerked her head up to meet my eyes, and the blush colored her skin like I'd timed it.

"You're . . . big."

A booming laugh broke free from my throat at her unexpected response, and her cheeks flamed even brighter.

"No, that's not what I meant. I mean . . . everywhere. Not just, in the . . ." She looked down, then jerked her gaze back to mine. "I'm going to shut up now."

That kind of awkward and fumbling response couldn't be faked, and protectiveness rose in me again. Eden was no con artist. She was a girl who couldn't even say the word *cock* without turning red.

"Ain't no shame in my game."

She reached out a hand and covered my lips with her fingers. "Stop. You're just making it worse. I wasn't checking out your . . . package. I mean, I did before you got in the pool, but that's only because I thought you'd have underwear on because who doesn't wear underwear?" The babbling continued, and so did my laughter.

Hell, I hadn't laughed this much since Delilah had given in to a customer's request and tattooed a flexing veined eggplant cartoon on a client so he could send pictures of it instead of dick pics.

Eden pulled her hand back and covered her face. "I'm going to stop talking now. I seriously can't be trusted to say anything that's not completely humiliating when you're standing this close to me naked."

"I disagree, and since I'm not ready to get out and put my clothes on, you're going to have to deal with it."

She mumbled something under her breath.

"Come again?"

Eden pressed her lips together for a beat before saying, "I don't know how to deal with it. This isn't something I've ever dealt with before."

A crazy thought popped into my brain. "Are you a virgin?"

If there was a red brighter than fire engine, that was the color of Eden's cheeks. "No! Of course not. Really. I've touched a dick before. I mean, just the one, but it still counts. Well, I didn't really touch it. Except, you know, inside me. Oh my God, I'm just going to shut up now."

Realization dawned on me as her babbled protest silenced. "You've had sex with one guy? Once? How old are you?"

Eden turned to bolt, but instead smashed her tits into my arm. I stepped close enough so that only an inch of water separated us.

Her gaze went skyward. "This is so humiliating."

That's where she and I had differing opinions. "Why? Because you haven't fucked every guy you've ever met? What's wrong with that?"

Eden's gaze snapped down to mine and her brows drew into slashes. "Hey, whoa now. You can toss that double-standard crap right in the trash. What if I had screwed every guy I ever met?"

Would that make me less of a person? I mean, it's not like you probably haven't been with dozens and dozens of women. I'm not judging you. Except for maybe that Kitty girl. I mean, really? You've got to have some standards."

My laughter boomed out again across the courtyard. "Cupcake, just because I can get most any pussy I want, doesn't mean I do it."

"Still, double standards are—"

When she started on another tirade, I decided to silence her the best way I knew how. I leaned down and covered her lips with mine.

Chapter Thirty

Eden

He was kissing me. He was naked. I was naked. And my hands, mouth, and the rest of my body decided this was the best idea anyone had ever had. That was the only excuse I had for why there was no water separating us anymore, and the hot, hard length of Bishop's cock pressed into my stomach.

My fingers gripped his shoulders as his hands found my ass and lifted me higher in the water, sliding his cock directly against my clit, a spot that normally only zinged with pleasure because of the toys I owned.

I moaned into his mouth and held on tighter. A small voice told me that this was going to escalate way too quickly for my own self-preservation, but I told it to shut the hell up because I wanted a non-self-induced orgasm.

Bishop's hands, no doubt incredibly clever due to using them all freaking day, squeezed my ass as he groaned.

One move. That's all it would take for him to be inside me. What stunned me more than the fact that I found myself writhing against him in a pool was the fact that I wanted him inside me so very badly.

Heat licked over my body, and I knew if I didn't stop soon, I wasn't going to have the willpower to stop at all. But before I could call a halt, Bishop jerked back and his hands dropped away from my ass. By the time my feet touched the bottom of the pool, he had backed away until he hit the other side.

"Fuck, cupcake. Two more seconds and I would've been inside you."

He said this like it was somehow going to be news to me.

What was the appropriate response for this? Probably not, *I know, right?*

Instead I blurted, "I don't have a towel. Why didn't I bring a towel?"

His lips turned up into a sensual smile. "Didn't plan the skinny-dipping? Just went with your instincts?"

"Basically."

Thankfully, Harriet had kept the apartment stocked with sheets and towels, but that meant I had to get out of this pool, naked, with Bishop watching me.

Umm. Nope. That wasn't going to work. Looked like I was going to stay in this pool forever—or at least until he left and I could climb out without him seeing the cellulite on my thighs and butt, and the lack of toned muscles due to not going to the gym in the last millennium.

Bishop seemed to read the dilemma on my face. "You going to go get something to dry off with?"

"Eventually."

"Now would be better."

I looked down at the water and pretended to study my nails. "I'm good with waiting."

"I guess you're going to get a great look at my ass then, because that means I'm going to go get them." With a splash of water, he pushed himself up and out of the pool, and my attention went right to his ass.

Where did men get asses like that? His was *perfect*. The rounded muscles flexed as he put

one foot on the ground and then the other.

He jogged up to the spiral staircase and I couldn't help but watch. I think I might have even drooled.

Ink. Muscle. Pure *man*.

My earlier thought about him being completely out of my league came back in spades. And now he knew just how inexperienced I was.

Bishop let himself into my apartment and disappeared for a few minutes before coming out with a towel wrapped around his waist and one in his hand.

He stopped at the edge of the pool and shook it out. "Come on, cupcake. You're going to prune."

Seriously? He's worried about me pruning and I'm staring at the outline of his cock beneath his towel, wishing he was still pressed against me. Apparently I was the only sexually frustrated one in this situation.

But even my sexual frustration wasn't enough to get me to step out of this pool naked in front of him.

"You can leave it on the edge and turn around."

Once again, his deep, rich laugh filled the courtyard. "Cupcake, I'm not sure where you got the idea that I was some kind of gentleman, but by now, you should know that's not the case. The only reason I didn't find out how tight that pussy of yours was is because I don't have a rubber on me."

How stupid was I that I hadn't even thought about a condom? Embarrassment filled me, and came out as contrariness. "And because I didn't want you to find out."

"Bullshit." He shrugged. "Whatever you have to tell yourself to make you feel better."

Bishop didn't drop the towel, and I was faced with the choice of staying in the pool or giving in.

"Just turn around."

"I've already felt nearly every inch of you, and there's not a damn thing I didn't like, so what does it matter?"

"It matters," I yelled. "Okay? It matters to me."

Instead of laughing at me or refusing again, he turned his back and held the towel out to the side.

I swam toward the stairs, climbed out, and pulled it from his hand. As soon as I had it wrapped around my body, Bishop turned around and his intense green gaze collided with mine.

"I want you. I'm not making any secret of that, but now I'm going to wait until you admit that you want me just as much."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him I wasn't denying it, but something held me back. Probably the same embarrassment that had paralyzed me in the pool. I didn't know how to navigate this situation, and I certainly had no idea how to respond.

When I stayed silent, Bishop didn't speak again. Instead, he reached for the knot of his towel and tugged it off before tossing it aside and reaching for his jeans.

His eyes stayed on my face as though daring me to look down like I had before. I was determined to prove that I had retained some self-control where he was concerned.

The hiss of the zipper sounded between us and he bent to grab his shirt. "You're a fucking contradiction. Stubborn, innocent, curious, and a whole hell of a lot of other things I haven't figured out yet." He pulled the shirt over his head. "But I will."

I wasn't sure if that was a threat or a promise, but either way, I didn't know if I'd be able to

withstand his scrutiny. I was supposed to be laying low, not attracting attention or raising questions while I waited for my summons. And instead I'd aroused the curiosity of a man who seemed to have the tenacity of a bulldog. I didn't need him to be curious, but the thought of him being anything else didn't sit well with me either.

I watched in silence as he shoved his feet into socks and pulled on his boots. When he was done, he stood.

"I'll be seeing you around, Eden. That's a promise."

Chapter Thirty-One

Eden

Fabienne put both hands on her hips and watched as I looped my apron over my neck and tied it around my back. The bright purple coordinated with my white polo and jeans and Sperrys. It wasn't like I could wear one of my new dresses, so this would have to work. Your Favorite Hole was embroidered on the purple hat I fit over my ponytail and secured on my head.

"That uniform makes you look even cuter than normal. I didn't know that was possible," Fabienne said before turning to the espresso machine.

Her words instantly made me wonder what Bishop would think when he came in for his coffee. Would he look at me differently? *What if he didn't look at me differently? God, that would be even worse.*

After he left last night, I'd kicked myself for not stuffing a vibrator in my suitcase. Note to self: next time, make sure to pack *all* the essentials.

I'd pulled up my favorite bookmarked dirty scenes and handled things the old-fashioned way. But even two orgasms hadn't been able to put me to sleep. I'd tossed and turned for hours, and then when I finally drifted off, I'd dreamed about Bishop sitting on the chair in my bedroom, jacking off while he watched me.

For the first time in my life, I considered begging for sex.

Pathetic. I would not beg. But it wasn't like I had the skills to make *him* beg. This needed to be remedied . . . but not right now.

"First things first. You're going to make me the best latte you can, and then I'll give you any pointers to up your game."

Pushing all dirty thoughts of Bishop out of my head, I turned to the espresso machine and unhooked the portafilter from the head and checked to make sure it was empty before holding it under the grinder and filling it with espresso grounds. After tamping it down, I returned it to the head and paused with my finger over the buttons.

"One-shot or two-shot latte?"

"Small is one, medium is two, and large is three. Let's do a medium. We don't do that tall, grande, venti shit here, for the record."

I slid the shot glasses under the spouts and pressed the button for two shots before bending down to open the fridge beneath and asking, "What kind of milk?"

"We do skim, two percent, soy, and coconut. Do skim, and I'll talk you through steaming coconut and soy later."

Nodding, I grabbed the container and poured what I hoped was enough into the metal pitcher and checked the thermometer on the side. From my own personal experience, I remembered that I needed to hit at least 155 degrees. I frothed the milk while the espresso finished dripping before grabbing a paper cup.

"Any flavoring?"

In my peripheral vision, I caught her head tilting to the side. "Amaretto."

Keeping one eye on the milk, I grabbed the amaretto flavoring and poured one shot into the bottom of the cup before adding the espresso. When the milk came up to temperature, I added it in as well, stirring as I went.

“I can’t make any fancy designs on the top, though. I hope that’s not a job requirement.”

I set the milk pitcher and the long metal-handled spoon aside and offered the latte to Fabienne.

“We’ll have you drawing dicks in no time,” she said with a smile as she accepted the cup.

There’s no way I can fit a dick as big as Bishop’s on top of a latte. Seriously, how big was that monster?

The thought disappeared as Fabienne brought the cup to her lips. *Moment of truth.*

She sipped and I held my breath. Her expression gave nothing away until she lowered the latte back to the counter and nodded.

“You’ll do just fine.”

Releasing my breath, my cheeks tugged with the smile that stretched across my face.

“Really?”

“Damn right, you will.”

The validation I felt from her approval soared far and beyond what I’d felt in years. I thought about holding it in, but cast that aside to pump my fist into the air.

Fabienne’s laugh seemed to fill the room, all the way to the tin-stamped ceiling. “Yeah, you’ll do just fine here. Now, let’s talk donut holes and packaging them up.” She swung her gaze to mine. “You’ve gotta handle them real carefully. Just pretend they’re a guy’s balls and you don’t want to crush them.”

I slapped a hand over my mouth. “Oh my God, you did not just say that.” Once again, a mental picture of Bishop’s equipment flashed through my brain.

“Sure did, and I bet it helps.”

And just like that, I was officially employed in New Orleans.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Bishop

The lines of a girl's face stared back at me as I worked on the portrait of a man's daughter on the outside of his bicep. It took all my concentration to make each one perfect because this wasn't the kind of tattoo I could fuck up and live with myself.

"She's going to be seven this year, and I decided this would be the way I'd always remember her. Even when she's got a license and driving and boys are chasing after her, I always want to remember my little girl when I was the only important man in her life."

My client's words penetrated, and I wondered what it would be like to feel that way. With the course I'd set for my life, it wasn't in the cards.

"You mind if we take a break? I could use a smoke."

I was holding the tattoo machine in midair as I let my mind wander, but snapped out of it. "Of course. Take your time." I looked down at my watch. "I'm going to run next door and get some coffee. You want anything?"

The client shook his head. "Nah, just some nicotine."

I put everything on the counter behind me and snapped my gloves off my hands before standing and stretching. Staying in one position for too long told me exactly how much of an old man I was becoming. Thirty-three years felt older than it should most days.

But when I walked into Your Favorite Hole, the feeling fell away as laughter reached me.

Eden was standing sideways, reaching into the donut bins and pulling out selections for a man that had to be eighty if he was a day.

"I mean, come on, it is called Your Favorite Hole for a reason. You have to pick your favorite." Her tone was light and teasing, and the man's smile grew.

"Oh, darlin', if I wasn't fifty years past my prime, I'd have a whole lot more to say to that."

The rush of possessiveness that had been dogging me since I'd met Eden didn't come this time. The old man was harmless.

He turned and saw me. "But this young man, he looks to be about the right one for you. I bet if you teased him, he'd just pick you up and carry you home."

Eden glanced toward me. Her cheeks bloomed with color but her smile stayed intact. "He does seem like the type, doesn't he? I think that's a safe bet."

The old man glanced between us, looking intrigued. "I sense some history here. You have intentions toward this girl? As her unofficial new grandfatherly figure, I feel the need to look out for her."

I didn't know what it was about Eden that made people automatically want to protect and defend her, but I couldn't fault the old man for feeling like that when it was my natural instinct.

Eden leaned an arm on the counter and rested her chin in her hand. "What say you, Bishop? Do you have intentions toward this girl?" Her tone carried laughter, but there was something else underlying it. *Challenge.*

I studied her and considered my response. Might as well lay it all out there. "I've got intentions. Plenty of them."

Eden's eyebrows shot up to her hairline at my answer.

The old man caught on quickly. "I bet you do, boy. I bet you do." He laid money on the

counter and reached for the box of donuts. “You better watch this one, Eden. If he’s anything like me with my Sally, he might take his time with the decision, but once he’s decided, there’s nothing that’ll stand in his way.”

His words echoed in my head. Was that what I was doing? Taking my time with the decision to make Eden mine? I hadn’t even considered the possibility of something permanent because my life hadn’t left room for it. And then here was Con asking me if I’d want to buy Voodoo, and an old man insinuating that I could have permanent intentions toward Eden.

I’d never let myself give enough thought to my future for permanence to be part of it. Maybe it was time for that to change . . . but that meant the threat that kept me moving every few years would have to be removed from the equation. I had no idea if they were still looking for me, but I knew better than to settle.

“I’m sure he doesn’t have any intentions of that sort, Mr. Flowers.”

Mr. Flowers studied us both. “I think you’ll be surprised by what he intends, young lady. Thank you for the donuts, and keep the change.”

He lifted the box and shuffled out of the shop, but not before pausing beside me to say, “I might be old, but I still know how to get rid of a body. You treat Miss Eden right.”

I nodded, holding back the smile his words produced. “Understood, sir.”

The door chimed as he stepped outside, and I turned back to Eden. Her cheeks were still stained pink as I stepped up to the counter.

“He just threatened to kill me if I treated you badly,” I told her, wondering if those cheeks would get darker. They did, all the way to a bright red.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Dead serious.”

She shook her head. “He came in an hour ago and just wanted to chat. It took us forty-five minutes to finally get around to picking out his donuts.”

“Guess that’s your special magic then. Making people want to spend more time around you.”

This time her eyes widened comically. “Yeah . . . I’m sure that’s it. Just look at you. You want to spend as much time around me as you would around someone with the plague.”

Her statement threw me. “You think I don’t want to be around you?”

“Every time I see you, you’re gone so fast, it’s like you can’t wait to get away from me.”

“Maybe I don’t think you’ll be able to handle what I’d want if I stayed.”

The red continued to color her cheekbones, but Eden straightened her shoulders and stood taller. “Maybe that’s exactly what I want.”

I stepped forward and pressed both hands to the purple laminate counter. “You sure about that, cupcake? Because I’m not exactly sweet and easy.”

“I gathered that from the girls waiting in the room at the hotel.”

A shaft of regret that she saw them stabbed through me. “Two-on-one isn’t my thing, so don’t worry about that.”

No, if I got tangled up in Eden, had her in my bed the way I wanted her, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to let her go. But given my newfound possibilities of permanence . . . maybe I could keep her.

“Well, I’m definitely not into two-on-one, so that wouldn’t even be in the realm of possibilities.”

The fact that I was standing in Your Favorite Hole talking to Eden about how neither of us wanted a threesome struck me as surreal. I had to dial it back before we got way ahead of

ourselves.

“What time do you get off work?” When her eyes popped open wide again, I smiled. “To hang out. Get some food. See what happens.”

“I’m here until midnight, and then I have to shower and change so I don’t smell like donuts.”

“You can shower at my place. I’ll find you something to wear.”

“I don’t think—”

“I don’t think you’re walking home from work by yourself, and I’ll be working until at least twelve thirty on this portrait. Come over when you’re done, and you can let yourself upstairs.”

The indecision warring inside her played out on her features, but I knew I’d won when she replied. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll even make you a late dinner.”

“You cook?” Her tone was pure surprise.

“I got a few tricks up my sleeve, cupcake. Guess you’ll find out what they are tonight. Now, how about a large black coffee and a bag of donut holes so I can push through and finish the rest of this tat?”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Eden

I couldn't believe I was going to spend tonight with Bishop. Well, not *spend the night*, but it was way past evening, so I wasn't sure what else to call it. I locked up the shop, still marveling that Fabienne had given me a key on my first day, and readjusted my bag over my shoulder.

Bishop had a valid point. I hadn't thought about how I'd be getting home after work on the nights I worked the late shift. As I knew all too well, me walking through the French Quarter by myself wasn't always the smartest move. But as I walked into the front door of Voodoo, and both Bishop and his client looked at me, I wondered if this was an even dumber move.

As Bishop already knew, my experience level wasn't exactly advanced, and I had no idea what he expected tonight.

"Hi." My voice wavered only marginally as I called the greeting. "Do you want me to just—"

My words were cut off as the door chimed behind me and clicking heels hit the floor.

"Hey, baby. You got time for me tonight? I want ink and cock, but I'd take just cock if you ain't got time for the other."

I spun around at the slurred, smoky voice to find a girl with bright red hair and almost no clothes on. Her body was ridiculous.

Is she a stripper? From the minuscule ripped tank and tiny little hot shorts to the towering six-inch clear stilettos, I didn't feel my mental question was unfair.

Bishop's tone was no-nonsense when he responded. "Out of luck on all counts, Star. Head on home."

Her rough laugh followed. "You know you're interested. Like you got better plans for later?"

Bishop's face stayed expressionless. "You might want to get a cup of coffee on your way home too."

The expression on her face morphed from smug and happy to harsh and downright ugly in a flash, and her attention turned to me.

"What? With this girl? Queen prim and proper? She do that schoolgirl-uniform shit and act like a naughty little slut for you? I know you like that kind of thing."

The muscle in Bishop's jaw ticked, but nothing else gave away what he was thinking. "The next time you need ink, you're gonna have to find someone else because this shop no longer exists for you anymore."

"You never did know a good thing when you had it. Fuck off, Bishop." She turned on her giant heel and clipped her way out, slamming into my shoulder and pausing. "Slut, you won't be able to keep him. No one can."

When the door shut behind her, I turned to Bishop and mouthed a silent *wow*.

"Sorry about that, man," he said to the customer first.

"No worries, dude. You don't have to explain crazy to me. I've got an ex-wife who could give her a run for her money."

"I'll be back in a second."

Bishop lowered the tattoo machine to the counter, snapped off a glove, and came toward me.

“What’d she say to you?”

I shook my head. “Not important.”

“What’d she say?”

“Do you mind if I go up and shower?”

Bishop’s hand landed under my chin, and he lifted my gaze to his. “What’d she say, Eden?”

“She called me a slut and told me I wouldn’t be able to keep you because no one could.

That’s all. Moving on now.”

He didn’t move his hand, and the muscle in his jaw ticked again. “If Delilah were here, she’d track her down and kick her ass. Star’s drunk, probably hopped up on pills, and what she said was dead fucking wrong.”

I nodded. “I know. I’m not a slut.”

His expression softened. “That’s not all she was wrong about.”

My heart beat harder at the words and the possible implications.

“Go on upstairs and take a shower. I’ll be up in a little while.” Bishop lowered his hand from my chin and laced his fingers through mine. “Come on. The door is this way.”

He pulled me toward the back hallway of the shop and stopped before the door next to the employee break room. I’d assumed it opened to a closet or something, but when Bishop pulled it open, I realized I was wrong. Inside was a stairway leading up to a door.

“It’s unlocked. There should be a clean towel in the closet in the bathroom. You can grab a shirt out of my dresser if you don’t want to put your work clothes back on. Hell, you can even wash them if you want. Washer and dryer are up there too, in the big closet by the door.”

“Uh . . . okay. I’ll be good. Sorry to interrupt your work.”

“You’re not an interruption, cupcake. You’re a breath of fucking fresh air. Go on up. I’ll be done soon.”

With his words propelling me, I climbed the stairs as he shut the door behind me.

* * * *

I stood in front of the shower, debating how tonight was going to go. I truly had no expectations, but something had changed between us. Bishop wasn’t the gruff, brusque, and nearly mute broody guy who I had a crush on anymore. Now he was looking at me like I mattered. Like this might not be all one-sided and mostly in my head.

What was I supposed to do with that?

I didn’t know how long I would be here, and I’d decided that was okay. Not knowing gave me some time to soak up all the adventures I could, but with it came a sense of urgency so I didn’t waste it.

The edges of my plan had frayed until it was in tatters. I wanted to stay. I wanted to be part of this little world I’d discovered. I liked the people and loved the city, even if I still got lost half the time.

And Bishop? What if this could be more than the dreams I had at night and the crush I nursed during the day? What if it could be real? I honestly didn’t have a clue how to *have* a real relationship.

That was something to worry about some other time. Like when I wasn’t about to get naked in Bishop’s apartment.

I’m getting naked in Bishop’s apartment. Holy shit.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Bishop

“I think I’m gonna call it a night, man. We knew I’d need another session, so you cool with stopping now?”

My client’s question was the best thing I could imagine him asking. “Your call.”

He grinned. “What kind of guy would I be if I kept you down here working when you’ve got that sweet thing upstairs waiting for you? A shit guy, that’s what kind.”

I could try to pretend I hadn’t been thinking about Eden since the second I’d walked back into the room. “It’s up to you.”

He lifted his arm. “Just wrap me up, and I’ll give you my money and get out of your way.”

“Sounds good. Let me make sure I’ve got you down for the second session and see if I need to block out more time.”

I taped the wrap around the partially completed tattoo and snapped off my gloves again before tossing them in the trash.

After taking care of shit at the counter, I locked up the shop after he left and hustled back to my room to clean everything up faster than I’d ever done before.

My client was right that I’d never had quite the incentive like I did now.

Eden was upstairs, and I was still figuring out how I was going to let this play out. I’d never wanted a woman the way I wanted her, but I wasn’t rushing things. Now that I’d let myself start considering the possibility of something that lasted beyond a night, everything had changed.

I flipped off the lights and opened the door to upstairs. I paused at the bottom of the stairs, listening for the sound of water, but heard nothing. Taking them two at a time, I reached the top and opened the door. Steam wafted from the open bathroom door, but I didn’t see Eden when I looked inside.

I froze on the threshold of my bedroom. She faced away from me as she pulled a T-shirt over her head, covering her naked skin inch by inch.

Fuck.

When it dropped to cover her rounded ass, I wanted nothing more than to stride forward and lift it up again.

I wasn’t sure if I’d breathed too loud or what, but Eden spun around.

“Uh . . . I borrowed a shirt.” And she did. White, with the Voodoo Ink logo on the front. The water from her skin and hair was already making it see-through in spots.

I had to clear my throat to find my voice. “I see that. You hungry?”

“Yes.” The glint in her dark eyes betrayed the fact that she wasn’t just hungry for food, but something still held me back. I could stride across the threshold and have her under me in that bed, but it didn’t feel right. I didn’t want her to think that was the only reason I asked her to come up here. I’d never been in this situation, so I had to play it by ear.

“Then you’re in luck because tonight you’re gonna have killer shrimp stir-fry. You like seafood, right?”

Eden nodded, keeping the smile pinned to her face, but it didn’t quite cover her disappointment.

Don’t worry, cupcake. You’re gonna get what you need. I don’t have it in me to wait too

much longer.

She followed me out of the bedroom and into the living area, and I nodded toward the old turntable on top of the entertainment system. “Go flip through the vinyl and pick something.”

My collection was one of the things I’d always figured would suck to leave when I moved on, because I traveled light. Now that the possibility of staying in New Orleans was taking root, everything in me was lighter with a sense of relief.

I pulled open the fridge and grabbed the bowl of shrimp that had been thawing since noon, and a container of cooked rice. I was rinsing the shrimp when the sound of Louis Armstrong came on.

Footsteps padded into the kitchen, and I looked over my shoulder. “Nice choice. A favorite of mine.”

“I figured since it looked like it was near the top of the stack. I’ve always liked Louis too.”

“You want to help? It’s not required, but if you’re in the mood to chop vegetables, I could use a hand.”

A flash of uncertainty crossed her face. “I’m a terrible cook. Like honestly terrible. So if you don’t care what the vegetables look like, then I’m happy to help. If you care what they look like, you might not want my knife-wielding skills.”

“Grab the celery and carrots out of the fridge and go to town. They don’t have to be pretty.”

“Aye aye, captain.”

We worked in companionable silence for several minutes before Eden spoke.

“You don’t have a New Orleans accent. Where are you from?”

I kept my focus on deveining the shrimp as I rinsed each one. “A little bit of everywhere. I started out in the east and ended up down south.”

“What kept you moving?”

“A whole lot of things. Long story, not always pretty. Guess you could call me a wanderer.”

Eden paused in her chopping for a moment before saying, “Most stories aren’t always pretty. That’s what gives them true beauty. I’ve always wanted to wander.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“I didn’t exactly have the option.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “Another long story. Not so pretty. Mostly, my father wouldn’t allow it.”

I finished up the shrimp and grabbed a big pan from the cupboard. “And did you always do what your father said?”

Eden’s voice quieted. “I couldn’t ignore his orders and get away with it.”

“Tough guy?”

“When he was around. The rest of the time my aunt raised me, or I was by myself.”

“What was she like?”

“Fine. She was my father’s half sister and didn’t seem to have a whole lot of love for him. But he paid for her life, so it wasn’t like she could do anything but be passive-aggressive about it when he wasn’t around. Which was most of the time.”

With each piece she revealed, I got a clearer idea of why Eden seemed so sheltered and yet wanted to see the world and be a part of it.

“Anyway, that’s all boring. Tell me about you.”

I poured oil in the skillet before moving across the kitchen to rest a palm on the counter on either side of Eden. “How are the vegetables coming?”

I glanced down at the pile on the cutting board and leaned closer. The veggies looked like

they'd been hacked to pieces, but that wasn't what caught my attention. No, it was the scent of my shampoo on Eden's hair. I leaned closer and breathed it in. I liked it. A whole fucking lot.

"It was a massacre," she said with a laugh, laying the knife on the counter and turning around to face me. In the circle of my arms, Eden smiled up at me. "No survivors."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Eden

I wanted him to kiss me. When he first walked into the apartment, I'd wanted him to rush into the bedroom and pick me up and kiss the hell out of me before throwing me down on the bed and climbing on top, or even better, letting me climb on top so I could finally explore him. But something had stopped Bishop, and I didn't know how to change it.

Was I really so bad at sending signals that he wasn't getting the *all clear for forward movement* sign? I wasn't afraid to move this along. I was more afraid that he wouldn't.

His head lowered until his lips were an inch from mine. "You seem to have survived just fine, cupcake."

I wasn't leaving it to chance this time. Pushing up on my tiptoes, I wrapped my hands around his shoulders before pressing my lips to his.

Instead of pulling back like I'd feared, Bishop cupped a hand around my cheek and tilted my head for a better angle before his tongue dived into my mouth. It was like he was starving—for me.

I wrapped a leg around his hip, and his free hand caught it and held me closer so I could press my center against the hardening bulge in his jeans. The T-shirt I wore rode up with each movement. Within moments, his palm was touching my bare skin, and I was in danger of leaving a wet spot on his jeans.

With a boldness I'd never felt before, I released my grip on one shoulder and reached down between us. Shifting my hips a few inches, I palmed his cock and squeezed.

Bishop's sexy groan was my reward.

He pulled his lips away, but didn't release my face. His gaze burned into mine as he spoke.

"You make me want a hell of a lot more than your hand on my cock, cupcake."

I swallowed. "Maybe that's exactly what I want."

"Not yet."

"But—"

He released my face and lowered his hand to where mine was gripping him, and peeled my fingers away.

"First, I need to know."

"Know what?"

"How bad you want me."

He shifted his hand to cup my center. The heat already blooming between my legs rushed a dozen degrees hotter as he used one finger to stroke up and down the slick heat. My hips surged forward, grinding against his palm. I needed more pressure, more everything. My moaning sigh filled the kitchen, and I didn't care how I sounded.

"So fucking sweet. You want to come on my hand? Fuck my fingers until you scream?"

His coarse words pushed me harder because I wanted that and more.

When one thick finger slid inside me, I moaned even louder.

"Fuck, you're tight. You're gonna strangle my cock when I finally get inside you."

If I still had any grip on my rational self, I might have found the energy to be embarrassed, but he increased the pressure on my clit as a second finger slid inside.

Oh my God.

That's when he finally started to move, thrusting his fingers in and out as I bucked against them. Both my hands wrapped around his shoulders again, my nails digging in to keep me upright.

"You're gonna come for me, aren't you, cupcake?"

Words weren't possible. My response was a moan and a clench of my inner muscles as the climax drew closer. I could almost reach it. He pressed harder on my clit, and it sent me over the edge.

I buried my face in his shoulder so the scream wouldn't wake the neighbors. Over and over, my muscles clenched as he kept up the pressure and the thrust of his fingers.

When I finally came down, he withdrew his hand and lifted his fingers to his mouth, and sucked them clean.

My eyes bugged wide.

"Jesus fucking Christ, cupcake. You're even sweeter than I thought you would be."

The words should have burned my cheeks with embarrassment, but instead they made me bold.

"And how sweet are you?" They were the words of someone who knew what she was doing, not the words of a girl who'd never had a penis in her mouth.

His gaze heated, and I knew my inexperience didn't matter. I was going to make him explode the way I had.

Letting the T-shirt fall to cover me, I lowered myself to my knees and reached for his belt.

His big hands gripped my shoulders as he pulled me to my feet before I could get any further. "Not here. If you're gonna wrap that sweet mouth around my cock, I want us both to be comfortable."

Bishop lifted me into his arms and carried me toward the bedroom.

When he lowered me to the bed, he came down on top of me. "But first, I want you to kiss me. Hard. Like I've been wanting your lips on mine since the day I met you."

He flipped us over and my T-shirt flew up in the back again, but that didn't stop Bishop from wrapping a hand around my ass and sliding me up his body. He kept one palm covering my bare ass as he pulled my face down to his, and the other hand he tangled in my hair.

My attention was divided. The aftermath of orgasm. His clever tongue and amazing kiss.

Against my lips, he murmured, "You're fucking perfect, Eden. Fucking perfect."

I thought he was just as perfect, and the proof was slicking across his belly and the waistband of his jeans where I sat.

Screw it.

My boldness grew, and I pulled back and inched my way down his legs.

"It's my turn."

Bishop caught the ends of my hair in his palm and gripped tightly, stopping my movement. "Have you ever had a cock between those lips, cupcake?"

"Does it matter?" I refused to let my inexperience get in the way of what I wanted.

"Not at all, but I can't lie and say that teaching you to suck my dick the way I like it hasn't been on my mind."

"Teach me?"

He released my hair and skimmed a hand along my jaw as he nodded. "Teach you to swallow me down and let it go deep? How to suck hard as you pull away? How to totally fucking wreck me for life?"

None of these sounded like bad things.

“Yes.”

Bishop’s lids grew heavy even as excitement lit his eyes. “Unbutton my jeans. See how fucking hard I am for you.”

I followed his directions and wrapped my hand around his solid shaft. I’d already seen how big he was, had felt his length against me, but pulsing against the palm of my hand, his cock seemed even bigger.

Instinct ruled, and I gripped him harder and stroked.

“You don’t need me to teach you anything, do you?”

I lowered my head to circle the crown with my tongue. “Just tell me if I do something wrong,” I whispered.

Where this inner temptress was coming from, I had no idea, but I was rolling with it.

Bishop groaned as I sucked the head into my mouth and teased.

“Your mouth might kill me, but I’ll die a happy man.”

He shoved his jeans further down his hips, lifting his ass so he could free himself.

I wasted no time taking him deeper, varying my suction and speed, trying to see what would wring another moan from him. Each noise acted like an incentive, and I wanted to make him come apart the same way I had.

“Grip the base and take me deeper.”

I followed his directions and was rewarded with another groan. His orders fell away as I did what came naturally. Bishop’s hands buried in my hair and lightly guided each movement when I would falter.

“Fuck, baby. I’m gonna come.”

I wasn’t sure if that meant he was going to pull out or if he was staying put. Either way, I kept going, sucking deeper, smiling inside as I felt his cock jerk, and hot, salty cream spilled into my mouth.

Was I not supposed to feel victorious? Because I felt like I’d just won a damn medal here.

When I finally lifted my head, Bishop hauled me up the bed and curled me into his side. I didn’t know what exactly I was supposed to say after a blow job.

“You didn’t need any instructions, did you, baby? Fucking destroyed me like it was nothing.”

A smile tugged at my lips, but a shaft of uncertainty still sneaked inside. “Umm . . . did you want me to go?”

He turned his head to stare into my eyes. “No way in hell. You try to leave this bed, and I’ll carry you right back. Besides, I want dessert before we have dinner.”

“Dessert?”

His green eyes flashed with heat. “One little taste wasn’t nearly enough. I’m gonna eat you until you scream.”

My thighs squeezed together instinctively.

“Now, put that sweet little pussy on my face.”

“What?”

“You’re gonna ride my beard until I tell you to stop.”

Holy. Hell.

When I didn’t move quickly enough, Bishop wrapped a hand around each of my hips and lifted me up.

“Spread your legs, cupcake. I’ve been thinking about doing this since the first time I saw

you.”

“You have?” Even I could hear the shock in my voice.

“Fuck yes.”

I moved up to straddle his face, and the first touch of his lips to my clit erased any self-consciousness at my position.

“Grab the headboard.”

I followed orders, and his tongue lashed me from top to bottom as the pressure from his hands on my ass ground me down against his face.

Within moments, I was rocking against him of my own accord as his moans sent vibrations through every nerve ending.

It might have been the fastest orgasm in the history of orgasms. Maybe that was the magic of the beard?

I’d certainly never look at it the same again.

“Bishop!” I screamed his name, my fingers going numb as I squeezed the top of the headboard.

He didn’t stop until I’d come a second time. My head fell forward, hanging between my limp arms.

Bishop shifted me off his face. “We’re definitely adding that to the regular menu. The way you rode my face, so fucking sexy.”

I flopped to the side and heaved in a breath and released it, hoping more oxygen would slow my rapid heartbeat.

“You okay?”

I tilted my head sideways just far enough to see his face. “I’ll let you know in a few minutes.”

His chuckle filled the room.

After several long minutes, my heart rate and breathing approached normal, and Bishop rolled out of bed and stood.

“I’m going to clean up, and then it’s time to feed you.”

“I could be on board with that,” I replied just as my stomach growled.

When he returned from the bathroom, he came around the bed and lifted me into his arms. Once in the kitchen, he deposited me on a stool.

“You sit. I’ll cook.”

“I was that terrible of a kitchen assistant, huh?”

“You weren’t terrible at all. But I’ve got it from here.” Bishop turned to the stove and fired up the burner before pouring oil into the pan.

“How did you learn to cook?” I asked, mostly because it stopped me from asking the question I really wanted to voice. *How did you get so good at whatever the hell you just did to me?*

Bishop shrugged as he let the oil coat the surface. “Probably like anyone. I need to eat, so I cook.”

I couldn’t imagine that there weren’t a lot of women who’d happily cook for him. “I bet you could’ve gotten all the girls throwing themselves at you in the tattoo shop to do it for you. Like a casserole schedule when someone’s sick? Everyone could have had their allotted day and they’d show up with food.”

Bishop turned and held up a spatula. “Oh, so now you’re a comedian? I’ll turn that tight little ass of yours red with this if you even think about suggesting that again.”

The heat that raged through my body at his response shocked me. Maybe I wouldn't mind that kind of thing? One of Bishop's eyebrows went up, and I knew he didn't miss my reaction. Curiosity and a hint of daring invaded his grin.

When he moved back to the pan and tossed the veggies in, I couldn't help but continue. Maybe it was my insecurity that I'd never be enough for a guy like Bishop? I'd seen the girls who threw themselves at him, and I didn't exactly have a whole lot in common with them. Basically, my boobs were real, my ass wasn't perky, and I covered a lot more skin when I went out in public.

"They'd probably put all sorts of voodoo in those dishes, anyway. Love potions so you'd succumb to them."

Bishop grunted as he stirred the vegetables in the pan. "More likely aphrodisiacs over love potions. They don't want love. They just want a ride."

I begged to differ, although he had to be right about wanting a ride. Just the thought of him giving some other woman a *ride* made my stomach twist into knots. But before I skipped off down the green jealousy brick road, I considered his words. They said a lot more than he probably intended. How could this man—this kind, sweet, and thoughtful man—think that's all he was good for? He was wrong.

"I'm sure they'd rather keep you."

Bishop fit the lid onto the pan before turning around to face me. "You want anything to drink? Water? Beer? Liquor? I don't have any wine or shit like that."

"Water would be great. I'm thinking I'll give it a few more days before I go back to drinking. My tolerance isn't exactly the greatest, anyway. I rarely drank at home. Maybe a glass of wine when I took a bath, but nothing extreme."

He snagged a bottle of water from the fridge and set it on the counter in front of me.

See? Thoughtful.

"There's nothing wrong with laying off the alcohol, especially if you're alone."

"You getting sick of rescuing me, Bishop?" I tried for flirty, but his face lost all traces of humor.

"Never."

The word hung between us as I met his green gaze.

I wished it could be true, but there was definitely a time limit on whatever was happening here.

I had to keep reminding myself of that while I watched Bishop cook and tried to figure him out. He didn't fit into any of the boxes I stuck him in. He was the epitome of tatted-up badass, and yet he was making us food and it sounded like he thought the women who were after him only wanted him for sex.

Was he insane? The man—whose hair was still tied up in a knot on the back of his head while I was dying to get my hands in it—didn't understand his appeal went far beyond the physical. Given his ripped body, drool-worthy hair and beard, and epic cool factor, I would have expected him to be cocky and convinced that he was God's gift to women. But that wasn't it at all. Bottom line, he was a good man who didn't seem to be aware of his worth.

I opened my mouth to ask him a question about his background, but he beat me to it.

"Have you made a list of all the things you want to do in New Orleans? You seem like a list kind of girl."

If he only knew how many lists of things I'd left hanging on my bulletin board in New York, he'd laugh. But I couldn't tell him about that.

Instead, I thought about what was typed on the paper folded up in my purse.

Eat crawfish

Learn to say something in Cajun

Drink a hurricane at Pat O'Brien's

Catch beads on Bourbon Street (without showing my boobs)

Play a hand of blackjack at Harrah's

Watch a Mardi Gras parade

See Lafayette Cemetery

Eat beignets at Café du Monde

At least I'd crossed off a couple things on the list. Every time I'd been on Bourbon Street, I'd been more worried about getting where I was going, or following Bishop, so I'd forgotten to try to get beads.

I wondered what he'd say if I told him that . . .

He stirred the veggies in the pan and came toward me to lean on the counter. "You do have a list."

"Maybe."

"Come on, cupcake, you gotta share."

"Okay, fine." I rattled off the whole thing, minus the items I'd already ticked off.

Bishop's eyebrows were nearly to his hairline when I was done. "You've put a little thought into this, haven't you?"

I shrugged. "I've wanted to come here for a long time."

"So now that you're here, you've gotta check off the rest of the list, don't you?"

"I may never get another chance."

His eyebrows lowered into a furrow. "Why do you say that?"

"It's complicated."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You really don't have a plan for how long you're staying here, do you?"

I shook my head. "It's . . . fluid at the moment. I'm going to stay as long as I can, though. I don't want to leave."

"Then don't."

"It doesn't work like that."

"This is your life, Eden. You get to choose."

If only he knew how very wrong he was about that. I could only imagine what would happen if I didn't obey the summons to come running back to New York. If Dom had to send someone to drag me back, they'd probably do it by my hair.

"What I get to do is make the most of it. So, you want to help me?"

I immediately wanted to snatch my question back, but it was too late. What if he didn't want to help me? What if he didn't ever want to see me again after tonight? He was a one-night kind of guy, so what made me think it would be any different with me?

Bishop turned back to the pan on the stove and lifted the lid. Steam escaped, and he spooned the vegetables into a bowl before dumping the colander of shrimp in. He seasoned them, but didn't answer my question.

I felt like an idiot. "Never mind. I know you're way too busy with work and everything to have time to—"

He looked over his shoulder at me. "Eden, shut up. If you think you're going to knock that list out without me, you're in for a hell of a surprise. Now, let me work my magic on this stir-fry"

and then we'll eat and figure out what we're going to tackle first.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Eden

My eyes flicked open but the rest of my body stilled. Heat radiated against my back, and a heavy arm rested on my side.

Oh my God, I'm in Bishop's bed. I repeat— In. Bishop's. Bed.

I scanned the room for a clock but saw nothing that could give me a hint as to the time. Last night, we'd eaten stir-fry off of mismatched plates and talked about my list until I could barely keep my eyes open. At one point, I was a little concerned I'd fall asleep midsentence and face-plant in my food.

I don't have a problem with carrying you home, Bishop had started to say, but I didn't remember anything after that.

He must have tucked me into his bed and called it a night.

I'm in Bishop's bed.

If I had to guess whether Bishop made a habit of letting women spend the night, my answer would be an unequivocal no.

So, what was this?

He shifted, and a thick, hard ridge pressed into the crack of my ass.

Oh my God. His morning wood felt just as big as I remembered from last night.

"Mornin'." Bishop's voice was rough from sleep, and sounded even more delicious than it did normally.

"Good morning," I replied before clamping my mouth shut. I had to have horrible morning breath.

"You passed out after dinner last night. I decided you were sleeping in my bed."

I opened my mouth to reply, but shut it again.

"You okay?"

My response was a nod.

Bishop's eyes clouded with confusion for a beat before clearing. "Ah, I'm killing you with my breath." He picked his arm up and rolled to the side. "Sorry 'bout that."

I didn't speak until he was firmly out of my bad-breath trajectory. "Not you, me. Do you have an extra toothbrush?"

All thoughts of brushing my teeth died when he pulled an elastic from his hair. The golden-brown waves fell around his shoulders, and he shook them out.

Holy. Fucking. Hell.

Everything in me screamed to throw myself at him and climb him like a tree. *That* was the guy who'd given me the best non-self-induced orgasms of my life. *That* was the guy who said he'd help me check the items off my list. *That* was the guy who'd spooned me last night.

"You're beautiful." My voice was quiet, almost reverent.

Bishop froze. "What?"

"You're beautiful. I just thought you should know."

"Guys aren't beautiful, cupcake."

"That's not true, because some definitely are. You're one of them."

He shook his head. "Goofball. You want to shower here again? I did throw your clothes in

the wash before I climbed in bed. They shouldn't take too long to dry. I'll run down and grab donuts and coffee, and you can wait up here."

"You're . . . not going to tell Fabienne I spent the night, are you?"

A hard mask slipped over his features. "Why would I tell her?"

"I don't know. I just . . . She's my new boss and I'm still working on making a good impression. I don't want her to think I took the job just so I would see you. Never mind. I'm not making any sense. Forget I said anything."

Confusion flashed in his expression before it softened. "I wouldn't say anything to your boss you didn't want me to say. For the record, Fabienne wouldn't care about anything other than the fact that I'll be coming into the shop even more now, anyway."

Because he wants to see me?

The implication hung there, but I didn't ask to confirm.

Bishop didn't stick around to offer a confirmation either. He turned and walked toward the dresser, and it finally dawned on me that he was wearing boxer briefs.

But . . . "You don't wear underwear normally."

He swung his head around to look at me. "Is that right?"

"Well, at least not the night you came in the pool, or last night."

His gaze never left mine. "You making a study of my habits?"

I shrugged. "Not on purpose."

He winked. "Don't worry, cupcake. I remember every damn thing I learn about you too."

* * * *

Mardi Gras was a blur of lattes, cappuccinos, double and quadruple shots of espresso, and thousands of donuts. Basically, a second-day trial by fire. Thankfully, Voodoo Ink was closing early tonight, and so was Your Favorite Hole.

Every time the door chimed, my gaze cut to it, wondering if Bishop would finally come in. Fabienne had mentioned offhand that he'd been in for his morning fix, which meant if he stayed with his routine, he'd also be coming in for his afternoon caffeine pick-me-up.

For the first time in my life, I was going to ask a guy out. Did it matter that we'd already technically spent the night together? No. That actually made it harder and more awkward in my opinion.

Another rush of costumed people filled the shop. Orders for donuts were shouted to Fabienne and Ellie, and they marked coffee orders on cups and lined them up near me. If things got too backed up, Fabienne would jump in and help, but I was busting my butt to keep up by making three drinks at a time.

My anxiety rose with each hour that slipped by without him making an appearance. I wanted to do this in person, not via text. My eyes scanned the next cup in line and I froze.

Quadruple-shot non-fat latte with cinnamon on top.

Delilah's regular.

My gaze immediately jumped to customers waiting in front of the espresso bar, and I found him watching me. His lips curved just the slightest bit, and mine did the same.

"Hi." My tone was quiet but cheerful as I refilled portafilters and snapped them into place to make the espresso. He already held his tall coffee, so I assumed he was just waiting for Delilah's.

He nodded and watched me make the drink. I forced a shot of confidence into my veins so I didn't screw it up somehow.

When I was finished sprinkling on the cinnamon, I snapped the lid on top and slid it across the counter.

With a deep breath, I went for it. “So, I was thinking maybe tonight you might want to, if you weren’t already busy—”

He interrupted my already botched attempt at asking him out. “I’ll be here at seven to walk you home.”

My hopes plummeted because I didn’t want to go home while Mardi Gras raged on outside my windows. This entire town was celebrating tonight, and I wanted to be part of it.

“But—”

“You’re gonna shower and change into a dress, and then we’re gonna work on your list tonight.”

My protests died on my lips, and I smiled.

“We are?”

He nodded.

“And that requires me wearing a dress?”

The barely there smile widened infinitesimally and his eyes flashed with heat. “That’s for me. Skip the panties. I’ll see you at seven.”

He wrapped a big hand around Delilah’s coffee cup before giving me a chin lift and walking out of the crowded shop with a bag of donuts under his arm.

Seven o’clock. Bishop was going to walk me home, and I was going to shower and change into a dress and we were going to work on my list.

And I wasn’t going to be wearing any panties.

Holy. Shit.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Bishop

Even in her polo shirt and jeans, Eden attracted looks on the walk back to her place from Your Favorite Hole. She stood out like a beacon in the crowd of women dressed for attention without even trying.

As usual, she was completely oblivious to the fact that she was gorgeous. It wasn't just her blond hair, pulled up in a messy bun, or her shining brown eyes or fucking kissable lips. No, it was the energy that surrounded her. Happy, positive, and practically vibrating with excitement about life. People were drawn to her as we walked by them.

And then there was me, following her like a big, hulking shadow with a look that said *keep the fuck back if you want to live*. More than one guy had opened his mouth or reached out only to shut up or snatch a hand back. I gave them a hard stare and kept moving. Eden didn't even notice what was happening.

The crowds thinned out as we turned the corner onto her street.

"That is just *crazy*. I've never seen so many people packed on that street."

"It's like this every year, from what I'm told."

We stopped in front of the gate and Eden pulled the keys from her purse. "Haven't you ever come down here on Mardi Gras before?"

"I've only been here a few years, and I've never been much for crowds, so I stayed away."

She fit the key into the lock and turned it, and I pushed open the gate.

"You never wanted to toss beads on Bourbon?" she asked as we stepped inside.

I shut the gate behind us. "Some guys don't need beads to see tits."

She swung her head around as we walked down the brick path leading into the courtyard.

"Oh yeah, I forgot I'm talking to the guy who can't beat the girls away fast enough as they throw themselves at you."

"What you forgot is that I've never cared to see any of them."

"Riiiiight." Eden stretched out the word as she climbed the spiral staircase in front of me before unlocking the door and stepping into her small apartment.

That's when I pounced, following her inside, shutting the door, and pinning her to the back of it.

Eden's lips parted and her eyes went wide as she stared up at me.

"You were the first one to walk into Voodoo who I didn't want to see walk out. If I could've, I would've dragged you up to my apartment and stripped you naked and tossed you onto my bed."

"Then why did you wait so long to touch me?" Her words came out breathy.

"Because some things are worth waiting for, and you're one of them."

"Why are you still waiting?"

"I'm not. I'm savoring." My lips lowered to hers and I covered her mouth before she could reply. When my tongue traced the seam, she let me in, and I took advantage. "You taste so fucking sweet. Sweeter than I should be allowed to have in this life."

"Shut up and kiss me." Eden's hands found their way into my hair, and she tugged my face down closer so she could kiss me back.

As much as I wanted to lift her into my arms and carry her to her bed, I wanted to give her more than just that. I wanted her to have everything she'd ever wanted, which meant everything on her list.

When I pulled away, her eyes were clouded and hazy. "Why are you stopping?"

"Because you're putting on a dress and we're working on your list."

"But—"

"Don't worry, cupcake. I'm going to taste you every chance I get tonight, and my cock will be buried inside you before the sun comes up tomorrow."

With that promise hanging in the air, I took another step back, and her gaze dropped to the fly of my jeans.

"I could—"

The thought of her mouth on my cock had it surging against the zipper so hard, I thought it might bust free.

"I know you could wreck me again with that sweet mouth, but not right now. Go get in the shower. Don't touch yourself either. I want you just as needy as you are right now, because I just decided we're adding a new spin to your list. Everywhere we go to check something off, we're going to give you a whole different sort of experience too."

"What do you mean?" Even though her question was quiet, I knew she was intrigued.

"It means that if we're sliding into a booth to eat, I might finger that tight little pussy and play with your clit until you come. Or if we're getting a drink at Pat O'Brien's, I might drag you off to a supply closet, and you can wrap those sweet lips around my cock."

I didn't think her eyes could get any bigger as I explained.

"You down with that? You wanna get dirty in NOLA, cupcake?"

"Yes." The shock faded and daring took its place.

That's my girl, I thought. And I realized that's exactly how I thought of her—as mine.

Except I had no idea whether I'd get to keep her or not.

But tonight, I'd do my best to make her as addicted to me as I was to her.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Eden

I could swear even my skin vibrated as I stepped into the shower and hurried through my routine. I'd never been so turned on in my life than I was when Bishop was telling me about this new aspect he was weaving into my list.

You wanna get dirty in NOLA, cupcake?

With him? Absolutely. I wanted it more than anything. I was already dying to know how he was going to feel inside me, and now he promised I wouldn't have to wait long.

Tonight was the night.

I shaved every inch of skin that could possibly need to be shaved, and scrubbed the scent of donuts and coffee from my body and hair. When my fingers dragged over my pussy to make sure I hadn't missed any stray hairs, my clit flared to life and I stifled a moan. I was tempted to keep circling it until I came.

What would he do? Come in and spank me for being a naughty girl and getting myself off in the shower?

"You better not be playing with that pussy in there, cupcake. I'll see it on your face when you come out."

Really? How could he possibly know that? His timing was unfairly ridiculous and accurate.

"I don't know what you could possibly be talking about," I yelled from the shower, although it was unnecessary. With an apartment as tiny as mine, you barely had to breathe to be heard in the next room.

"Yeah, you do."

"I'll be out in a second."

When I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around myself, I peeked out of the bathroom door and Bishop was there watching me.

"Are you wet, cupcake?"

"Well, I just got out of the—"

"No, your pussy. The one you were touching while you were in the shower after I told you not to."

Heat bloomed on my cheeks, but I wanted him to know the truth. "Yes, but I only bumped my clit. I didn't even make myself come."

"I'm gonna have to check for myself, I think."

He reached under my towel and skimmed the back of his knuckle along my slit.

"Fucking soaked." He groaned as he pressed just hard enough to slide his finger between my pussy lips.

My legs trembled, and I reached out a hand to press against his chest to brace myself. I don't know what to call the sound I made, but it was somewhere between a moan and a cry for more.

Bishop kept stroking.

"You make yourself come a lot in the shower?"

My voice shook when I answered. "Sometimes . . ."

He straightened his finger and circled my clit. "Do you picture me while you do it? Say my name when you come?"

I leaned into his touch, wanting more pressure, but Bishop pulled away as I pressed closer.
“Answer me, cupcake.”

On a moan, I replied, “Maybe.”

Bishop pressed hard against my clit, and I could feel the orgasm rising. But he didn’t let me have it. He pulled his hand away and sucked his finger clean.

“But—”

“Greedy girl with your wet little pussy. Get dressed before I change my mind and never let you out of your bed for the next twenty-four hours.”

I stared at him. “How is that a threat?”

Bishop chuckled darkly. “Go, now.”

* * * *

When we stepped out of my apartment, anticipation thrummed through me, along with need that wouldn’t quiet. It had taken everything I had not to get myself off in the bedroom after he’d brought me so close. But I had a feeling he’d make me pay for that somehow.

The sounds of a city partying its hardest came from every direction in the French Quarter, and it seemed every balcony was full. I’d opted for the teal dress and black ballet flats, and had dried my hair and applied makeup faster than I ever had before.

Bishop’s appreciative gaze told me I’d done just fine. His words confirmed it.

“You’re a class act, cupcake. And you’re all fucking mine tonight.”

As much as I loved that, a feeling of disappointment threaded through the excitement. Tonight was all well and good, but what if I wanted more than just tonight?

I pushed away the thought and decided to focus on having fun and checking off as many items on my *Must Do* list as I could. I was here to live in the moment, not worry about what was going to happen tomorrow. For all I knew, I could get a message telling me to get my ass back to New York.

I pinned a bright smile to my face and followed Bishop. “Where are we going?”

I expected him to say something about crawfish for dinner or maybe the casino for blackjack, but instead he shocked me.

“First, we’re gonna get you some beads.”

“We’re *what*?”

Bishop threaded his hand through mine and pulled me toward the corner. “Going to Bourbon Street.”

“It’s a madhouse out there.”

“And you’ve got your own personal security, so don’t worry. Besides, you wanted a hurricane at Pat O’Brien’s and we’re gonna knock that one off too.”

“On Mardi Gras? Are you crazy?” After a few days in New Orleans, I realized how ridiculous it would be to try to knock off any of my list during Mardi Gras. It was the busiest time of the year, and we’d have to wait hours to even try to get into the bar.

“Let me worry about that.” He glanced down at me with a grin. “You forget, I might not be the most social guy on the planet, but I know a fuck-ton of people. Who do you think Con turned over all his clients to when he stepped away from the business? Who do you think they keep coming back to?”

“You, I’m assuming.”

“Which means I know a big chunk of the Quarter. So you let me worry about making things

happen.”

“Okay, big guy. Whatever you say.”

He looked down at me. “Don’t believe me?”

I shrugged playfully. “Maybe. Maybe not. We’ll see if you can deliver.”

I spun in a circle, and the skirt of my dress flared.

Bishop grabbed my hand and pulled me against him. “You better watch it. No one gets to see that sweet little ass but me.”

One hand covered my left cheek and squeezed. I bit my lip, and he shook his head.

“Naughty little thing. You’ll pay for that. And, cupcake? I always deliver.”

He released me with another squeeze and I shivered with excitement.

* * * *

I stayed beside Bishop until we reached the police barricades that barely held in the partiers on Bourbon, and then he released my hand and wrapped an arm around my waist loosely.

“You’re gonna walk ahead of me, and I’ll tell you where we’re going.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier for me to follow you?” I yelled over the din.

“I can’t see you if you’re behind me. If someone grabs you or you get pulled away, my reaction time is slower. If you’re in front of me, no one is going to touch you because they’re gonna see me and know I’m what they’ll have to deal with. And if someone does, they won’t be able to do much before I grab ’em by the throat and take care of them.”

His explanation made sense, and I walked as he directed me through the crowd. I was concentrating on the ground and the people right in front of where I was walking, but Bishop spoke into my ear.

“Look up, cupcake. This is what you wanted to experience.”

I looked up as he turned me in a circle in the middle of the heart of Bourbon Street. I soaked up every sound, smell, and sight, tucking them away to remember someday soon. Bishop pointed up, and I followed his arm to see a woman in a purple, green, and gold tutu standing on a balcony with her gold bra barely concealing her large boobs. She threw beads every which way.

“That’s where you’re getting your beads.”

“How—”

But I should have known Bishop already had a plan. He grabbed both of my hands and lifted them into the air and let out the loudest wolf whistle I’d ever heard. It got the woman’s attention and she bounced on the balcony, hands full of beads waving back and forth.

“Do you know her?” I yelled.

“Nope.”

But it didn’t matter because she flung a handful of beads right toward us, and I pushed up onto my tiptoes and caught two strands as they flew our way.

Bishop caught four more, and turned me to face him in the middle of the street before lowering each necklace over my head. As he released each one, he pressed a kiss to my cheeks, nose, forehead, and finally my lips.

I wrapped a hand around his neck and pulled him closer to take the kiss deeper.

Cheers and shouts dulled around us. Every one of my senses was focused on Bishop and the giddiness roaring through my senses.

This is living.

When I finally released him, he dropped another kiss on my temple and spun me around.

“You see that corner? We’re headed there and then we’re taking a left. Next stop, Pat O’Brien’s.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Eden

Bishop directed me toward the famous red building of Pat O'Brien's, and once we broke through the crowd, the line I expected wrapped all the way around the corner.

We didn't slow or even try to find the end of it, though. Bishop walked us right to the front door where the bouncer checked IDs. The high from catching the beads began to fade as I worried about whether we could actually get in. It's not like we couldn't come back and do this another day, but I had to admit there was something incredibly cool about the idea of doing this on the most famous day of the city's entire year.

We stopped in front of the solidly built man as he handed a woman's ID back to her. The fierce frown dominating his face disappeared as soon as he saw Bishop.

"Hey, man. Never would've expected to see you here on fucking Mardi Gras. What the hell are you doin'?"

Bishop lifted his arm to wrap around the top of my chest. "My girl wanted one of Pat O's famous hurricanes on Mardi Gras. It wasn't like I could say no."

The bouncer's attention landed on me for the first time. "Hey there, Bishop's girl. You must not be from around here."

For a moment I thought I must still stand out like a tourist from his comment, but he continued.

"If you were, you wouldn't even attempt it. Just know, your man is making quite the sacrifice taking you to this zoo today. Enjoy it." He stamped our hands and jerked his head to the side, and Bishop propelled me forward through the darkened doorway.

Relief slid through me that he didn't ask for my ID. With Bishop standing right beside me, I wasn't sure how I could possibly explain why the name on it didn't match the one I'd given him. An icy trickle of guilt slid down my spine, but I pushed the feeling away. Tonight wasn't the night to worry about that. Besides, it wasn't like I'd lied to him about who I was. It would have been different if I'd given him the name on my ID, or so I convinced myself.

When we squeezed through the entry out into the courtyard, I realized why Pat O'Brien's was such a legendary tourist spot. The inner courtyard was totally New Orleans, at least from what I could see with the crowd of people. There wasn't any hope of getting a table, but Bishop got the attention of one of the servers passing by.

"Two hurricanes."

"Of course. I'll be right back with those."

Bishop guided me to the edge of a fountain where he sat down and pulled me onto his lap. My skirt spread out over us, covering the top of our legs and bunching up between us.

My butt rested directly on Bishop's hard thighs, without anything between my skin and his jeans. He was completely aware of this because his hand slipped under the fabric and his palm skimmed along my thigh.

His promise from earlier rose up with the goose bumps rising on my skin.

"You think you can be quiet, cupcake?" His tone wavered between playful and seductive.

I nodded, wondering how quickly the server was going to return with our drinks, and what kind of panting, writhing mess I'd be by then.

“Good girl. Would it make you feel better if you knew we weren’t the only ones doing this right now? I see at least two couples who are being a hell of a lot more obvious about it than we are.”

“Where?” I scanned the courtyard.

“Red-and-black dress at three o’clock.”

The only reason I knew three o’clock meant to my right was because I’d spent plenty of time watching *NCIS* reruns at night when I couldn’t get into one of my books. Who knew it would ever come in handy?

I glanced in the direction he’d indicated and found the red-and-black dress and, *oh my God*, I could see her skirt riding up as the guy she was with slid his hand beneath it.

Even as shocking as it was, I couldn’t deny my body reacted by pushing all the heat south, not that I wasn’t already primed from my shower incident.

“Watch what he does to her.” Bishop’s voice was a husky whisper sending shivers down my spine as he tucked my hair behind my ear and skimmed his lips along it.

The man pulled up the back of the skirt, exposing the rounded curve of the woman’s ass.

“Scandalous, what you’ll see if you’re looking for it.”

My nipples tightened into hard points against the bodice of my dress as Bishop’s fingers stroked my inner thigh.

I turned my head toward him, but he nipped my ear. “Keep watching them. I want to see if he’s going to do what I’d do if that were us up there.”

With every word, his fingertips edged closer to my center, and every sensation seemed heightened without panties acting as a barrier.

The man at three o’clock pulled the thong from between the woman’s cheeks and tore it free.

I released a pent-up breath.

“He just ripped her panties off. Did you like that?”

But somehow, I couldn’t find the right words to tell him just how much I liked it.

“Come on, cupcake. You can tell me how wet it makes you.” He paused. “Or I could just find out myself.”

His voice had dropped to seriously husky, and I nodded ever so slightly. I wanted him to touch me as I watched the other man yank the woman’s skirt down over his hand as she threw her head back.

As soon as the pad of his finger slicked along my wet slit, I bit my lip to keep from moaning just like the other woman must be.

“Fuck, I love that you’re soaked.”

He didn’t have to tell me because I could feel just how wet I was as he stroked and circled around my clit without touching it.

I opened my mouth, ready to beg him, when the server rounded the side of the fountain with our drinks.

Bishop’s hand is up my skirt and there’s a guy less than two feet away. But apparently the server hadn’t noticed or just didn’t care.

“That’ll be fifteen,” he said as he balanced the tray with two ornate glasses filled to the top with red cocktails.

I expected Bishop to slip his left hand out from under my skirt when he reached for his wallet, but he didn’t. He pulled a twenty from his pocket and handed it to the server before accepting one cocktail and placing it in my hands. The second, he set on the edge of the fountain.

“Keep the change.” The statement was a clear dismissal, and the server thanked him before walking away.

I slid the straw between my lips, desperate to look like we weren't doing what we were actually doing.

“Don't spill,” Bishop whispered as his finger pushed inside me.

Oh my God.

My first taste of a hurricane at Pat O'Brien's happened with me a minute from orgasm, courtesy of the sexiest man I'd ever met.

With each drink I took, Bishop's fingers became cleverer and bolder. His thumb found my clit as warmth from the alcohol hit me.

He didn't let me come until I was almost finished with my drink, and then pulled it from my hand and covered my lips with his to hide the sound of the half scream, half moan I couldn't hold back.

The aftermath of the climax washed over me as Bishop pulled his hand from beneath my dress. To cover the tremor in my hand, I reached to pick up my drink and sucked down the final inch. When I lowered it, I turned on his lap to meet his gaze.

“Well, that might not have been what I'd expected when I made my list, but it was a million times more memorable.”

One side of Bishop's mouth quirked up. “That's what I'm here for, to make this memorable for you. Now, you want to remind me what else was on that list?”

Chapter Forty

Eden

We left the craziness of Bourbon Street behind and headed down streets I hadn't yet walked. With Bishop beside me, his fingers twined in mine and the heat from a good buzz and an even better orgasm thrumming through my veins, I felt like I could take on the world. If one of Dom's goons showed up tonight and told me to come home, I'd squeeze Bishop's hand tighter and tell him to go to hell. It could have been my overactive imagination, but I thought that Bishop would tell him to go to hell right along with me. Possibly even fight to keep me here.

Maybe it was the alcohol, but every time he looked at me, there was something more in his eyes than I'd seen before.

He wanted me.

Well, no shit, E. He had his fingers inside you.

But more than that, he *liked* me. I could tell. Well, at least I thought I could tell. I hoped I could tell.

But what was I going to do with that?

Grab on to him and ride this ride for all it's worth. Take this opportunity and live, came the bold voice from inside me.

Buoyed by good spirits and even better booze, I decided that's exactly what I was going to do.

When we slowed in front of a building I'd never seen and Bishop pulled me toward an old wooden doorway, the amazing scent of Cajun food wafted toward my nostrils.

The girl waiting at the hostess stand just inside lit up at the sight of Bishop. "Hey, Bish. I've been wondering when you'd come see me again."

Her tone was more than flirty, bordering on suggestive. Scratch that—to be accurate, I'd have to say she was eye-fucking the hell out of him.

Of course, because I was female and human and feeling all warm and fuzzy about the guy who'd just given me the most memorable orgasm of my life, I had to do a full once-over. Okay, maybe twice-over.

Her hair had to have been dyed that red because there's no way the color was real, and her purple eyes were so vivid they had to be fake, and why, if you were picking out fake contacts, would you let them clash with your hair so badly? She was curvy in all the right places, with cleavage for days visible in the low V-cut of her shirt. And, oh my God, she couldn't have been wearing a bra because I could see what looked like nipple rings through it.

Is that what Bishop likes? Nipple rings and gravity-defying boobs? Because I clearly didn't have either of those. Then I reminded myself of the most important thing—He's with me. Not with her.

"Hey, Jules. We'll take a table for two."

It wasn't until Bishop lifted his arm from around my waist to rest it over my shoulders that Jules noticed I existed.

Her bright smile instantly turned from genuine to *I'm going to keep smiling if it kills me.*

"Oh, I didn't even see you there. Of course, I'm assuming that means you won't want your normal seat at the bar." She gave me a cursory inspection and seemed to write me off.

Really? Dammit, I looked good. My dress was adorable, my makeup didn't scream *I raided the MAC counter and tried every single thing they had, including twenty sets of fake eyelashes* like Jules, but then again, I didn't know if I could look that trashy if I tried.

Okay, so maybe I was getting a little catty, but still, who wouldn't after being brushed off like that? What happened to sisterhood?

"No, we'll take a table in the corner. Something out of the way."

Her gaze came back to me, and this time she gave me a long, slow study. "Not your usual style, Bish."

I didn't know if she was talking about me or the table, but I had a feeling she was talking about both.

"Change is good for the soul," was all Bishop said in reply, along with pulling me closer to his side.

Non-alcohol-induced warmth rushed through me, but I tried not to read into his words. Maybe it was only a temporary change for him. Then again, from what I gathered, whatever was happening between us didn't seem to be his normal at all. That had to mean something.

The hostess grabbed sets of silverware from a bucket, and spun. "Come right this way. I've got the perfect table for you."

She led us to the very back of the restaurant, right near the door where servers slammed in and out of the kitchen. The table didn't even look like it was used regularly for dining. From the way Bishop's body stiffened against my back, I could tell he wasn't impressed.

"Here you—"

"This one isn't gonna work for us."

She turned around, her face the picture of innocence. "What do you mean? This is the most secluded—"

Bishop grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the front of the restaurant, and for a moment, I thought he was going to lead me right out the door. But he didn't. Instead, he stopped next to a table in the corner that hadn't yet been cleared.

"We'll take this one. I'd appreciate you sending someone over to bus it." He pulled out a chair and waited for me to sit before looking at Jules.

"You don't date. That's what you told me. Sorry if I'm a little shocked."

Still standing behind me as he pushed my chair in, Bishop's hands landed on my shoulders and he squeezed. "I didn't then. But sometimes a man has to change to go after what he wants."

Another rush of warmth filled me along with a realization. It didn't matter if Jules was skinnier than me, had better makeup contouring skills, or bigger boobs with blingy hardware—I was the one who inspired Bishop to change. I was enough for him, and that was all that mattered.

A silent Jules gathered the plates in her arms and mumbled an apology before taking them away.

Bishop grabbed the menus from a holder between the condiments and set one in front of me.

"You'll be able to find crawfish every which way you could possibly want it here."

"Are we going to pretend that didn't just happen?" If not for the hurricane courage, I might not have said anything.

He looked up at me from where he was already checking out the menu. "There's not much to say. I want to be with you. No one else. End of story. I don't give a shit what Jules or the fuckin' pope thinks about it. I won't let anything stop me from making this night the best it can be for you."

I want to be with you. I'd already rationalized that myself, but hearing Bishop say it made all

the difference.

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. Tonight is already the best night I’ve ever had. You make everything I’ve walked past a hundred times seem new again. It’s like I’m seeing it through your eyes, and the world is a hell of a lot brighter that way. You make me happy, Eden.”

It was the best compliment I’d ever been given. The simplicity. The sincerity. The meaning behind it.

“You make me happy too. I can’t imagine how differently this last week would’ve gone if I hadn’t met you.”

“I don’t even want to think about you out there on your own. That’s enough to give me nightmares, and I’m a pretty tough motherfucker.”

“I would’ve survived. I just wouldn’t have gotten a chance to experience all this.” I gestured to the restaurant around us, but we both knew I was referring to so much more.

“Stick with me and I’ll make sure you get all the experiences you could possibly want.”

My smile widened as the server came to the table to welcome us and take our drink order.

“Another hurricane?” Bishop asked, an eyebrow raised.

“Why not?” I was feeling bold and alive and like nothing could possibly bring me down.

Bishop ordered a bourbon and let me taste the smoky liquor when the server brought it to the table. I wasn’t a fan, and washed it down with my hurricane.

The second cocktail hit me a little harder, and I was laughing as Bishop told me stories about tattoo cover-ups he had done. From the run-of-the-mill ex’s names, wedding dates, and wedding rings, to penises, vaginas, and things that couldn’t actually be identified.

“Don’t you get tired of covering up people’s mistakes?” I asked.

He shook his head, his expression thoughtful before he answered. “I don’t consider it a mistake. It’s a new beginning. A second chance. Why should we be stuck with something we don’t want when it can be fixed?”

The words hit home. *A new beginning. A second chance.* Wasn’t that what I really wanted? Not just an experience or an adventure? Something permanent. Like ink.

It suddenly occurred to me that Bishop might have an ex’s name hiding under one of his many tattoos. Did he have a second chance or a new beginning on his skin?

“Have you ever had a tattoo covered up?”

Bishop nodded, and I held my breath waiting for his answer. “Absolutely. Who do you think had the tattoo that couldn’t be identified?”

I blinked as a rush of relief blasted away the momentary gut twisting. “What do you mean, it couldn’t be identified? How do you get tattooed and not know what it is?”

Bishop shrugged. “I was young and stupid and it was a friend. He sucked, and I should never have let him near me with a tattoo machine. I had my uncle cover it up.”

“Your uncle?”

Bishop’s posture stiffened, and his easy mood seemed to evaporate. “Yeah, he’s the one who taught me the trade. He raised me, most of the time in the tattoo shop. He’s the reason I do this.”

“Is that how Delilah learned too?” Part of me wanted to drop the subject because something about it clearly made Bishop uncomfortable, but I wasn’t sure if I’d get another opportunity to ask.

He shook his head. “No. Our parents were killed in a car wreck and they didn’t have a will. My mom’s sister didn’t want to take us both, so she took Delilah, and my dad’s brother stepped up to take me. He already had a kid of his own and a struggling business, so he couldn’t handle

adding two more mouths to feed either. Just one extra was a struggle. I think Delilah became an artist just to piss off our straight-laced aunt, if you want to know the truth.”

My heart clenched as I imagined how horrible it would have been to lose your entire family in one fell swoop the way he had. “I bet that was hard, especially being separated from your sister.”

Bishop shrugged. “It was better than ending up in foster care. We were lucky, really.”

“Do you still get to see your uncle? Does he still have his shop?”

Bishop’s gaze dropped to the table as his shoulders tensed again. “He passed away. My cousin too.”

Kicking myself for probing what was obviously a painful subject, I apologized. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I didn’t know. I wouldn’t have brought it up otherwise.”

He held up a hand. “Don’t worry about it. It’s been a long time, but you know some things just take a hell of a lot longer to fade.”

I thought of the flashes of memories I had of my mother that weren’t even fully formed. I was four when she died. I still missed her, even though I’d never had a chance to actually know her.

“I understand.”

Our conversation trailed off as the food began to arrive. Crawfish four different ways, and I loved every single one of them. I steered the conversation back into lighter territory, and the easy, fun Bishop I’d had all night surged back to the surface.

“Did you save room for dessert?” the server asked as he cleared away our plates. “We’ve got a phenomenal crème brûlée and a fabulous apple dumpling.”

Bishop shot a look at me before answering. “I’ll let the lady decide if she wants anything, but I know what I’m having for dessert, and it’s not on the menu here.”

A shiver ripped through me at the heat in his gaze, and I knew exactly what he was talking about.

“I’m good. No dessert for me.”

“We’ll take the check,” Bishop said, his tone husky.

Chapter Forty-One

Bishop

The walk back to Voodoo Ink and my apartment seemed to take forever as we dodged the people clogging the streets. No one was ready to call it quits on Mardi Gras, and I knew the party would last until the sun came up, just like it did every year.

After three hurricanes, Eden's steps were more measured and deliberate as the buzz hit her harder.

"Come on, cupcake." I swept her up into my arms as she shrieked.

"You can't carry me all the way back! I'm too heavy."

"Watch me."

She wrapped an arm around the back of my neck and with her other hand, stroked my beard. "I like the beard. A lot."

Immediately, an image of how she'd ridden it popped into my head. I fucking liked my beard too. "Is that right?"

"Yep. You should probably think about taking up lumberjacking as a second career if tattooing ever falls through. Is that a thing?"

"Lumberjacking or tattooing falling through?"

"Either."

I shook my head. "No way am I gonna go somewhere cold and dress up in flannel in order to chop down trees. If you've got a lumberjack fantasy, you'll have to lock it away for a while."

She looked up at me, her eyes shining as I turned the down the alley that led to the back of Voodoo, and the crowd thinned out. "Nah, I'd rather have you than a lumberjack."

"What a coincidence. That can be easily arranged." I set her on her feet, and she held on to my arm.

"You make me feel like I've been waiting my whole life to meet you. Like everything was in a holding pattern until I got here, and now I'm finally getting a chance to live."

Her words hit me somewhere deep and resonated. I'd been existing, never letting anything go beyond superficial. Eden had plowed through my walls without trying, and from the moment I'd met her, everything had become more vivid. She was the turning point. She was a wild card.

What I didn't know was if this could ever be more than an adventure for her. More than one of the experiences she wanted to have. She still hadn't figured out how long she was staying, and as much as I wanted to tell her she wasn't leaving, it wasn't my choice.

All I could do was wait and see. And give her a reason to stay.

"Meeting you has been just as much of a revelation for me as it has been for you."

"Really?" Her dark gaze filled with longing.

"Yeah, cupcake. Really." I leaned down, cradled her face in my hands, and poured all the crazy shit I was feeling into a kiss.

Even though I was consumed by Eden, a noise grabbed my attention. Yanking my lips away, I shoved Eden behind me as movement came from the shadows of the alley.

"Who the fuck is there?"

The light on the back of the building that should have been shining over this section of the alley was out, but it hadn't been the night before. No one answered my demand.

All my senses jammed into high alert as I reached into my pocket and pulled out the keys. I held them out behind me to Eden.

“Open the door. Get inside. Single key on the big ring.”

Eden’s hand shook as she picked them out of my palm, but she didn’t say a word.

I heard the door open and said, “Hit the light inside.” I couldn’t make out whoever was in the alley, but I heard footsteps as someone ran for the street.

When the light from inside the tattoo shop flooded a small section of the darkness, I caught a glimpse of the back of a dark hoodie as a guy turned the corner.

I stepped inside the shop. “Go upstairs. I’ll be right there.”

“Are you going after him?” Eden asked quietly.

“Just checking shit out as soon as I can get a flashlight from the break room. I’ll be right up. I promise.”

With a small, uncertain nod, Eden opened the door to my apartment and climbed the stairs as I stepped into the break room and retrieved a flashlight.

The first place I pointed it was up at the light fixture Con had added to the back of the building for security. Power ran up the back in a piece of conduit rather than through the brick.

Crouching down, I checked the wire. *Cut.*

I locked the door before stepping farther out into the alley. If someone took me out, there was no way in hell I was letting them get to Eden.

The first noise I’d heard had come from near the Dumpster on the opposite side. Scanning the area, I found three cigarette butts in a pile. Someone had been watching. Waiting.

Anger and unease pooled in my gut.

Was my past finally catching up with me? Had they finally decided to collect? *Fuck.*

I knew I should have taken them out first, but that was like attacking a snake that would regrow three heads when you chopped off one. What was that Hercules shit called? The hydra?

If it wasn’t them, then who? The question gnawed at me as I headed back inside. Fuck whoever that asshole was for screwing with our night. I wasn’t going to let them wreck a goddamned thing.

I’d made promises to Eden, and I was keeping them.

Chapter Forty-Two

Eden

I should have been freaked. I should have been terrified. But instead, the adrenaline pumping through my veins manifested in a completely different fashion. When Bishop cleared the stairs, I was ready for him.

“I want more. Tonight. I want everything you promised me, and I’m not going to let anything get in the way.” I wasn’t sure I’d ever spoken bolder words that were more true.

His neutral expression changed in an instant.

“Fuck, I’m glad you said that. Because I’m dying for you, cupcake.” Bishop crossed the floor and lifted me into his arms. “Fuck the world. I don’t care if it burns to the ground. I need to be inside you.”

His lips crushed to mine, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. He carried me to the bedroom and lowered me onto the bed. Ever since I’d come in the middle of the courtyard at Pat O’Brien’s, I’d been wet and ready for more.

Before the bitchy hostess incident, I’d been teasing myself with the thought of Bishop dragging me off to the ladies’ room and taking me against the wall. I made a mental note to add that to my list for later.

It seemed the man had quite the talent for checking things off my lists.

When he pulled back, my gaze zeroed in on the bulge beneath his zipper. I already knew what I was getting, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t just as excited to get my hands on it.

But Bishop had other plans. He tossed my dress up and buried his face between my legs.

“Fuck, baby. I wanted to feel you coming on my tongue earlier. I’m gonna eat this pretty pussy for dessert, and then I’m going to make you scream.”

My hips lifted toward him, sending an undeniable message that I wanted this just as bad as he did.

“Please.”

Bishop splayed his hand out over my center. “If you were wearing panties, I’d rip them off you like the guy did at Pat O’Brien’s. But you’re such a naughty fucking girl that I don’t have that option.”

He dragged his fingers over my most sensitive skin. “You know how fucking hot it was to watch you walk through the streets knowing I could reach under your dress and touch nothing but bare skin? Do you know how many times I had to talk myself out of dragging you into an alley and finding out how tight this little pussy would feel around my cock?”

“I want it. I want it all.”

His lips twisted into a smile. “You want to be my bad girl, don’t you? My naughty girl? If you only knew all the things I wanted to do to you.”

I started to reply, but whatever words I meant to speak died as Bishop moved his hand and bent between my legs. His tongue stroked me from top to bottom before spearing inside. He moaned against me, like he was truly enjoying every lick and suck as much as he might his favorite dessert.

The feeling was decadent, and heat radiated from my pussy outward.

“So fucking sweet.” He lifted a hand and slid two fingers inside me, reviving all the nerves

that had been so overwhelmed by my earlier orgasm. They were ready for more. I was ready for more.

And he gave me more.

Curling his fingers, he found that perfect spot at the same time his lips closed over my clit, unleashing an orgasm like a tsunami. I gripped the sheets of the bed with both hands as I writhed against his face, shameless as I took my pleasure. I didn't feel inexperienced with Bishop; I felt amazing. Desired. Wanton.

It was fabulous.

Slick with my wetness, he pulled a finger out and slid it lower, brushing over a part of me that I'd never expected him to touch.

My entire body jumped, not out of fear, but from surprise and a sensation overload.

"You've never tested this sweet little ass, have you, cupcake? Never had anyone play with it and get you off just from the thought of how dirty and bad and naughty you'd be if you let someone touch it?"

I shook my head.

"Sweet little virgin asshole." His eyes darkened. "It's sexy as fuck to know that I'm the only guy who's ever touched it."

He dropped his mouth back to my pussy and proceeded to tease my clit until I was screaming and pressing against the finger he hadn't moved. It breached the muscle and slipped inside, and I froze.

A riot of sensations rolled through me. Oh my God. He had his finger in my ass. I didn't even know how to process it, but Bishop had no such difficulties.

"Someday you could take my cock here, but I gotta work you up to fitting it in that tight little pussy of yours first."

His dirty words sent me over the edge into another orgasm, this one darker and more delicious than the last.

When Bishop rose above me again, he was tearing open a condom packet with his teeth. "You're so fucking soaked. I can't wait to slide every inch inside you."

Everything in my body felt like it was moving faster, down to the very blood pumping through my veins.

"Yes."

He rolled the condom on and pressed my legs open wider. "I wanted to take this slower, but you're killing me, cupcake. You're fucking killing me."

"I don't want slower. I want you. Now. Right now. Don't make me wait."

His gaze heated again, and he lined up his cock and notched it against my entrance.

"So fucking tight and so fucking wet. You're going to milk this orgasm right out of me. I'm not going to stand a chance."

He pressed inside inch by inch, and my nipples hardened as he filled me. Twinges of sensation, not quite pain, not quite pleasure, zinged through my body until his thumb landed on my clit and I screamed.

Screamed.

Everything was a blur after that. I bucked up against his cock as he began to move and groan and fuck.

The orgasm hit me so hard and so fast, I couldn't keep my eyes open. Stroke after stroke, I writhed beneath him and begged him not to stop.

It was a revelation. It was *everything*.

When Bishop's groan filled the room and he fell to his forearms above me, I knew I was screwed. Not just literally, but every way imaginable.

Everything I'd wanted, he'd delivered. And now I had absolutely no idea what to do next.

Chapter Forty-Three

Bishop

This was the part I'd never liked. The part where I rolled over and felt like it was just another empty fuck. But with Eden, everything was different. I never wanted to roll over. I wanted to stay buried inside her for as long as I possibly could.

I kept my weight braced on my forearms, not wanting to crush her. Her heart hammered against my chest almost as hard as mine did against hers.

I'd fucked up my plan, though. I knew she wasn't wildly experienced, and instead of taking things slow, I'd just barreled right through.

Jesus, I'd told her I wanted to fuck her ass.

Don't get me wrong, I *did* want to fuck her ass. What sane guy wouldn't? But she wasn't like any woman I'd ever been with, and I needed to tread more carefully so I didn't fuck this up.

From beneath me, Eden shifted, and I knew I had to move off her whether I wanted to or not. I rolled over onto my back beside her, and still the only sound in the room was our pounding hearts and uneven breathing.

"Wow," Eden said, her voice hushed like she was praying.

A smile tugged at my lips.

"Definitely, wow."

I unrolled the condom from my dick, grabbed a handful of tissues from the nightstand, and wrapped it up before tossing it in the trash next to the nightstand.

Eden rolled over onto her side. "Do you want me to go?"

I pulled my head back so I could see her face. "You think I'd let you leave right now?"

A small smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "I hope not."

I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her into me. "No way in hell, cupcake. I like you in my bed, and I'm sure as hell not letting you out of it now."

Chapter Forty-Four

Eden

For the second time in my life, I woke up with the heat of a man at my back and his morning wood pressed into my butt crack.

I liked it, for the record. But only because it was Bishop. Maybe it was proof of just how little experience I had, but it was hard to picture waking up like this with anyone but him.

He liked to spoon, keeping me tucked in close to his body all night, and I slept like a rock in his arms.

But now the light of morning spilled through the shades, and I had to force myself out of his bed before I overstayed my welcome. Yes, he'd told me he wasn't letting me leave last night, but that was then.

My body twinged in places that hadn't twinged in a long time. Bishop's chest rose and fell behind me, and I carefully lifted his arm to sneak out from under it.

Except my careful sneaking wasn't very careful.

"Where do you think you're going?" Bishop's sleep-roughened voice broke the silence of the room.

"I'm getting up."

"That's a terrible idea." His arm tightened around me, and he pressed a kiss to the back of my head. "I think you should stay right here. Are you sore?"

The question sent a shaft of embarrassment through me that I shouldn't be feeling considering everything we'd done together, but I couldn't help it.

"A little."

"I'm sorry, cupcake. I should've taken it easier on you."

I twisted my body around so I could see his face. "Why would you have done a stupid thing like that? That would have been a terrible idea."

His concerned expression shifted to one of satisfaction. "Just trying to be a gentleman. Not sure I know how."

"Maybe you should just worry about being you." I shifted the rest of the way so I was facing him in the circle of his arms and pressed a kiss to his lips.

"I think I can handle that. Are you working today?"

I nodded. "Yeah, from twelve to six."

"That means we've got time to get breakfast before my first appointment." He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Gotta feed my girl."

My girl. Two words that sent a shaft of belonging through me and made me never want to get out of this bed.

"But first, we should probably shower together. Just so I can make sure you get all those hard-to-reach places nice and clean—after I dirty them all up again."

Heat bloomed between my legs, but I kept my tone nonchalant. "I think I could manage getting out of bed to do that."

* * * *

Two hours later, we left Bishop's to head to my apartment so I could change out of my dress. We ventured to a little hole-in-the-wall place Bishop preferred for breakfast and settled on a bench near the front while we waited for them to set up our table. Beside me sat a stack of newspapers people had left behind.

My father's picture, albeit small and in the dot style that particular paper was known for, stared back at me from a column on the front page. The headline read Will The Casso Empire Crumble?

Bishop stood to hit the restroom, and I grabbed the paper.

Dominic Casso's seemingly untouchable empire has come under attack from all sides. Feds have crippled the economics, and rival families are attempting a power grab while he's investigated on several counts of racketeering and fraud. Through it all, Casso remains a stoic head to what is suspected to be one of the most profitable organized-crime families since the 1970s. A long, detailed history of my father's rise through the ranks followed, but no new information about what was happening.

If I knew anything about Dom, he wouldn't let a single charge stick. He'd been questioned many times in the last ten years, which was when I started to become aware of the nature of his business, and nothing had ever stuck.

There had been no trials, no sentences, and nothing else that could slow him down. But he had to believe that whatever was happening right now was different from those other times because he'd never sent me away before.

I reached the end of the article where there was speculation as to how many illegitimate children Dom had fathered, and the current count was two. Two sons, that was. Very few people within or outside the family knew that I was his daughter and not his niece. Maybe it made more sense since I was forgotten half the time anyway and had been raised by his half sister.

I was folding the paper up and setting it aside when Bishop came back. His gaze darted to the front of the paper as I added it back to the pile. I didn't expect him to snatch it off the stack.

His eyes scanned back and forth as he read the entire article that I'd just finished before shaking his head and dropping it back on the pile.

"Seems like they'll never take that bastard down." His words carried a harsh edge, like it was something he took personally.

"You follow this stuff?" I asked, not sure why I risked the question. Maybe because I wanted to get a feel for his knowledge if I was ever allowed to tell him who I was.

"As much as the next guy. You would think we were still in the '70s with how much that guy gets away with and the cops' inability to do jack shit about it."

The hostess came to tell us our table was ready, and I was glad I didn't have to come up with an answer. *Bishop knows who my father is.* It was a revelation I didn't want to consider. My past and my present were supposed to stay separated with a neat line, not collide while we were waiting for breakfast.

It wasn't until I was at work that night that the next reminder came.

Chapter Forty-Five

Bishop

I hated that I'd let seeing that fucker's face in the paper ruin my appetite, but my body didn't know any other way to react. It hadn't been long enough since I'd seen Dom Casso's face through the sight of my gun, and I hadn't been able to pull the trigger.

I had no doubt that if I'd killed him that day, I would have died in short order, and the power vacuum left in his organization would have been filled by someone just as ruthless.

But I hadn't, even though he'd deserved that bullet through his chest. What were the odds that he would have had some girl come running to him and ruin my shot? When his bodyguards had spotted me and started shooting, I'd run, leaving revenge for another day and choosing to live.

But I'd done a shitty job of living until just lately.

Chapter Forty-Six

Eden

The phone I'd carried since I left New York vibrated in the front pocket of my apron as I handed a brown paper bag of donuts across the counter to an older couple. The vibration startled me so much, I lost my grip and dropped the bag before the man had a hold of it.

"So sorry." I snatched it off the counter and handed it to him again.

"No worries, darlin'. Ain't gonna hurt those donuts none." He winked. "But I hope she doesn't spill our coffee."

I glanced down the counter to where Asha, my coworker for the evening, filled two small cups with espresso.

"Of course not. Her hands are steady as they come."

The couple collected their coffee, and I stepped toward Asha. "I need to step out for a second to check this missed call. You mind?"

"Of course not. The rush is over. I can hold down the fort by myself for a few. Take your time."

I nodded and hustled out from behind the counter and down the back hallway. Pulling the phone from my apron pocket, I saw the number I'd memorized across the screen. *Missed Call & Voice Mail.*

My hand shook as I unlocked the phone and tapped the screen for it to play.

Instead of words, the message started as just static. Then something garbled and shouting. "Where the hell is she? Why isn't she at the safe house?" It was Dom's voice and he was *pissed*.

"You wanted her out of the way. I got her out of the way," a second voice said. It was much calmer and sounded like Vincent.

The call ended abruptly, and the rest of the conversation was cut off like someone had realized they'd accidentally made a call.

Dom wanted me in a safe house?

I listened to it three more times and was sure that Vincent hadn't intended to call. *One heck of a butt dial, Vin.* But nothing made sense, including the fact that Dom had sounded concerned about me. Not like the absentee father he'd always been.

But then Vincent's words brought home the reminder. *You wanted her out of the way. I got her out of the way.*

I turned and looked at the empty donut shop, and then to the back door that led into the alley.

I needed a minute and fresh air to gather my thoughts. "I'll be right back," I called to Asha.

"Told you to take your time, girl. I had seven shots of espresso to kick my hangover from last night, so I'm wired. I could handle a crowd all by myself."

With a weak smile on my face, I pushed open the back door and stepped into the alley. The air wasn't the freshest, but it wasn't clogged with the sugary sweetness from inside.

What the hell is going on?

Vincent had told me Dom wanted me gone, and sold me that spiel about no one knowing where I was, which I didn't even question at the time. And now? Now, I had no idea what the hell to think.

I stared down at the phone, my thumb hovering over the Call Back button, but I remembered Vincent's warning. The number was to be a direct line to him, not Dom. And what good would that do me? I'd followed orders like the good little mobster's daughter that I was and had left my phone behind, which meant I didn't have anyone's contact information except for the few numbers I'd memorized.

I didn't have Dom's personal cell phone number memorized. No one had ever bothered to give me the number to the Hell's Kitchen brownstone. I could call my aunt . . . but there was no way she'd give me any information that would allow me to disturb Dom. She wouldn't take the chance of earning his displeasure.

Did I even want to get in touch with Dom? If he hadn't given the orders for me to leave New York on my own, then wouldn't his first order be for me to come back? I couldn't honestly say I *knew* my father, but my gut said yes. As soon as he figured out where I was or how to contact me, he'd have his guys here to collect me and put me on a jet back to New York before I could even pack my suitcase.

Back to the gilded cage.

No more New Orleans.

No more experiences.

No more Bishop.

No. I wasn't ready. I didn't want to go. But how long would it take for Dom to find me? Vincent knew what credit card he'd given me, which meant he knew exactly where I was.

He's always known where I am. The realization swept over me.

From the second I'd booked my ticket with that credit card, he would have known where I'd gone. How could I have been so stupid to not even think about that?

There had been a few times I'd felt like I was being watched, but I'd brushed it off as my overactive imagination.

What the hell is going on?

Like the person in the alley last night. The one who'd been watching me and Bishop and then run.

Who was that? One of Dom's goons here to watch over me, even though I was supposed to be on my own? Or maybe the FBI had pulled the credit card records?

Too many questions and not enough answers.

The back door to Voodoo banged against the brick wall of the building, and Bishop stepped out with a ladder.

He stopped when he saw me leaning against the back of Your Favorite Hole.

"Hey. What are you doing?"

I shoved the phone into my apron pocket and crossed my arms over my chest. "Nothing. Just . . . needed some fresh air."

Bishop looked around the alley. "Not the freshest back here."

I shrugged. "It was the best I could do for the moment."

He leaned the ladder against the wall and came toward me. "Are you okay? You look upset."

"I'm fine. Just . . . tired."

A smile tugged at the edges of Bishop's mouth. "Some of that is probably my fault." He pressed a palm to the wall on either side of my head. "I'm staying at your place tonight, cupcake. We're not done by a long shot."

The heat in his eyes and the husky tone of his voice pulled me from my mini meltdown.

“Is that so?”

“Damn right. And before we do that, we’re checking a few more things off your list. Although I probably should make you slow it down, because I don’t want you runnin’ out of town as soon as you’ve hit them all.”

The lightness that had begun to take over when he’d spoken was momentarily doused. More than likely, before I could check them all off, I’d be dragged out of town. But that also sent a shaft of urgency through me. I needed to soak up every moment. I didn’t get to keep this man. I didn’t get to keep this city. I didn’t get to choose my future.

My face must have reflected my thoughts, because Bishop frowned. “Hey, what’s that look for? You already making your plans to bolt?” His posture tensed as if waiting for me to deliver the hard truth.

I shook my head. “No. I don’t want to leave.”

“That doesn’t exactly sound like you’re planning on staying.” The hands on either side of my head clenched into fists.

How honest was I going to be? He deserved more than my lies. “I might not have a choice.”

“You’ve always got a choice. It all depends on how much you’re willing to sacrifice to get what you want.”

“I want to spend tonight with you.”

His smile came back, but his posture didn’t relax. “Good, because you’re going to. Stop at the shop when you get off.”

“Okay.”

He leaned down and brushed his lips across mine. “So fucking sweet.”

Chapter Forty-Seven

Eden

After hours of serving donuts and making coffee drinks, I'd come to a decision. I would focus on living every moment in New Orleans like it might be ripped away from me at any time. When I hung up my apron and walked toward Voodoo, I made an impulsive decision.

I wanted a tattoo, and I wanted Bishop to be the one to do it.

That way, when I was alone in my apartment in New York, watching the world pass me by, I would have a permanent, tangible reminder of the amazing memories I'd made here.

Shaking off the depressing thoughts of what would certainly be my future, I smiled as the chimes on the door tinkled to announce my entrance. Delilah leaned over a man, no doubt creating some awesome piece of art, but Bishop stood at the counter, his arms crossed over his chest while he talked to a woman I'd never seen before.

"I don't have the money right now. But I swear I'll pay you soon. Or we could trade . . ."

Why was someone always hitting on him? Seriously, it was getting old.

"I've got a woman. No trades."

A sense of *déjà vu* swept over me. How many times would this happen after I was gone? It pushed me to embrace the time I had even more.

With a burst of confidence and attitude, I walked toward the counter. "I bet I could get you to do mine for a trade."

Bishop's attention cut to me, and his lips twitched. "You're the exception to the rule, cupcake."

The woman turned and her gaze raked over me. I expected a snide comment, but perhaps her fear of what Bishop would say in response kept her quiet.

"I'll just go down to Magazine. Those guys will trade."

"Good luck with that."

She stalked away, and Bishop watched me come toward the counter still riding my wave of confidence.

"What if I really did want a tattoo?"

"You serious?"

"Maybe."

"I need more than a maybe before I'm going to ink that skin."

"Do you have time to do it tonight?"

He tilted his head to the side. "What brought this on?"

"Does it matter?"

"Everything does when it comes to you."

His words, so simple and sincere, hit me somewhere in the vicinity of my chest.

"Then don't let me forget any of this."

With his expression darkening, he called to Delilah. "I'm knocking off for tonight. You got a problem with that?"

She looked up from the room where she worked. "It's been slower than shit all day. Make a run for it. I'll lock up."

Bishop stepped out from behind the counter. "Let's go. We've got some shit to talk about."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me along behind him to the back door. Outside in the alley, he unlocked a small garage door built into the back of the building, and a motorcycle came into view as he pushed the door up.

After he threw a leg over, he backed it out and dropped the kickstand before heading back into the garage and emerging with two helmets.

Once the garage door was closed and locked again, he held out a helmet to me. "We're going back to your place."

I stared at the helmet for long moments before taking it from his hands. "We're riding this?"

"That gonna bother you?"

Riding a motorcycle hadn't been on my list, but I wasn't opposed to trying it out. "No, not at all."

"Good. Let's go."

The ride to my apartment was short, but the feeling of Bishop in front of me and the vibrations of the bike between my legs wasn't something I'd forget anytime soon. When he parked on the street and I stepped off, I wanted to climb him, and he read it on my face.

"You liked that, didn't you?"

"I had no idea . . ."

"That you'd feel like you had the world's best vibrator between your legs?"

I bit my lip to hide the grin stretching my cheeks. "Basically."

"Get your keys. I see I've got something to prove now."

"Oh really? What's that?"

"That I'm a better ride than my bike."

A laugh burst free of my lips and the easiness from earlier today came back. "I don't think you're going to have a hard time proving that."

I unlocked the gate leading into the courtyard, and Bishop followed me inside.

Harriet's back door opened just before we reached the spiral staircase leading up to my place. "Eden, dear. Were you expecting company this afternoon?"

I stopped so abruptly at her question, Bishop's hand landed on my hip to steady me. "Company?"

"Someone rang your buzzer at least a dozen times. I finally got sick of hearing it so I looked out front, but they were leaving."

"They?"

"Two men in suits. They looked official. You haven't gotten into any trouble, have you?"

"No," I answered in a rush. "No trouble. That's just . . . strange."

Suits? It had to be Dom's people. Or the men from the hotel? FBI?

"Yes, very strange." Harriet's gaze was appraising. "If I didn't know better, I'd think I had a second Charlie on my hands. On the run from the law." She laughed. "But of course that's just me being a little bit of a conspiracy theorist in my old age."

I smiled, hoping it didn't look as strained as it felt. "I'm definitely not on the run from the law." *I don't think*, I added silently.

"Damn. I was hoping for some excitement to spice up the week. Unless they got the wrong buzzer and it was the IRS coming after me. Bastards."

Bishop and I traded glances at that before I thanked Harriet for the information. He followed me up to my apartment, and once he closed the door behind him, he asked the question I knew had to be coming.

"You gonna tell me what the hell you're running from? Or are you gonna make me keep

guessing?”

I locked the door and turned around slowly to meet his gaze. “I’m not running from anyone.”

“Why don’t I believe that?”

“I don’t know.”

I moved toward him, wanting nothing more than to change the subject and forget about everything outside of this apartment for the rest of the night. The world could go to hell, but I wanted to savor whatever time I had left with Bishop. I pressed both hands to his abs.

He studied me under his hooded gaze. “You trying to distract me?”

“I’m trying to get you back on track with your earlier plan.”

“Is that right?”

I nodded before pushing his shirt up. “Yes.”

“I guess I’ll just have to let you do that then.”

And he did.

Chapter Forty-Eight

Eden

If Bishop was an addiction, then I never wanted a cure.

For the next couple of weeks, we bounced from his apartment to mine, losing ourselves in each other. When we weren't in bed, he showed me more than the city. He showed me a life I desperately wanted to claim as my own.

With each day, I fell harder. I was in so much damn trouble, because I didn't know how I was going to walk away from him when the order came. Every day I waited for the text, but it didn't come. No more cryptic and accidental voice mails either, which I tried not to let stab me in the heart. Dom didn't know where I was, and apparently he'd decided he didn't care.

I pushed down that familiar disappointment and focused on all the good around me.

Bishop had become an integral part of my happiness, and the simple life I was living here was more than enough for me. I'd even started helping out with the books at both Voodoo and Your Favorite Hole, putting my skills to work.

Everything felt so . . . right.

But that didn't mean it was perfect.

"No."

The word came out of Bishop's mouth with more force behind it than I expected, and his entire demeanor changed with it.

We were curled up on my bed, and the easy postcoital moment was broken. I pushed up on my elbow, my hand resting on his chest, and looked down at him.

"What do you mean, no?"

It wasn't like I'd never heard the word before. *No* had been a common concept in my life in New York. It just wasn't something I'd expected to hear Bishop say when it came to something so simple as finally going to the casino so I could learn to play blackjack at a real table.

"No, as in I don't fucking go to casinos. They're not a good place for me."

Without another word, he rolled to his side, dislodging my hand, and climbed out of bed. He reached for his jeans on the floor and yanked one pant leg on and then the other. He zipped and buttoned them and turned from the room before I could even figure out how to respond.

I scrambled out of my side of the bed, grabbing his T-shirt and pulling it on. Everything felt off. I'd seen Bishop shut down like this around other people, but never around me. I didn't know what to make of it. He had the fridge door open in the small kitchen, and I spoke to his back.

"I'm sorry; I didn't realize that was a touchy subject for you. I can . . . go by myself. It's no big deal."

He slammed the fridge door shut and turned. "And who's going to teach you how to play blackjack? Some random guy who happens to see a sweet thing at the table and decides she's the one he wants to take home?"

The statement came out with sharp edges, and I jerked back. Was he . . . ? No way. I blurted it anyway.

"Are you jealous?"

Bishop's big hands landed on his hips and he drew up to his full height, dwarfing me in the tiny kitchen. If he were anyone else, I might have felt a shred of unease, but not with Bishop.

“Of course I’m fucking jealous, Eden. I know exactly what every man sees when he looks at you. You’re totally oblivious to the fact that they’d trip all over themselves to get closer to you.”

Now I was getting angry. “Of course I’m oblivious to all of that. I only see you!” I yelled the words across the kitchen with my own hands on my hips like some kind of shrew.

Bishop’s face relaxed and the tension in his stance drained away. He crossed the small space between us and cupped my face in his hands.

“I know, cupcake. And I’m the luckiest guy in the goddamned world because of it. I just don’t want to see anything happen to you. I couldn’t handle it.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me. There’s security, and even if there wasn’t, I’m not completely helpless.”

I’d even walked home from work *all by myself* several times in the last couple of weeks. Never mind that I never walked home alone if I worked until dark. That was just being smart, I assured myself.

Something that approached a growl escaped from Bishop’s throat. “Security at a casino isn’t your friend. They have one purpose and one purpose only—protect the interests of the house at all costs. That’s it.”

“Well, I’m checking this off my damn list, and if you won’t come with me, then what choice do I have?”

“And what is your goddamned hurry, Eden?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. This was a question I kept dodging, and Bishop was well aware I wasn’t giving him a straight answer. “I thought we decided we weren’t going to talk about that?”

“Like you never told me the real story behind why you skipped out on the hotel? You’re going to have to talk about it sometime, unless you plan to just up and leave without telling me a damn thing.”

I wanted to tell him everything. Every day that I kept my silence ate at me. I couldn’t keep this from him any longer. It was time.

He dropped his hands away from my face and jammed them into his hair, then turned away to face the counter. “Of course you’d have to be this stubborn. Why would I fall for someone who was easy to get an answer from?”

Everything in the room seemed to come to a screeching halt, except for my heart, which hammered harder than ever before.

“You’re falling for me?” My voice carried a tremble.

Bishop spun around to face me, his hair wild and his gaze intense. “How couldn’t I? You’re . . . everything.”

My head jerked back at his admission, and warmth slammed into my chest.

You’re everything.

The look in his eyes said it all. He meant it.

“You’re everything too.”

His arms closed around me and he pulled me against his chest, lifting me off my feet.

I soaked up his warmth, his scent, his *everything*. Even with 4.2 million men in New York, I knew I’d never find someone like Bishop. He was it.

And I can’t keep him.

No. I refused to let that stand. I wasn’t going to let this go and walk away from him. I’d figure out a way. There was no other option.

When he loosened his hold and lowered me back to the floor, determination flowed through me. I would figure this out.

“Let’s get you fed so you can get ready for work.”
I lifted up on my toes and pressed a kiss to his jaw. “Okay.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

Bishop

I sat up on my stool and stretched my back, and my client readjusted his position in the chair. From his stiff movements, it seemed like a break might be welcome.

“You want to take a break before we keep going?”

He lit up at the suggestion. “Yeah, man. That’d be great. I need a smoke and some coffee. You think we can finish this piece tonight?”

“We can, if you want to push through. I don’t have anything after you.”

“I just want it done. No offense, but my old lady might kill me if I have to keep coming back for more sittings.”

I set my machine on the counter. “I get that, man. I’m heading next door to grab coffee. You want one?”

“Yeah, black. None of that frappe frou-frou shit.”

“Cool. I’ll be back in a few.”

I stood, snapped off my gloves, and stretched as my client headed out the front door with a smoke in one hand and his phone in the other. The door chimed a second time as Con walked in. But he didn’t look a whole hell of a lot like my boss the way I was used to seeing him. Instead, he was kitted out in black tie, and his hair was slicked back from his forehead.

“Did you get kidnapped by the guy on the fucking Men’s Warehouse commercial?” I asked. “Do you *like the way you look*?”

“Shut the hell up. You work for me, fucker. I could fire you for that shit.”

“Yeah? You got someone else to pick up the slack who isn’t going to fuck up your shop’s rep?”

“Shut up. I just came to pick up the bank deposit I forgot yesterday. I’m meeting Vanessa at a fundraiser, and she’ll kick my ass if I’m late, so I don’t have time to screw around.”

“Raising more money for those boxing kids?”

Con nodded as he headed for the break room where the cash bag was locked in a drawer. “Yeah, we’re working on expanding.”

“Both of you, do-gooders.”

“It’s good to give back, man. You should try it sometime. Come down and let the kids take a few shots at you. It’s a fun time.”

“Maybe I will. So, where’s this fundraiser at tonight?”

“Casino. Somehow Vanessa talked them into donating a portion of the house’s share. I swear to God, that woman could talk anyone into anything.”

At the mention of the casino, I thought of my earlier blowout with Eden.

“Is it like five grand a person to get in? Or can anyone show up?”

Con shook his head. “Nah, we’ll take anyone’s money. There’s a silent auction, but that shit isn’t required.”

“If Eden shows up there, would you mind keeping an eye on her? She wants to learn to play blackjack, and that ain’t my scene.”

Con’s brow furrowed, but he didn’t ask questions. “Yeah, if she needs something, we’ll be there.”

“I’ll let her know.”

He grabbed the bank bag and headed toward the front. “You sure you don’t want to put on a monkey suit and come too?”

“You think I’ve got a tux lying around? Hell no. And even if I did, me and casinos don’t get along anymore.”

I knew what Con would think, what everyone thought when I said that. Gambling addiction. It was probably part of the truth, but not the whole truth.

“I get you, man. Tell your girl we’ll be there until at least midnight, but probably later. I’m hoping I can talk Titan into losing a million at the craps table. I already know Lord will lose miserably at poker because I’ve got Elle to distract him.”

Knowing the whole crew would be there made my unease at having Eden go to the casino without me drop to lower levels.

“I’ll let her know. Thanks, man.”

Con pushed out the front door and I was only a few steps behind him to head over to Your Favorite Hole. My client paced the sidewalk, puffing on his smoke and talking into his phone, so I figured I had a few more minutes. Either that or he could wait. I’d be staying at least an hour past what I’d planned to in order to finish his piece, so he didn’t have room to bitch.

The place was empty except for a kid with huge headphones on in the back corner, and his fingers flew over the keys of a laptop. He looked up at me when I came in, but quickly dropped his gaze back to whatever the hell he was doing. He’d been taking up space in that corner all frigging afternoon. If he were anything but a skinny, nerdy-looking kid, I would have warned him off, but he didn’t strike me as any kind of a threat.

“Hey there. What can I get for you?”

My attention cut to Eden and her purple apron and hat. She still looked delicious. “Hey, cupcake. I need two black coffees so I can push through and finish this piece I’m working on.”

Her smile dimmed a few watts. “Does that mean you’re working late?”

“Yeah, but I think I found a way to make amends for earlier today.”

Confusion drew her brows together. “What do you mean?”

I didn’t want to talk about our argument this morning, but I couldn’t avoid it.

“If you want to go play blackjack, tonight is the night. Con, Lord, and Titan will all be there with their women. Charity thing. You lose at the game, you’re going to be helping fund the nonprofit afterschool boxing program Con and Vanessa run.”

“You want me to go with them?” She looked down at her uniform. “I’m off as soon as Asha gets here, but I’m not ready for any kind of charity thing.”

“Take your time. They’re already on their way. You show up when you can, take a cab, and find one of them to help you learn the rules of the game.”

“You’re not going to come, are you?” Eden asked.

“No. I told you, I don’t do casinos. Take a cab back to Voodoo when you’re done, and hopefully I’ll be finished with this piece I’m working on.”

She turned away and grabbed two coffee cups before filling them and popping the lids on. “I wouldn’t want to intrude. I’ve already crashed one party. I don’t need to crash another.”

Eden’s disappointment came through loud and clear as she set the cups on the counter in front of me. She kept her gaze on my shirt rather than lifting it so I could see her eyes.

“Hey. What’s going on? Look at me.”

She lifted her face, and disappointment was stamped on every feature.

“I don’t like that you only want me to go because you know there’ll be a whole crew of your

friends there. It's like you think I'm not capable of doing it by myself."

I jerked back. "You want me to apologize for wanting to make sure you're not alone in a casino by yourself?"

"You don't have to manage me. I can handle myself."

There was something more going on here, but now wasn't the time to get into it. "I'm not managing you. But wanting to make sure my girl is safe while she gets to have all of her experiences isn't something I'm ever going to apologize for. Not a fucking chance. So are you going to go or not?"

"I don't know. Right now all I want is to get out of these clothes and into a hot shower. I'll decide once I get home."

"You're not walking by yourself at this time of night."

I could tell she wanted to roll her eyes, but she didn't. "I can't keep taking a cab six blocks every night that you can't walk me home. It's getting ridiculous."

"You want me to get someone down here to walk you home? Because there's no way you need to be out on those streets alone. I'm not taking chances with you, Eden. You're too fucking important to me."

Frustration rolled off her in waves, but I wouldn't budge.

"Fine. I'll take a cab."

"Good. Text me if you decide to go out tonight."

"Fine."

Her response was short, and I leaned across the counter. "I'm not trying to be a dick. I'm just trying to be a guy who cares about you."

"And I'm trying to prove to myself that I can do some things on my own, okay? You're going to have to let me, Bishop. I don't do clipped wings. Not anymore."

I leaned in and brushed my lips across hers. "I don't want to clip anything. Be smart, babe. Text me later."

She returned my kiss. "Your coffee's on the house. I'll talk to you later."

I dropped a ten on the counter anyway, and watched her grab a rag to wipe it down as soon as I was out the door.

Even though I'd expected to feel lighter when I came up with this solution, something about it left me off-balance.

Chapter Fifty

Eden

I stood in front of my small closet, the towel from my shower wrapped around my body while I debated what I wanted to do. My gaze traveled back and forth between a little black dress and a T-shirt I'd stolen from Bishop and didn't have any plans to return.

Why did it bother me so much that he wanted me to go tonight when a bunch of his friends would be there?

If Bishop had said he would go and help me learn blackjack, I wouldn't have cared. But his aversion to casinos was obvious. It didn't take a genius to realize that he must have had some sort of gambling problem in the past and now didn't want to be close to temptation. I could respect that. After I'd figured that out, I felt awful about asking him to go in the first place. It was like offering up a shot to someone who had dropped hints about being in AA.

Idiot.

But instead of telling me to go and have fun, I felt like he'd organized some kind of safe encounter for me. I should have appreciated it, but something about it had rubbed me the wrong way.

Black dress or T-shirt long enough to be a dress? That was the question.

Did I let my momentary annoyance stop me from experiencing more of New Orleans?

Screw it. I grabbed the black dress off the hanger and made my decision.

I was going, and I would have an amazing time. I might not know the finer points of playing blackjack, but I wasn't stupid. I could count to twenty-one. I understood the basic principles. I'd take fifty dollars and wouldn't let myself lose any more than that.

After spending what was probably a little too much time on my hair and makeup, I called a cab and headed down to the courtyard to wait. Harriet sat outside with a bottle of liquor and a giant cigar, puffing away like a pro.

"If I were fifty years younger and into women, I'd pick you up in a heartbeat. Way to go, girl. That man of yours is going to pin you to a wall when he sees you."

Hearing something like that come out of the mouth of a woman closing in on seventy was still jarring, but Harriet was truly one of a kind and only marginally batshit crazy. I loved her.

"I'm not going out with my man tonight, so he's going to miss out on all this." I gestured to my wildly curling hair.

"Oh really? You have a fight? That boy doesn't seem like the type to let you go out on the town without making sure he can keep his claim intact."

Her words fired up my annoyance from earlier. "He's working."

"His loss. You'll be the center of attention."

Immediately, I began to regret my decision to go all out with my primping. The center of attention was not something I needed to be.

She held out the cigar. "Want a puff? It's a good Cuban."

Of course it was. Because why would Harriet smoke anything but a Cuban cigar?

"I'm good, thanks. I don't smoke." I was actually considering going back up to my room and calling off the entire night when the sound of a horn honking came from out front.

"That'll be my cab. I should go."

“Have fun tonight, Eden. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

I wondered what exactly that mandate would preclude me from doing, but decided not to think too hard about it. Harriet seemed like she’d done *a lot* of living in her years, and I couldn’t imagine what she would consider off-limits.

* * * *

When the cab pulled up in front of the casino, I paid the driver and climbed out. A big sign hung out front advertising the charity event for the evening—The One Night You Can Lose and Still Consider It A Victory.

That was an amazingly generous situation, and I was stunned any casino would agree to donate part of their take. I supposed it had a lot to say about the persuasiveness of the charity and its benefactors.

I took the steps one at a time, careful to make sure my dress stayed down with the breeze picking up off the river. I didn’t want to have a Marilyn Monroe moment and flash an entire crowd of potential donors.

At the door, the man spent longer than normal staring at my ID, and I started to get nervous. “Enjoy yourself, Ms. Madden,” he finally said before handing it back to me.

I shook off the odd feeling that came with his smile, and headed to the floor. *It’s just nerves because you don’t like using a fake ID*, I told myself.

The floor was filled with machines that lit up and played music, along with tables, dealers, and plenty of players. More signs that announced the donations that would go to charity tonight hung from the ceiling and sat on the tops of machines. I had no doubt they’d encourage people to play deeper and lose more because they felt like they were losing for a good cause. It was actually a pretty brilliant fundraising idea.

Signs pointing to a silent auction room led in one direction, but I didn’t follow them. I headed toward the tables to watch and teach myself how to play blackjack.

The annoyance and unease I’d felt earlier in the evening fell away as excitement bubbled up. I’d never been inside a casino before, so every part of this experience was new and different. I could see how people would be drawn to the lights and sounds of the slots. They seemed so cheerful and fun. I thought of the fifty dollars in my purse and wondered if I should just stop and try one . . .

No. I was going to the main event. I had a purpose.

Men in tuxes and women in evening gowns were scattered around the giant room in stark contrast to the little blue-haired ladies and people in jeans. I caught sight of Con and his brother, Lord, at a table on the opposite side of the slot machines, but didn’t head in their direction.

I hadn’t texted Bishop yet to tell him my decision, even though I knew it was a shitty thing to do. The last thing I wanted was for him to send his friends to find me and babysit me. I’d had enough babysitting to last a lifetime. Guilt rode me as I walked toward the tables, because I knew Bishop had to be wondering what I’d decided to do. Unless he was so into the tattoo he was finishing he hadn’t noticed the time . . .

That was a cop-out and I knew it. I stopped next to a machine and unzipped my purse to find my phone.

“I remember you.”

The deep, smooth voice came from beside me, startling me so much that everything tumbled out of my purse. I jerked my eyes up to see a familiar man in a tux beside me, and we both

crouched to collect my lipstick, loose change, ID, the little cash I brought, keys, and other flotsam and jetsam.

“Shit. Sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I loaded my purse back up. “No worries. You just surprised me is all.”

“My wife will never let me live down scaring people by just saying hello if you mention it. Actually, she’ll probably say something that will have me carrying her out of here clawing and kicking. So, feel free to mention away.”

“Umm . . . okay.”

“Lucas Titan. We met at Dirty Dog and again at Valentina’s party before Mardi Gras.”

“I remember. It’s good to see you again.” It was one of those polite throwaway lines, and I immediately wondered if he’d been on the lookout for me at Bishop’s request.

At least, until he spoke again.

“Is Bishop here with you?”

Any budding concern I might have had about him being sent to babysit me fell away with his question. “No, he’s working, but I wanted to . . . show my support and probably lose the entire fifty dollars I’m planning on gambling.”

“What’s your game?”

“It’s about to be blackjack. After I watch a few hands and get the hang of it.”

Titan studied me closely. “You’ve never played?”

“Nope. Never. But tonight I’m going to.”

“You want a rundown on how it works? I’m due to lose some money, otherwise I’ll never hear the end of it from those two.”

He jerked his head toward Con and Lord, who were ordering cocktails from a circulating server.

“Are you sure you don’t have something better to do?”

He glanced back toward the group. “My wife shooed me away so she could spend time with her girls, so I don’t think I’ll be missed quite yet.”

“Okay, then I appreciate it.”

Lucas Titan led the way to a blackjack table, and I scanned the felt to see what the minimum bet was. I got the feeling his idea of gambling and mine were worlds apart. His tux looked like it cost more than a nice used car.

Five-dollar minimum bet.

I could handle that. I had said I only planned to gamble fifty, so maybe he was being polite.

“I’ll play a few hands and talk you through them. You can jump in whenever you’re ready.”

He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a money clip. He peeled off a hundred and slid it across the table to the dealer.

“Changing one hundred,” the dealer said aloud, and a man stepped up behind him and nodded.

The pit boss? My guess was solely fueled by the knowledge of casinos imparted to me by Hollywood.

The dealer sat out stacks of chips and spread out one stack on the table before pushing them toward Titan. Then he began to deal.

The two other players at the table received their cards first, and Titan kept a running commentary of what he was doing and why as I stood behind him.

I wondered if the dealer would get annoyed, or perhaps the pit boss, but neither said a word. Titan’s stack of chips grew and then diminished before growing again. After about fifteen

minutes, I felt like I was getting the hang of it. My hands were sweating where I gripped my wristlet, and equal parts of anticipation and anxiety spread through me.

What if I lost it all in five minutes? I guessed that didn't really matter, as long as I got to try.

A piece of bumper-sticker philosophy floated into my head. *It's not whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game.*

Well, I couldn't win if I didn't play at all, and this was what I had come to do.

"I'm ready," I said as I slid into the seat next to Titan.

He gave me an encouraging nod, and I pulled the fifty from my purse. I had an extra twenty stashed to make sure I could get home, but otherwise I was spending everything I had.

I slid the bill across the table, and the dealer repeated the process he'd done with Titan and pushed chips toward me.

The other two players stood and collected their chips. Apparently they didn't want to play at a table with a complete newbie.

Titan watched them leave and must have read the embarrassment on my face. "You've got as much right to play at this table as anyone. Don't worry about it."

I nodded and placed a five-dollar chip on the circle in front of my seat, and the dealer began to flip the cards in front of us. Titan talked me through the first four hands, and I lost two and won two.

"Not bad for a beginner. You're doing fine."

Two more hands went by, and I was down to thirty dollars in chips and getting a little nervous. I'd taken my chances splitting aces and lost both.

"You'll either come back or you won't. The thing you're doing that's smart is not betting more than you're willing to lose."

"And now you're a blackjack coach?"

A woman's voice came from behind us, and we both turned.

"Yve, the love of my life, you remember Eden?"

"Of course I do. I see you're not wearing one of my dresses." Her tone sounded playfully disapproving.

"I wasn't sure what would be considered appropriate for tonight so I fell back on the little-black-dress rule." I hoped she wasn't offended, but the smile that spread across her face told me she wasn't.

Her dress was some kind of vintage couture that hugged and flattered her every curve, and I was immediately envious.

"It was a good choice. Next time, I'll have to find you something like this. I'll keep an eye out."

The next hand was dealt, and I lost another five dollars while Titan won a stack of chips.

"Oh good, you're winning. Can I borrow you to go bid on a piece that Valentina donated to the silent auction? It matches the other pieces of hers we bought, and there's no way I'm letting someone else get it."

Titan stood. "Of course. But you know you can bid on whatever you want."

"If I'm going to bid enough to buy a car, I kind of need you there to do it for me. I think I'd puke otherwise."

"All right. I'm coming. Eden, would you like to join us?"

I looked at the dwindling pile of chips in front of me. "I think I'm going to finish this out and probably head home."

"I think you'll be playing a lot longer than you think. Good luck. We'll be around if you

need anything.”

The couple, gorgeous in their evening wear, moved in the direction of the silent auction, and I played one more hand before the red card popped out of the deck.

“New dealer,” the current one said as he stepped back to make room for another man. Another player sat down at the table and shot a glance at me with a nod. Not wanting to seem rude, I smiled back at him.

The deck was reshuffled and play continued, but with one very important difference.

I started winning. Every time. It was crazy. I started to bet ten dollars on each hand, and my pile grew and grew. I’d lose once and think my streak was over, but then I’d win the next six in a row. The stacks of chips seemed to multiply, and a heady feeling swept over me.

This was *fun*.

Chapter Fifty-One

Bishop

I finished wrapping up the tattoo, locked up the shop, and checked my phone. It was almost one and I hadn't heard from Eden. I'd lost track of time as I'd put the finishing touches on the piece, so it hadn't even occurred to me until I was done.

I texted her.

Bishop: Did you decide to stay in?

I hoped she hadn't. Tonight was the best night for her to check blackjack off her list. I just hoped she didn't get bit by the bug and want to go more often. It wasn't something I could do with her because showing my face in a casino was the fastest way to bring my past crashing down on me.

Now that I had something to lose, I wasn't taking any chances.

My phone buzzed with a text as I wiped down my station. It wasn't from Eden.

Con: Your girl is playing deep at the tables. She a card shark?

Bishop: Never played before in her life.

Con: Something seems off. Pit boss is watching her close, but it's not my place to step in.

An uneasy feeling twisted in my gut. Fuck. What the hell was going on?

Bishop: Beginner's luck?

Con: More like card-counter's luck.

My stomach twisted and fell to my feet. Eden wasn't a fucking card counter. No fucking way. I grabbed the keys to my bike off the counter and headed out the back.

When I parked my bike in the lot closest to the casino, I hurried up the stairs. My phone had two more texts from Con. The last one was from two minutes ago.

Con: I'm going over there. I think the pit boss is about to call security.

I flashed my ID for the guy at the door and rushed past him. If he ran my ID, there was a good chance it would pop up in the system.

"Hey, I need to see that closer." He stood to follow me, but I wasn't stopping for anything.

I scanned the tables, looking for Eden. I'd get her and get the hell out before security caught up with me.

I returned a text to Con.

Bishop: I'm here.

But before I could find Eden, I saw two men in suits closing in on a blackjack table. Con's

blond head stood out above the crowd as they stopped.

Fuck.

“She’s done. She’s leaving. It’s a simple case of beginner’s luck,” Con told the men as he stood between them and Eden. Lord, Titan, and Simon were headed over as well.

“I didn’t do anything. Mr. Titan showed me the ropes and I started playing. This dealer just gave me good cards.”

“We need you to come with us, miss. We just have a few questions for you and your associate, and we’ll need your ID.”

“Associate? I don’t have an associate.”

One of the security guys had a man in a white shirt and brown pants by the arm. “We’ve been watching both of you. You’re clearly working together. You both need to come with us.”

I stepped up to the other side of Eden. “Not fucking happening. She’s leaving with me.”

Her head whipped around and shock flashed over her face at my appearance. I didn’t fucking care if she was pissed because there was no fucking way I was letting casino security take my girl any goddamned place.

“Gentlemen, I think you’re getting worked up over nothing. She’d never played before we sat down tonight. She also doesn’t know this man.” This came from Titan. “To assume anything else is simply ludicrous.”

The pit boss recognized Titan. “Mr. Titan, we appreciate you vouching for her, but we need to handle this internally.” To the dealer, he said, “Take her chips.”

The dealer reached for them.

“Seriously? You’re gonna go there?” Con interjected.

“I won those myself,” Eden said, protesting as the dealer pulled them away.

Another man in a suit joined the group. “Do we have an issue here? All we ask is for your cooperation. Please come with us.”

“Fine, but I didn’t do anything wrong.” Eden stepped toward them in a move that seemed like she planned to follow them.

I grabbed her arm. “No way. She’s leaving. Keep the fucking chips. We’re done here.”

“Sir, that’s not your call.”

Eden whipped around to look at me. “It’s fine. I’ll explain, and they’ll understand this is all a big misunderstanding.”

Did she seriously think I was going to let her go? I kept a firm hold on her arm and pulled her behind me. “You gonna back me up here, guys?”

Titan, Lord, Con, and Simon formed a wall between me and Eden and the casino security personnel.

“It would be in your best interest for you to let them leave,” Titan said, his tone daring them to try to do anything else.

“Mr. Titan, we’re not looking for trouble.”

“Then you should get back to work. There’s a fundraiser happening tonight, and you’re attracting the wrong kind of attention from your patrons.”

A crowd was gathering around us, including Yve, Vanessa, Charlie, and Elle. The entire place felt like a powder keg about to blow if the security crew took one wrong step.

I took advantage of the moment of stillness and turned to hustle Eden out the nearest fire exit. The alarm blared, but I didn’t give a shit.

“What the hell are you doing? Stop. They’re not going to do anything to me.”

“You don’t know a goddamned thing about what happens in the back rooms and basements

of casinos, cupcake, and you're not going to fucking find out while I'm breathing."

She struggled against my hold, so I lifted her up and tossed her over my shoulder. Her scream barely roused any strange looks, not that I cared about that or how she beat against my back with her hand and small purse. When I reached my bike, I lowered her to her feet, and an enraged Eden, the likes of which I'd never seen before, greeted me.

"You fucking caveman! What the hell is your problem?"

I grabbed the helmet off the back and strapped it onto her head, avoiding her slapping hands. "Get on the bike, and we'll talk about this at your place."

Three men in suits were running toward us down the sidewalk as I started the bike.

"Oh my God, are they coming after us?"

"And the cops are probably next."

One man had a phone to his ear, and when Eden finally regained some of her common sense and hopped on, I tore out into the street.

No one would catch up to us on a bike, but I still took turn after turn just in case someone was trying to follow us. When I finally pulled up in front of Harriet's house, Eden flew off the bike and ran toward the gate to unlock it. I pushed the front tire up over the curb and followed her through with my bike, hoping like hell the passageway was wide enough. It was, but barely.

When I dropped the kickstand and stood it up on the cement pad, Eden ran back and slammed the gate shut.

"What the hell just happened?"

My entire body buzzed with the rush of adrenaline, and I stalked in circles around the courtyard.

"Go upstairs. Inside. I'll be up when I've cooled the fuck down so I don't say anything I'm going to regret."

Eden's face paled in the moonlight, but her mouth flattened into a thin line. She didn't say anything before she stalked up the spiral stairs and unlocked the apartment door.

I would have bet money on the fact that Eden wanted to slam it, but was too worried about waking Harriet to do it.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out of my pocket as I paced.

Con: That was fucking crazy. They ran out of here after her. Asked for both your names. I didn't give them.

Bishop: Thanks, man. I'm at her place. I appreciate you coming to her rescue. I don't know what the fuck happened tonight, but it's not fucking happening again.

Con: I think it's safe to say that neither of you should be coming back anytime soon.

Bishop: Not a fucking problem. Sorry to interrupt your fundraiser.

I shoved my phone back in my pocket and sucked in a few deep breaths.

Visions of what could have happened to Eden had flashed through my head the entire way to the casino and all the way home. I knew better than to think they'd give her the benefit of the doubt because she was a woman.

Guilt and pain from everything I'd fucked up before battered me. I hadn't been able to stop them when they had dragged my cousin Abby into a back room along with me. There was no fucking way I'd ever let that happen to Eden, regardless of her need for independence.

Chapter Fifty-Two

Eden

I shut the door and paced back and forth across my tiny living area. A whirlpool of emotions spun in dizzying circles inside me. Anger. Guilt. Annoyance. Frustration. Helplessness.

Bishop finally came upstairs and let himself inside. I stared at him for long moments while neither of us spoke. Whatever he was feeling was bubbling close to the surface.

“What the fuck did you think you were doing?” Apparently he hadn’t cooled down.

“What the hell were *you* doing?” I shot back. “You were the one who didn’t want to step foot inside a casino and then *bam*, there you are. I was fine. You didn’t need to come to my rescue again.”

His green gaze seemed to shoot fire as it locked onto mine, and everything but the rise and fall of his chest stilled. “You think you were *fine*? They thought you were a fucking card counter, Eden, working with a partner. Do you know what casinos do with card counters? Do you think they really just wanted to take you into some little back office to *chat*? They could’ve killed you.”

“This isn’t a freaking movie. No one was going to do anything to me.” To myself, I added, *especially once I dropped my father’s name*. Only someone with a death wish would dare touch me.

“Yeah, you’re right. No one was going to do a goddamned thing to you because I wouldn’t let them.”

Frustration overwhelmed the other emotions fighting for precedence. “I don’t need you to save me every time, Bishop! How the hell am I ever supposed to learn to stand on my own two feet and save myself if you’re always going to rush to the rescue? I don’t need a babysitter. I need to learn to be self-sufficient, and if no one in my entire freaking life will give me the chance, then how am I ever going to get there?”

Bishop jerked back like I’d slapped him. “What the hell kind of man would I be if I didn’t step in when shit goes sideways? You want me to back away and let you put yourself at risk? No fucking way. I can’t do that. I won’t do that.”

“Then you’re going to suffocate me.” My words fell like heavy boulders between us.

“Is that what you think I’m doing? Trying to suffocate you? Fuck, Eden. All I want is to keep you safe so I don’t lose you like I’ve lost damn near every other person in my life who fucking mattered!”

He stalked closer to me, and I backed away instinctively until my butt pressed against the cabinets in the tiny kitchen.

“I get that you need to prove that you can handle yourself. I get it. I really fucking do. But tonight was not the night to try. Those people aren’t a joke. They don’t believe in a slap on the wrist. They break fingers. Hands. Arms. Kneecaps. Legs. They fucking kill people who try to steal from them.”

Intellectually, I knew that he was right. But what he didn’t understand was that in *that* world, I was untouchable. I wanted to explain. I wanted to tell him exactly why he didn’t need to worry about me tonight. The words were there on my tongue, but I couldn’t get them out because he kept going.

His palms pressed down on either side of the countertop and he leaned over me. “I would die before I’d let them hurt you. Don’t take that away from me, Eden. Don’t tell me I can’t protect you.”

The anger and frustration that had been roiling within me drained away. How could I possibly stay mad at the man when he wasn’t trying to cage me?

“You have to know that sometimes I can handle myself, even if you don’t believe me. I promise I’m not a fragile little princess. I’m not going to break.”

The intensity burning in his eyes turned molten. “I know you’re not a fragile little princess. You’re fucking resilient. I see it every time I look at you. If I thought you were going to break, I wouldn’t do this.”

His hand came off the counter and buried in my hair, tugging my head back before his lips crashed down onto mine. Every bit of emotion that had been flying between us burst into heat. I grabbed his shoulders, giving back as good as I got. I wanted his kiss, wanted him to take me right here, against my counter.

Bishop must have read my mind, because he dropped his hand from my hair and reached for my thigh, lifting it and wrapping it around his waist before shoving my dress up.

“You want me to prove that I don’t think I’ll break you? I’ll take what I want and make you scream for me.”

“Yes, yes.” I moaned against his lips, tugging his shirt away from his shoulders, and his hand slid between my legs. He tugged my panties aside.

“Fuck, cupcake. You’re so goddamned wet. Fighting with me makes you want to fuck, doesn’t it?”

The heat of a blush burned over my cheeks, but I wasn’t about to deny it. “Everything about you makes me want to fuck.”

The words felt foreign coming out of my mouth, even though they were the absolute truth.

“Naughty little girl. You fucking love when I tell you what I’m going to do to you, don’t you?”

I moaned a response and it spurred him on.

“Shouldn’t have worn panties tonight. I’m gonna rip them off and turn you around and bend you over the counter. You’re not going to move your hands while I drop to my knees and eat this sweet pussy until you scream. I’m not going to fuck you until you’re begging for my cock with every breath. When I take you, I’m not holding back. You’re going to feel me tomorrow with every step. If you’re a really fucking good girl, I’m going to play with that virgin asshole so you’re one step closer to taking my cock there. Because you’re mine, Eden. I’m going to own every fucking inch of you.”

My entire body went up in flames, and he did exactly what he promised.

The elastic of my panties snapped, and Bishop pulled my leg from his hip and spun me around.

I grasped for any kind of purchase, but my palms found nothing on the countertop to anchor me against the waves of anticipation rolling through me. My skirt was flipped up over my ass, and the cooler air of the room provided a counterpoint to the heat of my body. Bishop’s big hands covered my ass as he lowered himself to his knees.

I only had a fraction of a moment to feel a shred of embarrassment that he must have been staring right at my ass as he spread my legs, but given his promises about what he’d do if I were *a really fucking good girl*, I couldn’t help but shiver.

His mouth covered me from behind as he pressed his face between my legs, his tongue

thrusting into me. My clit throbbed and ached for more until he slipped a hand around to circle it and tease me.

Moans slipped from my mouth, and Bishop growled his approval between my legs in a way that I felt all the way to the pleasure centers in my brain. They were blaring with color, and I swear whatever he did next had black spots invading my vision.

“Bishop!”

His name was ripped from my throat on a hoarse cry, but he didn’t slow. He pushed harder, finally making contact with my clit as an orgasm barreled down on me and shoved me toward the edge.

“Please, please.” I didn’t care that I was begging, and when the orgasm hit, I dropped my forehead to the counter and screamed.

Still, he didn’t slow. His movements sped up, and Bishop dragged another orgasm from my body until I was shaking and doubted the ability of my legs to hold me up.

“You ready to beg for my cock, cupcake? You want me to give you more?”

I nodded.

“I need the words, Eden. I want to hear it. I want you to tell me just how fucking bad you need it.”

“Please, I need it. I want it.”

“Not good enough, baby.”

Desperation rode me and I would have said anything, but words eluded me. “Please, I want you.”

“What do you want?”

“Your cock,” I said on a moan.

He pressed two thick fingers into me, and my body wept with the temporary relief.

“Yes!”

“In this tight little cunt?”

“Yes!”

“You gonna let me have it any way I want it?”

It seemed my vocabulary had diminished to only one word. The only one that mattered.

“Yes!”

“You gonna let me protect it and keep it safe so I can make you scream like this every night?”

Again, only one answer would work. “Yes.”

“Good, because you don’t have a fucking choice anymore, Eden. You’re mine. I don’t have much, but what’s mine I keep. I protect. I don’t ever let it go.”

“Please.”

“You on the pill? I want you bare. Nothing between us anymore.”

“IUD. I’m covered. Hurry.”

My words were pleas, but I knew I wouldn’t have to wait much longer because Bishop stood behind me and the hiss of his zipper was the best sound I’d ever heard.

“I’ve never fucked anyone without protection. I’ve never wanted to. But you crashed into my life and changed every goddamned thing.”

Bishop notched the thick head of his cock against my opening and then leaned over me, covering my hands and interlocking our fingers.

He pushed inside with one solid stroke. I expected him to pull out and slide in again and again, but he stilled. “I’ve been waiting for you my whole fucking life, and I didn’t have a clue.”

“I know. I know.”

“I don’t want to let you go, but I know you want my fingers on the hungry clit of yours, don’t you?”

I nodded. “I just want you.”

“And I want you to scream and squeeze the fuck out of my cock when you come.”

He released one hand and swept my hair over my shoulder and pressed his lips to the curve of my neck before trading it for his teeth. His fingers found my clit as the sharp sensation registered in my brain, and he began to move.

Decadent pain and overwhelming pleasure warred within me as he thrust and retreated, slamming against my G-spot. I screamed his name as my inner muscles spasmed.

Over and over, he fucked into me, delivering more pleasure than I thought possible.

“Fucking perfect,” Bishop growled into my ear, finally slowing. “So fucking perfect.”

He readjusted his grip, one hand coming around my hip to glide his fingers over my clit as the other thumb slid between my legs, gathering up my slickness. My overwhelmed brain tried to keep up with his movements, but didn’t compute.

Not until I felt that same thumb reposition itself right over my ass. All the nerve endings blared to life, and if it was even possible at this point, my pussy got wetter.

“Fuck, baby. You like that. My sweet naughty little cupcake wants my finger in her ass.”

He pressed against me, and another orgasm burst just before Bishop’s roar filled the kitchen.

He continued to thrust, to press, to devastate, for a few more moments before he collapsed over my back, his arm holding us both up.

For long minutes, neither of us moved.

Before he pulled out of me, Bishop growled one more word into my ear. “Mine.”

Chapter Fifty-Three

Bishop

I'd never come so fucking hard in my entire life. Bare. Inside Eden. The feeling was primal, and I wanted to end every night buried inside her before I tucked her into my side and we both passed out from exhaustion.

I wanted to wake up every morning by slipping inside that sweet pussy so the first thing she felt in the morning was how hard I could make her come.

Before, that was just a fantasy. Now, I wanted to make it a reality. I carried Eden to her bed and laid her down before heading into her bathroom to find a washcloth to clean her up. She tried to sit up when I returned, but I pressed her back down.

"I'm taking care of you. Let me."

She didn't protest, and I wondered how embarrassed she must be. She'd have to get used to it. Besides, I loved seeing the hot pink color rise in her cheeks. The dim light shining from the bathroom spilled onto her, and I wondered how far I could get that color to spread.

"You like when I play with your ass, don't you?"

There it went. Almost immediately, rising higher and diving lower. Her gaze darted away before returning to mine.

"Maybe."

"You like it. You want it. Makes you feel naughty, doesn't it? That forbidden thrill? Knowing I'm going to take you there and you're gonna beg for it?"

The blush kept going.

"You gotta know it makes me harder than a fucking rock to even think about it. Knowing that no one has ever touched you there, and I'm the one who's going to corrupt you?"

I could tell she fought the urge to look away, but my girl was tougher than that.

"You can admit it. You can like it."

"I can't help it. I like everything you do to me."

The smile that crossed my face had to be the epitome of *smug son of a bitch*. "I'll never give you anything but pleasure. Fucking promise." I returned to the bathroom and finished my own cleanup before turning off the light and coming back to her bed.

Wrapping myself around her, I tucked my cock between her ass cheeks. Perfect fucking place to sleep. She shifted back against me, and I wrapped an arm around her and pressed a kiss to her hair.

"Goodnight, cupcake."

Her breathing had already evened out, and I knew she was under. It didn't stop me from saying the words.

"Fucking love you, Eden."

Chapter Fifty-Four

Eden

The next morning, I woke up with a moan as Bishop's hard cock pressed into me from behind.

Full.

So fucking full.

His fingers played over my clit like he knew every move that would take me higher and higher until I screamed.

"Need more. Deeper." He pulled us both up so I was on my knees, my ass in the air, and he pounded into me, never letting up on my clit.

My pillow muffled the screams as I came.

Bishop climaxed with a yell and his cock pulsed as he poured into me.

Morning sex was a revelation. Even after I collapsed back onto the bed in an ungraceful pile, Bishop cleaned me up again, and this time I couldn't summon the energy to be embarrassed. My body had apparently decided that it was his and he could do whatever he wanted with it. I couldn't find any rational reason to disagree with this new development.

When he returned, he pressed a kiss to my shoulder. "We slept in, babe. What time do you have to work today?"

This yanked me from my happy post-orgasm state, and I rolled out of bed. "It's Saturday, right? Which means noon. What time is it?"

"Eleven fifteen. You got time."

"Shit!" All relaxation evaporated. "I need to shower and get dressed."

"I'll take you. We can shower together."

I turned around and looked at him. "Oh no. If we're going to shower together, I'm definitely going to be late. I've never had shower sex, so I'm not rushing through the first time."

Bishop's laugh, something I didn't hear nearly enough, echoed off the walls of my bedroom.

"Deal. I'll shower at home. You do your thing."

* * * *

Forty minutes later, I walked in the door of Your Favorite Hole after standing on the sidewalk and kissing Bishop for a solid five minutes. I think three people told us to get a room.

Fabienne was behind the counter, and Asha pumped her fist in the air when she saw me.

"Thank Christ. I need to go home and sleep. This shift has been killer." She covered her mouth with a yawn.

Fabienne shook her head at the girl. "You've been dragging ass all day, so don't pretend like you worked all that hard."

"I'm here; you can get back to bed."

Both women looked at me, and Fabienne jerked her head toward the front window.

"You totally got laid this morning, didn't you? I thought you were going for a second round the way he was about to eat you alive on the sidewalk."

Eden pre-last night would have been embarrassed, but the Eden of this morning who had

discovered the joys of morning sex, just answered, “Sure did. And it was fabulous.”

Asha frowned. “Dammit, I want morning sex. I need to get a man who looks at me like that.”

“Don’t we all,” Fabienne drawled before looking at Asha. “Get out of here. I don’t want you dragging ass again tomorrow. You screwed up three orders.”

Asha waved her fingers and bolted for the back room to hang up her apron before she slipped out the back door.

After she was gone, Fabienne looked at me. “You know what you’re doing with that guy?”

“Probably not, but does anyone ever really know what they’re doing with a guy like that?”

“Touché.”

Whatever else Fabienne wanted to say about it was forgotten as the door chimed and customers descended.

* * * *

Six hours later, Fabienne had left and I had two hours on my own before my relief for the night shift showed. Bishop had come in during an unexpected rush, and I’d barely had a second to smile and say hi as I handed him his coffee.

The door chimed again before I could get lost in my thoughts about what was going to happen when my two lives collided, and a familiar face popped in the door.

Delilah.

She looked incredibly amused.

“I don’t know what kind of mojo you worked on Bishop, but he actually smiled at customers today.” She strolled toward the counter, the petticoats swishing under her dress. “I don’t actually want to know, because *eww*, but I wanted to let you know that there’s something different about him.”

“Can I plead the Fifth? Because I can’t . . . I just can’t talk about that with you.”

The door chimed again and more familiar faces walked in. Charlie, Elle, Yve, Vanessa, and Valentina.

Delilah smiled. “Then it’s a good thing I’m getting coffee and bailing so they can get the scoop.”

“Are you okay?” Vanessa came toward the counter, ahead of the others. “Because Con and the guys were telling us about last night, and *holy hell*, I would’ve been freaking out.”

Delilah’s smile vanished. “What happened?”

Yve filled her in on the details. “Some guy at the casino might’ve set Eden up and made it look like she was counting cards. Security wanted to drag her off, but the guys wouldn’t let her. Bishop busted in and yanked her out of there, and security ran after them.”

Delilah blanched. “Bishop went into a casino? On purpose?”

The guilt I’d felt last night about putting him in that position came back with a vengeance. “He didn’t need to come to my rescue. I would’ve been fine. Really, I’m not completely helpless.”

“Do you realize what they do to people who they think are counting cards? They will fuck you right up and not ask questions.” Delilah’s concern sounded a lot like Bishop’s, except quieter.

“I wasn’t counting cards, so nothing would’ve happened. I don’t even know how. I wouldn’t have a clue what to do.”

“I hate to say it,” Vanessa chimed in, “but I don’t think it would’ve mattered. They were adamant, from what Con told me.”

“You could’ve walked out of there with broken or missing freaking fingers! This is serious shit.”

“They wouldn’t have dared.”

Charlie watched me, and even though the other five looked like they thought I was living in Denial Land, Charlie seemed to notice more.

“Have you figured out how long you’re staying in town?” she asked.

I shrugged. “As long as I can. I don’t have a solid plan.”

“Why is that?” Delilah’s tone was skeptical. “Because if you’re going to jet out of here and break Bishop’s freaking heart, we’re going to have a serious bone to pick.”

Did she really think I had the power to do that? I needed to turn this conversation away to something else before I ended up telling them everything. The need to tell the truth was so heavy on my conscience that I could barely hold it back anymore.

“I doubt Bishop would let her go anywhere,” Yve drawled. “I know what *possessive man in overdrive* looks like, and he’s got it stamped all over him.”

Considering she was married to the very powerful, very notorious billionaire Lucas Titan, I assumed Yve probably knew what she was talking about.

Vanessa nodded her agreement. “Caveman mode has been activated. She’s screwed.”

This wasn’t news to me, and the feelings I’d been wrestling with for the last eighteen hours came to the surface again.

“How do you deal with that? I’m not fragile. I need to be able to stand on my own two feet. I don’t always need him coming to my rescue and then getting pissed when I tell him I can take care of myself.”

All the women laughed at me, except for Delilah, who just smiled and shook her head.

“Good luck with that one,” Valentina offered. “Rix would’ve killed anyone who tried to hurt me. Actually, he did, but that’s a long story. That kind of alpha instinct isn’t something you can turn off.”

Elle pointed at her. “You were the one who didn’t want an alpha. I believe I remember you saying that you wanted a beta. Someone to watch *Masterpiece Theatre* with and drink wine.” Elle’s laughing eyes cut to me. “And she ended up with a crazy badass motherfucker who wouldn’t drink wine if Jesus himself made it from water.”

Valentina rolled her eyes at Elle. “I was drunk and clearly misguided.” She turned her attention back to me. “This is what I learned, and you can take it or leave it. But if you want the guy, you get the whole package. There’s no picking and choosing between the parts you like and the parts that make you want to rip your hair out. If he’s alpha, he’s always going to be alpha. You can’t turn that off. You can’t tell him not to protect you, because it would be going against every instinct he’s got.”

“She speaks the truth,” Yve said. “But if you’ve got demons you need to fight on your own, that’s something you need to come out with and tell him. Men, despite our every wish and hope, can’t read our minds. That said, even if you want to prove that you can handle yourself, there are times when it’s okay to break. You can lean on someone and not be weak. Believe me when I tell you that I didn’t need any man to take care of me, and it took me a hell of a lot to realize accepting help when it was offered didn’t make me less. It just meant I had more in my life.”

I soaked up Yve’s words. *It just meant I had more . . .*

“But you were a badass bitch from day one. The fact that Lucas got through your walls was

a freaking miracle.” This came from Charlie.

“I’ve never been a badass bitch,” I said without thinking. “I’ve never had the chance. I’ve been shielded from everything, and this was my one chance to experience life without watching it go by while someone stood in front of me to protect me from it.” As soon as the words were out, I knew they were a mistake. All the women looked at me.

“You want to elaborate on that?” Delilah asked.

Charlie shook her head. “You don’t have to.”

I chose my next words much more carefully. “Do you know what it’s like to live in a protective bubble?”

Charlie, Vanessa, and Valentina all nodded.

“Then you get that when you’re in the bubble, all you want is to get out. I can’t go back in the bubble. I need freedom.”

“Then tell him,” Valentina said. “Tell him exactly what you need, and if he can’t give it to you, then you know you’ve got a choice.”

Delilah kept quiet through this exchange, until she said, “He wants to keep you safe, and he’s got reasons, but there’s no way he’d want you to be unhappy. There’s gotta be balance.”

She was right. Balance was what I needed and hadn’t found.

“So, what do I do?”

“Talk to him.” This came as a chorus from the women.

“But before that, we all need coffee,” Yve said.

I laughed and nodded. “Deal. Give me your orders and I’ll get them going.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

Bishop

Con came out of the back room as I sent my client on his way. “Van come back with my coffee yet?”

“She was here?”

“Nah, she went next door with the women to talk to Eden, but she was supposed to bring me back coffee when they were done.”

“What do you mean, they went next door to talk to Eden?”

“They were worried about her after last night. Wanted to make sure she wasn’t freaking about what happened.”

“I took care of it.”

Con shrugged. “You know women. They gotta do things their own way. Your girl has been adopted into the crew whether you like it or not.”

I did like it, actually. The more ties Eden had holding her here, the less likely she was to leave. Even though I hadn’t pushed it lately, it drove me fucking nuts that she didn’t have any kind of long-term plan. I had lived that life. Staying in a place for as long as it worked, and then moving on when it didn’t.

With no ties, it was easy. I didn’t want leaving to be easy for Eden.

“So, basically, they’re over there meddling.”

“Basically. On the upside, you might learn something from it.”

“Oh yeah, like what?”

“Like why she was so fucking unconcerned about the idea of being dragged off into a back room at a casino. I know she’s naive and shit, but that should’ve scared the hell out of her.”

I’d been stewing over that all day. Eden wasn’t stupid. She could recognize when she was in over her head, even if she was hell-bent on pretending she could get out of it herself.

“I don’t have an answer for that.”

“You want me to call my people and start digging around to see what we can find out about her?”

The offer hung between us, and even though I wanted to say yes, I was waiting for Eden to come clean with whatever it was she was running from by herself. I wanted that. I needed that from her.

“Not yet. I’m gonna give it some more time.”

Con shrugged. “Offer’s on the table if you want it.”

“Thanks, man.”

The front door whooshed open and Delilah and Vanessa came inside, each carrying two cups of coffee. “Charlie said hi, but she was catching a ride with Elle, Yve, and Valentina, so she couldn’t deliver that herself.”

“You really did interrogate her with the whole crew, huh?” I asked, my gaze on Vanessa and Delilah, wondering who was the instigator behind this.

“We just wanted to make sure she was okay. She is.”

“And?”

“And nothing.”

“Bullshit, princess. We all know you got way more than that out of her.” Con raised an eyebrow at his woman, and I turned the same look on my sister.

“You’re gonna have to talk to her.”

“Thanks for the inside scoop, ladies.”

Con laughed. “Stubborn, both of you.” He accepted the coffee that Vanessa finally handed over and sipped. “But you got me the good shit, so I’m not complaining right now.”

“You better not complain. You like me stubborn.” She smiled up at him, and I wanted the easiness they shared.

Someday, I’d have that with Eden, but we had a hell of a lot to air out before we got there. It was kind of hard to push forward when we were both keeping so many fucking secrets.

I almost told her everything last night. I came close. But my secrets were tied up with the shame I carried. I hated that I’d been such a fucking selfish punk kid who thought he knew every goddamned thing. And then the fact that I’d run from it? Not exactly something I was proud of.

It occurred to me, while Vanessa and Con and Delilah shot the shit, that maybe whatever Eden wasn’t saying was the shit she wasn’t proud of. I wandered back to my room and pulled out equipment to sterilize before my next appointment.

Before Con and Vanessa left, Vanessa stuck her head in. “I’m not saying anything you probably don’t already know, but I think Eden’s dying to stretch her wings, and if you don’t give her that chance, she’s going to be miserable.”

“I got that from her last night.”

“I’m not trying to get in the middle of it, but I get where she’s coming from. You can give her a world she never knew existed and still keep her safe while you do it.”

I nodded. “She say anything else I need to know?”

Vanessa smiled. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Come on, princess,” Con called. “Let’s get out of here before the rain comes and we both get soaked on that bike.”

“See you around, Bish. Good luck.” She winked at me.

Delilah stepped into the doorway as soon as the back door closed. “You sure you know what you’re doing with her?”

“Figuring it out as I go.”

“You might want to figure it out faster.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

Eden

The man came in Your Favorite Hole twenty minutes before the end of my shift, his dark hoodie pulled up and his hands in his pockets.

Every instinct I had said something wasn't right with him. I fingered my phone in the pocket of my apron, the urge to call Bishop screaming at me.

But I was the one determined to stand my ground and take care of myself.

"Can I get you something?"

He looked up at me, and I could have sworn I'd seen him before. Somewhere. But before I could figure out where, he charged toward the counter.

"Give me all the money. Every fucking dime."

Fear. Honest-to-God fear ripped through me. It multiplied when he pulled out a gun.

Oh my God. Who the hell holds up a donut shop?

I raised my hands in the air like any normal person would who had a gun pointed at them.

"Okay. Okay. You can have it."

"Open the fucking drawer."

I lowered my shaking hands and turned the key, then pressed the button to release the cash drawer. The gun wavered in the air as I pulled each stack of cash from its slot and piled it on the counter.

"Don't put it on the fucking counter, put it in a goddamned bag. What the fuck is your problem, bitch!"

I wanted to yell that I'd never freaking been robbed before so I had no idea what the protocol was, but I kept it in. After yanking a bag from underneath the counter, I stuffed the money inside.

The chime on the door sounded, and both our heads whipped toward the door.

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit. A visibly pregnant woman walked inside holding the hand of a toddler.

"I want all the chocolate ones," the little boy said.

The woman looked up and saw the man and the gun and froze for a split second before turning to drop to her knees and shield the boy with her body. A uniformed cop walked by the front window, and the woman screamed for help.

The cop froze and tilted his head to see inside. The moment he saw the gun, he spoke into the radio on his shoulder and drew his weapon.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," the man bit out as he grabbed the bag. "Not fucking supposed to go like this." He turned the gun on me. "Where's the back door?"

I pointed to the hallway as the wail of police sirens became audible from outside and the cop pushed open the front door. The man with the gun shoved the paper bag of money inside his coat and fired off three shots at the front windows. Glass shattered everywhere, and the woman screamed before shoving her son toward the wall and curling her body around him.

The man ran to the back hallway and disappeared out the door as the front flew open again and the cop charged inside.

"He went out the back," I yelled. The cop nodded and gave chase.

The front door slammed open again and I expected more cops, or even Bishop coming from next door, but instead I saw Angelo.

Angelo?

“Come on, E, we gotta get out of here. Now. Hurry. More cops are coming, and they’re going to have all sorts of fucking questions for you that you can’t answer. They’ll arrest you, and I can’t let that happen.”

What the hell is he doing here? Confused, I stared at him. The normal suit I was used to seeing him wear had been traded for jeans and a leather jacket.

“How—”

“Come on, we ain’t got time for questions. We gotta go.”

My brain tried to make sense of what he was saying, but between being robbed at gunpoint and having my past show up, I stood frozen behind the counter.

“Eden, now! Your dad would fucking kill you if you talked to the cops.”

The sirens grew louder as Angelo hustled behind the counter to grab me by the arm and drag me toward the back door where the man and the cop had run.

“I have to make sure she’s okay!” I tugged at his arm, worry for the pregnant woman struggling to her feet shooting through me.

“You need to worry about your fucking self. We’re going.”

“No, I’m not going anywhere. You go. I’ll be fine.”

“Don’t make me hurt you, Eden. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I dragged my attention away from the woman to Angelo.

Hurt me? Why would he . . .

I saw something different in Angelo’s eyes. The easy camaraderie I remembered was gone, and in its place was crazy desperation.

“Let me go!”

Angelo’s fist shot out and slammed into my jaw. The pain didn’t even have a chance to register before everything went black.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Bishop

Gunshots. Breaking glass. Screams. I could hear everything through the wall of Voodoo Ink, and it was coming from Your Favorite Hole. I was out of my seat, tossing my tattoo machine on the counter and gone without saying a word to my client.

I pushed through the door in time to catch a glimpse of a man carrying someone out the back. A woman hunched over a little boy in the front, and sirens grew louder and louder. Scanning the store, I saw no sign of Eden.

The woman rose on shaky legs, gathering the boy against her chest. She pointed to the back door.

“A man took the girl who worked here. Out the back.”

Fuck.

I ran for the back door and shoved it open just in time to see a man carrying Eden round the corner and leave the alley. Her arm flopped lifelessly, and her head lolled backward in his hold.

“Stop right fucking there!”

I ran toward the man, my adrenaline pumping overtime. I reached the end of the alley and raced left. He was shoving her into the backseat of a Lincoln. She was clearly unconscious.

“Do not fucking move!”

He looked up at me for only a beat before slamming the back door and jumping in the front. I was twenty feet away when he gunned the engine and tore out into the street, narrowly missing sideswiping a cab.

I gotta get my bike. Follow them. I memorized the license plate number and grabbed my phone as I ran back to the alley.

“What up, man?” Con asked.

Between heaving breaths, I told him. “Find everything you can on Eden. And get your people to run this plate.” I rattled off the number before I could forget it. “Someone just grabbed her out of the donut shop and shoved her in a car. She didn’t look conscious.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“No. Hurry. I’m grabbing my bike. I’m going to try to follow them. Call me when you get anything.”

I pushed open the back door to Voodoo and Delilah was standing at the front. “What the hell just happened? Cops just swarmed Your Favorite Hole. They wouldn’t let me go in.”

“Eden’s gone. Someone took her. I’m going after him.” I ducked into the break room and grabbed my keys off the desk, not giving a single shit about the person still sitting in my chair. Delilah could deal with them.

I ran out into the alley, intent on getting on my bike as fast as fucking possible, but three cops with drawn weapons stopped me in my tracks.

“Stop right there!” one officer yelled. “Who the fuck are you?”

“I work at the tattoo shop, and some asshole just grabbed my girlfriend and shoved her in a car. Get the hell out of my way so I can go after them.”

“No way, man. We’re questioning everyone. You’re staying right here.”

Rage roiled in my gut. “Did you not fucking hear me? Someone just grabbed my girlfriend

and shoved her in the back of a car and took off. If you're not going to go after him, I sure as shit am."

"Come with us. Inside."

Gritting my teeth at every second I was losing, I realized I didn't have much choice unless I wanted to ruin my ink with the new addition of bullet holes.

The woman with the toddler was sitting in one of the chairs, rocking the boy back and forth. She looked up when she saw me.

"Did you get her?"

I shook my head, and the cop started asking her questions.

"Can you confirm what this man is telling us? His girlfriend was abducted?"

"Yes. Yes, he tried to get her to go with him and she wouldn't, so he knocked her out and carried her away."

"Now can I fucking go?"

The cop made notes on his little cop notepad as Delilah stepped into the doorway.

"Ma'am, step back," another officer said to her.

"You can use the tattoo shop if you want to clear people out of here. We have room."

The woman stood with her little boy and looked at the officer. "I want to get out of here."

"Fine. We'll move this next door." He looked at me. "Everyone can move next door."

I wanted to knock that fucking look off his face. Every second that slipped by made it less and less likely that I'd find Eden.

"Where is she?" Delilah demanded as I followed the cop out front. "Where the hell is Eden?"

The woman replied before I could. "He said she had to go. She couldn't talk to the cops. Her dad would be mad."

What the hell?

"Ma'am, if you could hold on until we're ready to get your full statement, that'd be helpful."

Delilah led the way into Voodoo, and the cop gave the woman the go-ahead to give her statement, but wouldn't let me out of his sight.

By the time the woman was done, I was more confused than ever, but that didn't change a fucking thing about needing to go after Eden.

"So you're sure she knew him?"

"It seemed like it."

"But he still hit her and carried her out anyway?"

She nodded.

"Something doesn't seem right," the cop said.

"No shit," I interrupted. "I've got the plate number. Call in a BOLO. Get every cop in this city looking for her."

He glared at me, but I rattled the number off anyway and he wrote it down.

The door to Voodoo swung open and another cop came in holding a plastic bag with a purse inside. Eden's purse. I went toward him.

"Can you confirm this belongs to your girlfriend?" he asked me.

"Yes. It's hers."

"Elisha Madden, right? I'll run it and see if we get anything."

I frowned and shook my head. "Eden Madden. Not Elisha."

The officer's brows furrowed. "That's not what the ID says."

"Let me see it."

Rather than telling me to fuck off, the cop slipped on a rubber glove and pulled it from the bag, holding it in front of my face.

“This her?”

The picture was Eden. The last name was right. The first name was not.

What the hell? I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture of it before he realized what I was doing.

“Hey—”

“Like you really fucking care.”

“So this isn’t her?”

“It’s her. But that isn’t her first name. It’s Eden.”

“You sure about that?”

I didn’t know what to say in response. Apparently I was fucking wrong about my girlfriend’s name.

The cops finished questioning the woman as Fabienne showed up and started making demands about what the hell had happened to her shop.

During the distraction, I called Con. Without a greeting, I launched into what I needed. “I need you to run a different name. Cops found Eden’s ID and it’s her picture, but the first name is Elisha. I got a picture. I’ll send it.”

“I’ll get him this ASAP, and I’ll call you back. You find any trail?”

“Cops wouldn’t let me go. They’re putting a BOLO on the car. Hoping like fuck they find it.”

“Good. That’s actually better than you roaming the streets hoping to catch a glimpse. I’ll call Rix, and hopefully he can give us the inside word from the cops. We’ll find her, Bish.”

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Bishop

I'd cruised for an hour on my bike looking for any sign of the Lincoln and had found nothing. According to Rix, the cops were getting hits on the BOLO, but none of them were the right car. Something had to break soon.

My phone rang and I grabbed it. *Con.*

"You got answers?" I demanded.

"Not all of them. But I can tell you one thing for sure. My guy ran the license, and even though it's a good fake, it's definitely a fake. He can't find an Elisha Madden or an Eden Madden. He's digging further. Going to see if we can figure out where it came from."

"New York City. That's where she came from."

"That's what I told him, but there are a lot of people who make fake IDs in that city."

"What about the Lincoln?"

"Rented by one Angelo Francetti over a week ago. For all we know, he could've stolen it."

"Did you give the name to your guy?"

"Still waiting to hear back on him. I'll let you know as soon as I hear."

I hung up, and Delilah watched me lower my phone back to the counter. "Something's not right here. Something's really not fucking right."

"I know."

I rode the streets again for another hour and came back to Voodoo when I didn't have a fucking clue where else to go.

She was gone.

What the hell is her real name? Fake ID? Why?

It seemed the woman I'd fallen for was a hell of a lot better at keeping secrets than I was. I'd gone round and round with my emotions. Anger that she hadn't told me. Concern that whatever she was running from caught up with her. Disappointment with every corner I turned that I didn't see her.

I called in every marker I had to find the car, and no one had a clue. Con's contacts were better than mine, so I hoped he'd find out something really fucking soon. Before I lost my goddamned mind.

We closed Voodoo, and Delilah made coffee up in my apartment. She and I sat across the table from each other, both staring at the phone between us, waiting for it to ring.

The pounding of someone running up the stairs from the downstairs shop to my apartment had me whipping my head toward the door.

Only Con had a key besides me or Delilah, so it was no surprise when he threw the door open. In his hand was a pile of papers.

"What do you have?" I demanded.

"More than I expected, that's for fucking sure."

He tossed the stack of papers on the counter, and I grabbed the top one.

Angelo Francetti had a mugshot and a rap sheet. One part stood out more than anything else.

Soldier for the Casso crime family.

Everything inside me went cold. Fucking frozen.

The Casso crime family. Dominic Casso. The head of the fucking mob. The reason I had no uncle, no cousin, and had been running for ten years.

“What the fuck?”

“Your girl . . . her name is Eden. Eden Mathews. But that’s only because she doesn’t have her father’s name.”

I remembered what the lady in the donut shop had told us the guy who took Eden said. That her dad would be mad. I looked up at Con’s solemn features and tried to put it together.

“Who the fuck is her father?”

“Dominic Casso.”

Ice froze my chest as realization slammed into me.

Delilah sucked in a breath. “Holy fucking shit. Was she here spying on you?”

The possibility hadn’t even crossed my mind until the words came out of Delilah’s mouth.

“No fucking way.”

“Knew you were running from something, but didn’t have a clue that was it. Fuck, man. Do we need to get you out of here?” Con asked. “This family is no joke. Even if they’re in a tailspin right now because of the Feds, Casso is still as dangerous as ever, according to my contact.”

Delilah pushed up from the table. “Con’s right. You need to pack your shit and go. What if they come for you?” Her tone took on a hysterical edge. “This could all be a setup.”

I looked at Delilah. “No. No fucking way.” I refused to believe it. *How can she be a Casso?* The odds were ridiculous. It couldn’t be true.

She put her hands on her hips. “How do you know? Isn’t it a little convenient that she ended up here?”

I thought of the sidewalk where I originally found Eden about to be assaulted. “I just know. There’s no fucking way. You’re sure that’s who she is?” I asked Con.

“Yes. No doubt at all. This shit is straight from the FBI database. Casso kept her under wraps, but my guy has a comprehensive file on the whole damn family. Fuck, she has a half brother who’s a movie star and one who’s a fucking billionaire. You’ve heard their names before too. Guaranteed. Report says she has no contact with them at all.”

I didn’t care about her siblings. “So, what the hell happened? Soldier from the family comes to drag her home, but she won’t go, so she struggles and he knocks her out and takes her anyway?”

“That would be the best guess I have.”

“What else do you have on him? Where would he take her?”

“Not sure. But my guy pulled credit card records, so that should tell us where he was staying. They’re in here somewhere. I just printed out the whole pile and came.”

All three of us flipped through the pages and scanned for the information.

In my head, I couldn’t stop thinking about how Eden had looked as he’d shoved her in the car. So fucking helpless while she was unconscious. The fact that she fought him and didn’t want to go with him gave me some hope.

“Where’s Casso now? Do we know?”

Con shook his head. “He’s under grand-jury investigation. The news has been all over the place, but he’s still walking free. Not sure exactly where he’s holed up, but the Feds are saying there’s been a power struggle and two of the other families are trying to wrestle control.”

Was that why Eden was in New Orleans? Out of the way to keep her safe? Fuck, I hated having this many questions and no answers. More than anything, I hated that she hadn’t trusted me enough to tell me.

“He was at the Sonesta.” Con held up a piece of paper. “Checked in under his real name and everything. He’s been there since before Mardi Gras.”

While Eden was there.

“What the fuck?” I grabbed my phone and pulled up Leon’s contact.

“What up, Bish?”

“You have a guy staying there named Angelo Francetti?”

“Why? What’s up?”

“Just check for me, would you?”

I heard clicking computer keys in the background. “Okay. Okay, yeah, I got him. He’s still checked in.”

“I’m on my way. Get me a key to his room.”

“Man, I can’t—”

“I’ll do your next piece for free. Just get me a fucking key to the guy’s room and don’t fucking tell anyone.”

“Okay. Okay. But if I lose my job over this—”

“We’ll worry about that later.”

I hung up and looked to Con. “You coming?”

“Fuck, yes.”

* * * *

When we got to the Royal Sonesta ten minutes later, Leon slipped a key across the desk in a little cardboard jacket.

“He’s in 208. You better not make a fucking racket. I’ll lose my job and then you’ll be doing all my shit for free.”

I grabbed the key. “We’ll be quiet.” It might be a lie, but it was what Leon needed to hear right now.

Con followed me to the elevator and I punched the button. “We got a plan?” he asked as we stepped into the elevator and the doors closed.

I looked at him. “This ain’t no special-forces op. This is smash-and-grab and get my girl.”

I’d grabbed my .45 before we left Voodoo, and if I knew Con, he was armed too.

“You carrying?”

“Of course.”

“Then we go in quiet and grab her.”

With both of us in agreement, we stepped out of the elevator and walked down to room 208. A Do Not Disturb sign hung on the knob. I pulled out the keycard and listened at the door for any noise.

Nothing.

I inserted it into the reader and waited for the light to turn green before moving the handle slowly. When I was ready to push it open, I looked to Con, and he nodded. I shoved the door open and we both drew on the room.

The empty room.

“Bathroom.”

I rushed to the open door and checked inside while Con cleared the closet and under the bed.

“Fuck.”

“Doesn’t look like he planned on leaving.”

It wasn't until that moment that I looked around and took in the contents of the room. Clothes were tossed over the armchair and the bed was unmade. A small printer was set up on the desk connected to a laptop, and photos were spread out across it.

Eden by herself. With Vanessa. With Delilah.

"He had her under surveillance." It was obvious, but I had to say something.

There were pictures of Eden with me, but in every one, my face was blacked out.

"That ain't normal surveillance technique," Con said, pointing at it.

He flipped through the stack of pictures, some where my face had been cut out. It was eerie, seeing that shit. It also told me that the guy didn't seem to be the most balanced.

"This guy doesn't like you much, does he?"

"Fuck him. Let's search the rest of the room."

A ten-minute search turned up a burner phone, three pairs of women's underwear that in my gut I had to guess were Eden's, and a stack of papers that had been shoved into the bottom drawer of the nightstand.

I was thinking of all the ways I wanted to break this fucker into pieces for touching my girl when Con's phone rang. He answered and immediately put it on speaker.

"BOLO turned up the car. It was left at Lakefront Airport. Rent-a-cop called it in. Officers are headed out there now, but chances are if he had a jet, they're long gone."

"Can you get the flight plans for every plane that has left?"

"Might take me a few, but yeah, I can."

"Thanks, man."

"Anything I can do to help, just let me know."

Con hung up and looked to me. "What do you want to do now?"

"Let's take the laptop, the burner phone, the papers and photos. Anything that could give us something to go on."

"Got it."

Con and I gathered it all up, stuffed it in a dry-cleaning bag, and headed back to Voodoo. My brain was sifting through all the possibilities. If they had a jet, she was long gone. The only place that made sense for them to take her was New York.

But if he was acting under orders, why would he knock her out? I couldn't imagine Daddy would be too fucking happy to have his girl manhandled like that.

When we got back to Voodoo, Delilah had questions too.

"How do we know if he's acting under orders or if he's on his own?"

"That's a good fucking question, but without calling Dom Casso himself or someone in his organization to confirm, there's no way we can know."

I grabbed my phone and kept calling Eden's number. It went straight to voice mail.

Unease laced the blood in my veins. If this was Eden's family coming to collect her, what the hell could I do?

But something about it felt all wrong. The woman from the donut shop said she hadn't wanted to go, which meant I wasn't going to rest until I was sure Eden was safe and happy.

I hadn't come this far only to lose her.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Eden

My jaw ached and my head throbbed. I opened my eyes as someone lowered me into a chair. I blinked. Not a chair. A seat. On a jet?

Angelo?

“Sorry about that, E. Didn’t want to have to hurt you, but you didn’t want to cooperate. You should know better. When I tell you to do something, you have to do it. It’s for your own safety.”

“Where are we?”

“Going home.”

“Where did you come from?”

“You should know I wouldn’t let you go without making sure you’re safe. Now, buckle up. We’re leaving.”

Even in my pounding head, none of this seemed right. Angelo shouldn’t be here. Why did he have a jet on standby? This didn’t make sense.

“I can’t leave yet. Not like this. I have a life here.”

Angelo’s normally affable features were hard as he reached down and buckled my belt himself. “You weren’t supposed to *have a life* anywhere but New York. This was always temporary. And you don’t have a choice. You’re leaving.”

I was sick of other people making decisions for me. Calling the shots. Telling me what to do.

“No. I’m not going.” I grabbed the latch to unbuckle it, but Angelo wrapped a meaty hand around my arm and stopped me.

“You’re not going anywhere but exactly where I tell you. That’s how it’s gonna go from now on.”

This wasn’t the kind, easygoing Angelo I’d always known. This was someone completely different. All my instincts shouted that I needed to get away from him. I forced myself not to panic.

“Okay. I’ll do what you say.”

He released his grip on me and stood. “Good. That’s how it’s gonna go. Nice and easy. You want something to drink? We’re taking off in a minute.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

He turned to the bar and removed a bottle of Fiji water, just like what he always stocked for me in the SUV. Handing it to me, he said, “Drink. Don’t want you to get dehydrated on our flight.”

I uncapped the water and took a sip. *Does it taste funny? Or am I paranoid?*

I waited for Angelo to turn back to the bar to get himself a drink, and I slipped the latch from my buckle and bolted for the door.

I made it three steps before he tackled me.

“Eden, Eden, Eden. You know better than that.” Angelo’s words took on a chiding tone. “You’re gonna have to take a nice long nap on the way home if you can’t behave like a good girl.”

He leaned up, but didn’t move off me.

My cheek pressed into the carpet, I waited for another chance to move when I felt a sting on my neck and my vision blurred. Angelo stood and I rolled over onto my back, blinking up at him and trying to focus.

“What—”

“Sleep. It’ll all make sense soon.”

Everything went black just after I realized I’d been drugged.

Chapter Sixty

Bishop

“We got a flight plan. Jet left at 2030 hours, headed for Teterboro airfield in New Jersey. Manifest lists two passengers, Angelo Francetti and Eden Mathews.” Rix delivered the information via Con’s phone on speaker.

“At least now I know where the fuck I’m going.” It had been the longest four hours of my life waiting for confirmation.

“You can’t take on the mob by yourself, man,” Rix said, and Con nodded in agreement.

“No way in hell,” Delilah chimed in.

“I’m not taking opinions right now.”

“Well, that’s too fucking bad because we’ve all got them.” Con looked at me from across the table where we’d spread out the pictures and shit from the hotel room. “Titan has a jet, and I’m guessing he’ll let us take it, but he’s going to want to go with. He’s like that. Lord’ll want in. Simon will fucking fly the thing if we can’t get Titan’s regular pilot. You’ve got a crew whether you want one or not.”

“I’m going.” This came from Rix. “If Hennessy is sober, we might be able to get him on board.”

“I’ll call Titan. Plan to meet at the airstrip in sixty minutes unless you hear otherwise.”

Con hung up the phone and looked at me. “There’s no way in hell we’re sending you into this without backup. Besides, if Dom Casso tries to kill you, we’ll just use Titan as a human shield. No one would dare shoot that cocky son of a bitch because he’s got more money than God. Definitely more money than the mob.”

“What about me?” Delilah stood, her arms crossed.

“No fucking way. I’m not taking a chance that I could lose you too. You’re staying. Hold down the fort.”

“You know I don’t like it.”

I wrapped an arm around her and pulled her into my chest. “But you’ll deal because you’re the best fucking sister a guy could ask for.”

“You’re such a dick sometimes.”

“Most of the time.”

“If you two are done with sibling-bonding time, I’m calling the cavalry and we’re going in armed to the teeth.”

It might not have been the plan I intended, but that was the plan we were going with.

An hour later, Titan led the way up the stairs to his jet, and I followed behind with Con, Lord, and Rix. Simon was already in the cockpit finishing the preflight check. Hennessy was MIA, which wasn’t anything new since he’d turned in his badge and left the NOPD.

Lord, Con, and Rix dropped their duffel bags on the floor of the cabin and Titan laughed. “You’d think we were going to stage a coup. Anyone feel like becoming the new leader of Cuba?”

“Only you, Titan. Only you.”

Con looked to me. “You want to give your girl one more call before we take off? Try her cell?”

I'd been trying it every five minutes for the last hour and hadn't gotten an answer. I tried it one more time.

Straight to voice mail.

"Let's go."

Titan studied us. "Then buckle your fucking seat belts, boys, because this flight is taking off."

Chapter Sixty-One

Eden

When I woke, my head throbbed and my mouth felt like I'd swallowed a bag of cotton balls. I wasn't in the jet anymore; instead, I was in a small room I didn't recognize. I rolled over and swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, holding the edge of the mattress until the urge to puke passed.

Where am I?

The furniture was dark wood and the linens were gray and navy, masculine colors. The shades were drawn, and the only light in the room came from a small lamp on the bureau. The glow cast a circle of light on framed pictures, and I moved toward them, hoping they'd give me a clue about where I was.

But all they did was confuse me more.

They were all pictures of me. In one, I recognized a dress I hadn't worn since dinner after my college graduation. I remembered because Dom had taken me out to celebrate, one of the rare times we'd had a father-daughter moment in the last decade. Another picture was from only a few days before I left New York as I was leaving work. Finally, it was the last one that scared the ever-loving crap out of me. I was naked. In my bed. My vibrator in my hand and my eyes squeezed closed as I orgasmed.

I wanted to throw up, and it had nothing to do with my aching head.

Angelo.

How? And why? He'd always been more kind and personable than any of my other babysitters, but everything seemed to point to it being a front for something much scarier.

He kidnapped me. Hit me. Drugged me.

None of that seemed like the guy I thought I knew.

And now he has a picture of me at my most intimate moment? Shivers of revulsion tore through me. Any sense of security and privacy I had was destroyed.

But why?

I knocked the frame facedown on the bureau so I didn't have to look at the picture. I wanted to take it out and tear it up, but I had to focus. I had to escape. It was up to me now.

I rushed to the door and yanked on the handle.

Locked.

I spun and headed for the window, but didn't make it more than a few steps before the door swung open.

"I saw you were awake. You like our room? I thought you might. You don't need all that girly shit like you have at home. That's not who you really are." A smug smile stretched across Angelo's face.

"Where am I? Where's my father?"

"You don't need to worry about anything, Eden. I got you covered. This is our new place. No one's going to bother us here. You slept longer than I thought, though. It's almost time for breakfast."

"You said you were bringing me home. I want to go home!" I was trying to hold on to my sanity and not lose it in hysterics, but Angelo's crazy talk was making it hard.

“You are home.” He emphasized every word. “This is where you’re going to be from now on. I’ve been working up to this for a long time. All your favorite stuff is in the bathroom. I bought you new clothes too.”

Working up to this for a long time?

I studied Angelo’s expression, trying to pinpoint what the difference was. Instead of deferential, he was cocky and assertive.

I gestured to the dresser and demanded, “How did you get that picture?”

He didn’t even ask which one I was talking about. “From the cameras,” he said as though it were obvious. There wasn’t a hint of remorse either.

“Cameras?” My brain was having trouble computing.

“Yeah. How did you expect me to keep you safe when I wasn’t around if I didn’t know what was happening? You never had to worry about anything, Eden. I was always there for you. You were never alone.”

Disgust blew through me. “You watched me?”

He nodded. “You can’t pretend you didn’t know. You put on shows just for me. I know you did.”

I wanted to throw up at the thought of him watching that, of seeing me so exposed. My stomach twisted and threatened to rebel.

“How could you?”

Angelo shrugged. “I just wanted to keep you safe. I had to be able to see everything. But now we can be together all the time, and I’ll never let anyone get to you.”

“What are you talking about?”

He was crazy. I’d never seen it before, but I could see it now.

His swarthy skin creased around his dark eyes as a smile spread over his face. “We’re gonna be together. Forever.”

I knew I had to be careful when dealing with someone this unbalanced, but it wasn’t like I had any clue how that worked. I wanted to scream that I was with Bishop and I loved him, but I was afraid it might push Angelo over the edge.

But apparently I didn’t have to bring up Bishop because Angelo was way ahead of me.

“I know you think that guy was the one for you, because he kept saving you. But that was supposed to be me. I didn’t make that shit happen so someone else could rush in and save the day. That wasn’t how it was supposed to work. You were supposed to realize how much you needed me. How only I can keep you safe. He doesn’t know anything about you. He can’t take care of you and love you like I do.”

Love? I barely held back the bile in my throat. Angelo didn’t love me; he was a freaking paid stalker.

“What shit are you talking about?”

“In New Orleans. The guy I paid to drug you at the bar. The tour guide I told to leave you at the cemetery. My buddies at the casino. You were supposed to realize you needed me, but you let that son of a bitch help you instead. He’ll never love you like I do.”

An icy-cold chill engulfed me when Angelo’s words sank in. Those things weren’t accidents. It wasn’t just me not being able to handle myself. I’d been set up. *And dammit, I’d survived and thrived against the deck he’d stacked.* It wasn’t my naïveté; it was Angelo the whole time.

He was fucking crazy.

“Where’s Dom? Does he know I’m here? Did you tell him I’m back?” I had to assume I was

in New York, because I didn't have any other guesses.

"Dom is busy taking care of Dom like he always does. He's never had time for you, but I do."

Another direct strike to the heart. It made me think of all the times that Angelo had hammered home how much Dom didn't care about me. Was that classic behavior of a crazy person? Trying to isolate me from my family?

"What about Vincent? He told me I couldn't come back until I got word from that number. I never got word."

"Vincent let me decide. Dom didn't have anything to say about it."

"I need to talk to Dom."

Angelo's features hardened. "You don't need Dom. You only need me."

"I need to talk to Dom," I repeated.

"I said *no*. You're going to have to learn to follow my directions, Eden. That's the only way we're going to be happy and keep you safe. No one loves you like I do. It's going to be fine as soon as you see that."

Nothing about this situation was fine. Angelo was unhinged, and I was all alone unless I could reason with him.

I decided to try a different angle. "But my dad will be happy that you've kept me safe, so don't you think you should tell him?"

"He'll be mad because he wanted you in a safe house and Vincent didn't follow orders. He sent you away so I could watch out for you. I needed you to get your adventure out of your system before we settled down."

Then what I'd gathered from the accidental voice mail made sense. Dom had been mad that Vincent had taken liberty with his orders. That meant Dom didn't want me out of the city. But the rest of what Angelo was saying didn't make sense either.

"Out of my system?"

"Yeah, I knew you wouldn't be happy until you got a chance to see some of the world. But you had to learn that it wasn't safe. You don't listen so good, so I had to show you. But that dick kept getting in the way. It worked out in the end, because now you know that he can't keep you safe like I can. Only me."

Which meant the robbery hadn't been random either. Angelo had set me up on every level. Made me doubt myself and my ability to take care of myself. As soon as I talked my way out of this, I had a lot to think about. But first, I had to get away from Angelo.

"I'm safe now, so there's no reason for me to stay here, right?"

"You're not leaving until I say you can. That's how this goes now. Are you hungry? I'm gonna get us some breakfast. You'll feel better after you've had food. Take a shower and get dressed in something pretty for me."

My heart hammered as he came closer. His overpowering spicy cologne filled my nostrils as he leaned down to brush his lips across my temple. My skin crawled where he came into contact.

"I can't wait to watch you come with my cock buried inside you. I'll show you what it means to be with a real man. Your man." He stood tall, his six-foot height dwarfing me. "I'm gonna give it to you so good you forget you've ever had another dick. I'm gonna blow my load all over your tits so you'll remember who you belong to. We'll call the doctor and get that IUD out so we can start our family. I can't wait to see you fat with my kid. Knowing I put it in your belly will keep my cock hard all the time. Just wait, Eden. Life is gonna be so fucking good."

Chills rippled over me because he meant every single word. He pressed another kiss to my

head before he turned and left the room.

Oh my God. I had to get out of there. There was no way in hell I was going to let Angelo have the chance to rape me. And it would be rape, because I'd never let him touch me willingly.

I wanted a chance to save myself? Well, I guess the universe decided to make it count.

I tore through the room, searching for a phone. A laptop. Anything.

Of course, there was nothing. Why would there be? That would be too damn easy.

I rushed to the windows and shoved open the curtains. The glass was frosted, and beyond I could see the shadows of bars.

The connected bathroom didn't turn up anything useful either—except for a tiny window with more frosted glass. It wouldn't budge. I jammed all my weight into it, but it held firm.

Did I dare break it? Even if I did, there was no way I'd squeeze myself through the window frame. My hips would never fit. I just wished I could see out and get some idea of where I was.

I needed a plan.

I wasn't helpless or a liability.

I didn't need to be rescued. I could rescue myself.

I hoped.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Bishop

Ten years ago, I'd left New York in a car I'd stolen in Queens. I dropped it in Pennsylvania and stole another one to get me to Cleveland. With every mile I'd driven, I plotted my revenge, rage and despair tearing through me.

I'd been so fucking cocky, thinking I could win enough counting cards to pay off the loan shark and set us up so we wouldn't have to worry. When security had come, I'd told Abby to run, but neither of us made it. They'd beaten the fuck out of us both, making it clear that they'd hunt us both until they'd been repaid double. Then they left us in an alley like trash, and Abby was dead by the time I came to. I'd carried her home, tears streaming down my face, as the acrid smell of smoke grew stronger and stronger. The tattoo shop and our apartment above it had both burned with my uncle inside.

Abby's body had joined my uncle's in the van to the morgue, and I'd made my plan. I knew they'd be back for their first payment. And I knew I had no way to get it to them.

I had nothing to lose.

So I bought a gun off the street and went looking for the man who'd ordered it all. He took what mattered to me, so I'd take his life.

His offices weren't far from the shop, and I went looking for him there. Standing in front of a brownstone in Hell's Kitchen, I'd leveled the gun at his chest as he'd stepped out of the front door, my finger on the trigger.

Until a blond girl had come rushing out of an SUV, raced up the steps, and thrown herself into his arms.

Surprised, I'd jerked, and my shot went wide. Casso's thugs had swarmed him and rushed the girl into the building.

Now I knew the blond girl I'd almost shot.

Eden.

And now I was going back, ready to trade my life for hers. I didn't have any false hopes that I'd be making a return flight on the Titan Industries jet.

No, this was coming full circle and ending here.

I was a dead man walking when I stepped off that jet, and I didn't give a fuck. All that mattered was making sure she was safe. I just didn't expect everything to come full circle quite like this.

* * * *

When Simon brought the jet to a stop on the tarmac just before sunrise, we all rose, armed to the teeth and with duffels slung over our shoulders as we waited for Titan to open the door.

"I never have to do this shit myself," he grumbled as he pushed it open and lowered the steps.

Another jet was parked under giant spotlights a hundred feet away, and Rix stopped short on the tarmac as he studied it. "Same tail numbers as the one that left NOLA. That's Casso's jet."

We all froze.

“Why is it still on the tarmac? Looks like it’s getting ready to fly again,” Con said.

I ran back up the steps to the cockpit as Simon was removing his headset. “Can you check with the tower, ask if that jet is leaving?”

He looked at me and pulled the headset back down. “They might not tell me, but I can try.”

I stood behind him as he radioed and asked for information.

“Roger that.” He lifted the headset off again. “It’s set for takeoff as soon as the passengers are aboard. No more than fifteen minutes.”

Con stood behind me in the doorway. “You think it’s him? Taking your girl somewhere else?”

“Don’t fucking know, but I’m not leaving until we see who’s getting on it.”

Con called the other guys back inside, and I explained.

“Change of plans,” I said. “That might be them. We’re not leaving until I know my girl isn’t here.”

Lord leaned against the cabin wall. “Want to set up a couple sniper positions? Me and Con can take ’em. That way, if shit goes down we can take them out.”

I thought of the airstrip. “Where the hell are you going to do that?”

Lord laughed. “Let us worry about that.”

“We got less than fifteen minutes, so we’re going now.” Con unzipped the duffel and pulled out two rifles. “I’ll keep it low so we don’t get any interest from the tower.”

Con and Lord exited the plane.

“Simon and I can cover you from here. There’s no point in not being totally prepared.” This came from Rix.

“And what about me?” Titan asked.

“You’re with Bish. Don’t let him die.”

“Thanks,” Titan drawled.

We headed down the stairs and Con and Lord were nowhere in sight, already having disappeared to God only knew where. It was easy to forget the brothers had been lethal in the military in their day. Simon and Rix stood like sentries at the stairs, sidearms out of sight.

“Here comes someone,” Rix said as headlights cut through the darkness.

A blacked-out Escalade pulled to a stop next to the jet, and the driver jumped out to open the back door. A man stepped out that I recognized all too well. It had been a long fucking time, but Dominic Casso wasn’t someone you forgot.

A flunky in the front passenger seat had circled around to open the other back door, revealing a second man. Both doors were shut after the two men exited, and it was clear there was no one else inside.

“No Eden.”

“But you’ve got the boss man, and you’ve got questions to be answered about where the fuck his goon took his girl. I say, no time like the present to ask them.”

I inhaled and slipped my gun into the back of my jeans.

Dead man walking.

The two bodyguards carried suitcases up into the plane, and Dom and the other man stood on the tarmac.

It was time. Fuck it.

“Where the fuck is Angelo Francetti?”

Both men spun around to face me as I stepped into the light, and one bodyguard came back to the stairs and drew a weapon.

“Who the fuck are you?” Dom demanded.

He looked exactly the same as I remembered. It was like the man hadn’t aged a day, despite running an empire that should have aged him years ahead of his time.

“Doesn’t fucking matter who I am. What matters is he’s got your daughter, and I’m not leaving until I find them both.”

Dom’s face pinched with confusion. “My daughter? What the fuck do you know about my daughter?”

“You don’t tell us who you are, you’re gonna catch a bullet to the skull in five seconds.” This came from the other man.

“You really don’t care where she is? Or that Angelo Francetti knocked her unconscious and dragged her out of a shop in New Orleans and put her on this same plane?”

Dom’s head jerked back and he looked at the other man. “What the fuck is he talking about, Vin? New Orleans? You told me she was safe. Why the fuck would Angelo dare lay a hand on her?”

“Get on the plane. I’ll take care of this fuck. He’s stirring up shit he has no business stirrin’.”

“I’m not going any fucking place until you answer my question. Where the fuck is my daughter? You’ve been puttin’ me off for days.”

“She’s safe. She’s fine. No one will bother her.”

“She’s not safe,” I said. “She sure as shit didn’t ask to be knocked out or kidnapped. And neither of you is going anywhere until I have my answers.”

Dom turned to Vin. “You’ve got sixty fucking seconds to get Eden on the phone or I’m gonna put a bullet in your brain. I don’t give a fuck how long I’ve known you.”

Vincent bristled. “All due respect, Dom, but you’ve got a lot more to be worried about right now than where your daughter is. You need to get on this plane and get the hell out of the country before the Feds catch up with you.”

“You’re not hearing me. Why the fuck aren’t you hearing me?” Quiet, yet lethal, anger edged Dom’s tone.

“Yeah, answer the fucking question, *Vin*.”

“Shoot this guy,” Vincent yelled to the bodyguard, his arm flung out toward me, but Dom held up a hand.

“Don’t fucking shoot anyone until I give the word.” He looked at me. “Now, tell me why I shouldn’t leave you bleeding out on this tarmac right now?”

“Because I’m here to find your daughter. Because apparently I’m the only fucking person who’s worried about her.”

Dom looked at Vincent. “New Orleans? I told you I wanted her in a safe house, and you said it was taken care of. What the fuck is your problem? Are you deaf?”

“She was taken care of. You wanted her out of the way; I told you, I got her out of the way.”

“In fucking New Orleans? Where the fuck is Angelo now?”

Vincent shrugged. “Busy doing what he’s told.”

Dom’s voice dropped into a harsh whisper. “You give me a fucking straight answer, Vin, or I will shoot you myself. Where the fuck is your kid, and where the fuck is my daughter?”

Kid?

Vincent looked at me closer, and recognition finally hit me. Ten years ago, he hadn’t been the number-two guy. He’d been climbing the ranks and carrying out orders.

He recognized me at the same time. “I remember you. You’re the one who ran like a fucking coward and never stopped. You’ve got balls of brass, boy, to come back here. You didn’t have so

many fucking tats or as much hair then, but I remember you.” He leveled the pistol at my head. “Time for you to pay in blood.”

Two red dots popped up on his chest.

“That would be a really poor idea on your part,” Titan said, stepping up next to me. “Two ex-Special Forces snipers will take you out before you can pull the trigger.”

I looked at Dom. “And if you let your guys shoot me, I won’t be able to tell you about the burner phone we found in Vin’s kid’s hotel room and all the interesting numbers it has on it. Like the Feds.”

I’d been saving that piece for leverage, and it worked.

Dom held an arm out in front of Vin. “Put the fucking gun down.” To me, he added, “What the fuck are you talking about? You trying to tell me Angelo is a rat who kidnapped my daughter?”

Before takeoff, I’d tried every number on the burner phone we found in Angelo’s room, and had two conversations with very special agents who were ready for the information Angelo had promised to deliver.

Vincent didn’t notice, but from behind him, both bodyguards leveled their weapons on his back.

“This fuck doesn’t know jack shit.”

“All I want is to know that Eden is safe, and you can have everything we found and do your own investigation, Mr. Casso.”

Dom looked at Vin. “Get Eden on the phone, now. No more fucking excuses, or I will end you. I don’t fucking care who you are. And you.” He raised his gun at my head, and one of the little red dots jumped to his chest. “You’re going to tell me why the fuck you’re so interested in my daughter.”

“Can’t you tell the guy’s in love with her? Jesus, why else would he face down the mob boss who had his family killed ten years ago?” Titan’s drawl was thicker now. “That’s storybook shit right there.”

“He telling the truth?” Dom asked.

“Fucking right, he is,” Titan replied.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” Vincent laughed. “What the fuck is it about that girl?”

“You better start from the beginning, boy,” Dom told me.

“Don’t have the luxury of that kind of time, Mr. Casso. Right now, Angelo Francetti has your daughter.”

“Angelo isn’t going to hurt her,” Vincent said. “He’s protected Eden for years.”

“Where the fuck did he take her, Vin? I want answers. *Now.*”

“He’s got a place in Jersey. He wanted some time alone with her.”

Dom turned to Vincent, his gun held loosely in his hand. “Wait. You knew your boy took my girl? What the fuck else did you know? That she was kidnapped? What about the Feds on your kid’s phone? You got explanations for all of that, my friend?”

“You’re gonna believe this guy over someone you’ve known for years?”

“This kid that walked up to us with the balls of a fucking elephant to make sure my daughter was safe? What motive does he have? Because the fact that you’ve been giving me the runaround for fucking days tells me that you’re the one I’ve got to worry about right now. Get her on the phone or my bullet goes in your brain.”

Chapter Sixty-Three

Eden

“I want to talk to my father,” I told Angelo when he opened the door to my newest cage. His features hardened into a scowl. “I told you to shower before breakfast.”

I knew I had to walk a delicate line. “I’m not feeling well, so I decided not to.”

Angelo rushed inside the room, and I had to curb my gag reflex when he reached for my hands and squeezed them.

“I didn’t want to drug you, but I didn’t have a choice. You need to learn to follow my orders, Eden. That’s the way this works.”

I forced a weak smile. “I really need to talk to my father.”

“You will when I say you’re ready.”

“And when will that be?”

Angelo didn’t answer, but instead dropped his grip on my hands and turned toward the door. “Come eat. It’ll make you feel better. And then you can shower after. We need to wash that city off you. Gotta make sure my girl is clean before I give her my cock.”

I shuddered and stopped just short of gagging at the thought. Schooling my expression so he wouldn’t read my disgust and decide not to bother waiting, I followed him into the living area of what appeared to be an apartment. But where?

“Where are we?”

“Doesn’t matter as long as we’re together, baby.” Angelo reached for the takeout containers he’d left on the kitchen counter with his wallet. “Got you eggs Benedict and an extra side of bacon. Your favorites.”

They actually were my favorites, but right now, the thought of eating either was enough to make me want to run for the toilet.

But I didn’t have to say anything because Angelo’s phone rang.

“Sir?”

At his greeting, I hoped like hell it was my father.

“He wants to speak to Eden? That’s not possible right now. She’s sleeping.” Angelo’s response was clearly a lie, and I had to assume the call was from Vin.

“No, I’m not sleeping! He’s holding me here against my will!” I screamed as loud as I could.

Angelo’s hand lashed out and he backhanded me across the face. “Don’t listen to her. She’s still doped up. She was doing all kinds of bad shit in New Orleans.”

My cheek burned where he’d struck me, but I didn’t care. “Fucking liar!”

He held the phone away from his ear. “You’re going to—”

“Daddy! Help!”

“I’ll call you back.”

Angelo hung up and turned to me. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You don’t get it yet, do you? Your life only matters as long as I say it matters. My pop is steppin’ into the number-one role, and he don’t like you much.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Dom is going down. Feds are all over him, and we’ve given them everything they need to

move in. The only way you're not going down is to stick with me."

I shook my head, unable to believe him.

"You think it was a coincidence when your credit card got canceled for fraud? I did that. Your bank account frozen? I did that too. The Feds eat up whatever info we give them, and they're going to put Dom away for life. Now sit the fuck down, eat your breakfast, and I'll be back after I've talked to my dad."

He walked toward the bedroom, his phone already lifted to his ear. As soon as he shut the door, I ran toward it.

While Angelo might be crazy, a mental giant he was not. I guessed he'd forgotten that he'd set up the bedroom door to be locked from the outside. I threw the dead bolt before Angelo realized his mistake and began pounding on the door.

"Let me out of here, Eden. You're not safe without me!"

"Fuck you!" I yelled.

I grabbed his wallet off the counter and ran for the door. Adrenaline and giddiness rolled through my veins as I unlocked it and threw it open.

Freedom. *I can save myself. I'm the hero of this freaking story.* Fuck Angelo and his whacked-out plans. I didn't need him to keep me safe. I just needed to get away from him.

I ran down the stairs, four floors, until I hit the lobby of what appeared to be a less-than-posh building. Slowing my pace, I walked out to the curb, hoping I'd be able to catch a cab this early in the morning.

I had to be in Jersey somewhere, because this definitely wasn't Manhattan. A cab turned the corner, and I waved it down. As I slid into the backseat, I heard someone calling my name.

From four stories up, Angelo yelled down at me. "Someone stop her!"

The cabbie looked up and then looked at me. "You okay, kid?"

I glanced into the rearview mirror to meet his gaze and winced at the red mark it revealed on my face.

"I've been better. Can you take me to Hell's Kitchen?" I gave him the cross streets of the brownstone. I didn't know where else to go, and my apartment didn't seem like the best choice. I needed to get to Dom.

"Sure, hon."

I did it. I really freaking did it.

I straightened my shoulders and held my head high.

I rescued my own damned self.

Chapter Sixty-Four

Bishop

Vincent hung up the phone and looked at Dom. “He’s going to call back when she’s awake. She’s sleeping right now. It’s still early.”

Dom tilted his head, suspicion clear in his gaze. “I don’t fucking care what time it is. You call him right now and tell him to bring her to the brownstone. We’ll all have a little come-to-Jesus meeting.”

Vincent bristled. “You need to get on this fucking plane, Dom, or the Feds are going to be all over your ass.”

I expected the crime boss to reconsider and act to save himself, but instead, he shook his head.

“Not getting on any fucking plane until I know my daughter is safe. If any of what these gentlemen say is true, I’ve put way too much trust in your family, and it’s time to clean house. After all, wouldn’t that be why the Feds are gonna come down on my ass?”

Vincent looked from me to Dom. “You’re gonna believe some kid who wants you dead over me?”

“He’s got no other motive. You have plenty.” Dom called to the bodyguards. “We’re going back to the city. Keep the jet on standby.” He nodded at me. “You’re coming with us. Your crew can follow, but if they take one shot, you’re dead.”

“Fine.”

“We’re right behind you, Bish,” Titan said.

I gave him a chin jerk and climbed in the SUV with Dom Casso.

* * * *

Something wasn’t right. The last time I was on this block, there were SUVs parked along the curb with armed men inside and a man posted at the door. Today, there were empty parking spots and no one else in sight. There had to be more to it than just the early-morning hours. Mobsters didn’t exactly work nine to five.

“Where the fuck is everyone?” Casso asked Vincent as we circled the block.

“Why would I know?”

“Because you’re in charge of security.”

“Boss, I think we should keep driving,” the bodyguard in the passenger seat said as we pulled up across the street from the front of the building.

“Park here and keep it running. We’re not leaving until Angelo shows up with my daughter.”

Vincent lifted his phone. “He said he’s on his way.”

We’d only heard Vincent’s side of the conversation, but I had a hard time believing anything that came out of that slick fucker’s mouth. Another SUV parked behind us, and I spotted Lord in the driver’s seat.

Now, we waited.

Or at least, that was the plan until a taxi pulled up alongside us and Eden jumped out of the

backseat.

I threw open the door, and Vincent's gun pressed against the back of my head. "Don't you fucking move."

Dom saw Eden right after I did. "There she is. Where the fuck is your kid?"

Eden raced toward the building, only to be grabbed by a guy who darted out between two cars.

"He's right there."

A man in a leather jacket, who I had to assume was Angelo, held a gun to her head, and Dom twisted in his seat to raise his pistol at Vincent's head.

Vincent laughed. "This right here is a predicament. You can't shoot me without killing her. I'm definitely going to kill this guy because he just fucking pisses me off. You ready for all that, Dom?"

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Vin? Drop your fucking gun or I'll rip your goddamned throat out with my bare hands. And Angelo better drop his, or he's gonna choke on his own fucking cock while he bleeds out."

"I don't think so. You're gonna be in handcuffs in a matter of minutes, and I'll be taking over the family. If you want your daughter to outlive you, you're gonna go quietly."

While he spoke, Angelo dragged Eden toward the car.

"Did you hear that, Eden? Your dad gets to decide whether you die or whether he goes to jail. What do you think he's going to choose?" Angelo's words were a taunt. "You've never mattered to him like you matter to me. And every time you run, I'm going to find you."

Eden's face fell . . . until she saw me and froze. "Bishop," she whispered. "Oh my God. You're here."

Dom spoke next. "You shouldn't have come here, Eden."

His words might as well have crushed her. "I'm sorry."

"This life was always too dangerous for you. You deserved better. I was selfish, though, wanting to keep you close instead of sending you farther away. Forgive me."

Everything stilled for a moment, and I took advantage of the lull. Reaching behind my head, I grabbed the barrel of Vincent's gun and jammed it up into the ceiling of the car. He pulled the trigger instinctively, and bullets ripped through the roof.

Chaos ensued.

I swung my elbow hard enough to break Vincent's nose and dived out of the car. One of the bodyguards turned and fired.

I ran toward Eden but Angelo raised his gun, aiming it at my head. I didn't slow, didn't stop. The heat of bullets ripping through my body never came because Angelo's body jerked as he fell.

I didn't hear the report of the rifle until after he hit the ground. I lunged for Eden, catching her around the waist and throwing us both to the ground and using my body to cushion us.

Bullets flew as I rolled us under a car for protection, happy to hear the steady beat of her heart.

I kept her head covered until the shots died and sirens wailed in the distance. Pulling her face away from my chest, I looked down at her.

"You okay, cupcake?"

"You came for me."

"You saved yourself."

Eden's eyes filled with tears. "My dad? Is he—"

"Come on, man. Let's get you both out from under there."

I recognized Con's tattooed wrist, and let him pull Eden out from under the car. I followed right behind her. "Casso? Is he—"

The black SUV disappeared down the street, squealing around a corner. Vincent's body lay unmoving on the sidewalk, as did Angelo's.

Eden lifted a hand to cover her mouth. "He left me. He left me." The words were mumbled from beneath her fingers.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," Con said as he and Titan hustled us into the other SUV, and Lord roared down the street.

No one else said a word as we hauled ass back to the airport. We all knew we'd have confirmation as soon as we got there. Casso's jet was waiting on standby. The Feds were coming down on him. He had every reason to run—and only one reason to stay.

Lord called Simon as we made the last turn, and he had the jet ready to move. Part of me hoped Casso at least waited to tell his daughter good-bye, but my chest clenched when I saw his jet was gone.

No one told Eden.

Chapter Sixty-Five

Eden

My father had apologized. I was trying to take comfort in that as Bishop half carried me up the stairs of the jet and settled me on his lap in a big comfy seat. I didn't want to cry tears for a man who'd basically abandoned me, but I couldn't stop myself.

I clung to Bishop as Titan gave the orders for takeoff. It didn't once occur to me to stay in New York. There was nothing for me there.

We were almost to cruising altitude when the bathroom door at the back of the jet opened, and every head swung in that direction.

"What the fuck?" Bishop said.

Con reached for his gun. "How the hell—"

My father stood in front of the bathroom door as though this were any normal flight for him.

"How did you . . . I don't understand . . ."

"It appears you and I have a lot to catch up on, and I couldn't very well do that from Costa Rica. Now, I believe some proper introductions are in order." He looked at Bishop. "I'm Dominic Casso, and I want to know why exactly my daughter is sitting in your lap."

Chapter Sixty-Six

Eden

I stood on the tarmac and watched my father fly away. Apparently, his jet had tailed us all the way from Teterboro, ready to pick him up and take him to some undisclosed location.

Bishop stood beside me, quiet since we'd deplaned. Everything had come out in that long flight back.

How Vincent had been responsible for giving the orders to kill Bishop's uncle, and had put the word out that Bishop would be hunted until he paid back double what he'd won counting cards. Dom hadn't had a clue.

Bishop had wanted my father dead for ten years, for a reason that was no longer valid. I felt the anger drain out of Bishop as my father explained the inner workings of his organization and that he wouldn't have been bothered with the details of something like that.

Ignorance was no excuse, but Bishop had a choice—continue to hold the grudge, or let it go. He'd made his choice, and that choice was me.

"You two ready?" This came from Con, who held open the back door of Lord's Hemi 'Cuda.

Was I ready? Ready to start over with this new life and not worry about it being snatched away from me at any second?

Yes.

Ready to be with Bishop and not keep any more secrets?

Yes.

But was he?

He'd shown up in New York, walking into the belly of the beast to face what he'd run from for ten years—all because he loved me. And then he'd sat in front of my father and told him that he wouldn't be content in this life until he made me as happy as I'd made him. That the only thing he wanted was to watch me fly, so long as he could soar beside me. His words had given me hope like nothing else possibly could.

I thought it was safe to say he was ready.

We slid into the backseat of Lord's awesomely cool car, and Con took the front.

"We're going to pretend none of this ever happened, right? You're not going to make me tell Vanessa? She'll be pissed she didn't get to go."

I wondered if he was crazy. "What did you tell her you were doing?" I asked.

"Helping a friend."

"Then I guess it depends on how many questions she's going to ask when you get home carrying a duffel bag of guns."

Con shrugged. "I'll leave those in the trunk. Lord can explain them to Elle."

Lord looked at him sideways. "Which means Vanessa will know by morning."

"Good point. I guess I'm gonna play up this hero angle pretty hard-core."

I pressed tighter to Bishop's side. "I don't mean to be rude, but this guy is the hero in my book."

Bishop looked down at me. "You don't need a hero, Eden. You've got that covered." He pressed a kiss to my hair. "But I'll be there by your side all the same."

“So, where am I dropping you off this fine evening?” Lord asked.

“My place,” I said. “If you don’t mind.”

Bishop nodded. “The boss lady says her place, so that’s where we’ll be.”

Boss lady. I liked it.

* * * *

I didn’t break down until I stepped into the shower and everything that had happened today came crashing down on me. I dropped my forehead against the wall, and my chest heaved when I thought about how close I’d come to losing everything.

Bishop. My father. My friends.

I cried for Angelo—the version I’d known before.

The door creaked, and a breeze told me Bishop was inside. The curtain slid open a foot and I turned my head sideways.

“Breaks my heart to see you cry, cupcake.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shook his head. “Don’t ever apologize for how you’re feeling. You own that. It’s yours.” He stripped his shirt over his head and shoved his jeans past his hips before stepping into the shower. “But if you’re gonna cry, at least do it where I can hold you.”

The water beat over us both as I clung to Bishop’s shoulders. He pressed his lips to my forehead and held on but said nothing. Nothing needed to be said. I just needed to let it all flow out and down the drain.

When the water started to run cold, he moved us out of the stream and turned it off.

“You need to go to my place where we have more hot water?”

I shook my head, a smile tugging at my lips. “No, I think I’m good.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive.”

“Then let’s get you dried off and dressed.”

We stepped out of the shower, and Bishop wrapped me with a towel before grabbing one for himself.

“We’re going to have to do something about the fact that you have no clothes here,” I said when he pulled his jeans and T-shirt back on.

He gave me a look. “I was thinking more along the lines of how we need to do something about the fact that we don’t sleep in the same place every night.”

Bishop had a point.

“We haven’t really talked about what’s next for us. Except, you know, the fact that you told my father you love me and basically dared him to stand in our way.” I was still smiling inside over how adamant Bishop had been on the plane. “So, what do you want to do?”

“I’m not going to rush you. You’ve wanted your freedom for a long time, and I’m not going to take that from you. You decide when and how we handle this. I’m on your timetable. I’m sure as shit not going anywhere.”

The fact that he wasn’t trying to push me made it all the better. “Do you kill spiders?”

Bishop looked at me like I might be crazy. “Say what now?”

“Do you kill spiders? Because honestly, I’m all for being independent . . . until spiders are involved. Then I want a big man in my house to kill them for me and carry me away and give me a dozen orgasms so I can forget about the horror of spiders.”

Bishop's booming laugh filled the small space of my apartment. "Is that right?"

I nodded.

"So are you telling me you want me around?"

"Yeah. I do. But it'd be even cooler if we could both keep our places and just go back and forth for now. Maybe see which one suits us better?"

Bishop studied me, and I realized he got what I was saying without me actually saying it. I wasn't ready to give up my place just yet. It was tiny, but cute and awesome, and I loved it.

"I think that works just fine for me, cupcake. I'll bring over a bag, and you can take a bag to my place."

"I'm going to have to go shopping." I thought about all the stuff in my apartment in New York. Designer clothes perfect for the life I no longer wanted. "Yeah, I'm definitely going to have to go shopping."

He pulled me into him and squeezed me tight. "I think your girls would be more than happy to help you with that."

My girls.

My man.

My life.

My everything.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

Eden

They ambushed me just before the end of my shift. In all honesty, I wasn't surprised. Charlie, Vanessa, Elle, Valentina, Yve, and Delilah strode into Your Favorite Hole like they were on a mission. The window had been replaced, and the events of three days ago seemed like just a bad memory now.

"It's time for details, sugar." Delilah stopped in front of the register and pressed both palms to the counter. "Bishop isn't telling me a damn thing."

I was actually surprised they'd held off this long, but then again, I'd been *busy* in the best way possible with Bishop at my place. Complain about my man-bunned giant keeping me trapped in bed for hours and hours? *Not likely.*

Fabienne wiped down the counter around the espresso machine and nodded at me. "You might as well knock off now and tell them everything. Make sure to do it loud enough so I don't have to work too hard at eavesdropping."

My boss had been incredibly patient, taking the incomplete explanation I'd offered her and my apologies about bringing the crazy into Your Favorite Hole in stride. I'd offered to pay for the window damage, but she'd just huffed.

"That's what insurance is for. You might've attracted the nutjobs like a magnet, but that doesn't mean you're responsible."

I lifted my apron over my head and slipped out from behind the counter.

They picked the cozy seating area, and Charlie, Yve, and Valentina crammed in on the loveseat. Vanessa took a chair and Delilah settled on the footstool, leaving the last chair for me.

"So, what the hell happened? And why the hell didn't you tell us you were some badass mobster's daughter?"

Delilah went straight for the jugular with her questions. Given that it was her brother who I'd dragged into it, I wasn't all that surprised. Before I could gather some kind of answer together, Charlie responded.

"Because some people don't like to talk about their fathers. Especially when they're infamous or notorious." She looked at me with understanding clear on her face. "I've been there. I get it."

I nodded. Charlie understood better than anyone what I'd been grappling with, except on a much crazier scale. Dom had kept me in the shadows, but she'd been thrust into the limelight during her father's trial. I supposed, in a strange way, I owed Dom for that. But now I was ready to live in the light.

"Dom was never a true father. I'm the youngest of his illegitimate kids, and I was never allowed to meet my half siblings. I wasn't really allowed to meet anyone. I think it was his way of keeping me safe, but . . . well, we all know how that worked out."

"We will when you tell us . . ." Delilah prompted.

So I told them as much as I could, and by the end, jaws were nearing floor level.

"We're thankful as hell you're okay, and that you didn't bring our guys back with any bullet holes," Yve said. "Although Titan would probably claim to be bulletproof."

I laughed, thankful she broke the shocked silence.

“Are you sure he’s not? Because he did stare down some mobsters like he had no fear.”
Yve’s tawny eyes widened a fraction before rolling. “Of course he did.”

“So, what’s next?” Valentina asked.

I smiled, but Delilah answered for me.

“Bishop is going to lock her down and never let her out of his sight again.”

I wasn’t going to argue with that.

With perfect timing, the front door chimed, and the man in question walked in. Bishop stopped behind my chair, lowered his hands to my shoulders, and squeezed.

“Have you finished your interrogation?”

Delilah made a noise that I was pretty sure qualified as a harrumph. “We can keep going for hours.”

Bishop’s grip tightened. “Not gonna happen. I got a date with my girl.”

His sister sent him a look that promised she wasn’t letting this go entirely. “I suppose we can let you have her. For now.”

Bishop released one of my shoulders and his hand slid around to my collarbone. “For now?” He laughed. “Fuck that. With Eden, it’s all about forever.”

A collective *aww* released on a sigh from the girls as my heart sped up.

Vanessa rose. “On that note, I think it’s time for us to go.” She met my gaze. “I would invite you to join us for girls’ night, but you’ve clearly got other plans. Know that you’re welcome anytime. We take turns hosting.”

Bishop released his hold as I stood.

“Thank you.” I shot a look at the man behind me and said to Vanessa, “You better believe I’ll take you up on it sometime.”

“We’ll hold you to it,” Charlie said. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me. “If you ever need to talk, I’m here.”

I squeezed her and then stepped back into the circle of Bishop’s arms, and my heart was near to bursting. I’d never had this. The overwhelming support. Friendship. *Love*.

It truly was everything.

* * * *

We climbed off the back of Bishop’s bike, and I unlocked the gate to the courtyard at my place. Harriet was coming out her back door as Bishop pushed his bike inside.

She clapped her hands. “I’m so glad I caught you! I wanted to take one last look at the place before I jet off.”

“Jet off?” I asked.

“In the flurry of all your excitement, I must have forgotten to tell you. I’m headed to Machu Picchu to expand my landscape watercolor skills. After that, I’m going to hug a few tortoises in the Galapagos and then see those crazy heads at Easter Island. I’ve got a lot to check off my list before I kick the bucket.” She came forward and wrapped me in a hug. “Now, keep yourself from getting kidnapped again while I’m gone. I don’t want to miss it.”

From inside, her front buzzer sounded.

“That’s my car to the airport. I’ll see you kids soon.”

“Safe trip, ma’am.”

“Not too safe, I hope. Life is all about taking chances.” Harriet winked, whirled around, and disappeared inside.

Bishop looked down at me. “She’s a nut, but she’s a cool old lady.”

I was thinking the exact same thing. Her comment about checking things off her list made me think of all the ones I had pinned to my bulletin board in my New York apartment.

“And here you probably thought I was crazy with my list of things to check off.”

He shook his head. “Not at all. Why not experience everything you can?”

It was the opening I needed. “I have at least dozen more lists. Cities all over the world. By the time I’m Harriet’s age, I want to check everything off.”

Bishop studied me. “Is that right?”

I nodded.

“Then I guess we’re going to have to get our hands on those lists so we can start planning.”

A smile stretched the corners of my lips. “Really?”

Bishop slid a hand under my hair and curled it around the back of my neck. “A lifetime of adventures with the most amazing woman I’ve ever met? Sign me up. I’m ready.”

I threw my arms around his neck and pressed my lips to his. When I pulled back, I met his green gaze. “So, about this date . . . what are we doing?”

“You’ll find out when we get there.”

By the end of the night, Bishop had inked us both with new tattoos—his was a cupcake, worked into the sleeve on his left arm, closer to his heart, he said. Mine was a beautiful bird on my shoulder blade, flying free. No more gilded cages or clipped wings for me.

I also finally checked off the last thing on my New Orleans *Must Do* list. I learned how to say *I love you* in Cajun.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

Bishop

Six months later

“A federal court has found Dominic Casso not guilty of all pending charges. Should we start calling him Teflon Dom?” a news anchor asked his co-host.

“I don’t know how he did it. I really, truly don’t,” Eden whispered from beside me on the couch with her gaze glued to the TV.

“He successfully pinned everything on Vin and Angelo, who didn’t exactly have a chance to refute it.”

“I’m not sad about it. I don’t know what that says about me as a person, but I’m not sad at all.”

I pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You don’t need to be sad. Angelo was a creepy fuck.”

We’d found more and more evidence of that once we’d gone back to New York and cleaned out Eden’s apartment. That was, after the Feds had let us in. Thankfully, we knew people who knew people.

Cameras had been installed in every room, including the bathroom, as well as in her office at the spa.

The head of one of the crime families who was supposedly engaged in the so-called “power struggle” that had been happening to take control of the Casso empire had come forward. He confessed to Dom that it had all been orchestrated by Vincent with Angelo’s help. Dom had cleaned house, identifying more associates and soldiers on Vincent’s separate payroll.

I hadn’t pushed too hard for more answers because, quite frankly, I wanted Eden as far away from the entire thing as possible.

Her father agreed, and had given his blessing.

Not only did he not want me dead, he wanted me very much alive for Eden. I didn’t want him dead either. Enough blood had been shed.

“Did you check the mail I left on the counter? There was a big envelope for you.”

She shook her head and pushed off the couch. When she made it to the counter, she lifted it. “This one?”

“Yeah.”

Eden tore it open. “What the hell?”

I stood and strode toward her. “What is it?”

She handed me a piece of paper. “A deed.”

“What?”

I grabbed the envelope, which didn’t appear to have a return address, and dumped out the rest of the contents on the counter. A picture, a brochure, and a set of keys fell out.

It was a house in the French Quarter. The picture didn’t look like much, but the brochure was a whole different story. From the outside, it looked like a simple brick building, but the pictures of the inside showed a completely renovated townhouse. The *ten thousand dollar a square foot* kind.

The deed was in both our names.

Eden flipped the picture over, and a note was stuck to the back.

An early wedding present. Don't keep my girl living in sin for too long, Bishop.

—DC

Eden's eyes practically bulged out of her head. "Holy shit. My dad just gave us a townhouse. In the Quarter. You've got to be kidding me."

I thought about the ring I'd bought last week at an antique store on Conti Street and had been carrying everywhere with me since. I shook my head. *How did the old man do it?*

"Oh my God, we have a house!" Eden yelled and jumped into my arms. "Not yours, not mine. Ours."

"We sure do." I stared down at her. "Did you see the note?"

She nodded. "You don't have to. I mean . . . if you don't want to. I know that's not really your thing."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Getting married. We don't have to if that's not what you want."

"Why the hell would you say that?"

Eden shrugged. "I don't know. I just . . . Delilah told me you said you never wanted to settle down."

I set her on her feet. "*Before you.* Every fucking thing changed when I met you, Eden. Stay here. Hold on."

I headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

Eden came outside as I ran down the stairs to where my bike was parked in the courtyard.

I unlocked the hidden compartment and pulled out the tiny silk bag. It hadn't cost a fortune, but it was too perfect for her.

I came back up the stairs as she was coming back out the door with her flip-flops on. "I told you I'd be right back."

"But—"

She stepped inside the apartment and I dropped to one knee. "This isn't how I planned to do this. Actually, I hadn't yet figured out how I was going to do it. But I don't ever want you to think that this wasn't what I wanted. You've always been what I wanted, Eden."

I pulled the ring from the bag and held it up. A pink morganite stone set in an antique platinum band of vines.

"You . . . you bought that?"

"Yeah. I did."

"You want to marry me?"

"When you're ready and not a day before." Her eyes shimmered with tears as I slid the ring on her finger. "If you'll have me."

She nodded. "Always."

I looked up at the ceiling, wondering if somehow Casso had known. Didn't fucking matter. He'd given his blessing, and Eden was mine.

The End

Click [here](#) to sign up for my newsletter, and never miss another announcement about

upcoming projects, new releases, sales, exclusive excerpts, and giveaways.

I'd love to hear what you thought about Eden and Bishop's story. If you have a few moments to leave a review on the retailer's site where you purchased the book, I'd be incredibly grateful. Send me a link at meghanmarchbooks@gmail.com, and I'll thank you with a personal note.

Are you ready to get dirty?

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Chapter One

Holly

Country Star JC Hughes Caught Between a Cock and a Hard Place
How is he going to explain this one away to girlfriend Holly Wix and his fans?

“That two-timin’ son of a ...”

I hiss under my breath as I stare at the headline—and the compromising picture accompanying it—splashed in vivid color across the front page of the gossip rag displayed prominently in the checkout line at my supermarket. For the second time in two months, it’s a picture of my “boyfriend” locked in an unmistakably passionate embrace with another woman, except this time she’s wearing a giant black strap-on.

The edges of the paper crumple in my sweaty grip, and I fight the urge to tear it to shreds, along with every copy sitting on the rack in front of me.

He’s going to destroy my career before it even has a chance to become a reality.

One year, they said. One year in this joke of a “relationship” and I’d earn my stripes, be all set in the world of country music. Judge me all you want for agreeing, but when your brand-new record label puts something like that in the contract that will jet you out of the backwoods town you’re dying to escape, you don’t ask questions. You sign on the dotted line.

But reality is a cold slap in the face, and some days it hits you when you’re standing in line at the grocery store. What happens when they finally catch JC with a guy? His habit of swinging both ways, but preferring men to women, is about to become the worst-kept secret in Nashville.

I’m Holly Wix, winner of a make-me-a-star TV show, and handpicked by the label to buoy JC’s once-impressive but now flagging career. It didn’t seem like a big deal when they slipped it into my contract in the beginning. What starry-eyed girl wouldn’t be thrilled to have her name linked to a country star?

Instead of the one-way ticket to stardom I naively expected, I’m becoming the butt of every industry joke faster than the guys back home can spend their paycheck on twelve-packs and scratch-offs. But I’ve got one shot at keeping this dream career alive, and honestly, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to save it. So this situation with JC needs to get settled before things spiral further out of control.

Tugging the bill of my trucker hat lower, I glance around to see if anyone has noticed me flipping out in the checkout line. A woman behind me clucks her tongue as she pulls her sunglasses out of her baby’s mouth.

Crap.

That cluck of her tongue was aimed at me, not the toothless, blue-eyed, smiling baby. Surprisingly, though, the expression on her face is sympathetic, not angry.

“Men are assholes, am I right? Being famous just makes them bigger ones.”

I smile weakly, and she continues. “Don’t believe everything you read in the papers, doll. They’re always ninety-five percent bullshit. Probably Photoshopped. He should have his head examined if he’s cheating on you.”

Snapping my gaze back to her, I read recognition all over her face, despite my hat, glasses, complete lack of makeup, and relatively low level of fame. I force a smile onto my face, but it feels awkward and fake.

“It’s called a gossip rag for a reason, I guess?” I reply, failing at my attempt to inject some humor into my tone.

She nods and gestures to the half dozen bottles of wine in her cart. “This probably sounds crazy forward, but you look like you could use a drink and someone to vent to.”

Vent to a perfect stranger I met in the grocery store? That would be insane, not to mention dangerous. If I did, the “she said” side of the story would be splashed all over tomorrow’s papers, and the label would kill me—the painful death of breach of contract and being blackballed in the industry.

I already used up strike one the first time a picture of JC hit the papers. I marched right into Homegrown Records’ offices and told them their devil’s deal wasn’t worth it, and that I wouldn’t help JC’s career at the expense of my own.

Their response? If I didn’t turn around, march my ass right back out of the office, and paste a smile on my face, they’d yank me off my tour, and I’d be a has-been before I ever got the chance to become a someone.

I’d go to bat for my career any day of the week, but faced with the threat of losing it, I’m ashamed to say I backed down and toed the company line. You only get one shot at your dream. It’s not something I’m willing to let go . . . regardless of how much of my pride I might have to swallow. Which brings me back to the gossip rag and the woman in front of me.

An awkward silence stretches between us in the checkout line as all the scenarios swirl through my brain of how I can reply to her. Finally, she smiles, and there’s something kind and knowing in her expression.

“I know what you’re thinking—you can’t spill your side of the story to anyone. Too risky.” She lifts her hand and flashes a giant rock on her left ring finger. “But I’m not just anyone. I’ve been on the front page of the tabloids too, and I know exactly how much it sucks. After being married for a decade to the biggest reformed horndog of them all, I’m no stranger to any of it. On top of that, I’d never break the vows of sisterhood.”

My gaze darts from the giant diamond to her face. Studying her makeup-free features, it finally hits me. “You’re Tana Vines.”

Tana Vines was the Female Country Artist of the Year about ten years back, and her husband was awarded Entertainer of the Year at least four or five times during that time. They’re country music legends. A true power couple.

She holds out her hand and I shake it, operating purely on instinct.

“Yes, I am,” she says. “It’s nice to meet you, Holly Wix.”

* * * *

Two bottles of wine later, Tana and I lay sprawled on chaise lounges beside her indoor pool. Behind the gated walls, and in the presence of someone I listened to on the radio in junior high, I finally have a chance to unburden all the crap that has been filling my head for months.

“Six more months? That’s a hell of a long time to put up with JC’s bullshit. Not to mention keeping your own legs closed. Good Lord, girl. Aren’t you dying to get some dick?” Tana asked.

An embarrassed laugh escapes my lips. “Um, I’ve been pretty preoccupied with learning the ropes, I guess.”

“Well, shit. I’d be dying for dick.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize my position with the label. I have a feeling that if my picture ended up in the paper the way JC’s has, the double standards would have me out on my butt so fast, I couldn’t even yell ‘Bingo!’ first.”

Tana rolls onto her side and faces me. “That’s probably the truth, but it don’t make it fair. The only reason they’re covering his ass is the shelf of awards he’s got from five years ago, and all the money they’ve got invested in him. You’re the perfect image booster. But you’re right—you’re expendable if you step out of line.”

I already looked up to Tana as a country idol, but now I have to say I have a bit of a girl crush. She doesn’t sugarcoat anything, and it’s refreshing in this world of people who say one thing and mean something completely different.

“Who’s expendable?”

A deep voice echoes through the pool room as Mick Vines walks in. The man—a living country legend—picks up one of the empty bottles on the table between our lounge chairs. “And damn, Tana. I’ve been lookin’ for you for a half hour.”

“Gemma knew where I was.” Gemma, I learned, was Tana and Mick’s live-in nanny.

Tana sits up as Mick sets the bottle down and leans over to press a kiss to her lips.

“There. Been lookin’ for that. My little bit a sugar.”

I turn my head away as Tana wraps her hand around the back of his neck and pulls him in for another kiss, this one not nearly so innocent. She doesn’t seem to care that I’m intruding on their intimate moment. And it’s a moment that makes me wish even more that I wasn’t trapped in this mess.

Not that I’m looking for what they have—because I’m truly not. I’m not looking for that kind of happily-ever-after for a good five or ten years. I’m too young for that, and my focus is on my career, exactly where it’s supposed to be when you’re standing on the edge of achieving the dream you’ve had since you were ten years old.

But even on that edge, I’m still only a puppet with the label pulling the strings. Six months in, and I’m already sick and tired of being yanked in the directions they want me to go. What could I accomplish if only I could cut those tethers and come into my own? But slicing those ties would mean sacrificing what I’ve already accomplished, and that’s not an option.

Mick stands tall again and notices me for the first time. “Who’s our guest, babe?”

It’s much less of a surprise that he doesn’t recognize me than it was for Tana to make the connection. Honestly, I’m still a nobody in this industry. I’m working my tail off on becoming a somebody, and I’ve got fans, but to someone at Mick Vines’s level, I’ll always be a nobody.

I smile and hold out my hand. “Holly Wix.”

His eyes narrow as he shakes my outstretched hand. “I’ve heard your name. Why have I heard your name?”

I’m stunned that there’s even a hint of recognition in him. My stomach turns in big flopping waves, and Tana jumps in, saving me from bumbling whatever explanation is about to fall from my lips.

“I picked up Holly in the checkout line while we bonded over how much it blows to see yourself on the front of a gossip rag.”

Mick’s gaze narrows further before it lights with knowledge. “Wix. You’re the hot young thing JC Hughes has on his arm these days.”

I cringe at the description, because that’s not how I want to be known. *But that’s what happens when you sign a deal with the devil.*

Tana slaps his thigh from her seated position. “And she’s touring with Boone Thrasher because she’s the hottest new talent to hit the stage since Carrie and Miranda.”

Her adamant statement throws me for a loop, and those nervous waves in my belly glimmer with pride.

Mick rocks back on the heels of his tooled black leather boots. “Ain’t heard her sing yet, but I’ve sure seen her picture.”

I wince, pride doused.

“And that’s the problem. The label has backed her into a corner, and they’ve made the JC situation a requirement. She can’t get out of it,” Tana explains.

Mick studies me. “Who you with, girl?”

“Homegrown. They signed me when I won *Country Dreams*.”

“Ah.” Mick nods twice. “Now I know where I first heard your name. And you probably signed a devil’s bargain to get your ‘million-dollar recording contract’ after you won.”

It isn’t even a question. Mick knows how the game is played.

“It was that or keep working at a bowling alley in BFE, Kentucky, and never taking my shot. At least this got me to Nashville.”

He raises a hand. “No need to get defensive. I’m not judging. We all take the route we need to take to get here, but that means living with the consequences. How long are you stuck with this JC bullshit? I’m assuming you have to suck it up and smile on his arm to help shine up his image and get some good press. Besides, we all know he’s been on the edge of casino-playing retirement for a more than a few years now.”

Dang. Mick really does know how the game is played. I guess you couldn’t be in Nashville as long as he has without learning all the pitfalls.

“Six months,” Tana offers. “And it’s not like when our managers hooked us up. JC doesn’t seem to care either way if he hurts Holly’s career.”

I swivel my head around to stare at Tana. “I didn’t know that you . . .” I glance back to Mick. “Really? Your relationship started out as a publicity stunt?”

Tana laughs. “Of course it did. Why else do you think I’d get involved with such a man-whore? I needed some street cred, and he was getting all the wrong kinds of press for sleeping with everything with tits.”

“Jesus, baby. That’s ancient history—and we kept that shit quiet for a reason.”

“I’m just saying that sometimes it actually works out fine,” Tana says.

Mick shakes his head. “Back to the point of this conversation.” Aiming his stare at me, he continues. “You could be fucked in six months if JC keeps this shit up. You’ve got sympathy on your side right now, but if you keep laying down and taking it, you’re just going to look like a fool.”

Tana slaps his thigh again. “Not helping.”

Her husband reaches down and grabs her hand. “Quit, woman, or I’ll spank your ass even harder tonight.”

Tana’s face flushes a bright red, and I decide to let the comment go without trying to figure out exactly what they’re talking about.

Mick releases her hand and grabs the magazine shoved between the wine bottles. “This the rag with the cheating dick?”

Shaking her head, Tana grabs it from his hand. “Nope, that’s the one with the hot billionaire dick I’m going to marry if you decide to leave me for some country starlet.”

I catch a glimpse of the cover. It’s a copy of *Forbes*, and there’s a stupidly handsome dark-

haired man on the cover.

The headline reads: Creighton Karas Crushes Competition.

“What are you talking about, woman? You’d bury me out back if I so much as looked at another woman,” Mick grumbles.

Tana’s lyrical laugh echoes off the walls. “Damn right, and don’t you forget it.”

I snatch the magazine out of his hand to get a closer look.

“Whoa, girl. Calm down.”

I wave him off, the wine dulling the instincts that would otherwise have me continuing to bow and scrape in his country-music royalty presence.

“Shhh. I need to look at him.” I’m not sure why I need silence to do that, but apparently the large bottle of wine I drank says I do.

The man is gorgeous, but he looks cocky and arrogant. I flip the magazine open and page through it until I find another picture of him.

I win because losing isn’t an option.

—Creighton Karas

I know I’m truly drunk when the only thought filtering through my brain is how much I’d like to be his prize when he’s winning. *Where the hell did that come from?* And like I’d even know what to do with a man like that. He’s so far out of my league, it’s not even funny.

I glance over at Mick and Tana, who are once again locked in a tangle of lips and limbs.

And . . . that’s my cue to leave.

I slap the magazine shut and rise on shaky legs. “I should probably get going.”

Tana pulls away from Mick and raises an eyebrow in my direction. “Honey, you ain’t driving anywhere. I’ll go make up a guest room. It’s the very least I can do since I got you shitfaced.”

“Not necessary. I should get home. I have . . . a plant that needs water. Or something.”

I squint because I can’t remember if my plant is dead or alive. I haven’t watered it in as long as I can remember. Apparently I’m thinking too hard about plants, which might be alive or dead, and not concentrating on my balance because I tip forward.

Mick catches me with an outstretched palm. “Come on, honey. We’re putting you up tonight. Won’t hear anything different.”

He turns me around and marches me toward the door that leads into the sprawling mansion. “Besides, it seems like someone needs to take you under their wing so you don’t get chewed up and spit out by this bitch of an industry. My wife isn’t exactly the type to bring home strays, so she must’ve seen something in you needing a little protection. We’re gonna make sure you have it.”

My eyes burn, and I blink back the unexpected tears. I’ve been in this town for six months, essentially friendless, and in one night I’ve apparently been adopted by two people I never thought I would ever have a chance to meet.

“G’night, Holly. I’ll see you in the morning, sweets,” Tana calls from behind me.

Apart from those blissful moments standing onstage, for the first time in months I have a genuine smile on my face, and I feel like I belong somewhere.

It doesn’t last long.

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About Meghan March

Meghan March has been known to wear camo face paint and tromp around in the woods wearing mud-covered boots, all while sporting a perfect manicure. She's also impulsive, easily entertained, and absolutely unapologetic about the fact that she loves to read and write smut.

Her past lives include slinging auto parts, selling lingerie, making custom jewelry, and practicing corporate law. Writing books about dirty-talking alpha males and the strong, sassy women who bring them to their knees is by far the most fabulous job she's ever had.

She loves hearing from her readers at meghanmarchbooks@gmail.com.

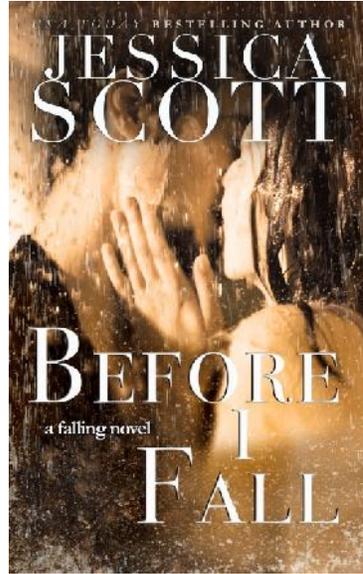
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Before I Fall

A Falling Novel

By Jessica Scott



Dedication

To my real life stats savior
You know who you are

Chapter One

Beth

My dad has good days and bad. The good days are awesome. When he's awake and he's pretending to cook and I'm pretending to eat it. It's a joke between us that he burns water. But that's okay.

On the good days, I humor him. Because for those brief interludes, I have my dad back.

The not so good days, like today, are more common. Days when he can't get out of bed without my help.

I bring him his medication. I know exactly how much he takes and how often.

And I know exactly when he runs out.

I've gotten better at keeping up with his appointments so he doesn't, but the faceless bastards at the VA cancel more than they keep. But what can we do? He can't get private insurance with his health, and because someone decided that his back injury wasn't entirely service-related, he doesn't have a high enough disability rating to qualify for automatic care. So we wait for them to fit him in and when we can't, we go to the emergency room and the bills pile up. Because despite him not being able to move on the bad days, his back pain treatments are elective.

So I juggle phone calls to the docs and try to keep us above water.

Bastards.

I leave his phone by his bed and make sure it's plugged in to charge before I head to school. He's got water and the pills he'll need when he finally comes out of the fog. Our tiny house is only a mile from campus. Not in the best part of town but not the worst either. I've got an hour before class, which means I need to hustle. Thankfully, it's not terribly hot today so I won't arrive on campus a sweating, soggy mess. That always makes a good impression, especially at a wealthy southern school like this one.

I make it to campus with twenty minutes to spare and check my e-mail on the campus WiFi. I can't check it at the house - Internet is a luxury we can't afford. If I'm lucky, my neighbor's signal sometimes bleeds over into our house. Most of the time, though, I'm not that lucky. Which is fine. Except for days like this where there's a note from my professor asking me to come by her office before class.

Professor Blake is terrifying to those who don't know her. She's so damn smart it's scary, and she doesn't let any of us get away with not speaking up in class. Sit up straight. Speak loudly. She's harder on the girls, too. Some of the underclassmen complain that she's being unfair. I don't complain, though. I know she's doing it for a reason.

"You got my note just in time," she says. Her tortoise-shell glasses reflect the fluorescent light, and I can't see her eyes.

"Yes, ma'am." She's told me not to call her ma'am, but it slips out anyway. I can't help it. Thankfully, she doesn't push the issue.

"I have a job for you."

"Sure." A job means extra money on the side. Money that I can use to get my dad his medications. Or, you know, buy food. Little things. It's hard as hell to do stats when your stomach is rumbling. "What does it entail?"

"Tutoring. Business statistics."

"I hear a but in there."

"He's a former soldier."

Once, when my mom first left us, I couldn't wake my dad up. My blood pounded so loud in my ears that I could hardly hear. That's how I feel now. My mouth is open, but no sound crosses my lips. Professor Blake knows how I feel about the war, about soldiers. I can't deal with all the hoah chest-beating bullshit. Not with my dad and everything the war has done to him.

"Before you say no, hear me out. Noah has some very well-placed friends that want him very much to succeed here. He's got a ticket into the business school graduate program, but only if he gets through Stats."

I'm having a hard time breathing. I can't do this. Just thinking about what the war has done to my dad makes it difficult to breathe. But the idea of extra money, just a little, is a strong motivator when you don't have it. Principles are for people who can afford them.

I take a deep, cleansing breath. "So why me?"

"Because you've got the best head for stats I've seen in a long time, and I've seen you explain things to the underclassmen in ways that make sense to them. You can translate."

"There's no one else?" I hate that I need this job.

Professor Blake removes her glasses with a quiet sigh. "Our school is very pro-military, Beth. And I would consider it a personal favor if you'd help him."

She's right. That's the only reason I was able to get in. This is one of the Southern Ivies. A top school in the southeast that I have no business being at except for my dad, who knew the dean of the law school from his time in the army. I hate the war and everything it's done to my family. But I wouldn't be where I am today if my dad hadn't gone to war and sacrificed everything to make sure I had a future outside of our crappy little place outside of Fort Benning. There are things worse than death and my dad lives with them every day because he had done what he had to do to provide for me.

I will not let him down.

"Okay. When do I start?"

She hands me a slip of paper. It's yellow and has her letterhead at the top in neat, formal block letters. "Here's his information. Make contact and see what his schedule is." She places her glasses back on and just like that, I'm dismissed.

Professor Blake is not a warm woman, but I wouldn't have made it through my first semester at this school without her mentorship. If not for her and my friend Abby, I would have left from the sheer overwhelming force of being surrounded by money and wealth and all the intangibles that came along with it. I did not belong here, but because of Professor Blake, I hadn't quit.

So if I need to tutor some blockhead soldier to repay her kindness, then so be it. Graduating from this program is my one chance to take care of my dad and I will not fail.

Noah

I hate being on campus. I feel old. Which isn't entirely logical because I'm only a few years older than most of the kids plugged in and tuned out around me. Part of me envies them. The casual nonchalance as they stroll from class to class, listening to music without a care in the world.

It feels surreal. Like a dream that I'm going to wake up from any minute now and find that I'm still in Iraq with LT and the guys. A few months ago, I was patrolling a shithole town in the

middle of Iraq where we had no official boots on the ground and now I'm here. I feel like I've been ripped out of my normal.

Hell, I don't even know what to wear to class. This is not a problem I've had for the last few years.

I erred on the side of caution - khakis and a button-down polo. I hope I don't look like a fucking douchebag. LT would be proud of me. I think. But he's not here to tell me what to do, and I'm so far out of my fucking league it's not even funny.

I almost grin at the thought. LT is still looking after me. His parents are both academics, and it is because of him that I am even here. I told him there was no fucking way I was going to make it into the business school because math was basically a foreign language to me. He said tough shit and had helped me apply.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, distracting me from the fact that my happy ass is lost on campus. Kind of hard to navigate when the terrain is buildings and mopeds as opposed to burned-out city streets and destroyed mosques.

Stats tutor contact info: Beth Lamont. E-mail her, don't text.

Apparently, LT was serious about making sure I didn't fail. Class hasn't even started yet, and here I am with my very own tutor. I'm paying for it out of pocket. There were limits to how much pride I could swallow.

Half the students around me looked like they'd turn sixteen shades of purple if I said the wrong thing. Like, look out, here's the crazy-ass veteran, one bad day away from shooting the place up. The other half probably expects the former soldier to speak in broken English and be barely literate because we're too poor and dumb to go to college. Douchebags. It's bad enough that I wanted to put on my ruck and get the hell out of this place.

I stop myself. I need to get working on that whole cussing thing, too. Can't be swearing like I'm back with the guys or calling my classmates names. Not if I wanted to fit in and not be the angry veteran stereotype.

I'm not sure about this. Not any of it. I never figured I was the college type - at least not this kind of college.

I tap out an e-mail to the tutor and ask when she's available to meet. The response comes back quickly. A surprise, really. I can't tell you how many e-mails I sent trying to get my schedule fixed and nothing. Silence. Hell, the idea of actually responding to someone seems foreign. I had to physically go to the registrar's office to get a simple question answered about a form. No one would answer a damn e-mail, and you could forget about a phone call. Sometimes, I think they'd be more comfortable with carrier pigeons. Or not having to interact at all. I can't imagine what my old platoon would do to this place.

Noon at The Grind.

Which is about as useful information as giving me directions in Arabic because I have no idea a) what The Grind is or b) where it might be.

I respond to her e-mail and tell her that, saving her contact information in my phone. If she's going to be my tutor, who knows when I'll need to get a hold of her in a complete panic.

Library coffee shop. Central campus.

Okay then. This ought to be interesting.

I head to my first class. Business Statistics. Great. Guess I'll get my head wrapped around it before I meet the tutor. That should be fun.

I'm pretty sure that fun and statistics don't belong in the same sentence but whatever. It's a required course, so I guess that's where I'm going to be.

My hands start sweating the minute I step into the classroom. Hello, school anxiety. Fuck. I forgot how much I hate school. I snag a seat at the back of the room, the wall behind me so I can see the doors and windows. I hate the idea of someone coming in behind me. Call it PTSD or whatever, but I hate not being able to see who's coming or going.

I reach into my backpack and pull out a small pill bottle. My anxiety is tripping at a double-time, and I'm going to have a goddamned heart attack at this rate.

I hate the pills more than I hate being in a classroom again, but there's not much I can do about it. Not if I want to do this right.

And LT would pretty much haunt me if I fuck this up.

I choke down the bitter pill and pull out my notebook as the rest of the class filters in.

I flip to the back of the notebook and start taking notes. Observations. Old habit from Iraq. Keeps me sane, I guess.

The females have some kind of religious objection to pants. Yoga pants might as well be full-on burqas. I've seen actual tights being worn as outer garments and no one bats an eye. It feels strange seeing so much flesh after being in Iraq where the only flesh you saw was burned and bloody...

Well, wasn't that a happy fucking thought.

Jesus. I scrub my hands over my face. Need to put that shit aside, a.s.a.p.

Professor Blake comes in, and I immediately turn my attention to the front of the classroom. She looks stern today, but that's a front. She's got to look mean in front of these young kids. She's nothing like she was when we talked about enrollment before I started. She was one of the few people who did respond to e-mails at this place.

"Good morning. I'm Professor Blake, and this is my TA Beth Lamont. If you have problems or issues, go to her. She speaks for me and has my full faith and confidence. If you want to pass this class, pay attention because she knows this information inside and out."

Beth Lamont. Hello, tutor.

I lose the rest of whatever Professor Blake has to say. Because Beth Lamont is like some kind of stats goddess. Add in that she's drop-dead smoking hot, but it's her eyes that grab hold of me. Piercing green, so bright that you can see them from across the room. She looks at me, and I can feel my entire body standing at the position of attention. It's been a long time since a woman made me stand up and take notice. And I'm supposed to focus on stats around her? I'll be lucky to remember how to write my name in crayons around her.

I am completely fucked.

Chapter Two

Beth

It doesn't take me long to figure out who Noah Warren is. He's a little bit older than the rest of the fresh-faced underclassmen I've gotten used to. I'm not even twenty-one, but I feel ancient these days. I was up late last night, worrying about my dad.

I can feel him watching me as I hand out the syllabus and the first lecture notes. My hackles are up - he's staring and being rude. I don't tolerate this from the jocks but right then, I'm stuck because Professor Blake has asked me to tutor him. I can't exactly cuss him out in front of the class.

Which is really frustrating because the rest of the class is focused on Professor Blake, but not our soldier. Oh no, he's such a stereotype it's not even funny. Staring. Not even trying to be slick about it like the football player in the front of the classroom who's trying to catch a glimpse of my tits when I lean down to pass out the papers.

Instead, our soldier just leans back, nonchalant like he owns the place. Like the whole world should bend over and kiss his ass because he's defending our freedom. Well, I know all about that, and the price is too goddamned high.

And wow, how is that for bitterness and angst on a Monday morning? I need to get my shit together. I haven't even spoken to him and I'm already tarring and feathering him. Not going to be very productive for our tutoring relationship if I hate him before we even get started.

I take a deep breath and hand him the syllabus and the first lecture worksheet.

I imagine he's figured out that I'm his tutor.

I turn back and head to my desk in the front as Professor Blake drops her bombshell on the class.

"There will be no computer use in this class. You may use laptops during lab when Beth is instructing because there will be practical applications. But during lecture, you will not use computers. If your phones go off, you can expect to be docked participation points, and those are a significant portion of your grade."

There is the requisite crying and wailing and gnashing of the teeth. I remember the first time I heard of Professor Blake's no computer rule. I thought it was draconian and complete bullshit. But then I realized she was right - I learned better by writing things down. Especially the stats stuff.

I look up at Noah. He's watching the class now. He's scowling. He looks like he might frown a lot. He looks...harder than the rest of the class. There are angles to his cheeks and shadows beneath his eyes. His dark hair is shorter than most and he damn sure doesn't have that crazy-ass swoop thing that so many of the guys are doing these days.

Everything about him radiates soldier. I wonder if he knows how intimidating he looks. And why the hell do I care what he thinks?

I'm going to be his tutor, not his shrink.

He shifts and his gaze collides with mine. Something tightens in the vicinity of my belly. It's not fear. Soldiers don't scare me, not even ones who look like they were forged in fire like Noah.

No, it's something else. Something tight and tense and distinctly distracting. I'm not in the mood for my hormones to overwhelm my common sense.

I stomp on the feeling viciously.

I'm staring at him now. I'm deliberately trying to look confident and confrontational. Men like Noah don't respect weakness. Show a moment's hesitation and the next thing you know they've got your ass pinned in a corner while they're trying to grab your tits.

He lifts one brow in response. I have no idea how to read that reaction.

Noah

I had to swallow my pride and ask some perky blond directions to The Grind. I hadn't expected Valley Girl airheadedness but then again, I didn't really know what I expected. I managed to interpret the directions between a few giggles and several "likes" and "ahs" and "ums". I imagined her briefing my CO and almost smiled at the train wreck it would be. We had a lieutenant like her once. She was in the intelligence shop and she might have been the smartest lieutenant in the brigade, but the way she talked made everyone think she was a complete space cadet.

She'd said "like" one too many times during a briefing to the division commander and yeah, well, last I heard, she'd been put in charge of keeping the latrines cleaned down in Kuwait. Which wasn't fair but then again, what in life was? Guess the meat eaters in the brigade hadn't wanted to listen to the Valley Girl give them intelligence reports on what the Kurdish Pesh and ISIS were up to at any given point in time.

My cup of coffee from The Grind isn't terrible. It certainly isn't Green Bean coffee, but it's a passable second place. Green Bean has enough caffeine in it to keep you up for two days straight. This stuff...it's softer, I guess. Smoother? I'm not really sure. It isn't bad. Just not what I'm used to. Nothing here is.

I wonder if there is any way to run down to Bragg and get some of the hard stuff. Hell, I am considering chewing on coffee beans at this point. Anything to clear the fog in my brain. But I need the fog to keep the anxiety at bay, so I guess I'm fucked there, too. Guess I should start getting used to things around here. No better place to start than with the coffee, I guess.

The Grind is busy. Small, low tables are crowded with laptops and books and students all looking intently at their work. It's like a morgue in here. Everyone is hyper-focused. Don't these people know how to have a good time? Relax a little bit? There are no seats anywhere. The Grind is apparently a popular if silent, place.

The tutor walks in at exactly twelve fifty-eight. Two minutes to spare.

"You're not late." I'm mildly shocked.

She does that eyebrow thing again, and I have to admit on her, it is pretty fucking sexy. "I tend to be punctual. It's a life skill."

"Kitty has claws," I say.

She stiffens. Apparently, the joke's fallen flat. Guess I'm going to have to work on that.

"Let's get something straight, shall we? My name is Beth, and I'm going to tutor you in business stats. We are not going to be friends or fuck buddies or anything else you might think of. I'm not 'Kitty' or any other pet name. I'm here to get a degree, not a husband."

My not-strong-enough coffee burns my tongue as her words sink in. She's damn sure prickly all right. I can't decide if I admire her spine or I think it's unnecessary. Hell, it isn't like I tried to grab her ass or asked her to suck my dick.

The coffee slides down my throat. "Glad we cleared that up," I say instead. "I wasn't sure if

blowjobs came with the tutoring."

She grinds her teeth. There isn't much by way of sense of humor in the tutor. She has a no-nonsense look about her. Her dark blond hair is drawn tight to her neck, and I can't figure out if she is naturally flawless or if she is just damn good with makeup.

There is a freshness to her, though, that isn't something I am used to either. Enlisted women, the few I've been around, either try way too hard with too much black eyeliner downrange or aren't interested in men beyond the buddy level.

But this academic woman is a new species entirely for me, and as our standoff continues, I realize I have no idea what the rules of engagement are with someone like her. At least not beyond her name is not Kitty and she's not here for a husband. Oh and can't forget the no blowjobs thing. She made the rules pretty clear.

She is fucking stunning and I suddenly can't talk.

She clears her throat. "So are we going to stand here and continue to stare at each other, or are we going to get to work? I have somewhere to be in two hours."

I motion toward the library. "Lead the way."

Beth

He's watching my ass as I walk in front of him. He's just the type who would do something like that. The blowjob comment caught me completely off guard. I hate that. I hate that I couldn't come up with any brilliant, sarcastic response, either. I always think of smartass comebacks fifteen minutes too late.

So now I am even more irritated than I was when he'd been staring at me class. What the hell had Professor Blake been thinking?

I lead us to a small table out of the way, where there won't be a lot of disruption. Stats is one of those things that takes a lot of concentration. At least it did for me until I learned the language.

I pull out the worksheet from class. Homework and lessons. "So let's get the business stuff out of the way," I say. I hate the tone in my voice. I'm not normally a ball-busting bitch, but he's set me off and if being cold and curt is the only way to keep him in line then so be it. "I'd like to be paid each meeting. Cash."

"What's your rate?"

I sit back. How the hell did that question catch me off guard? I don't know. I work part-time at the country club next to campus, but the tips are hit or miss. The thing about the wealthy? Some of them can be downright stingy. Most of the time, I make okay tips. When it isn't, I tried not to be bitter about how they don't need the money like I do.

I just smile and take their orders.

I'm stuck. Noah is not my first tutoring job, but my other jobs were paid for by the university. I have no idea how much to charge for freelance work.

"Fifty dollars an hour, three times a week," he offers abruptly.

I cover my shock with my hand. "Huh?"

"Fifty dollars an hour. I saw a sign in the common area charging that much for Spanish. Figure Stats should be at least that much, right?"

My voice is stuck somewhere in the bottom of my chest. Fifty bucks an hour is a lot of groceries and medication. It feels wrong taking that kind of money, even from Mr. Does-the-Tutoring-Come-with-Blowjobs.

"Will that be a problem?"

I shake my head. "No. That's fine." There's a stack of bills that need to be paid. The electricity is a week overdue. I'm counting on tips tonight to make a payment tomorrow to keep them from shutting it off. Again. Between that and the money from tutoring - I could keep the lights on. I can feel my face burning hot. I turn away, digging into my backpack to keep him from seeing my humiliation, not wanting him to see my relief.

"Same time, same place? Monday, Wednesday and Friday?" My computer flickers to life.

"Works for me. How much pain should I be prepared for?" He sounds worried. He should. Professor Blake is one of the top in her field, and that's no small feat considering she came up at a time when women were still blazing trails in the business world.

"Depends on if you do the work or not," I say. I can't quite bring myself to offer him comfort. I'm still irritated by the blowjob comment. "So let's get started." I lean over the worksheet. "What questions do you have from class today?"

I look up to find him watching me. There's something in his eyes that tugs at me. I don't want to be tugged at.

He looks away. He's strangling that poor pen in his hands. Clearly, I've struck a nerve with my question.

I wish I didn't remember how that felt. The lost sensation of not having a clue what I was doing. I didn't even know what questions to ask.

I don't want to feel anything charitable toward him, but there's something about the way he shifts. Something that makes him vulnerable.

I run my tongue over my teeth. This isn't going well. "Okay look. We'll start with the basics, okay?"

I open my laptop to the lecture notes.

He finally notices my computer. "I haven't seen one of the black MacBooks in years," he says.

He's not being a prick, but I bristle anyway. "It might be old but she's never failed me."

"It can run stats software? Isn't that pretty intense processor-wise?"

I don't feel like telling him that to run said stats program, I have to shut down every other program and clear the cache. I don't want to admit that there's just no money to buy a new computer. I can't even finance one because I don't have the credit for it.

Business school is about looking the part as much as it is about knowing the game, so none of those words are going to leave my lips.

"It gets the job done," I say. "Now, the first lecture."

"I get everything about what stats is supposed to do. I got lost somewhere around regression."

"Don't worry about regression right now. We're going to focus on understanding what we're looking at first up. Basic concepts."

I look over at him. He's scowling at the paper. I can see tiny flecks of gold in his dark brown eyes. He drags one hand through his short dark hair and leans forward. He's practically radiating tension, and I can feel it infecting me.

Damn it, I don't give a shit about his anxiety. I don't care. I can't.

"So the normal distribution is?"

I take a deep breath. This stuff I know. I draw the standard bell-shaped curve on his paper. "The normal distribution says that any results are normally..."

Noah

She knows her stuff. She relaxes when she starts talking about confidence intervals and normal distributions. Hell, I can't even spell normal distribution.

But she has a way of making things make sense.

And her confidence isn't scary so much as it is really fucking attractive.

I'm watching her lips move and I swear to God I'm trying to pay attention, but my brain decides to take a detour into not stats-ville. She's got a great mouth. It's a little too wide, and she has a tendency to chew on the inside of her lip when she's focusing.

I look down because I don't want her to catch me not paying attention. I need to understand this stuff, not stare at her like a lovesick private.

I'm focusing on confidence intervals when something dings on her computer. She frowns and opens her e-mail. It's angled away so I can't look over her shoulder, but something is clearly wrong. A flush creeps up her neck. She grinds her teeth when she's irritated. I tend to notice that in other people. I do the same thing when the anxiety starts taking hold. At least when it starts. It graduates quickly beyond teeth grinding into something more paralyzing.

I glance at my watch. It's almost time for her to go. I have no idea how I'm going to get my homework done, but I'll figure it out later. I'm meeting a couple of former military guys some place called Baywater Inn in a few hours. Plenty of time for me to get my homework done. Or at least attempt it. Because, of course, LT put me in touch with these guys, too.

But watching her, something is clearly wrong. I want to ask, but given how our history isn't exactly on the confide-your-darkest-secrets level, I don't.

She snaps her laptop closed and sighs. "I've got to run and make a phone call. Are you set for your assignment for lab?"

"I'll figure it out."

Her lips press into a flat line. "You can always look it up online."

"Sure thing."

She's distracted now. Not paying attention. I watch her move. There's an edge to her seriousness now, a tension in the long lines of her neck. A strand of hair falls free from the knot and brushes her temple. I want to tuck it back into place, but I'm pretty sure if I tried it, I'd be rewarded with a knee in the balls. And I like them where they are, thanks. I've come too close to losing them to risk them now.

I pull out my wallet and hand her two twenties and a ten. She hesitates then offers the ten back. "We didn't do the full hour." I refuse the money. "Keep it. Obviously you've got something to take care of. Don't worry about it."

She sucks in a deep breath like she's going to argue but then clamps her mouth shut. "Thank you."

She didn't choke on it, but it's a close thing. I am suddenly deeply curious about what has gotten her all wound up in such a short amount of time.

Maybe I'll get a chance to ask her some day.

I definitely have the impression that Beth Lamont isn't into warm cuddles and hugs. She strikes me as independent and tough.

And I admire the hell out of that attitude, even as she scares the shit out of me with how smart she is.

Chapter Three

Beth

I don't generally hate my job at the Baywater Inn. My boss isn't a prick, at least not an obvious one. I sometimes catch him checking out my ass, and he likes us to look a certain way on the job, but I suppose that comes with the territory. I guess the wealthy clientele don't like slobs serving them food, so he wants us to be neat and clean and if you happen to be a little perky, well then, added bonus. Usually.

I've heard the monthly club dues are something like ten grand. That's less than my dad's last emergency room visit but more than I make in a year. I guess if you have a lot of money, that amount isn't staggering.

My friend Abby is off tonight. I hope she's not sick. It's not like her to miss work and when she's around, work is so much more fun. She's the kind of friend whose sarcasm makes the entire day brighter. I want to text her to see if she's okay, but I'm almost over my texting limit for the month. I'll have to wait to e-mail her.

I set the dessert in the center of the table for the ladies who clearly spend their days enjoying the finer things in life. Their hands are perfectly manicured, their skin flawless. I wanted to hate these people when I first started here, but aside from a random douchebag, most of the clients are polite in a non-dickhead kind of way. Hopefully, they'll tip well today.

"Is there anything else I can get you?"

The older blonde, who doesn't look a day over thirty, shakes her head, and I leave them to tend my next table. Becky, the hostess, has seated a group of four guys at a corner table.

I start on my routine for serving a new table. I lay out the tiny drink napkins and start on the pleasantries.

"I'm Beth and I'll be taking care of you this afternoon. Can I get you started with anything from the bar?"

I scan each of the faces of the men until I get to him.

To Noah. My breath locks in my throat as our eyes collide. There's a quirk at the edge of his mouth. A cocky arrogance that was missing earlier when we were doing stats. I feel it rather than see it. My stomach tightens as the moment extends beyond recognition and into something uncomfortable and tense.

Will he point out that I'm tutoring him or will he pretend he doesn't know me?

"Hey," he says.

He's going to acknowledge me. Color me surprised. I've tutored before. Some of the guys on the basketball team and a softball player last spring. And I've encountered some of them here.

I can't explain my reaction to him. I can't control the warmth that prickles across my skin at his quiet acknowledgment.

"Nice to see you again, Noah," I manage. My voice loses its smooth edge, and I feel awkward and tense.

"Beth is tutoring me in Stats," he tells the other men. "So I don't embarrass myself and all that."

The big guy with his back to the wide bay window grins. "You were the TA in Stats last semester, weren't you?"

I remember him now with the context. Josh Douglas. He was a big guy who transferred in from another school and opted to take Stats a second time when he didn't have to. "Yes, that was me."

This is strange, this collision of two worlds. Usually there's a tacit nod or a quiet greeting, but this feels like I've been sucked into their orbit. It's not a comforting feeling because the worlds blur and along with them, the rules. I don't want to stand here talking about stats and class when I have drinks to serve and other customers to wait on.

"Gents, what'll it be? I think we need to let Beth here get back to work." This from the thin man to my left. There is a softness to his face that contrasts sharply with the hard lines of his body.

Noah is watching me when I take their drink orders to the bar. He's sat with his back to the wall again, giving him a clear view of the hallway that leads back to the kitchen. He is the first thing I see when I come around the corner, and I notice him now, every time.

Because he is still watching for me. That is the only way to explain how his eyes happen to catch mine each time I step out of the dimly lit hallway and into his field of vision. There is a darkness there, an intensity that is both off-putting and enticing.

But there is something else there. Something that tempts me to take a single step into the darkness and let it envelop me.

It is a temptation I can't afford. A single mistake would ruin everything I have worked my ass off to achieve.

But it is a fantasy that I can indulge in if I let myself. A little fantasy never hurt anyone.

I carry the drinks to their table, pretending this is like every other table. It is a normal job. There is no need for the tension in my belly, the heat crawling across my skin. I stand between Noah and Josh now, intensely aware of Noah in a way I haven't been aware of a guy in a long time.

I go through the motions but mentally, I retreat.

There is no room in my life for this kind of fantasy stupidity.

Regardless of the warmth that unfurls in my belly and penetrates my veins.

Noah Warren is off limits.

Noah

There's something about seeing her in the crisp white shirt and black skirt that twists up my insides and reminds me that I'm not dead and not a eunuch.

I hadn't expected to see her at the country club. 'Course I hadn't really known what I'd see at a country club. Hell, I am so far out of my league in this place, it isn't even funny. There are thousand-dollar sports coats tossed over chairs like they're ten dollar throwaways from Old Navy.

Beth moves like she fits completely in the scene. She wears comfort in her smile and competence in everything she does.

But there is something starkly feminine about her now. Something different from the cool, sexy confidence when she'd been instructing me in stats. There she'd been all business, focused on the numbers, the equations, and the work. She'd been in her flow taking me through the arguments and she'd made them sound less foreign.

I felt better about my chances of actually passing this class. And I really can't fail. It is such

a freak accident that I'm even here. I will not let LT down. Failing is absolutely not an option.

Beth leans across the table to place our drinks down. She looks down at me. "Only water?"

"I'm driving," I say. The truth. My hands aren't shaking anymore from leaving the parking garage. I'm still not used to how things rise up and take over when I'm least expecting them.

My shoulder aches and I rotate it to relieve the stiffness. The pain there is a dull echo now. As long as I stay ahead of it, I'm fine.

"Okay then." She takes our orders and disappears into that dark hallway where I assume the kitchen is.

"So what's the deal with her?" Josh asks.

"She's tutoring me," I say again. Also the truth. It is so easy these days. There are fewer lies to keep track of. I can almost believe I've got my shit together.

Kind of a relief, honestly.

"Yeah? Anything else come with that service?"

I turn a hard look on Caleb. I've just met him, but decided inside of five minutes that he and I were never going to be friends. Caleb has this sense of superiority about him that used to drive me nuts about our company executive officer. The XO had to make sure everyone knew he was the smartest guy in the room and Caleb is just like that.

Guys like Caleb got people killed because they didn't listen.

"Don't be a dick."

This from Josh before I have a chance to say a word. Josh knew LT and helped get me oriented, at least to the business school.

"What? She's smoking hot. I'd tap that."

I reach for my water, briefly considering whether or not to smash the glass into Caleb's face. "We're not discussing tapping anything. We're not in Iraq anymore," I say. There's a time and a place for locker room talk, and unless I've misread the entire situation - the middle of a place like this, that drips wealth and privilege - wasn't that place.

I could be wrong, though. Judging by Josh's reaction, I don't think I am.

"So you get settled in?" Josh asks.

"Yeah. New place is nice. Perfect, actually."

"You're not living in town?" This from Nathan, who hasn't said two words since we sat down. Josh told me he was quiet. I hadn't realized how literal he'd been.

"Nah. I'm about twenty minutes from campus."

"Not taking the bus?" Nathan is still nursing his beer. Caleb has already finished his first and is now twisting in his chair, looking for Beth.

Something violent rocks through me. The idea of him thinking about her like she's some kind of fuck toy makes me physically ill.

"Hell no," I say. "I'm sure it's perfectly fine and safe, but I'll pass on mass transport, thanks."

"Don't blame you," Josh says. "Sometimes, it kills me what some of these kids think of as a prank. Some freshman threw a soda bottle full of vinegar and baking soda on one of the buses last semester. Damn near gave me a fucking heart attack."

"Nice," I say. I'm watching for Beth. I can't help it. There's something about seeing her here that makes her seem vulnerable. In class, she was all boarded up and stiff. Professional and sexy and completely off limits.

Here, she's different. Softer. More approachable. I wonder if it makes her uncomfortable knowing she can't hide behind her stern presence from class.

I want to know. I want to know why she's working here. Business school isn't generally a

place where you find people who have to work their way through college.

But here she is. Delivering our food and smiling and making small talk.

My tongue is stuck. I can't think of anything blindingly brilliant to say. Instead, I watch Josh and Nathan and Caleb talk, losing myself in the warmth of her hip near my shoulder.

It's been a long time since I felt this awareness of another person. Not this kind of intense desire to know more, at any rate.

A soft touch on my shoulder. I look up to find her staring down at me. "Do you need anything else?"

Her voice is quiet, but it penetrates the fog in my brain. I shake my head. And isn't that fucking eloquent?

She walks off, and I try not to stare at the sway of her hips or the small span of her waist. She's not tiny like most of the underclassmen, but she's not an Amazon, either.

She's somewhere in between. Somewhere close to perfection.

And I'm a goddamned chump because she's made it abundantly clear that there will be no shenanigans.

Which is a shame.

Because for the first time since I've come home from the war, I feel a semblance of life in my veins. So much nicer than the haze I've been walking around in.

Pretending to live while waiting patiently to die.

Chapter Four

Beth

It's after midnight when my shift ends. I'll have to be up early. The best time to try and get through to the VA is first thing in the morning. I've never had a phone answered by a live person after ten a.m. I have no idea what they do all day, but answering the phone certainly isn't one of those things.

My feet hurt but nothing like they used to. Professor Blake gave me a gift card to Cole Haan my first year on campus. My soul had ached at the thought of spending that much money on a pair of shoes. But she'd basically ordered me not to argue because I was going to spend a lot of time on my feet. She was right. It was worth it to have a good pair of shoes beneath you.

I've had them resoled three times since she bought them for me. She was definitely right.

Still, I'm not walking home in high heels. I slide my worn sneakers on and head out into the darkness.

I don't mind walking home. I head through campus which is generally pretty safe, despite a few random incidents a few years ago.

Still, I keep a can of mace in my right hand. It might be illegal. I've never really checked, but I'm not going to be a walking statistic.

I've got too much to live for to risk it. And besides, if something happened to me, what would happen to my dad?

Headlights illuminate the dark in front of me. My blood starts pounding in my veins when I realize the car is slowing down to keep pace with me. I tighten the straps on my backpack and start scanning the area to see where I can disappear to. I'm wearing a jacket which covers my white shirt, so I'd be able to hide if I can get away from the road fast enough.

"Hey."

My stomach drops to my feet.

Noah.

"You know, it's really fucking rude to follow someone in the middle of the night." Now that I'm safe, I'm pissed. He scared the living hell out of me.

"Sorry. I just actually realized that."

He sounds genuinely embarrassed. I look down and he's leaning across the passenger's seat. "Do you want a ride?"

"You guys left hours ago," I say.

"I was curious how you were getting home."

I lift one brow. "That's a pretty lame excuse."

"Yeah well, I'm not really that smooth. What you see is what you get and all that."

He makes me want to smile, but I can't let that barrier down. Still, it's tempting to take the offered ride. It would get me home sooner. Dad might still be awake, but I doubt it. When he's like this, he sleeps on and off for days until he can walk again.

"How do I know you're not a serial killer?"

"I've got people you can call for references." He drums his fingers on the steering wheel. "Look, I was curious, okay?"

"About what?"

"You."

My breath catches in my throat. This is the strangest conversation I've had in ages. I don't have a ton of practice at this whole flirting thing, if that's what this is. I've usually got way too many things on my mind to worry about hormones. "Well, I'm sure the details of my life are incredibly boring and mundane. I think you'd be better off looking at the eligible underclassmen."

"I wasn't asking you to get married," he says. There's that crook at the corner of his mouth again. It suggests there might be dimples if he smiled. "Do you want a ride home, or are you content to skulk through campus in the dark?"

I can admit that I'm tempted. There's something rugged about Noah. An edge. There's something about him that doesn't fit into the neat caricatures of business school students.

I'm hesitating. There is frustration in the lines around his mouth, but I'm not really keen on him knowing where I live. I can't explain it, but I don't want him to see the tiny two-bedroom house that I share with my dad.

My dad gave up everything for me to go to school here. I shouldn't be ashamed that we're scraping by, but I am.

"Hello?" He waves his hand to get my attention.

"No funny business?"

"Hand to God," he says.

I get in the car.

"Nice ride." It seems like a safe conversation piece.

Another thing about him that doesn't fit the business school stereotype. His car is clean and taken care of, without demonstrating that obsessive cleanliness and shine of people who have way too much identity based on the vehicle they drive. It is also not nice enough to be doubling as an exoskeleton for his penis. For some reason, that makes me relax a little more around him.

"Thanks. I bought it when I first joined the army. Even managed not to get screwed on the interest rate."

I look over at him. The pale blue lights from the dashboard cut harsh angles into his cheeks. "That's impressive. I thought all car dealers around military installations were criminal."

He looks over at me, curiosity in his dark eyes.

"How do you know about car dealerships around military bases?"

"My dad used to be in the army," I admit, and I instantly regret mentioning the military bases. I don't want to talk about the army with him.

"Really? Where was he stationed?"

"He was at Fort Benning before he got out."

"I never served at Benning. My first duty station was Fort Hood, in Texas," he says. "I hear Columbus is nice, though."

"It's certainly better than Fayetteville and Fort Bragg."

"Bragg was my last duty station. I've got a lot of friends down there."

"Were you Airborne?" I can't help it. My dad's certificate from Airborne school still hangs on the wall in his room. I thought it would remind him of the good times. I don't think he's ever noticed that it's there. I notice it though. Every time I bring him his medication, the plaques and certificates I hung for him taunt me with the man he used to be. They are a reminder of everything he gave up so I could be where I am.

Noah

She is sitting quietly now. No longer Beth the tutor or Beth the waitress. No, this is a new aspect of Beth. So many facets to her. She is fascinating and I'm enjoying the sensation of her getting underneath my skin.

I honestly didn't think she was going to get in the car and I don't really have a good excuse for going back to the country club and checking on her. We'd stayed for hours, drinking and reminiscing about our former lives. War stories always felt good when you were with people who understood the life you'd lived.

It was such a far cry from sitting in classes with kids whose closest experience with war is Call of Duty.

"Why did you get out?" she asks after a long silence. We're sitting at a stoplight.

Such a loaded, simple question. I breathe deeply for a minute, trying to figure out how much to tell her. I don't want to look at her and see pity looking back at me. So many people look at those of us who join the military as a bunch of mouth-breathing idiots who couldn't do anything else with our lives.

She doesn't strike me as the judgmental type, but I can't know for sure. And I don't want to spoil the moment by letting my own bitterness and stereotypes into the conversation.

"My contract was up. I served with a buddy who pushed me to apply to the business school and well, here I am."

"Were you an officer?"

I shake my head. "No. I was enlisted. Got out as a staff sergeant."

She frowns at me. "How long were you in?"

"A little under five years."

"Wasn't that a little fast?"

I shrug. She clearly knows more about the military than most military brats. "A little," I admit. "But we were - are - at war. We tend to promote anyone with a pulse to fill the rosters."

She doesn't think my joke is funny. It's actually a pretty shitty joke, one that usually only other soldiers get, and it usually prompts another round of commiserating on how fucked up the entire mission was and still is.

"So you ended up here," she says.

"Yep. Hit the lottery in a lot of ways. It definitely takes some getting used to." I roll to a stop at another light. We're off campus now. "Where am I taking you?"

She directs me to her address. We turn down well-lit streets. It's in a nicer part of town close to campus. The houses are neat if small. They look old and well restored. Impressive, really. There's a lot of money at this school.

Which makes her job at the country club that much more interesting. If she lives in a swanky part of town, what's she doing with a job?

"So I wanted to say thanks for taking me on with the whole tutoring thing," I say. I want to put her at ease. She looks tense. Awkward. I'm not sure what to do to help her relax.

"No problem. We'll keep your GPA up."

I grin. I can't help it. "I'm not worried about how high my GPA is. I'm more concerned with failing."

"You won't fail." There's an edge to her words, an undercurrent of steel that surprises me.

"Don't underestimate how much my brain resists math."

She smiles, and it transforms her. She's exhausted, but her face softens in the low light.

"Don't underestimate my ability to teach."

"I guess I'll have to have faith then, won't I?"

"Faith, no. Practice, yes. Take the next right then I'm the second house on the left."

I turn down the street and stop where she tells me.

"Thank you for the ride," she says. "I appreciate it."

"No problem." I hesitate for a moment. "You don't have a car?"

"I like to walk. Gets me outside."

She's not lying, but she's not telling the entire truth, either. Her story doesn't jive with the neighborhood that she lives in. I'm used to watching my soldiers and figuring out when they're lying to me.

I'm not going to call her on it. Because nothing says stalker like "I can tell you're lying to me" in the first twenty-four hours of meeting someone.

"I'll see you in class." She unfolds her long legs out of the car. She's not wearing those glorious heels she had on earlier. It's a shame because she's got amazing legs, and those heels made them go on and on forever.

I watch her climb the steps for a moment, then pull away before she goes inside. I figure I've been enough of a psycho for one night.

But my curiosity about Beth hasn't really been satisfied. If anything, I've got more questions. She's so unlike most of the females around here. Hell, she's not like most of the males, either.

As much as I hate stats, I can't wait for our next class. Stats might just become my favorite subject.

Chapter Five

Beth

I wait until Noah pulls away then jogged off the steps and down the street toward my house. I haven't been too far off with the address I gave him. It belonged to a little old lady who was recently put into a home. I used to stop by and drop off her medications. Another odd job I'd done to earn extra money on the side. I missed Ellie sometimes.

It's really amazing how three streets over can go from being in the nice part of town to being in one of the sketchier parts. I don't want to make our neighborhood sound like it's some violent, trash-ridden dump. It isn't. Our neighbors are all working class and everyone looks out for each other in the vague way that people who work on different shifts do. We know who belongs and who doesn't.

But compared to the street where Noah dropped me off, our neighborhood feels...abused.

Still, it's home. It isn't perfect, but I have my dad and I am going to school and, you know, sometimes being a little hungry isn't a bad thing.

I let myself into our house. I really need to remember to pick up some WD-40 the next time Dad's check comes in. The door creaks something terrible.

The light from the TV casts an eerie glow in the small living room. The threadbare rug is a score I'd found in a dumpster behind one of the houses that are not officially fraternities, but everyone knows exactly what they are. That was before Dad's back had taken a turn for the worse and the VA had demonstrated just how completely fucked up they are. It was right around the same time that I'd gotten a healthy dose of just what "not 100-percent disabled" meant financially.

My blood pressure rises just thinking about the nightmare of phone calls I will have to contend with again tomorrow. My dad needs an injection in his back but because the powers that be judged them as elective, we've either got to get them done at the VA or pay out of pocket. And we can't afford them out of pocket.

But right now, I slip into the living room. Dad is laid out on the couch but at least he's awake. He offers a blurry kind of smile. "Hey, sugar bear."

I lean down to kiss his cheek. "Hi, Dad. How's your back?"

"Been worse, I suppose."

He's wearing one shoe. It's not laced up and it's half off his heel. "How did you get that on?" I don't care that he's gotten up - that is a good thing. But it hurts him to put his shoes on when his back is out.

"I had to try and see if I was still completely useless." He glances down at the single shoe. "I sneezed when I was bent over and damn near blacked out from the pain."

"Ah hell, Dad." My heart gets a little tighter in my chest. I lean against the edge of the couch and ease the shoe off his foot. He used to be so active, so alive.

So different from the man who can barely get off the couch.

I keep telling myself this is just temporary, that I'll get a job that has insurance and I'll claim him as my dependent. I'll get him the best back doc in the country and he'll get fixed.

My eyes burn because it is such a far-off goal. It feels like more of a dream. We barely have enough money for his prescriptions. The idea that someday I'll have a job where I make enough

money to have insurance, too, is...sometimes it feels like a fantasy that people like me live on, just to keep going.

I pull his one sock off and drop it on the floor by his shoes. "Want some help up?"

He shakes his head, his eyes closed. "I'm going to sleep out here tonight, I think."

"I'll get the heating pad. Did you get your evening medicine?"

His words are blurred together, jumbled. "I doubled up after the sneezing incident. I'm out until the VA can see me again for a refill."

"Crap. You are supposed to have enough to get you through to Wednesday." My stomach twists. I don't know what the kind of pain my father lives with feels like, but I know what seeing him in it does to me.

There is no way he's moving tomorrow.

I fight back tears as I check the cabinet where we keep the alcohol. I'm not much of a drinker. Dad doesn't really have a problem with it, despite me being underage. I don't drink that often, though, because what if I drink and he needs it?

We have a half-gallon of vodka. It's going to be close. I don't know if that will hold him for two days or not but he'll need it in the morning after his medication wears off.

The first time he ran out of medication after he'd gotten out of the army, I discovered how to get him through between appointments. It involves me buying alcohol with a fake ID and him getting hammered until he can't stand up.

Guess chipped discs in your spine will do that to a guy.

I hate seeing him drunk, but it's infinitely better than seeing him in pain.

I only had to clean up pee once, when he'd thought he was in the bathroom and instead had been in the kitchen.

I am so tired. All I want to do is sleep for one night without worrying about whether my dad is going to be able to move in the morning. Without worrying how we are going to pay the bills. Or whether we are going to have food in the house.

I blink hard. I have papers to grade, but I'll do it tomorrow. I just need to sleep before my dad sees me crying. I can't let him see me cry.

I cover him with a blanket and kiss him on the forehead.

"Love you, sugar bear."

"Love you, too, Dad."

My voice doesn't break. Barely. It's only when I'm down the hall and my door is closed that I let the tears come. They burn down my cheeks and relieve some of the pressure around my heart.

But they do nothing to ease the growing frustration that no matter how much I do, it is never enough.

Noah

I'm renting a small house outside of town. It's not exactly country living but it damn sure isn't living crammed into the city like the neighborhood where Beth lives. It isn't much, but it is home for the time being.

And hell, it beats being in Iraq.

The kitchen sink still has remnants of breakfast. Guess the dishes aren't going to wash themselves. I can't ignore the four orange pill bottles lined up like sentries in the open cabinet

near the kitchen sink. I reach for the one farthest to the left.

Princess Ambien and I had become lovers before I left Iraq, and she's never left me alone and afraid in the dark. I sleep like a champ with her. I don't know how people do it without her. She'll give me a few minutes to take a shower and all that, but soon she'll reach up and tug me to bed. Tuck herself around me like a warm blanket and pull me down into a mostly dreamless sleep.

It isn't the life I dreamt of for myself, but if the worst thing that happens to me from Iraq is that I need a little help sleeping, I figure I've come out ahead of most.

I shower and dry off, sliding between the cool sheets. They're scratchy tonight. My skin is tight, my hands dry.

I stare at the moonlight that spills into my bedroom. You can actually see the moon up in the sky out here away from the city lights. And the stars. I couldn't see them in Iraq. Too much dust in the city.

Tonight, though, I stare at the moonlight, and I think about Beth.

Her mouth in a firm line when she's in class. All business and proper.

Her mouth as she asked us what we wanted to drink. Softer. Smoother. Friendlier. That's what it was. She was friendlier at the country club.

I guess it has to do with tips and all that. Can't count on good tips if your customers don't think you're warm and charming.

It's a toss-up which Beth I'm thinking about. The two images blur as Princess Ambien slips her arms around my waist and pulls me gently toward sleep.

The last thing I remember is her standing on the porch of her house, waiting for me to drive off.

I wonder if she'll let me give her a ride home tomorrow.

Chapter Six

Beth

"No, I'm sorry, that's not acceptable." My voice is shrill. Almost breaking. "You can't do this. He's out of medication. He's in pain."

"Miss, I'm sorry but he's going to have to wait to see his doctor. If the pain gets too bad, bring him to the emergency room."

My face is burning hot. I'm fighting the urge to start screaming. "What happened to his appointment?" It's the fifth time I've asked this question of three different people.

The answers are all different. It doesn't matter because the end result is the same.

My dad's appointment has been canceled, and without a new appointment, they won't issue him new medication because he's on heavy narcotics.

"I need to speak with a supervisor."

"Miss, she's gone to lunch. I can have her call you back."

"Then find me someone else to talk to!" My ability to remain polite is fraying at the edges. On some rational level, I realize that none of this is the fault of the woman on the other end of the phone, but I don't really care about that at this moment.

The line goes quiet, and for a moment, I think she's hung up on me. It wouldn't be the first time for that, either.

I'm pretty sure I hate the VA. I'm sure the people there are lovely at Christmas and holidays, and at some point, they actually mean well. But I've been fighting this system for years, and I've lost any charitable feelings toward anyone in that agency.

"Miss Lamont, your father's appointment has been rescheduled."

"For when?" The words are a snarl.

We live six miles from the VA. I can take the city bus and be there in thirty minutes. I could drive, but it takes as long to find parking as it does to take the bus. I can find a real person and maybe, just maybe, find a piece of humanity in this terrible monster of a bureaucratic nightmare.

"Next Tuesday."

"And what's he supposed to do in the meantime?"

"He can come into the emergency room and we can get him a prescription to cover him until then."

This does nothing to soothe my anger, but I don't have a choice. It's better than nothing because the last time they canceled his appointment, he was out of medication for almost a month.

And we ran out of money well before the end of the month because vodka, even cheap vodka, costs more than I made in tips that month.

I somehow manage to thank her and write down the appointment information.

I try to wake my dad. He's staring at the TV in some kind of trance. He's not asleep, but he's definitely not hearing me. This sometimes happens. It's like he goes away, and I can't reach him.

It scared me the first time it happened.

"Dad." I shake his shoulder hard, jarring him out of it.

"Hey, sugar bear." His words are slurred. He's halfway in the bottle. He had to get up today and go to the bathroom. He fell trying to get off the toilet.

I hate the war. I hate the army. I hate the VA.

I'm going to fix this.

Goddamn it, I'm going to fix this.

"Dad, I've got an appointment for next week. You need to stop drinking so I can take you to the emergency room when I get home, okay?"

He nods. I hope he actually heard me. He knows this drill all too well but only if I've managed to get through the alcohol haze. We tried to take him in once when I was sixteen and he'd been intoxicated. They'd called the state and tried to take me away from him. He'd been out of the army by then, but we were still in Columbus. I'd called his old brigade commander and thankfully he'd helped get things sorted out.

There was no one here to call to sort things out. We weren't at risk of me getting taken away anymore. No, it was worse. Dad needed to be sober when I took him to the ER; otherwise there would be no new medication.

It was a goddamned catch-22. He could drink to manage the pain, but he couldn't get more pain meds. But in order to get the pain meds, he had to be in pain and stone sober.

I move the vodka away from him. I trust him, but there is no reason to tempt Murphy and all that.

I'm still pissed as I leave the house and head to campus. I'm not in the mood for business ethics today. I don't want to be around anyone.

I want to sit in my room and sleep. Maybe have a good cry.

But I can't.

Because I've got class.

And my father's life depends on me getting this damned degree.

Noah

"Business ethics" is kind of like "military intelligence." An oxymoron at best. How the hell can you combine ethics with profit when money undermines everything? But it's required as part of my degree program, and I figure it can't be that terrible of a class.

Josh sits down next to me. "Good times, huh? I wonder if this will be like one of those "don't beat your wife" safety briefings. Here's how not to get in trouble running your business."

I grin, trying to hide my discomfort. My hands are unsteady this morning. The anxiety meds haven't kicked in. Either that or I need a stronger dose. My stomach is in knots, and I slept like shit. Apparently I'm developing a tolerance to Princess Ambien and isn't that a thought that's loaded with discomfort. Add in that I wasn't able to sit at the back of the classroom. There's an Asian girl behind me writing in her notebook. I can hear the scratch of her pen against the paper. It might as well be a nail file against sandpaper.

But when Beth walks through the door, my whole perspective shifts. The scratching of the pen behind me fades. For a moment, I'm over the moon that she's in this class, too, but then I notice her eyes.

They're red, along with the tip of her nose. She's been crying.

I hate to think of her crying. It does something terrible to my heart that she's upset about something.

I stand up and get ready to ask her if she's okay. She sees me and offers a half-assed nod of acknowledgment.

And lucky for me, the only other empty seat in the class is next to mine.

I couldn't have planned it better. I guess having the scratching pen behind me is worth it if Beth gets to sit next to me.

"Rough night?" I ask when she slides into the chair.

"You could say that." Her voice is broken, rough. Like she's spent the night in a smoky bar.

"Anything I can do?"

"Do you happen to have a stash of Oxycodone around that you'd let me buy?"

I look at her hard then. That was not the response I expected. It hits me like a wet towel. I open my mouth to speak, but she beats me to it.

"Sorry, bad joke."

"Are you sick?"

She shakes her head as the professor walks in. He's a skinny man that reminds me of a ferret. He's got a pinched face and quick brown eyes that scan the room. He reminds me of my old company first sergeant. Mean old bastard but damn good in a firefight. It's not fair, but I'm not feeling charitable at the moment, even with Beth sitting next to me. Then again, some of the men I served with didn't radiate competence and character either. So I'm not sure why I expect bastions of virtue and honor in academia.

"So today's discussion is going to focus on the reading from the first assignment."

There is a groan through the class. Apparently, I'm not the only one who failed to check the syllabus.

"We're going to start the module on moral decision making with a thought experiment. There's a trolley speeding down a track. The brakes are out. On one track, there is a single person. On the other, a group of five construction workers. There is a switch that, if thrown, will go to either the left or the right. How do you decide who dies?"

A hand shoots up in the front of the class. The person attached to that hand is smooth and polished. She looks like a Ralph Lauren photo advertisement. "It's a no-brainer. You flip the switch and take out the one."

"Why?"

The poster child looks confused. "Why what?"

"Why do you choose one instead of five, Parker?" Apparently Professor Earl has spent some time memorizing our names. Which is actually impressive on a couple of different levels.

Parker frowns, and I think it might be the first time she's ever had to think hard about a response. "Because losing one person is better than losing five," she says, but she's no longer confident.

The professor continues. "The trolley experiment is meant to get us thinking about utilitarian judgments and the challenges associated with that decision-making framework. What if the one individual was Mother Teresa and the five were convicted murderers? Does that change the decision?"

Parker the poster girl doesn't raise her hand. Beside me, Josh shifts uncomfortably. I'm not too thrilled with this question either. These aren't sterile thought experiments. This is dancing uncomfortably close to some ugly truths I'd rather forget.

I raise my hand. "It's one thing to play mental games in class. It's another to have to live with the consequences of your decision."

"Very good, Mr. Warren. What kinds of decisions do business leaders have to make and how do you adjudicate between them?"

Beth raises her hand. "The focus on profit makes it difficult to consider other factors in a

business context. The medical insurance industry, for example, focuses on how to minimize patient access to care in order to maintain maximum profits. The entire bureaucracy is designed to prevent people from seeking out care. It's easier to look at the numbers on a spreadsheet than to think about how those five murderers' families will feel if they're sacrificed to save the life of a saint."

There is an edge in her words, a barely restrained fury lacing each word. Is this what had her upset before class? But she should have medical insurance through the school - most students do.

"So then how do you propose businesses make decisions?" This from Poster Girl Parker, who's twists in her chair to look back at Beth. "The consequentialist moral framework costs too much money."

"So we're putting prices on human life," Beth says. The edge is still there. Violence simmering just below the surface. "If that's what we're willing to do when we make business decisions, that's fine; but we need to acknowledge that's what we're actually doing."

I'm fascinated by the passion in her words. Like she's standing at the front of a column of advancing warriors, ready to defend the realm.

Her cheeks flush as she speaks and there's a light in her eyes. She's transformed from Beth the college student to Beth the Valkyrie. Both are equally stunning. I'm enthralled by her vehemence.

I am beyond screwed. Because I can no longer see her as merely my tutor.

She is a craving, sliding through my veins and making me want more.

Chapter Seven

Beth

I leave the classroom as soon as possible. I have to get away. The air is crushing me. The ethics class has fired me up and not in a good way. I was already wound up from the phone calls this morning, and arguing ethical dilemmas struck a nerve that I wasn't prepared for.

Sitting next to Noah threw me off balance and my comment to him about Oxy snuck out before I even knew what I was saying. It is universally stupid to even joke about stuff like that. I don't know him well enough, and it isn't something I joke about with anyone. Because the reality is about as unfunny as it comes.

"Beth!"

I try to pretend I haven't heard him, but he catches up too quickly with those long legs of his. "Hey, wait up a sec."

I stop and close my eyes, searching for some semblance of professionalism. I need my mask back in place, and I need it now. I'm feeling far too exposed today. Raw from dealing with the VA and, if I am honest with myself, a little afraid.

My dad is getting worse. The last time he threw his back out, he was flat out for a month. This time, it's been close to three, and the VA docs are no closer to getting him fixed than they were when this process started.

I stiffen when Noah's hand closes over my shoulder. His touch is strong and solid and offers a comfort that is far too tempting. He stands a little too close, his hand warm where he touches me. There is strength there. Real. It is a comfort that I badly need and for a moment, I allow myself to be selfish and don't pull away.

"Are you okay?"

Genuine concern in his words. Noah is nothing like I expected a former soldier to be – nothing like my dad's friends before he got hurt. They used to come to the house and drink and play cards and talk endless amounts of trash. If not for that stupid bravado, my dad might not have gone on his last Airborne jump. He might not have destroyed his back trying to prove he was still high speed and low drag.

Noah is nothing like the men my father used to call friends. There is no arrogant bravado, no need to cross the line between hoah and stupid. He is...he is just a good guy.

"Some girl is going to be really lucky to land you." My words slip out before I can stop them.

"I think that's a compliment?" He flushes and drags his hand through his hair. It makes me like him a little more. "But you avoided the question."

I look away then, because the concern in his eyes is blinding. "Just a rough morning," I say. Because I cannot find the words to tell him how tired I really am.

Because he is not mine to lean on. Not like that anyway. I'm his stats tutor, and there can be nothing else. No one wants to compete with a girl's father for her attention.

Every one of my relationships in the past ended because of my dad. And I'm better off without them, but I'm also tired of the heartbreak. I don't have the energy to deal with it anymore.

"Rough enough that you were crying before class."

Damn, he saw that. "What are you?" I ask, cracking a half smile. "Most guys don't notice

anything beyond the size of a girl's tits, and you're actually telling me you noticed I'd been crying?"

He returns the half-assed grin. "Well, I mean, I did notice your, ahem, curves, but seeing how I've developed a thing for your eyes, I noticed those, too."

"My eyes, huh? That's not a euphemism?"

His thumb brushes my shoulder. I can feel the gesture beneath my sweater. I resist the urge to lean into the caress. "It depends," he says. "Do you want it to be?"

I smile and shake my head. "Thanks for that. I needed a laugh."

"You didn't really laugh. You just kind of smiled sadly."

He steps closer until I can feel the heat radiating from his body. He's wearing a light blue striped button-down shirt and black pants. He looks every bit the business school student. It's his hands, though, that give him away. They're rough. Not manicured like many of the business school upperclassmen.

"My life is kind of a disaster, that's all." I want so badly to lean on him. To pretend that I could lay all of my problems in his lap, and he'd just hold me while I talked to him.

It's a stupid fantasy. The world doesn't work that way for girls like me. I'm not quite from the wrong side of the tracks, but I don't fit in with the women here who come from money and are looking for a husband with the right pedigree.

No, for women like me, the story is dramatically different. It usually involves a cat or six, and many beloved nieces and nephews if we have siblings.

Since I have neither, I'm leaning toward cats. Except that cats cost money, and we can't really afford another mouth to feed at the moment. Maybe when I get insurance.

"Want to get some coffee and tell me about it?"

My stomach takes that moment to rumble. Loudly. I want to crawl into a hole and die because Noah looks down in the vicinity of my belly. "Or I can buy you lunch."

"You don't need to buy me lunch," I say. But there's not much protest in my voice because I'm not prone to lying to myself or others. I am hungry. The apple and yogurt I'd had for breakfast didn't hold me over very long.

"I'd like to." His hand is still on my shoulder.

There are a hundred different reasons why I shouldn't go to lunch with him. Why I should go finish my assignments for the week and get prepared for our next tutoring session. I've got four more hours before Dad should be sober enough to take to the emergency room.

There are so many things I should be doing instead of going to lunch, but for one blindingly stupid moment, I want nothing more than to be normal.

And so I let my stupid need not to be alone take the lead. I nod and offer a warm smile. "That would be nice."

Noah

The mystery that is Beth Lamont continues to deepen. I half expected her to say no. The redness in her eyes is gone now, but the fatigue is still there.

"Where would you like to eat?"

"Whatever's easiest," she says.

"You're going to have to help me out here. I'm not over the getting-lost-on campus part of this operation." But she doesn't smile so I pull out my phone and look up local restaurants

nearby.

She falls into step next to me, which is good because I have the strongest desire to pull her into a hug. She looks like she's about to fall over. I've seen people look like she does. Coming off of long ruck marches, they do everything they can to stay upright, but the march has taken every ounce of energy they've got. They either sit down on their own or they collapse.

I'm hoping she'll make it to my car before she crumbles.

"So what led to the rough morning? Fight with the doctors?"

She sucks in a quick breath. It's subtle, but I notice because I notice everything about her. She's more pale than normal.

"Something like that," she says.

"Are you sick?"

"No." Her response is quick. A little too quick.

"Family?"

A quiet sigh. "My dad."

We enter the parking garage, and she follows me up the deadly stairwell to the second floor where my car is. I'm good at hiding it. I fucking hate parking garages. The stairs, man, the stairs are a fatal funnel. There's no defending yourself. One disciplined shooter can control the entire approach.

I pause at the top of the steps, looking into the cavernous parking garage. I'm not insane enough to think there's actual danger lurking in the shadows, but try telling that to my nervous system that reacts to every parking garage like I'm back in Iraq. I'm paranoid enough that I'm alert to the possibilities. Criminals tend to seek out the weak, and at approaching six feet tall, I'm not weak. But I'm also unable to relax.

Beth's hand is gentle and strong on my upper back. "Hey, where'd you go just then?"

I try to shake off the question. "My PTSD flares up in parking garages. Just checking to make sure there're no bad guys hiding in the dark."

She makes a sound that's somewhere between skeptical and amused. "That explains why you checked on me when I was walking home," she says.

"Bad guys like to hide in the dark," is all I manage. She's caught me, but I'm not sure if she realizes that she's seen a good chunk that remains wrong with me.

I've come home from the war pretty normal, all things considered. I'm dealing with the anxiety and the sleep problems. I'm actually considering trying to get my doc to wean me off the pain meds for my shoulder, but I'm going to hold off until after the fall semester. I don't want to be dealing with pain and trying to pass Stats. I've got more than enough to worry about without adding to the chaos of my first year as a civilian.

"Some of the worst of the worst, though, are hiding in broad daylight," she says as she climbs into the passenger's seat.

"True enough," I say. My throat is dry. Goddamn it I hate the parking garage. "How hard is it to get a parking pass somewhere else on campus?"

"Depends on how much money you've got lying around. Why not take the bus?"

I pause, taking my hand off the shifter where I was going to put the car in reverse. I twist toward her, wanting to get closer. "You know that whole parking garage issue I've got? I'm worse about busses."

"Fair enough. You could park off campus and walk in, though."

"How far?"

"Not too far. I usually walk to campus each day. There're lots of places just off campus you

can park for a small daily fee. It's probably cheaper than parking in here every day anyway."

A half-assed idea forms and it escapes before I think better of it. "I could park at your house and walk you to class every day."

"But then I'd have to explain you to my dad, and he's made me swear off boys until I graduate from grad school."

"Seriously?" I'm suddenly really curious about this mysterious father of hers. He's sick but dictating her life...

"I'm kidding, Noah," she whispers.

I'm struck by the sound of my name on her lips. It's something smooth and sensual and my mind detours into a decidedly not comforting place. "That's the first time you've said my name." I like it. A lot more than I probably should.

It was a whisper across her lips. I want to hear her say it again. I suddenly want very much to see if she'd let me kiss her. I wasn't lying when I told her I had a thing for her eyes. The green is intense and lined with grey but it's her mouth that draws me closer. It's wide and full and the perfect shade of pink against her skin.

I sound like a romantic, and maybe the war has made me appreciate beautiful things. There's not a lot of beauty at war. Terrible things. Ugly things. Anything good ends up destroyed. Violently.

She hasn't moved since I spoke. Silent and still, she's so quiet I can hear her breathing. "I've said your name before." A hushed whisper.

"No, I'd remember." I'm closer now. Close enough that I can feel the heat from her skin, the quiet huff of her breath against my mouth.

This could ruin everything. If I'm wrong, she could run out of my car, and I would have to let her go.

But I lean a little closer. Until my lips brush against hers. She's so much softer than I imagined. I nudge her gently, searching for permission before I go any further.

Her lips part, and then I'm not thinking anymore. I'm feeling. The soft glide of her tongue. The warm press of her lips against mine. The mingling of breath until I can't tell where she ends and I begin.

My hand shakes as I slide my palm over her cheek, cupping her face gently. Her skin is soft, so soft compared to the hard calluses on mine.

And I kiss her like she's my first taste of salvation.

Because she is. She just doesn't know it yet.

Chapter Eight

Beth

I won't say that kissing Noah is a mistake. It is a breath of something beautiful in the dark fatigue of my life. I love the feel of his mouth on mine, his taste. He's spicy, like cinnamon mixed with citrus. Warm and clean and fresh and a thousand other things that are pure and good.

The kiss ends after a moment. It could have been me, maybe him. I can't tell. He rests his forehead against mine, and we sit there silently, simply trying to catch our breath.

"I'm not sure what to say," I finally manage, giving voice to the thoughts swirling inside me.

There are darker thoughts. Ones that involve the slide of skin against skin, the fantasy of having time only to myself.

"Me, either." A gentle brush of his lips against mine. "Still hungry?"

"Starved." Not only for food, but I'm sure he's already figured that out. I want to kiss him again already.

I wish I were more creative. I might suggest some wild double entendre. Make him laugh. But I'm not that good.

He releases me, and I sink back into my seat. He drives us out of the parking garage and heads off campus, checking his phone for directions. I want to ask where he's taking us, but I'm willing to let him surprise me. Because I'm living dangerously, right? Being selfish for one fleeting moment.

"So what's wrong with your dad?" He's heading into the nice part of town. The really nice part of town that has all the great local restaurants that I've heard my classmates talk about. There's a social aspect of business school that I know is hurting my chances of getting into graduate school. It's part of why I'm not even sure about applying. The social scene is something I have neither the time nor the resources to participate in. I'm counting on a recommendation from Professor Blake because I damn sure haven't made the contacts that I should have been making. And I don't think we can afford it.

Which isn't to say I don't have friends. I do. But I shelter my life from them. The clothes I wear are from the secondhand shops in the wealthier parts of town. I look like I belong, or at least I try to convince myself that I look like I fit. I have Abby to thank for teaching me how to pass here.

I have no idea what's being said behind my back, and if I spend too much time thinking about it, I'll go crazy. I focus on my grades and my work. Everything else can't matter.

"He got hurt in the army. He's got two herniated discs in his mid-back."

"My first platoon sergeant had something similar. Screwed it up on a jump." He pulls into a parking spot in front of a brightly colored Mexican restaurant. "Do you like Mexican?"

"It's my favorite." The truth. It isn't expensive to make at home, and usually at the first of the month when Dad's check comes in, I buy and freeze fresh ingredients to use throughout the month. Some months, depending on the medications my dad is running low on, are better than others.

My stomach is clearly in the mood for Mexican. I still have time before Dad will be sober. It's kind of pathetic that I know how long it takes. Part of me feels like I'm enabling him but what else are we supposed to do?

I'll drive him to the ER and they'll give him some medication that will make him okay until the follow-up appointment. Sometimes, there's a steroid injection they can do that works miracles but it isn't often. Some docs disagree about whether or not they're necessary or if they're making things worse. It's not the real injection he needs anyway. Just a temporary fix, but so long as he's sober, the ER will treat him, as opposed to diagnose him as an addict and refuse to prescribe. It's another medical bill to add to the pile, but he won't be in pain for a little while and that's what matters.

It's a sad state of affairs but that's my life, right?

Noah holds the door for me as we step inside. His hand drifts to the small of my back. It's warm and solid and comforting. He asks for a small table away from the high traffic areas. I've noticed that about him: he always sits with his back to the wall. Part of me wants to ask about it; part of me doesn't want to put him on the spot.

I figure if he wants to talk about it, he will.

Right now, I am going to enjoy lunch. Lunch with Noah. A completely impractical escape from reality. Lunch can't hurt anything, right?

The echo of his mouth on mine, the warmth of his touch tingles on my lips.

Heat crawls across my skin as I lower my hand. He's watching me. His eyes darken as he watches me. Warmth slides through my veins. His gaze drops to my lips then slips back over my face. I've never felt caressed by a simple look before but there's something about the way he watches me.

"I would really like to kiss you again, sometime," he murmurs after our waiter leaves.

I sip my water, desperate for a distraction. Not because I don't want to kiss him again, but because I do. Because the man sitting across from me with the rough, gentle hands is such a complex variation from the guys I deal with every day. He's been out in the world. He's really lived; he's gone to war. He's done so much more than just being a college student.

And while I want to pretend that this might be something different, I'm wary. I've been burned before. My hormones might be all "hurray for penis" but my brain knows better than to jump into bed with the first guy in a long time who gets me a little stirred up.

Then again, he's only said he wants to kiss me again. That doesn't automatically mean we're going to be getting hot and sweaty any time soon.

"You know you could say something," he says. "Your silence is hell on the ego. Did I have bad breath?"

He catches me off guard. I laugh and it feels good. "No. Sorry. Lost in thought."

"Good ones or...?"

Because I can't help myself, I meet his eyes. Warmth looks back at me. He covers one of my hands with his. "You've definitely made the day a little brighter," I say.

He strokes his thumb along mine, sending little shivers of pleasure across my skin. "That's good to know. I'll have to come up with other ways to make your day a little brighter."

I shake my head. "Another euphemism?"

"Maybe. Though clearly I need to work on them."

We sit there talking about nothing and everything. About classes and how the basketball team won their last game and nonsensical things that don't matter. It's a completely normal afternoon in my abnormal life.

The whole time, his hand covers mine, his thumb stroking slowly. A light, teasing caress. No pressure. Just...connection. A human touch when I wasn't looking for anything but a paycheck.

It looks like I've gotten way more than I bargained for.

Noah

"So your dad. Why hasn't he been seen at the VA?"

She leans back as the waiter brings us chips and salsa and our drinks. She dips a chip and takes a bite. She's stalling, but I'm not sure why.

"We should try to keep this conversation light and enjoyable. If you get me started on the VA, I may start using creative profanity."

I lean a little closer so I can whisper in her ear. I'm tempted to bite her earlobe but I'm trying to behave. My restraint is damn near superhuman "I'm dying to hear what you consider creative profanity. I can't picture you swearing."

"The VA is one of the few institutions that gets my blood pressure up that high."

"Why?" I haven't been seen by the VA yet. I'm still on Tricare for a few more weeks and then I'm taking advantage of the student insurance. I've heard enough horror stories about the VA that make me skeptical at best. I won't be able to avoid it forever, especially not with everything that happened to me during the war. But I'm content to avoid it for now.

Beth sips her water then takes a deep breath. "They cancel more appointments than they keep, and he's been scheduled for surgery five times in the last year. Because he's not 100-percent disabled, he doesn't have full coverage at local hospitals. And because of his rating, his back problems are treated as elective as opposed to medically necessary." She takes a deep breath. Her voice is laced with tension. "It's complicated."

"Shit, I'm sorry."

"Thanks." She snags another chip. "So what's your story? You're a junior?"

"I took a lot of courses after work when I was down at Bragg. School accepted most of my transfer credits. I get to use my GI Bill to finish up my BA and then I'm applying to grad school."

"My dad gave me his GI Bill," she says after a moment. "He's the reason I can even begin to afford to go here."

There's something else there, beneath her words but I don't push her on it. "I'm glad I went to school while I was active."

"How did you have time? If you got promoted so quickly you had to be working a lot."

"I was, but I carved out time. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up so I joined the army."

"You joined the army on a whim during war?" Her words are laced with sarcasm.

I laugh and almost choke on a chip. How's that for romantic? Smooth, Noah, real smooth. "When you put it that way, it does sound kind of foolish," I say when I'm done hacking up a lung.

"I don't know too many people who would join the army because they didn't know what they wanted to be when they grow up. A couple of guys I went to high school with joined because they wanted to blow stuff up or because their dads wanted them to."

She's avoiding my eyes now, but she hasn't pulled her hand from beneath mine. I hope she doesn't feel the tremble in my hand. The anxiety is back, squeezing my lungs. Making me want to retreat into the shadows and comfort of the medication. Anything to take the edge off. I consider ordering a beer to get me through the rest of the day, but I don't make it a habit of drinking and driving.

No, my other vices are plenty. No need to add criminal offenses to my list of sins in this life.

"How did that turn out for them?" I ask.

"I don't know. My dad moved with me here once I got accepted, so I lost touch with a lot of people from high school."

"You don't sound like it's much of a loss."

She shrugs, swirling her tortilla chip in the salsa. Her hand tightens beneath mine. "I've always had a hard time fitting in."

"You seem like you're passing pretty well here. The professors like you."

"The professors continually tell me they've never had a student work like me. And I'm not sure if it's a compliment or not," she says.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Maybe my working too hard makes my class background obvious." She rolls her eyes with a funny smile on her lips. "Like my freshman year, my friend Abby pulled me aside and basically said, 'I'm your fairy godmother. Here's how you pretend you belong here just like the rest of them'."

It's so strange, hearing her talk about how she doesn't fit. I never would have figured that she feels this way. It's true enough that she's working and she walks everywhere but the way she carries herself makes me think quiet sophistication. The mystery of Beth Lamont deepens and I want to know more. So much more.

She catches me watching her and flushes. I love the way her cheeks turn a little bit pink, matching the tone of her lips.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to dump all my neuroses in your lap on a first date." There's an embarrassment there that's sweet and compelling.

"Don't apologize. I think it's fascinating. So many layers to you, Beth Lamont."

Her eyes sparkle now. "What about you? Where do you fit?"

I shrug. "I thought I fit in the army pretty good but that changed when I came home. I guess I haven't been here long enough to say if this place fits or not. If the discussion in class today is any indication, it's going to be challenging, to say the least."

"Why?"

"Because these are useless thought experiments. It doesn't teach you how to make these decisions in real life. When no matter what you decide, someone is going to die." Her green eyes are intense. Curious. She's unflinchingly honest when most people avoid any real talk about the war. Most folks say we support the troops until those troops bring up what really happens in war. Then they quietly change the subject. But not Beth.

"I don't spend a lot of time thinking about what you guys do during war. I spend most of my time pissed off at how we take care of people like my dad when they come home."

Her hand is tense now, beneath mine. We're treading into dark waters. Moving beyond a conversation about thought experiments and business school ethics into something dangerous and personal.

"I think they're tied together," I say.

"You're probably right." She finally slides her hand free to take a drink. "But it's not my place to judge. My dad came home. I'm not going to question what he did in order to make that happen."

"I'm not sure our classmates would be so forgiving," I say.

"Just wait. At least you're not in any political science classes where you'd hear about the American hegemony and racist imperialism."

I laugh because she sounds so disgruntled. "Not a card-carrying hippie?"

"Not exactly."

She's relaxed again as the waiter brings our food. She keeps glancing at her watch every few minutes. I'm curious enough to finally ask if she's going to be late for an appointment.

I am not prepared for her response.

Chapter Nine

Beth

"I have to take my dad to the hospital."

There's no point in lying to him. He's caught me staring at my watch. I could make something up about a nervous habit but I'm not that quick on my feet.

"His back?"

"He's out of pain medication," I tell him. God but the honesty hurts. It sucks. "The only way to get him through until his appointment is to take him to the ER."

I can't bring myself to be totally honest though. To tell him about my father's dance with alcohol and pain medication and everything in between that keeps him in the constant limbo. It feels like he'll never escape.

And I won't either.

But Noah catches my sleight of hand. "Why do you have to wait to take him?"

I want to avoid the answer. The hard truth of my life. I don't want to tell him about Dad having to sober up before the ER can treat him, or the lies I've told to get him medication when he needs it, or the alcohol I've bought with my fake ID.

I stab a piece of chicken, trying to come up with anything other than the truth.

"It's easier if we go after I'm out of class for the day." A weak story. I can practically feel the weight of my lie on my tongue. It's like a blazing neon sign over my head.

Noah's eyes tell me he's not buying it. There's a skepticism in those dark brown depths. I'm not ready to share all the dirty little details of how I'm making it through school taking care of my dad. Trust is a fragile thing. Something I don't give away easily.

More than anything, I don't want his pity. I don't want to answer the questions about why don't I leave him to take care of himself. Why am I working so hard when my dad isn't? Or the accusations that I'm being held back by my dad.

I won't hear it again.

My heart aches a little as I brace for the inevitable. My chicken is deeply interesting at the moment. I want to change the subject, but my words are locked in my throat.

But Noah continues to surprise me.

"You're amazing, you know that?"

I freeze. His answer is completely unexpected. There is sincerity in his brown eyes. Something close to respect. It's not an emotion I'm used to seeing looking back at me. I don't know what to say.

It's hard to breathe all of a sudden. I want badly to go back to the parking garage. To take things back to simple, like they were before. When he kissed me and there was nothing else between us.

But now he's told me that I'm amazing, and it doesn't jive with anything in my brain.

"That's a nice thing to say." Great, now I'm arguing with him over a compliment.

He sets his fork down and folds his arms on the edge of the table. I can suddenly see Noah the soldier watching me and it is not a comfortable feeling. I imagine his soldiers felt two inches tall when they were subject to this look. My dad used to have the same look when I messed up when I was little.

He hasn't given me the look in a long time.

But Noah watching me now is disconcerting at best. I don't know what to say.

"I was on guard duty once with this lieutenant. He'd gotten married before he left, but his wife got sick. Thyroid cancer. I remember because he was talking about how easily it was cured. Like, if you've got to get cancer, get this one." He pauses, takes a drink of water. "He tells me he's filed for divorce. When I ask why, he tells me it's because he wants to have kids. If she's already gotten sick at twenty-three, he's not going to be saddled with her and her health problems his whole life. Time to cut sling load and all that."

Revulsion squeezes my throat. "He sounds like a pretty horrible person."

Noah nods, sipping his water. It's a long moment before he speaks again. "I think so. He was cheating on her with the supply clerk, too."

"Sounds like a real charmer." I want badly to turn the conversation to something less depressing than cancer and infidelity.

"He was a shitbag, but it surprised me how many people I talked to afterward who agreed with him. Like they were completely mercenary about taking care of family. They wouldn't risk what they've worked so hard for." He takes a drink. "I think you can be like that until you've been through some bad stuff," he says after a moment. "Then you kind of hope you've found someone you can count on, you know?"

"My mom left us," I tell him. Because why not just put my entire life story out there, right up front, so he knows what he's dealing with. "When Dad got hurt. The first time he was laid up for more than a week, she shacked up with his platoon sergeant. Filed for divorce and took off." He's listening, no judgment in those sexy dark eyes.

I don't know why I'm telling him this. We're not a thing. He's going to a top twenty school; he's doing well enough in life. He hasn't been taking care of a hurt dad since he was sixteen. He doesn't need to know what my life entails. And yet, I tell him. Not everything. But a lot. A lot more than I tell most people.

And he listens. Really listens.

He pays the bill and holds the door once again. We walk toward his car, his shoulder bumping against mine. After a moment, I feel his fingers sliding down the top of my hand until his fingers thread with mine.

I hold on tight. Because I'm afraid that this might all be a dream that comes crashing to a halt just when things start to get good.

Noah

I wasn't lying when I told her I thought she was amazing. My words clearly make her uncomfortable. I can't help reaching out to her. To make sure she is real. People like her are so rare in this life.

As we walk to my car, I pause near her door. Anticipation curls through my belly. Her fingers tighten in mine as I lean in closer, cupping her neck with my free hand. "Thanks for letting me buy you lunch," I whisper against her mouth.

She makes a warm sound deep in her throat. The sound vibrates beneath my fingertips. I brush my thumb over her pulse, and it scatters under my touch. I want to feel her tremble. I want to pull her close and feel her body against mine, skin to skin, but I'm afraid to rush her. Instead, I nibble on her bottom lip. A gentle tug. She rewards me with a gasp, a quick rush of breath

against my skin.

Then she slips her fingers free of mine and slides her arms around my neck. She threads them through my hair, her nails scraping against my scalp. "I enjoyed it very much," she whispers, a moment before she opens completely for me.

Her tongue slides against mine, questioning, tasting. My hands slide down her back, pressing her closer to me. Her back is strong and slim. I love the feel of her soft strength against me. I want to be alone with her. To explore her body, the hard and soft contours. To discover where she likes to be touched. I want to feel her fingers on my skin.

I still then, ceasing my exploration. That would mean showing her my scars.

I'm not ashamed of them. I long ago made peace with how they came to be and what they mean for the rest of my life.

But I'm not sure I want to answer those questions yet. My fingers tighten on her lower back. She moans quietly into my mouth and I forget about the scars on my body and am lost completely in the taste and touch of her. Her nails dig into my skin and all I can feel is her, everywhere.

I'm not a warrior monk. I've been around the block a time or two, but there is nothing like feeling Beth pressed against me, her body swaying in time with mine.

"God but you can kiss," she murmurs.

"I can get used to being called God." Because I can't possibly think of anything cornier to say.

She laughs and it's like warmth and sunshine against my soul. Yeah, maybe I was a little bit of a poet in another life. A bad one but hey.

"Thank you very much for lunch."

"I think I'd like to see about taking you for dessert."

"Sad trombone noise," she says, but she's smiling and everything is right in my world. "I'm really glad I'm not here because of your strength in pick-up lines."

"We all have weaknesses," I say. But I haven't let her go, and her body is still pressed to mine. I want to keep her there, to protect her and shelter her from the reality of whatever she's getting ready to face with her dad.

In truth, I'm not sure I'm in any shape to have anyone in my life, but Beth is too tempting to let my better judgment take hold. Her body against mine makes me feel alive for the first time since I came home from the war. In her arms, I've found a place I fit, that feels right.

I slip my hand beneath her prim sweater and run my thumb down the center line of her spine. She shivers, but doesn't pull away. Her nails massage my scalp. I trace the same line over her skin. She makes that warm noise in her throat again. I press my lips to the spot.

"I wish we had more time." She tilts her head to one side in an offering that is so damn sexy, I'm ready to beg her to come back to my place with me.

I've got a sudden blinding fantasy of her naked in front of me, her back arched beneath my touch. I want to run my hands over her smooth skin and soothe the tension from her muscles until she turns to liquid in my arms.

"But duty calls."

She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Thank you for understanding."

I cup her face then because she sounds so sad it almost breaks me. "I admire you for what you're doing. A lot of people wouldn't."

"My dad gave up everything for me to be here in this program," she says. "I won't walk away from him just because things get tough."

I can't help but wonder what everything means, but I don't push her on it. I suddenly want her to trust me enough to tell me about it. I'm curious about her dad. About a man who could raise a daughter as steadfast and loyal as Beth is.

I kiss her then because I'm falling. Hard. And there will be no soft landing for me at the end of this.

Chapter Ten

Beth

He leaves me at the same address as before. I'm not ready to show him the full reality of my life. Maybe that makes me a coward, but I'm enjoying the fantasy I'm building around Noah. That maybe he wouldn't let me down. That maybe he could be someone I could trust.

He said he admired me.

I walk quickly to the house I share with my dad.

It's not admirable to take care of someone you love. It's just what family does. My dad went to war to take care of me. He sacrificed his health so that I could go to college. Taking care of him when he's hurting is a small thing, considering the gifts he's given me.

The TV is off when I enter the house, but I hear the music from his bedroom.

It's never good when the music is playing. It means he's remembering. Maybe good times, maybe bad, but I never know what to do when he's facing the memories.

He's sitting in the old leather chair in the corner of his bedroom. He's showered and sober.

He smiles sadly when he sees me. His face is worn and lined, but he's still the most handsome man I know. His dark hair is greying at the temples, and he's not as big as I remember him from when I was little. But right now, when he smiles and he's all there, I smile back because, in that moment, I've got my dad back.

I know it won't last. The pain meds will take him away again soon enough, and I know that as soon as he tries to stand, the pain will tear at him all over again.

But I'll still have that moment when he's relatively sober and he hasn't moved yet so the pain isn't overwhelming him.

"You're up."

"Mostly," he says. "How's school?"

"Really good." Because it is. I enjoy school so much more than I did in high school. I truly love my classes. "You doing okay?"

He shrugs. "Well, I got my pants on by myself so that's always a plus." He looks a little sheepish like he always does. I've had to put his pants on him before. "I could use some help with my shoes though."

"Sure thing."

I find his boots near the edge of the bed where I'd put them the last time I took them off. Kneeling down in front of him, I pull his socks on first, then slip his feet, one after the other, into his boots. I double knot them because I know if they come untied, he gets annoyed. Plus, any sudden movements caused by stepping on an untied lace could cause him to black out from the pain.

We're going to take the car. I don't drive it often because well, gas costs money we don't have. And, well, there's parking at the hospital. Add in that the idea of putting him on public transport to the ER involves too much pain and uncertainty and it's just easier to drive him. When it's just me, I tend to take the bus.

His mouth is pressed into a tight, flat line. I know he's hurting and I hate it. I hate the VA for being incompetent in treating him. I hate whoever said his injuries weren't service related. Just a few more percentage points on his disability and things might have been dramatically different.

I stand and offer him my hands. "Ready?"

He takes a deep breath. "Not really."

"Can I get you anything first?"

"This is one of those times where I wish I could find something funny to say. The reality is that I just don't want to move." There's resignation in his voice. We've done this drill one too many times.

He's got to psych himself up to face the pain. Anyone who ever says back pain is just people making shit up has never seen what it does to someone. And the people who do fake it deserve a special place in hell because they take appointments from people like my dad, who need them.

He's not faking. God but I wish he was. There have been too many times, though, when he's tried to pretend he's not hurting.

It's not a good thing to see your father on his hands and knees in the kitchen because he can't get to his feet. It's terrifying when you're sixteen years old and you don't know what to do.

I learned, though. Just like I learned that right now, I need to let him find the courage to stand up. I can't rush this.

All I can do is stand there and wait for my dad to take my hands.

Then I'll lean back and help pull him to his feet. I'll slide beneath his arm and help hold him upright while the pain passes.

Then we'll shuffle out to the car. He'll slowly lower himself into the passenger seat, and I'll help him swing his legs inside. I'll drive carefully to the ER where they'll check us in.

And then the real anger management will start. Because they'll pull up the bills we haven't paid. And ask about insurance that he doesn't have. And I'll be frustrated and angry because all they'll do is get him stabilized. They won't treat him because they're not required to.

But all of that comes after.

First, my dad has to take my hands.

Noah

Part of me wants to go with her to the hospital.

But I hate hospitals more than I hate snakes and spiders and being caught in small dark places.

Even if I went with her, I'd be next to useless. I'd have to double up on the anxiety meds just to walk through the door and that's not counting what I'd have to do to stay there for longer than a few minutes. Yeah, me and hospitals have some issues.

It's not like hospitals don't send me Christmas cards or anything like that. It's just that I really hate hospitals.

I need to get my homework done and prepare for our tutoring session tomorrow. I know Beth's not going to look at me like I'm some kind of Neanderthal mouth breather, but I still don't want to be a complete imbecile in front of her.

I've got some pride, after all. Just a little bit. You tend to lose a lot when you spend any quality time in a hospital. Tubes and nurses and needles do a number on any dignity you've got left. Who needs self-respect, anyway?

I love the silence of my place. I take my medication, the one that will wind me down but not too much. It's not time for sleep yet. Then I settle into my homework.

Except that my phone vibrates on the table next to me.

Hey we're meeting up at The Pint.

I frown. We?

Me, Caleb and Nathan. Nathan is celebrating or some shit.

What's he celebrating?

No clue. Quit bitching and just meet us there.

I have homework. I need to get it done, but I figure I can meet the guys for burgers and beer. Well, maybe not beer. Not really willing to go down the fun little wormhole of beer and anti-anxiety medication. I did that a couple of times. And the few memories I have involve police.

Too many people have pulled too many strings for me to be here for me to screw it up. I text Josh that I'll be there in a bit and get one of my assignments done. I crack open the stats homework, but my eyes cross at confidence intervals.

Beth will help make that clear tomorrow. I finish my reflection essay for ethics. I'll reread it later to make sure it's at least marginally coherent. Then I grab my keys and head into the downtown area where the old tobacco mills have been repurposed into luxury apartments and a foodie paradise. Gentrification at its finest.

I'm not so unaware of the history of the area not to notice the clear lines of demarcation between the problem areas of town and the newly upscale areas. You don't have to be a local to see it. It's stark and there are few areas that serve as bridging areas. Streets are either well off or poor.

The Pint is a microbrewery and there is so much hipster essence vibrating off the walls, I'm sure the guys have picked the wrong place. It's a far cry from Scruffy Murphy's on Broadway where I used to mix it up with guys in the Ranger Training Brigade. The Pint stays open all night, transitioning from a bar to a diner in the early morning. It's a strange mixture of businesses, but it works.

"Slim pickings on bars?" I ask, slapping Josh on the shoulder.

"Wait 'til you have the summer ale before you complain," he says.

I get a beer and pull up a chair to the table. Nachos and potato skins appear magically from the kitchen. Josh is right. The summer ale is awesome.

"What's the occasion?"

Nathan raises a beer. "To lost friends."

Ah, shit. This isn't a celebration. I feel like stabbing Josh for not warning me about this. I don't want to commiserate over people I don't know. I've got enough of my own bad memories.

Caleb raises his glass and I do the same. Solidarity and all that. You never leave a buddy alone when nights like this happen. I wish I didn't understand that. Caleb and Nathan had been deployed together, apparently. "Big firefight outside of Ramadi when we were not fighting in Anbar." Caleb makes air quotes around "not fighting." "Nathan always takes the anniversary hard. Figured I'd get you two sticks in the mud out to help me run herd on him tonight."

Nathan is already well in the bag. The fact that Caleb is looking out for him tonight makes me respect Caleb, at least a little bit.

Nathan leans in a little closer. "You know what pisses me off?" He's slurring. "The fact that all these fucking pussies in this goddamned place have no idea what we've sacrificed for them."

A big guy sporting a thick black beard and trademark hipster glasses looks over at the pussies comment. Both arms are covered in full-sleeve tattoos. And they're big arms. A hipster who likes the gym, apparently. Ah hell. Scruffy Murph's it isn't, but clearly, Nathan running his mouth isn't going to go unobserved. I hold up a hand to Glasses. "He's having a bad night."

"Clearly." And Glasses is German. Excellent. Never met a German who didn't appreciate a

good bar fight, but I'm hoping that maybe hipster Germans are different from the guys who hang out in the fest tents at Oktoberfest.

Hopefully, it won't come to that.

But Nathan is not going to simply drown the memories. And as he gets down and dirty with his, some of my own decide to come out and play.

Jack Johnson's "Flake" comes on. My throat closes off, and I take a sip of the beer. It's impossible to swallow. I can smell the fucking sand again. It got into all the nooks and crannies but right now, I can feel it burning into my cheek again as I lay face down on the ground. The rocket fire keeps coming and through it all, "Flake" keeps playing on my iPod as I pray that I won't die beneath a pile of concrete and debris in this shithole country.

I knock back another pull from the beer. Not a pleasant memory, that's for damn sure. But not much else I can do beyond ride the wave until it decides to leave me alone. Until next time. Or the time after that.

Because it's a funny thing about going to war. It never leaves you alone for long. It's always there. Lurking. Waiting. Skulking in the dark.

And as I sit here with Nathan and Caleb and Josh, it dawns on me why I feel comfortable with them in a way that I haven't felt around most of my classmates.

They've been there. They get it.

I take another pull off my beer and wonder how things are going for Beth at the hospital with her dad. I wonder if her dad has nights like this where the memories come out and play and all you can do is sit back and hope they'll eventually leave you alone again.

I want to text her. To see how she's doing.

But I don't. Because I'm off kilter enough to know that I shouldn't be around people tonight, and Beth doesn't need to put up with my shit.

I'll take a cab home later. My homework will have to wait.

Because it looks like I'm crawling into the bottle with Nathan and Caleb and Josh.

Chapter Eleven

Beth

I'm trying not to cry. I'm so angry I could scream, but there is little that moves an already unsympathetic nurse like calling her names for something that is completely not her fault.

"We can inject his back, but we can't give him any more of his current pain medication," she tells me.

"He doesn't have an appointment for another week. What is he supposed to do?" My voice is level, and I'm proud of myself. It's a small victory in a losing fight.

"I can give him prednisone. It's a steroid that will help with the swelling. And I can do some muscle relaxers. But he's triggered our medication system. There's no way for the doc to override it and prescribe him Oxy."

"So he's supposed to just be in pain. What about withdrawals?"

"I'm sorry. I wish there were some other way to deal with this, but there isn't. The new system locks certain patients out, and your dad is one of them. The doctor will talk to you about alternative medications."

My throat locks up and my eyes burn. I do not want to cry in front of this woman. He's going to be hurting for more than a week until his appointment.

Which means he's going to crawl into the bottom of a bottle to manage the pain. I want to climb the walls and scream at the unfairness of it. But I don't because having a tantrum doesn't solve anything. It only gets security called.

In the end, I nod and ask what paperwork I need to fill out.

A few hours go by before they inject him. A little while after that, he's already moving better. I get his prescriptions, but it's still another hour before we can leave. It's almost midnight. An early night for us, all things considered.

I stop by the pharmacy and deal with the reality that I can't pick up everything the doc has prescribed. I take the prednisone and the Tramadol, leaving the Flexeril until I get paid. I hope. I'm not convinced the Tramadol is a good idea, but the doc staunchly refused to prescribe my dad's normal medication. They're not going to do much good, but the double dose of prednisone has worked a little bit in the past. Maybe it'll hold him over until next week. And hopefully the non-narcotic pain medication they gave him will hold him over and not send him into withdrawal.

He's stiff but able to get out of the car on his own. He leans on me as I help him into the house and into bed.

"You get your homework done?" he asks as I'm untying his boots.

"Most of it. I've still got a little bit to do."

"You should get some sleep. You're too young to work this hard."

I toss one boot on the floor, nudging it beneath the bed so he won't trip over it if he gets up in the middle of the night. "It's only temporary, Dad. Once I get a job and get us insurance, I'll take a break. Maybe a nice vacation to the beach after we get your back fixed."

I pour him a stiff drink and hand it to him. I know the injection won't last. The heating pad beneath his back is more to make me feel like I'm doing something for him than actually helping. But he gets cold at night so the heating pad helps there, too. Maybe someday, I'll be able to

afford to turn the heat up.

"Night, sugar bear," he says as I pull the blanket over his hips.

"Night, Daddy." My voice breaks, and I leave before he catches it.

I don't cry in front of my dad. I did once, right after mom left. I was sixteen and he was sitting at the kitchen table back when he could still do things like that. There had been a bottle of tequila in front of him, and he'd been tossing back shots. I'd cried and asked him when mom was coming home.

He'd offered me a shot. Said she wasn't so I should cry and get it all out of my system. She wasn't worth my tears.

I'd sat with him that night. Yeah, I tried the tequila. I don't know why people drink that stuff. It was terrible. I didn't get much beyond the burn at the tip of my tongue before I turned back to water.

But I never cried in front of him again after that.

It wasn't shame or anything. I just never wanted him to think any less of me. He'd gone to war. He'd done so much in life to make sure I would be able to follow my dream of going to school. If I couldn't handle a little stress in life, what kind of person did that make me?

I swipe at my eyes as I try to finish my ethics assignment. I'm not going to cry about this.

My dad came home. He's alive when I have friends whose dads didn't. I'm not crying over some stupid policy and the mindless drones who enforce it like storm troopers.

Except that I am.

Hot tears spill down my cheeks, and I finally surrender. I cover my face with my hands. A single sob breaks free and I tamp it down. I don't want my dad to hear me in our tiny house.

But my heart aches tonight. Because he's hurting and there isn't anything I can do to fix it. I don't have that job yet that can get us insurance and money to pay for whatever surgery he needs that will fix his back so he won't constantly be in pain.

There has to be some way to fix it. The VA has scheduled appointments for surgeries. Surely that means they can do something, right?

The tears keep coming. I bite my hand to make them stop, but I can't. My chest is tight and tonight, it's all coming out. I find one of our dish towels and cover my mouth. Another sob breaks free and it hurts. It fucking hurts that I can't fix this.

That I might never be able to fix this. That my dad might spend the rest of his life in pain because I haven't been able to figure out the medical system that keeps him in pain. There has to be a better way but right now, I can't see my way out of the hopeless morass of the VA system.

I cover my face with the towel and let the tears come. Because I can't do anything else until they stop.

And I still have homework to do.

Noah

I make it home alive. I'm pretty sure I left the cabbie a good tip. I've got his card in my pocket so I can call him in the morning and he can take me back to wherever I left my truck.

I'm not really drunk. Just kind of fuzzy on several levels. Things feel thick, and I can't quite make my feet work right. But I finally make it through my front door, and I think I get it closed behind me.

Bed. There it is. I crawl into it and lay face down long ways. I suppose I should take my

shoes off, but they're at the other end of my body and that seems like a really big distance at the moment. I see my stats book on the chair. I have the sudden urge to know if Beth is awake.

I shouldn't text her. It's late, and she works so damn much. If I text her and she's not awake, I'll be the biggest dick for waking her up. I lower my head to my phone. Damn it I just want to hear her voice.

Memories suck. I want to hear her tell me about her dad and chase away the sound of that fucking song that haunts me.

I would have been fine if not for that damn song. And it's stuck in my head now, which makes matters worse.

Don't text her. Don't text her.

My phone vibrates in my hand. I don't dare hope that it's her. That would be more than a little freaking weird.

It's Josh. Make it home okay?

That is such a soldier thing to do. Checking on your buddy. It's embarrassing for me to admit how weird it was that there wasn't a phone roster handed out on the first day of class. No one was appointed class leader to make sure that everyone was accounted for. All the students were essentially on their own, and it was a completely foreign idea to me. No one needed to check on anyone else. I wasn't responsible for anyone but myself.

I have to admit that it made me feel a little useless. I made sergeant at twenty, which meant that I spent most of my brief life as an adult watching out for other people. Checking on their barracks rooms, making sure they were where they were supposed to be when they were supposed to be there. Making sure I had everyone accounted for after indirect fire hit our base.

Making sure everyone left was on a flight home when we left country. Counting people had become second nature to me - and now I didn't have to do it anymore. None of us did.

But there's good ol' Josh, checking on me. I was supposed to be the sober one. Not tonight, apparently.

My phone vibrates in my hand again.

Yep. In bed now. My thumbs feel fat and clumsy, and I have to squint to make sure I've typed what I meant to type. LT used to harp on us about the perils of drunk texting. It was part of his weekly safety briefing speech: don't put anything in a text that could be used against you in a court martial.

Sleep tight. Don't let the sand fleas bite.

Not funny.

Sand fleas were definitely not funny. Nasty little fuckers. Amazon.com must have made a small fortune shipping flea collars to us. Man didn't the commander flip out when he caught us wearing flea collars around our boots. He'd said the permethrin treatment should have worked fine. Yeah, well it hadn't, and we were getting tore up.

One of my soldiers had been evac'd back to the states with leishmaniasis, which had left us a man short in the stack for patrols. Things had gone to shit shortly after he'd left, too. Lucky bastard missed out on all of the fun stuff.

I lower my head to my forearms and let myself drift in a hazy fog. I'm going to pay for this tomorrow. I've never been a big drinker, so when I do drink, I pay for it. I was never one of those guys who could stay out until PT formation, puke on the run and keep going. I a nonfunctioning ball of misery when I'm hung over; there's was no other way to put it.

My phone vibrates in my hand again. A phone call, not a text. I squint but can't read the number so I just hit the green icon.

"Y'allo." Silence. I squint and make out the number. Oh shit, it's Beth. "Hey," I say, hoping that I'm not slurring.

"Were you sleeping?"

"Nope, just lying here." Mostly the truth. I don't think sleep is in my future any time soon tonight. More like drifting on fuzzy clouds until my alarm goes off. "How's your dad?"

Silence again. "Beth?"

"He's okay. They gave us a really hard time about his medication. I feel like it was a waste of a trip."

"Are you all right?"

"I...Not really."

Tomorrow, part of me will be really fucking happy that she called me tonight. Right now, though, another part of me hurts for her. I can hear the pain, the fatigue in her voice. "Is there anything I can do?"

A quiet sigh. "I don't know. I just...I didn't want to sit here alone in the dark."

Fuck fuck fuck. I could go to her if I hadn't been drinking. I don't want to tell her that though. I've let her down. Left her alone.

Maybe there's another way.

"Did I ever tell you about the time we filmed a music video downrange?"

A choked sound that I hope is a laugh. "No I don't think you mentioned it."

"Yeah. You know that 'Call Me Maybe' song?"

"How could I not?"

"We totally did choreography and everything. LT put it up on YouTube but then it went viral and the brigade commander found out about it. He was not amused."

She laughs and some of the tension around my heart eases off a bit. "What happened?"

"Well, LT got a sharply worded ass-chewing while the rest of us got the sergeant major's boot in our collective asses along with extra guard duty."

"I don't suppose this video has been immortalized anywhere? It sounds like something my dad would like."

"You don't want to check out my dancing skills? I was on top of a container in PT shorts and a reflective belt with three other dudes doing a line dance."

She's laughing again and I smile. "I think I like the image of you as business school student. I'm not sure what seeing you dancing would do to my impression of you."

"It's very masculine, I swear." I'm resting my head against my forearm, holding the phone to my ear. It's kind of surreal, lying there in the dark, talking to her as the world spins slowly beneath me.

"Noah?"

"Hmmm?"

"Thanks for making me laugh."

My eyes burn suddenly. Her words make me think she hasn't had a reason to laugh in a long, long time. I know the feeling.

"Any time. I'm full of stories about me dancing in Iraq."

She makes that warm sound that I'm starting to love. "Good night, Noah," she whispers.

"Good night, Beth."

The silence is back, but now, it's a good silence. The song is gone from my head, replaced with a happier memory of that fucked up deployment and the comforting thought that Beth called me tonight when she needed someone.

That alone is worth the price I will pay for the hangover tomorrow.

Chapter Twelve

Beth

The sun is already up when I finally slide out of bed. It was a long night. I'm not sure why I called Noah last night, but I'm glad I did. I try to picture him dancing on top of a shipping container and can't quite create the image but it makes me smile.

I slip a sweatshirt on over my tank top and head into the kitchen.

I stop in the doorway. "Dad?"

He's upright, standing over the stove, cooking something that smells like a mixture of heaven and awesome. Because it is really hard to screw up just-add-water pancake mix out of a box. And I'm not entirely sure the mix isn't expired but I'm not about to say something and ruin the morning.

He waves a spatula in my direction. "I was hoping you'd be in bed a little longer."

"How are you upright?" He could barely move last night and now he's cooking breakfast?

"I have no idea what was in that shot last night but I'm mobile. I thought I'd cook my little girl some breakfast for taking such good care of her old man."

I walk over and put my arms around his waist. He kisses the top of my head and it feels good, so good to have my dad hug me. To have him fully in the room at the moment and not spaced out on pain medication.

I lean my head against his shoulder for a moment, hoping that this isn't a dream. "Last night was kind of rough," I finally say.

"Yeah." He leans his cheek against my head and I want to stay there forever. "Maybe this time, the meds will last a little longer and I'll actually get the surgery."

I pull away then. What I'm about to suggest is basically financial suicide but I can't come up with any other options. "What if we pay for the doctor and the surgery outright?"

He flips the pancake he's managed to mangle in the pan. It's a disaster, but I don't care. I sneak a look at the date on the box. Not expired. Winning all the way around.

"We can't afford that, sugar bear. And we probably don't have the credit, either. Something like that would break us."

We're already broken, but I don't tell him that. I've been handling the bills since Mom left. Dad's been too in and out of things to do it reliably, and after the first couple of times the electricity had been shut off while I was still in high school, I took over.

I don't tell him about the stack of unpaid bills in the box near the kitchen table. It doesn't do any good to make him worry about them.

I'll graduate in another year. Hopefully, get a job. Grad school was a possible option, but I'm pretty sure it's a long shot. A job is a better choice. Hopefully one that will enable us to pay down some of the debt. That will keep him from running out of medication.

"I don't like seeing you hurting like this, Dad."

"I know. Trust me, I don't like you seeing me like this, either. No parent wants their kid to have to take care of them." He slides the disaster of a pancake to a plate then starts another one. We don't have much by way of food, but we try to make what we've got last. Eggs, potatoes. There are about a dozen different ways to prepare them so that you get multiple days of food out of them.

You only get sick of certain foods when you have options. Most of the time, though, we don't run out of food. We have to be careful, though.

I've got to meet Noah for our tutoring appointment in a few hours. That'll be money I can use to pick up the rest of Dad's medicine on my way home from campus today.

"What are you going to do today?" I ask.

"See if the guys at the shop need any help."

When he's able, my dad works part-time for a computer repair shop near campus. It's an under-the-table job because he's not reliable enough to be there full-time, and he doesn't want to take a payroll slot away from someone who can.

He likes fixing things. Our kitchen table is a score he'd rescued from a yard sale several years ago. Before he'd gotten hurt, he'd stripped it down, patched it and refinished it. It is still in our kitchen, a little more worn than when I'd been little.

It's a reminder of what life had been before my dad went to war because he'd transferred his G.I. Bill to me and had incurred a service obligation. What life would be like again, once I figured out how to get his back fixed.

Breakfast is one of the few things he cooks and does well. The mangled and slightly burned pancakes are extra special today because it's been so long since he's been able to get up. I take my time, not wanting the morning to end.

Afraid that when I come home tonight, I'll see him once again on his back on the couch, unable to move because of the blinding pain.

I clean up after we eat, washing the dishes by hand and setting them to dry in the rack. It's an easy thing, spending time with my dad. We talk about nothing in particular.

I want to tell him about Noah, but I'm not sure how to broach the subject. Or what to even tell him. We aren't a thing. Yet. I don't think. Maybe we are.

Maybe some other time. Right now, Dad asks about my classes and I tell him I've got a job tutoring.

"Are you still working at the Baywater?"

"Yeah."

"That's a lot on you, honey."

I shrug. "It's okay. I've got an easy class load this semester." Which is only partially true. Writing papers is easy for me, and my two main classes require weekly reaction assignments and an end of term assignment. No exams, which is nice. I'm TAing Stats for Professor Blake and earning credit in my minor.

It isn't terrible. And besides, I think I'm going to enjoy tutoring Noah a lot more than I thought I was going to.

My perceptions of him as a former soldier were completely off base. Now, though, I don't know how to get back on normal footing with him.

Maybe we established a new normal last night. It was certainly going to be interesting. I get ready and kiss my dad good-bye. Hoping that the medication will last more than a few hours. Because it was nice, really nice, having my dad back, even if it was only for a little bit.

It is a reminder of why I am working so hard.

Because I want my dad back.

Noah

I'm nervous and the anxiety medication isn't doing its trick today. I double up an hour before I'm supposed to meet Beth, after picking up my truck before it kicks in, so I'm not driving while fuzzy. It doesn't get me high but sometimes, my reaction to a double dose isn't what I expect. I find a parking spot off campus on the side of the road near some luxury apartments. I suppose if you've got the money to pay for school at this place, you can put your kid up in a nice place, too.

Not the kind of problems I ever expected to have. I'm not broke, but I damn sure don't have two grand a month sitting around for a place like that. Besides, I'm not sure I'd want to live this close to other people.

I shoulder my bag and head out at a good clip toward campus. I'm not far from the business school but it's about a twenty-minute walk to the library where I'm supposed to meet Beth.

I want to know how she's doing after last night.

I'm dying to see her again.

I woke up this morning, my body tight and tense. I'd drifted into that space between sleeping and waking, and damn if I hadn't imagined pulling Beth into bed with me. I wanted her hands on my body, her head on my shoulder. I wanted to feel her beneath me. Her breath on my skin.

Hell, I'm already reacting to the idea of seeing her again. I need to get my head straight before she thinks I'm some kind of walking erection.

I keep circling around the thought that she called me last night. It was a call that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with something else. Something a hell of a lot more powerful than a quick screw.

I pass beneath a bridge. In the shadows, I see a couple pressed together in the darkness. An erotic, hidden embrace. My brain detours to thinking about Beth like that. Open in my arms in a stolen moment. Letting my hands caress her skin.

I rub my hand over my mouth. It's a good thing I've got the walk to try and pull my thoughts together. I can't get the couple out of my mind, though. They're burned into my memory. His hand had been just there at the front of her pants, his thumb caressing her hipbone. There had been an eagerness in the way she'd arched into his touch.

Would Beth let me touch her like that? Would she make that little sound in her throat that I loved if I kissed her neck? Christ, I'm a disaster. At this rate, the walk to the library was getting me more wound up, not less.

I stuff my hands into my pockets, wishing the medication would kick in to distract me from the aching need that is growing harder to ignore. It's been too long since I've gone out and gotten a little bit wild. I stopped hooking up when my phone started ringing in the middle of the night with my troops' problems. I mean, I'm not a saint by any stretch of the imagination but it's been a while for me, to say the least. I need to build up my stamina up before I see about taking Beth Lamont someplace alone. There is something about Beth that makes me want to make sure I do things right, and being quick on the trigger isn't going to leave a good impression.

Just tasting her made me want more than I've allowed myself to want since I've come home. I've been going through the motions since I started school. I am here because other people want me to be here, not because I think I belong.

LT helped get me here. I owe it to him to finish and I will. I met Josh and Caleb and Nathan because he would have wanted me to, and I am glad I did. They are people who speak my language. I don't know where else I might have wanted to be, but I am here now for whatever reason.

And that reason is starting to feel like Beth.

I pause at a crosswalk and sway on my feet a little bit as the meds slam into me. Finally, the

blurry, familiar feeling is back. The nervous knot in my belly loosens, and my thoughts stop racing around the hamster wheel in my head like I am on some kind of crazy hyper loop.

Things slow down, and it feels like they are back to normal.

Back to Beth.

A slow smile spreads across my lips as I walk into the library. She's waiting for me near the circulation desk. She's wearing a simple black sweater and slim pants that make her legs go on for miles. Her hair is pinned at the base of her neck, and her small hoop earrings are guaranteed to drive me wild through the entire session.

Her lips part a little when she sees me. I hope that's a good thing.

"Hi," I say. And how's that for eloquent and charming?

"Hey."

"How's your dad?"

"He's good." Her voice is throaty and low. I want to take her someplace private. I'm not sure I can be alone with her in a public space.

I want to run my hands down her thighs.

Fuck, how am I supposed to concentrate on statistics?

"I reserved a carrel for us to use."

"What's a carrel?"

"Study room. I figure we could use it as a place to keep your books and such, now that you're walking to campus."

My mouth is suddenly dry. "Is this like a private space?"

Her eyes darken a little, and she offers a slight nod.

I'm speechless. And more than a little aroused.

Chapter Thirteen

Beth

I want this. I don't know how to say the words, so I hope in some weird way that Noah is a mind reader. I tell him about the carrel, and the way his eyes darken makes my skin tighten and burn. He understands what I've done.

The permission I've extended between us.

My body is warm as I lead him up the stairs to the second floor. I can feel his gaze on my back and hips as he follows me. I'm aching as I turn down the hallway that leads to the small room.

It's private, in that there are four walls and a door. The walls are paper thin. The policy says we have to use headphones if we're going to watch any videos.

I doubt we're going to be watching any videos.

And I don't have the slightest idea how we're going to get through his lesson today with the heat burning between us.

He was there for me last night. I called out of a stupid moment of weakness, and he made me laugh.

Now, I can't think of the laughter. I can only feel the heat as I key open the door and step inside.

He steps in behind me. He's there, almost at my back. I hear the faint click of the door as it closes. Noah doesn't move. I'm aware of every inch of his body in the almost space behind me. Every nerve ending is alive, crackling with energy. Heat pools between my thighs. I press them together to stop the ache, and the pressure only makes it worse.

"Is this your space?" he asks. His voice is ragged and thick. His breath is hot against my neck but still he doesn't touch me.

"Yes." I release a shuddering breath. I'm afraid to turn, to see the arousal in his eyes. "It's a policy violation to..."

"To what?" He skims his fingers over my neck, and I bite back a whimper. "To touch you?" He slides his fingers down my scattering pulse. "I've wanted to touch you since I first met you."

I close my eyes and tip my head a little, offering myself to him. He nibbles gently on my ear, his breath teasing my skin. I can't think of anything beyond the feel of his lips on my skin. Need is hammering wildly between my thighs. Never in my life have I been so aroused by such a simple touch.

He shifts then, pressing his big body into my back. His hand covers my mouth before my cry escapes. I want, oh God, how I want this. I want him. I grip his forearms, needing something to do with my hands. I'm barely standing at this point. I want to sink to my knees and take him down with me. He's hard and pressing against my back, rocking gently as he continues the assault on my throat. My ear. My soul.

"I want to do this right," he whispers. "I want to lay you down in my bed and strip your clothes off you piece by piece." I arch against him and can feel the hard length of him against the cleft of my ass. He slides one hand down the center seam of my body. Skimming the space between my breasts until his palm is flat against my belly. His hand is big and solid and rough, and I want him lower, lower. I shift, opening for him to touch me there, just there. "I want to feel

you come against my mouth."

Lower. Please lower. "Touch me." A harsh demand. A plea.

"Here?" His palm slides against the front of my heat, just above where I need him. I make a sound, spread a little further. Urging him silently to please touch me. "Say yes, Beth." A nip on my ear. "Please say yes."

"Yes."

He slides his hand down now, between my aching thighs. The pressure drives me that much closer to the edge. I'm wet. I can feel it through my thin pants. I know he can feel it. He presses hard against me, the heel of his palm caressing me where I'm swollen and wet for him.

"Can you come for me? If I touch you like this, can you come?"

He's whispering again, dirty things I've only read about. I rock against his hand. I want his skin on mine. I want to be skin to skin, flesh to flesh. I want to feel his heat against me. I want his fingers where I'm wet and aching.

But he simply continues his gentle assault. Winding me up higher and higher until I'm writhing against his hand, needing just a little more. My nails dig into his flesh. He turns my head until he captures my mouth with his and I'm making sounds that are lost on the breath between us.

And then it hits me, crashing over me until I'm nothing but trembling nerves firing over and over against the raw and sensitive flesh that he still has not touched skin to skin.

He's kissing me, bringing me back from the edge that I've tumbled over. Soft, petting caresses now. Tempered and tame, slowly bringing me down, back to earth.

I turn in his arms, unsteady against his solid length. I can do nothing more than rest my head against his neck and breathe for a moment, pulling myself back together.

And all the while, he's stroking my back, my hair, my arms. Like I'm the most precious thing in the world to him. I stand there for a moment, lost, forgetting everything but the feel of Noah Warren surrounding me, embracing me.

Holding me upright against the onslaught of sensation he has brought to life.

Noah

I'm destroyed by her reaction. I knew holding her would be too much, too powerful, but I had no idea how unrestrained, how wild she would be in my arms.

I was right to keep us both dressed. There is no way to do what I want with her. Not here when anyone can walk by the door and see in the tiny window.

She's trembling in my arms. I want badly to take her home with me. To bring her to my quiet place.

Slowly. I need to go slowly with her. Not just for her sake, but for mine, too.

This is new territory for me since I've been home. And Beth...Beth is worth the wait.

I lean back, cradling her face. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips swollen from mine. "God, but you're fucking beautiful."

"You're not so bad yourself." Her voice is like liquid honey, thick and rich with arousal. She brushes her lips against mine. "We really should get started on stats. I have to be to work in two hours."

The thought of her in that fitted white button-down shirt does something to my insides. I clear my throat and reach between us to adjust my pants. Her hand covers mine, sliding over the

back of my palm. It's an erotic embrace, something unexpected and sensual. She presses her hand against mine and the pressure against my erection is intense. I shift then, sliding her hand beneath mine so that she's cupping my cock. I'm so hard it hurts.

"Seems like that's going to be a distraction," she whispers.

My brain goes completely off the rails as I imagine her dropping to her knees in front of me. I squeeze her hand around my cock, trying to remember that once upon a time, I had more control than a horny teenager. That I had discipline and motivation and, holy hell, her hand sliding over my erection is driving me quietly insane.

"Can I pick you up when your shift is over?" Now is probably a terrible time for a blowjob joke. I can't summon the willpower to take her hand away. The gentle friction isn't enough. It's everything, the center of my whole world. I want more.

"I'd like that." A promise in those words, a promise that I cannot wait to unwrap slowly, so slowly.

She slips her hand up my belly and I immediately miss the warmth of her touch. "So. Stats?"

I nod, my mouth dry, my erection painful. I have no clue how I'm supposed to think about anything other than her naked and writhing in my arms, but there are probably worse problems to have.

She sits in one chair; I take the other. Our thighs are touching and we are shoulder to shoulder as we lean over my textbook.

She explains confidence intervals in a way that actually penetrates the sexual haze in my brain and makes sense. I do a couple of problems by hand, and she checks my work. I like having her watch me. Knowing that she's making sure I'm getting it right.

Sitting here and scratching out equations, I focus on the mental energy required to make sense of it. The reward is the gentle press of her thigh against mine. Not erotic at the moment. Comforting. Steadying.

Holding me upright when I could fall away amid the fear of failing, falling flat on my face. I'm working now, and the problems are clicking in a way they've never clicked before. Like the language is suddenly making sense.

She corrects me when I make a mistake, the tapered point of her fingertip gliding over my chicken scratch writing. I glance over at her. She's focused and serious Beth now. She meets my gaze, and her cheeks flush.

"I love seeing you blush." The truth, I decide, is probably the best track with her. Her flush deepens. "It's true. You've got this amazingly pale skin that turns this gorgeous pink." I lean closer because I cannot help myself. "I want to see how far down your body it goes."

She offers a throaty laugh then taps the paper. "Focus." But she's smiling, the first time I've really seen her smile since I've met her.

I do as she asks, and I work through the other problems she's assigned as extra work. I'm motivated now, not just to get them done and get them correct, but to get through them so maybe I can steal a few more moments of her time before she has to leave.

There are so many things competing for her. Her dad. Her work. School. I'm selfish enough to want my own time, my own space. More than a few hours a week of tutoring.

She's not there yet. Patience. I need a plan. I need to find a way to become part of the space in her life.

Because she is more than fire in my arms.

She's life. And I crave her more than breathing.

Chapter Fourteen

Beth

We actually managed to do his work. I'm kind of amazed that we accomplished anything but somehow it happened. I head to the pharmacy and pick up my dad's prescriptions with the money Noah pays me.

I don't let Noah drive me. He wants to, but his car is in the other direction off campus and I'm already halfway to work with the detour by the pharmacy. I promise to wait for him at the end of my shift. I'm not closing tonight, which means I'll be done by ten.

I call dad and check on him. He's short on words. It happens when he's neck deep in a project. My heart does a little flip that he's working. He'll be distracted for however long it takes him to fix the computer.

Which means that for once, I can steal a few minutes for myself and not worry that I need to rush home.

The good days - when he has them - are really, really good.

My heart is a little lighter. I had enough money for dad's medication. Even though it's not what he usually takes, I'm hopeful that with the injection, it might just keep the edge off the pain until his next appointment that, please God, won't be canceled.

I sail through my shift. Abby comes in and catches me smiling to myself.

"So what's his name?"

Part of me feels guilty that I'm so transparent. On the other hand, maybe I am a crappy friend for not sharing that there was something interesting happening in my life. She knows a little bit about my dad, but I don't tell her too much. I'm not ashamed, exactly, but I hate, hate the pity that usually accompanies people knowing.

Abby is one of my closest friends. The one I call in emergencies and who makes me laugh no matter what. She's gorgeous, with skin the color of rich coffee and beautiful natural curls. I'm jealous of her flawless complexion. She tells me she's jealous of the fact that I can go to the drug store for makeup and not have to spend a fortune on color-matched foundation.

We've been friends since we both started at the Baywater, and she adopted me. Yeah, I have to work through school but she's taught me how to blend in, even at work.

I flush a little bit, and even in the dimly lit hallway near the drinks, she catches me. "Oh, this is news." She leans in closer with a conspiratorial whisper. "Spill. Seriously. I haven't seen you this hot and bothered...ever, now that I think about it."

"Noah. A guy I'm tutoring in stats."

She shoots me her "yeah, right" expression. "Is 'stats' a euphemism for penis?"

I cover my laugh before our boss hears me and comes to investigate. "Well, it wasn't when it started but things have gotten a little...interesting." I breathe out. "He's picking me up after work."

Abby's eyes light up. "You have protection, right? You're not going to lose your damn mind and do something stupid?"

I pause because, no, I don't have any condoms. I'm on the pill for several reasons but still...

"Gotcha covered." She tugs me into the break room and pulls a discreet bag out of her purse.

"You carry these around?"

"Let's just say they're a holdover from my last relationship."

I frown at her. "Abby, you haven't been with Robert in six months."

She rolls her eyes. "It's not like they're expired. Sheesh. I just never got around to taking them out of my purse." She presses the small cloth bag into my hand. "Put them to good use."

I shake my head but slide them into my bag. Because she's right. We've both been careful since we got to school. Girls like us don't have the means to raise a baby and finish school. Babies are the end of any aspirations we might have for a better life through education.

She's watching me, waiting for me to answer the questions she has not asked.

"This is kind of serious for you, isn't it?" There's a sense of wonder in her voice.

"I don't know." An honest answer if nothing else.

She says nothing for a moment at the uncertainty in my voice. "I don't think I've ever seen you not sure about anything. So I think that means this is important." She brushes my hair off my shoulder. "He better be worth it."

There's a reason why I love Abby. I lower my head to her shoulder for a moment, letting myself absorb her strength and confidence. She's amazing in so many ways. I love her for watching out for me. It's nice to be worried about, for once, instead of being the one doing the worrying.

"I think he might be," I whisper. "I think we need to get back to work before Dave comes searching for us."

"He'll probably just inspect our shirts for the appropriate amount of tension across our tits."

She's not wrong.

We hit the floor, delivering drinks and food and chatting with clients. I manage not to screw up any orders even though my thoughts are a million miles away, on Noah.

I usually stay on for extra hours, needing the few more measly dollars I can scrape by for tips. But tonight is already a slow night, and if not for Abby distracting me with tales from table twelve, I die of boredom.

And as I'm heading for the door, Noah is there, standing in the foyer of the ridiculously expensive country club. He's wearing the same light blue button-down shirt from earlier. He's relaxed and more than a little ruffled.

It warms my soul that he's waiting for me.

Abby walks by. "Hey, Noah. Take care of our girl."

I flush as a slow smile crawls across his lips. "You were talking about me?"

"Maybe."

"Hopefully not about how terrible I am at stats."

I choke back a laugh and he lifts one eyebrow. "Abby asked if stats was a euphemism for something else. My mind just took a detour, that's all."

He steps into my space. Close enough that I can smell the soap on his skin. "I wonder if it's the same one mine just took."

I press my lips together as the warmth is back, spreading like a languid heat through my veins. "We'll have to find out, won't we?"

Noah

She's got time. When she tells me that she doesn't have to rush home, all the blood leaves my brain and goes to the not-rational place in my body.

She slides into the car and closes the door. "I, ah." Shit. Every bit of finesse has left me.

And she laughs at me a moment before she cups my cheek and kisses me. A soft, sucking kiss that sends rational thought over the edge and leaves nothing but sensation in its wake. "Can we go to your place for a little bit?"

"At least one of us is thinking clearly."

"I wouldn't go that far. I was distracted my entire shift."

She looks tired and gorgeous all at once.

"How far from campus do you live?"

"Twenty minutes. Small place off a big house around a farm pond."

"How do you afford it?"

"It's cheaper than living in town." I turn down the dark country road, leaving the city behind us.

She leans against the window, peering up at the bright night sky. "Wow. I forgot how bright the stars can be."

There's a ridiculous pleasure beneath my heart at the wonder in her voice. I don't want to remind her of life back in the city, but I can't help it. I have to do the responsible adult thing.

"Your dad's okay?"

She makes that warm sound in her throat. "Yeah. Whatever they injected him with last night has really made a difference." She sighs quietly. "I love it when he's up and not hurting." She tips her head toward me as I pull into the driveway of my small house. "He's fixing a computer right now. Lost in circuit boards and memory cards."

"He fixes computers?"

"When he can, yeah. He's pretty good at it. He'd almost gotten hired on at one of the local tech companies, but they opted not to because of his back."

I frown. "That doesn't sound right."

She shrugs, and her voice is resigned. "When the company pays your insurance and you've got a potentially expensive preexisting condition, it can absolutely disqualify you from a job."

Her words are like ice water in my veins. I've got a shitload of things that probably qualify as preexisting conditions.

And I am about to show her more than a few of them.

"That's why I'm in business school," she says. "It's my best shot at getting a job that will pay enough that I can pay for his treatment outright."

"I thought insurance couldn't deny people anymore."

She shakes her head then leans forward to peer out at my small house in the headlights of my old truck. Water from the pond reflects in the moonlight. "Wow, you weren't kidding about the farm pond."

"It's quiet out here."

"It's beautiful." There's a sense of wonder in her voice again, and I don't want to talk about insurance anymore.

I have this ridiculous fantasy of lying her down in the moonlight. I follow her out of the car, coming up behind her. I love the way she fits against me. Like her body is made for mine. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close.

She sighs into my arms, running her hands over my forearms. Her nails scrape my skin in a gentle caress.

"I've been thinking about you like this since earlier in the carrel." My lips are just near her ear. She shivers in my arms, and I'm ready to fucking melt into her. I can't screw this up.

She makes that sound again, that throaty purr deep in her chest, and I give into the temptation. I press my lips to the space where her throat meets her shoulder, that soft pale indent of skin.

Her nails dig into my skin a little harder when I suckle her there. And when she shifts to rock that gorgeous ass of hers against my cock, I'm damn near done right then and there.

"Can I take you inside?" We both know where this will go if we step inside. I want her to be sure. To be one hundred percent.

I'll stop if she changes her mind. I might cry a little. It's a completely un-masculine thing to do, but I might.

I pray that she says yes.

She rubs her hands down my arms. "I'd like that." A throaty whisper filled with promise.

The moon is bright enough, and my house is small enough that I don't need any lights to see where I'm going. I toe the door closed behind us, and then we're alone in my tiny kitchen. I turn her in my arms so I can feel her softness against me. She's curves and strength and poise and beauty all in one amazing package.

My fingers steal beneath that crisp white shirt. I feel her skin prickle beneath my touch. Slowly, I'm guiding her backward toward my bedroom. The house isn't that big. A few steps and we're there. The bed consumes the space, and for once, I'm eternally grateful I sprang for a bigger mattress when I moved here.

She's warm and soft in my arms, letting me set the pace, the tone.

One more step and I leave her there. She's standing in a moonbeam, bathed in silvery white light.

Her throat moves as she swallows, and I'm entranced by the motion and the shadows. I'm behind her, keeping her body bathed in the light. I'm barely touching her now, skimming my hands over her arms, barely brushing against the warm fabric of her blouse.

She lifts her hands to that first button. I capture them in mine. "Let me?"

A question, not a demand.

I guide her hands to her sides, finally connecting skin to skin. I slide my hands up her arms to that button. I push it through the tiny slit, revealing her pale, pale skin and the perfect curve of her breasts.

I'm tormenting myself with this, but I want to savor every moment of unwrapping her. I want her out of her head when I slide inside her. I want to be out of my own so I can focus completely on her.

Chapter Fifteen

Beth

My breath is locked in my throat as he undoes another button. My breasts are heavy and tight. I crave his touch. I want his hands on me. But he's deliberate and slow as he pushes another button open.

I open my eyes to discover there's a mirror over his dresser. And he's watching me. Heat floods between my thighs at the realization of what he's doing. It's erotic and sexual and pure sensuality all wrapped together.

He tugs the blouse open. I wish I had a bra that was sexy lace and flowers. It's simple cotton, but when he sees it I might as well be wearing the tiniest bikini. He traces his fingers over the edge of one cup. My nipple tightens at the promise of his touch. He tugs at the edge of my bra until it's finally free. The cool kiss of air is a shock from the loss of the warmth of my clothing.

Then he touches me. A gentle stroke of his thumb over my nipple. He's watching my reaction in the mirror, and I'm lost to the sensation, fascinated by watching his touch tease my body to awareness. My nipple tightens to a smaller bud as he strokes it. Again and again - each touch striking liquid heat between my thighs.

I squirm, shifting my legs apart just a little. Just enough to see his gaze drop down to where I want his touch. His hand, his mouth. Anything to relieve the pressure there.

He drags my shirt off my shoulders and my bra follows. I'm exposed and vulnerable now in the bright moonlight, but he hasn't taken his eyes off mine in the mirror. He's warm at my back as he slides his hands up my soft belly to cup the underswell of my breasts. Almost worshipful, he cups them, his thumbs stroking closer to my nipples.

"Noah."

His name is a prayer. He shifts then, his thumbs circling my nipples. Making them stiffen until I'm ready to beg him for more. I part my legs just a little more. An offering.

"Touch me." I can't manage anything more coherent than that.

He slips the hook free of the loop on my pants and slowly - so slowly - the rasp of the zipper exposes me. I don't know what I expect, but he pushes my pants down, down my hips. He kneels in front of me, sliding my feet free of the fabric.

I can't look in the mirror now. Not with him on his knees in front of me, close - so close, to what I want to ask for. I don't have the needy words to say what I want.

His palms are rough on my legs as he drags them up, higher, closer to my aching core. My thighs are wet and he hasn't even touched me there.

I'm watching him now. It's strangely erotic being completely naked in front of him while he's still fully clothed. His touch stops there, just at the seam of my body. He slides his thumb over my swollen clit, the barest touch. My hips jerk at the sensitive caress.

"Christ, you're wet," he whispers. "Can I touch you?" His questions are an erotic sensation all their own. I manage to nod, my body tight and tense with anticipation.

He urges me back until the backs of my thighs collide with his bed. I sink onto his blankets and sheets and I am surrounded by the scent of him. They're cool against the fire raging along my naked back. His hands brush my thighs farther apart and then his thumb is there again. Stroking. Gently petting me where I'm swollen and wet.

Then his mouth is on me. Soft and warm and wet. Suckling me where I'm most sensitive. I almost come off the bed as he torments me with his tongue. He's done nothing more than flick his tongue over me when I completely come apart in a burst of stunningly bright light and brilliant stars.

I'm vaguely aware of a sound like crinkling foil and then he's there, pressing into the swollen folds of my body. Somehow he's naked and we are skin to skin, flesh to flesh. I wrap my arms and legs around him and urge him closer. I want, I need, the fullness of him. Of Noah.

He's filling me, slowly, inch by inch, riding the shuddering waves of my body until he's deep and thick inside me.

I try to press my hands to his back but he threads his fingers with mine, dragging them over my head. And when he moves, I'm completely lost again in a sea of sensation and hyper arousal that takes me beyond consciousness and into a space where he ends and I begin.

He kisses me, and I am drowning in my taste and his, the pleasure of our bodies mingling on our tongues. The distant edge of orgasm comes roaring back, pulsing through my body with a violence that is utterly destructive, dragging me down and carrying him with me.

I'm gone from this plane of existence, carried into a space where there is only Noah. Only me. And together we crash into the void.

Noah

I hold her close when it's over. I don't know if the earth moved for her, but it damn near tilted on its axis for me.

Little shudders vibrate through her every so often. I can't tell if she's dozing, or if the remnants of her climax are still rippling through her.

It's endearing as nothing else is. I want her again. I want to keep her there in the cocoon of my bed and shelter her from the world. But I know she needs to get home.

And just like that, reality is back, for me at least. I'm reluctant to let her go. I'm terrified that this will be just a dream. A great dream, but one that I will miss when I wake up. I kiss her shoulder gently.

"I should get you home."

She nods. Her hair is cool silk on my damaged shoulder. She hasn't noticed the scars and I'm anxious to get dressed. If we can avoid that conversation today, it would be the perfect ending to a perfect day.

I'm not hiding exactly, but I'm not sure how to have the conversation yet. Not with someone who matters to me.

She slips from my bed into the bathroom. I take that moment to pull a sweatshirt over my head. I'm pulling on pants as she steps back into the room, her body gloriously naked.

"I want to remember you like this forever." She smiles as she steps into her clothing, piece by piece, reversing what I did earlier.

It's more erotic to watch her dress than it was to undress her. And when she's back in that simple white blouse and black pants, my fantasies are already at a fevered pitch, creatively spinning different ways to enjoy her.

I go to her now because it feels strange not to. I cup her face. "This isn't going to get awkward, is it?" I'm suddenly deeply insecure. It's supposed to be the girls that worry about this stuff, but I'm not so issue-free that the thought hasn't occurred to me. What if I read this entire

situation wrong? What if this wasn't for her what it was for me?

"Well, we're not doing naked stats if that's what you're asking." Her lips twist into a teasing grin. "But no, it's not going to get awkward." She brushes her lips against mine. I capture her, holding her close, sipping and savoring her lips for another impossibly long moment.

"Will you be on campus tomorrow?"

"We have class, so yes."

"Can I see you?"

Her lips are back in that smile of hers. "Seeing how we're in the same class, I think so."

I pinch her butt for teasing. She yelps and ends up close enough that I can wrap my arms around her again. "I'll see you in ethics, Ms. Lamont."

"I'll see you in ethics, Mr. Warren."

I drive her home, my hands wandering over her thighs, her neck, her body. I can't keep them from wandering.

I kiss her hard when we stop in front of the same address I've left her at each time before.

"Think of me tonight?" she whispers.

"I don't know how I wouldn't."

She disappears into the darkness up the steps. I head back to the quiet of my small house.

I can smell her in my space now. On my sheets. Part of her is still with me.

I'm tempted, so tempted not to take the sleeping pill tonight. So tempted to sink into my sheets and try, just once, to sleep with the memory of Beth's touch on my skin, the feel of her body pressed to mine.

But I'm not a fool. I know what happens if I don't sleep with Princess Ambien. The dreams are bad, the nightmares worse.

And I would hate to see Beth - something good and pure and right in my fucking world for once - dragged into my nightmares.

My only escape is my nightly surrender to the sleeping pills. I pretend to sleep a dreamless sleep. I wake up, rinse and repeat, and hope that maybe the next day won't involve so many pills.

But tonight, as the sleeping pill drags me down, I'm surrounded by Beth's scent. I pretend it's her body I'm folded around instead of the pillow. I imagine it's still warm from her skin. I breathe in deeply, inhaling the memory of her touch, the sensation of her hands on my skin, instead of the clawing, burning memories that usually wait for me in the dark.

Chapter Sixteen

Beth

I deliberately sit away from him in ethics class. I see him the moment I walk in. He's in the back against the wall, just like he was on that first day in stats. It feels like a lifetime ago. His eyes darken to deep brown as he watches me cross the classroom away from him. I feel provocative and aroused again. It's going to be hell to pay attention to moral decision-making knowing he's in the back of the class. I wonder if he'll be as distracted as I am.

I take a seat near the front on the opposite edge of the room. I know he can see me, but I'll be forced to pay attention because it would be too obvious if I turn around to ogle him in the crisp white shirt he is wearing today. It's harder now because I know the feeling of his skin against mine, the hard body that can bring so much heat and pleasure with the faintest touch.

The professor comes in and hands out an unexpected quiz on ontologies. I write furiously, grateful for the distraction behind me. It only works for a moment and then I'm finished, listening to the sound of my classmates' pens scratching on their papers.

I sneak a quick glance over my shoulder.

He lifts one brow in that way he does. Heat floods between my thighs again as I remember his mouth on me. Holy hell, I'm going to go up in flames. I shift in my seat again and face the front of the class.

I barely hear the lecture over the blood roaring through my veins. This is probably a good reason why I shouldn't date. It's hard as hell to pay attention when all the blood that's supposed to be in my brain is turning my body into a raging hormone.

"If I call your name, I need to see you after class," Professor Earl says.

That's unusual. Someone must have been caught cheating again. Sadly, it's an all too common a thing these days. Copying and pasting off the Internet simply isn't a smart tactic for passing classes, but time and again, people attempt it and invariably get caught.

"Ms. Lamont. Mr. Warren."

I catch Noah's gaze across the room as Professor Earl calls three more names. He is as confused as I am.

I hate being put on the spot. My stomach pitches, and I lift my bag onto my shoulder. I'm almost sick in two minutes flat.

Professor Earl hands me a small envelope of heavy card stock. That's the kind of thing I wouldn't have ever noticed had Abby not pointed out the difference in paper thickness to me. Heavy card stock meant quality. It means money.

"Morgan Banking and Trust wants to hire a paid intern. This is an invitation-only black tie event. I strongly suggest you treat this event as a prospective interview."

Leave it to Professor Earl to drop a bombshell like that in our laps and leave. He isn't exactly Mr. Personality but then again I suppose that's why he's in academia. Academics are known for their neuroses. Another thing I didn't know until Abby enlightened me.

My hands are shaking as I step into the hall. I feel, rather than see, Noah fall into step with me.

"Why don't you seem happy about this?" he asks as we step outside.

It must have started raining while we were in class. I'm in a daze. I barely feel the cool water

hitting my skin.

And then it stops.

Noah's holding a large black umbrella. I can't help but smile. "You're always prepared, aren't you?"

I'm aware of everything about him. The white shirt that has turned slightly transparent from the rain. The smell of his soap. My heartbeat centers in the space between my thighs. I'm aching for him once more. I want to let the world fall away, to ignore the flips my stomach is doing. I want to be wild for once.

"I try." His voice is throaty and warm. Heavy.

I step into his space. I need the contact to convince myself that this is real. That he's standing here in the rain with me. My fingers run over the hard line of his stomach.

"What are you doing?" His throat moves as he swallows hard. I lean in and press my lips to the spot where his pulse beats visibly beneath his skin. I'm vaguely aware that he's lowered the umbrella, shielding us from the rain and the view of passersby.

"Living dangerously," I whisper. "I would very much like to sneak off with you somewhere for a few minutes."

His free arm comes around my waist and I lean into him. Until then, I haven't realized how much I need the human contact. The touch of another body against mine. The feeling of his hand at the small of my back.

"You know this place better than I do."

I smile at the raw need in his voice. My fingers spasm against his chest a little.

"We're not going to get caught by the campus police or anything?" He sounds completely unworried.

"I hope not," I say. "I'm not exactly in tune with the criminal element around here." I run my fingers down the line of his throat. "But I've got an idea."

It's half-baked as ideas go. A place that I remember from freshman year: the basement of the old science building. Dark and silent, it was a place we'd been dared to run through as part of an initiation that the school didn't officially know about or sanction.

But it is the only place I can think of that would be abandoned at this time of day. And I don't want to wait.

Because I don't know how long I have before life pulls me back in, away from Noah and the glorious reprieve I have with him. And I am determined to enjoy it for as long as I can.

Noah

She surprises me. Then again, everything about Beth is surprising to me. She leads me away from the business school and toward the science building, a structure that looks like something out of a dark gothic movie like *The Crow*. Stone gargoyles watch us from their perches as she slips us through a side door.

We're in a wide open study area. Couches and chairs and a small coffee kiosk fill the space. It's sparsely populated, but she leads me down behind a small auditorium to an old door with an Exit Only sign above it.

I'm tight with anticipation as I follow her down the narrow staircase and into the dark. My heart slams against my ribs and I remember how much I fucking hate stairs like this. I'm ready to bolt, to flee back into the light and out of the fatal funnel when she turns to me, sliding her body

against mine.

Just like that, the panic morphs into a different kind of arousal. One where I'm hot and tight and tense, but it's pleasure running through my veins instead of fear.

She's fumbling with my pants. I hate that I'm wearing a belt in some vague attempt to pass as a respectable member of the business school. There's one exit light penetrating the darkness. It's shadows and sounds and the brush of fabric against skin.

I feel the cool kiss of air against my erection. Only for a moment and then her hand is circling me, squeezing gently. I close my eyes and let her do what she wants with me. I'm her slave. At that moment, I'd do anything she asked me to.

I want to drop to my knees and worship her. I want to turn her around and pin her to the wall. My thoughts are a tumbled erotic mess.

My brain short-circuits a little when she slides down my body.
"Holy shit."

She's on her knees in front of me. Her mouth is there, just there. She places a teasing kiss on my hip bone. She doesn't notice the scar. Or maybe she does and simply doesn't care. Her hand slips down my length again. I'm enthralled, watching her with the shadows and the light dancing over her face.

My breath locks in my throat. I fall forward, my arms braced on the cold cement to keep myself upright. She's teasing me. Her eyes sparkle in the dim light.

Then it happens. The gentlest kiss against the tip of my cock.

I'm going to die. That's all there is to it. Slowly, so slowly, she takes me into her mouth, sucking me hard enough that I damn near collapse. Light enough to leave me wanting more.

I'm frozen, rooted to the spot as she uses her mouth to drive me over the edge and into a place that is nothing but sensation and pleasure and darkness. I want to move, to thrust into her warm, moist mouth but I don't. I'm terrified of hurting her. Of ending the most blindingly brilliant pleasure I've ever felt.

I'm ready to come. Fuck, I'm right there. I manage to grip her shoulders and pull her upright. I'm tearing at her pants, struggling to get them down over her hips.

My hands are shaking as I try to get the condom on.

She's facing the concrete wall now, her arms over her head, her back arched. A silent, gorgeous offering. I touch her bare, swollen skin. She makes that sound for me as I stroke her where she's soaked for me.

I want to go slow. To draw out the pleasure. But the minute I sink into her, she arches against me. Urging me deeper. Rocking against me and trying to set her own pace.

"Hurry." A breathless command.

I'm lost in her. I reach between her thighs, stroking her. She's so fucking tight and wet and hot. It's a torment to pull out, only to find the sweetest pleasure again as I sink into her. Again. Over and over the pleasure builds.

And then she's shattering around me. Pulsing and squeezing my body, riding my hand with quiet gasps. There are no other sounds between us. The sensual, erotic slide of bodies. The slick heat melting the air around us. She's coming, and I'm losing my mind as I pump harder, harder.

Until my own release damn near kills me. I'm frozen, pulsing into her, losing a piece of my soul. Surrendering another piece of my heart.

Chapter Seventeen

Beth

He walks me to work. We're both more than a little unsteady after the basement. I'm not sure who is more off kilter. His hands are shaking as he kisses me.

"You okay?" I ask.

He's edgy now, and I'm not sure why. "Yeah." He tries to grin to hide it, but I'm not fooled. I'm pretty good at reading people. "You?"

"Very much so." He brushes his nose against mine. "I'll pick you up after work?"

I squeeze his fingers. I like this new normal we've established. "I'd like that."

"Let me know if I need to beat anybody up for getting too handsy." He tries to make a joke but it falls awkward and flat. I step closer to him. Press near enough that I can feel the heat of his body. "What's wrong?"

He swallows hard. Blinks rapidly a few times. His hand trembles against my waist. "I'll tell you some other time." He brushes his lips against mine. "Promise."

And then he's gone, leaving me with the echo of our pleasure tainted with a new worry.

I didn't think my heart was big enough to make room for another worry. I was wrong.

I don't have time, though, as I meet Abby in the staff room. "We're getting slammed tonight. Some big production by Morgan Banking Company."

I remember the invitation in my bag. "They're hiring an intern, apparently, but why are they here tonight?" I pull out the card and barely open it before Abby snatches it from me. Her eyes light up.

"Because they can be," she says like it's the most obvious thing in the world. She's not wrong. She hands me back the invitation. "You realize this is a very big deal, right?"

"I can't go."

She's more scandalized than the time I told her I didn't own any makeup beyond Cherry ChapStick.

"Of course you're going. This is invitation only. One of the professors had to put in a word for you to get this. You're going."

"I don't have anything even remotely close to black tie. And I damn sure don't have the money to spring for something in the next three days."

Abby's face lights up even more. She's devious, sometimes, and when she gets like this, it's hazardous to your health to get in her way. "Oh, we can fix all of those things."

"Abby, I love you, but I've seen your closet."

"My closet is filled with stylish, affordable designs that I find on sale. Yours, on the other hand, is a borderline tragedy despite my best efforts. But I'm not talking about raiding my closet. I know someone who can help us out."

"What? You've got three magic mice that are going to turn into coachmen?"

She smiles, and it's positively blinding. I cannot for the life of me understand why she hasn't found someone since she broke up with Robert. She's beautiful, smart, and strong and has a wicked sense of humor.

Maybe guys are intimidated by her. I know I was the first time I met her.

"What do you mean, you know someone?" I ask her again as we pass in the hall.

But she managed to get sucked into work and I didn't have a chance to ask her again how she was going to make me fit to present at the event. We are slammed busy. Which means it will hopefully be a good night for tips. When the alcohol flows at these events, so does the money. I hate being so mercenary about it, but there it is. It's easy to be cavalier about how money doesn't matter, but when your father's ability to walk hinges from one day to the next on whether you make good tips, it's not so simple.

I smile as an older gentleman hands me his empty scotch glass, and I take his order for another. Top shelf, too.

The tab is going to be steep on this one.

Abby leans into me. "That guy whose drink order you just took is the CEO of Morgan Banking. He's the Morgan in the name. Alistair. Very blue blood, if you get me. His family goes back to the first settlement here in the state."

"Nice."

"He's known for being a hard-ass. Pay attention to him tonight and take notes. There will be a quiz at the event on Friday."

It amazes me that Abby can even think that far ahead. I've got no idea how she's going to make me presentable, but hey, if she wants to play fairy godmother again, then who am I to argue? She's never been wrong before.

But now that she's pointed out Alistair, I'm watching more closely. Paying attention to the conversation as I collect glasses and deliver fresh drinks.

"The current interns are a bunch of spoiled brats." This from a shorter man standing to Alistair's right. "I swear if I hear Kiki giggle one more time, I'm going to commit hari-kari."

Alistair smiles tolerantly. "She's young, Tim. I think we were young once."

Tim snorts. "Young. Airhead, you mean. She screws up the simplest job. I have to check even her most basic analysis every time she turns one in. She needs to just find her husband and start practicing her homemaking skills. She's not a good fit for the office." Tim zeros in on me. My heart catches in my throat. "Can I help you?"

I clear my throat and play it cool. "I was just waiting to see if I could get you gentlemen anything else."

Tim turns to Alistair. "I bet this waitress is better at following directives and thinking on her feet than Kiki Millstone."

Alistair looks right at me but doesn't see me. I'm staff. I'm invisible to people like him. He hands me his glass while Tim moves on to another topic of conversation.

Well, that didn't go as planned. I've learned what Tim doesn't like but nothing about Alistair.

Guess I need to practice more skulking.

I hurry back toward the bar. Abby is plating hors d'oeuvres.

She talks fast, dumping information into my lap that I have no idea how I'm going to use. "He's got a granddaughter at Princeton who is majoring in sociology. She's his favorite. His son is disappointed in her. Wanted her to go to law school instead of becoming a bleeding heart liberal hippie. His words, not mine."

I'm amazed listening to her ramble on facts. "Alistair had a heart attack last year and is rumored to be dealing with his mortality. His son is far more cutthroat than he is."

"The son?"

Abby points to a sharp-dressed, dark-haired man in the corner. He's smooth and polished and wears the jacket like a second skin. He's casual without really trying. He belongs here. It

practically radiates off every gesture.

"Howard Alistair Morgan the Second. Named after his grandfather." She smiles at me. "Do you not know your local families? How have you worked here for so long and not been paying attention? Hell, there are buildings at this school named after these people."

Clearly, I have a lot of work to do between now and Friday.

But with Abby in my corner, I have a tiny seed of hope that maybe, just maybe, this might be the break I need to be able to take care of my dad.

Noah

I'm sitting in my truck, waiting for her to get off work. Staring at the invitation. Handwritten on cream-colored heavy paper. It reeks of wealth and privilege.

This is not something I want. It is not something I need. I know how I got this invitation. LT. It has to be. Guess he's still watching out for me, whether I want him to or not.

I don't even know how to spell "black tie". I suppose I'll hit up Josh and Caleb and Nathan. One of them should know. Caleb was a captain before he got out. He's from this kind of life.

I'm not sure what to make of this invitation. I don't want to work for the banks or the families that are tied into them. I want to do something...something that matters. I miss the army. The sense of purpose that I had. Now I'm just a college student like everyone else. My soldiers aren't calling me with their problems in the middle of the night. I don't get asked for advice or called to bail anyone out of jail.

When I was leaving, I couldn't wait to put all of that behind me. Shithead soldiers doing shithead things.

Now, though, I realize those were the best shitty times of my life. The stories. The memories.

Here on campus, there's nothing that compares to those times - to sitting around the ops tent at night bullshitting. Drinking bad coffee and pissing and moaning about foods we miss or the women we've left back home.

This invitation isn't for me. It's for the man LT believes I can be.

I'm not sure I can be that man. I'm not sure I can even attempt it.

I don't want to let him down.

But I don't know what else to do.

Beth steps out of the blinding light from the foyer. Her hair is loose around her shoulders. She scans the parking lot and I take a tiny, selfish pleasure in knowing that she is looking for me. I pull out of the darkness and roll down the passenger's side window. "Hey, babe. Need a ride?"

She laughs at my failed leering attempt and it leaves a bright spot on my soul, pushing aside the darkness and worry of my thoughts.

"How was work?"

She sinks into the seat next to me with an exhausted sigh. "Interesting, believe it or not." She points to my invitation on the dash. "I've got incredible information about our interviewer on Friday."

"Don't you worry that I might get the offer instead of you?"

Her expression suggests she hasn't even considered the possibility, but I have. I can't compete with her. I won't. "I wouldn't be a very good friend if I didn't tell you what I know, now would I? You need this job as much as I do."

Because I can't resist, I lean over, brushing my lips against hers. "I think I'm going to get obnoxious and make sure that you get the job."

"Don't you dare." But she's smiling because she doesn't think I'm serious.

It's the best idea I've had since this invitation fell into my lap. Make Beth look like the obvious choice. She'll fit in perfectly in their world. "You'll be an excellent intern."

"Clearly you don't understand the rules of the intern game and how they're different for guys and girls." When I say nothing, she continues, "I'll get my ass pinched a lot, called 'babe' and 'dollface' and have to smile and nod and not make a fuss. You'll get dragged out to bars and shown the way life is for men with power."

"That sounds painfully boring. I think I'd rather get my ass grabbed."

She closes her eyes as I start the truck and drive her home. "So what interesting tidbits did you learn?"

"Well, the old man wants to bring in fresh eyes to the internship. He's tired of hiring the kids of family friends, which is how the invite was even extended to us in the first place. He's been a big donor to the business school and figures this is a way to build relationships with new talent."

"God, I love it when you talk business. I imagine you in a pencil skirt with sexy glasses lecturing a boardroom."

She smiles at me in the darkness. "What is it with male fetishes about chicks in pencil skirts?"

"I don't have a pencil skirt fetish. I have a Beth in a pencil skirt fetish. See the difference? Smart and sexy in the same package."

"You sweet talker. You're good at this."

"What's that?"

"Making a girl feel special."

I stop in front of the house. The lights are out again. It dawns on me that they're never on. I lean over, cupping her face. "That's easy. Because you are."

I kiss her now because there's nothing else in the entire world that I want to do instead. Even the insidious thoughts about the next pill take a backseat to tasting her, slow and easy. I could spend the rest of my life kissing her.

My throat locks up, and I pull away suddenly. I'm ashamed of the confusion I've put in her eyes. "Sorry," I mumble. But I don't have a good excuse for my panic. It's just there, squeezing my chest until I can barely see beyond the black spots from lack of air.

"What?" Her hand on my forearm. Gentle. Steady. A sensation of light in the bleak darkness that's trying to drag me under.

I want to tell her. About the dark. About the pain. About the pills chasing everything away. I want to tell her how alive she makes me feel.

But doing that means I have to admit how dead I've felt for so long. Since before I came home. Since before LT made me promise I'd go to school here if he got me in.

I've been underwater. Barely breathing. And with Beth, I can really feel and it is overwhelming me.

And the rest of my life suddenly doesn't seem like something heavy and thick that I have to slog through. I suddenly very much want to figure out how to really live again.

Because if there's a chance, even the slightest chance, that she might be a part of my life next week, next year, then I..

I've got to get my shit together.

Chapter Eighteen

Beth

For the first time since I've met him, I'm worried that there is more to Noah than he's letting on. I'm tired and keyed up all at once. I walk home, unafraid on familiar streets, listening to music on the ancient iPod that Dad bought me five years ago. It's pretty much only good for music these days. They stopped updating this version a year or so ago.

But right now, I need the music to tune out the worry.

Dad left the light on for me. That's a good sign. I'm hopeful for the first time in forever. Maybe I've got a shot at this internship. Paid internships are so rare, they're like a rainbow-colored unicorn. The fact that they're recruiting juniors and not seniors...everything about this feels like it's in the too-good-to-be-true category. I've learned a lot of hard lessons about that sort of thing over the years.

Like the guy who promised he loved me for me. Until I showed him the house I shared with my father. Until he saw the reality of the life I had no intention of running away from. I would not abandon my dad. I hate even thinking about him. I've put him in the same category as Voldemort – he who shall not be named.

He abandoned the relationship so fast my head spun. Abby had been my rock during that harsh episode. She'd set me up with one of her friends, but the chemistry hadn't been there. Add in that her friend had been gay and trying to make me feel better - the whole thing had been a disaster. But I still loved Abby for trying. And Graham had become a close friend.

My dad is awake but things aren't great. The vodka bottle is on the counter.

The light is on in the bathroom.

"Dad?"

"Yeah."

I'm suspicious. He doesn't sound like he's half in the bag, but there had been a lot more vodka than what's left.

He steps out of the bathroom. He's moving fine.

"What the heck was in that shot?"

"I don't know but I haven't felt like this in years." He's smiling, really smiling.

The kind of idiot smile I wear when I think about Noah. "Dad, are you seeing someone?" I ask slowly.

He rotates his jaw for a moment, considering his words. "Not exactly. Remember the nurse from the other night?"

The hospital is a blur of forms and of placating faceless nurses and orderlies. "No?" I'm confused and it's not a feeling I'm enjoying.

"Anyway, she came by to check on me yesterday after you left for school."

"A nurse. Made a house call. What is this? Dr. Quinn?"

I'm irritated, and I can't explain why. I should be happy my dad is feeling better. Even happier that someone stopped by and checked on him. But it's not sitting right. I can't summon anything but wariness about what's going on. I've been taking care of my dad for as long as I can remember. This...this feels like loss.

I'm just tired. I shouldn't be overreacting like this. I just need sleep and everything will be

better in the morning.

But he continues, and the story gets even more fantastic.

"Anyway, Sally came by and checked on me. And we went to lunch since I was actually upright and mobile." He runs his hand through his hair. "She came by tonight, and we had a couple drinks."

My dad is acting like a goofy kid, and I'm the overprotective parent. I want to switch roles. I want to be the kid he worries about. "I was worried when I saw the alcohol. That maybe the shot had worn off."

He stills then. "It's only a matter of time, isn't it?" He scrubs his hands over his face. "Maybe it'll stick until my appointment."

"If you have the appointment."

"Here's hoping."

I swallow the lump of emotion in my throat and cross the room, hugging him quickly.

"You okay, sugar bear?"

"I'm fine, Dad. I've got an event I've got to go to Friday. I'm interviewing for a paid internship." I don't tell him that it's a big deal. I don't want to get his, or more accurately my, hopes up.

"You'll knock it out of the park. I'm sure of it." He kisses the top of my head. I want to tell him about Noah. I want to ask him what I should be worried about with Noah being a soldier.

But instead, I just stand there and hug my dad. Because moments like this are too fleeting, and I'm always afraid that today might be the last day I'm with him.

I can't explain my fear. It's not rational. It's not something I can turn off.

But I remember the first time I almost lost him. The day I realized that I had to be the adult in our family because the pain overwhelmed him.

It's a terrible thing to call 911 on your dad.

So when the good days come, I hold onto them with everything I am. Because I know that they're not going to last.

I crawl into bed later and grade the assignments from the stats homework. Our neighbor's Internet connection is working tonight. Some days I can access it, other days I can't. Tonight is one of the good nights. Otherwise, I would have to wait to get the campus WiFi.

Grading circles my thoughts back to Noah and the nagging worry that something is off. Maybe it's just me being paranoid.

But it isn't. He pulled away. He'd been sweet and funny one moment, and the next, he'd been distant. Not cold, exactly, but the warmth I'd expected from him was gone.

I wish my phone would ring. I don't care that I'm over my minutes for the month; I just wish he would call. Wish I could hear his voice and he would make me laugh like he did the other night.

Something changed tonight, and I have no idea what that means for our relationship.

Or if there will still be a relationship tomorrow.

Noah

It's hell knowing that you're hurting someone you care about. I saw the worry in Beth's eyes last night when I left her. The confusion that I, and I alone, was responsible for.

So when I cancel our appointment for tutoring today, I know there are a thousand and one

unanswered questions I'm leaving in the void.

When I call, the school clinic to set up an establish care appointment, I am shocked that they can get me in today. Guess that's what happens when you live in an area known for one of the highest doctor-to-patient ratios. Beats the hell out of calling Womack down at Bragg and waiting six weeks for an initial appointment.

My hands are shaking by the time I get screened and led back to the doctor's office. The nurse has me strip down to my boxers and put on one of those thin paper gowns that are supposed to preserve your dignity. I sit on the exam room table for what feels like forever, and my anxiety is one heartbeat away from a full-blown panic attack.

My meds are out in the car. I'd doubled up, but it doesn't feel like that was enough.

The antiseptic smell of the doctor's office isn't as overpowering as it is in a hospital, but it's enough to trigger a waking nightmare.

I'm sweating by the time the doctor walks in. She's a short, muscular Asian woman who I'd swear was fresh out of medical school.

"You don't seem like you're doing so hot," she says in a heavy accent. It sounds like something out of New York. "Want to tell me what's going on?"

There's a nurse, but I can't tell you when she came into the room. My vision has zeroed down to a tunnel, focused on the doc.

"I don't do so well in doctor's offices," I manage. I clear my throat hard. Again. It doesn't help. I can't get enough air in my lungs.

She murmurs something to the nurse. "Are you taking anything for anxiety?"

"Klonopin." My brain, at least, has that information readily available.

"When is the last time you took it?"

My brain scatters, searching for the information. It's noon. I know that because I'm supposed to be with Beth right now. Instead, I'm freaking the fuck out in the doctor's office. "First thing this morning. Six, I think." Ballpark, anyway. I don't tell her I took two, though. That I keep to myself.

Then next thing I know, a small plastic cup is being pressed into my hand. A tiny white pill rattles in the bottom of it. The medication dissolves on my tongue. The silence in the room is heavy and thick and awkward. I'm a goddamned disgrace. LT would be so fucking proud of the kid he helped get into one of the top schools in the country shaking like a shitting dog in front of a doc.

All because I got a little banged up downrange.

Jesus.

The panic recedes, leaving the anger in its place. I'll take the anger. I can use the anger. The panic shuts everything down and makes me useless.

"So, want to talk about what happened?" The doc speaks slowly and quietly.

"That's kind of the reason I'm here." I can't talk now. My thoughts are no longer racing. My hands are steady now. "I want to figure out how to get some stuff straightened out."

"What kind of stuff?"

I shift and pull the hospital gown off my shoulders. I know what the scars look like. I know the muscles beneath them still burn most days, some days worse than others.

I know exactly what the nightmares feel like. The trapped feeling as the fire melts my uniform into my skin.

The doctor's fingers are cold where I can feel her touch. There are a lot of dead nerve endings there now.

Beth hasn't seen my shoulder. I managed to keep them hidden in the dark and the shadows that night at my place. It had been all about her. I'm glad, because despite my best efforts at convincing myself that I'm fine, that I've left the war behind, I am clearly not fine. Not by a long shot.

"The tissue has healed well. How's your range of motion?"

I zone out now. Her questions bounce off the haze of the anxiety meds. Answer all of them on autopilot as she tests my motor skills, my strength. My left arm isn't as strong as my right. It probably never will be again, no matter how hard I work on it.

"You reported you're still taking Tramadol for pain as well as Ambien for sleep and Klonopin for anxiety. Anything else?"

My mouth is dry. I'm not sure if I can find the words I need. They're stuck in the base of my throat, right behind my Adam's apple.

"I..." I swallow again. "I need to...are there different meds I can take?" A deep breath that doesn't fill my lungs. "I don't like how I feel on them."

"And how is that?"

Dead. Numb. Like I'm running through life at the bottom of a pool of Jell-O. "Just not myself," I say instead. Because saying any of those things would have triggered a trip to the funny farm with the military. In the past, any mental health problems that escalated and were reported to the docs were dealt with quickly. Usually they got the individual sent out of the unit and the force.

We needed deploying fighters, not people sitting on the shrink's couch.

God, but I wish I'd sat on that couch. Just once. Just to get an azimuth check. Was I still normal? Would I ever be again?

"I think we need to assess whether the benefits you receive from these medicines outweigh the risks."

It's not an answer I want to hear. Some docs will do anything to keep from prescribing medication. Others are pushing pills on you the minute you walk through the door.

I leave with a fresh prescription ready to be filled.

I have referrals to a pain clinic. And the burn clinic. And the psych clinic.

Fucking great.

I should have gone to Stats. I probably would be feeling less crazy.

Chapter Nineteen

Beth

I'm in that weird space that's not a breakup, but the fresh and shiny newness is dull and damaged.

I'm tender today. I know in my heart that Noah wasn't lying about the doctor's appointment, but I can't shake the feeling that something is very, very wrong.

"Don't tell me the honeymoon is already over?" Abby leans forward in the mirror, dabbing her index finger beneath one eye.

My hands are tight in my lap, my fingers twisted together. "I'm not sure."

She turns and leans against the sink. The small bathroom we use to change for work is empty except for us.

I'm not sure I want to talk about it. I'm not sure what to say. We didn't have a fight. There was no disagreement. We were fine and then between one moment and the next, we weren't.

"Have you talked to him?"

I shake my head. "He canceled his tutoring today."

"Is he sick?"

"I don't know."

She folds her arms over her chest and makes a tsking sound. "I never figured that you'd fall this hard this fast."

"I'm not sure falling is what happened."

"Sure it is. He's missed one day with you, and you're acting like someone just stole your puppy and threatened to sell it on eBay."

I smile, if only to try and get the subject changed. "So can I ask what you've got planned for me Friday?"

"What's your favorite color?"

"Black tie doesn't exactly scream color options."

"Something sophisticated. I think a deep emerald green would be an amazing color on you."

"Abby, at this point, I'll be happy to not look homeless."

She beams at me in that impish way that tells me she has a plan. If I didn't know her better, I'd be worried, but Abby's plans always have a way of working out. I don't know if it's her constant optimism or just plain good luck, but she's definitely got a knack for miracles.

I'm not worried about what she's going to come up with. No, I'm distracted by thoughts of a guy that has taken my world and turned it inside out.

My shift goes by in a blur. I smile and make all the appropriate conversation, but my mind is a million miles away. I want to leave and call him. I want to know if he's okay.

There is a part of me that hates him for making me worry. But I don't have that claim on him.

That knowledge hurts more than his distance. The knowledge that I let my heart trip over the line and fall for him before I even knew what was happening. It's too fast, too abrupt.

It's too much everything. I don't know what to do with the aching want inside me.

The emptiness knowing that he's out there and not with me tonight. When did this happen? When did I become this needful thing craving just a note, a text, something that tells me he's

okay? That it's all in my head and everything is okay?

I want to rewind everything and start over. I want to go back to that first stats session and set down clear boundaries. I don't care if I miss out on the blindingly powerful attraction or the brief moments of peace I've found with him.

I don't want the hurt. And this hurts.

My shift ends. Abby hands me a card with a list of things I need to bring tomorrow and tells me to meet her at her place at four with my black patent leather pumps.

"Hey." She stops me before we step into the darkness. She rides the bus home and her stop is in the opposite direction from where I'm heading. "I'm sure everything is fine. Maybe it's just school stuff."

"You're defending him?" I'm surprised because she's usually the first one to tell me to kick anyone not worthwhile to the curb.

She shrugs. "I've never seen you like this." She leans forward and gives me a quick hug. "I'd like to see you catch a win for once. You work so hard for everything you've got. Maybe I was hoping this would be easy for you."

Her words make my throat close off. Like we're already sitting around toasting the demise of another relationship that failed to get off the ground.

She disappears into the dark, and I stand there a moment, letting her words wrap around me. They were meant as a compliment, but they don't feel like it.

I tuck my hands into my pockets, peering up at the sky. Only the brightest stars pierce the city lights. My heart sinks a little in my chest.

I start down the sidewalk. It's damp, and there's a chill in the air. The perfect melancholy night.

A shadow moves from the darkness and takes shape, stepping into the light.

I stop breathing. He's okay. But then I see him, really see him and realize that no, he's not okay. He's alive. He's standing there.

But he is not okay.

And I don't know what he's going to tell me that will make it better, but I hope that I'm strong enough to deal with whatever it is.

Noah

I wish I didn't see the hundred thousand emotions flash across her face. At least half of them are different shades of hurt.

"I'm the world's biggest asshole." It's a hell of a greeting, but it's the only thing I can come up with.

She offers me a sad smile. I suppose I deserve a lot worse.

I toe the cement in front of me, wishing I could come up with some grand speech to explain myself. Something that would make her understand and bypass the pity I never wanted to see in her eyes.

"Nah," she says. "As assholes go, you're a relatively small one."

I smile despite myself. I want to approach, but I'm stuck to the pavement. I had a plan about what to say when I saw her. A brilliant explanation for being a dick.

"I know I don't deserve it but would you come with me?" I suck in a deep breath. "There's something I need to show you."

She starts to shake her head. I step into her space then. Rest my hands on her shoulders.
"Please, Beth? Trust me just this once?"

She presses her lips together in a flat line. She's going to leave. She's going to say no. My fucking psychosis has broken us before we even had a chance.

She breathes out. A surrender. "Okay."

I start to speak, then decide against it. Instead, I lead her to my car. She sits quietly as I drive us away from campus toward my place. Her arms are folded over her middle. Protective.

I can't say that I blame her.

There's no moon tonight. There's silence but for the crunch of our feet on the gravel walkway to my front steps.

I close the front door behind us.

She's standing in my tiny kitchen. Waiting.

The light over the stove creates dim shadows in the tiny space. I stand there for a moment, uncertainty a live thing in my belly. Knocking my fist against the counter, I finally start unbuttoning my shirt.

"Noah."

I can't speak. I don't stop, though. Button after button, I strip away the protective barrier. The shield that hides my body from the world. From her.

I know the moment she sees the damage. I hear the sharp intake of breath and the silence that follows. I know what it looks like. I've seen it, of course, but only when I was really fucked up and able to stand the sight.

I can't look at it sober. At least not as sober as I am right now, which is somewhat more than normal. Without the haze of drugs, the scars bring back all the memories, the smell of burned skin, the terror and panic ripping through me as my body burned.

I want meds now. I'm physically craving the release from the fear twisting in my guts.

I suck in a trembling breath. I don't know what I'm going to say until the words start.

"I want to fucking forget the goddamned war." A heavy pause. "I came home. I want to pretend it never happened. That I'm just another college student with nothing to worry about but how to pay for school." I close my eyes. I can't see her looking at me. She deserves to know everything, but even now, exposed and vulnerable, the entire truth remains locked in my throat. "I want to forget it, but it's carved into my skin. For the rest of my life, I will carry this with me."

I'm terrified of turning around. I can't do it. The fear is raw and cutting and slices through any bit of sanity I've scraped together since I left the army and the war behind.

I feel her a moment before her hands connect with my skin. Her gentle, soft palms are flat against my back.

And then I feel it.

The press of her lips above the damaged skin of my shoulder blade. Her hands slide over the thick scars on my shoulder and bicep. A soothing caress as she finally folds her fingers over my heart.

"If this was supposed to scare me, you'll have to do better than that." Her words are a whisper across the good skin on my back.

A ragged sound escapes me. Something that might be a laugh or a sob. I don't know. I'm folding her in my arms, burying my face in the softness of her hair. Relief shudders through me, powerful enough that my eyes burn with it. I can't tell her everything. I can't.

But she's here. She didn't run away. There's no pity or revulsion in her eyes, or any emotion in between.

She put her hands on my scars, and goddamn if that didn't heal a piece of my damaged soul. I want to give her everything. My heart. My life.

Everything but the truth. I can't. Not yet. Maybe, just maybe, I can change what the truth is before I have to tell her about it.

She cups my face. Her palms are cool and soothing against the fire beneath my skin. I want to say something profound. Something meaningful that she'll remember for the rest of her life.

But she kisses me. Her lips are soft and warm and moist. She sucks gently on my bottom lip. I'm ragged enough that I can do nothing beneath the sensual slide of her tongue against mine. She shifts and her body is flush with mine. Her hips rock slow and sensuously against me, driving me wild with her tiny rhythmic movements.

"You scared me," she whispers against my lips.

My fingers clench against her back. "I'm sorry." I'll probably do it again, but I'm selfish enough to want to keep her with me for one more night.

I don't think. I lift her against me and she wraps her thighs around my hips. The pressure against my erection is pleasure and pain all at once. I want her naked against me. I want to feel her body beneath me. I want mine to tell her everything that she is to me.

I stumble to the bedroom, and we fall into the bed. There is no finesse tonight. There is simply tearing clothing and lips and hands on skin.

And then I'm there, her thighs wrapped around my hips. She's naked and beautiful beneath me. She slides her hands up over the damaged skin on my chest and shoulder to pull me down. Her mouth opens beneath mine and she urges me home. She's sweet and wet and swollen and ready. I've somehow managed a condom, and then she's squeezing me, welcoming me, her body tense and tight and the sweetest sensation.

I slide from her warmth then back again. Smooth and slow. Her fingers find mine and our hands are bound like our bodies. Palm to palm, skin to skin, the erotic friction burning her into my soul. Her release starts as a tremble, something deep and quiet, building with gasps and that sound I love. I kiss the spot on her throat as she comes apart beneath me and I join her, tearing apart at the seams that are barely holding me together.

Chapter Twenty

Beth

His heart beats slow and steady beneath my cheek. My own heart nearly drowns out the sound. I don't know what to say to him.

What is the right response when someone shows you what war has done to their body? I'm sorry feels trite and insufficient. Does it hurt is just stupid and cruel.

What do I say that isn't patronizing or self-indulgent?

I press my lips to his heart. "I'm glad you made it home," I finally whisper. Because I've got no other words that come close to the turmoil of emotions twisting inside me.

He goes still beneath my hand. "I don't know what to say to that."

I lean up so I can see his face. There is misery and fear there - uncertainty and terrible, terrible pain. I cup his cheek. "You don't have to say anything."

He frowns a little. "I never really thought about it like that."

He shifts and pulls me close once more. I go willingly into his arms. It's so much more poignant and special after the day I've spent filled with worry for this man.

There is more he isn't telling me, but tonight, I've seen what it cost him to show me the damage the war has done to his body. I can only imagine the depth of the scars I cannot see.

It has taken so much for him to trust me with this. I see that now, and I understand so much more about the man in my arms.

My eyes burn. Before I fell for him, I wouldn't have considered being where I am at this exact moment. I would not have let myself fall for a soldier, a man damaged by an unnecessary war. I hated the war before because of what it did to my father. I hate it more now that I've seen what it did to Noah.

My father hates the weakness in his body, and he is a grown man. Noah is my age. Guys our age are busy trying to hookup at parties and going to games and living it up.

But not Noah. It's like the war has robbed him of his youth. He is older than his years, the weight he carries heavier than anything I can imagine.

My body warms again and without thinking, I slip my thigh over his hips, sliding up until I'm straddling him. His eyes widen slightly. His hands rest gently on my hips, caressing my thighs. I slip over him, surprised to find him hard again. My body is slick and wet and ready for him. I slide over his length, the gentlest erotic friction. His stomach clenches as I rock over his erection.

He presses a condom into my hand. My hips are moving now against him, a riot of sensations against my swollen heat driving me, driving him, wild with unmet need.

Slowly, I roll the condom into place. His hips jerk as I shift back, the tip of his erection poised just there. I wait until he meets my eyes. Watching, watching, I slowly, so slowly, slide down his length. Inch by inch, I take him inside me. He fills me, satiating the emptiness inside me. He's deep, so deep, inside me. I rock gently, using my body to clench around him.

His gasp is enough to drive me closer to the edge. His fingers dig into my hips, urging me to move faster.

I dig my nails into his skin, anchoring myself against him as I lift my hips and then press my body against his again. He groans, and it's the sweetest sound. I want this. I want him. Harder. I

want him to take control. To pound into me until he can feel everything I feel when I'm with him.

We roll and he's there, driving into me, sending me spiraling wide. I reach between us, my fingers finding the exact spot I need and I'm coming again, violent and powerful. A scream tears from my throat and he captures it. The waves crash over me - pulsing, pounding sensations. Powerful, so powerful.

I dig my nails into his back. Urging him, whispering nothing and everything. Telling him with my body that I'm glad he's home. That he's here and I want nothing more than to be here with him at this exact moment.

And when he comes, it's a storm, a powerful release that touches the part of my soul I have tried to protect.

I'm open now, exposed and vulnerable. With a word, a touch, Noah can destroy me. There are no words for what he's done to me. I've fallen and fallen hard for this man.

There is nowhere I would rather be.

Noah

Her body trembles a little when she's in that space between sleeping and waking. I need to get her home, but I don't think I can move.

I'm broken. The stone around my heart has been shattered. It's in her hands now. There's nothing I can do to take it back.

I'm not sure I want to.

She's seen the damage. She knows at least part of what the war has done to me, and she's stayed. I'm so fucking grateful and overwhelmed, I can't speak.

I kiss her forehead. She makes a sleepy noise and nestles closer. I love the feel of her body against mine. She makes that sound again. I almost hope she's asleep and I can keep her with me.

I want to fall into her arms tonight, not Princess Ambien. There's no magical cure for what ails me, but tonight, I have at least the faintest sensation of sleep reaching up and pulling me under without the sleeping pills dragging me down first.

To sleep, really sleep, is a temptation I'd forgotten how to crave.

But I don't know how to ask her to stay. I can't tell her I need her. It's not fair to put that on her. Maybe someday. Maybe after I talk to the docs, I'll find another way. And maybe, her dad will be well enough one of these nights that she'll stay.

But I can't ask that of her. I can't - I won't - make her choose between her father and me. I'll make sure she gets home. Because I might be crazy, but I have a little bit of honor left in me.

"I hurt you," I whisper. "I'm sorry."

She slides her palm down until it's resting over my heart. I cover it with my own. The contrast between our hands is stark. Hers have committed acts of caring, of love and devotion. Mine, acts of war. I have been cruel, and not just to the enemy. To Beth, to someone I care about more than breathing.

"Please say something. Tell me to fuck off and die or something."

She smiles and makes that sound. "I'm not going to tell you to fuck off and die." A quiet pause. "I don't know what to say. I worried about you."

"You shouldn't have."

Her expression tells me I'm a moron. "It doesn't exactly work that way, you know. I don't get to shut this off when we're not in bed."

"I know."

"Then don't do that again. Don't leave me worrying about you. Because I'm not wired like that. I can't turn it off with a snap of my fingers or a click of my heels." There is an edge beneath her words. Anger and hurt, that she's lashing back to spare me.

It does something funny to my heart to know that she is holding back again. Still. Maybe she always does. Except when she is beneath me. Then there is no holding back. Nothing restrained.

I close my eyes, unable to meet her gaze when I say what I have to say. "Maybe this is a mistake. Because, clearly, I'm still fucked up from everything. I can't promise that I won't hurt you again." I clear my throat. "You should be with someone who won't put you through that."

She shifts, and I'm afraid to see her climbing out of bed. Walking away. Even though I'm giving her permission, the idea of her walking away breaks me a little.

"Did you hurt your brain coming up with that bullshit?" I open my eyes, and she's staring down at me, anger flashing in hers. "Because that took more creative reasoning than some of the stuff you came up with when we were starting stats."

The words are stuck at the bottom of my throat.

"You don't run when things get a little bumpy. That's not how life works. You stick. If you care about people, you stick."

I swallow the lump that's making it hard to breathe. "I'm not very good glue."

"No, you're more like two-sided tape, only one side is covered in cat litter."

I laugh and pull her close because her analogy makes no sense.

"My mom left as soon as she realized what life with my dad was going to be like. She left both of us." Hurt laces through those words, old mixed with new. I realize what I've done to her in the last day. "I will never be like her. I will never bail on the people I care about."

There's danger there - a commitment to an ideal that will only lead her to a broken heart, or worse, a burned-out broken spirit. The world has a way of doing that to even the very best of us. Especially to the best of us.

"My dad hit my mom. He wasn't a drunk or anything. He was just mean. He wanted things done a certain way, and when they weren't, he was like a giant spoiled baby." I sigh because dredging through these memories hurts more than it should. It's been five years since I last went home, and I have no intention of ever going back there. "I think she stayed for me. But now that I'm gone, I can't figure out why she stays." A deep breath. "I tried to get her to leave him when I left home. I told her I'd send her money. I'd get her set up in a place on her own. She didn't have to stay with him anymore." Beth's body tenses and she shifts, nestling closer. "She just patted me on the cheek and said I didn't understand. And she's right. I don't understand. I don't understand why someone stays in something like that."

"Maybe you should ask why he hits instead of asking why she stays." A cautious statement. One filled with wariness and resignation. Because neither question gets at the desired end state of my mom being away from my dad.

"I never thought about it that way."

She shifts then, hooking one leg around my hip and drawing me closer once more, and there's no more discussion. I need to take her home. But I'm losing myself in her once more before I face the loneliness of spending the rest of my night alone.

Chapter Twenty-One

Beth

It's strange without my dad at home. I can't explain how it makes me feel that he's not only on his feet, but also on a date. He knows I won't be home tonight. It's Friday and tonight is the big invitation-only event that has the potential to change my life - barring any natural disasters, broken shoes or slips of the tongue that result in all of us being embarrassed.

I set my bag with my expensive shoes on the floor and rifle through the mail, sorting between junk and bills. Some of them are medical, others from school.

I should have sorted them better. My hand shakes as I open the first one and absorb the amount. The miracle injection for my dad's back has set us back another seventy-five hundred dollars. Anesthesia. Blood work. Various tests. The actual injection itself was only a grand. All the ancillary stuff that went along with it that jacked up the price. It is goddamned criminal that they charged the people who can least afford to pay the highest rates.

It's not like I've been even making progress on the previous eighty thousand in medical debt, but for some reason, this number breaks me a little more. It's so much money. In the rational part of my brain, I know there are jobs out there. That I'll start paying it back once I'm working full-time.

But right now, it's more weight added to the stack of bills that are an albatross around my neck. Sometimes, everything feels like an uphill climb. I put it away and head out to catch the bus to Abby's.

I don't know what to expect tonight. Abby will have more information for me, but I've never been good at the social scene where I'm expected to interact and not simply take people's orders. I can manage in the classroom well enough, and I can smile and work the floor really well at the country club. I've paid enough attention to how the ladies who lunch act at social events; I'm pretty sure I can pull it off.

But I've never had a job hanging on a social function before. Maybe that's how these things are really decided. Who fits best, not just at the office but after work, too. I have no idea, honestly.

I try to put it out of my mind, but my stomach is in knots, twisting and turning until I'm positive that the first thing I eat is going to come right back up on me.

But then I'm at Abby's and she's pinging off the walls with excitement. It's hard not to catch her energy.

"Put this on." She hands me a deep emerald green sheath dress that looks at least three sizes too small.

"There's no way this is going to fit."

"Trust me." She ignores me while she's digging in her makeup bag. And by makeup bag, I mean small suitcase full of a billion different palettes.

The dress slides over my hips like crushed silk. It clings to my curves, but she's right - it fits like a dream. The scoop neck accents my collar bones but keeps slipping and exposing my bra. The long sleeves give it a more sophisticated feel than had it been cap-sleeved.

"Here." Two pieces of double-sided tape and she's fixed the bra problem. I step into my shoes and immediately tower over her. She pauses and glances up and down my entire length. "I

knew it."

"Where on earth did you get this?"

"I have a friend who works for a place that helps women dress for job interviews."

"Who wears something like this to a job interview?" The dress is fantastic and well beyond my price range.

"Depends on the job, now doesn't it?" Abby smiles and holds up a palette next to my face.

"Sit. No peeking until I'm done."

"You are just full of commands." The butterflies in my stomach are more from excitement than nerves now.

"I'm doing a strong eye and everything else will be neutral."

"I don't even know what that means," I say.

"You'll see. And we need to pull your hair up. I want a messy bun at the base of your neck."

"That's how I do it for school."

"It ought to be easy then, huh?" She's focused now. The tip of her tongue is pressed to the corner of her mouth. "Close your eyes." I comply and try not to laugh at how serious she is at the moment. She pats and taps my face. "Did you fix the things with lover boy?"

"I think so." I'm not sure what to say. How to explain what happened last night. I know now what I'm dealing with, at least a little more. But I'm wary where I wasn't before. I want to guard my heart even though it's far too late for that.

"That is the most tepid response I've ever heard in my life."

"It's complicated."

"When isn't it? Try me."

"He's...trying to deal with some stuff from the war." It's a dodge, but his wounds are not mine to share freely. Given how hard it was for him to show me, to trust me with what happened to him, I can't just tell the world.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why I will never, ever date a soldier."

"It's not all bad," I say. When my dad tells me stories about when he was gone, I can hear the regret in his voice - that he misses it. To hear him talk about it, I'm always left with the feeling like there is nothing like it. It's something I'll never experience, but that doesn't mean it hasn't touched my life indirectly through my dad and now through Noah.

"No, I'm sure it's not. And I'm the last person to judge someone for their life choices. But I've got more than enough drama in my own life. I want a well-adjusted, normal, stable guy. Not someone who needs high-risk activities or guns to feel like a man."

Neither of those things describes Noah, but I'm not going to argue with her. She is skeptical of men and their motives. I can't say that I blame her. Abby is the exception that proved the rule. Her mother raised her alone and made sure that Abby was going to college. She never told me everything her mother did to provide for her, but I get the impression that it went above and beyond working two jobs.

"Okay." She brushes beneath my eye one last time. I feel her move away.

She holds up a full-length mirror, like Vanna White turning the glowing letters. Only I'm what's glowing. She's done something to accent my eyes, just a little bit, and my lips are wet with a pale gloss. I'm a princess. Someone elegant and refined and completely at home in this place.

"Wow."

I could never have pulled this off on my own. I would have done too much makeup. The dress would have been wrong.

"Abby--"

She beams her "I told you so" expression in full force at me. "I love it when I'm right." She folds her arms over her chest, smiling. "Okay, now remember, don't talk about religion, guns or politics."

I make a face. "Why on earth would religion, guns or politics come up at a business party-slash-whatever this is?"

She lifts one eyebrow. "Sugar, you're in the South."

I laugh because it's true. I just forget that sometimes.

The doorbell rings. The cab is here. I wouldn't normally use the money for one, but I can't ride the city bus in this outfit. Noah wanted to pick me up but it doesn't look good for us to arrive together. At least not for me. I want them talking to me, not wondering what I'm doing afterward with him. And maybe that's selfish and a little bit mercenary, but I need this job. Badly.

Abby gives me a quick hug. "Knock 'em dead. For your dad."

Her words are the confidence and courage that I need.

Because I am terrified of screwing this up.

Noah

I've never been good at mingling and small talk. I've always avoided it unless I was ordered to attend. When we would be forced to do mandatory fun - otherwise known as activities we "would be at" because the commander decreed it so. LT and I would stay long enough to be seen and then sneak off. That was before the war. After - well, there was no after. I came home and left the military behind.

I'm nursing a vodka tonic and pretending to care about some local scandal with the energy company. This is the stuff I should be paying attention to, but I'm distracted. Amid the wealth and opulence of the Baywater's formal ballroom, there is someone missing.

Beth isn't here yet.

We're a half hour into the thing, and she's not here.

I offered to pick her up, but she didn't want us to arrive together. It makes sense - for her, when she points out that I don't have to manage impressions of myself like she does. But I won't argue with her because her life is not mine. I think she's wrong - she's never had to answer stupid fucking questions like, "What is it like to go to war? Did you ever kill someone?" But I'm not going to press the issue with her.

My fingers tighten around the glass, and I realize that just thinking about that question is spiking my blood pressure.

Where the hell is she?

"So tell us about yourself, Noah. What are you majoring in?" The question comes from old man Morgan. He's a big man, still intimidating despite pushing sixty. He's on, at least, his third scotch, but doesn't appear to be drunk or even on his way to being drunk.

I notice things like this. I'm all for partying and getting buck wild, but I'm wary of people who crawl into a bottle in public. It says something about their decision-making capabilities. I did it once, and it was a painful lesson that I'm unable to forget. I puked on the battalion command sergeant major's Stetson, and well, I ended up on every shit detail he could find for the next six months.

Literally.

I focus on old man Morgan and the here and now. He's not the sergeant major. He's just some old dude with a shitload of money who has the potential to solve some of Beth's problems. If she would just get her ass here.

"Business ethics and decision sciences, sir."

"Ethics. Interesting. Why ethics?" He takes a sip from his drink, and I realize that he's not actually drinking.

We can smell our own, apparently. I wonder if he's noticed I'm not drinking either. Doesn't matter how much I might want to. I can't. Not if I want to maintain my composure.

"Well, sir, I was in the military, and I want to understand how we make decisions and why organizations run the way they do. What is the line between individual ethics and business decisions?"

He's watching me closely. I want to scan the room once more, but I don't. I'm focused completely on my audience. "Do you think businesses need ethics?"

"I do, sir. I know it's not a popular field among some of our colleagues, but I believe we have an obligation to consider facts beyond profit and loss."

There's a glimmer in his eye, and I can't tell if I've pissed him off or sparked his curiosity. "Like what?"

"Like our employees. In the army, I had a lieutenant who always used to talk about second and third order effects. Not the direct consequences of our decisions, but the ones that came after that we didn't foresee."

His eyes crinkle at the edges. "This lieutenant sounds like he was pretty smart for a lieutenant."

I smile at the memory. "It drove my commander crazy that LT was smarter than he was and not just book smart. He had this way of seeing the world that was really different, but he fit, too." I find old man Morgan watching me closely and the scrutiny is a little unnerving.

"You admire him."

"Very much so, sir. I want to be like him when I grow up."

Morgan laughs, and in the space between one moment and the next, I notice Beth standing in the doorway. She's wearing something that hugs her curves. She is stunning. Glamorous and sexy and professional all at once. Her hair is twisted at the base of her neck in that way that drives me over the fucking moon wild.

Morgan notices her. Hell, everyone in the room notices her. I clear my throat. "Sir, may I introduce Beth Lamont. She's --"

He cuts me off as Beth approaches. "I've seen you somewhere before. Where?"

She flushes and the effect is stunning. "Sir, I waitress part-time here."

He frowns at her. "You say that like it's something to be ashamed of."

Her throat moves as she swallows. I want to taste every inch of her exposed skin. "No, sir. I've worked very hard to be where I'm at."

"You should be proud of that," he says to her.

She's not bristling, but it's a close thing. Morgan glances between us. "And how do you two know each other?"

"She's my statistics tutor," I say before she can come up with a different story.

"Tutor, eh?"

"Yes."

"Most men wouldn't admit to needing a tutor," Morgan says. I can't tell if he's fucking with

me or not.

"I learned in the army that pretending you know what's going on when you don't can get someone killed."

"No one is going to die in Stats," Beth says.

"Feels like it sometimes. Professor Blake doesn't mess around," I say.

Morgan chuckles. "Indeed, she does not. She's terrifying."

It's my turn to frown. "You know her?"

"Son, I know everyone in this school," he says, and there's an underlying note of something I can't put my finger on.

I stiffen then. I'm not his son. He turns to talk to someone else, and I feel Beth's hand on my arm. A warning. A restraint. I finally meet her eyes.

"Don't," she whispers.

"What?"

Her lips curl into a faint, teasing smile. "You know what."

I lift one brow. "Don't want me to get drunk and puke on his Italian leather shoes? It would make you look that much better."

She shakes her head, that faint smile painted in place. "I think admitting you needed a tutor took care of that," she says.

"Good. Now go talk to his son and be brilliant. You're getting this job."

The mask she has painted on flickers. Just a little, but enough that I notice it.

"What?"

She shakes her head, and the mask is back in place. She migrates to a small cluster of people including Morgan's son. She's all business, and as I watch her work, I realize that she fits in this place better than I ever could.

LT was wrong. This is not my space, and it never can be. The world these people live in isn't my world.

I don't even know why I'm here.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Beth

I'm exhausted from being on all evening. It's a different kind of emotional drain than waitressing. You get a break between customers. You can take the fake smile off your face as you're fetching food and ordering drinks from the bar. But at a thing like this, you're on one hundred percent of the time.

My face hurts from smiling so much. My feet are ready to chop themselves off at the ankle and go on strike.

But it's over now. I've timed my departure to be right in the middle. Not the first out the door, not the last.

I didn't get to talk to Noah the rest of the evening, but I'm worried about him. He's seemed tense and strained since the night started and he looked more stressed as the night wore on. As I leave, I notice he's already gone. I try to ignore the disappointment. I wanted to talk to him. To see if he was okay.

I step outside and walk to the end of the building to call a cab. No point in advertising the fact that I don't have a car. Well, I do, but it's not the kind of car you drive to an event like this. Our fifteen-year-old Buick doesn't exactly fit in with the shiny BMWs and Mercedes'.

I feel him before I see him. He melts from the shadows. Relief is a palpable thing across my skin.

"Hey." He's tired, but there's something else.

"Hi," I say.

"Are you rushing home?"

I shake my head. "My dad has a date."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Last emergency room visit ended up being a good one, huh?"

"That was the night I called you. It wasn't a good one." I shrug. "But yeah, I guess the shot they gave him that visit made a big difference."

"You don't seem happy about it."

I follow him to his car, grateful that he's here. That he waited for me. That things feel closer to normal than they had. "I guess I'm waiting for the other shoe. We've had spells like this before, and they never last."

He opens the door for me. He's close, right there. I can reach out and touch him if I want. And I want to. Badly. I slide my hands beneath his jacket. His shirt is warm and I want to strip away the barriers between us.

"That's pretty cynical for someone so young."

His mouth is there, just there. I brush my lips against his, needing his touch, his taste. "Not cynical. Realistic."

My hands are wandering over his chest. I can't get enough of him. I'm edgy and needy, and I suddenly very much want to be alone with him.

"Well, Realistic, would you like a ride home?"

I step closer until my body brushes against his. "I'd like something."

"Did I tell you how amazing you look this evening?"

"Abby is my fairy godmother."

"Do you turn into a pumpkin at midnight?"

I'm slowly untucking his shirt, grateful that he's parked in a dark side of the lot away from the lights and the parking lot security cameras and the rest of the world.

"I think the coach turned into a pumpkin at midnight." His stomach is hot and smooth. I run my thumb over the edge of his hip bone and feel his belly jump beneath my fingers.

He captures my face in his hands, his eyes intense. He opens his mouth like he's going to say something, but he kisses me instead. I sigh into him, relief and need twisted and achy inside me. His tongue slides against mine, teasing, stroking. Burning me up with sipping, sensual licks. He nibbles on my bottom lip before sucking gently on the spot.

"Stay with me?" A plea.

My breath gets caught somewhere beneath my heart. "I--"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. You need to be home." He's kissing my jaw, then. Teasing, nibbling kisses along the pulse in my throat.

"I want to." Because I do. But I'm afraid. He sucks gently on the spot right below my ear. I'm melting for him.

"Come home with me?" He pauses then, cupping my cheeks. "If you change your mind and want to go home, I'll take you. I don't care if it's three a.m. or what." A hesitant kiss against my swollen lips. "I want to wake up with you. I want to make you breakfast and feed you."

There's an edge to his words. Something needy and a little terrifying and completely compelling. The idea of waking up with him is...it's something I haven't dared let myself want.

I don't know how tonight went. It didn't feel like a disaster, but the one thing I'm terrible at is reading people at this place.

But nothing that happened tonight feels as right, as good, as thinking about waking up with Noah.

"I don't have a toothbrush."

"There's a twenty-four hour drug store on the way to my house."

I smile at his deadpan response. "You've thought about this."

"More than you'll ever know."

Noah

She says yes.

I mean, it's a simple thing, right? Spending the night with someone. Happens all the time. But it's not a simple thing.

When she's been at my place, it's been dark. And I've been plenty distracted by the feel of her beautiful body beneath mine.

But asking her to spend the night means she'll see everything in the broad light of day. She'll see the medication in the kitchen. She'll see the scars again and maybe she'll decide that I'm not worth it.

I don't know if this is a mistake or a test. I'm known for fucking up the good things in my life. LT was always really good at stopping me from stepping on my dick despite myself. I wonder if he'd tell me to take her home to her place or mine.

I wish I could see into the future and figure out if this was either the best idea I've ever had

or the worst. I carry her into my house because I can't bear to be separated from her. I want this fascinating, beautiful, loyal woman in ways I can't explain.

I don't make it very far.

I'm careful taking her dress off. Lowering the zipper, I'm enthralled by the sight of her in her panties and bra and those magnificent heels that accent her gorgeous legs. "You've got the most amazing curves."

She smiles and shakes her head. "You should talk dirty to me more often."

I step to her until she backs into my small kitchen table. Lay her back until she's spread open before me. A feast that I plan on savoring for as long as she'll let me.

"Beautiful. So fucking beautiful."

She makes that sound in her throat. It reminds me of a purr. "I want to take your panties off."

"Oh hell, you're really going to talk dirty?"

I kiss her to stop her from talking. "Shh."

She lies back, draping her arms over her head. Her breasts rise and fall with each breath. I reach behind her, unhooking that incredibly sexy black cotton. I could stand there watching her for hours. She's perfection. I frame her belly with my hands, sliding them over her soft skin to cup her breasts. Her nipples pebble beneath my touch. Her eyes darken as I stroke her skin gently. Watching her body respond is a powerful drug, a hit of the purest ecstasy.

I lean down, teasing one nipple with the tip of my tongue. The barest caress. She gasps at the slightest touch. I lick her belly, then lower. Lower. Until her sex is just there, ripe for me. I kiss her gently and feel her wetness through the cotton. She's swollen.

"I want to see you," I whisper. "I want to taste you."

A quiet moan is my reward. It's exquisite torture pulling her panties off. Seeing her drives all the blood straight to my cock. Goddamn it, she's fucking gorgeous. Swollen and glistening perfection. I stroke my thumb across the seam of her body. She whimpers, her hips jerking beneath my touch. She's slick and oh so wet.

I love her taste. I circle her with my tongue, listening to her gasps and cries to find exactly what makes her crazy. I suckle her and she digs her fingers into my hair.

Again, I suckle her. She nearly bucks me off when I slide my thumb inside her. Stroking her with my fingers, using my mouth. She's gone, over the edge. I feel her start to come on my finger. Squeezing, pulsing, she's tight, so fucking tight. I'm relentless, driving her over the edge of her orgasm.

And then I'm sliding inside her, riding the receding edge of her climax. She's tight and pulsing around me, urging me with her body, her nails, her feet digging into my ass. Demanding everything I am, everything I have.

I lift her and carry her to my bed. I'm still inside her as we tumble into my sheets. She straddles me, riding me, driving me closer, closer. I love seeing her rising over me, her hair falling down from the prim and proper bun, tumbling over her shoulders in a mess of dark blond.

And then there's no more thought as my orgasm rips through me, tearing at the remains of my soul. I pull her closer, trying to keep her there, exactly there. I want to be inside her forever.

I wait until she's falling asleep to slip from her embrace to sneak into my kitchen. I'm not foolish enough to try and sleep without the Ambien. Tonight, though, I cut the pill in half. I'm going to do this. It starts tonight. Half of what I'm used to taking.

It's worth a shot, right?

I slip back into bed. She makes a sleepy sound and curls closer. She's softness in my arms. Her hair is cool silk against my scars.

She's a peace I'll never know, but maybe, just maybe, I can reclaim a tiny piece of what I lost.

"I'm falling for you." There's no response in the darkness. I didn't expect any. The mere fact that she's here, sleeping with me, trusting me...It breaks me a little more knowing that I've lied to her.

I'm lost in her, and I don't know how to find my way out of this mess I've created.

I'm not sure I want to.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Beth

He's making me breakfast. And I'm not allowed to help. He kisses me and tells me to take a shower and he'll take me home. It's early, but I'm not tired. I slept, really slept. The worry about home is still there, it's always there, but it's not overpowering.

I step into his shower, holding my face under the steady, strong stream. His shower is tile, real tile. It's older, but that's not the point. Our shower is ancient plastic that's impossible to get really clean. And the water pressure in his shower is just this side of amazing. It beats into my skin, massaging my body with hot, wet heat.

I slip into one of his button-down shirts. It falls mid-thigh and the sleeves are too long. I roll them up and realize that I have nothing to wear home. I can't possibly put the dress back on. I'm terrified of ruining it.

I inhale the warm smell of toast.

I walk in, and his gaze sweeps down my body and back up again.

"I approve of this wardrobe selection," he says, turning his attention back to the pan.

"I'm not sure what I'm going to get home in, but I'm sure I'll come up with something."

"Grab a pair of my sweats and flip flops. I know where you live. I'll get them back, I'm sure."

Guilt sneaks up and wraps around my heart. I should have told him a long time ago about the address.

He flips the eggs flawlessly.

"Of course you can cook eggs. I always end up mangling the yolks."

"They're probably still good if you cooked them."

"That is seriously cheesy," I say. I sit at the table and butter a piece of toast. "Where did you get this bread?"

"Grocery store on Ninth Street. I splurged this week."

A luxury we have never afforded. I don't resent it. I savor the taste and texture. I used to make bread in our bread machine, but then it broke and I never got around to digging through the local thrift stores to find a new one. I should do that. Dad likes my bread.

"So what are your plans for the day?" he asks. "It's Saturday and all that."

"I've got to work today at three. Finish an assignment and prep for stats lab this week."

He slides a plate in front of me. The eggs are perfectly cooked. I pierce the yolk with my bread. "This is fantastic."

"I'm glad you like eggs. I probably should have asked first, but since you've never said anything about food issues, I guessed."

I smile up at him, and wish I could see past the blinding bright spot that Noah is in my life. Wish I could see how this ends. If it's a happily ever after or a Greek tragedy.

I slide my arms around his waist. For a moment, I simply rest my head on his shoulder and breath him in, surrounded by his warmth, his scent. Everything about him fills me with something I haven't had space or room for in my life.

And I need this now. I need him. He's a craving that only gets stronger each time I satisfy the urge. His arms come around me and he kisses my neck. It's a simple embrace. Something

powerful all on its own. "I want to stay here forever," I whisper. My voice is thick. Heavy with fear that I'm afraid to give words to, afraid to put out into the universe.

His arms are tight around me, like I'm a lifeline for him as much as he is for me.

He leans back and cups my face. I love this habit of his. It's something warm and tender and incredibly erotic all at once.

"This is pretty intense for me," he says. "I never expected to fall for my hot stats tutor."

I smile because it's the corniest thing he could have said. "You weren't expecting me?"

"No one can expect someone like you, Beth." His voice is serious now. "You're a unicorn. People like you don't exist."

"I don't know what that means." I'm terrified that it means he's put me on some kind of pedestal. Elevated me to some exalted sainthood that I don't deserve.

"It means you're pretty damn special to me." He brushes his lips against mine. "And I'm terrified of fucking this up."

I nuzzle his neck because I hate the space between us. "You won't."

"Don't underestimate my powers," he says.

I laugh quietly. "I will never underestimate your power to cook delicious eggs."

"Well, I've got that going for me. Speaking of which, you should eat before they get cold."

He urges me back into my chair. My skin protests the loss of his warmth, but I eat because he cooked for me. I don't normally have a big breakfast. Some peanut butter and an apple usually does the trick for me.

This is a feast in so many ways.

He joins me a few minutes later and we sit in the morning sunshine that fills his small kitchen. I notice the torn remains of a tattoo at the edge of a scar on his upper arm.

Before I can stop myself, I trace my fingers over the jagged, raised edge of the burn.

He stiffens but doesn't pull away. His nostrils flare as he watches my fingertip slide over his skin. "What was the tattoo?"

"Tribal armband. Completely unoriginal." He lifts his arm and reveals the unrestricted remnant on the underside of his bicep. It's a mixture of flames and waves in an intricate pattern. It looks like it's solid colors, but closer inspection reveals tiny designs in each color block.

"Do you ever think about getting it redone?"

Noah

"Tattooing over scars is tricky. I'd have to find the right artist." I haven't allowed myself to go there until now. I keep the jagged remains of the tattoo as a reminder of what was destroyed on that terrible day.

I lost everything that mattered to me.

I'm not ready to cover it with new ink and pretend that I've come out on the other side all better.

"My dad has a couple of army tattoos. The Ranger tab on one shoulder. And his old unit patch."

I smile because it's something that new soldiers do all the time. And it's easier to shift the conversation to her dad than my war.

She slides my t-shirt sleeve higher, though, back to inspecting the scars and the shredded remains of the tattoo. I brace for more questions that I'm not sure I'm ready to talk about.

Maybe I need to. Maybe I need to tell her about the war, about LT and the guys. About why things feel like they fit when I'm around Josh and Caleb and Nathan. What I have with her is something different. Something that fits, too. But it's something fragile. Something I can still

break.

She surprises me now, placing a soft kiss on the center of my shoulder. I can barely feel it through the damaged nerves, but the surrounding sensations remind me of what it's like to feel. Her hair brushes against my good skin. Her fingers are a gentle pressure on my forearm. She overwhelms me with that single gesture, and I'm undone by the simple tenderness of it.

I force myself to remain still. To not panic. I close my eyes, letting the sensations wash over me.

Her touch battles with the fear that threatens to unman me. The fear that has been with me since that terrible day. My breathing is ragged.

If she can sense my distress, she doesn't say. She simply slides out of her chair and into my lap and pulls me into her arms. I'm lost in an ocean of conflict. I want to be here with her, but the war won't let me go. It intrudes into every moment of peace I try to hold onto.

There's nothing I wouldn't give up to stay in this moment with her. To leave the war outside and pretend that I'm a nice, normal, well-adjusted guy.

But normal, well-adjusted guys don't have a platoon of pills lined up in their pantries. We don't lie to ourselves about being able to sleep without sleeping pills or need double doses of anxiety medication to go to the damn doctor.

I'm a fucking disaster, and I'm ruining everything with my silence. I need to tell her everything. I need to give her a chance to get out while she still can. Before she falls as hard for me as I've fallen for her.

The thought of never seeing her again - it hurts. My heart aches with the imagined loss.

I rest my head on her chest and slide my arms around her waist, holding her close. I never want to let her go.

I have to. I have to get her home. She has things to do that don't involve me.

I've got to figure out how to fill my time while I wait for her to get off her shift. I'll pick her up tonight because that's become my routine. My excuse to see her.

Because having her in my life has become as routine as breathing. I need her like I've never needed anyone, and it terrifies me that she has this power over me that I've never given freely to anyone.

I close my eyes. My hands are flat on her back, holding her, stroking her soft skin beneath my shirt.

"This is a great way to spend a morning," she whispers.

"There are no alternatives I can think of that would be better."

She makes that sound in her throat, and I can feel it beneath my cheek.

"What will you do today?"

"Homework," I say. Because it's the truth. "I'm practicing being a responsible student. I've got some stiff competition in class."

She runs her fingers through my hair. Her touch is like little electric pulses along my skin. "I've got to check on my dad," she whispers.

"I know. I'm just pretending for a moment that I don't have to take you home."

She sighs heavily. "So I need to tell you something," she says.

There's an ominous tone to her voice that sets me on edge. I wait, saying nothing.

"I don't live where you've been dropping me off." She's wary now. There's a deep concern in her voice.

She won't meet my eyes.

"Do you live in a van down by the river or something?"

She blinks - once, twice - then laughs out loud. "I used to watch old episodes of Saturday Night Live with my dad. I love that Chris Farley skit." She sucks in a trembling breath. I can feel her shake beneath my touch. "You're not mad?"

"Unless you're living in a crack house, in which case I'm going to be mad because you're not living somewhere safe. No I'm not mad. Why would I be?"

"Because I've been lying to you. Pretending to be something I'm not."

I cup her face then because I can feel the fear in her and I hate it. "I'm not mad. If this is the worst lie you've told me, then I think you're off to a pretty good start. You're not selling drugs to pay for school or anything illegal or otherwise?"

She gives a choked laugh. "I won't tell you I didn't think about it once or twice with my dad's bills. But he needs the medicine, so I can't really sell it."

"I thought about pretending to have ADHD once and selling the pills."

"Really?" She's mildly horrified and smiling at the same time.

"No, not really. I just wanted to make you laugh."

Because if this is the worst lie she's told, then my sins are that much worse. I think of the little sentries in my pantry, the formation of orange bottles in a regimented row. I should show her what my life is like. Show her what I hide from everyone.

But I can't. Because I'm a coward. I'm afraid to show her what the war has really done to me. How I've let a single incident take over my life. It has burned away everything, leaving me with a shadow of what was.

But I leave the pantry closed.

Because I cannot bear to lose her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Beth

"You can come in if you want."

We're sitting in front of the tiny house I share with my dad. I see it now through his eyes, and the burning shame I feel is hot on my neck. The gate to the wire fence is hanging off one hinge. The grass died a long time ago, and I don't have the time, effort or energy to put into fixing the yard. The porch needed a new coat of paint like fifteen years ago.

I've never been embarrassed to be flat-ass broke until right now. My eyes burn with the shame of not having worked hard enough. That maybe if I'd fought with the VA more, my dad would be fixed instead of having to use the emergency room for routine care they should have provided him.

Noah's fingers slide over the back of my neck. They're warm and strong and offer instant comfort against the shame burning on my skin.

"I can practically hear you thinking over there," he says. He nudges my cheek until I'm forced to meet his gaze. "This is nothing you have to hide. Nothing to be ashamed of."

I offer a weak smile. "Get out of my head." But there's no bite to my words. I can't summon the energy. The shame is pushing me down, like an elephant sitting on my chest.

"I've done plenty of things to be ashamed of in my life. Living in a place you can afford, making sure your dad is taken care of while you work your ass off to get through a top twenty program isn't one of them."

I blink rapidly, fighting the burn. "When you put it that way, you make me sound like Superwoman."

He brushes his lips against mine. "Maybe you are."

I shake my head. "I'm not."

He strokes my cheek with his thumb. His words have soothed the burn a little, but it's still there. Still an oppressive thing sitting on my shoulders.

"I think I'd like to meet your dad."

I am embarrassed to be wearing his clothing. My dad isn't a prude by any stretch of the imagination. He's always taught me to be responsible when it comes to sex. Still, it feels somewhat wrong to walk into the house in Noah's clothing with Noah in tow.

"I guess there's no time like the present." Because it's true. I was going to tell my dad about Noah at some point. Like today, maybe. "If he's home."

"Still not okay with the idea of your dad dating?"

"It's not that," I say. "He's done this kind of thing before. He goes all bonkers over a woman and ends up doing something stupid that sets him back."

"You have had an interesting life." He sighs. "He doesn't own any guns, does he?"

I smile at his feigned nervousness. "No. I sold them after I found him sitting up one night with a beer in one hand and his nine millimeter in the other."

"Jesus, Beth."

I shrug. "It was a long time ago. Right after my mom left us."

"Wasn't selling it illegal for you?"

"I had a friend of his from work do it."

"Shit."

I climb out of the car and wait for Noah to round the vehicle. I'm more nervous than I realized. My hands are shaking beneath the neatly folded dress draped across my arm.

I unlock the front door. The lights are off.

I slip in something wet. My heart starts pounding. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I have the foresight to put the dress down before I fall, stumbling toward my dad in the middle of the kitchen floor.

"Call 911."

But I think Noah is already on the phone.

"Dad? Dad?" There's blood beneath his face. I check for a pulse. It's there. Faint but there.

I manage to roll him over. Noah is there, helping me. "Stabilize his head and neck," he says.

I can barely see through the tears. I'm blinking and swiping at my eyes, trying to see. I slap his cheeks, trying to wake him up.

I'm vaguely aware of kneeling in broken glass. He moans and his eyes roll back in his head. From somewhere far off, I hear the wail of the sirens.

Noah pulls me away as the paramedics rush into the kitchen.

"What happened?" the short woman EMT asks as she barks commands at her partner.

"I don't know. I came home and he was face down on the kitchen floor."

"Does he have a history of alcohol or substance abuse?"

The shame is back, burning over my face. "Yes."

"Which one?"

"Both. He suffers from severe back pain, and when we run out of medication, he self-medicates with alcohol."

Such a sterile explanation for the chaos that is my life.

"What was he taking before this episode?"

"He was recently prescribed Tramadol and Flexeril instead of the Oxycodone he normally takes. He was supposed to have an appointment early next week. The ER docs refused to prescribe him Oxy."

It is in that moment that I realize his medications are all missing. They are not lined up on the counter like neat little soldiers.

Goddamn it.

The paramedic says nothing as she and her partner roll my dad onto the stretcher. He's not responding to anything they've attempted. "Are you riding with us or following?"

"Riding with you."

"No." Noah's hand on my shoulder stops me. "You're bleeding," he points out. Somehow he's managed to find me a pair of yoga pants and a sweater, along with a first aid kit. "We'll follow you."

In the car, I shrug out of his bloodied sweatpants. "I bled all over your pants."

"It's just blood. It'll come out." There's a resignation in his voice, something dark and troubled. "Make sure you've got the glass out."

My knees aren't nearly as bad as the blood suggested. There's no glass.

I change quickly because we are at the emergency room moments behind the ambulance.

I know this drill.

And I am terrified that this time, it might end differently.

Noah

I shouldn't have come here, but I couldn't leave her to face this alone. In some rational part of my brain, I know she's done this sort of thing without me before. But I couldn't leave her alone.

Instead, I'm useless and frozen in the emergency room while she talks to the admitting personnel. If I'd found a way to stay busy, I might not have noticed the smell. The underlying latent fear. Hospitals and churches are where most people confront their mortality, and it is generally an unpleasant experience.

We're not very good at facing the ends our lives.

I've already done that once before, and I'm not too keen on doing it again. But I can't leave her alone.

"He's in triage. Once he's stable, we'll send someone out for you."

"Can you at least tell me what the initial assessment is?"

"Accidental overdose."

Beth's hand covers her mouth. I'm there, supporting her as she staggers beneath the news. Supporting her is enough to keep me from falling apart myself. The panic is there, just waiting for its opportunity to strike. To turn me into a shaking ball of pathetic misery. To remind me of the temperature that melts flesh into bone.

"I've got you." I pull her against me and guide her outside because I cannot be in that waiting room another moment longer.

There are wooden benches. I guide her to one. She's limp against me as we sit. I hold her and whisper nonsense. She feels light as a feather.

"I shouldn't have left him." Words like shattered glass.

"It's not your fault."

She stiffens in my arms. "I left him."

"It's not your fault."

"I've seen that movie," she whispers. "And you're right, it's not my fault, but I knew the risks. I knew this couldn't last."

I can feel the anger rising in my chest like bile. "You're determined to blame yourself for this."

"I've been doing this a lot longer than you've known me, Noah. I know the drill, and I knew the risks." She's repeating herself. She's in shock and she doesn't even realize it.

"The risks of taking one night for yourself? One fucking night, Beth. When is the last time you've done that?" I'm not shouting, but it's a close thing. The anger is there, just there. Barely leashed.

She doesn't answer because she can't. Her eyes are rimmed with red and the sadness surrounding her is breaking my heart. She's miserable, and she's determined to pour more salt on the self-inflicted wounds.

"He was alive when we found him," I say, attempting more rational conversation. "He's going to be fine."

She covers her mouth with her hand, muffling a sob. "I can't lose him, Noah. I can't. He's the only family I've got."

The ragged pain in her voice breaks me. Reminds me that I've walked away from my family, but they're still out there in the world somewhere. Her mother is out there, but it's clear that the only family who matters to Beth is her father.

I pull her close. Her tears soak through my shirt. I don't care. I hate seeing her like this. And what's worse is that she's gone through this how many times before alone?

"They shouldn't have switched his medication," she whispers. "I don't even know what Tramadol is."

"They say it's supposedly less addictive than oxy." And that's bullshit, but I don't tell her that. She doesn't need to know about my problems today.

Of course, if I freak the fuck out in the middle of the ER, she's going to figure out everything a hell of a lot faster than I want her to. I can handle this. I have to.

I can't leave her alone. No one should have to put their father in the hospital.

Part of me hates the man who has Beth's devotion. He should have been a better fucking man and figured out his medical problems. He should have gotten off his ass and fought. Instead, he's laid around and let Beth take over running both their lives. He was a goddamned soldier, damn it. He should have fought harder.

My eyes burn. I hate him for doing this to her. He's turned his little girl's love into something he can lean on when he's too stoned to take care of himself. And Beth - goddamn her, she doesn't even see it. He's not going to get better. He doesn't have to because she'll always be there to pick up his life.

I can't say any of this to her. I admire her too much to slap her in the face with her devotion. Because that's what this is. This is a daughter who loves her father. She just can't see that her father has let her down.

I hold her. Sitting outside of my own personal hell, I stay with her. Hours pass. She calls into work and tells them she's had an emergency. Her boss gives her grief, but she fends him off with her cool, professional Beth voice.

When the nurse comes out and asks her to step into the back, I go with her.

"Your father has suffered a seizure." The doctor is brisk and cold. Hell of a bedside manner. "We suspected alcohol poisoning and pumped his stomach. He mixed alcohol with his pain medication. We believe the Tramadol and Flexeril triggered the seizure. We're going to admit him and run some more tests."

She nods. "Is he awake?"

"He is. We're hoping you can talk some sense into him. He's trying to check himself out against medical advice."

"He's what?"

"He says he's going home. Given the scare, the likelihood of a concussion as well as possible liver damage, we're strongly advising against it."

I find her fingers, threading them into mine. She's limp, like she's given up completely. "Don't," I whisper. "Don't let him do this without a fight."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Beth

"Dad?"

He's got an IV in one arm. There's a butterfly bandage over one eye. His jaw is swollen. He blinks, and it takes a minute before he recognizes me. "Hey, sugar bear."

"The docs tell me you're being a pain in the ass." My voice breaks and the tears start again.

"Ah hell, honey, don't cry." He holds open his arms and I lay my head on his chest. I can't help it.

"You scared me." The truth, even if it's only the partial truth.

"Not gonna lie. I scared myself this time."

His arms are limp. He can barely hold them around me.

"What happened?"

"I had a couple of drinks with Sally. Next thing I know, I'm here."

I lean back so I can look down at him. I can feel Noah standing near the door. Dad hasn't noticed him yet, but for me, he's a balm, soothing the anger and fear pulsing beneath my skin.

"All your medication is gone, Dad. Are you sure she was a nurse?"

"She was here the other night. You don't remember her?"

"I never met her, Dad." My heart hurts because he's confused. He's never introduced me to Sally. I don't know if she was here or not. And clearly neither does he. "You can't come home tonight, Dad. You have to let them check you out."

"You and I both know we can't afford it."

"You came here earlier this week and didn't have a problem with it."

"And then I saw the bill. For a couple of shots and some pills, we're in the hole another seven grand."

My heart is breaking in my chest. I'm going to lose him, and he doesn't care. "I don't care about the money." My words break. Shatter like shells on pavement.

"Well, it's time that one of us did. I can't keep doing this. We're going to lose the house at this rate."

"They can't take the house," I say. But I'm not sure.

"I'm fine. I messed up my meds or something. I'm going home."

"You're not listening to me!" Tears are falling hard down my face now. "You cannot come home. You had a seizure. You need to let them figure out what happened so it doesn't happen again. You don't have any medication, Dad."

"I've got my appointment next week. We've managed without medication before, we'll manage again. I'm not staying here tonight. It'll be another fifteen thousand at least."

"I don't care about the money!" I'm screaming at him now. "You've got to stay and let them fix you!"

"Calm down, sugar bear. You're going to get us in trouble."

Noah's arms come around me, but I push away from him. He doesn't let me go. "No, Dad. Don't tell me to calm down. I won't let you do this. You can't come home. You have to stay." A broken whisper. "Please don't do this, Daddy. Please stay." I swipe at my cheeks because I can't see. "I can't lose you. Please let them fix you. Please?"

Noah is the only thing holding me up.

"Is everything okay in here?" A security guard steps into the room, hand braced on the utility belt on her hip.

"Fine, ma'am," Noah says. She studies us all for a moment. She doesn't look convinced but leaves us be.

My dad finally notices Noah. "Who are you?"

"I'm Noah. I'm a friend of Beth's."

"Is 'friend' a euphemism for something I should be worried about?"

"I think you should be worried about taking care of your health, sir. Beth is quite capable of taking care of herself."

My dad cringes, physically recoiling from the slap in his words. Shame burns up my neck. I thread my fingers with Noah's. I appreciate the gesture if nothing else. If it takes a stranger shaming my dad into staying in the hospital, I'll take it.

"That's a low blow coming from someone I don't know," my dad says.

"Yes, sir, it is. But you didn't see how she's been breaking her back trying to take care of you. The least you can do is do your part and try to take care of yourself."

"You don't know dick about me."

"I know you were a soldier and that you got hurt during the war. Believe me, I know all about that."

"What do you know about the war? You're just some spoiled rich little fuckstick whose mommy and daddy paid his way through this place."

"Staff Sergeant Noah Warren, sir. No one has paid for anything I haven't earned."

There is curiosity in my dad's eye now. "You were in the army?"

"Got out about six months ago. I was downrange before that."

"Where?"

"Which time?"

"Last?"

"Taji. North of Baghdad."

"I know where it is. I was just outside there. Near Sadr City."

"Fun place to spend your deployment."

They've changed languages. Oh they're still speaking English, but they're talking about places I've never been. There is a meaning beneath their words now, a shared experience that I will never be a part of.

My panic recedes. Noah is talking to my dad like it is a completely normal thing to discuss the war in a hospital emergency room. Maybe it is.

And I am amazed at the transformation, not just in my dad, but in Noah. I now see the soldier in him in a way I never saw before. He stands a little bit straighter. His body language shifts into something more regimented.

"Sir, I've only known your daughter a short while, but I've never seen anyone work as hard as she does. I'm asking you, one soldier to another, to please stay tonight. Not for yourself. For her."

"Don't call me 'sir'; I worked for a living."

Noah grins. I don't get the joke. I'll ask him to explain it later if I remember.

"Don't make her spend every waking hour worrying about you, trying to figure out how to fix you."

"Damn it, son, I get it."

"Good." Noah squeezes my fingers. "I'll wait for you outside? I need to get some air."

He leaves and but for a moment, I fall a little bit harder.

"Where'd you find him?" My dad sounds disgruntled now. I don't really care. At this point, I want him safe and not in pain.

"I'm tutoring him in stats."

"A soldier, huh?"

"He was. He's not anymore."

"Enlisted boys are trouble."

"Says the enlisted boy." No sarcasm there at all.

"You like him."

Understatement of the century, but I'm not really able to shift gears this quickly. I'm still raw and a little wounded from yelling at him. "I can't have this conversation right now, Dad."

He flushes and looks away. "So if I'm staying, could you get me a few things from the house? Toothbrush, maybe?"

The tears are back and holy hell am I tired of crying. You'd think there would be a point when you'd run dry, but no, there are always more. "I can do that."

He holds open his arms, and I go to him again because he's my dad and he's alive and I am so fucking grateful that he is still alive today. I lay there and breathe in the smell of the antiseptic and the medical tape and his soap and skin.

Because there is nothing else I can do.

Noah

I danced a little too close to the edge in there. I wanted to stay. I needed to leave. I said my piece and got the fuck out of Dodge before I fell apart in front of both of them. And wouldn't that be just fucking perfect for Beth? Her dad ODs and then she figures out that the guy she's dating has his own issues.

I'm sitting outside on the bench. My heartbeat is slower now. Mostly back to normal. I'm not sweating anymore and my hands are steady. Mostly

I'm resting my head on my hands. Hunched over in a ball of deep breathing misery. I wish I'd taken LT up on some of that metaphysical shit he was trying out when we were downrange. He'd been dating a medic who'd been all into yoga and meditation and shit. He swore that he was sleeping better because of it. I think he was just sleeping better because he was getting some ass between patrols.

I met Katie the medic. She seemed nice. And LT had really liked her. I wonder what would have happened if their relationship had made it home.

But it hadn't, and there isn't much to do about it now, is there?

I close my eyes and wonder how Beth is doing. How her dad is. I can't go back in there, though. I'm this close to completely losing my shit, and I really don't want to do that to Beth. Not today. Hell, not ever.

Which complicates things just a little bit. How the hell do I get cleaned up when I haven't even told her that I've got a small problem with pills?

"Fuck." I sit back hard, banging my head on the bench. Stars explode in front of my vision. What the hell have I done? She was all freaked out about telling me about her real address.

I've got to figure out how to tell her, "Hey babe, you know those scars? Well, they still

fucking burn, and oh, by the way, I can't sleep without sleeping pills because every time I close my eyes, I'm back in that fucking fire. It was cool sleeping with you, but I wasn't really there. I had to get high first and pass out."

I am such a fucking loser. I scrub my hands over my face. I know what's happening. I'm far too familiar with the symptoms. Racing thoughts. Pounding heart. I'm having a full blown fucking anxiety attack in front of the hospital, and I don't have my goddamned meds.

I've lost my shit twice in the last week, and I'm not prepared for it. Because I'd stopped carrying the fucking pills with me because I'm tired of feeling like a goddamned junkie. Well, guess what, soldier boy, turns out maybe you should take a little of your own advice and take better care of yourself.

Jesus, I'm having an argument with myself.

"Hey?"

I lower my hands and see Beth standing there. She looks damaged and fragile. Like the slightest touch will send her over the edge.

"How's your dad?"

"They're doing blood work on him right now. He's a baby when it comes to needles."

She's trying to make light of it, but she's so transparent she's practically translucent.

"Let me take you home?"

She nods. Her eyes are bruised and red. I stand then and hold out my arms. She walks into them, and I almost collapse from the purest pleasure of holding her against me. She trusts me. And I have fucked things up beyond repair by lying to her from the start.

Oh, I can come up with a thousand excuses. It didn't really come up. There was no box to check on the interview for a tutor to declare drug problems and panic attacks.

Or maybe I can justify it by saying I really don't have a problem. The pills enable me to function. Isn't the definition of a problem something that interferes with everyday life? In that case, the scars and the fucking war are the problem, not the pills.

None of those explanations work, because they're all more lies surrounding the fragile truth.

I'm an addict, and I have been since I woke up from that fire with my veins full of morphine. And I've fallen for a girl whose father is an addict.

And I am going to break her fucking heart when she finds out.

I walk her to my car, and we're both silent. I don't have the energy to make small talk, and she apparently doesn't either.

Maybe I can talk to the psych doc, and she'll help me figure out a plan to get clean before I have to tell Beth the truth. Maybe I won't have to break her heart all over again.

We ride in silence. I follow her into her house. She starts to pick up the kitchen.

I stop her. "Get your dad's stuff. I'll take care of this."

She doesn't argue. I half expect her to. She moves down the hall. I find the broom and sweep up the broken glass, then mop the floor.

It's only when I'm finished that I realize that Beth hasn't come back out into the kitchen yet. It's a small house. Neat and clean, if cramped. There are books stacked on the floor near the kitchen table. She must study there. There's a tiny living room with a well-worn couch and a small diode TV. I haven't seen one of those in years. I didn't realize they still made them.

The hallway is narrow. I follow the light.

She's sitting on her father's bed. Her head is down. There's a photo in her hands. My heart breaks for her.

I knock on the door quietly.

She startles. Her face is flushed from crying. She puts the picture back on his dresser.
"Sorry," she mumbles.

"Don't apologize for hurting."

She offers a watery smile. "I'm not used to having someone here when things go to shit."

"That really sucks." Not the most eloquent thing I could say, but then again, I'm walking a razor's edge of my own.

I sit next to her. Wrap my arms around her shoulders and hold her because it's the only thing I can do.

It's a long time before I start talking.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Beth

He pulls out his phone. I watch him type something in and pull up a YouTube video and presses play. It's "Flake" by Jack Johnson.

"I hate this song."

I frown as he sets the phone on my dad's dresser. "Then why are you playing it?"

"I'll get to that part. Dance with me?"

I gather my dad's things and carry them into the kitchen. His request makes no sense. "I don't want to dance right now, Noah."

He stops me. The music is playing in the other room. "Trust me? There's a reason for this."

My kitchen is tiny. The table is the only thing in it that's not a cheap throwaway. I keep holding out hope that I'll stumble across an estate sale where the kids just want to get rid of Grandma and Grandpa's stuff dirt-cheap.

I look around at the tiny space. At the man asking me to dance in it. I shake my head but move into his arms anyway. He cradles one of my hands in his. His free hand presses lightly to the small of my back.

"So why are we dancing to a song you hate?"

He's guiding me around my kitchen like he's Fred Astaire. Okay, maybe not, but it's smooth and soothing.

"On my last deployment, we got bombed. A lot."

"That doesn't sound like anything good."

"It's not." He's not meeting my eyes. I'm not sure where he's going with this, but I rest my head against his shoulder and let him guide me. I've always liked this song. "So one day, I was on my way back to my CHU from the gym, listening to my iPod."

"CHU?"

"Sorry. Containerized Housing Unit. Where I slept."

"Ah." I love the sound of his voice beneath my cheek. The deep vibration against my skin.

"I got caught in the open, and there was nowhere for me to get shelter. And the rocket attack lasted for what seemed like forever. I just laid there as the bombs went off around me. This song was stuck on repeat, and I couldn't get to it because it was in my hand."

"Why didn't you get the -- Oh."

"I got trapped beneath something. Boxes. Building. Shipping stuff. I have no idea. My shoulder was pinned down and I was trapped. I was burning, and all I could think about was turning this fucking song off."

"Noah." There is nothing I can say. No words that are sufficient. Thank you for your service doesn't cover things like this. Not by a long shot.

I keep dancing with him, but I no longer like this song. I've seen the scars on his shoulder, his back. The damaged tattoo shredded by raised, red scars. It didn't make sense to play this song. Not now. Hell, not ever. I would never play it again. So why was he?

"Why are you playing it now?"

"I want to change how I feel about it. I want to remember something good that happens when I hear it instead of remembering that day in the desert." He presses his cheek to the top of

my head. "If I close my eyes, I want to feel your hair against my face instead of the burning sand. I want to feel your body against mine instead of the debris stabbing me. Your hand in mine instead of the iPod I couldn't turn off."

I release a shuddering breath. There is a powerful want beneath those words. It's more than a dance. More than making a new memory.

There's so much in those words. They wrap around me and crush the air from my lungs. I lift my face to his and kiss him. I kiss him until I can't breathe. Until the dance stops and my body is pressed to his with an urgency that threatens to destroy us both.

My fingers trace over the hard lines of his belly. He's pinned between my body and the counter. My tongue slides against his, the most intimate dance. I can't breathe, and I can't stop. I need this. I need him.

Noah.

I push his pants open. I want him. Now. I want to forget everything except the way he feels when he's inside me. I want to lose myself in the slide of his body into mine. I want this. I want him. Hard and fast and now.

He pushes my yoga pants down. Off one leg. Just enough that he can lift me then and then he's there, inside me. And I'm filled. Completed. He stumbles and we go down in a mass of limbs and naked flesh.

He's there, just there. He cups my face as he slides inside me once more. Slowly this time. On the kitchen floor that smells clean now, Noah fills me. The pleasure is raw and ragged and everything I need. I rise up to meet him, squeezing him with my body. Drawing out the pleasure, forgetting the pain.

For just a moment, there is just Noah and there is just me. We are the only two people in the entire world. I run my hands over his shoulders, beneath his shirt. I feel the scars beneath my touch and he doesn't pull my hands off. I urge him closer. Deeper. I want him inside me today. Tomorrow. Forever.

I look into his eyes and there are so many memories looking back at me. I'm not sure if he sees me.

"Noah." A whisper. A plea.

He focuses then. "You came home," I whisper. My fingers dig into his back as he thrusts inside me again and again. "You're home."

With me. But I can't say that out loud. It sounds like something permanent, and I am too bruised to make those promises. Instead, I arch beneath him, cupping his face.

"Say my name," I whisper. It sounds so dirty. So commanding. At that moment and always, I need to know he knows he is with me, loving him. Holding him forever close.

His eyes darken and some of the memories scatter. "Beth."

A prayer. A promise.

"Again."

He slides one hand beneath my hips, lifting me to take him deeper. "Beth."

"Again. Say my name when you come."

He shudders. My body clenches in response. I'm close. So close.

I shatter and the last thing I hear is my name on his lips as he joins me in the abyss. I am undone. Completely and truly lost.

Noah

I'm lying with her on her kitchen floor. I've been in less comfortable spots but at that moment, with Beth pressed to my side, I can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be. It's quiet now. That fucking song isn't playing anymore. Guess my phone's battery finally gave up and went to sleep. Which is fine.

I may hate that song a little bit less now. As therapy goes, I think this was fucking brilliant. Maybe I can get Beth to do it again some time when she's less fragile and I'm less broken.

I want to ask her if she'll stay with me tonight. Or if I can stay with her. She's still bruised. Still the walking wounded.

How did she do this alone?

"That was a great dance," I finally say. My voice breaks.

Maybe that's part of it. Of putting the pieces of my life back together again. Maybe I need someone else to help me do it.

She makes a warm sound against my throat. "It was a pretty great distraction, all things considered."

"Is it always like this with your dad?" I can't help it. The question sneaks out before I can stop it.

"Sometimes it's worse, sometimes not so bad." She sits up and slips her yoga pants back on. "I think it's worse this time because he didn't have the same medication he'd been on."

"Isn't that illegal, to change someone's prescription?"

"I have no idea. I've spent so much time arguing with the bureaucratic bullshit at the VA that I have no mental space for anything remotely associated with medical law." She runs her fingers through her hair then stops, resting her head in her hand. "Thank you. For being here today."

Her words are sudden and unexpected. "Where else would I be?"

She's suddenly busy searching for one of her socks. "I don't know. Home, doing homework maybe?"

"You have a pretty high opinion of me if you think I could be doing homework knowing you're dealing with all of this alone." Her words actually hurt. I don't think she means them to, but they sting nonetheless.

"I'm just...I'm not used to having someone here." She crawls up my body to kiss me softly. "Thank you."

I hold her close because I'm terrified that one of these times, I'll let her go and it will be for the last time. I've never felt anything like this. It's powerful and it's overwhelming and it's the most potent thing I've ever experienced.

"It's what I do." A true statement. I'm used to being leaned on. I'm used to having soldiers call me, I'm used to picking them up. Beth is not one of my soldiers, not by a long shot, but for one night, it feels really good to be needed again.

If I'm honest with myself, I've missed that part of army life. Maybe it was part of what kept me functioning before I left. I have the pills. I've had the pills since the fire.

But they hadn't taken over my life when I was still in. Maybe I was just too busy to notice. It's only since I've been in school that I've been doubling up. Noticing the anxiety more. Feeling my purpose in life slipping further and further away.

I kiss her forehead. "Will you stay with me tonight?" Because I don't want to be alone. I can feel the latent panic dancing at the edge of my soul, waiting for the right moment to strike. Waiting to catch me unaware. Maybe if Beth stays, it won't be able to marshal the energy to take over my life because I'll be worrying about her rather than sitting alone with my thoughts.

I can hope. She sits up and adjusts her clothing. I do the same, not missing the fact that she hasn't answered.

"I don't know that I'm going to be fit company tonight," she says after a moment.

I place my hands on her shoulders. "I'm confident you won't be."

She smiles. "You're a pretty brave soul, aren't you?"

"I don't think you should be alone." I cup her face. "If you don't want to stay at my place, I'll stay here. If you'll have me."

She leans against me, resting her head against my chest. It's starting to become my favorite position. "I'll stay with you if that's okay?" She swipes at her cheek with the back of her hand. "I've got homework to do."

"Is your boss going to be mad that you weren't at work today?"

She hesitates a long moment. "I'm usually pretty reliable, so no, I don't think so."

"I hear a 'but' in there."

She shakes her head. "It's nothing."

I let her go. I want to push her, to figure out what she's not telling me, but she's not up for it and I don't want to start an argument.

I wash the few dishes in the sink while I wait for her to pack a bag. Her backpack is near the door already.

I pause, studying the empty pill bottles on the counter. "Do you need to report the missing pills to the police?"

She steps into the kitchen. Her hair is piled at the base of her neck. She's changed clothes. She has a small L.L. Bean tote bag over one shoulder.

"They wouldn't do anything anyway. It's not enough for them to worry about."

I frown. "How do you know what amounts they'll worry about?"

She swallows and sets her bag down, then starts shuffling through her backpack. "We were broken into when we first moved here. They stole Dad's medication. I called the cops to report it and, well, there wasn't much they even attempted. Took a statement, gave me a police report. And that was that. I had to figure out how to get Dad meds because the doc had pretty strict rules on when they would refill a prescription."

"How did he manage?" I knew all about pain and keeping it under control. You had to stay ahead of it. Once it first started burning hot, you were fucked.

"Drinking and basically not being functional for days on end until we could get the new medication." She's avoiding my eyes now, sorting through miscellaneous papers on the counter.

"Jesus, Beth."

"It sounds worse than it is."

"No, it sounds pretty rough on all counts. How long have you been taking care of your dad like this?"

"I think my mom left when I was sixteen so...A while, I guess."

I realize in that moment that I am staring at a woman who has had to grow up a hell of a lot faster than I ever had to.

And I am awed by her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Beth

I'm far too used to the hospital. They let me into the back when I return with Dad's things. Noah waits outside. It's easy to see he's got issues with hospitals. I'm not surprised given his history. I'd like to ask him about it, but how do you even start that conversation? "Hey I noticed you were freaking out back in the ER. Want to talk about it over coffee?"

Those conversations don't generally go well. Like hardly ever.

I'm alone in Dad's room. One of the nurses stops in. "He's getting an MRI."

"What's the plan?" I ask. I hate that I cringe at the thought of how much an MRI is going to cost us. It's worth it. Maybe if I keep telling myself that, it will be true.

"Let me get the doc to talk to you."

I hate that non-response, but I understand that they've got their scripts they need to stick to.

I'm alone for only a few minutes - a miracle if I do say so myself - before the doctor walks in. He's young and dark-skinned with sharp features and kind eyes.

"I'm Doctor Zahid." His hand is soft and strong all at once.

He flips through my dad's chart, pausing to read whatever it is he was looking for. "You've got things pretty well lined up. Your dad gave you a medical power of attorney?"

I press my lips into a humorless smile. "That was fun trying to find a lawyer to actually prepare it. Something about a teenager making medical decisions for a grown man made a lot of them uncomfortable."

"So you've been doing this for a while then?" he asks. I don't answer and he doesn't force me to. He seems like he's got a good read on the situation. "Your dad has had a pretty rough go of it lately, hasn't he."

I smother the urge to say something smart. Alienating the doc isn't a good way to get stuff done. "That's one way of putting it," I say.

"There are a couple of things going on with him."

I brace for the list because it will be a list. A "couple" is never just two issues when you're dealing with chronic pain and everything that goes along with it.

"Well for starters, there's the back pain. Why hasn't this been treated surgically?"

I offer a tolerant grimace. It's supposed to be a smile, but I'm too worn down for that tonight. "It's a long story that involves the VA and about three years' worth of canceled appointments and surgery being classified as elective as opposed to medically necessary."

Dr. Zahid blows out a hard breath. "I've heard stories like that. I'm sorry. Your father's problems don't need to be this bad. The surgery is two-day inpatient at worst." He looks down at his chart. "Have you talked to any of our caseworkers here? There are programs designed to help fund cases like your father's."

I shake my head. My hands are sweating. "I did when we first got here, but they said that because he was a disabled vet, he had to go through the VA. They couldn't help him. Then the VA told me he was lower priority because he wasn't 100-percent disabled. And the runaround began."

"I think we can do something about that," Dr. Zahid says. "I want you to call this number and set up an appointment. Give them my name and tell them I referred you. I think they can

help."

I tuck the card into my pocket. It's not the first time I've been promised help, and just like every other time, I'll follow the lead, just to make sure it's actually bullshit. Because maybe, just maybe, one of these times it won't be.

"The second thing going on is that I want your father admitted. For several reasons. First, we need to make sure whatever caused the seizure isn't a physical condition."

"That tells me you already think it isn't."

"I think it's a drug interaction. Tramadol and Flexeril are a commonly prescribed combination, but we're starting to realize that it's more dangerous than previously thought. Plus, switching him from Oxycodone to Tramadol was a risky transition to make without medical supervision. If we're going to transition him to Tramadol, then we need to make sure he comes off the Oxycodone in a controlled manner. Third, his pain is being poorly managed."

"Try not at all," I mumble.

"And we can do better," he continues, ignoring my interruption. "I want to schedule him for surgery here. In this hospital."

I look up sharply. "We can't afford that."

"You can't afford to keep using the emergency room as primary care, either."

I'm having a hard time breathing. "So that's the plan?" My lungs are tight, thinking of the medical bills. But he's right. We can't afford to keep using the ER as primary care.

"It will get him in the system and get him fixed. And his problem is fixable, Ms. Lamont. The lack of access to care is exacerbating it."

His words burn, and I want to scream at him that he's telling me things I already know. But he's trying to help. He's either offered me a lifeline or another road leading to false hope and a dead end, but it's better than standing still.

"How long will he be an inpatient?"

"A week. Maybe more while we transition him off the opiates."

"So he's really an addict."

"I think you already know the answer to that." He makes a note on my father's chart. "Your father will always be an addict. There is no cure for this. But he's got one thing that many other addicts don't have. He's got a supportive home environment."

"You don't know that. I could be stealing his pills and selling them to my classmates for drinking money."

He is clearly not amused. He stares at me for a moment and I brace for a stern talking to but he does not justify my sarcasm with a response. It's probably just as well. "He's going to have a long recovery, even after the surgery."

"You say that like this surgery is a foregone conclusion. I don't have that much faith left in the medical system left."

He grips my shoulder then. The human connection is unexpected in the sterility of this environment. "I understand your frustration. But we've got resources to help. When your father leaves the hospital in a week or two, or however long it takes, he will have a list of appointments and his surgery will be scheduled."

It sounds too good to be true, but I'm too tired to fight, to explain that I've heard this all before. We've gotten so close to surgery that we'd went through pre-op at the VA, only to have the surgery canceled the same day. No explanation. Just we'll try to reschedule you as soon as possible.

"Thanks, doc."

When I'm alone, I sit there trying to absorb everything he's told me. Trying to find hope in the fact that someone, at least, believes that my dad can be fixed. That it doesn't have to be this way.

I'm not convinced. Maybe I've run out of hope. Maybe I'm just overtired.

But right now, waiting for my dad to come back to his room, there's a plan. Which is more than there was this morning.

It's all I've got. It's got to be enough.

Noah

She steps out of the hospital and my world tilts beneath my feet. Seeing her penetrates the fog in my brain like a green laser pointer aiming at the stars at night. It's like she's been discharged from the bowels of hell, a place I cannot follow her. I hate that I'm too fucking weak to stay with her while she's in there.

"So what's the verdict?"

"They're admitting him. And I have to call this woman because the doc swears there are programs to help people like my dad."

She looks defeated. "That sounds like it should be good news?" I ask cautiously.

"I've heard it all before. They'll figure out that he's not eligible for one bureaucratic reason or another."

I wrap my arm around her as we walk toward the garage where my car is parked. I don't know what to say. How do you tell someone at the bottom of the well that things will get better?

She's silent on the ride to my place and I leave her to it. Mostly because I don't know what to say. She's been through a hell of a day. Her pain is echoing off mine, stirring up memories that I'd rather forget, or at least bury beneath the pills. I'm dancing on the knife's edge and it's taking everything I've got to keep my shit together.

I carry her backpack into the house. "Go take a shower. I'll get dinner going."

She offers me a tired smile. "I'm not really that hungry. Don't cook on my account."

"You act like I'm getting ready to start a four-course meal. I was mostly thinking of grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup." I brush my lips against hers. "Just relax for a little while."

"I don't even know what that means." She's swaying on her feet as she shuffles toward the bedroom.

The fatigue weighing on her is practically a physical thing. She's been dealing with so much for so long by herself that I'm not sure she even realizes the ways that it's rewired her normal. She was completely functional today in a situation that would send most people into a tailspin. Civilians don't have traumatic experiences every day. They damn sure don't find their fathers face down in a pool of blood.

But she did, and she didn't fall apart. She functioned until the ambulance got there. And she is functioning still.

But the crash is coming. It always comes after the adrenaline burns off. LT taught me that the crash was inevitable, and that you needed to plan accordingly. Which is why I sent her to take a knee.

I don't hear the water running. I slide the grilled cheese off the burner and pad down the hall.

Beth is asleep. Curled on her side, her phone dangling dangerously from her fingertips. Her lips are parted, her face relaxed. The stress of the day is gone, at least until she wakes up.

I take her phone and cover her with a sheet. She can eat when she wakes up, which with any luck will be in the morning. A good eight hours of sleep will do wonders for her.

I dig through the front pouch of her backpack and pull out her phone charger and plug it in next to mine on the kitchen counter.

The silence of my kitchen is oppressive. I have homework but I can't shake the sick feeling in my guts. I've been so worried about her crash I forgot about my own.

The panic is back, twisting like bad food in my stomach. I lower my head to the kitchen table and just breathe in and out. Wishing that I didn't know how this ends.

It ends with a sleeping pill. It ends with me sinking into oblivion while Beth is here. I won't hear her if she gets up. I won't hear her if she needs me.

I will hear nothing in Princess Ambien's warm embrace, and that's exactly how she likes things. I am her slave, and there is nothing that I can do about it if I expect to keep functioning.

I step outside into the cool darkness. There's a single patio chair on the front porch, left over from the previous owners. I put my feet up on the rail and rest my head against the side of the house. The stars are brilliant points of light in the night sky.

The burning starts deep in my chest. The tightness squeezes the air from my lungs. My vision blurs and the stars are no longer bright but fuzzy. The war is circling close to the surface tonight.

"Ah fuck, LT, why can't I just let the war go?" I wish he was here to talk to. I could use some advice. I scrub my hands over my face. "I mean, I came home. I'm relatively okay. Why can't I just accept that?"

I stare up at the night sky. It's quiet. I don't actually expect a response from wherever LT is now.

"I don't know what to do." I double over, fighting the grief that threatens to break me every time I stand at the edge of this abyss.

"I wish you were here to tell me what to do. How do I unfuck this? If I stop taking the pills, I can't function. If I don't..."

I know the rational answer. Take the damn pills and stay functioning. I can't fall apart on Beth right now. Not when she's dealing with all of this shit with her father.

"I know how this story ends. We both saw it so many times."

I can't sit here alone in the dark. I go inside, grab my phone and send Josh a text. Can you meet? Having a hell of a time tonight.

Say where.

I leave a note for Beth in case she wakes up, but I can't stay here alone right now. I'm dancing as fast as I can on the edge of a pin, and tonight, that pin is about to stab me in the ass.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Beth

It takes me a minute to figure out where I am when I wake up. Warm smells remind me that I fell asleep in Noah's bed. I reach out, only to find that I am alone.

There is a light on in the hallway, casting shadows in the dark. The house is quiet. I'm not used to this kind of quiet. There's always traffic around my house. The silence is actually a little unnerving because it accentuates the silence of being completely alone.

A note near my cell phone confirms my worries.

Went out with Josh. Needed to clear my head.

Part of me is disappointed that he isn't here, but I get why he left. Hell, I basically crashed on him for - I look at my phone - six hours. It's three am. Lovely. There's a tiny seed of worry, but Noah's a big boy. He's been to war. I'm sure he can handle going out in our tiny college town.

My stomach rumbles. He's got bread and a toaster. It'll hold me over. I'm not particularly fond of the idea of tearing apart his kitchen looking for something to eat. I need something other than butter, though. Hopefully, he's got some peanut butter stashed somewhere.

I open the cabinets and stop short.

Standing in a neat row like little soldiers are bottles of pills. My heart stops in my chest. I can hear nothing but the pounding of blood in my ears. It's none of my business. I'm not snooping. I just stumbled across them because he keeps them with the...peanut butter, right below them.

But what if is an insidious whisper on my shoulder.

My hand trembles as I reach for the first one. Oxycodone. Tramadol. Flexeril. Klonopin. Wellbutrin. Behind them, Vicodin. Percocet. A big bottle of Tylenol Three. Some with his name on the bottles. Some not.

Okay, so he's got medication.

I bite back tears because this isn't a few pain pills. Maybe on their own, each one isn't too bad, but combined, these are heavy duty. I wish I was some vapid idiot who could ignore them and not have a clue about what it means that they're here. But I know. I fucking know what these drugs do to a person.

He's been lying to me the entire time I've known him. My hand is cold over my mouth. I'm biting back a sob. My cheeks are wet and my heart, my heart is breaking in my chest. I am so goddamned tired of crying over the men in my life.

I can't stay here. I can't do this. Not tonight, after I've almost lost my dad. I can't deal with the knowledge that Noah is...I can't even think it.

I pick up my phone and call Abby.

"Hey, what's wrong?" She's clearly not asleep. Which makes me curious about why she's awake at this hour, but now isn't really the time. I'm on the edge of falling completely apart for the second time in the span of a day.

"Can you come get me? I need to get home." Abby is like me. She has a car but she doesn't drive when the bus is easier.

"Where are you?"

I love Abby just a little bit more right then. I tell her the address.

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Thank you."

"Do you want to tell me what's going on while I drive or when I get there?"

I cover my mouth to keep the sob restrained. "I think I better wait." My voice breaks.

But my heart is already broken. Because I am an idiot and let myself fall in love with an addict.

Again.

Noah

I didn't mean to start drinking, but the next thing I know, Josh and I have a bottle of Jack on the table between us and we're going shot for shot.

"This isn't going to end well," I say. I think I'm slurring already.

"Never does."

Josh is bigger than me. Well over six feet. He's got the tolerance of a bull moose.

He raises his glass. "Halfway down the trail to Hell..."

I raise mine in response. I know this song so well. I might have ended my career at Bragg, but I damn sure started out in the First Cavalry Division at Hood. "In a shady meadow green..."

We finish the first chorus together. "Are the Souls of all dead troopers camped, near a good old-time canteen. And this eternal resting place is known as Fiddlers' Green."

I toss back my drink, blinking hard because goddamned everything hurts tonight.

I lean forward, covering my mouth with my hand, trying to get everything locked away. The booze is hitting me hard because I doubled up on the Klonopin before I left the house.

"You ever wonder why we went?" I look over at Josh, who's busy pouring us both another shot.

"Drink. If we're drinking, bottoms ups, brother."

"How are we getting home?"

"Cab, how else? We can crash at my place later."

There's a reason I need to get home to my place, but it dances at the edge of my brain. Teasing me. I frown, staring into the glass, but I can't remember. Fuck, it'll come to me. It feels important, but the harder I chase the thought, the further away it gets.

Damn it.

"And yeah. It surprises me sometimes," Josh says.

"Huh?"

"Like I'll be listening to the radio and a song will come on from one of my deployments and I just...I go back." He grins. "There was this one time we were out in sector and my buddy Cricket was taking a piss. He looks down and he's all 'oh fuck guys'. He was standing on an IED."

"Get the fuck out."

Josh starts laughing at the memory. "No shit. He's standing there with his dick out and we're all laughing and scared shitless he's all 'you guys, this isn't funny. What the fuck do I do? I don't want to die with my dick out. Not like this anyway'."

I'm laughing because it's exactly the kind of shit that happens downrange. "Holy hell." I wipe the tears from my cheeks. I tell myself it's from laughing too hard. "So what happened?"

"We took pictures while the EOD team got him out of there."

"Oh my God, that's fucking wrong."

Josh shrugs and refills our glasses. It's going to be a rough fucking night.

"How do you turn the shit off? When you start thinking about it?"

Josh taps his fingers on the glass. He's silent for a long moment. I'm not sure exactly how long because time is kind of fuzzy at this point. Everything is numb except the hurt in my chest.

"I don't. Sometimes, I can distract myself by going for a run or something. Other times, not so much. That's when Uncle Jack comes into play."

My hands are tight on the glass. "I can't fucking be in a place like this without freaking the fuck out."

Josh pins me with a knowing look. "We've all got our demons, brother."

"Mine are winning." I roll my t-shirt up, revealing the torn remnants of my tattoo and the scars that trace over my shoulders. "I have a hell of a time sleeping without meds."

"You should talk to the doc."

"I did. They gave me more meds." I toss back my drink. "I went in asking for help getting off the shit and they gave me more shit."

Josh pours another glass. Clearly my confession of being a goddamned pill junkie isn't groundbreaking news. "Sounds about right."

"I can't function without the shit."

"So what's the problem? You're going to one of the top schools in the country and you're doing fine. I fail to see the problem here." He pours another shot.

At this rate, I'm going to be under the table in about fifteen minutes.

I stare into the golden whiskey, his question banging around my head like a kettle drum. What is the problem? I'm fucking fine. I mean, I'm mostly okay.

I can't feel the glass in my hands. I can see my fingers rubbing the cool glass but I can't actually feel the sensation. My brain isn't registering it.

Everything is a little slow. A little fuzzy.

"I guess it's not okay if I have to spend the rest of my life doped up just to go to work every day." There's another reason. A more important one. It crashes into me, reminding me of the only good thing I have in my life.

"Holy fuck. Beth."

Josh looks at me. "The tutor?"

I drop my head onto the table, resting it on my forearms. "Fuck me."

"Dude, what happened?"

"Beth. She's been taking care of her old man since she was a kid. He's got a small problem with pills."

"Bigger or smaller than yours?"

I look up at him. He's a little out of focus. "I don't think it matters, does it? When she figures out I'm a goddamned junkie, she's going to split."

Josh shakes his head. "One, you're only a junkie if you're blowing dudes for Oxy behind a dumpster."

I laugh because that's seriously fucking wrong. "Is that the clinical definition?"

"Last I checked, yes." He pours another glass. "Look, man, sometimes the shit gets to me. I drink if I can't cope. Does that make me an alcoholic?"

"Technically, yes."

"Well, fuck 'technically.' I'm the one who needs to get my head around everything that happened downrange. I'm the one who's got to figure out how to get up every day rather than eat

a fucking bullet. So fuck 'technically.' Whatever it takes to get through this shit, man. Whatever it takes. If a pill keeps you from sitting in your goddamned bedroom rocking on the floor, then so be it. And fuck these fucking fuckers for judging you for that. They haven't done what we've done. They haven't done a goddamned thing but sit in their safe little ivory towers and watch the goddamned war on fucking TV."

He ends with a shout. Several rather irritated hipsters look at us, shake their heads, and go back to their drinks.

"See?" Josh is getting wound up now. "These fucking cowards sit here and drink their fucking drinks. If we were at Bragg, we'd be fucking brawling right now. But oh no. Not these fucking pussies."

A strong hand claps me on my shoulder. "And I think that's about it, gents. Time to head out."

The bartender is one of said irritated hipsters, except that he is Josh's size with full-sleeve tattoos on both arms. "Fuck you, man," Josh says.

"No, fuck you. I paid my dues in Najaf and Sadr City. So this fucking pussy says get the fuck out of my bar."

Josh's face lights up. "No shit? What unit?"

And just like that, our night gets extended.

And all I can think about is how Beth is everything right in my world. But she's a small point of light in the darkness of the war that overshadows everything I do.

I can't forget the war. I want to. Holy fuck, I want to.

But I can't.

And I don't know how to fix what it's done to me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Beth

"Want to get some pancakes?" Abby asks as we pull away from Noah's.

"It's almost four in the morning."

"Which means it's the perfect time for pancakes. Especially ones with lots of whipped cream and fruit. I know a great place."

I sink down into the passenger's seat. I'm drained. Empty. I've tried to come up with a million and one excuses as to why he's got all those pills in the kitchen. But I keep circling back to the one ugly truth I can come up with.

God, it hurts to even think it.

"So what happened?" There is sympathy in Abby's voice. Not pity. I know the difference and Abby has never pitied me.

"Apparently Noah has some issues from the war."

"What kind of issues?"

I look over at her. "When did you get glasses?"

"I need them for long distances. I only wear them in class and driving. Don't change the subject."

"They're cute."

"Again with the subject," she says dryly.

"The kind of issues that need a shitload of pain pills to deal with. Among other things."

"What did you find a crack pipe or something?"

I make a sound that's mildly horrified. "No. He's just got a lot of medication."

"And?"

"And my dad is strung out on that shit. When he can't get his medication, I buy him alcohol to keep the pain at bay. He's in the hospital right now because they think he had a seizure from it. And I'm supposed to just shrug off the cabinet full of drugs Noah has?"

Abby shakes her head. "I didn't say any of that." A long silence stretches between us.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, leaning my head on her shoulder. "It's been a hell of a week."

"I know. It's okay." She turns into town. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. For all of it. I really hoped Noah would be the real deal."

I curl my arms around my middle and slouch back into my seat. "Thanks."

"How's your dad?"

"They're doing a bunch of tests on him tonight. Admitting him. He tried to leave without being seen." My throat closes off again. "Holy hell, can this day just end?"

"Why did he want to leave without being seen?"

"Because he didn't want to pay the bills."

"Damn."

"Yeah." I glance over at her. "I think pancakes sound fantastic. Do they come with alcohol?"

"As a matter of fact, they do. Believe it or not, there's a diner that serves alcohol and amazing pancakes." She smiles. "I didn't think you were much of a drinker."

"I'm not, but you know, everyone else around me seems to be getting shitfaced on a regular basis. I'm thinking I should try it."

"It's fun on the upswing, but damn sure sucks on the downslide. Hangovers are hell on the skin."

I grin. "I'm sure you've got a cure for them."

"But of course."

She pulls up to the diner. It's in the old tobacco district. The high-end restaurants and loft apartments in the old industrial part of town.

"Who on earth comes up with the idea of pancakes and booze?" I ask as we walk up the sidewalk.

"Someone who has clearly been in an IHOP at four a.m., but doesn't want the party to end."

There's a kitsch neon sign in the window. "Aren't there laws about when the alcohol has to stop being served?"

"Probably."

"Is this place legal?"

"I assume so," she says. "Quit worrying, will you? Let's get some breakfast. I should warn you though, that I am now obligated to hate Noah for the rest of your life because all I'm going to hear are the bad parts."

But I've stopped hearing her.

Because Noah is sitting at the bar with one of the guys from the Baywater. The bartender is leaning on the bar. Noah isn't really sitting. It's more like he's listing to one side, his head cradled in one hand.

"You've got to be kidding me," Abby says, looking between me and the men at the bar.

"What are the odds that we're going to end up in the exact spot that I don't need to be in?"

Sound fades. He's the only thing I can see. It hurts my heart just looking at him

He hasn't seen us. We can leave before there's a fight. We can turn around, and I can go home and start the long, painful process of getting over him.

I should let him explain. I should give him that chance, right? I mean that's what a better person would do. But I'm not feeling brave or good or strong at the moment. Everything inside me is breaking into a thousand pieces all over again.

It hurts so much to think about it. I can't do this again. Caring for my dad, loving him, takes everything I've got. I've been killing myself to take care of him. I don't have any room in my heart for another lost puppy.

"We should go." Abby sounds far away. Like her voice is at the other end of a long tunnel.

Noah stands up. Sways a little on his feet. Of course he does. His words are heavy and thick, jumbled together. "I'm going to hit the..."

He sees me. A thousand emotions flash across his face.

And in that instant, he knows that I know. I see the recognition, the fear.

The regret that follows quickly, draining the color from his face.

And I'm such a fucking loser that my first instinct is to go to him. Because he's been there for me this week. I wasn't alone. For once I wasn't alone and now I am again and part of me hates him for doing this to me.

But I can't do this. I can't come home and find Noah face down on the floor. I can't manage his medication to make sure he doesn't take too much.

I can't do it.

I love him. But I can't.

Noah

It's been hours since my last shot. Josh and Eli the bartender have been swapping war stories while I've been chugging down water. I've been ready to go for hours, but I'm not going to leave Josh at the bar even if it is with his new BFF Eli the bartender who was at Najaf.

I didn't expect to see Beth at the bar. In some part of my brain that's not completely fucked up, I realize what her being here means. It means she opened the cabinet by the fridge. It means she knows.

I don't know what to say. I stand there dumb and mute, my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I try to speak but nothing comes out.

Her friend is looking at me like I'm the antichrist. Maybe I am.

"Is that her?" This from Eli the bartender.

"Yeah."

"She looks pissed."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious. That helps clarify the situation tremendously." Apparently I can talk now, so that's a plus.

I wonder if I'll be able to unfuck this before she decks me. Because realistically, I deserve it. She has every right to be pissed.

Doesn't she? Fuck, I'm upside down over this girl.

She turns to follow her friend out of the diner.

"Beth, wait."

How original. Jesus, my inner monologue needs cue cards.

She stops. Holy shit, she actually stops. "I can't do this with you," she says, quietly. She won't look at me, won't meet my eyes.

"I've been trying to come up with a good explanation," I say. It sounds lame even to my ears.

"A good explanation for what, Noah?"

My mouth moves, but the sound is stuck again, locked in the back of my throat.

"You can't even say it." She presses her lips together into a flat line and her eyes fill once more. She looks ragged and raw from crying. "I fell for you. I fell hard. And before I fell, I thought, this is too good to be true. Turns out I was right. It is."

"It's not like that. It doesn't have to be." More hapless pathetic words have never been spoken. I'll beg if I have to. I have to explain this. I have to fix it. Everything that is right and good in my world is slipping through my fingers, leaving me alone and empty. Just like before.

"Like what, Noah? Are you going to tell me that you've got everything under control? That you don't ever take too much or run out too soon?"

Shame burns over my skin. "No. I wasn't going to tell you any of that," I whisper. "I was going to tell you I'm sorry."

That catches her off guard. She hesitates. Her mouth opens, then closes again. "Me too, Noah." She reaches up and cups my cheek in a gesture I have done a hundred times to her. Her hand is warm and soft. I want to capture her and hold her there. To beg her to let me explain. To tell her about the fire and the pain and the fucking memorial ceremonies that destroyed a part of my soul.

Instead, she whispers, "Me too."

And I have to let her go. Because I'm a lying selfish bastard, but even half-cocked I recognize the end when I see it.

There's no getting her back from this. I've broken the fragile thing that had been growing

between us. I did this because I didn't tell her about the fire or the nightmares or the fear of the dark places.

I've lost her.

I've lost everything.

Again.

Chapter Thirty

Beth

"Ms. Lamont, did you hear the question?"

I look up at Professor Earl. "Sorry, could you repeat the question?"

I am acutely aware of Noah's absence in the back of the class. I can feel the empty space where he used to sit like it's a palpable thing, even with Josh still there. It's been a week, and I haven't seen him. He hasn't been in class. He hasn't set up any tutoring appointments. Not that I expected him to. I wanted to text him. To call. Just to make sure he's okay. I want to ask Josh, but every time I even think about approaching him, I chicken out because he looks so angry. Josh is Noah's Abby, I think. And I am a coward because I can't face his anger.

It's the absolute silence that worries me. And I hate myself for worrying but that's what I do. I'm the damn fool for continually picking up strays in my life.

"I asked what responsibility does the organization have to its employees? Does the business owner have an obligation beyond the exchange of a paycheck?"

I look down at my notes. I've got nothing. The last hour of class is a blur. Hell, the last week is fuzzy. I'm grasping at thin air, trying to pull something out of my ass on the spot. I pick the closest thing I can. The thing that burns on a personal level of hell. "I think organizations do have an obligation. Consider the military. They send soldiers to war, right? And when they leave the service, if they're fine, they get nothing. But what if something develops later? What do soldiers get? And what if something happened while they were in?" What if they're burned in a fire when a building collapses on them? But I don't say that. "What obligation does the military have to provide access to medical care if they've created problems that will require lifelong treatment?"

Parker chimes in. She's wedded to utilitarian ideals and has never considered that there is something more out there than numbers. I don't hate her most days. She's perky and blond and every jock's wet dream. She's not a complete idiot, but she's definitely here looking for her MRS degree. Which is fine, I suppose if that's the life you're from. I don't have that luxury.

"People in the military volunteered. No one held a gun to their heads and made them sign up. The military doesn't owe them a lifetime of treatment just because they may or may not have gotten hurt. How many bogus PTSD claims are out there right now? They cost the taxpayers billions because it's easy money."

I'm usually pretty even-tempered. Even when someone says something that really gets under my skin, like Parker's comment just did.

My voice is even. Barely. "They volunteer to serve so that people like you can go to college and live your life and not have to worry about things like the welfare of our country." I can't keep the emotion from bleeding into my words. "They don't volunteer to be broken for the rest of their lives because they can't get access to medical care for issues that the military caused."

"Then maybe they should have gone to college instead of joining the army," Parker says mildly. There is a smug self-assurance on her pretty features that is a serrated blade on my last nerve.

"You do realize that the military is more educated than most of the American public, right?" It's taking everything I've got to keep my temper under control. I can feel Josh watching me. I

wonder why he hasn't chimed in yet. This is as much his fight as it is mine. Probably more so.

"Sure. The bottom line is that these aren't America's best and brightest. We're talking about people who should have gone to college and didn't and now they want us to pick up the tab for the rest of their lives for their choices."

It's amazing how blasé she sounds. Not bitter. Not spiteful. Just like she's stating a fact about the weather. I suppose it's easy when it's a numbers game, which it is to someone like Parker. It's not so easy when it's about someone you love.

"I think you're forgetting that volunteers serve so that you don't have to," Josh finally interjects. "The organization that rewards its members' loyalty will find itself able to attract better applicants. The organization that thinks there is nothing more important than money will not continue to recruit the same quality of individuals."

I want to ask him about Noah. Where is he? Is he okay? But I don't.

"People are motivated by rational self-interest. You can't put a price on loyalty," Parker says.

"That's where you're wrong. Employees motivated by monetary reward are less productive, less motivated, and less trustworthy. Organizations would be smart to figure out how to optimize employees' emotional ties to their companies." Josh looks right at me, his expression filled with blame and anger, and something else. There is no mistaking that Josh is pissed. And that anger is directed fully, completely, at me. "In a functioning society, relationships are reciprocal. Exchange relationships only exist as a condition of trust. Trust is the foundation of every relationship, business or otherwise. You can't buy it."

The discussion fades, and I can't hear it anymore. All I can think about is the harsh judgment in Josh's eyes.

It takes me the rest of class to summon the courage I need. I catch him in the hall. At first I think he's not going to stop walking but then he does. He refuses to meet my gaze. "Is he...is..." I can't say the words. Fear closes off my throat.

"Ask him yourself." He starts to walk off then stops and turns back. His body radiates violent tension and I take a step back. Josh notices. "You know what? That's the fucking problem with people like you. You hear all the stuff about PTSD on the news and you rush to judge all of us as crazy fucks one bad day away from snapping."

His comment strikes a nerve, one that is really fucking tender after the last week. "You don't actually get to say you people to me. I've been taking care of my father - a veteran - since he came home from the war."

"Well, good for fucking you," Josh snaps. He takes another step into my space. "You get to be the fucking martyr taking care of the disabled vet. Spare me your heroics, sweetheart."

"What the hell is your problem?"

"My problem? You want to know what my problem is?" He advances toward me, stopping an inch from my face. I can feel the violence radiating off him. I try to back up again, but I'm against the wall. "You wrote Noah off. You saw the pills and you immediately decided junkie. You never talked to him about it. You never said 'hey, maybe this shit isn't a big deal.' You just saw the pills and looked at the shit with your dad and said 'nope, not doing this.' You're a fucking coward for running out on him. He deserves better."

"You don't actually get to judge that," I whisper.

"Yes, actually I do. I'm his friend. I've been there. Like he was for you that week with your dad. But oh no, not you. You fucking bolt at the first sign of trouble."

"He's got a goddamned cabinet full of hard drugs, Josh. What am I supposed to do? Turn a blind eye and pretend everything is fine? Until when? Until it isn't?"

"You're supposed to trust him enough to talk to him. To give him a chance to figure out what the hell is going on in his life." He looks down at me with disgust and it hurts worse than anything else. "You're supposed to stand with someone you love, not cut and run the first time things get a little rough."

He might as well have slapped me. His words stab me in the heart and rip open my chest. I stand there bleeding from the harsh, ugly truth.

Noah

I've fallen behind in stats. Just like I suspected I would. I can barely understand what the hell regression is, let alone what residuals are and why they're important. But I'm too damn stubborn to ask Beth for help.

I saw her in class after the fight at the bar. Just once. And then I stopped going. I can see her clearly in my memory and it haunts me. She's frozen. She doesn't smile, doesn't acknowledge me. She's gone to a place where I cannot reach her. Does this hurt her as much as it's killing me? Hell, I want to fix this but I have no idea how. So I retreat. Because there's nothing else I can do.

There is an e-mail from Professor Blake after I miss my second class. See me. God, but those notes haven't gotten any easier since the first time I was in school. I want to ignore her but she is the one person on campus that I will not blow off. Fear is a sick knot in my belly as I knock on her door.

"Things aren't working out with the tutor?" she says by way of greeting. There are barriers between us that need to be there when we're around people. I pretend to be just another student; she pretends I'm an anonymous face in the crowd. But we both know better.

"Not exactly."

She takes off her glasses and comes around her desk and pulls me down onto the small couch in her office, the barriers gone. She's no longer Professor Blake. She's LT's mom and she's been a surrogate mom to me since I first met her years before.

There is earnest concern looking back at me and it nearly breaks me. "Talk to me, Noah. You were doing so well. What happened?"

"It's complicated." I can't bear to see the disappointment in her eyes.

"It always is." She cups my chin, forcing me to stop hiding from her.

Her smile is kind and warm. You'd never guess that she makes the meanest scones on the planet from looking at her in Stats. She's cold and hard and demanding in public. In private, she's warm and loving and...she's the mom I wish I had. Her hand slips from my chin to rest on my shoulder. She is patient comfort and I am tempted to let myself fall completely apart. But I can't. Because I'm terrified I might not ever put the pieces back together again.

"I kind of screwed things up with Beth."

"Tell me something I don't know, Captain Obvious," she says dryly. I can practically hear LT in her voice. The same tone. The same dry sense of humor. "What happened?"

"She's been dealing with her dad's medical issues."

"His addiction issues, you mean."

"Right. Those." Shame crawls hot and prickly up my neck. The panic dances in my gut. The words are stuck somewhere between my lungs and my throat.

"You know you can talk to me, right?"

I cover my mouth, but not before the sob I've been fighting breaks free. It's been building

for days. "I don't know how to fix things. I used to have a purpose. I used to know how to fix everyone's problems. And I can't even figure out how to call her and say I'm sorry. I fucked up."

"Mike always talked about you. You were the platoon's white knight. Always saving people from themselves."

"Yeah, well, what I did mattered. People trusted me. Here? Here I'm just a fucking college student who can't even do stats without someone explaining it in crayons."

"That's not true, and you're selling yourself short."

"It damn sure doesn't feel like I'm selling myself short. I'm in over my head, and I should just get out now. Go back to doing something I'm good at."

"Would you join the army again? Go back to war?" I suck in a hard breath at the harsh reality that her words slap at me. "I'm not trying to be cruel, Noah. But maybe you just haven't figured out why you're here yet."

Anger snaps past the blockage in my throat. "Don't pull the 'God has a plan' bullshit on me."

She holds up her hands. "I wasn't going to. I was going to tell you that there's a reason you're here and not back in Afghanistan or Iraq. And maybe that purpose is to be here for Beth. And me. Because knowing you're here, knowing that you meant so much to Mike means the world to me. I don't know what your purpose is, but I do believe you'll find it again." She reaches out and covers my hand with hers. The bones in her hand are fragile, her skin soft and cool. "Maybe you're here for others, just like you've always been."

Tears burn behind my eyes once more. They're hot and tumbling down my face. "Why did it have to be Mike, Sheryl? Why him?"

"I don't know." Her arm slides around my shoulders and I lean on her because I can do nothing else. "But I still have you and that has to be enough."

I cover my mouth with my hands, trying to bind the emotion back before it crushes me. "That's a pretty shitty trade-off."

"Maybe it is. Or maybe your time here on earth isn't done yet, and maybe Mike's was."

She leans her head against the top of mine, and I remember why I love her. "I will miss him every day of my life. But knowing I've still got one son in this world is enough for me."

"I'm not your son." I'm not trying to be cruel, but the words are necessary and true.

"Maybe not by blood, but you are the son of my heart. Don't try to get out of it, either. You're stuck with me."

I smile because it's the kind of thing she's always said. The first time I met her was when Mike brought me home for Christmas like a stray puppy. And Sheryl welcomed me into her home and made me feel like...like I belonged.

"I've screwed up pretty bad," I whisper.

"I'm sure it's not as bad as you think."

"It's on the level of really not good shit." I don't have the words I need. Even now, trying to confess my sins to the one person in the world who won't judge me, I'm stuck on how to say it.

"I've got a small pill problem."

She doesn't move, but I feel her stiffen. "The kind of small where you're just taking a bunch every day or the kind of small where you're robbing children of their lunch money for drugs?"

I'm horrified, but I laugh anyway. "You should break this terrible sense of humor out in class. You'd be less terrifying."

"The whole goal is to be terrifying, silly boy. People won't take me seriously if I'm cracking jokes all the time." She takes both my hands in hers. "What kind of pill problem?"

And finally, I find the words.

Chapter Thirty-One

Beth

"You're not going to make shit for tips if you don't get a smile on your face. You can look like someone died after your shift," Abby says.

My phone is a solid weight in my hands and it is silent. "Noah hasn't been around for a week."

"Which is good because that means the break is clean and you're moving on. Take table five, for instance. Tall, dark and drop-dead sexy. He's been checking out your ass all night."

"Table five is yours, he's more your type, and holy cow, can you have a little sympathy?"

"No, I can't, because I'm your best friend, and my role in this scenario is to push you out of your heartbreak to a tall, dark, soothing balm like table five."

I smile and shake my head. "Don't ever change, Abs."

"I hate it when you call me that. Ab-by. 'Abs' is my least favorite body part."

"Ha."

"Seriously, take table five. Make small talk. Remind yourself that there are other men in the world."

"Says the woman who hasn't dated since she broke up with her ex?"

"My middle name is hypocrisy." She shoos me toward the table. "Now go."

I love Abby but I'm not in the mood to flirt. Still, she's given me a table and I have to make the most of it. I need the money. My call to the woman Dr. Zahid recommended has actually not ended in disaster. Except that I've got to pick up three hundred dollars in prescriptions in two days when my dad gets out of the hospital and I'm about eighty bucks short. So I kind of have to be nice to Mr. Tall, Dark Soothing Balm.

"Hi, what can I get for you?"

He looks up at me and up close, I can see that Abby isn't joking. His eyes are a dark, dark brown, the color of molten chocolate. His skin is light caramel. He's got a strong jaw and shoulders that are made for that suit. "Gin and tonic and your phone number."

I smile and try to make it genuine. "You'll have to do better than that to get my number."

There are tiny dimples in his cheeks. If my heart wasn't already bruised and broken, I might flirt with him. "Who was he?"

"Who?"

"The guy who broke your heart."

"Are you psychic or something?"

He lifts one broad shoulder. "Not exactly. You just look like you could use a good laugh. I assumed it was because of a guy."

I offer a wry smile. "Pretty good assumption."

"Any chance I can fix it?"

"What are you, my therapy godfather?" I try to take the sting out of my words. They escape before I can stop them.

He's unfazed, his eyes still warm and kind. "Nah, nothing like that. I just hate to see a pretty girl look so sad."

I roll my eyes. "We really need to find you some better pickup lines."

He laughs then and hands me his card. "Well, if you change your mind, give me a call sometime. No pressure."

"Thanks, but I'll pass. Can I take your order, though?"

The rest of my shift passes without incident or any more stray flirting. My heart hurts from the fight with Josh. I don't know how to wrap my brain around Josh's verbal slap. His was a direct hit. It cut and cut deep.

Not knowing what's going on with Noah, though. It's killing me slowly.

I'm tempted to take the car to his house. I want to know if he's okay.

I don't know what I'll say if I see him. I just...I just need to know that he's all right.

Maybe if I keep telling myself that, it'll be true.

I shoulder my backpack and start on my walk home. Part of me holds out a little bit of hope that maybe Noah will be waiting for me outside in the dark like he used to. That he'll step out of the shadows. That he'll be okay.

The moon is out tonight, making my walk home brighter than it normally is.

His car is in front of my house when I round the corner to my street. My heart beats a little faster when I see it.

He is sitting on my front steps. His arms folded across his knees. Still. Utterly still. And waiting.

There is a rush of fresh air into the space where my heart had been. He's here. He's okay.

And then he looks up at me. And I realize that he is not okay. His eyes are bloodshot and rimmed with red. He's lost weight. He's still. Unnaturally still.

The broken gate creaks behind me as I step into my yard. Fear slows my steps as I approach. I don't know how this story ends, but I'm terrified of the different ways that it could.

"Hey." It's all I can manage.

"Hey." He swallows hard. "How's your dad?"

"He's okay."

"Is he still in the hospital?"

I nod. "Yeah. Detox didn't go so well." An understatement that stands between us, an impassable chasm.

He looks down at his hands. He scrapes one nail with his thumb. "So listen. I'm, ah, I've got to go away for a while."

"You've already been away for a week." I take another step. Because I'm an idiot, but I want to be closer to him. I want to feel his skin against mine. I want...I want him.

I don't know how to do this. So I let the silence stand when I really want to ask him where he's been. How.

"I tried stopping everything two days ago." He won't look at me. "It didn't go so well." My words from a moment ago are a slap. "I'm taking incompletes in all my classes." He finally looks up at me and there is fear and uncertainty in his dark brown eyes. "If...if I come back, will you help me pass Stats?"

"What do you mean if?" My voice breaks.

Noah

I try to swallow the dust in my throat. This is so much fucking harder than I thought it was going to be. My hands are shaking. I lock them together to keep her from seeing. "I don't know

what kind of person I am anymore. I don't know who I am without the pills. There's this thing out in Colorado. It's rehab and PTSD treatment and all that."

I hadn't planned on telling her. I meant to ask her about Stats and then leave. I didn't want to worry her. I didn't want to see the pity and the disappointment in her eyes when I admitted just what the war has done to me.

I'm such a fucking liar. I needed to see her. Just once more. And the words just spilled out.

"I've been using since I was in the hospital. I've been abusing for the last year or so." The words are sticking in my throat, but I force them out. They're rough and ragged and raw. Kind of like the sand that carved its way permanently into my skin in that hot fire. "I've gotten pretty good at convincing myself that I don't really have a problem."

I finally look at her. She is bruised and battered in the moonlight, her pale skin almost glowing. "I'm not asking you to wait for me or anything like that."

"Noah." I can hear it in her voice. The leading edge of sympathy that's not quite pity yet, but it will be.

I have to finish this before I chicken out. "I just thought you should know. I'm, ah, I'm not doing this for you. I was. I was going to try. I kept trying to find the words, and life just got in the way. But..." I look down at my hands again. "If this is going to work, I've got to want it for myself. So I'm not doing it for you."

"Good." A whisper in the darkness. A surprise.

I look up at her sharply. "Well, that's hell on the ego, that's for damn sure."

She makes a horrified sound that's somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "That's not what I meant." A pause. "I'm glad you're doing this for you, Noah. Because you're right. You can't do this for me. It has to be for you."

She steps toward me then. Stops when she's close enough that I can see her pulse throbbing in her throat.

She stuns me when she drops to her knees. And leans forward until her head is resting against my shoulder, her arms sliding around my waist. She smells so good, so fucking good. I should leave. I should get the fuck out of here before I ruin this fragile truce again.

But I can't. Because Beth is in my arms again. I never thought I'd smell her hair again or feel it pressing against my damaged skin. She's my lifeline, and I never should have put her in that position.

I shudder and pull her close until she is in my lap. I can feel the wetness against my cheeks, and as long as I live, I'll never know if the tears are mine or hers.

"I miss you. Oh God, I miss you." The words tear from my throat.

"I've worried about you. I didn't want to but I did." Her arms tighten around me in response. Her words are not a promise. They're nothing.

They are everything.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Beth

My father is finally out of the hospital, but he's not ready to come home yet. The drive to the inpatient treatment center on the other side of the state is awkward and quiet. It's good, don't get me wrong. But I don't know how to deal with the reality that my life may not revolve around taking care of my dad anymore.

The phone number that Dr. Zahid had me call wasn't too good to be true. And now my dad is on his way to some holistic treatment center where he'll stay for the next month. Getting clean and getting healthy.

Without me.

I don't know how I feel about that.

"So don't burn the house down or anything while I'm gone," he says when we pull down the long gravel drive toward the address. It looks like an old plantation complete with white pillars and a drive lined with ancient pine trees.

I try to smile. "I won't."

"You don't sound very happy to be getting rid of your old man for a month."

My throat squeezes shut as I help him out of the car. "I'm scared," I finally whisper.

"Me too." He pulls me into a hug and I'm lost, holding onto my dad for dear life, terrified that I might never see him again. Which is stupid because this is the closest I've come to having him back since he first got hurt.

"I'm going to get better, sugar bear. I promise." Whispered words I've dreamed about. "You won't have to take care of me anymore."

A sob breaks out of my throat. I don't know what that even means but I won't lay that on him. I swipe at my cheeks and try to smile up at him. "No cute nurses, okay? Because that didn't work out so well last time."

He rolls his eyes, but a flush crawls up his neck. My dad, the ladies man. Who knew? "Fine," he grumbles. "I'm going to get signed in and settled." He pauses. "You don't have to come in."

I'm not sure if I want to or not. "I'll see you in a month," he says when I say nothing.

I nod and he slips by me, heading toward the big house. I don't turn around. I can't. I wait for a long time before I slide back into the driver's seat. I can see him in the rearview mirror, standing on the porch, his green army duffle bag dangling from one hand. It's breaking my heart to leave him there but it's for the best.

I keep driving. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. But there, in the broken shards of my heart, is a single seed of hope.

* * * *

There is a note from Professor Blake for me to see her after Stats. I'm distracted and not paying attention. Normally I'd be tense with anticipation, wondering what she needs to see me about, but there is too much on my mind.

Noah has been gone a month. I still look for him in class every day. I look for him in the

shadows after work.

I haven't heard from him. I don't know if he's okay. I don't know if he's quit the program and just hasn't come home. I don't know if he's managing or if he's not and it's killing me. It keeps me awake at night when I'm supposed to be grading assignments and completing my own.

It's the not knowing that drives me slowly insane.

I knock on Professor Blake's door. There is a cream-colored envelope on her desk that she slides toward me. It's heavy in my hand. "Congratulations, Beth."

My fingers shake as I open the envelope, reading the words I'd put so much hope into. Then I read them again because they cannot possibly be real. "I start the internship at the end of the semester?"

She nods, her eyes warm and filled with pride. "You've worked very hard for this."

Words are locked in my throat. "It doesn't seem like it's possible," I whisper.

"Howard was on the fence about you. He wasn't sure a girl from your background would be a good fit." Her words should sting but they don't. They are true enough. "But Alistair was impressed by your story. He overrode Howard's objections."

I look down at the heavy card stock in my hand. "Thank you," I whisper because I am confident she had more to do with this than she's willing to admit.

My eyes blur again. I'm so tired of feeling like the other shoe is going to drop any day now. That my dad is going to be back on the couch and my normal will return to what it was. I don't know how to function without him, but I'm learning. I stayed out late with Abby after work last night. We ended up at a coffee shop talking about work and school and her distinct lack of a love life since she broke things off with Robert. I sure know how to party, right?

This internship feels like a pyrrhic victory. Something I wanted so much for so long but now it's empty and hollow. I wanted to celebrate with Noah but he's not here. But I don't say any of those things.

"He's going to be okay." Professor Blake is apparently a mind reader.

I look up sharply. "Ma'am?"

"Noah. I've known him a long time. He's like a son to me." She hands me a photo that has sat facing her computer, but away from the door. I've never seen it before.

I look down at two grinning soldiers. I recognize Noah immediately. "Who's this?"

"My son Michael."

My throat closes off as I stare down at the picture, absorbing how young and carefree and strong Noah looks.

There is sadness in her eyes. Sadness and understanding. "Noah has always been a thoughtful boy. More so than Michael. When Michael asked me to see about helping Noah out with his application to school, I had no idea how long it would be before I'd see either of them again."

Her words do something funny to my heart, knowing that she's connected to Noah this way. "Noah said it was important that he pass all his classes."

Her smile is warm and kind. "He's determined not to screw this up. He doesn't understand how having him here is more than enough for me." Her smile turns a little bit sad. "I tell you this because I'm betting on Noah to pull through this and come out stronger on the other side. He's stronger than he knows." She pauses so long that I look back up at her. "So are you."

I swallow hard. "Thank you." I don't argue with her even though she's wrong. If I'd been stronger, I wouldn't have bailed on Noah in the first place. Guilt is an insidious thing sitting on my heart, smothering the happiness I should feel at being offered this internship.

Maybe I'm just tired. I'll be happy about it tomorrow when I've had time to process it.

I head to work because there is nothing else I can do. My father is in rehab, making sure he's capable of functioning on his own before he comes home.

I am completely alone and I don't know what that means.

I guess I'll have to figure it out. I tell Abby about the internship and she damn near shrieks with excitement. Her happiness will have to be enough for me for now.

I'm exhausted after the end of a difficult shift. Every customer tonight seemed to be a whining diva who needed the lemon in their water at room temperature, or their asparagus had touched their bread and could they have another plate please.

I'm irritated and tired and lost in thought when I step into the darkness and head home. I want to tell my dad about the internship but I'm not allowed to contact him for another week, at least.

I want to tell Noah but I don't know how to reach him.

I am alone in the darkness, walking between the pools of light that illuminate the sidewalk. It's damp but warm on the walk, and my mace is in its customary place in my hand. I'm edgy tonight. Wary when the shadows move.

A familiar form melts out of them. A form that I recognized. A form I hadn't dared hope for.

Relief is a palpable thing that prickles over my skin. I stand there frozen for a moment.

There is nothing I can do.

Then I take a step. A single, halting step.

Noah. There. Just there. So close. So very close.

And then we're both moving until he's in my arms, and I'm in his. Our mouths collide in a fierce rush of heat. My body fits to his the way it was meant to. His arms are tight around me, his skin hot and warm. His grip is fierce and strong. Like he's never going to let me go.

I am fine with that plan. His clothes are bunched in my fists. He is warm and strong and solid and real. So goddamned real.

"Oh God, I missed you."

"I missed being called God," he whispers against my mouth.

I laugh because I can't help it then lean back to look at him, really look at him. He looks rested. Whole.

He looks like Noah. Not some fractured GI put back together by pills and bad medicine. He's just Noah. My Noah.

He cups my face gently in his hands in the way that I have come to love. His mouth is warm against mine. "I missed you so much," he whispers. And then I am lost in his arms. I'm never going to let him go.

He's home.

And for the moment, it is enough.

Epilogue

Beth

I am alone when I wake up. I'm not used to it, but it's getting better. I no longer have the blazing flash of panic wondering where he is or if he's okay.

I suppose the latent worry will always be there. Trust, when broken, never goes back together just like it was. There are always fault lines and cracks, but it's up to both of us to avoid stepping on them.

It's easier some days and harder on others. I'm not sure what today will bring.

I hear the shower running. Steam rolls out of Noah's bathroom. I wonder how long he has been in there. Given that the sun isn't up yet, it's not a good sign.

I'm still navigating through this new aspect of our relationship. The one where I try not to worry and fuss over him and he works on staying sober. It's hard because I know that he is still in pain. Will probably always be in pain.

I don't know how to fix that. But I've gotten better at being there when the pain comes. It's not a perfect solution, hell it's not even a marginally good one, but it's the best we've got right now.

I slip from the bed. Sliding my pants down my hips and tugging my tank top over my head, I then pad toward the bathroom. Steam mats my hair, making it curl into my skin.

I can make out his shape in the fogged up glass of his shower door. His head is down, beneath the water. His shoulders bent.

I can hope that he's merely rinsing his hair but I'm not that naïve. Not anymore, at least. I hesitate, but only for a moment, then I open the door and step into the scalding heat with him.

His skin is hot. I slide my arms around his waist, resting my head against his back. He doesn't move for the longest moment. Water runs over my face, soaking my hair, my skin. My blood warms just from touching this man.

And from the memories of what we've done in his shower. Have I mentioned that I love his shower?

For a moment, we simply stand together, his body stiff and tense.

Then his hands cover mine near his heart. I melt a little bit more for this man. I can feel the scars beneath my cheek, the stark demarcation between smooth strong skin and the raised edges of the damaged areas. I press my lips near the edge. I want him to feel my touch. To know that I am here for him. Always. No matter what.

He turns after a moment and pulls me close. I will never get over how good it feels to be skin to skin with him. To feel his heart beneath my cheek, his arms strong around me. There is so much strength and goodness in him.

So much courage to keep on going when things are dark and difficult and others would just give up. I think he's thought about it. At night, sometimes, I find him alone in the dark, listening to "Flake", staring into the distance at something only he can see.

I sit with him on those nights because it is all that I can do. I can't take away the memories. I can't dull the pain. But I can be there for him.

He brushes his lips against my forehead, then lower until he finds my lips. I open for him, tasting the sleep and the water. I love the way he kisses me. Long, simmering kisses, slow glides

of tongue and nips of teeth. He strokes the fire to life in me with the simplest touch. I burn for this man. I always will.

He cups my face and deepens the kiss. I slip my hand between our bodies, cupping him, stroking him gently. I've learned what he likes, what drives him wild. He's done the same, listening as I tell him what I like. Whispering dark and dirty things that with him are good and right and clean.

But right now, in this moment, there are no words. There is simply the slide of bodies, the caress of skin as he sinks to his knees in the shower, taking me with him. I straddle him, angling my body until he is there, just there. He stops me then.

Waits until I meet his eyes. His thumb strokes my cheek, his hands strong and familiar.

"I love you," he whispers against my mouth.

I slide down his body then, taking him deep inside me with a single motion, moving in that special way that takes us both closer to the edge of the abyss.

I dig my fingers into his shoulders, bracing myself so that I can move the way we both need. The delicious friction, the slide of his body into mine, drives us both closer to the edge of the abyss.

And then he moves and we are on the floor. The shower streams behind us but all I can feel, all I can see is Noah rising over me. His body tight and tense and driving into me. His eyes dark and haunted as he watches me. Our bodies slide together and I reach for him, pulling him down. My arms are tight around his back, my thighs gripping him tight as my orgasm dances just out of reach.

"I love you," I whisper in his ear. "I love you."

I don't know if he believes it. If he feels it deep in his soul like I do.

But I will say it every day until the end of time if that's what it takes.

Because I will never leave him alone again.

* * * *

Keep Reading For A Sneak Peek at CATCH MY FALL...

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Former Army Sergeant Deacon Hunter is trapped.

Trapped in the friend zone. Longing for the woman who captured his heart when they were deployed in Iraq.

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But some scars refuse to stay hidden.

One fateful night changes everything and neither of them know if their relationship will ever be the same.

All Deacon knows is that he'll be there to catch her when she finally falls.

* * * *

Chapter One

Deacon

"Can I touch it?"

Sweet baby Jesus, the things I do for my job.

The woman leaning across the bar is about one deep breath away from bursting out of her top, and I'd bet every red-blooded man in the joint is hoping for just that.

The Pint is busy tonight, filled with a very unusual mix of customers, even for a place that's known for its unusual mix of customers.

And by unusual, I mean veterans. Almost all of us who work here are vets or as I like to call us, refugees from civilian life.

My friend leaning across the counter is not a vet. Otherwise, she wouldn't be nearly as enthralled with the dog tag tattoo as she is.

And I wouldn't be nearly as drawn to the distraction of her touch. A certain part of my anatomy is fervently hoping her touch will linger a little longer. Maybe drift a little lower.

He's been feeling neglected lately and, well, she might be just the one to help me pass the night away with some smooth body rocking.

My friendly customer leans over a little further and runs her finger over the dog tag tattooed into my bicep. It's nested in a little silver line of tiny silver balls, pieced together to represent the real chain I no longer wear.

The dog tag tattoo was the first one I got when I joined the Army, the stuff that NCOs laugh at privates for doing. I damn sure laughed at my joes when they did stupid shit like I did once upon a time.

The girl leaning across the bar smells like oranges and sunshine, and maybe a little too much Patrón. I lean closer, in part to do my service to mankind and to keep her from actually falling out of the top she'd dangerously close to abandoning.

Eli, our boss and defacto commander even if he doesn't want to be, tends to frown on public

nudity. The cops don't really like getting called for those kinds of things, either.

The cops like bar fights even less, and naked chicks tend to spark the caveman in even the most civilized of hipster college dudes. And well, The Pint has a reputation to uphold as an upscale establishment. It's just that every so often, when we get the ratio of veterans to college students a little too high, we collectively give in to mankind's baser needs: whiskey and sex.

All that being said, it's part of my duty description to help Ms. Patrón keep her clothes on and keep her hands on my body.

Her finger is soft and smooth against my skin, and she traces the small chain over the ridge of my collarbone until it disappears into the white T-shirt I've worn to work tonight.

The slide of her finger over my skin should be arousing but it's not nearly as compelling as I want it to be. I want to lean closer to let her press her lips to my skin and see what else she'd like to do with that perfectly painted mouth.

It should be no sacrifice to stand perfectly still while she touches me. Her touch is a connection, linking me from my alcohol-induced haze to the world of sensual sensation.

It's a fantasy. One that doesn't exist for me, hasn't existed in several weeks if I'm being honest with myself. Christ, I need to get fucking laid.

But my friend across the bar with the barely contained breasts is not going to be the one to break that streak.

It's not an easy thing to break the contact but I do. Because what I need will not be satisfied in a simple touch. At least not hers.

Christ my dick is picky these days. Miserable fucker.

"Another drink?"

Ms. Patrón leans back and traces the same finger over her bottom lip. "I'm trying to behave," she whispers. "But yeah, I think another shot would be just the thing."

"You misbehave often?" Because I can't quite help myself. Maybe if I flirt, I can summon the energy to ask her to come home with me. To strip off her clothing and see if she's willing to do a little service for her nation.

I really need to stop drinking. That sounded fucked up, even to me.

"A little too often, to be honest."

"Why do you sound like that's a bad thing? Everyone's allowed to misbehave. Isn't that the fun of being an adult?"

She knocks back the shot and smiles at me, licking her lip. "I'm trying to pretend I'm not an adult tonight."

Danger Will Robinson. Abort! Nope. No way in hell I'm keeping this conversation going.

"Well, I'm not into daddy fetishes." I grin and wink at her, trying to take the sting of rejection out of my words. She wants to keep drinking, she can, but I have to see to other customers.

Eli, the owner of the Pint, steps out of the cellar, kicking the door shut behind him. "So, any takers on how long before we have our first fight tonight?"

I glance over at him, then out at the highly unusual crowd at an already unusual bar in a town known for unusual bars. The Pint is in one of the old tobacco brick buildings in downtown Durham and it would be unremarkable except for Eli and the space he's created here.

He's somehow managed to become the center of gravity for the small veterans community here in a hipster college town. I can't really tell you how I stumbled into a job here. It wasn't on purpose.

And yet, here I am, serving expensive ass whiskey to a bunch of college kids who are

looking at the crowd up from Fort Bragg for a night on the town like they are from another country.

Which, to be fair, is an accurate statement. Fort Bragg is a long way from Durham as cultures go.

It doesn't help that somehow, tonight became an unofficial Ranger Panty night. I'm not sure if it was a dare on social media or what, but there's about two dozen people in the bar wearing the ultra-short running shorts made famous, well, by the Rangers.

One half of the population I mentioned before is wearing Vineyard Vines and Sperrys. The other half is literally wearing combat boots and Ranger Panties. There is some mixing between them, but for the most part the military folks are on one side of the bar, laughing and getting tanked, and the college crowd looks like its doing an ethnography of military bar stories, watching warily from a distance, like they're afraid one of the vets is going to snap and shoot the place up.

This is fine, I'm sure. Like, what could possibly go wrong?

I'm honestly not sure how I feel about half the bar population running around in those shorts.

'Course, half the population in the bar includes a lot of the women, wearing them, too, which makes it really fucking hard to concentrate every time someone decides to bend over.

Dear God in heaven, thank you for the women who decided tonight was laundry night, too.

"It should be okay. So long as Caleb doesn't show up tonight," I tell Eli.

"Cut him some slack, will you?"

"I have no idea why you continue to support him. He's ended up in the hospital after trying to kill his liver one too many times, he's an obnoxious drunk, and quite frankly, his latent amosexuality is fucking annoying." I toss back a shot of Patron at the mention of my least favorite regular customer.

"I'm trying to get him into Crossfit or something to see if it can help him quit drinking," Eli said. I ignore the fact that he doesn't comment.

"That's all we need. Mr Shoot 'Em in the Face wearing TapOut gear and getting a fucking Jeep Wrangler."

Eli glances over at me as he shakes a drink, then strains it into the glasses.

"Ranger Panty Night seems to be a success," he says, sliding the drinks across the bar to the waiting frat brother. "It's definitely brought in a different crowd."

"Hard to argue," I say mildly, playing along with the impersonal conversation because it's better than the alternative. "Ranger Panty Night is practically printing money. How the hell did you come up with this?" Receipts are way up tonight. Especially since it's a Thursday, and the Fort Bragg crowd most likely has to be at PT early tomorrow morning. They've got at least a two-hour drive home.

"It was completely by accident. Caleb sent me a link to the Amazon reviews for Ranger panties, I laughed my ass off then posted it on social media. Somehow, I ended up offering a free drink to anyone who showed up in Ranger panties and, well, the rest is history."

I lift my glass to him in mock salute. "As long as no one calls someone else a fucking moron, we should have a real productive night."

And hopefully not too productive because it's just me and him running the bar these days. We really need to hire some additional staff, especially if we continue growing like we have been.

But it's a bar. And despite our efforts, there is a schism down the middle of our space, one that I'm not sure how to heal. I love the brick walls and the low hanging lights. The black and

white pictures of soldiers mixed with photos of Durham's history.

Technically, it's not my job to heal anything. That's Eli, everyone's favorite Boy Scout who looks like a Hell's Angel.

Unlike me—I look like an angel but raise holy hell whenever I get the urge.

Except that lately, I haven't felt like raising hell.

I wish I knew what the problem was because I fucking hate feeling like this.

A shorter dude in Ranger panties changes the music from something pulsing and intense to a smooth country song. And of course, that's when the shit show begins because clearly, the Sperry's crowd wants more pop remixes.

In the middle of the beginnings of a bar fight about what music should be played, a sleek woman wearing jeans and a black tank top slides into the space between the opposing sides and starts to dance.

And I mean really dance.

Her hips sway to the music, her eyes close. Her lips part just a little.

One of the Sperry-wearing trust fund babies moves in behind her, his hand sliding down her hip, his body moving in sync with hers, like they've done this before. Her movements make her tank slide higher, revealing the ink that spreads out around her waist.

It's entralling, watching her move. Watching her lose herself in the feel of someone else's body against hers, the smooth slide of his hands down her flesh, drawing her closer.

I'm not the only one captured by the sight of the erotic duo. As the smooth, slow, country music continues the tension in the bar is replaced by a sensual energy, from people daring to cross the gap and make that most elemental human connection.

She turns and the light hits her face just right. Her eyes are closed, her lips parted.

I'd recognize Kelsey Ryder anywhere.

And suddenly, I'm not longer enthralled by watching her dance.

This is how our night ends, ladies and gentlemen. With me standing there, fighting the urge to drag his fucking hands off a woman I haven't seen in years. A woman who could fuck my brains out and still be up and ready to go on patrol in Iraq the next morning.

Kelsey. Fucking. Ryder.

Watching her move, watching his hands slide over her body, I am hit with a violent longing.

Reminding me that I am suddenly, starkly, alone.

Just like always.

Also From Jessica Scott

Thank You for Reading!

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* * * *

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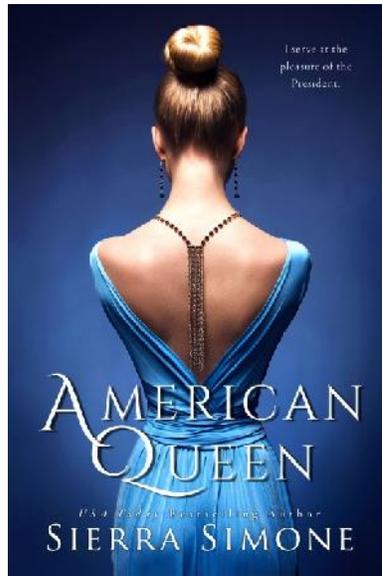
Jessica Scott is a career Army officer, mother of two daughters, three cats, and three dogs, wife to a career NCO, and wrangler of all things stuffed and fluffy. She is a terrible cook and even worse housekeeper, but she's a pretty good shot with her assigned weapon and someone liked some of the stuff she wrote. Somehow, her children are pretty well-adjusted and her husband still loves her, despite burned water and a messy house.

Photo: Courtesy of Buzz Covington Photography

Find her online at www.jessicascott.net

American Queen

by Sierra Simone



Dedication

To the No Shadow Bitches—Penises!

Acknowledgements

To every author who wrote a book about King Arthur, to my mother for giving me a copy of *The Once and Future King* when I was only eight, and to my AP English teacher, who let me make my senior project a book about how sexy Mordred was.

To Laurelin Paige, who held my hand, read countless drafts, quoted Rob Bell to me, and finally got me back for that time I made her change the beginning of *Fixed on You*. You were right about the beginning, you were right about everything. Of course.

To Nancy Smay of Evident Ink, The Editor From Heaven, who corrected my tenses and patiently explained to me exactly why a president can't talk about drone strikes in front of his new girlfriend. I don't deserve you NEVER LEAVE ME.

To the No Shadow Bitches, I won't out you here, and I solemnly swear not to get *one* of you worked up about biting necks again.

To Melanie Harlow and Kayti McGee, my sNAtches, my confidantes. And at Target prices!

To Ashley Lindemann, who pets my head and keeps the lights on while I transmorgify into a hermit crab. Everyone should know by now we're a package deal.

To Jenn Watson, who tells me what to do and has zillions of great ideas and has never once complained about the lecherous way I look at her.

To Rebecca Friedman, you are possibly the smartest, most energetic woman I know, and sometimes when you're trying to talk to me about agent stuff, I space out and just think about how pretty you are.

To my Lambs—you guys are the best readers a girl could ask for, and I promise to keep writing the most depraved smut possible for all you very depraved ladies. And especially you sexy ladies I met in Birmingham and LA and Virginia Beach, let's just all go on vacation together someday, k?

To the bloggers, all you amazing wizard women who read faster than I can shoot a glass of whiskey and still find the time to be online and cheerful and helpful. As always, the Dirty Laundry girls and Literary Gossip girls make my days brighter. Amie and Martha, there are some times where your kindnesses have been the things that gave me the strength to keep wrestling with this book. Candi, you are the oil in my engine (yes I want that to sound dirty) and Ang Oh, someday I want to come canvassing with you and your wife and learn all your secrets to having such pretty hair.

To my fellow authors who have propped me up with a drink or a hug or have let me chug champagne in their backyard while I had hand, foot and mouth disease (it's a long story), thank you. Especially CD Reiss, Becca Hensley Mysoor, JR Gray, Stacy Kestwick, Sarah MacLean, and a bunch of young adult authors who I won't embarrass by putting their names in the back of a book about double vaginal penetration, but you know who you are. Or at least you remember drinking with me in Illinois or in Texas or at the Lake of the Ozarks or in Fort Morgan or in Tennessee.

And finally to Josh, my once and future king. You'll always be my King Arthur (and scotch will always be my Lancelot. Or Tom Hiddleston if he's free. I love you!)

Prologue

The Wedding Day

Love is patient.

Love is kind.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in truth.

It bears all things,

it believes all things,

it hopes all things,

it endures all things.

It endures all things.

I stare at the last line of the Bible verse as my cousin Abilene and her mother continue to fuss with the edges of my veil. The entire passage from I Corinthians is etched into a marble block in the church's narthex, and any other bride standing here might have seen these words as a comfort and an encouragement. Perhaps I'm the only bride ever to stand in front of these massive sanctuary doors and wonder if God is trying to give me a warning.

But when I think of what awaits me at the end of the aisle, of *who* awaits me, I straighten my shoulders and blink away from the verses. From the moment I met Ash, I knew I was destined to love him. I knew I was destined to be his. There's no place he can go that I won't follow, no sacrifice he can demand of me that I won't give, no part of myself that I won't offer willingly and completely to him.

I will bear, believe in, hope for, and endure Ash's love until the day I die, even if that means robbing my own soul.

And it *will* mean robbing my own soul.

My only comfort is that I won't be alone in my suffering.

With a deep breath, I step in front of the doors just as they open, the airy notes of Pachelbel's *Canon in D* drifting through the stone nave. My grandfather takes my arm to guide me down the aisle. The guests are standing, the candles are flickering, my veil is perfect.

And then I catch sight of Ash.

My pulses catches, races, trips over itself as it rushes to my lips and face and heart. He wears his tuxedo as if he were born wearing one, his wide shoulders and narrow hips filling out the tailored lines perfectly. Even if he didn't stand at the top of the stairs leading up to the altar, he would still seem taller than everyone else around him, because that's just Ash. He doesn't have to exude power and strength, he simply *is* power and strength made manifest. And right now all of that power and strength is bent toward me as we lock eyes and, even across the distance of the nave, begin to breathe as one.

Shock seems to ripple through him as he fully sees me—the dress, the veil, the tremulous smile—and pleasure kindles and glows in my chest at this. He wanted to wait to see each other until the ceremony, he wanted this moment. And I have to admit that watching his handsome face struggle to contain his emotions, feeling my own blood heat at the sight of him in his tuxedo—it was worth it. No matter how outdated the tradition is, no matter how much it

inconvenienced our guests, no matter how long those hours were this morning without him, it was worth it.

And then as my grandfather and I move closer, I see *him*.

Right next to Ash, dark-haired and slender, with ice-blue eyes and a mouth made for sin and apologies, sometimes even in that order. Embry Moore—Ash's best friend, his best man, his running mate...

Because of course, I'm not just walking down the aisle to the man I've been in love with since I was sixteen, I'm walking down the aisle to marry the President of the United States.

The hundreds of guests fade away, the massive stands of flowers and candles vanish. And for a moment, it's only the bride and the groom and the best man. It's only me, Ash, and Embry. There's no presidency or vice presidency or freshly painted First Lady's office awaiting me after the honeymoon. There aren't hordes of cameras inside and outside the cathedral, and the pews aren't filled with ambassadors and senators and celebrities.

It's the three of us. Ash stern and powerful, Embry haunted and pale, and me, with bite marks on the inside of my thighs and a hammering heart.

It's when I'm almost to the front that I see the best man has a bite mark of his own peeping above the collar of his tuxedo, large and red and fresh.

It's when I'm almost to the front that I see that the small white square in Ash's tuxedo pocket isn't a silk handkerchief, it's undeniably the familiar lace of my panties. No one who hasn't seen my panties before would know, but he's so blatantly displaying them, like a trophy. The last time I saw them they were clutched in Embry's strong fist...

My grandfather lifts my veil and kisses my cheek, putting the veil back down over my face. Ash extends his hand and I slide my fingers into his, and we step up to the priest together, one of my bridesmaids straightening my dress after we find our places and stand still.

I don't realize I'm crying until Ash lets go of my hand, reaches under my veil, and swipes his thumb across my cheek. He lifts his thumb to his lips, licking the taste of my tears off his skin. His dark green eyes smolder with promise, and behind him, Embry's hand unconsciously goes up to touch the bite mark I'm certain Ash left on his neck.

I shiver.

The priest begins, the guests sit, and I wonder one last time if God wants me to stop this, if God can barely stand to look at the three of us, if God wasn't trying to warn me before, because what did I really think I could endure? What did I really think the two most powerful men in the world would be willing to endure from me?

But then I catch sight of Ash's eyes, still flared with unmistakable heat, and Embry's long fingers, still probing the mark on his neck, and I decide now that this fairy tale couldn't have ended any other way.

I mean, God can warn me all he wants, but that doesn't mean I have to listen.

Part One:

The Princess

Chapter One

Eighteen Years Ago

I was cursed by a wizard when I was seven years old.

It was at a charity gala, I think. Save for the wizard, it wouldn't have stood out from any other event my grandfather took me to. Ball gowns and tuxedos, chandeliers glittering in opulent hotel ballrooms while string octets played in discreet corners. Ostensibly, these events raised money for the various foundations and causes championed by the rich and bored, but in reality, they were business meetings. Political allegiances for this candidate or that were sounded out; potential donors were identified and wooed. Business deals began here, and marriages in the upper reaches of society began here as well—because among the wealthy, what were marriages but lifelong business deals?

I understood some of this, even as a young girl, but it never troubled me. It was life—or at least Grandpa Leo's life—and it didn't occur to me to question it.

Besides, I enjoyed dressing up in the expensive flouncing dresses Grandpa Leo bought for me. I enjoyed having adults ask my opinion, I enjoyed seeing all the beautiful women and handsome men, and most of all, I enjoyed dancing with Grandpa Leo, who always let me stand on his shoes and who never forgot to spin me around and around so that I could pretend I was a princess in a fairy tale.

And late at night, when the big black car would pick us up and take us back to the Manhattan penthouse, he would let me chatter happily about everything I'd seen and heard, asking me questions about who had said what, about how they said it, if they had looked happy or sad or mad as they said it. He would ask me who looked tired, who looked distracted, who grumbled under their breath during the keynote speeches. It wasn't until a few years later that I realized Grandpa relied on me as a kind of spy, a watcher of sorts, because people will behave around children in ways they won't around adults. They let their guard down, they mutter to their friends, certain that a child won't notice or understand.

But I did notice. I was naturally observant, naturally curious, and naturally ready to read deeply into small comments or gestures. And at Grandpa Leo's side, I spent years honing that natural weapon into something sharp and useful, something he used for The Party, but that I used for him because I wanted to help him, wanted him to be proud of me, and also because there was something addictive in it. Something addictive in watching people, in figuring them out, like reading a book and deciphering the big twist before the end.

But the night I met the wizard, all of that was still in the future. At that moment, I was giddy and wound up from spinning in circles and sneaking extra plates of dessert from the winking waitresses. I was still spinning when my grandfather beckoned me to join him near the doors of the ballroom. I skipped over, expecting another of his usual friends—the Beltway wheelers and dealers or the snappish, bored businessmen.

It was someone different. *Something* different. A tall man, only in his mid-twenties, but with crow-dark eyes and a thin mouth that reminded me of the illustrations of evil enchanters in my fairy tale books. Unlike the evil enchanters, he didn't hunch over a cane or wear long, trailing robes. He was dressed in a crisp tuxedo, his face clean-shaven, his dark hair short and perfectly combed.

My grandfather beamed down at me as he introduced us. “Mr. Merlin Rhys, I’d like you to meet my granddaughter, Greer. Greer, this young man is moving here from England, and coming in as a consultant to The Party.”

The Party. Even at seven, The Party was a force in my life as strong as any other. A risk, I suppose, that came with having a former Vice President for a grandfather. Especially when that former Vice President had served in the White House with the late Penley Luther, the dead and revered demigod of The Party. It was President Luther who was referenced in all the speeches and op eds, it was Luther’s name that was invoked whenever a crisis happened. What would Luther do? *What would Luther do?!*

Mr. Merlin Rhys looked down at me, his black eyes unreadable in the golden glow of the ballroom. “This seems a bit dull for a girl your age,” he said, softly but also not softly. There was a challenge in his words, lodged somewhere in those neatly folded consonants and airy vowels, but I couldn’t puzzle it out, couldn’t sift it away from his words. I kept my eyes on his face as my grandfather spoke.

“She’s my date,” Grandpa Leo said affectionately, ruffling my hair. “My son and daughter-in-law are traveling out of the country for humanitarian work, so she’s staying with me for a few months. She’s so well-behaved. Isn’t that right, Greer?”

“Yes, Grandpa,” I chirped obediently, but when I caught the frown on Merlin’s face, something chilled in me, as if a cold fog had wrapped itself around me and only me, and was slowly leaching away my warmth.

I dropped my eyes to my shoes, shivering and trying not to show it. The glossy patent leather reflected the shimmers and glitters of the gilded ceiling, and I watched those shimmers as Merlin and my grandfather began discussing midterm election strategy, trying to reconcile what I felt with what I knew.

I *felt* fear, the kind of creeping, neck-prickling fear I had when I woke up at night to see my closet door open. But I *knew* that I was safe, that Grandpa Leo would keep me safe, that this stranger couldn’t hurt me in a room full of people. Except I wasn’t afraid of him hurting me or stealing me away, necessarily. No, it was the way his eyes had bored into mine, the way his disapproval of me had enveloped me so completely, that frightened me. I felt like he knew me, understood me, could see inside of me to all of the times I’d lied or cheated or fought on the playground. That he could see all the nights I’d been unable to sleep, my closet door open and me too afraid to get up and close it. All the mornings my father and I went walking in the woods behind our house, all the evenings my mother patiently taught me tai chi. All the fairy tale books I so adored, all of the treasures I’d gathered in the little treasure box stored under my bed, all of my secret childish dreams and fears—everything. This man could see it all.

And to be seen—really *seen*—was the most terrifying thing I’d ever felt.

“Leo!” a man called from a few feet away. He was also with The Party, and Grandpa gave my hair a final ruffle as he gestured to the man to approach him. “One moment, Mr. Rhys.”

Merlin inclined his head gravely as my grandfather turned to speak to the other man. I willed myself to meet his eyes again, and then immediately wished I hadn’t. His eyes, I now realized, had been shuttered when speaking to Grandpa, and they were un-shuttered now, burning with something that seemed a lot like dislike.

“Greer Galloway,” he said in that soft-not-soft voice. Something like a Welsh lilt emerged in his words, as if he’d lost control of his voice as well as his eyes.

I swallowed. I didn’t know what to say—I was a child, and always my girlish demeanor had been enough to charm Grandpa Leo’s friends—but I sensed that it would do no good here. I

could not endear myself to Merlin Rhys, not with smiles or dimples or twirls or childlike questions.

And then he knelt down in front of me. It was rare for the adults in Leo's world to do that—even the women with children of their own preferred to stand over me and caress my blond curls as if I were a pet. But Merlin knelt so that I could look him in the eye without craning my neck, and I knew despite my fear, this was a sign of respect. Merlin was treating me as if I were worthy of his time and attention, and even though it was tainted with disapproval, I was grateful for it in my own young way.

He reached out and took my chin in his long, slender fingers, holding my face still for inspection. "Not ambitious," he said, dark eyes searching my face. "But often careless. Not cold, but sometimes distant. Passionate, intelligent, dreamy...and too easily hurt." He shook his head. "It's as I thought."

I knew from the stacks of books beside my bed that the words of an enchanter were dangerous things. I knew I shouldn't speak, I shouldn't promise him anything, agree to anything, concede or lie or evade. But I couldn't help it.

"What's as you thought?"

Merlin dropped his hand, and an expression of real regret creased his face. "It cannot be you. I'm sorry, but it simply can't."

Confusion seeped past the fear. "What can't be me?"

Merlin stood up, smoothing his tuxedo jacket, his mind made up about whatever it was. "Keep your kisses to yourself when the time comes," he said.

I didn't understand. "I don't kiss anyone except Grandpa Leo and my mommy and daddy."

"That's your world now. But when you are older, you will inherit *this* world," Merlin said, gesturing around the room, "the world your grandfather helped create. And this world hangs on a thread, balanced between trust and power. Powerful people have to decide when to trust each other and when to fight each other, and those decisions aren't always made with the mind. They're made with the heart. Do you understand this?"

"I think so..." I said slowly.

"Greer, one kiss from you would swing this world from friendship to anger. From peace to war. It will destroy everything your grandfather has worked so hard to build, and many, many people will be hurt. You don't want to hurt people, do you? Hurt your grandfather? Undo all the work he's done?"

I shook my head vehemently.

"I didn't think so. Because that's what will happen if your lips touch another's. Mark my words."

I nodded because this was logic that spoke to me. Kisses were magic, everyone knew this. They turned frogs into princes, they woke princesses from deadly sleep, and they decided the fates of kingdoms and empires. It never once crossed my mind that Merlin could be wrong, that a kiss might be harmless.

Or that a kiss might be worth all the harm it caused.

The regret in his eyes turned into sadness. "And I am sorry about your parents," he said softly. "Despite everything, you are a sweet girl. You deserve only happiness, and maybe one day you'll learn that's what I'm trying to give to you. Hold tight to the things that make you happy, and never doubt that you are loved." He nodded towards Grandpa Leo, who was now walking back toward us.

"Don't be sorry for my parents," I said, puzzled. "They're just fine."

Merlin said nothing, but he reached down and touched my shoulder. Not a pull into a hug, not a pat or a caress, just a touch. A moment's worth of weight, and then nothing but the feeling of air on my skin and worry settling into my small bones.

Grandpa Leo scooped me into his arms as he reached us, planting a big mustached kiss on my cheek as he did. "Isn't my granddaughter something special, Merlin?" he asked, grinning at me. "What were you two talking about?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but Merlin cut in smoothly. "She was telling me how much she enjoys staying with you."

Grandpa looked pleased. "Yes. I love Oregon as much as anyone, but there's nothing like New York City, is there, Greer?"

I must have answered. There must have been more conversation after that, more words about politics and money and demographics, but all I could hear were Merlin's words from earlier.

I am sorry for your parents.

In my overactive imagination, it wasn't hard to conjure the worst. It was what always happened in the stories—tragedy, omens, heartache. What if my parents had been killed? What if their plane had crashed, their hotel caught on fire, their bodies beaten and robbed and left to die?

I am sorry for your parents.

It was all I could think of, all I could hear, and when Grandpa Leo tucked me into bed later that night, I burst into tears.

"What's wrong, sweetie?" he asked, thick eyebrows drawn together in concern.

I knew enough to know he wouldn't believe me when I told him that Merlin was an enchanter, maybe a bad one, or that he could somehow sense my parents' deaths before they happened. I knew enough to lie and say simply, "I miss Mommy and Daddy."

"Oh, sweetie," Grandpa Leo said. "We'll call them right now, okay?"

He pulled out his phone and dialed, and within a few seconds, I heard Mommy's light voice and Daddy's deep one coming through the speaker. They were in Bucharest, getting ready to board a train bound for Warsaw, and they were happy and safe and full of promises for when they returned home. For a short while, I believed them. I believed that they would come back. That there'd be more long forest hikes with my father, more tai chi in the evenings with my mother, more nights when I fell asleep to the sound of them reading poetry to each other with logs crackling in the fireplace nearby. That the warm sunshine and tree-green days of my childhood still stretched out before me, safe in the cozy nest of books and nature that my parents had built.

But that night as I tried to fall asleep, Merlin's words crept back into my mind along with the fear.

I am sorry about your parents.

I barely slept that night, jolting awake at every honk and siren on the Manhattan streets below Grandpa's penthouse, shivering at every creak of the wind-buffed windows. Dreams threaded my sleep, dreams of tree-covered mountains in a place I'd never seen, broad-shouldered men crawling through mud and dead pine needles, my parents dancing in the living room after they thought I was asleep. A train steaming across a bridge, and the bridge collapsing.

My parents danced, the wind blew through the trees, men crawled through mud. The train plunged to the valley floor.

Dance, trees, mud, death.

Over and over again.

Dance, trees, mud, death.

And when I sat up in the weak sunlight of morning to see my grandfather standing in the doorway, his eyes blank with shock and horror, his phone dangling from his hand, I already knew what he was there to tell me.

Like King Hezekiah, I turned my face to the wall and prayed.
I prayed for God to kill me too.

Chapter Two

Eleven Years Ago

God, as he often does, chose not to answer my prayer. Or at the very least, chose not to answer *yes*.

Instead, my life went on.

My mother's parents were aging and frail, and while I had an aunt and uncle in Boston, they already had a daughter my age and they made it quite clear that they weren't willing to take on another child.

But it hardly mattered. From the moment Grandpa Leo got the phone call, from the very second the reality settled over us, it was never in question that I would live with him. He was only in his fifties, healthy and energetic, with plenty of room in his house for another person. He was a busy man, busy with The Party and his thriving green energy empire, but Grandpa Leo was never the kind of man to say no to anything other than sleep. He moved my things into his penthouse, enrolled me in a small but academically rigorous private school in the Upper West Side, and folded me into his life as best a widowed grandfather could.

I remember crying before and after the funeral, but not during. I remember hiding inside myself at the new school, so different from the airy Montessori classroom back in Oregon. I remember Grandpa Leo buying me stacks of books to cheer me up, and I remember reading late into the night. I remember missing my parents so much it felt like someone had scooped something vital out of my chest with a giant spoon. I remember hearing Merlin's words about my parents.

Merlin's prophecy.

If he'd been right about their deaths, was he also right about the other things? He'd told me to keep my kisses to myself—was it a warning I had to follow?

I was certain it was. I was certain now that Merlin could see the future, that he could predict doom, and in my grief and terror, I promised myself at seven years old that, no matter what, I would never kiss a man or woman so long as I lived.

Never, ever, ever.

* * * *

When I was fourteen, Grandpa Leo asked me whether I'd like to continue going to school in Manhattan or if I'd like to enroll in a boarding school overseas. My cousin Abilene was being sent there in the hopes that she would settle down and focus on her schoolwork, and Grandpa thought I might like to go as well. I was already an excellent student—there were no worries there—but I think Grandpa worried that I was too isolated living alone with him, only going to environmental fundraisers and party events, spending my evenings immersed in gossip and speculation about politicians and businessmen, and spending my weekends as Grandpa's secret weapon, observing and reporting back to him.

"You're young," he said, sitting at the dinner table as he handed me the booklet for the school. The pictures seemed almost calculated to lure me into saying yes—thick fog, old wooden

doors, gold and green English summers. “You should see the world. Be around other young people. Get into a little bit of trouble.”

Then he laughed. “Or at the very least, keep your cousin out of trouble.”

And that was how Abilene and I ended up at the Cadbury Academy for Girls the autumn of my fourteenth year.

Cadbury was an impressive place, a large and sprawling complex of stone and stained glass, with towers and multiple libraries and an honest-to-God Iron Age hill fort right in its backyard. I loved it immediately. Abilene loved only its proximity to the boys’ school a mile down the lane. Almost every night, she would crawl out of our ground-floor window and creep across the soft green lawn to the road. Almost every night, I would go with her, not because I wanted to see the boys, but because I felt protective of her. Protective of her safety, of her future at Cadbury, of her reputation.

We crept into dorm rooms, met in the back gardens of pubs that didn’t bother to kick us out, joined illicit parties on the massive flat-topped hill where the Iron Age fort once stood. We weren’t the only girls most of the time, but Abilene was the constant, the leader, the instigator.

By fifteen, she had the tall willowy body of a model, with soft budded breasts and long red hair. She was loud and vivacious and pretty, she drank more than the boys, played lacrosse like her life depended on it, and always, always had a circle of people around her.

In contrast, I was a thing of shadows and corners. I spent most of my free time in the library, I often ate alone on the grounds with a book resting against my knees. I ignored sports but chose dance and creative writing as my extracurriculars instead. I was shorter than I wanted to be, my body lagging behind Abilene’s in the things boys liked to see, strong enough for dance but not quite slender enough to look good in the leotard. My chin had the slightest hint of a cleft, which Abilene and I would spend hours trying to hide with makeup, and I had a beauty mark on my cheek that I loathed. My eyes were gray and felt flat compared to Abilene’s lively blue ones, and all of this would have been fine if I had even one ounce of the charisma Abilene so effortlessly exuded, but I didn’t. I was quiet and spacey and dreamy, terrified of conflict but sometimes thoughtless enough that I accidentally caused it, fascinated with things that my peers cared nothing for—American politics and old books and coral reef bleaching and wars fought so long ago that even their names had all but turned to dust.

The one thing I liked about myself at that age was my hair. Long and thick and blond—golden in the winter and nearly white in the summer—it was the thing people noticed first about me, the way they described me to others, the thing my friends idly played with when we sat and watched TV in the common room. Abilene hated it, hated that there was any one thing about my appearance that showed her up, and I learned within a few weeks at Cadbury that her sharp tugs of my ponytail weren’t signs of affection but of barely controlled jealousy.

Despite the hair, Abilene was still the monarch and I still the lady-in-waiting. She held court and I anxiously kept a lookout for teachers. She shirked her homework, and I stayed up late typing out assignments for her so she wouldn’t fail. She partied and I walked her home, balancing her on my shoulder and using my phone for light as we stumbled down from the hill, her hair smelling like spilled cider and cheap cologne.

“You never kiss the boys,” she said one night when we were fifteen, as I guided her down the narrow lane back to the school.

“Maybe it’s because I want to kiss girls,” I said, stepping over a patch of mud. “Ever think of that?”

“I have,” Abilene drunkenly confirmed, “and I know that’s not it, because there’s lots of girls at Cadbury who would kiss you. And still you never kiss anyone.”

Keep your kisses to yourself.

Eight years later, and I could still see Merlin’s dark eyes, hear his cold, disapproving voice. Could still remember the eerie feeling of portent that came over me when he predicted the death of my parents. If he believed people would suffer if I kissed someone, surely there was a good reason.

An important reason.

And besides, it was such a small thing to give up. It’s not like I had boys knocking down my door to kiss me anyway.

“I just don’t feel like kissing anyone,” I said firmly. “That’s the only reason there is.”

Abilene lifted her head from my shoulder and hiccupped into the chilly night air. Somewhere nearby a sheep bleated. “Just you wait, Greer Galloway. One of these days, you’re going to be just as wild as me.”

I guided her around a pile of sheep shit as she hiccupped again. “I doubt it.”

“You’re wrong. When you finally cut loose, you’re going to be the kinkiest slut at Cadbury.”

For some reason, this made me flush—and not with indignation, but with shame. How could she know the thoughts that flitted through my mind sometimes? The dreams where I woke up throbbing and clenching around nothing?

No, she couldn’t know. I hadn’t breathed a word of those things to anyone, and I never would.

Like my kisses, I would keep those things to myself. After all, I was happy like this. Happy to take care of Abilene and dream of college.

Happy to pretend that this was enough.

Chapter Three

The Present

“And so if we turn back further than Geoffrey of Monmouth, back to the *Annales Cambriae*—that’s the Annals of Wales for those of you not up on your medieval Latin—we see the earliest mention of the Mordred figure, here called ‘Medraut.’”

The clack of keys on laptop keyboards echoes through the small classroom as the students furiously type out notes. The bulk of the undergrads here are actually pre-med or poli-sci, only taking my Arthurian Lit course to fill out their humanities credits, but that doesn’t stop them from striving for the highest scores. Georgetown isn’t cheap, after all, and a lot of the students here need to keep their grades up to retain scholarships and grants. And I empathize completely; only a couple months into this lecturing gig, I can still vividly remember the late nights and coffee-fueled mornings as I finished up my Master’s in Medieval Literature at Cambridge. Sometimes it’s still hard to believe I’m actually done, actually back in the States, actually doing a grown-up job with a nice leather briefcase and everything.

“Mordred is only mentioned as dying alongside King Arthur here,” I continue, moving from behind the podium over to the whiteboard, “and we are given no information as to his role in the battle, whether he was fighting against or alongside Arthur, whether he was Arthur’s son or nephew or simply just another warrior.”

I uncap a dry erase marker and start editing the family tree we’ve been working on as a class throughout the fall semester, writing a question mark next to Mordred’s name.

“The King Arthur legend is famous for many things—the Holy Grail and the Round Table, of course—but maybe it’s most famous for the epic love story between Lancelot and Guinevere.” I draw a heart between their two names on the board, and giggles ripple through the class. “But as we saw moving backward from Chretien de Troyes to Geoffrey of Monmouth, Lancelot was a character invented by the French to satisfy their need for courtly romance. He’s not in the earliest mentions of the legends at all.”

I cross out Lancelot’s name on the board, writing *made up by the French* above his name. More keys clacking.

“But there is the hint of another romance, older than the Lancelot story and even more dangerous.” I draw a new heart, this time between Mordred and Guinevere. “After the Annals, the next mentions we get of Mordred almost always depict him kidnapping the queen or trying to marry her. This is usually pointed to as the source of the strife between him and King Arthur—who long before being depicted as Mordred’s father or uncle may have simply been a romantic rival.”

I cap the marker and turn back to the podium. “I think Mordred, more than Lancelot, highlights the central problem of King Arthur’s court...which is that trust, love, and family don’t always come packaged together.”

I can hear the old wall clock behind me tick over, and the students slowly begin closing laptops and opening bags, trying to appear attentive but their minds already out the door.

“That’s all for today,” I announce. “Next week, we’ll start into the Welsh Triads. And don’t forget to submit your final project proposals!”

They finish packing up as I walk back to my desk to pack up my own things. A few students stop by with questions and to pick up graded assignments, and then I'm alone in the room.

For a few minutes after they've left, I stare out over the vacant seats, as if trying to remember something I've forgotten. I haven't forgotten anything, of course, and nothing is wrong, but an empty restlessness chases after my mind all the same.

You have everything you need, I remind myself. *A good job, a nice house, a grandfather who loves you, a cousin who's your best friend.*

I don't need anything else. What I have is enough.

But then why do I feel so lost all the time?

* * * *

My office at Georgetown is small and shared with two other lecturers, so it's crammed with desks and file folders and books and stacks of neatly stapled handouts. I love it. I love it so much that I've been known to sleep here instead of my small townhouse near Dumbarton Park (which of course, I can only afford to live in because it belongs to Grandpa Leo and he refuses to hear anything about me paying rent.) It's something about being in the old stone building, alone in the hallway of mostly empty offices, the darkness falling through the office window...it's easier to remember why I sought out this life. A life of books instead of kisses. A life where Merlin's warning doesn't feel like a curse, but a choice.

I'm used to working late into the night, to being the last one left in the English department, and tonight's no different. I grade a few papers and then move on to the book I'm trying to write—a literary examination of kingship as chronicled through the multiplicity of Arthurian legends throughout the ages.

I know it sounds boring, but really, I promise it's not. At least not to me. After all, I met a real wizard once, my very own Merlin...even though as an adult I can laugh down the idea of magic and tell myself that his warning was nothing more than nonsense.

After all, I ignored it twice and nothing happened.

Other than my heart breaking both times, nothing happened.

I'm buried deep in my own mind, trying to recreate a line of thought I had last night about leadership in the Dark Ages, when the back of my neck prickles with awareness, as if someone is standing behind me.

Someone is.

I turn in my chair to see a man leaning against the doorway, arms crossed over a muscular chest, his bright blue suit stretching across his shoulders. Even with the jacket buttoned, I can see the way his tailored pants hug his hips and thighs, the way his white silk tie lies flat against the tight button-down underneath.

I tilt my face up to his, swallowing.

Ice-blue eyes and day-old stubble. High cheekbones and a straight nose, full lips and a tall aristocratic brow. A face made for brooding on a moor somewhere, a face made for Victorian novels or Regency period dramas, the face of the prototypical elitist stranger at a ball in a Jane Austen book.

Except this man's no stranger to me.

Embry Moore.

Vice President Embry Moore.

I scramble to my feet. "Mr. Vice President," I manage. "I didn't—"

His eyes crinkle at the edges. He's actually a year younger than President Colchester, who took office only six months before turning thirty-six, but years of sunshine and four tours of duty have given him the tiniest lines around his eyes, visible only when he smiles.

Like right now.

I swallow again. "How can I help you, Mr. Vice President?"

"Please don't call me that."

"Okay. How can I help you, Mr. Moore?"

He steps forward into the office, and I can smell him. Something with bite—pepper maybe. Or citrus.

"Well, *Ms. Galloway*, I wondered if you were free for dinner tonight."

Oh God.

I peer around him, and he waves a hand. "My security detail is waiting for me at the end of the hall. They can't hear us."

I should ask him why he's here, why he's at Georgetown, in my office, at nearly midnight. I should ask why he didn't call or email or have some secretary chase me down. Instead, I ask, "Isn't it a little late for dinner?"

He glances at his watch without uncrossing his arms. "Maybe, but I'm confident that any restaurant you'd pick would be happy to open up for me. Or open up for *you*—I'm pretty sure there isn't anyone in this town that doesn't still owe Leo Galloway a favor or two."

"I don't throw my grandfather's name around," I say, a little reproachfully. "I don't like the way it makes me feel."

"Just because you want to forget who you are doesn't mean the rest of us can forget you." His voice is soft.

I take a step back. I swallow. A subdued and dignified anger, sculpted into a careful, quiet shape after five years, rises from its slumber. Because, of course, Embry had once been very good at forgetting me.

"Why are you hiding away here?" he asks, uncrossing his arms and taking a step forward. His voice is still soft, too soft, the kind of soft that croons promises in your ear and then breaks them.

I should know.

"I'm not hiding," I say, tilting my head at my desk, stacked high with papers and books and Moleskin journals. "I'm working. I'm teaching, I'm writing a book. I'm happy."

Embry takes another step forward, swallowing up the space in my office with one long stride. He's close enough that I can smell him again, a smell that hasn't changed after all this time.

I close my eyes for a minute, trying to reorient myself.

"You never were a good liar," he murmurs, and when I open my eyes, he's so close to me that I could reach out and run my fingers along his jaw. I don't, turning my head away and looking out the window instead.

"I'm not lying," I lie.

"Come to dinner with me," he says, changing tactics. "We've got a lot to catch up on."

"Five years." The words are pointed, and to his credit, he doesn't parry them away.

"Five years," he acknowledges.

Strange that such a long time can sound so short.

I sigh. "I can't have dinner with you. If I'm seen out with you, then my face will end up on Buzzfeed and all over Twitter, and I can't handle that."

Embry is listening to me, but he's also reaching out to touch a strand of white-gold hair that's fallen free from my bun. "That's why we're going late. To an unannounced place. No one will know but me and you and the chef."

"And the Secret Service."

Embry shrugs, his eyes starting to crinkle again. "They won't write their tell-all memoirs until after they've retired. Until then, our dinner is safe."

I can say *no*. I know I can, although I've never been able to say it to Embry. But I don't want to say no. I don't want to go to the pristine townhouse, impeccably furnished and impossibly soulless, and spend another night alone in my bed. I don't want to be staring up at the ceiling of my bedroom, replaying every moment, every glance, my hand stealing under the sheets as I remember the citrus-pepper scent and the way the shadows fell across Embry's cheeks. I don't want to be whipping myself for another wasted night, another missed chance...especially with him.

Just for one night, I can pretend I'm someone else.

"Dinner," I say, finally conceding, and he grins. "But that's it."

He holds up his hands. "I'll be as chaste as a priest. I promise."

"I hear not all priests are that chaste these days."

"Chaste as a nun then."

I reach for my trench coat by the rack near my desk, and he grabs it for me, holding it open for me to step into. It's attentive and intimate and charming while being dangerous—all the things I remember Embry being, and I can't make eye contact as I step into the coat and belt it closed over my blouse and pencil skirt. For a moment—just a tiny, brief moment—I imagine I feel his lips on my hair. I step and turn, facing him and trying to keep my distance all at the same time.

Embry notices, and his smile fades a little. "I'll take care of you, Greer. You don't have to be afraid of me."

Oh, but I am. And not a little bit afraid of myself.

* * * *

Teller's is a small Italian restaurant a few blocks away from campus, and it's one of those delicious tiny places that's been around forever. Embry doesn't seem surprised when I suggest it, and after a few phone calls and a very short trip in a black Cadillac, we are inside the old bank building being seated. We're the only ones there, the waiter's footsteps echoing on the cold marble floor and the lights dimmed except for those around our table, but the chef and the servers are nothing but polite and happy to feed us. The Secret Service find discreet and distant points in the dining room to stand, and for a moment, without them in sight, with Embry's suit jacket thrown carelessly over the back of a nearby chair, I can pretend that this is normal. A normal dinner, a normal conversation.

I take a small drink of the cocktail on the table, trying to wash away history, drown it in gin. My history with Embry is hopelessly tangled up in my history with someone else, and as long as I let that someone else cast a shadow over our dinner, there's no way I can hope to have a conversation that isn't strained with pain and regret. The only answer is to put everything in a box and shovel gravel on top and bury it until it suffocates.

"How have you been?" Embry finally asks, sitting back in his chair. I try not to notice the way his shirt strains around his muscular shoulders, the way the lines of his neck disappear into

the bleach-white collar of his shirt, but it's impossible. He's impossible not to notice, he's impossible not to crave; even now, my fingers twitch with the imagined feeling of running them along his neck, of slowly unbuttoning his shirt.

"I've been fine," I finally manage. "Settling into my new job."

He nods, the candlelight at the table catching on his eyelashes and casting shadows along his cheekbones. "So it seems. I bet you're an amazing teacher."

I think of my lonely classroom, my silent office, my pervasive restlessness.

I change the subject. "And your job? Being Vice President? There's more to it than being photographed with a different woman every night, I'm sure."

The old Embry would have laughed at this, grinned or winked or started bragging. This Embry sits forward and stares at me over his cocktail glass, his hands coming together in his lap. "Yes," he says quietly. "There is more to it than that."

"Mr. Moore—"

"Call me that one more time, and I'll have you arrested for sedition."

"Fine. *Embry*...what am I doing here?"

He takes a deep breath.

"The President wants you to meet with him."

Off all the things he could have said...of all the reasons I thought I might be sitting across the table from a man I haven't spoken with in five years...

"President Colchester," I say. "Maxen Colchester. That President?"

"As far as I know, there's only the one," he replies.

I take a drink from my cocktail, trying to keep my motions controlled and my expressions blank, although I know how pointless that is with Embry Moore. When I first met him, he was a servant to his emotions, impulsive and moody. But in the last five years, he's become the master of deliberate, studied behavior, and I know by the way his eyes flicker across my face that I'm not fooling him at all.

I set down my drink with a sigh, abandoning all pretense of calm. Like he said before, I've never been a good liar and I hate lying anyway.

"I'm a little confused," I admit. "Unless the President wants to talk about the influence of Anglo-Saxon poetry on Norman literary traditions, I don't see why he'd want to talk to me."

Embry raises an eyebrow. "You don't?"

I glance down at my hands. On my right pointer finger, there is the world's smallest scar—so small it can't be seen. It can only be discerned in the way it disrupts the looping whorls of my fingerprint, a tiny white notch in a tiny white ridge.

A needle of a scar, a hot knife of a memory.

The smell of fire and leather.

Firm lips on my skin.

The warm crimson of blood.

"I don't," I confirm. I have hopes, I have fantasies, I have a memory so powerful it punishes me nightly, but none of those things are *real*. And this is real life right now. This is the Vice President, that is the Secret Service over there, and I have a stack of papers waiting to be graded at home.

I'm not sixteen anymore, and anyway, I told myself that I was putting that other man in a box and burying him.

"He saw you at your church last week," Embry finally says. "Did you see him?"

“Of course I saw him,” I sigh. “It’s hard to miss it when the President of the United States attends Mass at your church.”

“And you didn’t say hello?”

I throw up my hands. “Hello, Mr. President, I met you once ten years ago. Peace be with you, and also the left communion line is the fastest?”

“You know it’s not like that.”

“Do I?” I demand, leaning forward. Embry’s eyes fall to my chest, where my blouse has gaped open. I straighten, smoothing the fabric back into place, trying to ignore the heat in my belly at Embry’s stare. “He was surrounded by Secret Service anyway. I wouldn’t have been able to say hello even if I wanted to.”

“He wants to see you,” Embry repeats.

“I can’t believe he even remembers me.”

“There you go again, assuming people forget about you. It would be sweet if it wasn’t so frustrating.”

“Tell me why he wants to see me.”

Embry’s blue eyes glitter in the dim light as he reaches for my hand. And then he lifts it to his lips, kissing the scarred fingertip with a careful, premeditated slowness. Kissing a scar that he should know nothing about.

My chest threatens to crack open.

“Why you?” I ask, my voice breaking. “Why are you here instead of him?”

“He sent me. He wants to be here so badly, but you know how watched he is. Especially with Jenny—”

Darkness falls like a curtain over the table.

Jenny.

President Colchester’s wife.

Late wife.

“It’s only been a year since the funeral, and Merlin thinks it’s too soon for Max to step out of the ‘tragic widower’ role. So there can’t be any emails or phone calls,” Embry says. “Not yet. You understand.”

I do. I do understand. I grew up in this world, and even though I never wanted to be part of it, I understand scandal and PR and crisis management as well as I understand medieval literature.

“And so he sent you.”

“He sent me.”

I look down at my hand, still held tightly by Embry’s. How did I end up tangled with these two men? The two most powerful men in the free world?

This is real life, Greer. Say no. Say no to Embry, and for God’s sake, say no to the President.

I breathe in.

Fire and leather. Blood and kisses.

I breathe out.

“I’ll see him. Tell him I’ll see him.”

I don’t miss the pain that flares in Embry’s eyes, pain that he quickly hides.

“Consider it done,” he says.

Chapter Four

Ten Years Ago

“You have to hold still,” Abilene fussed at me. “I keep messing this one up.”

I sighed and forced my body to stay still, even though I was so excited I could barely breathe. In just a few minutes, a hired car would pull in front of the London hotel Grandpa Leo had put us up in and take us to a large party in Chelsea, a party with adults and champagne. There would be diplomats and businessmen and maybe even a celebrity or two—a world away from the stale beer and crackling speakers of the hill parties back at school.

It was my sixteenth birthday, and as a special treat, he’d allowed us to tag along with him to the party. Or rather, he’d invited me and only reluctantly allowed Abilene to tag along—he could hardly invite one granddaughter and not the other, but we both knew (even if we didn’t say it aloud) that bringing Abilene to something like this carried a significant risk of embarrassment. She’d nearly been thrown out of Cadbury multiple times for a host of crimes—drinking on the premises, breaking curfew, a nasty incident that led to another lacrosse player with a black eye—and every time, Grandpa Leo had quietly paid the right money and pulled the right strings to keep her installed there.

The last thing he wanted was for her to disgrace him at a party full of his friends, but I promised him that I’d keep her on her best behavior. I promised him that I’d keep her from drinking too much, from talking too much, from flirting too much, just as long as he’d let her go, because she would be so hurt if I was able to come along and she wasn’t.

And Grandpa Leo, who used to terrorize senators and petroleum executives, who helped shape the strongest environmental legislation on record and publicly excoriated his enemies on a daily basis, relented to my pleading with a gruff smile and let Abilene come along.

And that’s why Abilene and I had spent our evening in an expensive hotel getting ready, why I was currently trying not to squirm in a chair as Abilene carefully pinned my final curl in place.

When she finished and I stood up to give myself a final once-over before strapping on my high heels and going downstairs, she made a noise behind me.

Worried, I spun around to the mirror. “What is it? Is my bra showing?” I tried to turn this way and that, positive that Abilene had seen something potentially disastrous.

“No. It’s...it’s fine.” Her voice sounded choked. “Let’s go. Grandpa’s waiting.”

I shrugged and sat down to pull on the strappy heels that matched the blush pink gown Grandpa had bought me earlier that week. The tulle and organza dress had a narrow waist and form-fitting bodice, a delicate sash in back, and a skirt that erupted from sedate layers into luxurious drapes and loops. With a matching tulle flower set into my hair and metallic pink heels, I felt like a princess, even though I knew I wouldn’t look like one compared to Abilene.

Tonight, she wore a tight dress of electric blue, with a keyhole in the center of the bodice displaying a swath of creamy-pale skin, and her glossy red hair was down in loose waves. She looked years older than she was, mature and sophisticated, and I stifled the usual pang of weary resignation that came along with seeing Abilene dressed up.

I was used to being in her shadow, after all, the companion to her Doctor, the Spock to her Kirk, and so it shouldn’t bother me tonight. Even if it was my birthday. Even if I was in the most

beautiful dress I'd ever worn. But after looking at her, so polished and alluring, it was impossible to look at my reflection and see anything other than the faint cleft in my chin, the ridiculous beauty mark that refused to be covered up, the flatness of my eyes even after the most strategic uses of mascara and eyeliner.

So I did one final check to make sure my strapless bra wasn't showing, that I hadn't accidentally smeared pink lipstick across my face or sat on Abilene's half-eaten Galaxy bar, and then opened the door. Abilene pushed past me without a word and refused to speak to me on the ride down to the lobby.

The mirrored doors opened, and she strode out of the lift, her heels clicking on the marble floor. "Are you angry with me?" I asked.

I racked my brain trying to think of anything I could have done to make her mad and came up with nothing. But sometimes that didn't matter with Abilene. For all the times she hugged me out of nowhere, made sure I was invited to a party, or defended me to her friends, there were other times when she'd plunge suddenly into a dark, sullen mood, when her stare would burn like acid and her words char my skin like fire. I'd learned not to negotiate with these moods or try to appease them, even though they seemed to happen more and more frequently. There was no point—you couldn't argue with a storm cloud, you could only wait for it to blow past.

"I'm not angry with you," she said, still walking fast. I could make out the stout shape of Grandpa Leo through the front doors and, overlaid on top of him, our reflections: Abilene all scarlet and sapphire, and me shell-pink and gold.

She must have seen it too, because she froze, staring at the door. Then she turned to me. "Just stay out of my way tonight," she mumbled. "Just stay away from me."

Stung, I watched her walk through the doors as the doorman opened them for her and give Grandpa Leo a big hug, a fake smile plastered onto her face. I wanted to yell at her, tell her that I was the only reason she was going to the party in the first place. I wanted to scream and kick, because couldn't I have *one* night, just *one*, that wasn't all about her, that she didn't upstage or steal or poison with her drama?

And most of all, I wanted to cry, because Abilene was my best friend, maybe my only friend, and the whole world felt off-kilter when she was like this with me.

But what could I do? What could I say or scream or beg that would make her understand?

So I did what Greer Galloway usually did.

I quietly followed in her footsteps.

I went through the doors and into Grandpa's arms and then climbed into the car with her. We sat shoulder by shoulder, my skirt overflowing onto hers, her soft hair brushing against the skin of my arm, and we didn't say a word to each other the entire drive.

* * * *

Within minutes of arriving at the party, Abilene disappeared. I made to go find her, but Grandpa Leo held me back with a hand on my arm and a shake of his head. "She'll be fine after a few minutes," he promised. "Some space to cool down will do her good, and besides, I'd like to introduce you to a few of my friends." I knew *introduce* was Grandpa Leo-speak for planting me as his spy, that he would want me to circulate and listen, or stand by his side and observe people while he talked, and I wanted to do that, I really did, but I also wanted to fix whatever was wrong with Abilene and me before the night grew any older.

I bit my lip, scanning the crowd for any sign of dark red hair, but I saw nothing. She was long vanished into a sea of tuxedos and circulating cocktail trays. I reluctantly allowed Grandpa to pull me deeper into the party.

Women cooed over me and men complimented me, their eyes trailing along my body in a way that I wasn't used to, and I knew it was all because Abilene wasn't next to me. They couldn't see how marred my face was, how boring my body, without a gorgeous redhead the same age standing beside me for comparison. This thought should have made me happy, that without Abilene's radiant charm, I could finally bask in the kinds of compliments she gathered so effortlessly, but it didn't. I only felt more miserably aware of her absence. After an hour of this, I excused myself from Grandpa and a circle of guests to go find her, and that's when I ran—literally—into Merlin Rhys.

He reached down to steady me by the elbow, keeping the amber drink in his other hand from sloshing as he did so. "Pardon me," he apologized, even though it was my fault.

"No, it was my mistake," I said. "I'm sorry."

He peered down into my face and something shifted in his expression. "You're Leo Galloway's granddaughter," he said. No inflection, no follow up. Just that one fact, the one fact that identified me wherever I went, as if the ghost of President Penley Luther was standing right behind me.

"Yes," I said. "We met once, you and I, but I was a little girl."

You predicted my parents' deaths.

You warned me never to kiss anyone.

"I remember," Merlin replied, and the way he looked at me almost made me feel as if he could read my thoughts. Like he'd heard them as clearly as if I'd spoken them aloud.

"Merlin!" A man in military attire appeared next to us and clapped a hand on Merlin's shoulder. Merlin smiled tightly at him. "I was wondering when I'd catch up to you. How have you been?"

Merlin turned to answer the general, and I took the opportunity to vanish, my heart pounding in my chest.

Merlin unsettled and frightened me, and through all these years I thought it was because I'd met him as a little girl, at an age when almost anything can seem scary. But he still scared me at sixteen. There was something about him...not hostile necessarily, but aggressive. You felt his mind pushing at yours, challenging the walls around your thoughts, slithering through the defenses you kept around your feelings. It made me feel exposed and vulnerable, and I'd had enough of that from Abilene tonight.

I found my cousin in the townhouse's library—a large lovely room with open French doors leading to a wide patio outside—with an empty champagne flute dangling from her fingers as she let a man older than her father kiss a trail of sloppy kisses down her neck. I cleared my throat and he straightened up, embarrassed. He beat a hasty retreat with a muttered apology in Italian, leaving Abilene against the wall looking livid.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" she demanded once he left the room. "I told you to leave me alone, not barge in here and ruin my life!"

"I'm not trying to ruin your life!" I exclaimed. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

She snorted in disgust. "Yeah, right."

"What is going on with you tonight?" I asked. "You've been angry with me since the hotel."

"I'm not angry," she maintained, her nostrils flaring. "I just don't want to be around you right now. God, why is that so fucking hard to understand?"

“It’s not—”

“And you know what, you always do this,” she went on, her eyes starting to shine with unshed tears. “You always push and push and push, like you have to know fucking everything, and one of these days, you’re not going to like the answer.”

I raised my hands, as if to show I meant no harm. “I don’t want to push you. But I know you’re angry. And I know it has something to do with me. I want to fix it, Abilene, let me fix it, please.”

“You can’t fix it,” she hissed. “Just stay away—”

“I’m not going to do that, I *can’t* do that—”

“Just leave me alone!” Her shrill voice rebounded through the room, and as if to punctuate her statement, she threw the champagne glass to the floor, where it shattered like ice on the polished parquet.

“Abilene,” I whispered, because I had never, ever seen her like this, so angry that she would act like this in someone else’s house, and there seemed to be a moment where it caught up with her too, where her eyes widened and her pale skin went even paler.

And then she stormed out of the room.

For a long minute, I stared at the mess on the floor. It glittered and flashed in the deafening silence that followed her exit, and it filled my vision, filled my mind and my throat and my chest, until it shrank back to normal size and I could breathe again.

My eyes burned with tears and my throat itched with all the things I wanted to scream at my supposed best friend, but I didn’t do any of that. I didn’t cry and I didn’t yell. I dropped to my knees and began picking up the shards of glass, sliver by tiny sliver, picking up after Abilene like I always did.

“You’ll cut yourself if you’re not careful,” an unfamiliar voice said from the patio door.

Chapter Five

Ten Years Ago

The voice was American, which at this very London party was enough to make me pause and look up. He was in his mid-twenties, wearing an Army dress uniform, and as he strode towards me, it felt like all the air left the room, like I couldn't breathe, like I would suffocate, but suffocate in the kind of way where visions dance before your eyes as you die. Broad, powerful shoulders tapered into trim and narrow hips, and his face...it was a hero's face. Chiseled jaw, strong nose, full mouth. Emerald eyes and raven hair.

He walked over, close enough that I could read his nameplate now. *Colchester*. A name that sounded strong and solid and a little chilly.

He squatted down next to me, his pants pulling tight over his muscled thighs. "Let me help."
Say something, my brain demanded. *Say anything!*

But I couldn't. I didn't know how to make the words come out. I had never seen a man so handsome, so overtly masculine, and for the first time in my life, I felt overwhelmingly and painfully *female*. I felt slender and soft, yielding and pliant, and when he looked up from the glass to smile kindly at me, I wondered if I would fall apart, like a blown rose caught in a strong wind.

He stood and deposited some of the broken flute in a nearby wastebasket, and then he brought the basket over to me. He knelt down again to pick up more glass.

"She's jealous of you, you know." Colchester said it quietly, while keeping his gaze on the floor.

I thought I'd misheard him. "Jealous?"

He cleared his throat. "I hope you don't mind, but I was standing outside when you first came in the room. I heard you exchange words."

I frantically searched my brain, trying to remember if I'd behaved like an idiot. This man was so much older than me, so contained, so *fucking hot*, and the desire to impress him was as sharp as the shards of glass in my hand.

He shook his head, as if reading my thoughts. "Don't be embarrassed. I was impressed with how calm you stayed, considering how angry she was with you. Of course, when I saw you, I understood immediately."

"Understood what?"

"That she's jealous."

It took me a beat to understand what he meant. "Of me?" I let out an incredulous laugh.

I wasn't in the habit of being falsely modest. This wasn't me begging for compliments or trying to patch my insecurities with flattery, because two years with Abilene had trained me to accept her greater worth on nearly every level—save for the academic and in earning Grandpa Leo's love. There, I excelled. But everywhere else—beauty, friends, personality—Abilene surpassed me. And any other girl at Cadbury would have agreed.

"Abilene's not jealous of me," I said with a smile. "She's *Abilene*. I'm just me...I'm not *like* her. If you saw her, you'd understand."

"I did see her," he replied dryly. "She and her acquaintance took occupancy of the room while I was on the patio, which left me stuck outside. Red hair, blue dress, right?"

“Yes,” I said, my smile fading. “So you did see her. You do understand.”

“I did and I do. Let me see your hand.”

I gave him my hand without thinking, extending it out and offering him the small pile of broken glass I’d collected. With deft fingers, he plucked the shards out of my palm and dropped them one by one into the wastebasket. “I thought I told you to be careful,” he said.

I was staring at his face, mesmerized, and I had to tear my eyes away and look down at my hand. I’d cut myself somehow, driven a needle-thin point of glass into my fingertip while trying to clean up, and now blood welled around it, wet and sticky.

“Oh,” I whispered.

And I don’t know if it was the sight of the blood or the icy prick of pain or my sudden proximity to him, but my vision shifted and my perception sharpened, and for a minute, I saw *him*, the real him behind that striking face and decorated jacket. I saw him like I would have if we’d met in the stuffy clusters of the party, if we’d met while Grandpa Leo stood beside me, waiting for me to deliver my observations and deductions.

I saw the small cut along his jaw.

I saw his hand cradling mine, sure and strong, his skin rough and nicked from war.

I saw the dull glint of the Distinguished Service Cross pinned near his heart.

I saw the faint smudges under his eyes.

I saw it all, and the pieces pulled together and wove into a picture.

“They say meditation helps,” I said quietly. “With the insomnia.”

His gaze snapped up from my finger to my face, and his eyes—already the dark, clear green of a glass bottle—seemed to grow both darker and clearer.

“What did you say?”

“Meditation. It’s supposed to help.”

“What makes you think I have trouble sleeping?”

How could I explain the way I knew things? The way I’d been trained for years to hold up a magnifying glass to everyone? I searched for the easiest answer. “It looks like you cut yourself shaving this morning. Like you were too tired to keep your hand steady.” And without thinking and without hesitation, I reached up with the hand he wasn’t holding and touched his jaw, lightly grazing my fingertips over the cut.

His eyes fluttered closed while his other hand came up against mine, holding it tight to his face. The long sweep of his black eyelashes nearly covered up the sleepless bruises under his eyes. The moment froze—the feeling of his smooth face warm against my palm, the blood still dripping from my finger, the muffled noise of the party through the closed door to the hallway.

“I’m sorry,” I offered gently. “If I could help you sleep, I would.”

He smiled, his eyes opening, and the moment unfroze, although I still felt it hanging between us. A palpable pressure, a prickling awareness.

A thawed energy.

Scared of its strength, I started to pull my hand away from his face, but he kept it there for a moment longer, looking me in the eyes. “I’ve never told anyone I have trouble sleeping,” he said. “I can’t believe you just knew.”

“Lots of soldiers struggle with it after difficult missions,” I said, looking down. He released my hand and I let it drop, keeping my gaze on the sparkling glass in my palm. “I just wanted to help. I’m sorry if I overstepped.”

“Not at all.” His voice was warm and filled with wonder. I risked a glance up at him and saw him staring down at me with an awed gratitude so intense it made me flush. “Actually, I should

thank you,” he said. “It’s almost a relief to have someone know. To be able to quit pretending, just for a minute, that everything’s okay. That I’m still strong.”

“You are strong,” I whispered. “I don’t know what happened to you, I don’t know what you did, but I know that if you can stand in front of me tonight and still be kind, that makes you strong.”

He took in a deep breath at my words, those green eyes like emeralds in the dark, and then let it out. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome,” I said back.

And this time it was his turn to break our connection and look down, turning his attention back to my injured hand.

“This will hurt a little,” he warned, gently tugging the glass splinter loose. Another teardrop of blood oozed out, and without a word, he bent his head over my hand and drew the pad of my finger into his mouth, sucking the blood off my skin.

I could feel every flicker of his tongue, every soft scrape of his teeth. And every thrum of my pulse and every beat of my heart cried out for more, for something, for I didn’t know what, but parts of me knew. My skin erupted in goose bumps, and I wanted to press my thighs together to soothe an ache that seemed everywhere and nowhere all at once.

When Colchester lifted his head, a small drop of blood clung to his lower lip and he tasted it with his tongue, his eyes locked on mine. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, couldn’t think. I could only feel, feel and then obey when he said, “Stand up.”

We both stood.

It was as if my blood and his gratitude had woven a spell around him. His pupils were dilated and dark, his lips parted—and it was those lips that captivated me now. A perfect mouth, not too lush or too pink, just full and ruddy enough to contrast with the hyper-masculine square of his jaw and the strong line of his nose. The sharp angles of the cupid’s bow on his upper lip begged to be traced, and for a minute, I imagined doing just that. I imagined reaching out with the finger he’d just kissed and running it along the firm swells of his mouth.

“That’s the last time you are allowed to hurt yourself for her, do you understand?” His voice was almost disciplinary.

It’s not his business, a wayward thought intruded, but I pushed it away. The moment I’d mentioned his insomnia, the moment I’d touched his face, he and I had gone beyond what could be called a normal interaction. And there was something so knowing in the way he said it, so caring, and I realized how I felt now must have been how he felt when I told him I knew he couldn’t sleep.

“Yes,” I said, meeting his gaze. “I understand.”

He nodded. “Good girl.”

I flushed again, pleasure curling deep in my chest for reasons I didn’t understand, and he let out another long breath, his eyes on my pinkened cheeks.

I felt like a live wire, like a hot beam of light, all energy and vibration with no direction or outlet. A few minutes before, I’d felt female, but now, I felt *young*. He was a man, and I was still very much a girl, and that difference was so deeply erotic to me, so delicious, and I just wanted to melt into it. Dissolve into him.

Perhaps he felt it too, because he murmured, “You’re trembling. Are you scared of me?”

“I don’t know,” I whispered. It was the truth.

He liked that answer, it seemed, because he smiled. “I’d like to touch you again, if that’s okay.”

I thought of his lips on my finger, the bruises under his eyes, the heavy ache somewhere deep in my body. “Yes, please,” I said.

His hands came up under my elbows, cradling them as he searched my face. He must have seen what I felt, the echo of my words stamped all over my face:

yes please

yes please

yes please

And then he pulled me closer, those large, warm hands sliding behind me, one planted firmly between my shoulder blades and the other against the small of my back, and I could feel every curve of my body pressed against the wide, hard expanse of his chest. My head tilted back of its own accord, and his eyes dropped to the long arch of my throat.

“Stay there,” he breathed. “Don’t move until I tell you.” And then he bent down to press his lips against my neck.

I shivered—no one had ever done that before. Everything he was doing to me, every command and touch and caress—it was all new.

Virgin territory.

“What’s your name, angel?” he asked. I was still frozen like he’d asked, and he was clearly enjoying it, running his lips down to my collarbone.

“Greer.”

“Greer,” he echoed, nuzzling into me. “Tell me, Greer, do you like my lips on your skin?”

“Yes,” I responded, a little breathlessly. “And—”

“And what?”

“You telling me to do things. Ordering me. Moving my body.”

He groaned at that, lifting his head from my neck and pressing me closer to him. Even through the uniform jacket and my own dress, I could feel the firm lines of his chest and stomach. And for the first time, I could smell him. He smelled like leather and woodsmoke. He smelled like a fire burning.

Burn me, I thought, a little wildly. *Consume me*.

His gaze fell down to my mouth, and his eyelids hooded.

“You’re so young...” he whispered.

Somehow, I knew what was coming next, I knew what he’d say. In the same way he’d asked for permission to touch me, he’d need to know it was okay to do more. He’d need reassurance that I was old enough, that I was an adult, that my consent would have legal weight.

I wanted to lie. I *needed* to lie. Because if I told him what he wanted to hear, I knew he’d kiss me. And nothing seemed more important than that right now, nothing seemed more urgent and necessary. I needed him to kiss me, if he didn’t, my body would curl into ash like kindled paper and disappear, please please please—

Except I wasn’t a liar.

Except I wasn’t supposed to kiss *anybody*, that was the promise I made to myself nine years ago after all, and *anybody* included handsome American military officers.

Except I was certain that—somehow—he’d know I was lying. I knew those green eyes would blaze into mine and illuminate the outline of every lie and half-truth I’d ever told.

“Tell me you’re eighteen,” he whispered.

“I’m not.”

“Damn you.”

And then he tilted my face back up to his, and his mouth came down over mine anyway.

I'd never kissed a boy or a girl, never even tried, and now I had a man's lips firm and warm over mine, insistent and demanding. If I had been thinking clearly, I might have worried that I would be bad at kissing, that I would be laughably awkward and a disappointment to this beautiful stranger. But I wasn't thinking clearly, the only thoughts I had were single words—*fire* and *leather* and *more*—and I didn't need to know what to do.

He knew. And that was how it was supposed to be.

One warm hand cupped the nape of my neck while the other pressed against the small of my back, and his lips parted my own. I gasped the moment I felt him lick inside my mouth—it tickled.

It was soft—dangerously soft—silken, and warm. Every nerve ending I had came frighteningly alive, crackling with need.

And all from one lick of his tongue.

I opened my mouth more to him, sighing as he pressed me closer, so close that I would have lost my balance if he let go of me. It felt so right to open to him, to mold against his body, and I wanted to offer him every inch of my skin. The column of my neck, the space between my breasts, my inner thighs...everywhere.

The thought made me bold, and I realized I wanted to kiss him back. He groaned as I tentatively licked inside his mouth, and I felt his entire body shudder as I did it again.

He tasted sweet and clean, like mint and gin, and the more I kissed him, the more I could taste the lingering salt-tang of my blood. My finger stung from the cut, and I wanted him to suck on it again, I wanted it so badly, and so I pressed it against his lips and into his mouth.

His eyes burned as he closed his lips around my finger and sucked, and everything felt throbbing and swollen—especially the space between my legs. And then his lips were hot on my neck, covering the dip of my clavicle, nibbling on the lobe of my ear.

"Greer," he breathed. "God, where did you come from?"

I don't know, but I feel like I've always been waiting for you.

And then his forehead fell against my neck. "And why aren't you eighteen?" he mumbled into my skin.

"How old are you?" I asked.

He lifted his head, resignation and regret in his eyes. "Twenty-six."

His grip on me loosened, his hands sliding away from my body. I made a noise as he let me go, a noise of pure pain and loss, and he gave a breath like he'd been punched in the gut.

"Please," I begged. "Please."

He inhaled raggedly. "You don't even know what you're asking for."

"I don't care. Anything—I'll let you do anything to me."

"I believe you. That's why you're so dangerous."

We stared at each other, and I lifted my fingers to probe at my lips, which thrummed with blood and heat, swollen and soft. "That was my first kiss," I said, more to myself than to him.

His own lips parted in surprise. "It was?"

"I haven't..." *He doesn't need to know you're a virgin, Greer. It's embarrassing enough that you've never been kissed.* "Yes. You gave me my first kiss."

His eyes blazed a deep green, a summer forest about to catch fire, and there was a moment that I thought he was going to reach for me again. As if the idea of being the first man for me ignited a sense of possession in him. But at that moment, the door to the library opened and Merlin Rhys came in from the hallway.

Keep your kisses to yourself.

Tell me you're eighteen.

Oh my God, what have I done?

We both froze, and then Colchester stepped back and cleared his throat, slipping back into cocktail party mode. “Merlin, hello. Ah, this is Greer...um...”

“Greer Galloway,” Merlin supplied, and his friend swiveled his head to look at me.

“As in Vice President Galloway, Greer Galloway?” Colchester asked me, his strong face both interested and vulnerable.

“Former Vice President,” I mumbled, not for the first time in my life and certainly not for the last.

“Ah, okay. And Greer, this is Merlin Rhys. He’s a family friend and invited me here tonight. I’m in between assignments, but I didn’t want to go home, so he graciously let me tag along.”

“Much good it did if you spent the night hiding on the patio,” Merlin said mildly.

Not the whole night, I wanted to say, but then Merlin’s dark eyes raked over my lips, and somehow—*somehow*—he knew. He knew that I’d kissed his friend. He knew that I wanted to do it again. He knew that I wouldn’t have stopped, would have surrendered every bit of myself right here in the library.

“We should go,” Merlin said shortly, his eyes still on me as he addressed Colchester. “It’s getting late.”

Colchester stepped away and then looked back at me, biting his lip. It made him look almost boyish, almost my age, until I looked closer and could see that he bit his lip not out of uncertainty, but to control himself.

Merlin sighed and left the room. There was a second when I was certain Colchester would follow him right away, catching the closing door in his large hand and ducking out without a word of goodbye, but then the door closed. And my stranger was still in the room with me.

He was on me in a second, pressing me against the wall, stoking my body to flames once more. “I don’t want to leave,” he told me, tracing his nose along my jaw.

“Then don’t,” I practically pleaded, and he swallowed my pleas with his mouth, kissing me and kissing me and kissing me until there was nothing but his hot mouth and the blood pounding deep in my core.

He stepped back with a heavy breath. “I have to go,” he said with genuine regret, after running a hand through his short hair. He looked as put together and collected as when he’d first strolled in from the patio, as if the kissing hadn’t even happened. As if *I* hadn’t even happened.

“Wait!” I called out as he reached the door to the hallway that Merlin had walked through moments earlier. “I just realized...I don’t know your first name.”

He paused with his hand on the doorknob and looked down at it. “Captain Maxen Ashley Colchester.” He bowed his head. “At your service.”

“Maxen,” I echoed.

He glanced up and a shy smile crossed his face. “I think I’d like it if you called me Ash.”

And then he was gone.

Chapter Six

Ten Years Ago

Dear Captain Colchester,

I hope it's not too forward of me to email you—or too awkward. But I asked my grandfather if he could find your email address for me, since Merlin is a mutual friend, and I wanted to tell you that it was really nice to meet you last Saturday. I know we didn't talk about it very much, and it's probably nosy of me, but I was thinking more about your insomnia and I thought you might like a couple of the attachments about meditation I have at the bottom of the email.

I hope you're enjoying London!

*Sincerely yours,
Greer Galloway*

Dear Ash,

Is it okay if I call you Ash? You said so the night we met, and I would like to, but it also feels strange to call a near-stranger by their first name. Especially a military stranger, because Grandpa Leo has so many military friends that I'm pretty much trained to salute whenever I see a uniform. I also hope I didn't bother you by not mentioning my last name while we were talking. Sometimes at parties like that the Galloway name means certain things—usually that people want me to pass on messages to Grandpa or ask for favors. Sometimes it means they don't want to talk to me at all because they hate my grandfather and his political party. Or sometimes it just means that I can't start from scratch when I meet someone new. I know that seems like a silly thing to care about, but my whole childhood I was introduced to the world as Leo Galloway's granddaughter. Here at Cadbury, I'm always 'Abilene's cousin' or 'Abilene's roommate.' I'm never just Greer, and I got to be that with you, and that was special for me. I hope you don't feel like I was trying to hide something from you?

Anyway, if you're still in London, I hope you're having a good time.

*Sincerely yours,
Greer Galloway*

Dear Ash,

I wasn't going to bother you any more since it's been almost three weeks since I sent my first email (and I was certain that I was annoying you) but when I was watching the news about the Krakow bombing last night, Grandpa Leo called. We talked about what the bombing meant for Europe and NATO and America, and then he mentioned that you'd been reassigned back to the Carpathian region the week after the party. I feel so terrible for emailing you such trivial stuff when you were back on duty, and I just wanted you to know that I had no idea. I'll make sure to light a prayer candle in church for you and pray a rosary for you every night.

Be safe please.

*Sincerely yours,
Greer Galloway*

Dear Ash,

It's a real war now. Officially. The Carpathian problem has been around for so long that I'm not sure even Grandpa Leo ever thought it would really come to a head like this. But the Krakow bombing last week—over nine hundred dead—there's no way war wouldn't be declared. At least that's what Grandfather said.

Did you know that my parents were killed by Carpathian separatists? Almost ten years ago now. They blew up a train bridge and killed almost a hundred people, my parents included. All that death, my childhood completely torn apart with God only knows how many other children's, and for what? A small chunk of land squashed between Ukraine and Poland and Slovakia? It makes no sense to me.

Except, in a weird way, it does. I have every reason to hate the Carpathians, but I can't. I can't actually transpose my own pain and grief over the images of the war I'm seeing. Instead, I keep thinking of the Carpathian children who might lose their own parents. I keep thinking about how peaceful and quiet I feel when I remember my childhood in Oregon, when I remember what home feels like. There's no doubt that a handful of the militant separatists have done terrible things, and I understand why there is war now. But part of me wishes that we could simply sit down and grant them what they want—their home. Sovereignty is a complicated thing, and creating a new nation is a fraught prospect in a region already as carved up as Eastern Europe, but what if there could be a way forward without war? I've been raised in politics and I'm not naive enough to believe that we can erase killing and violence, but even if we could reduce it just a little...wouldn't that still be worth trying?

I've been praying for you every night like I said I would. I hope wherever you are that you can feel that. Somehow.

*Sincerely yours,
Greer*

Dear Ash,

You're famous now. Imagine my surprise yesterday at waking up to your face all over the news. My horror when I found out what you lived through, my relief that you were unharmed. It's unthinkable to me that you were able to fight your way out of a building surrounded by separatists, all while carrying that wounded soldier. I can't fathom what kind of courage it took for you to stay with your friend when the rest of your squad escaped. What kind of skill it took for you to fight off your attackers and eventually save yourself and him. But after reading and watching all the profile pieces on you, I shouldn't have been surprised. You have a history of being a hero, don't you? And I'm not trying to tease you or make you uncomfortable. I've been around every sitting president, vice president and first lady since I was a baby, and I have seen how tiring it can be to have people fixate on your accomplishments. But I can't write this letter without telling you that I'm in awe of how many times you've risked your life for your fellow

soldiers. 'No greater love than this' is what Jesus says about men like you, and I'm honored to say that I've met you in person, and that you're even kinder and more humble than all the profile pieces and journalists say.

That being said, to me you are still Ash. Our acquaintance lasted only an hour, but the things that I remember about you—the cut on your jaw, the way your hands felt as they worked the glass splinter out of my finger—are more than your battles. You are a hero to me, but you are a man too. Maybe even more man than hero.

*Yours,
Greer*

Dear Ash,

It's been six months since we met, and part of me is embarrassed to look at this chain of emails—a chain with only me in it. I tell myself it's because you're at war, because you've been saving lives—last week, that high school building where so many civilians were taking shelter!—but I guess I'm also not foolish enough to believe that a twenty-six-year-old war hero wants unsolicited emails from a boarding school student. So I should stop bothering you, I know I should, but it feels as if I have taken you up as a sort of hobby. Reading about you, thinking about what I should write to you. The girls at school are obsessed with the fact that Abilene and I were at the same party as you this summer, and even though it's one of the only times anyone has been interested in actually talking to me, I hold what happened between us as my own private secret. I don't want anyone else to know what it felt like to be in your arms. I don't want anyone else to know about the little groan you made when we kissed for the first time. I'm greedy for you, or at least for those memories of you. I'm not stupid—I know that you must have a girlfriend or that you've had them—I know I'm not the only person who's heard that little groan or felt the heat of your hands on their back. But I like to pretend. I like to feel possessive of these small parts of you, the parts that don't belong to the public imagination, and maybe that's the real reason I can't stop writing.

*Yours,
Greer*

Dear Ash,

It's my seventeenth birthday today. It's been exactly one year since we met, and while you've fought in several crucial battles and saved countless lives, I've completed a year of high school. The two don't really compare, do they? I told myself after my last email that I wouldn't bother you again, both for your sake and for my pride, but tonight I feel strange. Restless, I guess. It's hot for England, even for May, and muggy. I have the windows thrown open and a fan blowing, but I can't seem to cool down. Every part of me feels flushed. And Abilene is gone from our dorm room and I found a bottle of Prosecco stashed in her mini fridge, and so I'm tipsy and alone, on top of being restless and hot.

It feels like the kind of night to make a bad decision. I think normally girls my age find boys my age to make their bad decisions with—at least that's what Abilene is out doing right now—but I don't want that. There's something really pedestrian about the kind of fun Abilene seeks

out, and this is not me trying to force morality onto her, because I don't think there's anything immoral about having sex, but it's more of an...aesthetic...thing, I guess. I don't want boring, common ways of being bad. I want ways that rattle me to my bones, that send me to my knees in repentance, I want to be the kind of bad that leaves me wrung out with bite marks blooming purple on my body. I want to go to the brink of not knowing myself, I want someone to take me there and hold me by the neck and make me stare at an entire reckless realm of possibility. What's the point of sex if you don't feel like every dark crevice of your soul has been exposed to the light? If someone doesn't take your lust and your shameful thoughts, and twist them into a spell that leaves you panting like a dog for more? I think I want that for myself. I want a normal life too—I want an education and career and my own house and to make all of my own decisions—but whenever I think about sex, about what sex would be like when I'm older, I don't ever imagine the Titanic hand-hitting-the-car-window thing. I want to feel like my veins are being sliced open by the sheer desire of someone powerful, I want to be handled and cherished and used and worshipped. I want a man or woman to claim me as their equal partner in every way—until we're alone. Then I want to crawl to them. I can have that someday, right?

Right now, as I type, I've got one leg slung over the arm of my computer chair because it's so hot, but also because it makes it easy to tease myself in between writing sentences to you. I do this a lot when I'm thinking about you. (I am guessing you probably don't know that, and tonight, for some reason, it just feels like I should tell you.) I started by running a fingertip under the lace of my panties, imagining it was you. Imagining that we are back in the library and we were never interrupted by Merlin. I imagine you pulling up my skirt after I tell you that you were my first kiss, because you want to know if I'm a virgin. You want to feel if I'm still intact, if I'm wet for you, you want to know what I'd feel like wrapped around your dick.

God, I'm so wet right now. I wish it were your fingers inside me, your thumb on my clit. You'd be so good at that. I can't stop thinking about your hands, how big and strong they are. I bet your eyes would burn green as you rubbed me, I bet you would lick your lips at the thought of tasting me, of being the first man to ever taste me. I think about what it would have been like if you'd fucked me that night, right there against the wall maybe, or on the large desk in the corner. Abilene says boys should always wear condoms, but I wouldn't have wanted you to. I would have wanted to feel your skin, if it was hot and if it was smooth and silky. I would have wanted you to feel me. I would have wanted you to whisper in my ear how good I felt, what a gift I was giving you, how you could stay inside me forever and ever if only I'd let you.

What noises do you make when you come? Do you gasp? Groan? Whisper names? I think I'd like you to whisper my name. Sometimes I imagine you in your cot on base, your hand beneath the blankets trying to be quiet, and then when you come, you have to bite your lip so you don't say my name aloud. I imagine you fucking your fist in the shower, wishing it was me instead of your hand. I imagine you imagining me in every different way a man can be with a woman, sweet and rough and slow and angry and loving. And right now, I'm going to stop typing and finger myself until I come, and when I come, it will be your name I say.

I don't know if this will ever be read. If it will go straight to spam or into some folder marked 'Crazy Girls with Vice Presidents for Grandfathers'. I almost hope you never see this, but it couldn't go unwritten. Not tonight. But this will definitely be the last time I write to you.

Tomorrow, I'll wake up hung over and ashamed, although hopefully with that dark excitement that comes with making the best kinds of bad choices. You won't hear from me again, and I'm sorry if any part of this made you uncomfortable or irritated. But you should know that even if I'm not writing you emails any longer, I'll still be thinking of you every time I dig my fingers into my pussy.

Be safe.

*Yours,
Greer*

Chapter Seven

The Present

Ten years separate me and that moment in the library. Ten years encompassing wars and illness and the entirety of my adult experience, and yet somehow it all shrinks to a pinprick point and disappears as I walk into St. Thomas Becket Church. It's erased and there's nothing between me and the man kneeling near the front of the sanctuary, his head bowed. There's no air, no time, no different versions of ourselves...I could be sixteen right now, walking up this aisle, and he could be twenty-six.

Maybe it's because of this that I hesitate as I get closer to him, my feet slowing as my pulse speeds up. When Embry suggested my church as a meeting place, I leapt at the idea. The church is where I feel safe, the church is where I feel watched over by God, and most importantly, the church is neutral territory. I can't bear the thought of waiting in line to see him in the West Wing, a hastily penciled-in visitor, and I even less could bear the thought of being smuggled into the Residence. I understand discretion, but I also don't want to feel like contraband. Like the living embodiment of a lie.

Stop freaking out. You still don't know for sure why he wants to meet you. Embry had hinted—intimately—at the reason, but I've been burned by hope before. And besides, how could there be any room for hope at all? After Jenny, after that long sweaty night in Chicago, *after ten years*, for fuck's sake. I should keep this box buried. I should save myself while I still can.

But I don't stop walking. I send a quick prayer—a blank prayer, a silent plea, because I don't even know what to pray for at this point—towards the tabernacle as I genuflect and slide into the pew behind the President. I carefully set down the kneeler and get to my knees, lacing my hands together and bowing my head, as if to pray, but I never get around to actually forming the words.

I study the President instead.

He's praying as well, kneeling like me, his dark head hanging down over his hands. He's shucked his jacket, leaving him in a white button-down shirt. His sleeves are rolled up, exposing tan, muscular forearms, and I can tell from the loose way the shirt collar lies against his neck that he's unbuttoned his top button and loosened his tie. The shirt stretches and pulls over the wide shoulders and broad muscles of his back as he keeps his head bowed.

And because I can't help it, I let my eyes trail down to the narrow lines of his hips. His pants are excruciatingly tailored, *excruciatingly*, the fabric hugging a firm ass and hard, thick thighs. Heat floods me everywhere, sending sparks and electric flashes dancing across my skin. How could I have forgotten how powerful he is in person? That there is still a soldier's body under those dark suits and requisite flag pins?

And then when he speaks, the sparks dancing across my skin ignite into true fire as I remember the words he murmured against my lips that night a decade ago—*tell me you're eighteen* and *do you like my lips on your skin* and *God, where did you come from?*

"I've prayed for the free world, the less-than-free world, my enemies, my allies, my staff and my mom's favorite dog," the President says without looking back at me, his voice rich and burred around the edges. "Am I missing anything?"

"The babies trapped in limbo, maybe."

“How could I forget about them?” He leans his head farther down for a brief second. “And please watch over the babies trapped in limbo. In the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.”

He crosses himself, and I get a glimpse of those large, square hands that once cradled mine. “Thank you for meeting me,” Ash says. “I know it was presumptive to send Embry—especially as you haven’t ever met him—to do something so personal, but I couldn’t wait another minute after seeing you here on Sunday. And I also couldn’t get away to do it myself. I mentioned it to him and he volunteered to help right away.” He smiles. “He’s an amazing friend.”

Especially as you haven’t ever met him...

Ash doesn’t know that Embry and I know each other? A quiet worry starts tugging at my heart, but I push it aside. “Vice President Moore is a very persuasive messenger.”

“I know. That’s why I sent him. Trust me—the things he’s persuaded *me* to do can’t be spoken aloud in a church.” The President stands and comes around to the side of my pew, extending a hand. I take it and look up, and all worries about Embry fade into nothing. There is only Ash.

Since the night we kissed, I’ve seen thousands of pictures of Maxen Ashley Colchester, I’ve watched all his televised rallies and debates and press conferences, but it in no way prepared me for seeing him right now. Even though he’s perfection personified in any medium, no picture or video can do him justice. Nothing can compare to seeing him in person, face to face.

Still the same chiseled planes and full mouth, the bottle green eyes—still the most handsome man I’ve ever seen, aside from Embry Moore. But what the President has is more than good looks. There’s a certain nobility to his face, an honesty and openness, and even more than that, a sense of purpose. Like he knows exactly who he is and within seconds, he can tell you exactly who you are. It’s electrifying.

I allow him to help me to my feet. I’m shaking, and he notices.

“Do I scare you?” he asks, his brow furrowing. Like Embry, there are lines around his eyes and mouth that weren’t there a decade ago, and I see a few silver strands peeking through his jet-black hair. If anything, it makes him even sexier now than when we first met.

“Will you be angry if I say yes?” I manage.

His hand slides from mine up to my elbow, and I realize how close we’re standing. “Angry is not even close to the kinds of feelings you stir up, Greer.”

Oh God.

I can’t handle how intense this is, how fiercely my body is reacting to his mere proximity when all we shared was an hour a decade ago and another hour five years after that. I fumble for a way to defuse the sudden weight of the conversation. “Mr. President—”

He sighs. “Please don’t call me that. Not here. Not now.”

I try to force myself to say his name aloud—the name that I wrote a thousand times in looping cursive during my high school classes, the name that I sighed to myself in my shower with my hand between my legs—but my decorum was forged in the crucible of The Party and it’s so hard not to use the title I know I should use.

He leans in, and I smell the fire and leather smell of him. It makes me dizzy.

“You can call me ‘sir,’ if you like,” he murmurs. “But only when we’re alone.”

I have to close my eyes.

He guides me into the aisle, and then we’re walking past the altar to a door at the side of the church. We walk by stone-faced Secret Service agents and go out into the church garden, his

hand moving from my arm to the small of my back, steering me where he wants us to go. The gesture is possessive, peremptory, as if he assumes he has prerogative over my body.

I want him to. I want him to have every prerogative over my body.

I don't see any agents in the garden, even though I know they must be there, but for the moment, it feels as if we're alone among the rustling red and gold trees and wilted fall flowers, and he stops us in the middle of a flagstone-paved clearing, next to a bleached-white statue of the Virgin.

"I won't waste your time. God knows I have little enough of my own. But I couldn't—" he pauses, the famously eloquent soldier at a loss for words. "I couldn't wait any longer," he finally says in a low voice.

He is so close, and all I can smell is leather and leaves and I force myself to take a step back. I have to think, I have to use my brain, because my body and my heart are screaming so loudly that I can't hear anything else, and what they're screaming is *yes please yes please yes please* even though a question hasn't been asked yet.

The President—*Ash*, I mentally correct myself—lets me step back, but his eyes are on me like hands, still possessing me, still steering me.

"I don't think I understand," I say. "I don't understand why you wanted to meet with me."

He runs a hand through his hair, a gesture I recognize from that night. "That's fair, I suppose," he says, his eyes on the leaf-covered ground as he frames his next statement. "And I don't want to scare you away by being too...direct."

"I mean, I'm still shocked that you remember me. We met only the once."

"Twice," he corrects me. "Chicago, five years ago. Remember?"

Flames lick my cheeks and I take a deep breath. "I remember." It was the night I lost my virginity, after all. Girls usually remember that sort of thing. "Twice then. We've talked twice."

And then I bite my lip, remembering something I've managed to forget for several years, because it's not exactly true that we've only talked twice. *I have talked to Ash more than that, though he never talked back.*

The emails.

My face flushes even hotter, this time with humiliation.

God, the emails. Why was I so young and stupid? So ready to attach meaning to the things adults do without thinking twice about it?

"They were very memorable," he says. "Two times in ten years might not sound like a lot, but it was to me..." He trails off, and my heart squeezes.

But I breathe a silent sigh of relief that he doesn't mention the emails. I never did get a response to any of my messages, and I had assumed for years that he'd never received them, since he had been actually fighting a war at the time. The younger Greer spent too many hours brooding in the dark about those unread messages, but now as an adult, I pray he's never even seen them.

"Something's wrong," he says, reaching out to tilt my face up to his. I realize that I was staring off into nothing.

Lie. Just lie.

But I hate lying. I try to find an answer that isn't the whole shameful truth. "I'm embarrassed. Of how I acted when I was younger."

A smile, surprisingly tender. "Is that all this is? Why you're acting like you don't understand why I want to see you?"

“I just...I thought about that kiss so much,” I whisper. “But I knew there was no way you would remember it. Why would you? You were an adult, a man, and I was just a child. And you’ve gone on to live this incredible life, to be a hero and now a leader, and you had your beautiful wife—”

Fuck! I swallow the rest of my words, wishing I could swallow up my own idiocy along with them. Of all the things I shouldn’t bring up, the late Jennifer Colchester was at the top of the list. And sure enough, Ash winces at the word *wife*. Just the tiniest bit.

“I loved Jenny,” he says quietly, letting go of my chin. And it’s then I notice the dark smudges under his eyes, the telltale signs of exhaustion in his face. He still has trouble sleeping, even after all this time. “And I miss her. It hurts me still that she died so young and in so much pain. But Greer, I won’t pretend that I ever stopped thinking about you. I can’t pretend that.”

“It was one kiss,” I say, shaking my head. “Why would you—”

He holds up a hand to stop me, and I fall silent. “I’m not going to let you do that,” he tells me. “You’re not allowed to dismiss what happened or tell me that it wasn’t worth remembering. I *did* remember. I *do* remember. And I won’t forget any second of that night.”

“It’s just so impossible to believe. That *you*—Maxen Colchester—remembered me. Thought about me.”

A noise leaves him, half heavy breath, half incredulous laugh. “We are meeting after all these years,” he says, “and you believe I haven’t been thinking about you?” He takes a step closer, so close that I could lean in and press my lips against his icy blue tie if I wanted. It’s nearly the same color as Embry’s eyes.

“Look up at me, Greer,” the President orders me. I do as he says. It almost hurts to look him full in the face, he’s so perfect, but it hurts more not to look.

“All the words that men use about women—enchanted, charmed, addicted—they don’t even begin to cover what I felt for you and your handful of shattered glass. I thought about you that night, and the next and the next, and when I was deployed to Carpathia, you were *all* I thought about. I built these fantasies in my mind where I would come home after the war and find you at whatever university you were at. I would kiss you until you were like you were that night at the party, begging me to do whatever I wanted.” His green eyes are dark, stormy, his pupils wide. “Years later when I finally came home, all I wanted was to find you. But things happened...the war started up again and I was promoted and Merlin needed my time and then I met Jenny...” He lets out a breath. “I had just proposed to her the night before I saw you in Chicago.”

Chicago. Also known as the night I met Embry. The night I lost my virginity.

“Ash, you don’t have to—”

“I do,” he cuts me off. “Because I don’t think you believe me. And it makes me a terrible man, wanting you after all this time, *through* all these years. Because I did want you, even while I was married to Jenny. I sought out your grandfather every chance I could, just to listen to whatever scraps of news he had about you. Whatever academic honor you’d been given, what you decided to major in, whether you wanted to move back to America or stay in England. And late at night, while Jenny slept next to me in bed, I’d replay our kiss over and over again. What it felt like to pin you against the wall. What your voice sounded like in my ear, all breathless and full of wonder, like I’d just given you a gift. And I would hate myself for it, but I couldn’t stop.”

His eyes search mine. “So why did I want to meet you today? Because I haven’t been able to stop wanting to meet you for ten years. Because I want you. I want to kiss you again. I want to learn everything about you, everything about what you love and hate, what you study, what you

want for your future.” He reaches up, his thumb brushing against my lower lip. “I want you to be mine.”

I try to hide my shiver. He can’t know, he can’t possibly know, how those words roll through me, punch through my skin and crawl into my veins.

Be mine.

Not *let’s date*, not *be my girlfriend*. This would be more than anything that trivial, and Ash knew it.

But the exhilaration is chased by a quick, cruel voice.

Remember the times you’ve been hurt before?

There’s no way this can be true.

This is crazy.

Say no.

Leave.

I shake my head, but his thumb stays against my lip. I fight the urge to bite it or lick it. Instead, I meet his eyes and say firmly, “You don’t know anything about me, other than what I kissed like once. That’s not enough to build on.”

“Does it scare you that I thought about you as much as I did?”

I think for a moment. It doesn’t, actually, especially given how much *I* thought about *him*. Much more than thought—I wrote to him. I touched myself to the memory of him.

“No. Just, it’s so unexpected. I had no idea how you felt...”

His thumb sweeps across my lip a final time and then moves to the line of my jaw. “I was at war, Greer. And then I was married. It wasn’t something I could act on.”

I nod. “I get that.” But I don’t say anything else because my mind is racing faster than my pulse, stacking what I know against what I feel.

I now know that Ash has been as preoccupied with me as I was with him—for all these years. So preoccupied he wants to be with me now, and I can’t pretend this doesn’t make me dizzy. Like my blood is carbonated, like my body is fizzing over with feelings. Excitement, lust, relief. But those ten years didn’t just sail by—they left an indelible mark on me. I fell in love with Ash, only to watch him marry another woman. I slept with a different man, only to never hear from him again.

In short, this last decade has been a harsh lesson in guarding my heart, and I have been a very, very apt pupil. I have built walls around my feelings, barriers and bridges and moats, all to protect me from the possibility of getting wounded again.

So how can I honestly be thinking about saying yes to Ash? How can I—cautious, closed-off Greer—concede to being his? What if he hurts me again? What if he’s disappointed in me or falls in love with someone else?

And, the largest question of all, how can I try to date Ash with Embry in the background?

For the first time, Ash looks uncertain. “You’re thinking of reasons to say no, aren’t you?” he asks quietly. “Did that night not mean to you what it meant to me?”

I shake my head vigorously. “No, no. That night meant absolutely everything to me. And that’s why this is a bad idea. Aside from you being the President and having no time or space for some girlfriend, I’m scared that I’ll get hurt. I’m scared that we’ll find that we don’t have anything in common, that our kiss was just a fluke, and even after all that, that it won’t matter because I’ll still fall in love with you. I’ll fall in love with you even as we find out we’re all wrong for each other and I’ll be left broken-hearted over you again—”

“Again?” he asks.

I try to look away, but he won't let me. He keeps my face tilted towards his, lowering his own until our noses touch.

"God, if you only knew what it does to me to hear that you felt that way." His voice is hoarse. "Tell me what I have to do to earn it back. Tell me what I have to do to make you as twisted up over me as I am over you. I'll do anything. Anything."

I can feel his breath against my lips. Warm and intimate. I should make him promise something, I should demand his fidelity or honesty or utmost care. But that would be too close to lying, and instead I admit the terrible truth.

"You don't have to do anything, Ash. I'm already yours."

He breathes out, a shudder going through him, and then he presses his lips to mine.

It's nothing like our first kiss, and yet everything like it at the same time. I still feel soft and young and female as he pulls me close against his body. I still feel like I want to melt into him, dissolve into nothing and everything at once. And he still makes that low, quiet groan in the bottom of his throat, as if he can't help himself, as if I've irrevocably weakened him by letting him touch my lips with his.

Our first kiss was impulsive, exhilarating and stunning, but unplanned, a kiss between strangers with no past or future. This time Ash kisses me with intent, with the promise of more, with the promise of a future and his affection and care. And I kiss him back as a woman, not as a girl, just as eager as I was then, but more experienced. All the more ready to surrender.

We break lips just for a moment, and I look up into his eyes. "Wow," I whisper.

"Wow," he laughs back at me.

"This is my first kiss in five years." I don't know why the confession is dragged out of me, but it is. I want him to know how much he meant to me, how much he means to me now.

I see the way his eyebrows pull together at my revelation, see the way he mentally tucks that information back to ask me about later, but for the moment, he only murmurs, "Then let's make it count," and lowers his mouth back down to mine. I smell the leaves and leather, feel the firm warmth of his mouth and the strength of his arms, and then I'm drowning in him. His certainty and his strength, his desire and his need. And then beyond a shadow of a doubt, I feel *him* drowning in *me*, feeling him giving over every atom of himself to my keeping. We are consumed and rebuilt all within the same moment of lips and hands fisting tightly in clothes.

A clearing throat interrupts us, and Ash reluctantly pulls away. I see a Secret Service agent waiting by the entrance to the garden.

"Mr. President, it's time."

Ash closes his eyes a moment and then opens them with a sigh. "I have a meeting with the Polish ambassador at four."

"About Carpathia?" I ask. The war has been theoretically over for two years, but there's no doubt that the region is still deeply volatile.

"Always about Carpathia," he says with a rueful smile. "I'd rather spend the evening with you though."

I want to ask when I can see him again—or more honestly, when I can kiss him again, but he beats me to it.

"Greer, my job—and the kind of man I am—I tend to ask a lot of the people I care for. My schedule is...well, it's fucked. Constantly. I want to promise that I can see you right away, but that may not be the case."

"I understand," I say softly. "You forget that I know what it's like for you better than most people."

“I hate this,” he says suddenly, fiercely. “I want to take you home with me tonight, and I don’t want to wait to see you again.”

“Ash, really, I understand—”

“No,” he interjects. “*No*. I’ve waited ten years, and I refuse to wait any longer. If I send a car for you tonight, will you get in it?”

I think back to earlier, to my relief at not being smuggled into the White House like a mistress, like a dirty secret. Discretion is one thing, but is that what I want for myself? To be a late-night visitor? To be the hidden plaything of a man in power? I’ve stayed away from politics for years, built myself a nest in an ivory tower so I wouldn’t ever have to think about politics again, and I’m willing to surrender myself to the most famous politician in the world after one kiss?

But then I look again at Ash, at those green eyes burning down at me, and I realize that all this debating is pointless. Of course I’ll get in the car. Of course I’ll go to him. It almost feels like I don’t have a choice, like my choice was made when I was sixteen and pinned between the wall and an eager Army captain.

“Yes, of course,” I tell him. “I’ll go anywhere you want me to.”

Chapter Eight

The Present

When the car pulls up, I'm ready. I'm so ready that I'm trembling, part of me wanting to run and hide and the other part of me wanting to run straight to the White House so I don't have to wait a second longer. I've showered, shaved my legs, put on makeup, taken off the makeup because it felt like too much, then put a little makeup back on...and still there's so much time to kill. I change outfits at least three times, settling for a short blue dress of embroidered cotton with a flared skirt and cap sleeves. The short hemline and the nude high heels I pair with it are just sexy enough to signal how I'd like the evening to go, but the high neckline and sweet blue color are enough to claim innocence in case I'm wrong about what he wants with me.

Wants *from* me.

I pray with every cell in my body that I'm not wrong.

But at the same time, I find myself hoping the car doesn't show. Because if it shows, if I get in it, then it's all over. I'll go from being Greer Galloway the academic to Greer Galloway, Presidential mistress. And the Beltway will smell the Galloway in me and finally suck me down into its swamp once and for all.

Headlights sweep across the living room, and for a moment, I consider locking the door from the inside and refusing to go out. Sending a message to Ash saying, "Sorry, but I can't be part of your world." Continuing my life of solitude and study.

But then I look around my living room—clean wood floors and loaded bookshelves, and the well-used fireplace—and I see the decades stretching out before me. The new Greer with her scars and all her reserve living lonely and empty, while the old Greer—a girl who wrote a soldier halfway across the world her darkest thoughts—suffocates silently and dies slowly under a veil of dust and term papers.

I go outside to the car.

The Secret Service agent has a faint smile on his face as he opens the door for me. "Good evening, Ms. Galloway."

"Good evening," I say a bit breathlessly.

And that's the last we speak for the entire drive.

Growing up as Leo Galloway's granddaughter, I'm not intimidated by Secret Service agents necessarily, but I do wonder what this one thinks of me, since it must be painfully obvious what's going on. But he acts as if there's nothing abnormal about a young blonde being summoned to the President's side this late at night.

And then I have a terrible thought, a thought that twists my stomach. What if it's not abnormal? What if I'm just another in a long line of women secreted into the Residence, like some kind of modern-day concubine? What if all of Ash's talk about *being mine*, about wanting me, is just the game he plays to get women into his bed? He hasn't publicly dated anyone since Jenny's death, but that doesn't mean that he hasn't been seeing women privately. I mean, how likely is it that a man like Ash—sexy and powerful—would be celibate for more than a year?

I have no right to be upset about it, but I find that I am. It was hard enough knowing he was with Jenny when she was alive, that she got to be the one next to him, the one kissing him, the

one who heard his murmurs and moans late into the night. But that there might have been any number of women since then...

Suddenly feeling very lonely, I pull my legs up onto the car seat and rest my chin on my knees, an old habit from when I was a girl riding with Grandpa Leo back and forth across Manhattan. But as much as I'd like to pretend I'm still a little girl safe with her grandfather, I can't. Not with where I'm going. Not with who I will see when I get there. Even the city outside wants to remind me I'm not a child anymore, the sedate streets and stately parks a world away from the busy, messy capitalism of Manhattan.

It *is* beautiful, though, and I find myself lulled by the passing of gold and red trees, lamps wreathed by fog, sternly noble buildings rising together as we approach Pennsylvania Avenue.

And then the car is rolling through the gates, through the various security checks, and we come to a stop. I'm helped out by the taciturn agent and delivered to a young Hispanic man wearing a tweed jacket and horn-rimmed glasses waiting by the door.

There's something about his boyish, bookish face that makes me trust him immediately. But even though he looks kind, capable, and discreet, my stomach still clenches at yet another person being involved. Another person who thinks that I'm—what? A mistress? A whore? A weak, lonely woman?

"Ms. Galloway?" he asks.

It's only the memory of Ash's lips on mine that nudge me forward. "Hello," I say. "It's nice of you to meet me."

He waves my words away. "I'm here all the time anyway. This is the first time I get to do something fun for the President."

His words give me the tiniest edge of relief; maybe Ash isn't secretly fucking his way through Washington's eligible women after all.

"I'm Ryan Belvedere, but everyone calls me Belvedere because there's like four Ryans on staff," he says, his words coming out in the fast pattered rush of the chronically busy. He sticks out a hand, which I shake. "I'm President Colchester's personal aide," he continues. "He wanted to be the one to greet you, but his meeting with his foreign policy staff has gone late. He sends his apologies, but it was necessary business after his meeting with the ambassador, I'm afraid."

Carpathia, I thought. *He's had serious news about Carpathia from the Polish ambassador.*

"I completely understand," I say.

"I knew you would. You're Leo Galloway's granddaughter, huh? What was that like?"

"What's it like working here?"

Belvedere glances around the nondescript entrance we're standing in. "Less glamorous than the brochure."

"Then you've got your answer."

He laughs and starts walking, gesturing for me to follow. "It can't be all that bad. And it made it really easy for them to do your background check tonight—you've had so many already over the years."

"I'm still not sure they didn't do one on me before I was born," I say and he laughs again. He seems quick to laugh...I could see why Ash would have chosen him to be his right-hand man.

We walk down a hallway, and then down another hallway, up and around a maze of stairs and doors and into a room lit with a handful of soft, low lamps and studded with sofas, end tables and bookshelves, with a desk at one end. The wall color and furniture have changed since the last time I was here with Grandpa Leo, but I know exactly where I am. My stomach twists and all my

doubts rise again. Do I really want to be here in the Residence? Practically throwing myself at the mercy of the dead-eyed, forever glad-handing gods of political life?

“President Colchester has invited you to make yourself at home,” Belvedere says, interrupting my unhappy thoughts. “I would suggest in the living room here or...in his bedroom.” Belvedere’s eyes twinkle. “It’s just through those doors.”

I can’t stop the rush of blood from going to my cheeks. What am I doing? I’m *inviting* trouble, I’m inviting the inevitable Internet storm once it gets out that I’m here.

“I’m sorry,” Belvedere says, his eyes still sparkling. “I shouldn’t tease. It’s just, we’re all really excited.”

“Excited?” I ask warily.

“About the President having a date with you tonight. We’ve been trying to coax him into moving on for months. It’s time for him to have some sort of companionship, and frankly, he needs to get laid *bad*.”

I let out a shocked laugh. “You can’t talk about the President that way.”

“The hell I can’t. You haven’t seen him like I have, and I’m telling you with all the male authority I have, he needs a woman.”

I hate myself for asking such a leading question, but I can’t help it. “Surely he doesn’t need a date for that to happen? To be with someone?” *Please tell me what I want to hear, please please please.*

Belvedere shrugs as he walks towards the entrance to the hallway that will lead him back to the West Wing. “Maybe not, but it hasn’t happened. At least that I know of, and I’m around him constantly.”

“So I’m...the first? Since Jenny?”

Belvedere pauses and looks at me. The smile on his face is less gleeful now and more understanding. “He’s not the kind of guy who does casual sex, and it’s too risky in his position anyway. Add that to his grief over Jenny and his drive for this job...well. We all understand why he’s waited. But we’re also excited that you’re here. He needs someone for him, someone who can be there only for him, and I really hope you can be that someone. Even if it’s just for one night.”

The aide’s words touch me, and underneath all my misgivings, I find the truth. “I think I hope I can be that someone too,” I say, and I mean it.

* * * *

It takes another hour for Ash to return to the Residence, an hour which I’ve spent exploring and fiddling with my phone and checking my hair in the bathroom every ten minutes. The sitting room is generously decorated in pale creams and minty greens, the antique furniture giving the room a very traditional, very postcard-from-The-White-House feel, making me think that an interior designer did most of the choosing.

But when I get brave enough to crack the bedroom door and look inside, I see only Ash’s hand. Lots of muted grays and deep charcoals, a small array of understated furniture and a rigid adherence to geometry. No soft angles, no unnecessarily decorated furniture. Everything is deeply functional, solidly built, and free of ostentation. A room for a soldier.

My eyes light on the large four-poster bed, and my breath catches. Will I lay on that bed tonight? Will I wake up there tomorrow morning? Or will I be packed off while it’s still dark, sent away under the cover of night to avoid the press?

The thought makes me anxious, and I go back to the bathroom to smooth my hair one more time, staring blankly at the woman in the mirror.

I see a slender neck and a delicate jaw. Breasts that are high and firm, a narrow waist, and slender hips. In the low light coming from the sitting room, the shallow cleft in my chin and the beauty mark on my cheek seem exotic and striking, my lips full and pink, and my eyelashes long and dark. The mass of white hair—which is slowly darkening to gold in the chilly fall weather—currently pinned back into a sleek knot.

She's jealous of you, you know.

All those years ago, that's what Ash had said to me. I hadn't known what he meant, was unable to conceive of any universe where Abilene had anything to be jealous of. It took a few years for me to finally realize what everyone else saw the night of my sixteenth birthday, but even I eventually had to admit that I was no longer the ugly duckling I'd branded myself as. I'm maybe not the sensual, exuberant swan that Abilene was and still is, but I do have a beauty all my own.

To kill time, I wander to the far edge of the sitting room, looking out over the dark veldt of the South Lawn. In the distance, the Washington Monument pierces the midnight air, the squatly elegant dome of the Jefferson Memorial close by. I've never seen this particular view at night, and it hits me, really hits me, that I'm standing in the White House waiting a few feet away from the President's bedroom door. Waiting for exactly what, I don't know, but I'm so ready. So very ready.

I turn away from the window and walk a perimeter around the room, feeling my high heels press deep into the thick carpet, and I'm stopped by a large framed photograph on the wall, the subjects initially difficult to make out in the dim light. But my pulse speeds up as I realize who's in the picture.

It's Ash and Embry, somewhere deep in the mountains of Carpathia, wearing their Army fatigues with guns and helmets and armor. They have their arms slung around each other's shoulders, and the way they smile at the camera makes it seem like they have some kind of secret, like they'd just gotten away with something. There's so much friendship in the picture, so much brotherhood and trust, and I remember that it was Embry whom Ash saved that day in a Carpathian ambush, Embry that he faced down an entire squad of enemy soldiers to save. But of course there were more battles after that, four or five more, where Embry and Ash both emerged as heroes—Ash the brilliant tactician and Embry the reckless brawler who flung himself heedlessly into every storm of bullets he encountered. I may have stopped writing to Ash the year I turned seventeen, but it didn't mean that I stopped searching for his name in the news, which meant that I also searched for Embry's. My intense feelings for Ash never went away, but they had been joined by new feelings for the handsome, rakish face that joined his in every newscast and online article.

What girl wouldn't have fallen in love with those two?

I touch my fingertips to the glass, as if I could touch both of those men at the same time, and even just the thought of that, of touching Embry and Ash at the same time, makes me light-headed.

Be careful, I caution myself. If you do this thing with Ash, there will be no escaping Embry either. You'll be playing with fire.

"That was after the village of Caledonia," Ash says from behind me. "The one where Embry was injured and I had to carry him out."

Trying not to act startled, I drop my hand, still feeling the cool glass against my fingertips. “Were you friends before then?”

“Yes. But after that, we became much more than friends. Like brothers.”

I turn just as Ash’s hands slide up my bare arms, warm and large and slightly rough.

“I’m glad you got in that car,” he says, ducking his head to meet my eyes. “I was a little worried you’d change your mind.”

“I was worried *you’d* change your mind,” I tell him. “This is still so surreal to me.”

“That I want to spend time with you?”

“That you remember me at all.”

He gives me one of his smiles, the kind where his eyes crinkle up and his face opens into an expression of unimaginable warmth and joy. I’m reminded forcefully of Embry. Maybe the pair are only brothers in the emotional sense and not the biological, but they share the same weather-beaten, mischievous smile, and that smile is enough to get me to agree to anything.

“Don’t move,” Ash says, and he disappears into his bedroom. He returns with a small wooden box. “Have a seat.” He gestures towards the end of the room.

Thinking he means the sofa by the window, I move towards it, but he corrects me, and when he does, there’s a change in his voice. It gets sterner somehow, and the effect on my body is immediate. “Sit on the desk, facing the chair.”

It’s a strange request, and there’s a moment when I want to ask why. But then I see the fire in his green eyes, the same fire I saw when I told him once upon a time that I liked the way he told me what to do with my body.

It’s a test, I realize. And what’s more, it’s a test I want to pass, a test I want to do. Listening to Ash feels as natural as breathing, and after only a breath of hesitation, I walk over to the desk and slide myself onto it, careful to keep my skirt from riding too far up my thighs.

I’m not sure what exactly I expect him to do, but when he comes and sits in the chair in front of me, it feels right. The way it’s supposed to be.

“Thank you for listening to me,” he says. He keeps his gaze on my face.

“I like listening,” I whisper.

“Do you?” he asks, setting the box in his lap and leaning back. “How much?”

“A lot,” I admit quietly. “It feels...natural...with you.”

A small smile. “I’ll tell you a secret: I like it when you listen. That feels natural to me too.”

I glance down at the box, wondering what could be inside. It’s about the right size for cigars, but Ash doesn’t strike me as much of a smoker. What else then? Something sexual? Condoms, maybe, or lube? Nipple clamps?

Ash notices my wary look. “Nothing in there will bite, I promise.”

So no nipple clamps then.

“Do you remember at the church?” he asks, changing the subject. “When I told you that I ask a lot from the people I care for?”

“I do.”

“I meant that in more ways than one. I’m busy, for one thing, often traveling and always stressed, and I—” he stops himself, searching for the right words.

I nudge his knee with my foot. “You won’t scare me away by being too direct. I promise.”

“*To answer before listening is folly*,” Ash quotes, shaking his head, and then sighs. “It took a long time for us to be alone in a room together. Part of me thinks I should enjoy it before I ruin it.”

“And the other part?”

His eyes darken. “The other part of me thinks you should be more nervous.”

I shiver. A good shiver, but a shiver nonetheless, and he doesn’t miss it, his eyes trailing from the pulse pounding in my throat to the goose bumps on my thighs. He looks at the wooden box a moment and then seems to make up his mind.

“We are going to have a conversation now,” he says, “among other things. And we can stop at any time.”

“I don’t want to stop.”

“It’s hard to want to stop,” he says, running his fingers along the edge of the box. “It’s even harder to say the word when you know you should. Have you ever used a safe word?”

For that one whole time I had sex? I laugh out loud. “No.”

He doesn’t seem offended by my laughter. “Perhaps we should find one for you.”

“I don’t think I need a safe word for a conversation. Even a conversation with unspecified *other things*. And especially not with you.”

“You especially need one when you’re with me.” He says it calmly, evenly.

And then suddenly I believe him.

Despite that open, handsome face, despite the historic building I’m standing in and the elegant antique furniture all around us, I believe him. I can’t tell if it’s something in the cool way he says it or something in the flare of light in his eyes, or if it’s the remembered shards of that night, of the way he said *good girl* to me when I obeyed his order, or the way he licked the blood from my fingertip...

“All those times you’ve asked me if I was scared of you, you were serious?”

“It was with good reason.” He leans forward. “I’m not trying to tease you or frighten you unnecessarily. But I’m hard on the people I love. It took me a long time to learn that, and you are too important to me for me to treat that lightly. You have to know that you can stop anything about me—my words or my body—at any time. You have to know that you can leave me at any time.”

I’ll never want to leave. The thought appears unbidden and I shove it aside. But it’s harder for me to shove aside the word *love*, as if I’m one of the people he loves, because to be loved by Ash...I’ve wanted that since I was sixteen.

“If you don’t have a word in mind, you can use my name—my first name.”

“Maxen?”

He nods. “You say that when we’re alone together and everything stops. For a break—if you need one—or completely, if that’s what you need instead.”

I think for a moment. The kind of pornography I watch and the kind of books I read—well, I’m definitely no stranger to this kind of thing. In fact, certain facets of this lifestyle have been the subject of my fantasies since I was old enough to have fantasies. But faced with the reality of a relationship like this, I find myself shy. Not out of fear necessarily—although there is a little fear and I’d be foolish not to be at least a little wary—but out of an acute awareness of how little I know. Of how meager my experience with any kind of romance or sexuality is. When I speak next, my voice is hesitant. “Does all this make you...the kind of person who dominates people?”

Another nod. “Yes.”

“Are you going to whip me or something?” I ask, suddenly nervous.

“Not all Dominants are sadists, Greer. I won’t always want pain or humiliation, but I will always want control.”

“But you will want pain and humiliation sometimes?”

He leans back again, his face thoughtful. "I'm approaching this wrong. You'll have to forgive me...it's been six years since I last initiated a relationship with someone, and I'm out of practice. And in any case," he says, rubbing his forehead with his thumb, "I didn't know enough about myself then to warn Jenny."

It's Jenny's name that galvanizes me. It's a sick urge, to want to show up a dead woman, to prove I'm as good as she was, but it's an urge I can't fight in time to control myself.

"Show me," I say. "Show me what you need to warn me about."

Chapter Nine

The Present

“Show me,” I repeat.

His eyes lift to mine.

“You said we were going to have a conversation among other things, right? Let’s do it. I know what to say to make you stop. I trust you.”

“You barely know me,” he points out.

“You’re a war hero and the President of the United States. If I can’t trust you, I can’t trust anybody.”

He smiles again at that. “You make a specious case, given how many manipulative Presidents there have been, but I want to be convinced, so I’ll allow it.” He reaches down and slips a high heel off one of my feet, repeating the action on the other foot, rubbing gently at the red line left above my toes. “Why you act afraid of pain when you already wear these is a mystery to me.”

I giggle a little, and the look on his face at the sound of my laughter is electrifying. Belvedere, Embry, me...the President seems to love the laughter of others. The realization strikes me with a chord of melancholy. What loneliness and darkness does he carry in his heart that he needs such people around him?

He places my left foot on the arm of the chair he’s sitting in, and as soon as I see that he’s going to do the same with my other foot, I instinctively pull it back, since that would entail me spreading my legs in this short skirt. He doesn’t react, other than to look up at my face, and I realize that he’s waiting to see if I’ll say his name. My new safe word. I bite my lip and force my body to relax.

I place my foot back in his hands, and he sets it on the other arm of the chair. I’m grateful that our relative heights mean that he’s at eye-level with my chest and not my pelvis, but that gratitude disappears when he says, “Pull your skirt back for me.”

My hands shake when I obey, partly from excitement and partly from nervousness. I wasn’t lying when I told him it felt natural to obey him, but I’ve also never exposed myself so brazenly, so intimately and deliberately. Despite the impassive look on Ash’s face, I can see that he’s fascinated, aroused by bossing me around like this, and that bolsters me.

“I’ve never done this before,” I admit as I finish pulling my skirt up. Cool air wafts around my inner thighs and against my lace-covered pussy.

“Which part?” Ash asks, keeping his eyes on my legs, on the sliver of lace between them.

“Listening to someone. Showing myself off. I’ve only ever had sex once,” I confess.

His head snaps up. “Only once?”

I nod, swallowing. “When I was twenty.”

He groans, resting his head against my knee. “You mean I’m going to be the second man who’s ever been inside you?”

“You sound so certain that you’re going to take me to bed,” I tease, but my teasing comes out breathier than I mean for it to. It’s the way his dark head looks as it leans against my bare thigh, the way his legs are spread all strong and casual in the chair...yes, he should be certain that he’s going to take me to bed. I’ll take myself there if he doesn’t.

“It’s my job to be certain of things, Greer.” I feel the movement of his lips against my thigh as he speaks, and it makes it impossible to sit still. “Tell me—why haven’t you been with more men? Or women?”

“I’ve been asked out a lot,” I say. “Men, and yes, a couple of women. But I say no to them all.”

“Did someone hurt you the first time you had sex? Or was it otherwise unpleasant somehow?”

I think of Embry’s long, muscled body moving over mine, of his strong hands digging into my hips. “It was amazing. But it was the second time I had kissed someone and then had my heart broken, so I decided not to repeat that pattern.”

“And that’s why you haven’t kissed anyone since then,” Ash says, a question in his face. “You’re worried if you kiss a new person, that new person will also break your heart?”

“That’s right.”

“I won’t break your heart,” Ash promises.

“Again.”

Another groan. He seems to like being reminded that he had that power over me. He lifts his head. “Pull your panties aside. I want to see your pussy.”

“Okay,” I whisper, and I do as he says. It’s almost frightening how easy it is to listen to him, how easy it is to do something as unlike myself as spread my legs on a desk for a man I barely know, but dammit, it feels right. It feels good. It feels like another Greer—a Greer I put to sleep and buried in the backyard of my mind—is slowly waking up. The Greer who wrote those emails to Ash, the Greer who bit Embry’s shoulder and trailed scratches down his back as he moved between her bloody thighs. She is loving waking up to this, she wants to preen like a cat as Ash draws in a long breath once he sees the already-wet flesh of her pussy.

His hands slide up the outside of my calves, the rough skin tickling my knees and then my inner thighs as he braces his hands there and pushes me wider apart. I feel myself opening, feel his eyes on the part of me only one other man has seen. One other man who happens to be his best friend. And the Vice President of the United States.

“Beautiful,” Ash says, a hint of awe in his voice. “Just...beautiful.”

I’m chewing hard on my lip, my thighs quivering, because as excited as the old Greer is about this, I can’t help the new Greer’s litany of worries—if I look too wet or not wet enough, if he can smell me, what I’ll taste like if he wants to taste me.

“Look up at the ceiling and breathe in and out in counts of four,” Ash tells me. “It will help calm you down.”

I’m surprised he can read my body so easily, but then maybe I shouldn’t be. He can perceive the meanings behind the faces of dignitaries and the words of politicians—why not a woman’s body? I tilt my head back and breathe like he told me to, in and out.

One two three four...

one two three four...

one two three four.

“Some Dominants don’t like to sit with their head below the head of their partner,” Ash says conversationally below me, his fingertips beginning to trace circles and loops on the inside of my thighs. “Because it’s demeaning. But look at us right now. Who is the demeaned one?”

I look down from the ceiling and right into the mirror hanging behind the desk. I see a young woman with flushed cheeks and wide eyes, the tops of her naked thighs visible within the frame. And Ash’s silhouette in the chair, those powerful shoulders and that strong neck. And then I look

down at him, with his sleeves rolled up and his tie still perfectly straight and clipped to his shirt with a slim silver bar.

“Me,” I say, swallowing. “I’m the demeaned one.”

“And how does that make you feel?” His tone is still casual, still distantly curious, as if he’s asking me about a book I’m reading.

“A little excited. A little ashamed.”

“Why ashamed?”

I close my eyes. “I like this more than I should.”

“There are no *shoulds* when you’re with me,” Ash says. “The only things you worry about are the things I tell you to worry about. Understood?”

“Yes.”

Fingers skate up to the place where my legs join my hips, and I bite my lip again. “Now,” Ash says, leaning down to press his lips to the inside of my thigh, “would be a good time to call me *Sir*.”

“Yes, Sir,” I breathe.

“And since I’m in charge of you while we are alone together, I also want you to know that you’re not allowed to worry about pleasing me. It might seem like there’s a lot to learn, a lot to know, but there’s not. I’ll tell you everything you need to know, and you will only have two responsibilities—surrendering to me and saying my name aloud when it would hurt you physically or emotionally to continue. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir,” I say again, and who *am* I right now? Agreeing to something so extreme with a man I’ve only been in the same room with a handful of times? But I don’t care. I want this, I want this, I want this. I don’t care how insane or how demeaning it might seem. Right now, it only feels quiveringly, perfectly right.

“Good,” he says, a smile in his voice. “You have no idea how much it pleases me to have you here. I’ve fantasized about this moment for so long.”

“You have?”

He sits up and reaches for the box balancing on his thigh. “Here. Open this.”

Curious, I wrap my fingers around the proffered box and pull it closer. Ash leans back as I examine it, smoothing his tie and looking faintly amused. “There’s nothing dangerous in there,” he tells me.

Still, I take my time opening it, wondering what could be so important that he had it in his bedroom, at the ready. I have no idea what to expect—bullets or military badges or mementos of his dead wife even—but it’s none of those things. I swing the lid all the way open and pull out a stack of papers folded into quarters, papers that are dirty and soft from repeated handling.

I glance at Ash with a confused look, and he inclines his head toward the papers in a silent invitation. He wants me to read them.

With hesitant fingers, I unfold the paper. It’s computer-printer-sized, looks like it had once been bright white with fresh black printer ink. But the black of the words have faded and dulled, and the paper is smudged with what looks like oil and dirt and blood.

Dear Ash,

It’s my seventeenth birthday today. It’s been exactly one year since we met...

My eyes snap to his. “My emails,” I say, a little numbly. “I thought you never got them.”

“I got them,” he replies. “I got them and I read them a thousand times and then I printed them out so I could read them wherever I went.”

“But you never wrote back, never even once. Not even to tell me to stop writing to you.”

“You were seventeen, Greer. Was I supposed to write back and tell you that yes, I did fuck my fist every night thinking of you? That every time I read your emails I had to jack off, that even the mere sight of your name on my computer screen got me hard? I hated myself enough for having those feelings for a girl that age. I couldn’t make it worse by reaching out to you.” He gives me a rueful smile. “But I also couldn’t bring myself to tell you to stop. To block your emails. God, I wanted you so much and it was the only way I could have even this little piece of you. So I kept reading. Kept coming to fantasies of you fingering yourself at your desk as you wrote to me.”

“Ash,” I say, stunned.

“I have them memorized, you know. Word for word. *I don’t want boring, common ways of being bad,*” he recites, his hands once again warm and rough on my inner thighs. “*I want to be the kind of bad that leaves me wrung out with bite marks blooming purple on my body. I want someone to hold me by the neck and make me stare at an entire reckless realm of possibility. I want to crawl to them.*”

My cheeks are flushed as he says my own words back to me. I’m so embarrassed and yet...that he memorized my words, touched himself thinking of them, that he carried my words with him wherever he traveled...

“Greer,” Ash says, his hands sliding up to my hips and holding me tight, “I have to know you meant what you said. It’s been ten years since you wrote me that email, and while I’ve spent those ten years wishing to God that you were mine, I know things might have changed for you.”

Everything *has* changed. So much has changed. And yet nothing at all, because here I am just as breathless and squirmy as I was kissing him when I was sixteen. As infatuated and obsessed as when I wrote those emails.

“I want to know if I can be the man to hold you by the neck,” he says. “I need to know how much you’ll let me do to you, how far you’ll let me go, because you are the only woman who’s ever said those words to me. The only woman who’s wanted that from me.”

His fingers dig into my hips, and I nod, vigorously, desperately. “Yes,” I plead. “Yes, please.”

A certain tension leaves his shoulders, and the smile he gives me is luminous. “I’ve waited so long for this. Wanted this so hard, so painfully, and now...” He takes a breath, moving his hands down so that his palms rest on the top of my legs and his thumbs brush against the crease of my thighs. “Now you are here, and you are actually telling me you want to be mine.”

“I’ve wanted to be yours since I was old enough to want it,” I tell him. I can feel the warmth from his thumbs, the faintest movement of them as they gently rub closer and closer to my cunt, and it makes me ache so fiercely I can’t handle it. I try to subtly move my hips so that I get the touch where I need it, but he merely presses his palms against my thighs to stop me.

“What do you want?” I ask him in a whisper. “Let me give it to you.”

The words are like water to a parched man, and he presses his eyes closed for a moment. Then he opens them. “Don’t move,” he orders, pressing my legs wider apart. I’m so exposed to him, and his thumbs are so very, very close to the place where I throb and need.

“Yes, Sir,” I murmur.

And then the first press of his touch. His thumbs brush against my folds, up and down, up and down, until I’m fighting the urge to squirm, and then he spreads my pussy open. He can see every fold, curve and slick line of me, and the way he’s looking at my cunt, as if it’s something for sale, a thing for his pleasure and his possession, it makes it impossible to stay still now. I wriggle a little on the desk.

Thwack!

A sharp slap on the inside of my thigh.

I'm surprised by the hot flash of pain, and even more surprised at the way my pussy tightens at it, the way goose bumps pepper my flesh and the way my nipples harden. I can't stop the whimper that leaves my mouth.

"I'm the first man to look at your pussy this way, aren't I? The first to spread you open and just look."

"Yes, Sir," I confirm, heat flushing in my stomach as I remember Embry that night. There had been no looking then, no deliberate teasing. Just hands and mouths and need. There's something that's so inherently, deeply right about the way Ash takes his time and exerts his control. Embry treated me like a treasure he couldn't stop himself from plundering. Ash is treating me like a jewel to be polished and then shattered and then polished again. Like I'm all the more beautiful for the ways he'd like to wreck me.

"I want you to show me what you did when you wrote to me," he says. "I want to see what it looks like when you fuck yourself."

I let out a ragged breath. "Right now?"

"Yes. Right now."

All at once, my bravery leaves me. "I'm just... I've never done that in front of anyone. I'm worried I'll look stupid."

"For ten years, I've been dreaming about you," Ash reassures me, his thumbs back to rubbing their sweetly teasing rubs. "Just having you here, on my desk and spread open for my pleasure, is more than I ever hoped to have. There's no earthly way you can disappoint me."

But, sensing my hesitation, he wraps his strong hand around my own and gives it a squeeze. "I'll help you get started," he informs me, guiding my hand to my waiting pussy. I'm bare, and the outer skin there is so soft, so deliciously soft. "Don't think of it like anything other than what it is. I'm making you do this. You don't have a choice. It doesn't matter that it feels strange or embarrassing, because the only things you have to worry about are listening and remembering your safe word. Say *yes, Sir* if you understand."

His words relax me, soothe me. There's no way in hell I want this to stop, and he's right—the minute I relinquish all control and surrender my body to his wants and commands, the fear of embarrassment slips away. "Yes, Sir."

"Good girl. Now show me what you did in that computer chair all those years ago. I want to see you come."

I do as he says, letting my eyes fall shut as he moves my hand so that my fingers graze the wet folds and then move up higher to my swollen clit. The moment my fingers touch it, I nearly jolt off the table. I'm starved for this, needy, because even though I get myself off nearly every night, having Ash here changes it fundamentally. It's no longer me and my blurry memories merging with my darkest fantasies, it's me and Ash and Ash's hands moving back down to grip my hips and Ash's pulse thudding above his collar and Ash's silver tie bar glinting in the dim light of the White House living room. It's both of us together, and it feels just as intimate as sex, even though we are both fully clothed, even though the hand slowly rubbing my clit is my own.

It only takes a minute for me to find my rhythm, to find that perfect pace and pressure to send my body slowly spiraling upwards. I bite my lip to muffle the tiny moans coming from deep in my throat, but I can't stop the rocking of my hips as my body wakes up and begins demanding more. I spread my thighs wider, Ash's pleased hiss rocketing through me like a meteoroid, and I

severely underestimated how much I needed this because I'm so close, so impossibly close, and it's only been a couple of minutes.

"You're going to come for me, aren't you?" Ash asks in a low voice.

I nod, panting. I'm wet everywhere, my body hot, my thighs tight, my clit feeling firm and puffy all at once. My other hand, still pulling my panties aside so I can work myself for Ash, begins to cramp, and as if Ash can tell, he hooks the fabric with his thumb, freeing my hand from its task. I place that hand behind me so I can tilt my head up and lean back farther, relishing the feeling of Ash's hands on me, his hungry eyes on my pussy, and that thought alone is enough to push me right to the cliff's edge.

"Tell me when," he orders. "I want to know when."

"Now," I manage. "Right now."

Without hesitation, he plunges two of his fingers inside me. The rough intrusion sends my body convulsing, the orgasm suddenly infinitely more intense for those large, unfamiliar fingers inside me, and I clamp down on them, shuddering out my release.

"Look at me," he tells me, and I do, meeting his eyes as my climax continues to pull at my stomach and thighs. As I continue to squirm down onto his hand and ride out my first non-solo release in years.

"Oh, that's good," he murmurs, glancing down to where I'm still trying to fuck his fingers. "That's so good. That's exactly what I need."

He says it almost like feeling my pussy come around his fingers was some sort of audition and that I passed with flying colors, and the thought prolongs the shuddering contractions until finally several seconds—or hours—later, I'm left loose and tingling on the desk. And then I give a little laugh—incredulous, exhilarated.

I can't believe I just did that.

I can't believe it at all.

"Did that feel good?" Ash asks, fingers inside me still.

"Yes," I breathe.

The fingers twist cruelly, pain flaring up and bringing with it a wave of deep, itchy desire. "Don't be ungrateful," the President chides. "What do you say?"

It's so hard to think with his fingers inside me and pleasure still leaking through my limbs. "Yes, *Sir*?"

Another twist and I have to fight the urge to start fucking his fingers again. "Try again."

Twist go the fingers, moan goes Greer.

"What. Do. You. Say." *Twist twist twist.* "When. I've. Made. You. Feel. Good."

"Thank you, Sir," I gasp, not fighting myself any more and rocking into his thrusts.

A small smile like a comma at the corner of his mouth. "Good girl." He presses his thumb to my clit and starts working it, building me up to a second orgasm so fast that I barely have time to register that it's about to crest, and then it's on me, and I'm shivering apart into bliss, contracting around the President's hand, and gasping *thank you thank you thank you* as his eyes blaze with heat.

With gratitude.

"No, thank *you*, angel," he murmurs, eyes on my face, fingers still gently working. "Thank you so much more than you can ever know."

Chapter Ten

The Present

Ash's fingers probe me once or twice more, pressing against my g-spot and testing my responsiveness, and then he slides them out, using my dress to dry his hand. The gesture is at once degrading and unbelievably sexy, and before I can again plunge into a *who am I* mental soliloquy, he says, "Snap your fingers instead of saying my name if you need to."

I blink at him, confused, and then all of a sudden his large hand is fisted in the hair at the back of my neck, literally dragging me off the desk and to my knees. I tumble past his legs, his hand in my hair preventing me from using my hands to balance myself, and I land hard on the carpet, my dress catching between my body and Ash's legs and baring my ass.

Ash's hand is already on his belt buckle, deft and sure, and then his pants are open and I catch a glimpse of him. Male and hard and thick, and so much more beautiful than I ever could have imagined—all smooth ridges and a wide flared tip, every part of him flushed a dusky red. It's hard for me, throbbing for me, and like a greedy girl, I reach for it with both hands.

A sharp tug of my hair. "Just your mouth," Ash says.

I have next to no practice doing this, but I remember Ash's comforting words from earlier and put that out of my mind. He wants me to try, I want to try, that's all that matters. And so I lean forward and run the flat of my tongue up the underside of his cock, feeling every curve and swell of his shaft, relishing the shaky breath I hear him take above me. I repeat the action, faster this time, and start flickering my tongue experimentally around his tip, finding all the spots that make him pull my hair harder, the places that make his stomach tighten and his breath catch. Without my hands, it's hard to apply the right kind of pressure, and so I lean forward even more, pinning his cock against his muscled stomach, which is still mostly covered by his expensive white button-down. There's the scratch of Italian cotton on my cheek and the glide of his silk tie, a contrast to the heat of his skin, and then his hand is at his root and his other hand yanking at my hair, and my mouth is forced down onto his dick.

His crown is so wide, and I choke as he holds my head down onto him. The minute he hits the back of my throat—still far from all the way in—he yanks my head up and I gasp for breath, the stinging in my eyes manifesting into tears that smudge my mascara. My heart is racing, my blood flooded with adrenaline, and I realize I'm squirming the tiniest bit, my pussy already demanding more. I'm aroused and exhilarated and ashamed all at once.

Ash doesn't speak, doesn't loosen his hold on my hair or move the hand currently controlling his erection, and I realize he's waiting. He gave me a small taste of what this would be like, and he's waiting to see if I'll snap my fingers or say his name to stop it. But I do neither.

I lick my lips instead.

He smiles then, a quick smile that doesn't seem like it's necessarily for me. Like he's smiling at himself, smiling in satisfaction. Like he knows he made the right choice.

His cock is forced past my lips again, but this time I'm ready for it, opening my lips and taking a deep breath through my nose.

"Relax your tongue," he murmurs from above me, and then lets out an, "Ahhhh, yes, like that," when I comply. He moves a little slower than the first time, pulling me off and back onto his erection with a steady but not unkind pace, going a little deeper each time, until there's

finally the moment he pushes deep into my throat. My body rebels, my throat convulsing and threatening to gag, but then I realize the hand in my hair is caressing my scalp and that he's crooning something to me. I can't hear what he's actually saying over the panic in my mind and the blood in my ears, but just hearing his voice grounds me. I breathe through my nose, more tears leaking over the edge of my lower lids, and reflexively swallow against the urge to gag.

"Holy shit," Ash swears as I swallow around him, his hips bucking up into me. *"Fuck."*

I do it again, with much the same response, the swearing and the jerky thrust into the tight vise of my throat, and at the same time I feel a rush of triumph, I also see my mascara-stained tears begin to drip onto his white shirt. He must see them too, because he gives a groan—half regret, half sheer cruel desire. I can feel his reluctance as he lifts my head and his dick leaves my mouth, but all I feel is a rush of overwhelming gratitude and also a kind of indescribable pride that I made him react that way.

I suck in several desperate breaths while he stares down at my face and gently wipes at the black tears on my cheeks with his thumb. "More," he says, "I need more," and then he's shoving up inside me again, this time without mercy. I don't snap my fingers, I don't struggle—because God help me, I love this too much—but I can't help the way my fingers claw at his thighs and my bare feet kick at the carpet as I let him fuck my throat. It's invasive and brutal and fucking intoxicating. I'm the one being used, but in the dirty, airless heat of it all, he's the one weakened and at the mercy of my mouth. He's the one unraveling, thrusting and swearing and sweating, the one who's more beast than human, and all because of something I'm doing. And doing well.

"Need to come," he mutters raggedly. "I'm going to come."

I get a quick break for air and then I'm back down, and I feel both of his hands on my head, pushing me down as far as I'll go, to the point where my nose is buried against the clean, shortly trimmed hair at the base of his cock. Now that I know the swallowing trick, I do it repeatedly, driving him into a frenzy, and soon his forearms are clamped on my head and his body curled over mine, holding me fast as he pumps several hard, short thrusts into my throat. The silk tie rasps against my cheek, and my hands are desperate and everywhere, pulling at his pants, his belt, the expensive leather upholstery of his chair.

He finally erupts with a breathy grunt that makes my toes curl. I'll be hearing that grunt in my dreams, in my fantasies, how helpless and yet strong it was, how very, very male. The sound of it lodges in my gut, and when the hot warmth of his climax finally hits my throat, I know I'm a lost cause. Nothing—not literature, not teaching, not traveling, or looking out over Manhattan at night—nothing compares to this. Having the powerful body of a powerful man pressed against me, owning me and taking pleasure from me. Having his most intimate, unguarded self unveiled, and only to me.

Because this night, this moment? I could be the only woman in the world, the only mouth and the only body, and that isn't love, exactly, but it feels like it, and maybe that's what counts in the end.

He lifts my head off his cock and says simply, "Lick me clean," which I do. Thoroughly. So thoroughly that he starts to get hard again and pushes me off.

"Enough," he says sternly, but when I look up, his eyes are sparkling with amusement. "You're too good."

Despite my raw throat, despite the wet tears on my cheeks, his words make me want to purr and stretch like a kitten. I don't think I've ever felt so close to another person, so admired and, yes, despite the brutal face-fucking, respected. I've never been this happy and content, save for that handful of moments under Embry's body all those years ago. I rub my face against Ash's

knee, like a cat indeed, and he indulges me, stroking my hair and praising me for how good I made him feel.

After a few minutes of this, he straightens up, tucking himself back into his pants. “Stay like that, on your knees, and put your hands behind your back.”

I do as he says, watching him stand up and walk into his bedroom again, thinking there will be more to the night. My cunt rejoices, because I am so incredibly worked up after making Ash come, but when he comes out of the bedroom, he’s not holding any kinky sexy toys or condoms. He holds only a soft-looking washcloth and a hairbrush.

He sits back down in his chair and tilts my chin up, cleaning my face slowly and gently, wiping away every last black mascara trail and cooling what I know must be flushed cheeks. Then he tells me to turn around, still kneeling, and I feel him begin to pluck the hairpins out of my ruined chignon, one by one.

“Your hair,” he says in a low voice. I hear the pins hitting the desk one at a time, *clink clink clink*, as if he kept them all in his fist and then dropped them onto the desk in a steady rain. “There’s no end to the things I’ve thought about doing with your hair. It was the first thing I noticed about you that night, you kneeling among all that glittering glass, your hair like sunshine. Like white gold.” I can practically hear him shake his head. “I suppose I’ll never know if it was your hair or seeing you on your knees that captivated me at first. I’ll also never know if it was you noticing my sleeplessness or watching you bleed for someone you loved that made you unforgettable to me.”

His words are rolling through my veins, a spell of fire and heat.

“But that hair. I used to think about it incessantly, what it would look like wrapped around my fist as I fucked you from behind. How it would feel wrapped around my cock, like so much loose silk. There were times when it was all I could think about, what your hair would smell like and what it would feel like against my lips...” I feel his lips against my hair now, dropping kisses onto the crown of my head.

We’ve just been so intimate, his fingers in my cunt and his cock in my mouth, but for some reason the kiss on my hair reverberates through me like a church bell. It’s gentleness and desire all at once, and after what we just did together, that kind of warm affection seems more precious for all the abuse that came before it. Tears smart at my eyes again, this time for a very different reason than physical pain.

He picks up the brush and starts to pull it through my hair with even, soothing strokes. I only have a few tangles, and Ash works through them with care, so that I barely feel any tugging or stinging. “But of all the things I thought about,” he continues, “it was brushing your hair that I thought about the most. Just watching it glint in the light, hearing the brush move through it. There would be nights in Carpathia where we’d be out on patrol in the mountains, freezing in the darkest hours of the night when it was too dangerous to light a fire, and to pass the time, I’d imagine brushing your hair. Sometimes you were the age you would have been at the time—seventeen or eighteen—and other times I’d imagine you older. Pregnant and at my feet, with my ring on your finger.”

The image gives me a moment’s pause. In my loneliest hours, I have imagined something very close to his little fantasy, and hearing him admit it sends another church-bell-style shiver through me.

The brush pauses in my hair. “Does that make you uncomfortable?” Ash asks. “I know that I’m basically confessing to a history of obsession. And I don’t want that combined with my position as President to make you feel coerced or threatened.”

“I don’t feel that way at all,” I murmur, and the brush starts back through my hair again.

The brush is replaced by his fingers, running through the tresses over and over again, smoothing and separating and smoothing them again, like a hand moving through running water. It’s impossible to describe being touched like this when no man or woman has ever touched me this way before. When I was a child, I was touched with a parent’s or grandparent’s love, and when I was a teenager, there had been the inevitable tickles and snuggles with my best friend and cousin. But I’ve never been touched as a woman by another adult this way—with reverence and care. With sex still hovering in the air. It thrills me and unnerves me at the same time, because what if it ends? I’m not a woman of low self-esteem, but how can I possibly be worthy of the love of a man like Ash? What will happen if he realizes this?

“I know I probably haven’t earned this privilege,” Ash says after several long moments of stroking my hair, “and that it will mean that things will change, but I would love it if you spent the night with me. If you slept—and I mean that literally—in my bed with me.”

“How will things change?” I ask.

“There’s a chance the press will see you leave. There’s a chance a staffer will recognize you as you exit the Residence. There’s a chance I’ll be doodling your name on every bill I sign tomorrow.”

I can’t stifle my girlish grin at that, and I’m glad he can’t see my face. I take a minute to think. After what we shared, after learning about the emails—it hasn’t shrunk my fears about delving back into this life, but the fears are put in perspective. Ash is worth it. The Greer I used to be is worth it.

As my answer, I turn to face him. “We could do more than literally sleep, you know.”

A reproachful tap of the brush on my upper arm. “Don’t tempt me. I think we’ve committed enough sins for one night.”

Vulnerability must have flashed in my eyes, because before I know it, I’m being raised to my feet and kissed deeply. Ash’s tongue slides against my own, his lips firm, and his hands are sliding up my back to find my zipper. He tugs it down, and soon I’m standing in a pool of blue cotton, wearing nothing but my panties and bra. Ash pulls back with a smile and takes my hand to press against the front of his still-unbuckled pants.

“See?” he asks as I wrap my fingers around the thick erection I find there. “Trust me, Greer, there’s hardly anything I want more than to throw you onto my bed and rut into you until I’m too tired to move. But I’ve waited so long to have you here…” He reaches out and twines a strand of gold hair around his finger. “I want to take my time. I know that sounds horribly old-fashioned, but we only get to have these first times together once. I want to savor them.”

That touches me, strangely. I want to savor these times too, although the idea of waiting for them is almost unbearable. “I guess when you put it like that, it’s hard to argue with.”

“I’m hard to argue with,” he informs me. “That’s why I’m the President.”

He scoops me up into his arms with a sudden movement, carrying me to his bedroom, and I let out a stream of giggles like bubbles underwater. Each one seems to light up his face more and more until he’s practically glowing as he sets me down on the bed. “You have the most incredible laugh,” he says, dropping a kiss onto my waiting lips. He walks over to his dresser and retrieves a plain white T-shirt for me to put on. “Has anybody ever told you that?”

“Only you.”

He sighs at that, the idea of being an *only* or a *first* for me seeming to please something deep inside of him, and when our fingers brush as he hands me the T-shirt, I resist the urge to grab his tie and pull him to me so we can get started on some other firsts.

He returns to the dresser and removes his tie bar and cuff links, dropping them slowly into a dish inside his top drawer. His handsome face turns uncertain. “Greer...if this—if us spending the night together, is too much, I want you to tell me. I know I can be controlling, and sometimes I forget to ask people how they feel before I demand to have my way. It’s probably a good quality for a soldier or president, but it’s not necessarily a good one for a lover. That’s one of the reasons your emails had such an impact on me—even before I knew who I was and what I wanted, you seemed to know exactly what you wanted. You wanted to have done to you the kinds of things I wanted to do to you, and it made me feel like...maybe...” He pauses, does the thing where he rubs at his forehead with his thumb. It’s sweet, somehow, seeing this famous orator, the President famed for his certainty and surety, at a loss for words. For me.

I stand up, still in my bra and panties, clutching the shirt in my hand. I go to him and hand him the shirt, and then turn back to face the bed. He understands immediately, his strong hands unfastening my bra hook by hook.

“I still want those things,” I tell him. I look at him over my shoulder. “I want you to do them to me. Do you remember what I asked you in my last email?”

He lets out the kind of breath that tells me he knows exactly what I’m talking about. “*I want a man or woman to claim me as their equal partner in every way—until we’re alone. Then I want to crawl to them.*”

The bra is loose, and I turn to face him again, letting it fall from my shoulders and onto the floor. His eyes darken into the deepest green at the sight of my naked breasts. “That hasn’t changed,” I whisper. “If anything, it’s truer today than it was then. I promise to tell you everything—even when I think you won’t like what I have to say—but I want you to know that it’s not too much. I know it’s fast right now, but we’ve also had ten years leading up to this. And even though I told myself I was over you, past that time in my life, I think without knowing it that I’ve been waiting for you all along.” I brush my fingers along his jaw, and he closes his eyes for a moment. “I’m ready to stop waiting.”

He opens his eyes and smiles. “Me too. Arms up.”

I don’t miss the way his gaze sweeps hungrily over my breasts as I raise my arms, and I hope that he’ll change his mind about having sex tonight, but despite the erection bulging the front of his slacks, his self-control is ironclad. He pulls the T-shirt over my arms and head, and then gives me a little smack on the bottom. “There’s a spare toothbrush in the bathroom cabinet. Brush your teeth and then get in the bed.”

I obey, walking through his dressing room and into the bathroom. As I brush my teeth, I can’t help but gaze around, trying to wrangle the surreal feeling of brushing my teeth in the President’s bathroom. The bathroom is as modern as the dressing room is traditional—clean lines of black marble and white tile, clearly recently renovated. But the dressing room still retains its antique feeling, with an ornate fireplace in the corner and richly red drapes hanging around the windows. An unused vanity sits against the wall next to a tall window, its mirror spotless and its surface clean, except for one picture frame. I remember seeing pictures of First Ladies sitting in here, at this very vanity, and my chest feels hot. I never wanted this, never pictured myself living here, either as a president or the First Lady, yet for a moment, I see it. I see it and I don’t hate it. Not for the fame or power or even the beautiful old house, but for Ash. For Ash, I think I might be able to live here.

I wander a little closer, looking at the picture. It’s Ash with two women, both black, one old and one young. I recognize the young one right away—Kay Colchester, Ash’s foster sister and current Chief of Staff. The older woman must be Ash’s foster mother. I scan the picture for every

single detail, as if it contains a biography of Ash's life, but all it shows me is love and warmth. All three of them grin at the camera as the sun shines on a tidy little bungalow behind them, and even though the media always painted Ash's orphan backstory as nobly tragic, there's nothing sad or tragic about this picture at all. Ash had a happy childhood. That touches me in a very deep place, so deep that I almost want to cry, but I don't.

Instead, I turn abruptly from the vanity and go back into the bathroom to finish up. Ash joins me, and while I want to stay and watch him brush his teeth, he waves me away with a look that tells me he hasn't forgotten that he gave me particular instructions. With a stifled pout, I go to the large four-poster bed and crawl under the soft, gray blankets.

When Ash enters, he's only wearing his slacks, the white shirt and tie abandoned somewhere along the way. My mouth gapes a little at the sight; those powerful muscles shifting under all that warm skin, the lines of his hips tapering in from his wide shoulders, the V that disappears into the low waist of his tailored slacks. Smiling at the way I'm gawking, he unzips his pants and steps out of them, draping them over a low sofa, and stalks toward the bed.

I can't believe this is happening. That this is real life right now. The President—the Ash of my dreams for ten years—wearing tight boxer briefs and walking toward me with a hungry look in his eyes. Maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe I'm hallucinating.

But no. He clicks off the light and slides into the bed, his iron arm snaking around my waist and then pulling me tight into him, my back to his chest. I let out a happy sigh at the feeling of his long, big body curled protectively around mine, and then I wriggle my hips suggestively when I feel the thick rod of his erection nestle against my ass. He gives me a light pinch. "Don't be naughty," he breathes in my ear. "I've had ten years to dream up punishments for you, and I can't wait to try them out."

"Neither can I."

"I think you really mean that. And it pleases me more than you can know." He pulls me a little tighter and kisses the back of my neck. "Have you ever slept in a bed with a man before? Just slept?"

As much as he loves knowing he's my first at things, I can't lie. I nod my head against the pillow. "Yes. The night I lost my virginity."

He stiffens a little, and I can practically feel his jealousy roiling through him.

"You're not...mad...that I'm not a virgin, are you?"

"Oh, Greer, of course not. How could I be when I was married to someone else? I begrudge you nothing. But him—whoever he was—I begrudge him fucking everything."

There's a kind of dark bitterness to his words that thrills me, with my craving to be possessed. But they also scare me. Because for some reason, just now, it hits in a real and concrete way.

Ash doesn't know I slept with Embry.

Ash doesn't know that the man he wants to begrudge everything is also his best friend.

The quiet worry I pushed aside this afternoon comes back, no longer quiet but shrill and keening. I no longer feel as if Ash is holding me by the neck, forcing me to face some reckless, unknowable fate, but that I am holding him. That we are both on the precipice of some terrible and beautiful and inevitable destiny, and that if I don't stop us, we'll both go tumbling headlong into its welcoming teeth.

I shift, suddenly restless, at odds with my own thoughts, and Ash is there with a kiss to my shoulder. "Keep still for me, angel," he murmurs. "Let me hold you for a few minutes longer."

How can I deny him—or myself—that? I still my limbs and relax back into him, deciding to muffle my thoughts about Embry until tomorrow. My body folds into Ash's as if it was made for it.

"I have to tell you that I'm still not a great sleeper," he says after a couple of quiet minutes, and I remember noticing the smudges under his eyes this afternoon.

"I've heard meditation helps," I say, a little dryly.

"You know, I've heard that too," he says, just as dryly.

"I shared a bed with my cousin for years, and she kicks and grunts in her sleep. I can handle you."

He laughs a little laugh. "I wish I could get to the point where I can sleep long enough to talk in my sleep. But probably I'll end up going over to the office to work at some point in the night. I just don't want you to feel abandoned or worried if you wake up and don't find me next to you."

I rub my ass against his cock again. "I've heard of something other than meditation that puts men to sleep."

That earns me a real pinch, and I let out a little yelp.

"Go to sleep, Greer," comes his voice in the dark.

"Yes, Sir."

And I do.

Chapter Eleven

Five Years Ago

When I was sixteen, I lied by omission twice. Both lies landed with cats-paw softness, light and silent, and for many years I thought that both were harmless.

I thought wrong.

The first lie was to Ash. I wrote to him that the girls at my school were obsessed with him, obsessed with the fact that Abilene and I had been at the same party mere weeks before his heroic act launched him into fame. I didn't tell him that *Abilene* herself was the most obsessed with this fact.

And the second lie was to Abilene.

It wasn't abnormal for me to keep things to myself for a few days before I confided in her, and so I didn't tell her about Ash and the kiss for a week after it happened. And then the story broke about the village of Caledonia. The news showed a formal picture of Ash in his uniform, and his face was strong and noble on the screen in our dorm common room.

Abilene, who had refused to speak to me since the night of my birthday, forgot her anger and turned to me with her dark blue eyes alight. "I remember him!" she exclaimed. "He was at the party in Chelsea!"

Which is when I should have said, *I know, I made out with him in the library.*

What I said instead was, "I remember seeing him there too."

And then Abilene went and told every girl she could find about our brush with the famous.

As the news and Internet outlets began churning out detailed profiles of Ash, Abilene's fascination only grew. She printed out his military photo and carried it in her binder. She obsessively memorized every fact about his life: his absent parents, his early life in a foster home, becoming valedictorian at his high school. She started telling anyone who would listen that she would marry him some day. She joined groups online dedicated to Colchester fan-worship. And I knew, with all the perception that Grandpa Leo had drilled into me, that the truth would wound her instantly and fracture whatever peace we'd managed to restore after the night of my birthday.

Anyway, it had only been a kiss, and as the weeks wore on and my emails to Ash went unanswered, I decided that a kiss wasn't worth destroying our friendship over. In the heat of her adoration for the newly famous war hero, she had once again welcomed me into her confidence, and things were finally back to how they'd been before the party. I couldn't bear to give that up. Not again.

And aside from our repaired trust, I also assumed she would get over Ash as quickly as she got over most things. Abilene wasn't flighty by any means, but she was passionate, and one passion could easily drive out another. After a few months she would meet a new boy or start a new sport and she would forget all about Maxen Colchester.

How wrong I was.

* * * *

The years passed. I turned seventeen and stopped writing to Ash, although my chest never stopped squeezing when I heard his name. I turned eighteen and graduated from Cadbury Academy. Abilene left for college back home, I applied to Cambridge and got in. I turned nineteen and picked a major that definitely wasn't politics or business, much to Grandpa Leo's disappointment. I turned twenty, glanced around at my barebones flat with its beat-up teakettle and air mattress, and bought a plane ticket home for the summer.

I'd been home frequently to visit Grandpa, but something about that summer felt different. Maybe it was the ten solid weeks in America looming ahead of me or maybe it was the fact that Grandpa was traveling for work and I had the Manhattan penthouse mostly to myself, but I felt displaced and lonely. So when Grandpa invited Abilene and me out to Chicago to stay with him while he worked on his latest green energy acquisition, I jumped at the chance, finding a flight the very next day.

My plane landed at the same time as Abilene's, and when we met each other, we fairly collided into an embrace, jumping up and down.

"My God," Abilene said, pulling back, "you finally figured out how to do your own makeup."

"Nice to see you too," I teased.

She smiled, her eyes flicking from my hair to my bright pink dress, but there was a new shadow in her smile.

She's jealous of you.

I shook the thought away. She looked gorgeous in her short shorts and halter-top, hair glossy and red, and her pale shoulders smattered with freckles. That old fight couldn't reach us here, now, not when we hadn't seen each other in so long and had an entire week to spend together. I slung my arm around her shoulders, having to reach up as I did so since she was a few inches taller than me, and squeezed her into my side. "I missed you, Abi," I said. "I wish we were going to the same school."

Abilene rolled her eyes but put her arm over my shoulders too. "If you want that, you're going to have to come to Vanderbilt. There's no way I can handle another rainy summer in England."

"Girls," Grandpa Leo greeted fondly as we walked into the penthouse suite after a sweltering drive from the airport to the hotel.

We ran to him and hugged him like we were seven years old instead of twenty, exclaiming over his bald head and bushy beard and thin face.

"You need to eat more, Grandpa!"

"You need to shave!"

He waved us off like we were fussy saleswomen. "I'm fine. And I hear that the beard thing is in for women right now. Is that not true?"

Abilene and I wrinkled our noses and he laughed. "Well, never mind then. Consider it shaved. I have to head out for lunch with some old friends—do you girls want to tag along?"

"I'm going to take a nap," Abilene declared. She flopped dramatically onto the hotel suite's couch, as if she'd been traveling all day instead of riding on a plane for an hour.

Grandpa looked over at me. "Well, Greer? You know I always like to have you and your eyes with me at these kinds of things."

I was tempted to stay at the hotel too, but I knew Abilene would make good on her threat to nap, and I had no desire to knock around more empty rooms alone. It's why I came to America

for the summer, after all, for conversation and connection, and as much as I wanted to spend time with my cousin, I wanted to escape my thoughts more.

“Of course I’ll come,” I said.

Grandpa beamed at me. “I’ll grab my briefcase and then we can go.”

Abilene pretended to snore, and when I went over to give her a hug goodbye, she kept her eyes closed in fake-sleep. “Don’t get into any trouble without me,” she said. Her long dark eyelashes rested prettily on her freckled cheeks, a ginger Sleeping Beauty.

I poked at her side. “You are pretty much the only reason I’ve ever been in trouble.”

She smiled then, a cat’s smile, eyes still closed. “That’s what I’m saying—I want to be there for any trouble you find.”

“At a lunch with Grandpa? Hardly likely.”

She yawned for real, settling on her side. “Still, though. Share any cute boys you meet.”

* * * *

Lunch was at a well-lit, modern cafe inside the Chicago Art Institute, and it was the usual handful of politicians and businesspeople discussing election cycles and policy. Grandpa Leo, sober for thirty years, automatically slid me the wine the waiter poured for him without asking.

I listened politely, white wine bright and crisp on my tongue, watching everyone’s faces and gauging their tones, dutifully recording mental notes to report to Grandpa later. Half my mind had already drifted back to Cambridge, back to the classes I’d enrolled in for the next session, back to the beaten, dog-eared books stacked next to my air mattress in my grimy little flat.

Until I heard Merlin’s name from someone at the table.

My head snapped up in alarm, and sure enough, Merlin Rhys himself was strolling up to the table, tall and dark-eyed and clean-shaven, his expression open and more amiable than I’d ever seen it. Until his gaze slid over to me, that is, and then the openness faded, leaving something tiredly resigned in the lines of his face. I could see it clear as day: he hadn’t known I’d be here and he didn’t want me here, for whatever reason.

I ducked my head with embarrassment, even though I’d done nothing wrong.

Why didn’t I stay at the hotel? I berated myself. If I’d known for one second that Merlin would show up...

“Sorry we’re late,” came an easy, deep voice from behind Merlin. My heart stopped.

The world bled away.

And there was only Maxen Colchester.

Four years older and painfully more good-looking, post-tour-of-duty scruff highlighting the strong lines of his cheeks and jaw, wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of low-waisted slacks that emphasized how ridiculously trim and lean his body was. He folded his soldier’s frame into a chair next to Merlin, the elegant table setting in front of him doing nothing to diminish the sense of raw power and strength radiating from his body. I’d forgotten, somehow, what that power and strength felt like in person.

It felt like drowning.

Tell me, Greer, do you like my lips on your skin?

Yes.

I believe you. That’s why you’re so dangerous.

My fingers curled around the stem of my wineglass, and I forced myself to focus on it, on the way the glass felt on my skin. Smooth and whole, not at all like the jagged shards and

splinters I'd cradled in my hands the night I met Ash. All these years, I'd told myself I didn't care about Ash, wasn't haunted by our kiss. I'd wanted to be sophisticated, the kind of aloof girl who kissed men like Ash and then forgot all about it. I wanted to be different than Abilene with her fan forums and obsessive fantasizing, I wanted to be wise and worldly and apart from such schoolgirl crushes.

But I couldn't pretend that any longer. Not when faced with warm-blooded, green-eyed reality of him.

Right now, I was the Greer who'd written those embarrassingly honest emails, the Greer who'd melted into his touch, who'd shivered as he licked her blood from her skin. Right now, I was a vessel of pooling want, I was ready to be whatever he wanted me to be, ready to crawl into his veins and make him mine. I was eager and humiliated and yearning and mortified, and I knew the absolute truth in that moment—I was in love with Maxen Colchester. It was foolish and silly and absurd—nothing could be more unworldly and unsophisticated—but somehow, terribly and incredibly, it was true.

“...and my granddaughter Greer.”

I lifted my gaze, realizing Grandpa Leo had been talking this whole time, introducing the others at the table to Ash and Merlin. I suddenly wished I was in something less girlish than this pink knee-length dress with its neatly folded bow at the back. I wished I had put my hair up or reapplied my lip-gloss, or anything to feel fresher and prettier and *more* than I was in that moment. Instead, I felt incredibly naked and young as I met Ash's stare across the table.

He'd frozen in place—just for a second—his eyes flaring into a green fire before settling back into their usual emerald. Then he gave me a genuinely happy smile and said in that easy, confident voice, “Greer. So good to see you again.”

Again.

He remembers.

I took a breath and smiled too, a smile that felt too shaky and too excited and too hopeful. “Yes. So nice to see you too.”

And then I lifted my wineglass to my lips, hoping no one saw the trembling of my hand as I did.

The lunch went on as normal—Merlin was having a party tonight for his fortieth birthday, and everyone at the table was going—and the conversation turned back to politics, although with Merlin there, the conversation finally drifted away from the minutia of elections and numbers and into slightly more interesting territory. Merlin was asking my grandfather if he'd ever support a third party presidential candidate, and the table stirred with the natural antipathy establishment politicians have to such talk.

But even that couldn't hold my attention when Ash was so near. He talked very little, choosing mostly to listen, but when he did speak, it was so concisely elegant and perceptive that even these people, who spent their lives talking over everyone else, had trouble finding a response that matched his insight.

Every word he said, I stored away, as if his opinions on the viability of a third-party candidate were secret revelations about himself. I watched his every movement from under my eyelashes, the way his hand looked as he twirled the stem of his wineglass between his fingers, the way he held himself perfectly still as he was listening to someone else—perfectly still except for the occasional nod of understanding—a stillness not learned in a courtroom or a legislator's chamber, but in battle. A stillness that could have been curled over a sniper's rifle, it was so

deliberate and immovable. A stillness that accounted for the movements of wind and the fluttering of leaves and careful intakes of breath. A stillness that was patient.

Predatory.

If Ash ever became a politician, he would slice through these people like a stick slices through weeds. They'd be bent and broken before they ever saw it coming.

I didn't have that stillness. Perception, yes. Patience, no.

And so it was agony to be so close to Ash, able to soak up every lift of his shoulders, every flex of those fingers, every rich, deep word, and to know that there was nothing to be done about the tempest inside me. There was no outlet for this restless ache, this almost-pain, this fidgety, giddy feeling twisting inside my chest. At any moment, my control would break, and it would all come spilling out of me.

Do you really remember me? I would blurt, leaning forward. Do you remember our kiss? I do. I remember how you took care of my cut, I remember how you told me not to move, I remember how you pinned me against the wall. I dreamed of it for years after; I still dream of it. I thought I didn't care, I tried to shove down that girl, I tried to be someone else, but now that I'm with you, I don't think I can. I don't think I can want anyone else and I don't think I want to be any other version of myself than the girl you boss around.

I can bleed for you again.

Let me bleed for you again.

And then, as if he'd heard me, as if my thoughts had reached out to him, he turned his head and met my stare head-on. His fingers tightened almost imperceptibly on the wineglass, and I imagined them tightening in my hair, fisting my white-gold locks and snapping my head backward so he could bite my throat.

I caught my breath at the thought, tearing my gaze away from his. I had to go. I couldn't be wet and panting and miserable at this table—not with these people, not with my grandfather, not with the source of my torture so breathtakingly close.

I leaned into my grandfather. "Do you mind if I go poke around the museum a bit?" I asked quietly.

"Yes, sweetie. I imagine you must be bored to death. I'll text you when we're done."

Gratitude flooded through me, and I gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "Thanks, Grandpa."

I pushed my chair back and excused myself with a hurried murmur, careful not to make eye contact with Ash as I did. Even so, I could feel his eyes on my back as I left, and I wanted to look back so badly, I wanted to see for sure if he was watching me leave, if he was watching my legs or my hips or my hair, but I didn't. I strode quickly out of the restaurant, only breathing once I was out the doors and on my way to the museum proper. There was something inside my body that kicked and struggled at being separated from Ash, just as there was something that kicked and struggled while in his unbearable presence.

As I paid for a museum ticket and took a small folded brochure with a gallery map, I ran back through everything I had done and said. Had I humiliated myself in any way? Had I looked too much at him? Spoken too breathlessly? I couldn't bear anyone at that table thinking I was ridiculous—especially Merlin, who already seemed to dislike me for some unaccountable reason—but I didn't want Ash in particular to think I was besotted. No doubt he would find it as ridiculous as I found it myself.

I saw nothing as I walked through the galleries, absorbed nothing, thinking only of Ash. I didn't even bother glancing at the map in my hand, and so I had no idea where I was when I

found myself in an enclosed courtyard surrounded by statues. I was alone and the sunlight on the stone gave the room a holy glow, like a church. The silence was so profound that I could almost hear the statues themselves, marble so lifelike you watched for it to breathe, collecting dust, their creators long dead.

My mind quieted.

I stopped in front of one statue, arrested by the delicate stonework—a young woman veiled and dressed in robes—a tambourine hanging limply from one hand. There was something about her face—downcast and a little stunned—or maybe it was the instrument dangling listlessly from her fingertips, that made it look like she'd forgotten how to be inside her own body. Like she'd fall apart if she tried to stand or speak.

I could empathize.

“That’s Jephthah’s daughter,” came Ash’s voice from behind me. I’d been so absorbed in the sculpture that I hadn’t heard his footsteps, and I spun around to hide my surprise.

“What?” I asked, hoping I sounded normal and not the strange version of panic-excited I felt like.

“Jephthah,” he said, nodding toward the statue as he took a step toward me. The light glinted off the face of the large watch on his wrist as he put his hands in his pockets. “He was a judge in ancient Israel, a war leader who fought against the Ammonites, and he made a vow to God. If he won his fight against his enemies, he would offer the first thing that came out of his house when he returned home...he’d make it a sacrifice, a burnt offering. I’ll give you one guess what he found coming to meet him.”

“His daughter,” I said, sadness and disgust sticking heavy on my tongue.

“His daughter,” Ash confirmed. “She came out dancing, ready to make music with her instruments. When he saw her, he despaired and tore his clothes, but when he told her what he had vowed, she refused to let him renege on his word to the Lord. She asked for two months in the mountains with her women so that she could ‘bewail her virginity.’”

“So she could bewail her virginity,” I repeated. “I know how that feels.”

His mouth twitched at that, but I couldn’t tell if it was with a smile or a frown. “And then she returned to her father. The Bible only says that he made good on his vow...it doesn’t go into detail—almost as if the priests writing it knew how awful it was even then. And after she was sacrificed, there was a festival of women every year, who gathered together for four days to lament her death.”

“And that’s it?” I asked incredulously. “He was allowed to murder his own daughter and burn her corpse? Just because of some promise he made about a battle she had no part in?”

Ash nodded. “Awful, isn’t it? You can see why she seems so shocked. So sad.”

He stepped closer again, this time standing next to me and looking up into the downturned face of the statue. “Some people say that it was a rash vow, a vow made in haste without much thought, and that may be true. But I think some people haven’t ever been in a war. You don’t know what you’ll promise yourself or God until you’re facing down that moment yourself. Until the lives of countless others rest on your shoulders and yours alone.”

I turned to look at him, meaning to examine his face, to question him, but it took me a second to regain my train of thought because fuck, he was good-looking. *Hot* wasn’t the right word, neither really was *handsome*. They didn’t capture the raw masculinity that barely seemed contained in his wide, lean frame. They didn’t capture the potency of his muscular body, the keen flash of his eyes, the unexpectedly generous lines of his mouth. “So are you saying you approve of him sacrificing his daughter?”

“Fuck no,” Ash said, and something about seeing a man so in command of himself use a word like *fuck* was undeniably erotic. “Even taking into account the fact that human sacrifice was a norm in the Levant, it wasn’t supposed to be a norm for the Israelites, certainly not during the period of the Judges. Rabbis from as far back as a thousand years ago have contended that Jephthah never actually murdered his daughter, that he instead ‘sacrificed’ her to a life of religious servitude. Some people think it never happened at all, but it was a story retrofitted to explain the ritual of women gathering to lament a maiden’s death.”

“What do you think?”

Ash’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly at the statue, as if he could persuade her to spill her secrets. After a beat or two, he shrugged and sighed. “I think what actually happened is less important than the story we want it to be. Is this a morality tale, cautioning against impudent vows? A different morality tale, showing the righteousness of upholding a vow even when it’s hard? Is this a narrative showing where a pagan tradition was shoehorned into the well-ordered history of the Levite authors? The first step to understanding anything—whether it’s the Bible or *Fifty Shades of Grey*—is acknowledging that we come to it with agendas of our own. We want it to mean something, we are biased whether we know it or not, and usually what we walk away with is what we want to walk away with.”

“What do you want to walk away with from her? What do you want it to mean?”

For the first time, he looked down at the floor, and for a moment, just for a moment, I could see the weight of every death, every battle, every cold night spent in the fens of Eastern Europe pulling on him. And then he turned to me and it all vanished, leaving only a regretful smile. “I guess I want it to mean that the Lord forgives soldiers for unacceptable sacrifices. For decisions made in the heat of the moment, when there was no good choice, there was only what would save the most people, even if it meant leaving someone to burn.” A deep breath. “Metaphorically, I mean.”

I pulled him into a hug.

I don’t know why I did it, how I overcame that twisting, awkward agony that came with being near him, but he sounded so pained, so burdened and haunted, and my heart had known no other way to tell him *it’s okay. I’m here and I know and it’s okay.*

So I wrapped my arms around his waist, turned my face against his broad chest, and pulled him close. There was a moment, an exhale that sounded like a breathless groan, and then his arms were around me too. I felt his lips against the crown of my head, lips and then his nose and his cheeks, as if he were rubbing his entire face against my hair. As if he was marking himself on me or I was marking myself on him, as if he wanted to make a life for himself in the tousled waves.

“It seems you are always meant to be comforting me somehow,” he said, lips moving against the golden tresses.

“I like making you feel good,” I whispered. *Better*, some distant part of my mind said, *you meant to say that you like making him feel better.* But that wasn’t entirely true, maybe not at all true, because making Ash feel good conjured all sorts of lip-biting images in my mind. And whatever images it conjured for Ash seemed to be lip-biting as well, because I could feel a thick erection beginning to press into my lower belly.

I pushed against it, eliciting a real groan from Ash this time, and then his hand was in my hair, fisting at the nape and yanking my head back, just like I’d imagined at the restaurant. He didn’t say anything, simply stared down at my parted lips and exposed neck, breathing hard, his erection now like steel against me.

He didn't ask me anything, didn't say a word, but his whole face seemed like a question, his whole body, his hard cock and his rough hands. *Do you like this? his face seemed to ask. Do you want more? Would you crawl for me? Bleed for me?*

He didn't say the question out loud, but I said the answer out loud.

"Yes, please."

His hand tightened in my hair, his pupils widened, and for one perfect moment, I thought he was going to kiss me. I thought he was going to toss me to my hands and knees in the middle of the sculpture courtyard and give me a reason to stop bewailing my virginity. I thought he was going to drag me by the hair back to his hotel room and show me every single shadow that flickered in those forest eyes.

And then the moment crested and broke, like a wave. The energy dissipated; his hand loosened in my hair and then was gone, he stepped back and ran a shaking hand over his face.

"That was inappropriate," he said unsteadily, his thumb moving to rub against his forehead. "That was wrong. I'm so sorry."

I stepped forward, my heart in my hands. "It wasn't wrong, I said yes, Ash—"

But what I would have said next—what he would have done—became nothing more than a barely legible entry in the diary of what might have been, because at that moment my grandfather strolled into the courtyard, beaming at us both, totally oblivious to what had just happened between Ash and me mere moments before.

"Major Colchester! I wondered if you'd vanished to take in the art too. A shame to come here and eat in a place meant for looking."

I let my grandfather pull me in a side hug and give me a whiskery kiss on the temple. "Ash—I mean, the major—was explaining this statue to me. It's a very sad story."

Ash stopped rubbing his forehead, and it seemed to take great effort for him to pull himself together. "It's a story from the Hebrew Bible," he said, almost absently.

"Ah, say no more," Grandpa said. "All those Old Testament stories are too grisly for my tired bones. That's the part of Mass when I usually dart off to use the bathroom."

"Oh, Grandpa, you do not," I said.

"But wouldn't it be funny if I did?" he asked, eyes crinkling. "Anyway, I am stealing Greer away for the time being, but I won't apologize, because you'll have her back tonight for more Old Testament horror stories."

"Tonight?" Ash and I both asked at the same time.

"Merlin's fortieth birthday party, of course," Grandpa boomed. "I'm bringing my granddaughters, and I know you're coming and bringing that excellent Captain Moore with you. You'll have even more time to talk then."

Ash's lips parted and pressed together. And then parted again. "Yes. Greer and I need to talk."

The look he gave me was nothing less than urging, pleading almost, and I could feel the ghost of his fingers in my hair. God, I wanted him to urge me to do anything, plead with me for anything, and I wanted it so much that I almost felt ready to make my own rash vows.

"I'm looking forward to talking," I said, somewhat pointlessly.

But Ash didn't look satisfied at that. He looked miserable.

"Goodbye, son," my grandfather said, and I gave Ash a wave as Grandpa and I started for the doors. Ash waved back, once again wrapped in his unreadable stillness, and I gave a little shiver as I turned around and walked out of the courtyard.

What exactly had just happened?

Chapter Twelve

Five Years Ago

Abilene squealed and threw her arms around my neck, strangling me into a hug. “A party with Maxen Colchester!”

I had just told her about Merlin’s party tonight and how Grandpa wanted us both to go. Her dark blue eyes had simmered with excitement, had taken all of three seconds to boil over, and then she was shrieking and hugging me, jumping up and down as she did.

“Oh my God, just you wait and see how fantastic this going to be!” she exclaimed. “This is so perfect, it’s too perfect. *Maxen Colchester*. I’ve been dying to meet him for so long.” And then she added, as if realizing that I was still there with her, “And maybe he’ll bring his cute friend, the one they have on the news all the time.”

“Embry Moore,” I supplied, the sudden rush of adrenaline making my head spin. I felt outside of myself, like I was floating, like I was drifting backwards in time, back to Ash and our kiss four years ago. Back to the courtyard this afternoon, his hand in my hair and his eyes on my throat, like a hungry vampire. God, I couldn’t stop seeing his face in that moment, couldn’t stop feeling his body pressed against mine.

“Right,” Abilene said, letting go of me and clapping her hands together, “Embry Moore. And then you can meet Embry and I’ll meet Maxen, and everybody will fall in love and live happily ever after.” She said it with a laugh that could have been self-deprecating, as if she understood how ridiculous the whole idea was, but all the same, her eyes shone with the kind of dangerous Abilene energy that meant she was about to get her way. I’d seen that energy before every lacrosse game, before every meeting with the headmaster, every night before she’d swung her leg out of the dorm room window to sneak out.

And for the first time in four years, my little lie of omission suddenly seemed a lot less little.

I almost opened my mouth to tell her—well, I don’t know what exactly I planned on saying—but she interrupted me by shoving my purse into my hands.

“We’re going shopping,” she declared. “And we aren’t stopping until we find the perfect outfit.”

And as usual, I let myself get swept up in her plans. Who knew what the night might bring? Ash might change his mind about going, or he might change his mind about talking to me at all. Dread soured my stomach, even as a part of me realized it might be for the best. It would hurt awfully, but it wouldn’t hurt as much as losing Abilene’s friendship.

Would it?

* * * *

Merlin’s party was on the rooftop of an upscale hotel overlooking the Chicago River, and by the time Abilene and I arrived, it was well underway. While Grandpa went early because he planned on leaving early to catch a late meeting, Abilene had insisted we get there an hour after the party’s start time, so that we didn’t look desperate or worse—get forced into making small talk with inconsequential people. I rolled my eyes at that, but I didn’t argue. I was still twisted up

in knots about going—about Ash—and it didn't take much to convince me to hide in my room for another hour.

But when we got there, I had to agree that Abilene had made the right decision. It was so much easier to step off the elevator and melt into a crowd of boozy chatter than it was to stand around awkwardly and stare at the newcomers walking in. I offered to get Abilene and I each a drink and slipped away from her, tugging self-consciously at the short hem of the raspberry mini-dress Abilene had somehow talked me into buying.

"Miss Galloway," came a voice from behind me.

Startled, I turned to see Merlin himself standing behind me in line, elegant as always in a three-piece suit. Even the strong breeze ruffling his black hair looked refined. But all that elegance couldn't hide the dislike that glittered in his onyx eyes or the displeasure pulling at the corners of his thin mouth.

"Mr. Rhys," I said politely, making to turn back around, my chest thudding with nervousness.

He caught my arm before I could turn away and steered me away from the line, towards the far corner of the patio. "I know you are here because of your grandfather," he said once no one could hear us, "and because of the love I bear him, I won't ask you to leave. But you should."

"You want me to leave?" I asked, stunned. Of all the things to worry about tonight, that had never occurred to me. That I actually wouldn't be welcome.

"Of course."

"Of course?" I repeated. "I'm sorry. I don't understand. Did I do something wrong? Do you...hate me...or something?"

"*Hate* is a word used by the young," he said, looking at me with an exasperated, chastising look. "I have no reason to hate you. Surely it must occur to you that I don't act or speak without a good reason to do so."

"And there's a good reason why you don't want me here tonight?"

At that, Merlin's face softened, and when it did, I saw that underneath his sharp, predatory gaze, he was a handsome man. Handsome and tired, like Ash had been when I met him. "There is a good reason. And it's that I don't want to see you or someone else I care about hurt. But I suppose it might be too late for that." He sighed and stretched his neck. "Do you remember that night in London, when you kissed Maxen?"

Heat rose to my cheeks. "Yes. Not that it's any of your business."

Another sigh. "It *is* my business. I don't like that it is, but I can't help a lot of things I don't like. You see, I care a lot about Maxen. I believe someday very soon, he's going to be more than a hero. I think he's going to be a leader. But a leader is only as powerful as the people around him, and it matters which people he surrounds himself with."

I bristled at that. "I'm not a bad person, Mr. Rhys. And I'm not a weak or stupid person either."

"Oh, no," Merlin said, shaking his head, "you misunderstand me. You are absolutely none of those things. You are too much of the opposite."

I had no idea whether that was a compliment or a warning, but I did know that I wasn't willing to let go of Ash, not for Merlin. "I'm not convinced."

Merlin gave me a sad smile. "The thing is, Miss Galloway, you don't need to be convinced. It's over now, for better or for worse." And then he took my shoulders and turned me to face the other guests, and the noise of the party faded until there was only the sound of my sharp, staccato breath and the wind blowing off the lake.

Ash. Ash was here.

My chest expanded.

And then Ash turned and I saw that his arm was wrapped around a pretty brunette. She smiled up at him, and he leaned down and kissed her nose, and they both laughed. The sun glinted off a dazzling ring on her left hand.

Ash was here with another woman. The same Ash who'd almost kissed me this afternoon, who'd pressed his hard-on against me, who'd smelled and kissed my hair as if it were the only thing he wanted to smell and kiss ever again. A flash of rage—hot and bright—and then I remembered the way he'd stepped away from me in the courtyard, the unsteady, troubled way he'd said *that was wrong, I'm so sorry*. How miserable he'd looked when he said that we needed to talk tonight.

Of course. It all made sense now—the aborted kiss, the misery, the *talk*.

My chest contracted, and somewhere inside myself, a valiant, flickering little hope was snuffed out, leaving only smoke and the faint whiff of what could have been.

"He asked her to marry him yesterday," Merlin said, his polished voice cutting through the wind. "So you see how things are."

It felt like I couldn't breathe. Couldn't think.

But yes, I could see how things were. I certainly could do that.

"This is what I would have protected you from," he continued quietly. "Discovering this so, *ah*, publicly."

I made myself turn away from the happy couple, feeling disoriented, feeling weak. "Of course he would have met someone else," I mumbled, mostly to myself. "It makes sense. He's not a priest. Why wouldn't he be with someone?"

But I had honestly never thought of Ash with another woman, it had never occurred to me to imagine such a thing, and the reality of it felt almost cruel in its obviousness. He was handsome and famous and kind and delightful, and why wouldn't he fall in love with a beautiful woman? Why hadn't I thought of this?

Whatever my reasons had been, I felt terribly and horribly ashamed. Ashamed of falling in love with a man I didn't know, ashamed of hoping he'd remember something that happened in another country four years ago, ashamed of being young and clueless and helpless and so utterly stupid.

"I should go," I said suddenly, feeling a familiar ache at my throat. "I need to go."

Merlin didn't say anything to convince me otherwise, he merely nodded. "You're a good person, Greer. And you deserve happiness. I only ask that you keep your kisses to yourself a while longer. And someday, there will be a happily ever after for you too."

I didn't want to keep my kisses to myself, though, and I certainly didn't want a thin promise of *someday*. I wanted Ash, and this afternoon in the courtyard had sealed my fate. I was doomed to want him and not have him, and like the Lady of Shalott, I'd be weaving pictures of my pain and devotion for years to come.

"Goodbye," I muttered, swallowing past the knot in my throat and turning away. Merlin stayed in the corner, his gaze like iron chains weighing me down as I tried to flee, linking me to him and his awful words. I had this miserable portent that I would be dragging these chains for years. My curse, my punishment for a crime I couldn't have stopped myself from committing, even now.

A curse for a kiss. That's how wizards worked, wasn't it?

There would be tears, I knew, and soon. I kept my head down as I walked, trying to hurry without actually seeing what was in front of me, navigating around tipsy businessman and lobbyists and state senators, trying not to run into the low sofas and glass tables, remembering vaguely that the elevator had been in the center of the patio.

And of course, since I wasn't watching where I was going, since my mind was so busy with Merlin's words and my heart was too preoccupied with its mortal wound, I tripped over a step I hadn't seen and stumbled right into Ash's hard body.

I hadn't known he was there, had been trying to avoid coming anywhere near him, in fact, but the moment I put my hands against his solid chest, the moment he grabbed my elbows to catch me, I knew it was him. That body and those hands...the memory of them had been etched into my brain forever. More than etched—*branded*.

My cheeks flamed red with humiliation, my pulse spiking and my chest caving in from the weight of this embarrassing moment. Being held by the only man I ever wanted to hold me...and at the same moment that fantasy had to be euthanized. At the same moment I realized he was going to be married to another woman.

Get away get away get away, my mind screamed in a rabbit-shriek of panic, but my body keened for his touch, begging me to press closer to him, melt into this moment forever.

I found a breath but I couldn't find my voice. He'd stolen it.

"Greer," he exhaled. His pupils had shrunk and then dilated into wide black pools, as if he'd stepped through an invisible doorway into some sort of darkness no one else could see. He flicked his tongue across his lower lip, as if unconsciously remembering our kiss, remembering this afternoon, and I let out a tiny helpless noise that only he could hear. His grip tightened on my elbows.

I could feel Merlin watching me, his elegant hands inside his elegant pockets, waiting to see what I would do. Waiting to see if I still carried his chains and his warnings in my heart.

"I'm so sorry," I mumbled to Ash's chest, ducking my head down. "Excuse me."

I tried to take a step back, but his hands stayed firm on my arms, his eyes searing into the top of my head. He wasn't letting me go, and I didn't want him to let me go, but I couldn't do whatever this was. I couldn't do the fake acquaintance, catching-up small talk thing. I couldn't do the pretending and the smiling and the polite questions when I knew that he'd be going home with his someday wife tonight.

I jerked myself out of his hold, stepping back and twisting away, and I ended up twisting right into Ash's fiancée, who seemed to be returning from the bar, a martini in each hand. We collided and cold gin splashed onto the front of my dress, soaking the raspberry fabric and turning it into a deep maroon.

"Oh my God, I'm such a klutz!" she exclaimed as I blinked, unable to process this new development as fast as I needed to. "I'm so sorry, oh my God, here, here," and she set the glasses on the ground and started trying to mop at my dress with her own, fussing over me with that big sister behavior that all women nearing thirty have towards younger women.

I know now that her name was Jenny—Jennifer Gonzalez, soon to be Jennifer Gonzalez-Colchester, a family law lawyer and amateur sharpshooter—but in that moment, I only knew what I saw. I saw that she was lovely, with large brown eyes and skin the color of rich amber. I saw that she was kind, with the way she apologized and worriedly sponged at my bodice with the hem of her own fluttering dress. I saw that she was happy, and it was Ash that made her so.

I saw that you can be hurt—mortally wounded, in fact—and it doesn't have to be anyone's fault. Sometimes the world is just cruel that way, and it wasn't fair to begrudge them their happiness even as it tore down my own.

Tears burned hot at the back of my eyelids, and I pushed Jenny's hands away. "Thank you, I'm fine," I said thickly. "I have to go, though. Excuse me."

And I pushed past her to get to the elevator. My only thought was of escape, my only feeling was the desperate, clawing need to be alone, and so I ignored her concerned voice, the hesitant murmurs of the people around us.

But I could not ignore Ash's voice. I was almost to the elevator, almost to freedom, when I heard him call my name. "Greer?"

I didn't want to look back and yet it was the only thing in the world I wanted. My head swiveled of its own accord, and I glanced at him over my shoulder. He was looking back towards Merlin in the far corner, and as he turned back to face me, confusion and a dawning realization were written all over his face. He took a step toward me, his eyes begging me to stop, but I couldn't. Not even for him would I draw out this public gutting.

I turned around and stabbed at the elevator button several times in quick succession. Luckily, it opened for me right away, and I stepped inside. I refused to look up, kept my eyes only on the door-close button, and jammed it in so hard that the knuckle on my thumb turned white. Out of my periphery, I could see him say something to Jenny and then walk toward me, and panic flared in my chest.

By the grace of God, the elevator doors slid shut then, leaving me all by myself. With a gentle lurch, the elevator started going down, and I slumped against the mirrored wall and finally allowed myself to cry.

* * * *

When the elevator doors opened to the hotel lobby, I was still crying. In fact, my tears had escalated into very loud, very embarrassing sobs, the kind that leave you sucking for air, the kind that contort your face into something ugly and wrung out. And my phone was buzzing insistently in my coat pocket, and I was fumbling for it as I exited the elevator, trying to hold in my sobs and failing, trying not to make eye contact with any of the hotel guests in the lobby, and then I pulled out my phone and saw texts from Abilene on the screen, coming in almost too fast to read.

Abilene: r u okay?

Abilene: did you just leave the party

Abilene: like, it looked like you were running for the door

Abilene: maxen *is* here but fuck he's with some girl

Abilene: some lawyer

Abilene: r u coming back up? come back up so we can figure out what do about this lawyer girl with max

Goddammit, Abilene. I tried to wipe at my eyes so I could see the phone's screen to type an answer, but there were too many tears, and then I was jostling against a stream of people walking into the lobby, and for the third time tonight, I walked right into another person.

"Fuck," I swore, already swerving to push past him and reach the door.

"My favorite word," said a smoothly pleasant voice, and that voice was hypnotic in its charm. Almost against my will, I looked up into the face of one of the handsomest men I'd ever seen. Maybe *the* handsomest on purely looks alone, since so much of Ash's attractiveness came

from who he was as a person. But this man, with his ice-blue eyes and cheekbones even God would be jealous of, he'd be stunning no matter what kind of person he was.

I was halfway to smiling at him through my tears when I realized I'd seen those blue eyes and those cheekbones before, and my smile froze in place.

He was Embry Moore, and he was Ash's best friend. And that association was enough to jump-start my body again, if not my mind, because the last thing I could handle was a protracted interaction with someone close to Ash.

"Pardon," I mumbled, the tears coming out thick and hot and garbling the word. I moved around him and reached the wide revolving door that led to the sidewalk outside, and then I was free to breathe the warm evening air and hear the impatient honks of taxis and the sound of sirens somewhere in the distance.

I took a deep breath, trying to stave off the tears for long enough that I could come up with a cogent plan. There was Abilene to think about, of course, and also questions from my grandfather I wanted to avoid, which he would certainly ask if he came home from his meeting and found me home early, crying into a pillow.

I could fake sleep, though. And there was no way I could stay here.

I would just have to tell Abilene I was going home, and then I would hide until I could find a way to lie about what happened tonight, or at least hide it. But when I reached for my phone, I couldn't find it anywhere—not in either of my pockets or the inner pocket of my jacket—and that's when I heard the footsteps.

I turned around to see Embry Moore walking to me, my phone held in his outstretched hand. Like Ash, he wore a fitted button-down shirt, but unlike Ash, he'd layered a gray vest and gray blazer on top—both the shirt and jacket sleeves rolled up to the elbow. With the cuffed sky-blue pants and loafers, he looked like a playboy let loose from his yacht, and even in my current emotional state, I couldn't help but appreciate his graceful and lanky male form as he strode confidently toward me.

"You dropped this," he said in that sophisticated purr, a purr that belied money and education and privilege.

"Thanks," I muttered, taking the phone with one hand as I tried to wipe my face with the other.

"Are you okay?" he asked, ducking his head a little so he could look into my downturned face.

"I'm fine," I snapped, turning and starting to walk again. It was unbelievably rude to leave him like that, I knew, but I couldn't help it. It was just a testament to how fucked up tonight had become.

After a few steps, my tears finally started to slow. I had a plan—I had my phone back—and if I could just make it back to Grandpa's hotel, I could cry until my pain dried up and my body went limp. I just had to make it there was all, and that started with getting a cab.

I swung towards the road, and to my utter shock, Embry Moore was right behind me, his hands jammed into the pockets of his ridiculously blue pants. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked, concerned. "I feel constitutionally unable to leave you alone like this."

"I'm fine," I said through gritted teeth. "Not that it's any of your business."

"But what is anyone's business, really?" Embry mused philosophically. "That's the first question man ever asked God, you know. 'Am I my brother's keeper?'"

I snorted, the derision somewhat undercut by the tears and snot that accompanied it. “It was a rhetorical question asked by a murderer to stall a missing persons investigation. I wouldn’t start with Cain as your entry point into the fundamentals of humanity.”

“John Steinbeck did. Are you saying *Of Mice and Men* is a bad book?”

“I’m saying that the parallels to be drawn from the world’s first murder to migrant farm brotherhood to us standing on a Chicago curb right now are nonexistent.” But despite myself, I found my lips tugging up into a smile.

“Well, now you’re just being deliberately uncreative,” he pouted. It was an unfairly sexy look on him.

“Also, Steinbeck once ended a book with an adult breastfeeding scene,” I pointed out, needing to say something before I started staring at his perfect, full mouth.

“To illustrate the *human condition!*” he exclaimed with mock frustration. “Who hasn’t breastfed a little bit to understand the dehumanizing depths of poverty and displacement?”

“Me. I haven’t done that.”

“Well, me either, but maybe if I buy you a couple drinks tonight we could change that for each other.” He waggled his eyebrows, and the whole thing was so ridiculous that I giggled.

“I’m not letting you breastfeed from me,” I said, wondering how this conversation got so strange and funny, and also wondering when I’d stopped crying, because I realized I had.

“Get your mind out of the gutter,” he said with a pitying shake of his head. “I obviously meant that you would breastfeed from *me*.”

I giggled again. “I didn’t peg you for the kinky type.”

“You aren’t pegging me at all. That’s our current problem.”

And it was a joke, and he said it with that crooked dimpled grin, but suddenly my mind was filled with the image of Embry underneath me, moaning and panting, and heat filled my cheeks.

He was still talking. “Can I tell you about my actual kink?”

I nodded a little uncertainly, realizing that I’d stepped away from the curb and was facing him completely now.

“Well, the kink that really gets me off is taking gorgeous strangers to get hot dogs on Navy Pier. Sometimes if I’m really kinky, we ride the Ferris wheel too.”

Was he saying that he wanted to do those things with me? “I imagine the porn for that particular kink is woefully lacking.”

“It is. I only get my fix in real life.” He stepped closer to me and offered his arm, and even through the shirt and blazer, I could see the firm swells of muscle. “What do you say? You, me, hot dogs and more Steinbeck-bashing?”

Yes.

It was incredible that as much as I wanted to hide away, as much as I wanted to cry and wail and gnash my teeth, as much as Ash filled every breath and thought with his face, I wanted to say yes. Embry was so funny and smart and effortlessly charming, and I felt better just for these last five minutes with him. Not to mention how flattering it was after everything that someone as famous and interesting as Embry wanted to spend time with me.

Also, he was *so fucking hot*.

But— “Don’t you have a birthday party to be at?”

His eyebrows pulled together, puzzlement sliding into understanding. “Ah. I’m guessing if you know who I am and what party I should be at, you came from there yourself?”

I looked back toward the street, not wanting to talk about it. “Yes.”

“Ah.” And then he thankfully, thankfully left it at that. “So what do you say? I mean, if you can play hooky from the party, so can I.”

“I don’t know...” I kept my eyes on the road because I knew if I looked at him, it would be all over. “I had planned on going back to my hotel. Calling it an early night.”

“What a waste that would be,” he said softly, taking a step toward me.

I allowed myself to glance at his feet, the cuffed pants showing the barest glimpse of dark brown hair just above his ankles. I wondered what that dark hair looked like on his calves and thighs, if it looked dusted on or if it grew thick and manly. If it matched the hair stretching from his navel to his cock. I wondered what it would feel like under my fingertips or rubbing against my own legs.

“You don’t even know my name,” I stalled.

“I know that you’re beautiful. I know that you know your twentieth-century American lit. I know that you’ve been crying and I would do anything to see you smile instead. I’d say that’s enough for a hot dog and a Ferris wheel ride, wouldn’t you?”

My resistance, already crumbling, caved completely, a pile of hesitation and good intentions now resting at my feet. I looked up into those glacially blue eyes and knew that something was about to change. Maybe it had already started to change.

“My name is Greer,” I said.

“Sweet Greer.” My name sounded so heavenly on his lips. I wished he would say it over and over again. “Let me take you out for bad food and neon lights. I don’t know what happened to make you leave Merlin’s party in tears, but I don’t want it to have the final say in tonight. I think *we* should have the final say, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I whispered, and I slid my hand onto Embry’s arm.

He grinned down at me, and the world was never the same.

Chapter Thirteen

Five Years Ago

Two hours later, Embry and I were swinging high above the ground in an enclosed car, alone, our mouths sweet from cotton candy and our bodies warm from wanting each other. I could smell him now, something with citrus and heat, like pepper, a smell that made my toes curl in my shoes, a smell that made me restless with the urge to kiss him.

On one side of us there was the relentless glow of the city, and on the other the relentless black of Lake Michigan, and Embry and I were two twilight figures in the middle, half in shadow and half in the heady light of the city and carnival rides below us. We sat on the same side of the car, our bodies near but not near enough, and just a minute before, Embry had taken my hand in his. There had been some accidentally-on-purpose brushes of fingers and shoulders throughout the night, a moment where he'd smilingly wiped a pink smear of candy from the corner of my mouth, but there was something so deliberate and intentional about the way he reached for my hand and placed it firmly against his own. Then our fingers interlaced, and my heart flipped over.

The only other man I'd held hands with had been Ash, and that had been four years ago. I'd forgotten what it felt like, palms sliding against palms, large male fingers stretching and squeezing against my slender ones. I'd avoided romance and sex in any form since Ash, for reasons I didn't entirely understand myself, and now because of a moment of weakness, I found myself alone with a man who seemed to be romance and sex personified. Even his flaws were attractive: the occasional scowl and frown as we talked about our pasts—me staying studiously away from the topic of Ash or my grandfather and him even more studiously avoiding talk of battles and Carpathia; the somewhat presumptuous way he flirted so filthily and with such confidence; the fleeting giddy grin when we talked about the future and the places we wanted to go and see.

He felt like a *real* person, a person who exuded confidence but had moments of insecurity, a person who laughed because he knew no other way to drive out the darkness, a person who craved connection but couldn't let go of something inside of himself in order to reach for it.

In other words, with all of my gifts of perception and analysis, I couldn't escape the feeling that he felt a lot like me.

And the entire night, through all our wandering talks about Cambridge and literature and the beautiful corner of the Olympic Peninsula where he'd grown up, he hadn't once asked me about the party. Hadn't asked why he'd found me crying and gin-soaked and trying to hail a cab. And for that I was eternally thankful. So thankful that I found it possible to confess the events of the party to him, even if only in vague terms.

I looked down to where our hands were linked, up to his face, which was watching mine with an expression of interested but reserved hunger, the way a cat looks when you toss a toy their way but before they pounce to get it.

I took a breath. "There was someone at the party tonight."

He nodded, as he'd been waiting for me to speak these words all night. "A man someone?"

"A someone I had feelings for. And yes, it happened to be a man."

I could tell from the amused quirk of his lips that he was fighting back the urge to banter about heteronormativity with me, and I appreciated it. I liked bantering with Embry, but I wanted to get this off my chest more.

“It’s been years since he and I...well, we weren’t together in any real sense. But I still had feelings. We met unexpectedly this afternoon, and there was a moment where I thought maybe he felt the same way. But then I saw him at the party tonight with someone else, and it hurt. It hurt and I was so furious with myself for feeling hurt, because I had no right. No normal person would have feelings for four years with no encouragement, no interaction to bolster them, and then feel wounded at the actual proof that there was no hope of a relationship.”

I leaned my head back against headrest of the seat and concluded, “I’m disgusted with myself.”

Embry’s hand left mine, and for a painful second I wondered if I’d disgusted him too, if something about my story conveyed neediness or clinginess or delusion, but then he was on the floor of the car kneeling in between my legs and taking both my hands in his. The car had a glass floor, and beneath Embry’s blue-clad knees, I could see the dizzying spin of the carousel far below, the tiny toy-people moving and shopping and eating like miniature dolls in a miniature dollhouse.

Embry moved my hands to his face, and I needed no encouragement to slide my hands over the carved lines of his jaw and cheekbones, to run my fingers over the strong ridge of his straight nose and up the swell of his proud forehead. My hands roamed through his sandy-brown hair, thick and soft, almost curly, and then down to his neck, where I stroked the warm skin along his collar.

“Sweet Greer,” he murmured, closing his eyes and leaning his head against my knee. “I’m disgusted with myself too.”

My hands paused as I absorbed his words.

“I know exactly how you feel. There’s a someone for me—they’ve been a someone for me for years—but they aren’t *my* someone. No matter how much I plead, no matter how much—” his breath catches “—how much I give of myself. I’m wrecked with it, so much that I think it’s never possible I’ll find another someone and I’m doomed to be miserable forever.”

My fingers resumed their stroking, my heart breaking for him and for me and for both of us, and then he caught my wrists and gave the inside of each one a gentle kiss. On the second one, I felt the faintest flicker of his tongue, right over the blueish veins, and something deep inside my body clenched. I was the girl who’d written those emails once again, the girl who wanted *bad*, who wanted *wrong*, and wanted it in the most soul-thrumming, reckless ways possible.

“I don’t want to be miserable tonight,” I whispered, and Embry lifted his head, his blue eyes unreadable in the shadows. “I don’t want to feel doomed or disgusted. I don’t want to think about him.”

“I can do that for you,” he said, his voice low. “If you ask me.”

Everything smelled like him in that moment. Pepper and lemon and promise.

The brave Greer spoke for me. “Then do it.”

Ash would have hesitated, not out of disinterest, but out of caution, out of a need to establish consent and boundaries, because Ash was—*is*—a self-aware monster. Acutely aware of the marks he would leave on his lovers’ souls and bodies, of exactly how dangerous he was.

Embry didn’t hesitate. He didn’t ask for clarification, for hard limits, for a safe word. He didn’t ask what I needed in bed or what I wanted, how many people I’d been with, whether I wanted him with a condom or bare. He left all of those questions unanswered, unasked, and with

a searing kiss, showed me the thrilling joy of abandoning safety and leaping feet-first into passion. I kissed him back, not forgetting Merlin's chains, but intentionally throwing them off, intentionally abandoning them.

I wouldn't keep my kisses to myself, I'd give them to Embry instead.
And damn the consequences.

* * * *

When the Ferris wheel landed, we were already ruffled and breathless, and when we finally got a cab, there was no keeping our hands off each other. I had never made out with someone, and at any rate, my last kiss had been over four years ago, and so the experience was intoxicating. The way Embry breathed against my mouth, those tiny stitches of breath when my hands found someplace new, the tiny growls when I opened for him—my lips and arms and legs—heedless of the cabbie in the front seat.

We hurriedly paid the driver, and then Embry fairly yanked me out of the cab, pulling me through his hotel lobby so fast that my feet unexpectedly skipped into tiny jogs to keep up. And then the elevator doors closed and I was pinned against the wall, my legs around his waist and his erection right against my center, his mouth open and hot against my neck and collarbone. All the times I'd fingered myself, gotten myself off with vibrators, none of it could compare to the actual sensation of having a willing, eager male between my legs. The sensation of narrow hips shoving against me mindlessly seeking relief, hands cruelly yanking down my dress and bra cup, the sight of a man's head ducked against my breast, nuzzling and biting and sucking.

And then the doors opened.

Once again, I was yanked along, and since the hallway was empty, I didn't bother pulling down my dress, didn't bother readjusting my bra. Instead, I stood behind him as he fumbled for his hotel keycard, skirt rucked up, hair tousled, breast exposed, begging him in a wild, impatient chant, "Hurry, hurry, hurry..." And when he looked back and saw me exposed and whining with need, he gave an almighty groan. The door *snicked* and unlocked, and he turned the handle and pulled me inside the dark room, lit only by the skyline outside the window.

He'd pulled so hard that I stumbled as I crossed the threshold, but it didn't matter, because he caught me and swung me into his arms, carrying me straight to the bed. He stood over me, stripping off his shirt and vest and blazer, not even waiting to toe off his shoes before he lowered his body over mine. I heard the shoes clunk, one by one, onto the floor, heard the slow creak of my leather jacket as he bracketed my body with his forearms, heard the hitch in his breath as our bodies met, heard my answering moan as he roughly kneed my legs apart and ground his erection against me.

His mouth crashed down over mine, and I was lost once more. He kissed me like a man who was facing down death, kissed me like he would never see me—or any other woman—ever again. He kissed me like he knew me and knew my pain, something I'd never felt from anyone ever before.

I scratched my nails down Embry's bare chest, catching those flat nipples and making him hiss, reaching for his belt. He knelt up, and I sat up with him, my shaking hands struggling with the belt, the task made all the harder by Embry's insistent hands tugging at my jacket. There was fumbling and pulling and frustrated moans punctuated by leaning, awkward kisses, and then suddenly his belt was gone and his pants unfastened and my jacket was somewhere in the shadowed depths of the room. He was back over me and I arched underneath him, needing the

contact, needing the pressure, which he was all too happy to give. I kicked off my heels and used the balls of my feet to work the waistband of his pants down past his firm, muscled ass, and then his cock and my pussy were separated only by the silk jersey of his boxer briefs and the demure cotton of my panties. He swiveled his hips against my cunt, and I cried out with pleasure, my nails digging into his back.

“Fuck,” he grunted into my neck, giving another trial thrust. “I’m going to come just like this. Humming you like a teenager.”

I could come too, just like this, with the rough grind of his cock against my clit, with the thin fabric between us adding an angry sort of friction. But it wasn’t enough for Embry, wasn’t enough for me either, because we’d both unlocked the worst kind of desperation in each other, the kind of desperation that wouldn’t be satisfied until it had cannibalized itself, caught flame and burned itself to ashes.

Too impatient to pull my dress off properly, Embry tugged on the straps and yanked it down so that it was bunched around my middle.

“Your tits,” he murmured, “I want to see them.”

I managed to squirm out of my bra, and then he was on my breasts with his mouth and his rough fingers, making me whimper, and suddenly our breastfeeding conversation from earlier didn’t seem so insane, so ridiculous. In a weird way, it was almost like he was nursing from me, in a metaphorical, vampiric sense, he was seeking succor from my body. Seeking nourishment and release and life, and I wanted to offer it to him.

He licked and sucked and bit with abandon, completely lost to himself and his need. Unlike Ash, who had touched and kissed with such deliberate intention and skill, who awoke my soul with a single brush of his lips, who would later awake the submissive animal within me, Embry kissed with nothing but mindless fire and passion. He awoke the female in me, the woman, and only underneath him could I have found this writhing, assertive version of myself.

Without thought, without anything but blind need, I pushed Embry’s head farther down, past the bunched raspberry fabric, past my navel, my fingers fisting in his hair when he pressed his mouth and nose against the damp white cotton that covered my cunt. He inhaled and his ensuing groan seemed to thrum inside my very bones.

He wrapped his fingers around the sides of the panties and pulled them down, tossed aside to join the leather jacket on the floor. And then he was back at my secret place, one arm sliding underneath my hips to lift me to his mouth, the other positioned so he could easily stroke my belly. A kiss on my mound, a kiss to each inner thigh, and then his mouth was there, *there*, and my hips jerked involuntarily at the sensation.

It was too much, too much, even though he’d just started, but I’d never felt this before, never felt what a silky wet mouth could do to silky wet flesh. Never known how the gentle nip of teeth would feel on my clit, the sucking of lips on the same, never guessed what having my hole circled and then fucked with a strong tongue would be like. If I had known—Jesus, if I had known, I would have never turned down those myriad offers of dates and drinks at Cambridge.

“You taste so good,” Embry growled from between my legs. “You going to come for me now? Going to make me taste you as you do it?”

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me, nodded against the pillow, writhing and panting, holding his head in place while I rubbed against him. While I fucked his mouth and face, taking my pleasure with each grind of my clit, with each masterful stroke of his tongue. And my body built and built and built its pleasure from that, like a castle of tightly strung tension, each block

taking me higher and higher, each buck of my hips and fluttering suck of his mouth sending me soaring.

I raised my head, looking down my bared breasts and dress-covered stomach to my hips, which were still lifted to his mouth. He looked beautiful just then, the light from the window showing his eyelashes dark on his cheeks, the sensual curve of his muscular shoulders and arms, the slight curl of his thick hair. And—*oh*—his hips moving against the mattress as he ate me, as he mindlessly fucked the bed with his face in my pussy, so needy, so desperate for contact and friction.

That sight—of this powerful, gorgeous man driven to rutting against anything by the taste of my cunt—was what finally did it. I clenched against his mouth and released with something like a scream, my first ever orgasm from someone other than myself, rolling and thrusting and quivering. He pinned my hips in place to hold me still and lapped it all up, licking me until the waves finally stopped cresting, and then he was up on his knees again, wiping his mouth with his forearm. His cock was so hard that the dark tip had pushed its way out of the waistband of his boxers, standing up almost past his navel, the dim city light catching the bead of moisture at his slit.

And his eyes—he was gone. He was raw now, a hard body of speechless need. He stood and shucked his pants and boxer briefs and went into the bathroom, emerging a moment later with a small foil packet in his hand. He handed it to me wordlessly, his hands shaking.

“I need,” he said in a trembling voice. That was all.

Not *I need you*, not even *I need to fuck*.

Just *I need*.

The honest primal nature of it took my breath away. I needed, too. Just for tonight.

But as I slid to the edge of the bed and tore the foil packet open, I remembered the uncomfortable hurdle of my virginity. I was Catholic, yes, some would even say a devout one, but I wasn't particularly traditional when it came to premarital sex. It was merely that Ash had ruined me for any other touch...at least until tonight.

Should I tell Embry? Should I slow this down?

I don't want to slow down.

I wanted to be fucked, hard. I wanted to come again. I wanted the cruel, vicious knowledge that I'd had a man's cock inside me so that whenever I saw Ash again, I could guard myself with my own experience. He wouldn't be the only one who didn't wait, he would no longer be the only one who'd moved on. I would have fucked his best friend, cried out another man's name, and I wanted that satisfaction so much I could taste it.

Yes, I needed. Yes, in any universe I would be right here, right now, doing this very thing, but in *this* universe, the jealousy and pain fueled the fire, and from the way Embry's eyes hooded at the sight of my hand grasping his erection, I guessed that I wasn't the only one wanting to fuck away my demons tonight.

I had never rolled on a condom before, but Embry helped me, holding his dick steady as I slowly worked the latex down his length. He had a beautiful cock, eight thick inches, straight and proud with a purple-dark tip and close-cropped curls at his base. Even the heavy sac underneath his dick was beautiful, looking so full and ready for release, and I laid back on the bed and beckoned for him to join me, ready for him to spill himself inside me. Ready for him to relieve the ache there.

He followed me, his body still trembling with the effort of holding back, and settled on top of me.

“Open up,” he demanded through clenched teeth. “Open yourself for me.”

There was no question in his tone. No permission. I might have been any woman underneath him, any warm pussy he’d found for the night, and that thought was freeing and exhilarating in how dirty and impersonal it was.

I spread my legs, and he was right there, the huge head of him pushing against my entrance. It was so big, so wide, so much more than my fingers had ever been, and I cried out in real pain. I wanted this, I knew I did, but my body was at war with itself. My nerve endings shrieked in pain at the same time something much deeper and much more unknowable whispered to me to take it, to move into him, to be penetrated.

“Jesus, Greer,” Embry muttered, shoving in another forceful inch. Sweat gleamed on his shoulders and chest, and his lips trembled. “You’re too tight. I can’t—”

Another shove, another inch. I cried out again, tears spilling from my eyes.

“I’m a virgin,” I blurted.

He froze.

“I don’t want to stop,” I said hurriedly. “I just—I felt like you should know.”

“You felt like I should know,” Embry echoed, his blue eyes searching my face.

Ash would have stopped, checked in with me. He would have asked if I really wanted this, to lose my virginity to him, in some anonymous hotel room. It was because Ash would have wanted so badly to be cruel to me, to take my virginity in the most crude and rough way possible, he would have forced himself to be circumspect until he knew it was what I really wanted. Then and only then, would he have let the beast out, the real monster.

Embry was not Ash.

His eyebrows drew together, his lips parted with an exhale so strong I knew that whatever control he’d had was finished, and then the ridged muscles of his flat stomach bunched together and he thrust all the way home.

A sound tore from my throat—raw, real pain—but Embry was heedless above me, fucking into me like a man possessed. It felt like I was being wedged in two, like I was being split apart, and the invasion was brutal and absolute. I scratched at his back and at his ass, and one moment I scratched in anger and pain, the next in desperation to have him deeper and harder. I didn’t know my own body in that moment—my own body didn’t know itself—that there could be so much pain from such a natural act and yet so much desire. Not that there was pleasure right away, I don’t mean that, but that there was something deeper than both the pleasure and the pain, a deep, deep itch that was finally and blissfully being scratched.

“You’re with me,” he grunted in my ear as he continued to force his way in and out of my virgin cunt. “You’re not with him. You’re giving this to *me*.”

His words made me moan. They were possessive and dark and rude and fetishizing and *I didn’t care*. It turned me on to hear and see him so aroused by breaking my hymen, and it piled more fuel onto my jealous, bleeding heart. I *was* giving this to someone else. Ash would never have it, and I let myself imagine that made me satisfied. That it covered up the pain I felt tonight at seeing him with Jenny.

Embry rose up on his knees, keeping his tip lodged in me, and his fingers dug hard into my hips as he swept his gaze over the place where we joined. I looked too, and it gave me some kind of strange delight to see the blood wet and dark on my thighs, smeared across his thighs and hips, glistening in streaks on the condom.

“Yeah,” Embry said to himself. “That’s it. All mine.”

He slid back inside me again, this time laying his whole body over mine. Our naked chests pressed together, sweaty and slick, our bloody thighs sliding easily past each other's, and he wrapped his arms tight around me. His face was in my neck, my chin tucked in his shoulder, and all of his weight was on me. It didn't feel heavy at all, or at least it felt like the right kind of heavy, especially when he began grinding in and out of me with short, rolling thrusts.

And that's when the deep, deep itch finally flared into true pleasure; the drag of his large helmet against my sensitive front wall, the friction at my clit from the base of his cock, the biological urge to be stretched and filled—all of it winding my body like a clock, whirring tighter and tighter.

“You're going to come for me, aren't you?” Embry said in my ear. “You're going to come on my dick. And when you do, when you're shuddering underneath me with blood on your thighs, it's *my* name you say, got it?”

I was in no place to disagree. All I could feel was the hard male body above me, all I could think about was the hard maleness *inside* me, and there was no room between our sweaty, eager bodies for Ash. In this moment, it was only Embry, Embry, Embry, and as he pressed down even harder against my clit, I dug my fingernails into his back and held on for dear life as my body finally wound itself so tight that it broke apart.

“Embry,” I chanted, “Embry, *Embry*,” as my pussy clutched at him, pulsing in tight, hot, painful waves. The thick length inside of me made all the difference, shifting the locus of my pleasure to deep inside my core, and I found myself bucking against him instinctively, trying to drive him deeper into the seizing, clenching heart of my orgasm.

And all the while he was muttering into my neck, words I couldn't catch but that sounded raw and urgent, and at the same time that he caught my lips in a scorching kiss, he drove himself deeper than ever before and held himself there, grunting into my mouth as he pulsed his own pleasure deep inside me. It went on and on, for both of us, his release so strong that I could feel the throb of his dick as he filled the condom with his orgasm, and I had a surreal moment of regret, wishing that there hadn't been a condom, wishing that it would have been bare hard flesh buried deep into the soft. That there would have been the uncivilized mingling of my virgin blood with his seed.

Embry lingered a minute more, dropping kisses on my forehead and cheeks and lips as my body gradually stopped quivering, kisses that were as tender as his fucking was rough, and then he circled the condom with his fingers and pulled out. He was gentle and easy with it, but it still stung, and I let out a wounded hiss.

“I'm sorry,” he said distantly, climbing off the bed, and the sudden absence of his warmth and the reservation in his voice made me shiver. I felt extremely vulnerable, like my skin had been peeled away, like my chest had been cracked open and my heart was beating in the open air. My throat tightened, those tears from hours ago threatening to return.

Did I just make a gigantic mistake?

He got rid of the condom, and then came back and stood over me at the edge of the bed in the near-darkness. I had a sudden moment of fear—real, blaring fear—that he was about to ask me if I wanted a cab or an Uber. That he was about to hand me my clothes and wish me a safe ride home. But he didn't do either of those things. He leaned down and lifted me effortlessly into his arms and carried me into the brightly lit bathroom. I was deposited on the cold granite counter while he turned on the shower, me blinking owlshly in the light, and he stepped in between my legs while he waited for the water to warm up.

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” I answered, also quietly.

He looked down at my thighs, where lines of dried blood had crusted into thin smears. There wasn’t that much blood, actually, it had felt like so much more at the time, but seeing it now without the heady sex hormones and in the bright light of a strange hotel bathroom, it seemed so much more barbaric. It looked violent and regrettable, even though it was neither of those things.

Embry ran a long finger up my leg, stopping well short of my pussy. “I’m sorry,” he said, and there was nothing distant about his apology this time. His blue eyes were filled with guilt and his mouth was twisted with a bitter self-recrimination. “I was...I don’t know what I was. You deserved better for your first time than me.”

I caught his hand and brought it to my lips, kissing his knuckles gently. He let out a low exhale and his sleepy cock gave a stiffening jerk.

“It was amazing,” I said. It wasn’t my job to assure him or massage away whatever he was feeling right now, but I did want to be honest about myself and how I felt. “The way I felt when I came—the way it felt to have someone else inside me—I loved it. But I also feel really flayed open right now. Like I want to cry, but I don’t think I’m sad necessarily. Just aware. Or maybe unaware. I don’t know what the right word is. Happy or sad feel too far apart from this.”

He leaned forward, resting his forehead against mine. “It was too rough, Greer. First times are supposed to be tender. Slow.”

I shook my head against his, squeezing his hand. “I wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

The truth must have been clear in my voice, because he straightened up and looked at me warily as he helped me wriggle out of the dress that was still bunched around my waist. “You’re a dangerous girl.”

“Dangerous for whom?”

“Me,” he muttered, helping me down from the counter and leading me into the shower, but I caught a crooked flash of a smile when he turned away from me to close the glass shower door. My heart fluttered, and I realized he was the dangerous one. I would fall in love if I wasn’t careful.

“I meant what I said,” I told him, closing the distance between us. “I wouldn’t do anything differently. I’m glad it was you. I’m glad you did it the way you did.”

“And what is the way I take care of you now?” he asked. “Tell me what you need. Anything. After what you gave me, after what you let me take from you, anything.”

That vulnerable feeling again, that heart beating in the open air. “Can I stay with you tonight?”

The way his face looked after I said that, as if I’d broken his heart. “Jesus, Greer. You can stay with me for the rest of my life.” His hands found my ass, my waist, my hair, his face in an expression of combined awe and compassion. “Do you really think I’d kick you out into the night? Do you think that this evening meant so little to me that as soon as I came inside you, I’d want you gone?” He shook his head in disbelief. “And I’m over here wondering how much time I can steal away from you this week, wondering when it’s okay for me to ask for your number, meet your family, visit you at college. Yes, of course you can spend the night. I want you in my arms until it’s time to feed you breakfast in bed, and then I want you in my arms some more.”

He leaned his head down to brush his nose against mine, and I melted. “You are the most extraordinary woman I’ve ever met,” he murmured with a smile. “I’m not stupid enough to let you leave my sight.”

* * * *

I suppose now it's easy enough to guess the end of this particular story. Embry and I fooled around in the shower until I was a wild woman in his arms, and then he took me back to bed, where he made love to me as slowly and softly as the first time was rough and hard. It still stung and hurt, the tears came again, but the pleasure found me faster this time, and soon I was coming apart under his expert touch, shuddering in quiet release. He came inside me, and then we cleaned up and fell asleep, me wrapped tightly in his arms. We woke up once more and I was too sore for sex, but Embry slid down my body and tongued me to a vicious, exhausted orgasm, and when I reached for him afterwards, he pushed my hand away and knelt up over my stomach. Within six or seven strokes, he was shooting a painful, long release onto my belly, and the sight of him climaxing over me was so beautiful I wanted to memorize it forever.

What a man.

What a heartbroken, funny, charming, moody man.

And the eight-inch dick and muscled stomach and war hero past didn't hurt at all.

I'd texted Abilene from the Ferris wheel to tell her I was out with a guy and planning to spend the night at his hotel—which I gave her the name and the address for, a girl can't be too careful—but when I woke up early the next morning, Embry's naked hairy legs entwined with mine and his warm breath ruffling the hair at the back of my neck, I figured I should go home and show my face to Grandpa and Abilene and find a fresh change of clothes. But after that...well, Embry had mentioned he'd be in Chicago for another week, and my pussy blushed at the thought of all that time together. Funny how the wound created by Ash didn't hurt any less, didn't feel any less jagged or deep, but somehow there was this new space for joy and excitement carved out in my chest. For the first time in so long, I looked forward to the future. Had someone to make each minute feel exotic and newly washed, simply because his memory was stamped upon it.

I extricated myself from Embry's arms, biting my lip to still my huge smile as I looked down at him. He slept like a child, full lips parted ever so slightly, covers all kicked up and tangled around his long, muscular legs. I wondered if I would get to see him again like this, morning after morning after morning, my pussy aching from his attention and my heart thudding with nervous happiness.

God, I hoped so.

I left him a quick note on the hotel stationary—my number and hotel name and room number and promised I was just leaving to reassure my relatives that I wasn't bobbing facedown in the river. I told him I wanted to see him today as soon as he woke up, and I'd be waiting for his call.

I signed my name, and added:

ps. I wouldn't do any of it differently. Any of it. I can't wait to see you again.

But I didn't see him again.

He didn't call, didn't come to my hotel, didn't write. Didn't try to contact me or find me. I spent the week curled up in bed while Abilene brought me ice cream and counseled me through what she thought was a normal post-one-night-stand heartbreak. My grandfather flew back to Manhattan with me and tried to cheer me up by taking me to my favorite restaurants, my favorite Broadway shows, and for him I tried to fake smiles and happiness, but the moment I boarded the plane to London eight weeks later, I let the mask fall from my face and shatter at my feet.

For the first time, I considered that Merlin's admonition against kissing was meant for my own well-being. Perhaps he knew, with whatever foresight he seemed to possess, that I was

simply doomed to heartbreak. That no matter how isolated I tried to make myself, the men I would invariably trust with my body and my heart would treat those gifts carelessly.

Well, I wouldn't make that same mistake again, I vowed. No more kisses, no more men. No more trusting and giving and hoping. No more of that girl who craved rough and wrong and reckless, no more wanting to crawl or be held by the neck and dominated. That Greer was over, through, suffocated and dead and buried. There would be books and libraries and manuscripts—things that I could trust—and I would build a life all by myself, without anyone else, without the chance of getting used up and brokenhearted again.

I never stopped waiting though. For Embry to call. For Embry to show up with his crooked smile and colorful pants and the best excuse for not coming after me that week in Chicago.

He never did.

Except, of course, five years later when he strolled into my office at Georgetown and asked to take me to dinner.

Chapter Fourteen

The Present

I wake up expecting Ash to be long gone, for the bed to be cold and empty next to me, but that's not what happens. Instead, I wake up nestled into a warm chest, a heavy arm draped over my side. For a moment, I forget where I am—*when* I am—and squint at the tall windows at the edge of the room, expecting to see the looming outline of Chicago skyscrapers. But no, it's the weakening fall sunshine overlooking the South Lawn, and I'm not in a hotel room with Embry, I'm in the White House. In bed with the President.

I roll over to look at him, taking care not to wake him up. He stays fast asleep, his breathing deep and even, his face relaxed and vulnerable. I stroke the thick black hair brushing against his forehead and finally indulge my urge from ten years ago and trace his mouth with my fingertips. Against my belly, I feel his sleepy erection, impressive and thick even at half-mast.

My fingertips on his face wake him.

His eyes blink open, finding my face immediately. "Greer," he says, his voice sleep-rough and warm.

I snuggle into him, kissing the warm space below his collarbone. "Good morning, Mr. President," I say.

"I fell asleep," he says, sounding surprised. "I fell asleep with you."

"Wasn't that the idea?"

He kisses the top of my head. "The idea was for *you* to sleep in my bed. I haven't had a full night's sleep since my first tour of duty."

I pull back to look up at his face. The thought sends a pleasant warmth to my chest, that I was able to give him something, that he had something with me that he hasn't had in fourteen years. "Maybe I'm your sleeping lucky charm."

"In that case," he says with a smile and a sudden move so that he's on top of me, "I might have to keep you in my bed forever."

He pins me with his arms and kisses me, and my sighs turn into moans as he rocks his hips against me.

"I want to stay in your bed forever," I breathe. "Please."

And with the pert rap of awful timing, a knock sounds at the door, followed by Belvedere's exasperated voice. "Mr. President, please. I've called every phone you own, and I more than anyone am happy you're still in bed, but you have a meeting in your office in thirty minutes. It's time to peel yourself away from Ms. Galloway and get in the shower."

I burst into giggles, and Ash grins down at me. "I should fire him," he says, leaning down to bite my earlobe.

I run my hands up the wide, muscled lines of his back, trailing my nails back down to his ass, regrettably covered up by his boxer briefs. "You should go," I whisper.

He nods, giving my earlobe a final nibble and then rolling off me. He goes to the door, opening it to an impatient but amused Belvedere. "I'm up, I'm up," he says. "I'll be down in twenty-five minutes."

"Sure," drawls Belvedere. "You won't have any temptation to linger while there's a warm, sleepy blonde in your bed. Maybe I should stay."

“Goodbye,” Ash says firmly, closing the door on him and turning back to face me.

I’m already up, searching for my clothes to get dressed and leave, but Ash walks over and pulls the dress out of my hands, tossing it on the bed. “Shower. Now.”

My body tingles at his words, and I scramble to obey, shedding his T-shirt and my panties as I go. I step into the glass-walled shower just as he enters the bathroom, stripping off his boxer briefs as he does, and I have to force myself to breathe. Even though I had his cock in my mouth last night, this is the first time I’m confronted with his body completely naked, and there’s almost too much to take in all at once. Those vast expanses of warm skin, the irresistible curves of muscles and delectable lines of tendons, those angled lines of muscle coming down from his hips to his penis. And that part of him is mesmerizing all on its own, thick and proud even at rest, the crown wide and flared.

“I’m up here,” Ash says amusedly as he steps into the shower with me, walking past the knobs without turning the water on.

I drag my eyes up from his cock, barely making it to his face for all the distracting ridges of muscle and flat, brown nipples and wide, powerful shoulders. “You’re beautiful,” I tell him honestly. “I want to stare at you forever.”

“We don’t have forever,” Ash says. “We have about ten minutes. And those ten minutes are going to be for me.”

“For you?” I ask to clarify. I don’t understand, even though I can’t think of anything he’d do that I would object to. And I have my safe word if he does.

“Turn around,” he orders. “Hands on the wall, legs spread. This is the first time I get to see you naked too, don’t forget, and I’m not going to miss a thing.”

With a happy shiver racing down my spine, I do as he asks, trying not to feel self-conscious as I feel his hands on my ass, squeezing and separating so that the most basic parts of me are exposed for his viewing. He squats down behind me, to look at my cunt more closely. “Perfect,” he says in a whisper, kissing me there. I moan and shove my hips back, wanting more, and he stands up with a laugh and slaps my ass. “Turn around, angel.”

I turn and he catches my wrists in his strong hands, moving both above my head. “Keep those there,” he says as he lets go and takes a step back to look at me. The posture has my chest jutting forward, my breasts pert and high, and my stomach stretched taut, and his gorgeous cock thickens and stirs. He doesn’t take it in his hand though, and neither does he touch me. He simply takes in every shadow and curve of my body, every inch, every secret and public place.

Finally, when my nipples are hard under his gaze and my cunt wet and swollen from wanting him, he comes close to me. He fingers the ends of my hair, idly, almost like a horse buyer does with a horse’s mane. “This is all mine now, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I pant.

“This hair and these tits and that pussy—all mine.”

“Yes, Ash, all yours. Please—”

He gives me a stern look. “When I want you to beg, I’ll tell you.”

My cunt is so tight it hurts. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good,” he nods, looking back down at my hair between his fingertips. “On your knees.”

I kneel, the cold tile hard on my knees, but I ignore it, enraptured by the man in front of me. His hands are running through my hair, smoothing and stroking it, and then it’s only his left hand while his right slowly fists his cock. Slowly moves from the root to the crown, as surely and deliberately as Ash does anything. I’m lit on fire by the sight of that hand, strong and big and scarred. There is the faintest dusting of dark hair on the back, only near the wrist, hair a shade

lighter than the black hair leading like an arrow down from his navel. Everything about him—legs shoulder-width apart, muscles in his arm flexing as he strokes himself, that insatiable dick ridged with veins—is so male and rough and greedy.

“That hair,” he says, wrapping it tighter around his hand. I begin to feel the tug on my scalp, but I don’t mind. I want my hair pulled, I want my eyes to water, and more than anything I want to see Ash come.

He wastes no time, his hand working hard and fast, his eyes searing trails from my face to my tits to my bare knees on the tile and finally landing on the skein of blond hair circling his hand. He lets out a low exhale, the furrowed lines of his stomach tensing, and then those dark eyelashes flutter as he comes, aiming not for my tits or my face, but for the hair he’s so obsessed with. I watch in hungry fascination as he erupts, thick and hot and long, my gold hair now seeded with the white pearls of his climax.

I could stay like this forever, I think dizzily. On my knees, marked by him, beside him.

But we don’t have forever. I have to fight off a serrated bite of frustration as I remember how limited his time is and will be for years to come. There will be no days where I’m his only focus. No long lazy mornings in bed, no time spent without an eye on the clock. I’ll never be anything more than a ten-minute mistress when he’s married to a nation.

I reach for his legs and bury my face in his hip, trying to hide my thoughts, and he lets me for a moment, stroking my head and allowing me to nuzzle against him. My wet desire has receded in the wake of this desperate need to be close to him, to reassure myself that he’s real, that right now, in this moment, he is mine to press against and I am his to use and pet as he sees fit.

After a long minute like this, he tugs my head back by my hair—gently this time—and searches my face. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t ask me what’s wrong, and he doesn’t need to. He gives a small nod to himself, as if he saw what he expected, and then reaches for my elbows to guide me to my feet.

“Stay there,” he says. In a few seconds’ work, the water is on and warm and he’s guiding my head under the spray. He doesn’t let me do anything myself—he wets my hair and then massages in the shampoo. Rinses it and then massages in the conditioner. I relax and let his strong fingers do all the work, washing away the traces of his orgasm.

The shampoo and conditioner are for women’s hair, brand new, and I wonder if he had them sent for as early as yesterday afternoon. As early as a few days ago, when I told Embry I’d meet him. And I’m about to remark about how skilled he is at washing a woman’s hair when I remember that he’s a widower. He was married for years. Of course he’s done this before.

And of course I’m not jealous of a dead woman. Of course not.

In any case, he’s as efficient as he is gentle, and within a few minutes, we are both washed and clean and wrapped in towels. I sit down on the bed and watch him get dressed, the act of fastening cufflinks and knotting his tie almost as erotic as anything else we’ve done in the last twelve hours.

I’ve almost worked up the courage to ask when I can see him again when he turns to face me, fixing a silver tie bar into place. “I hate this as much as you do, you know,” he says, looking at me. “I hate squeezing you into the margins. I hate that I can’t give you all of my time. All of myself.”

He walks over to the bed, tugging at my towel, rendering me naked and damp. Goose bumps erupt everywhere, my nipples hardening into stiff furls. “You deserve more than me. You deserve a whole man, not a man who can only give you scraps of himself.”

“I’ll take whatever you can give me,” I say, shuddering with pleasure when he runs a pensive finger down my neck to my nipple.

“I know,” he says, and his voice sounds almost sad. “But it isn’t kind to you. Lie down and spread your legs.”

I shift on the bed, opening myself to him, the act of such wanton obedience still triggering a wave of modesty and shame. But I cling to the shame, delight in it, and let it guide me.

His fingers caress my pussy, parting the petals to find the wetness within. “I want to give you everything it’s possible for me to give. I want to give you everything I can. And I don’t want you to be a secret.” His long middle finger slides inside me, and my back arches off the bed. He sits next to me and then there are two fingers, crooking expertly against my sensitive front walls as the heel of his palm grinds against my clit. My body takes to his touch like dry tinder, sparking immediately.

“I know you’ve stayed away from this world for a reason. I know it might be asking a lot of you.” He looks up from where he’s touching me to meet my eyes. “But I don’t just want you at my feet. I want you by my side.”

It’s so hard to think with his hand moving like that, fucking me so perfectly. “I don’t want to be a secret either,” I manage, my thighs tensing and my belly clenching. I’m so close to the edge already, and it’s ridiculous that it should take so little, but nevertheless here I am clenching around his fingers. Any second now I’m going to come, any second now, any second now...

“Good, then you’ll come to the state dinner next week,” Ash says, pulling his fingers out of me and standing up.

My pussy wants to sob. *So close.* Without even thinking about it, I snake a hand down to my clit, ready to finish myself off. And then, with a movement so quick I don’t even see it, Ash is on the bed kneeling over me, one knee planted firmly on each side of my rib cage and my hands both trapped over my head. He circles my wrists with his left hand and then shoves the fingers of his right hand into my mouth—not gagging me exactly, but keeping me from talking. I remember what he said last night—that I could snap my fingers to safe out if I couldn’t speak—but I don’t want to. I’m instantly, deliriously wet, my whole body trembling with burning need as the President kneels over me and pins me to his bed.

I smell leather. I smell fire. I smell and taste myself on his skin. I could die right now and be happy.

“You don’t get to come unless I say so,” Ash says. “I don’t care if you’re alone, if you’re with me, if I’m holding a Hitachi to your clit while I fuck you—your orgasms are mine and if you have one without my permission, then you’re a thief. You’re not a thief, are you?”

I shake my head, his fingers still deep in my mouth. I can still taste myself on them—a lot sweet, a touch of sour, that rich smell that only seems to come from a cunt.

“Good,” Ash says. Kneeling above me like this, he looks more like the soldier I know he is, and with a frisson of electric fear, I can suddenly imagine him fighting someone. Killing someone. I can’t explain how I can know this and also still feel completely safe, I can’t explain the deep thrill of having a dangerous man mounted on top of me like I’m a lamb about to be tied up and carted off to slaughter. But it’s there. Undeniable and addictive.

I can feel the tension in his thighs as he keeps me restrained underneath him, see the turgid outline of his erection pushing against his expensive slacks. “Do you know what they used to do to thieves?” he asks.

I do, actually. Incidental to studying medieval literature is some familiarity with medieval law. But that’s not part of the game right now, so I shake my head again.

“I’m not going to cut off your hands, of course,” he murmurs, his eyes now on my hands. His grip on my wrists tightens. “But I think I could devise my own version of the stocks. Or I could punish you according to Biblical law, and make you return what’s mine but again sevenfold. That would be seven orgasms you would have to give me for each one you stole. But either way, angel, there’s going to be punishment.”

His fingers leave my mouth and then he’s back on his feet beside the bed, wiping his hands on his handkerchief and carefully adjusting his slacks before he finds his suit jacket.

“Why are you leaving me like this?” I whimper in frustration. “You could have finished me.”

“Because,” he answers, swinging on his jacket and buttoning the middle button, “I want you to say yes to the State Dinner.”

I groan, searching the ceiling as if there’s an answer written there. “If I attend that dinner, then there’s no going back. You and I will be...real.”

“We’re already real,” he says, bending down to brush his lips on my forehead. “And I don’t want to go back. I want you to be mine in here, and I want to be yours out there. And besides, if you go to the State Dinner, I’ll let you come afterwards.”

“That’s not until next week,” I squeak.

He shrugs, tucking his phone into his inside pocket and walking over to the door. “Then I know you’ll really, really want to be there.”

“You aren’t playing fair,” I accuse, rolling up on one elbow to glare at him more directly. I’m not really playing fair either, since I know that I’m displaying my tits and hips to their greatest advantage here, and sure enough, his eyes blaze at the sight of me when he turns around.

But his control is absolute. He simply smiles and says, “I never said this would be fair. But if we do it right, it may just end up being fun.” He opens the door and pauses. “It’s what we both need, Greer. Isn’t it?”

I bite my lip. I nod.

I’m rewarded with a lion’s smile, and then the door closes and he’s gone. I flop miserably back down on the bed, my cunt awake and pulsing and my chest threatening to crack with happiness.

He’s right.

The bastard is right.

Chapter Fifteen

The Present

That day Belvedere arranged for me to get home, and somehow I had to pretend life was normal. I taught class, I went to faculty meetings, I tried to work on the book. But I couldn't pretend, not when every time I closed my eyes, I could see Ash sitting in that chair in front of me, powerful legs sprawled out, eyes hungry as he watched me touch myself. Not when I could still smell smoke and leather and not when I could still feel the weight of his arm as we slept together in his bed.

No, there was too much to pretend, not to mention that I didn't *want* to pretend things were normal. I wanted that flutter in my chest as I remembered that Ash wanted me, and wanted me in every way. I wanted the nervous trembling in my hands as I thought about seeing him again. I wanted that deep, itchy frustration as I remembered I couldn't touch myself, couldn't come without his explicit permission.

But with the wanting came doubt. I'd had this feeling, this *wanting*, three times before—after meeting Ash in London, after our afternoon in the sculpture courtyard, and after I'd slept with Embry. Three times, I'd felt the dizzying pull of falling in love, only to have the embers of my heart ground out on the cold ground.

Could I really trust this feeling again? Or did it even matter? Even if I decided I wasn't going to fall in love with Ash again—if I'd ever even stopped loving him—could I really stay away from him? Was I doing what I *wanted* to do or was I listening to parts of myself that didn't need to be listened to?

I spent the next two days going round in circles with myself. I loved Ash, I wanted him, but I also doubted Ash, I doubted our happiness.

It was this doubt that made my happiness feel sharp and brittle, as if it would shatter and cut me at the slightest touch. Well, the doubt plus two other reasons. One reason was Embry.

The other was Abilene.

* * * *

A few days after my night with Ash, I'm walking into a trendy NoMa office building in search of my cousin. I'm jittery, both with the anticipation of talking to Abilene and also with three days of pent-up lust knotting in my cunt. Though we haven't been able to meet again, Ash has called me every night, sometimes ordering me to finger myself but not come, sometimes ordering me to listen to him as he strokes himself. Sometimes just to talk, and after we hang up, I realize with a pang how lonely I've actually been all these years that I've avoided romance.

And I hear it in his voice—he's been lonely too.

Corbenic Events is on the fifth floor, a striking office of glass walls and bright colors, and it's Abilene's very own. After she graduated from Vanderbilt, she used seed money from Grandpa to start her own event-planning firm in the heart of D.C. Weddings, cocktail parties, galas—you name it. Her calendar was full after two weeks in business, and she was able to pay Grandpa back after only six months. That Abilene was able to build such success in such a short time surprised Grandpa and her parents, but it didn't surprise me. She always was passionate,

and when she wanted something, she went after it with a single-minded zeal that would shame a saint. It was more surprising that she kept the venture going after three years, since her interest in things usually fizzled out long before that. But there were—and are—exceptions.

Which is why I'm here today. I'm here to undo my silence about Ash from ten years ago. I'm here to confess.

I walk through the busy office, crowded with harried young interns and planners snapping at people on speakerphone as they leaf through stationery books. Abilene's office is in the very back, with an impressive view of the shiny new condos that have sprung up here recently, and I find her inside, bent over a glass desk spread with papers.

I take a moment just to watch her without me knowing. She really is beautiful, and there's something undeniably sexy about the way she holds herself, every movement and gesture so graceful and deliberate it looks like she's performing for some unseen audience. In fact, I know she is—she used to spend hours in our dorm room watching movie clips and mimicking the most mundane things. The way Zoe Saldana stretched her neck. The way Scarlett Johansson glanced up from under her eyelashes. The way Kiera Knightley held a teacup. It was hypnotic to watch, the way that watching a 3D printer is hypnotic; I watched Abilene create herself, form herself into a predetermined image to her liking. And this is the result, a woman whose movements are sensual and studied, so rehearsed that they're ingrained, and even though it should make her seem distant or forced, it doesn't. It only makes her more intriguing, more mysterious.

I shove down a resigned sigh—that old, familiar jealousy—and push the glass door open. “Hey.”

Abilene looks up and smiles at me, her long red hair moving against her slim black dress. Abilene always makes black look classic and stylish. On me, it always looks like funeral wear. “Greer,” she says, glancing back down at her work, “is it our lunch day? I must have totally forgotten. This malaria benefit next week is scrambling my brains, seriously.”

“No, it's not our lunch day,” I say, taking a seat in front of her desk. I see a pair of Louboutins in the corner of the room, a sparkly clutch perched on a credenza nearby. “Date tonight?”

Abilene sighs dramatically, throwing her head back. “Yes, though I'd rather break my ankle than go. Some Hill staffer I met at the gym. He didn't have his shirt on when he asked me to dinner, and I couldn't stop staring at his abs long enough to figure out how to say no.”

“Maybe he'll be good in bed?” I suggest.

She looks at me with a smirk. “With all those muscles, he better be, although it's usually the pretty ones who are the worst lays.” She pauses. “I take that back. It's the *senators* who are the worst lays. Three pumps and a gasp, and then you've got a sweaty fifty year old on top of you who's already feeling guilty about lying to his wife.”

I laugh. “It only happened that one time, Abi. Hardly a real data set.”

“One time was enough,” she mutters, back to the papers.

“Maybe try an ambassador next. At least they have accents.”

“How do you know I haven't tried them already?” she challenges playfully.

She's always been like this about sex, regaling her friends with her exploits over cocktails, casually referencing men she's slept with or expensive hotel rooms she didn't have to pay for. Only I out of all her friends know the truth—that Abi has never taken a man to bed that she didn't respect or who didn't respect her. That the hilarious blind dates and furtive one night stands with politicians are few and far between, and most of her lovers have been men she felt genuine affection for, or at least genuine attraction. To Abi, sex is something to be taken or

consumed, and then mostly forgotten, like a good cup of coffee. But like most coffee connoisseurs, Abi is still choosy about what she drinks.

I sigh. "I wish I were like you."

She tosses her hair in that joking, faux-smug way of hers—a move perfected from watching Emma Stone interviews—and shrugs. "Of course you do. What is it today that's made you realize the obvious?"

I lean back in the chair, running a finger along the dark wood of the armrest. I think about waking up with Ash, his words as he left the room. *It's what we both need, isn't it?* "I wish I could be as comfortable with sex as you are. As confident and, well, casual isn't the right word. But I guess it's the closest word I can think of."

"Honey, you can have all the casual sex you want. Any bar in the District—I can find you a lawyer in less than two minutes. A rich one in less than five."

I shake my head, smiling. "I know I can do that, but it's not what I *need*. I need it to be..." God, how can I describe this in a way that won't make me sound like I'm into tentacle porn or something? *Just use the right words, Greer. If you do it in bed, you should be able to say the words.* "...I need it to be, um, controlling. Dominating and submitting. That kind of thing."

Her blue eyes light up. "I knew it!" she crows. "I knew you were secretly kinky. You are totally in the right city, my freaky cousin. I mean, it's not my scene, but I know everyone in this town and I can get you anything you like. Congressmen who like being whipped, pegged, electrocuted, you name it."

I can't help the small giggle that escapes, and I'm waving my hand for her to stop. "No, no, I don't need someone—" I was going to say, *I don't need someone who wants to be whipped, I want to be the whip-ee*, because I know that Abilene wouldn't immediately guess I'm submissive. She may not be into kink, but she'd be a Domme for sure if she was, and she would assume I'd be too, simply because that's how her mind works.

But maybe it's something in my tone or my face, because she misinterprets my sentence and by doing so, correctly interprets everything else. "Because you've met someone already?" Her eyes go wide and she scans my body, from my knee-high boots to my sweater to my face. "You *have*, haven't you? You have that glow! Oh my God. Have you had sex? Is it someone powerful? Why didn't you tell me the minute it happened?"

My stomach flips with nervousness, and I smooth my skirt over my gray tights. "It just happened this week. It's really new...or I guess, it's kind of old too. And we haven't had sex yet. We agreed we would take our time with it."

Abilene smirked. "What is he, religious?"

"Sort of. I mean, yes, but I don't think he's a monk or anything. He lost his wife recently."

She leans forward. "A widower? Greer, is this an *older* man?"

Tell her. You have to tell her now. My stomach flips again, and I want to lie. I detest lying, and yet telling the truth seems so unnecessarily awkward and provocative...

But then I remember the State Dinner this week. If I don't tell her myself, she'll hear about it anyway, and that will be so much worse.

I take a breath. "Do you remember that party in London, the one Maxen Colchester was at?"

She looks a little thrown by the change in subject. "Yes, but what does that—"

"I kissed him," I interrupt. "In the library. After you and I fought, he came in from the balcony, and we talked and then we...kissed."

Abilene's eyebrows rise and her mouth gapes. "What?"

“We kissed, and then after that, I was going to tell you, I swear, but you seemed so taken with him and I didn’t want you to be angry with me, especially when I thought I’d never see him again. It wasn’t worth it. So I didn’t tell you.”

She blinks. I’ve never seen her this stunned, this slow in gathering an emotional response. The vacuum of anger—anger I know will explode out of her at any second—gives me the courage to finish.

“And in Chicago I saw him again, and we had a moment...but it didn’t matter because then we all saw that he was with Jenny. That night, the man I slept with who never called me back? It wasn’t some random guy I met at the party. It was Embry Moore.”

“Holy shit,” Abilene says, still blinking.

“And so Embry Moore came to me a week and a half ago, and told me Maxen wanted to see me. And we met and kissed and it was just as magical as the first time, and we—” Once again, I struggle for the right word. Dating sounds too informal, and it’s too early to claim love, at least anywhere outside my own head. “He’s asked me to go to the State Dinner this week with him,” I say, and I planned on being soft, being giving, because I’m the giving one in our friendship, always, always, but instead, I find my voice getting stronger and my chin lifting defiantly. “And I’ve agreed to go.”

She doesn’t respond, and I see signs of that Abilene rage fluttering under the surface of her skin: a dangerous flush on her neck, a brightness in her eyes, a tightness in her lips.

“Abi,” I say. Plead. *Don’t do this. Don’t make this into a fight.*

But then she swallows and gives me a forced smile. “Well, I’m happy for you. My crush on Maxen Colchester was so long ago, I barely remember it. And if anyone is going to be with him, it should be you.”

I want to believe her. I want it so badly. “Are you sure?”

This smile comes a little easier, although there’s still that same strange brightness in her eyes. “Yes, Greer. It would be ridiculous for me to carry a torch for someone I’ve only seen in person once. I’m glad you told me.”

“I was so scared to tell you because I knew how much you adored him when we were younger,” I say on a relieved breath. “Thank God you don’t hate me now.”

“Of course I don’t hate you.” She sits back, tapping a fingertip on the glass desk. “So the President and the Vice President too, huh?”

“No, no,” I rush to clarify. “What happened between Embry and me was a very long time ago. And I was upset about Ash and Jenny, and obviously Embry didn’t enjoy it that much, since I never heard from him again.”

Abilene’s head cocks at my casual use of Maxen’s middle name, but she doesn’t comment on it. Instead she says, “Are you sure there isn’t something between you and Embry still? You’re blushing.”

I press a hand to my cheek, and sure enough, the skin is warm and flushed. I try not to think about that night in Chicago. I try not to think how handsome he looked in the candlelight at our dinner last week, how that citrus and pepper smell of him seemed to follow me home and taunt me while I tried to sleep.

Just because you want to forget who you are doesn’t mean the rest of us can forget you.

“There’s nothing between Embry and me,” I repeat, but my response took too long and my face betrays too much. I never was a good liar.

Abilene’s smile curls into something sharp. “Whatever you say, cousin mine. Just be careful. This city is full of wolves, and they are always hungry.”

“There’s nothing for them to be hungry for,” I say again. “Embry isn’t a problem.”

The smile curls sharper. “I think he’s very much a problem for you. And for the President too.”

I frown. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just this, Greer, that men like them have secrets. You don’t get to be that powerful that young without some big skeletons in your closet, and I guarantee you that the President and Merlin Rhys would be willing to do anything to keep those secrets contained. Anything.”

“I feel like you know something I don’t.”

“If you’re dating the President, you’ll find out soon enough,” she says and there’s something cruelly gleeful about her voice. “And I think some women might be able to live with his past, but you’re not one of them, honey.”

I flick my mind over my mental log, trying to scan Ash’s past for any whisper of scandal, but I come up short. Before I can say anything else, Abilene waves off my words. “Don’t worry about it. Seriously. I’d hate to scare you off of a romance you just started. Now, I have a meeting in about five minutes. You’re welcome to wait in here until I get back and then we can grab lunch or...?”

The meaning is clear. *It’s time for you to leave.*

Grateful for the exit strategy, I stand up. “I’ve got to get back to work. A new batch of projects have come in for grading.”

Abilene stands too and comes around her desk. She gives me a hug that isn’t any lighter or shorter than any other hug she’s given me, but all the same, I can tell there’s something new between us. Something ugly. And while half of it is her jealousy, the other half is this new doubt she’s sown in my mind, this new fear.

You’ll find out soon enough.

I shiver as I leave her office and step out into the chilly November air.

What does that even mean?

And what if I don’t want to find out?

Chapter Sixteen

The Present

When I open the door to my townhouse, I'm so distracted by my conversation with Abilene that I don't even notice the tall man standing in the living room. I throw my purse onto a nearby chair and get ready to walk into the kitchen to forage for some coffee—coffee with a hefty amount of bourbon thrown in—and get the shock of my life when I see Merlin Rhys out of the corner of my eye.

"Jesus Christ," I gasp, stepping back and slumping against a bookshelf. He steps out of the November afternoon murk gathering in the corners of my living room, putting his hands up to indicate he means no harm.

"Ms. Galloway," he says, inclining his head.

"How the hell did you get in here?" I say—well, sputter, really—trying to cover over the adrenaline with outrage.

"I used to live here," Merlin says calmly, producing a key from his pocket and setting it on the coffee table. "Years ago, when I was just moving to Washington, your grandfather was kind of enough to let me stay here until I found a place of my own. I promise I won't intrude again, but I did think it was time that you and I have a talk."

The bookshelf presses into my back. A cloud passes over the sun. The room is cold shadows as Merlin takes a seat on the armchair, crossing his legs. The movement is graceful but not sensual, elegant but not effeminate. There is something almost asexual about the way he carries himself, just as there's something ageless in the sharp lines of his face.

It's been five years since I last saw him in person, although it was impossible to avoid seeing him on television or hearing his name on the news in the time since. He was the campaign manager for Ash's campaign, and now he's Ash's senior advisor—one of those roles that seems as ubiquitous as it is mysterious—and I know the timing of this encounter isn't a coincidence.

"A talk," I repeat. My throat's dry, and I clear it. "Five years ago, I came to your birthday party and you told me—again—to keep my kisses to myself. Are you going to tell me a third time? Am I in trouble?"

And in the gloom of the shadows, the man I've been afraid of since I was seven laughs.

Laughs.

Not a sinister laugh, not a cruel laugh. A happy laugh. A friendly laugh. And through the shadows and years of fear, I see that he's just a man. Not a wizard, not a psychic, not the kissing police. Just a well-bred, perceptive man who is capable of laughing loudly enough to fill a room.

Ash does love to surround himself with laughter, I think, peeling myself away from the bookshelf to go sit down across from Merlin.

"You're not in trouble," he says finally, a smile still on his face. There's warmth in his eyes—real warmth—although I still detect the same wariness from our past encounters.

But I'm not seven or sixteen or twenty any more. The wariness doesn't upset me like it used to. "Then what do you want to talk about?"

"I want to tell you a story," he says, folding his hands in his lap. "It won't take very long to tell, and you may not care that much about it, but I think it's an important story for you to hear."

I consider this for a minute. I would be well within my rights to demand that he leave. I could even leave myself. I don't have to sit here and listen to a man who's been nothing but rude and terrifying to me since I was a child. But I can't help it, I am intrigued by the idea of Merlin telling me a story. I teach literature, after all, stories are what I deal with, what I think in.

"Okay," I finally concede. "Tell me." As if on cue, the clouds move across the sun again and the room brightens with weak sunshine.

"Once upon a time..." Merlin starts slowly, irony twisting his mouth a little "...there was a man who fell in love with a married woman."

"That's a little different than the usual beginning," I cut in.

"It's more common than you'd think," he replies. "David and Bathsheba? Tristan and Isolde? Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne?"

"Those are not very happy stories," I point out.

"I never said this would be a happy story. Only a common one," Merlin responds, leaning back a little in his chair. "Now, back to our man and woman. This is a common story, and so this man tried all the common ways of getting the woman to notice him. He flirted, he pleaded, he tried to impress her daily. They worked in the same place, you see, and so he could be relentless in wooing her, just as his own love for her felt unmercifully relentless to him. But she loved her husband, and even if she didn't, she was the kind of person who didn't believe in breaking marriage vows."

"Good for her."

He nods. "I agree. It was difficult to resist this man, though, especially as the years dragged on. He was handsome and powerful and he wanted her, even when she was pregnant with her husband's child. It's a flattering feeling to be desired by the President of the United States, which I'm sure you know."

I can't hide my surprise. "The man was a president?"

Merlin looks me straight in the face. "A president your family knows very well. President Penley Luther. Your grandfather's running mate."

I must look like a mask of shock, but I can't help it. Grandfather only had glowing things to say about President Luther—really, everyone only had glowing things to say about him. It's hard to imagine the hero of the American economy and international diplomacy chasing after a married woman.

"You have to remember," Merlin says, "that Luther was a bit of a playboy. And he was divorced. To him it seemed natural that she would want him, and Luther never ignored nature for morality's sake, at least in his personal life."

"So what happened?"

Merlin looks down at his hands for a moment. "What usually happens in these cases, although it didn't happen in the usual way. There was an economic summit hosted by the United Kingdom at a secluded estate in Wales. Luther brought this woman along, since she was his senior advisor, just as I am to Maxen now. The summit was brief but busy, and on the last night, the people gathered there had a small party. Lots of drinks. Warm fires in the chilly spring night. You get the picture.

"The night grew late, and everyone went to bed but Luther, who stayed up by the fireplace in the central hall, drinking and looking into the flames. He was so absorbed that he didn't notice the caretaker and his wife clearing away the empty glasses, or their little boy helping them. Finally, the little boy walked up to him and touched his arm. 'Do you want help back to your room?' the boy asked.

“‘I do want to go to bed, but not to my own,’ Luther said. He was too drunk to care that he was talking to a child. But this child was more observant than other children. ‘I can take you to her room,’ the boy offered quietly. The man didn’t answer, but it was obvious he was gripped with some kind of indecision.

“‘I can take you around the outside and through the balcony door,’ the boy said. ‘No one would see you then.’ Luther looked up, his eyes growing clearer, and then he stood and followed the boy.”

I find I’m leaning forward in my chair. I make myself sit back. “What happened then? Did he go to her room? Did she kick him out?”

“No. She welcomed him inside and locked the balcony door behind him.”

“But she resisted him for *years!* Why give in now?”

Merlin shrugs. “The human heart is a mystery. Perhaps she loved him as ardently as he loved her and couldn’t bear to hold herself back any longer. Perhaps it was the alcohol or the seclusion. Perhaps he wore her down. I do know that she and her husband separated shortly after—perhaps they’d already agreed to the separation and she didn’t see her marriage as an obstacle any more. But what is certain is that they spent the night together—and several more after that. And that winter, she had a baby.”

I search all my memories of President Luther, all of the stories I’ve heard from Grandpa. “I don’t remember Luther having any children though.”

“No children that he claimed.” There’s a fleeting look of sadness in Merlin’s eyes. “The woman, she died in childbirth. It’s rare in this day and age, but it happened. An amniotic embolism. At the time of her death, she and her husband were in the middle of divorce proceedings and the husband knew the child wasn’t his. Luther, for all his public peccadillos, knew it would be politically dicey to claim the baby as his when the child’s conception was shrouded in a cloud of adultery and unseemliness. So the baby was absorbed into the system and put into foster care. Her husband kept their little girl—still a toddler—and Luther went on living his life, although I’ve heard he was never quite the same after her death.”

I think of that woman, perishing before she could hold her own child. Was she alone? Was there anyone to comfort her as she labored, to hold her as she died? “This is awful.”

“Greer, can you think of anyone you know who was raised in the foster care system? Any famous orphans that you know of?”

It takes a second for his words to tumble over in my mind, to find purchase in what I already know. “You can’t mean...”

“I do mean. Maxen Colchester is Penley Luther’s son. Abandoned at birth to be raised by strangers for the sake of political expediency.”

I think of that picture in Ash’s dressing room, arms wrapped around Kay and his foster mother. “Maybe it was for the best,” I say slowly.

“That he was raised by the Colchesters? Happy and safe, instead of growing up in the public eye? Yes, I think it was for the best. Some might even say it was meant to be. His destiny.”

I look up at him. “Why are you telling me all of this?”

Merlin returns my gaze, kind and direct. “Because you deserve to know where Ash came from. You deserve to know his history, because it’s about to become his future.”

“What does that mean?”

Merlin sighs. “It means a lot of things, I’m afraid, because Luther’s lust has sown a lot of seeds that cannot be unsown, but right now, it means that someone has gotten a hold of this story, at least according to my sources, whom I trust. It may be a week before it breaks or it may

be a year, but when it does break, it will be incredibly disruptive. And now that you are with Maxen, you must expect to be disrupted too.”

I don’t ask how he knows I’m with Ash. Whether Ash told him or whether he knows it because he seems to know everything, I always knew, deep down, that Merlin learning about us was unavoidable. I do ask another question though. “When did Ash learn about it himself?”

There’s a flash of anger in his eyes, real anger, but I recognize it’s not meant for me. “At Jennifer’s funeral. Of all the places.”

God. Imagine not knowing anything about your birth parents until you’re thirty-five. Long after you’ve given up hope of knowing your real origins. To have your origins be so sordid and so miserable. And then to learn it in the middle of your own personal tragedy...

“Who told him?” I ask.

The anger settles into a hard glitter in Merlin’s dark eyes. “His half-sister.”

“So she knew.”

“Oh yes. Her father made sure of that. Made sure to impress upon her how their lives were ruined by Luther, and how her mother was essentially murdered by Luther’s lust. Her father nurtured a deep bitterness inside her, the way you might nurture a hothouse flower. With lots of care and attention. Who knows when she finally found the baby that killed her mother, who knows how long she bided her time to confront him about the sins of his father, but she timed her blow with killing accuracy. She couldn’t have found a more vulnerable time to tell him.”

Jenny’s funeral was towards the end of the campaign, only a month or two before the election. “Maybe this sister of his didn’t want him to get to the White House?” And then I have another thought. “Is she the one who leaked the story now?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Oh,” I say suddenly, sitting up. “My cousin Abilene, she said something to me today. ‘You don’t get to be that powerful that young without some big skeletons in your closet...’ She said there were rumors about Ash—rumors that I might not be able to handle. She must have heard about this somehow. This must be what she meant.” *Shows how well she knows me, I think irritably, if she thinks something like this would make me feel differently about Ash.*

But Merlin glances away from me when I say this, and an uncomfortable shiver works its way down my spine.

“Merlin?”

“There are...other...things about Maxen that I’m sure will come to light, when it’s the right time.” Merlin’s voice is unreadable, his face is a walled garden of secrecy. “And yes. I imagine they will be difficult to hear.”

“Like what? I don’t like the idea of everyone knowing things about the man I love that I don’t.”

At the word *love*, Merlin’s face softens. “I know. I’m not trying to be deliberately evasive, Ms. Galloway. If I could, I would tell you right now, because I believe that you do love Maxen. I believe that you have a right to know. But these things...well, they aren’t my secrets. They aren’t my stories to tell.”

I run a hand over my eyes. Between Abilene and Merlin, today has been filled with too much information, too much emotion. I just want to be back with Ash again, under his body or sitting at his feet, where things feel right.

Or with Embry...a voice whispers in my head.

I ignore it.

“One more thing before I go,” Merlin says, standing up and smoothing down his suit jacket. “I owe you an apology.”

I stand up to join him, but I don’t move to stop him or encourage him, and he continues.

“There are times that I know I must have seemed cruel or dismissive you. Times that I *was* cruel and dismissive. That was unkind to you, and I’m sorry. I only ever had Maxen’s wellbeing as a priority, and for a long time, I was concerned that you would hurt him.”

I’m dumbfounded by this. “*Me hurt him?*” I ask, thinking of all those nights I spent longing for him, my heartbreak in Chicago.

“You see yourself and your potential much differently than the rest of us do, I assure you.”

“Now you sound like Embry,” I mutter, and maybe that was a mistake, because it sends a frown pulling at Merlin’s mouth.

“Indeed. Well, it’s not so irrational to believe that you had the power to hurt Maxen—one look at his face that night in London, and I knew he was lost to you. And that’s why I introduced him to Jennifer Gonzalez, and did everything I could to make sure they married.”

“You set him up with Jenny to keep him away from me?” I have no idea how to think about this, even though I know exactly how to *feel*. A slow anger creeps up my body. “You wanted me away from him badly enough that you made him marry someone else?”

“I didn’t make him do anything,” Merlin says mildly. “I introduced him to Jennifer and encouraged their affection as much as possible, but in the end, the choice was his. He chose her.”

Why this still stings, I have no idea, but it does. I wrap my arms around my body. “I never understood,” I murmur, “why you disliked me so much.”

“I told you,” he says, walking towards the door, “I worried you would hurt Maxen. I still worry about this, but it’s out of my hands now. Perhaps this too is destiny. All of our destinies.”

“I won’t hurt him,” I say, following him to the door.

“You won’t mean to. Not the way his sister wants to hurt him. But you will hurt him much worse than she ever could. My only hope is the knowledge that you’ll bring him more joy than pain.”

“You can’t know any of that,” I say, and I hate how petulant my voice sounds. “You’re not actually a wizard.” Then I add, for the sake of the seven-year-old Greer, “Are you?”

Merlin laughs again, the same room-warming laugh, and despite myself, my anger abates a little. “Goodbye, Ms. Galloway. I am sure we will see each other again soon.”

I hold open the door as he walks out, and when he steps onto the front stoop, something occurs to me. “You said you wouldn’t tell me those rumors about Ash because they weren’t your stories to tell. But then why did you feel like you could tell me about Ash’s birth parents?”

Merlin turns and smiles. He seems oblivious to the brutal November wind. “Haven’t you guessed it yet? That story is my story too.”

It’s obvious now that he’s said it, and I can’t believe I didn’t guess before. “You were the boy, weren’t you? The boy on the estate who showed Luther the way into her room?”

“After Maxen’s sister told him the truth, he came to tell me. I’d had no idea, but as soon as I heard the whole tale, I knew. I’d never forgotten that night, the night I met the President. I’d never forgotten how sad he looked, how...*guttled*...he was with loving someone. But after Maxen told me the story and I put it all together, I realized I should have known he was Luther’s son long before then. Because that gutted look? Maxen had been wearing it for years whenever he thought about you.”

And with that, Merlin leaves, and my anger leaves with him. Confusion remains, frustration remains, but the anger vanishes, leaving an empty hole in its place. I watch him get into a

waiting car and drive off, and then I close the door, my body abuzz with too many different emotions. It's time for the coffee and bourbon I promised myself earlier, except maybe I'll skip the coffee and go right for the bourbon.

And it's as I'm pouring myself a steep glass of Blanton's that I realize Merlin never actually answered my question about being a wizard. I sit back in my kitchen chair, staring at the whiskey, thinking back to the first time I met Merlin. Thinking back to my first kiss with Ash, my night with Embry and everything that's happened since. I think about Ash's sister and the brightness in Abilene's eyes and the upcoming State Dinner and the rumors swirling around the man I love, rumors so dark that everyone seems afraid to speak them out loud.

Lastly, I think about Embry, about the way my heart still aches for him. About the way I still secretly want his heart to ache for me.

I drink the whiskey in four long swallows without coming up for air, and then I pour myself another. Ash and I getting together should have been the end of the story, the happily ever after to our fairy tale. But somehow I have the feeling it's just the beginning.

I throw back the whiskey and pour myself a third glass.

Part Two:

The Queen

Chapter Seventeen

The egg-blue gown rustles prettily as I walk up the stairs to the second floor of the Residence, the silk of the tiered skirt just loud enough to be heard over the gentle strains of music coming from below. The dinner is set to start soon—there’s a string quartet playing Chopin while the guests chatter over cocktails and hors d’oeuvres—and while I’ll be by Ash’s side for most of the evening, I want to find him before the dinner starts. Share a moment that’s only the two of us before the cameras start flashing and the gossip kicks in. Before the hungry wolves realize they’ve just found their next dinner.

I think I hear a sound coming from the living room, and I slip through the open door saying, “Belvedere said I could find you up here—oh.”

Ash isn’t alone.

Looking like a prince or a movie star in his crisp black tuxedo, he’s sitting on the sofa, leaning forward, long legs bent, power coiled in his body. And Embry—also in a tuxedo—is in front of Ash, sitting on the carpet. It’s clear that both of them were engaged in a serious conversation—there’s a furrow in Ash’s brow and a cast of unhappiness to Embry’s shoulders—but that’s not what stops me in my tracks. Because Embry isn’t just sitting in front of Ash, he’s *kneeling*. Kneeling in front of Ash the same way I would—between his outstretched legs, caged in by the shiny black dress shoes planted on the floor. Kneeling in front of Ash as if it’s the most natural place in the world to be. And Ash isn’t only leaning forward, he’s got a hand fisted in the shoulder of Embry’s tuxedo jacket, as if they’re getting ready to fight or to kiss.

A bolt of unthinking desire sizzles straight to my core, and my chest tightens with an unfamiliar excitement.

Both men both freeze at my entrance, looking over at me with expressions I can’t read right away. Guilt, maybe, or maybe just guilty surprise, or maybe it’s something more complicated, like relief laced with anger...or anger laced with relief. And I don’t know what my own face betrays because I don’t even know what I’m feeling myself. *They’re just talking, they’re best friends, they’re the President and the Vice President, it’s natural that they would talk together.*

But like this? And I can’t help it, I feel a stab of jealousy at their closeness, at their shared history. How many years has Embry been able to be close to Ash, how many years has Ash been able to stare into Embry’s ice blue eyes, while I was denied both of them? How often do they get to touch each other and talk together, how many evenings have started this way, when all of my evenings have started with loneliness?

They both unfreeze at the same time. Ash drops his hand from Embry’s shoulder, and Embry eases himself back so he’s lying on his side on the carpet, propped up on one elbow, all casual elegance and ease. It looks almost illegally decadent of him, especially in that tuxedo.

“Greer,” Ash says, and the only thing I hear in his voice is affection. Happiness that I’m here. I must have imagined the guilt and the anger, I must have been mistaken in thinking that Embry kneeling in front of Ash means something. And I’m certainly imagining the strange tugs of feeling in my chest at the sight of these two men so serious and intimate with each other. I’m imagining the near painful pull of heat in my belly at the sight of Embry on his knees between Ash’s legs.

“You look like a princess,” Embry says as I walk over to the couch. His voice and face are teasing and friendly, but his eyes tell a different story. His eyes tell me that he remembers what I

look like underneath the dress, that he remembers what I taste like and feel like. Being denied orgasms all this week has made me painfully responsive, my arousal on a hair trigger, and I have to remind myself to breathe normally.

I'm not here with Embry. I'm not here *for* him. I'm here for Ash. Ash, Ash, Ash.

Oh, but why does Embry have to look so good right now? Lounging on his side like a tiger, blue eyes like the inside of glaciers? It's too much to be around him even at the best of times, but now, when I'm so starved for pleasure that I could come from a single touch, it's murder.

I sit next to Ash on the sofa, the motion deliberate and precise. Ash watches me carefully, taking me in, the thoughtful furrow in his brow growing slightly deeper.

"This is a very beautiful dress," he says, reaching out to run a finger along the neckline. It's not scandalously low, but the corseted bodice pushes the swells of my breasts over the top and his finger follows the sloping curves. I let out a shuddering breath, almost a moan, and then I hear Embry scramble to his feet.

"I should leave you two alone," he says, making for the door.

"Embry," Ash calls after him.

But Embry doesn't look back, just tosses a half-wave in Ash's direction. "I'll see you downstairs," he says, and then he's gone.

Ash's profile is thoughtful when I turn back to look at him. And I think I should tell him now, explain about Chicago and Embry and all about that night, but I don't know how to start. And I don't know how to finish either, because if I tell that story to Ash, he'll be able to see in an instant that Embry still affects me. That my feelings for him aren't over with. And there would be no way to verbalize that my feelings for Embry don't at all cancel out my feelings for Ash. They are related and intertwined, they are layered on top of one another, they are both and together and all at the same time.

Even I don't understand how there's room for both inside me—how could I expect Ash to?

There's another moment of silence, and then Ash reaches for me. He easily pulls me onto him, until I'm a ball of embroidered silk perched on his lap, and he lays a light kiss on the exposed nape of my neck. One hand is splayed against my stomach, holding me close against him, and the other one is digging in my skirts, skating up past my legs to my thighs.

I part for him with a happy sigh, and I feel the wide pads of his fingers probing my pussy through my lace thong.

He hooks it with one finger so he can investigate further. "Wet," he confirms in a rasp. "You're already wet. Is it for me?"

"Yes," I moan, shivering as his fingers graze my clit. "It's for you."

"Because this pussy is mine. Only mine. It gets wet only for me, is that right?"

It's not a lie when I breathe, "Yes, yes. It's your pussy. It's wet for you." And it's the truth, somehow, because even when I crave Embry, even when my body keens for him, it's bound up with Ash. Even when I gave my virginity to Embry, it was because of Ash. My body can't separate wanting the two.

There's a nip at my neck and a playful smack on my cunt. "Keep yourself wet for me," Ash orders as he withdraws his hand from under my skirt. "And then, after the dinner, I'm going to spend the rest of the night taking care of my pussy. How does that sound?"

I sigh. "Like dinner is going to take too long."

* * * *

The dinner goes much as I expected. Ash and I walk down to the dining room together, and there's a frenzy of cameras and questions, a buzz of interest running through the guests. I feel a little like Cinderella in the blue silk gown, with my thin crystal headband nestled into my updo. Abilene tried to coax me into something a little more daring, saying I needed to maximize my entrance onto the political scene, but once I saw this ball gown, I knew it was the one. And the way Ash steals glances over at me, I know I chose correctly.

After the staircase, Ash presses a kiss to my cheek—to the delight of the crowd—and goes to formally greet the Polish president. I join the other guests, hoping to melt anonymously into the crowd without the President by my side to draw attention.

This fails—magnificently.

First, there are the reporters, and then there are the guests themselves—politicians and their wives, notable Polish-Americans, high-ranking military officials. Most of them want to schmooze and make themselves known to me, assess firsthand how important I am to the President and how I might be useful to them in the future. I know how this game is played, so I smile and laugh and shake hands and give them nothing, but do it so sweetly that they don't realize it until they walk away. A few are more daring, more salacious—is it serious with the President? How long have we been together? Wasn't it so lovely of me to comfort this noble, stoic man still reeling from the death of his wife?

Then there are the speeches—one from the Polish president and one from Ash—and Ash's is so rousing that the applause doesn't stop for almost five minutes afterward.

And then there's one more encounter after that, one that leaves me a little shaken. It's during dinner, and even though I'm supposed to be seated next to Ash, he's been waylaid by dignitaries at the other end of the room, leaving me alone with the other guests at the table. I'm fairly adept at the political small talk, but I don't enjoy it, and when the main course of roasted duck in apple appears, I'm grateful for the silence that falls over the table as we eat.

It's then that the woman next to me turns and asks, "So, are you fucking him yet?"

Years of practice keep me from dropping my fork, and those same years of practice make me glance over at her. Raven-black hair. Pale skin. Green eyes. She looks to be in her late thirties—elegant and beautiful and vaguely scornful—and she reminds me of someone, although I can't quite decide why. I look down at her place setting.

Morgan Leffey, Sen.

I've been intentionally avoiding politics since I came to Washington this summer, but after seeing her name, I'm able to dredge up a thin biography of Senator Leffey:

-Republican, but elected in a traditionally blue state.

-A staunch supporter of military action against Carpathia (which could explain why she's invited tonight, to show Poland solidarity in their continued diplomatic tensions with the new, hostile nation).

-Divorced, but now unmarried and unattached.

-No children, no big scandals.

It feels like there's something else that I'm missing about her though, something big. I can't put my finger on it.

All this assessment happens within the blink of an eye. On the next blink, I ask calmly, "Pardon me?"

"I said," she answers with a catlike smile, "have you fucked Maxen?"

I dart a quick glance around us, and she puts a cool hand on my arm. "No one's listening, I promise. Now, have you let the President fuck you yet?"

“That’s not your business,” I decide is the safest answer.

“That means no,” she says, sounding satisfied. “Has he hurt you yet?”

I feel the blood leave my face.

“Has he flogged you? Or tied you up? Fucked your throat? Has he made you cry and then beg for more while the tears are still on your cheeks?”

How can she know this about Ash? About this side of him?

“What he and I have is still very new,” I answer carefully. A chess piece answer. A pawn left exposed on the field.

She takes the bait. “Then that’s a yes,” she says, smug knowledge lacing her words.

I watch her face. *Have you fucked Ash?* I want to demand. *Has he dominated you?* The thought of Ash with *anyone* else sets my palms to itching with envy, but the thought of him with Senator Leffey? Well, that sends daggers of pure, uncut rage straight between my ribs. And the thought of him doing the same things with her as he did with me—the commands, the control, the rough, vulnerable need—it fills me with something deeper than jealousy, a lizard-brain need to defend my territory from invaders, defend it to the death.

As if she knows what’s happening inside my mind, she gives me another smile and takes a sip of her champagne. “Don’t worry, Greer. Maxen and I are done fucking for now. No need for jealousy.”

For now. What a deliberate choice of words. I have the nearly irrepressible urge to dump my own champagne in her lap, but I don’t. Instead, I force myself away from my anger, force the jealousy aside, and redouble my focus on her. On the smile curling at the edges of her mouth, her eyebrows quirked in enjoyment. She wants me to flare up and she wants me to be defensive—she’s counting on me reacting the way she would in my shoes.

But she’s not me, and I’m not her. I give her a small smile that I know looks tentative and shy. “It’s hard not to be jealous, Senator. You are a very beautiful person, and like I said a minute ago, what the President and I have is very new. I guess it’s hard not to be insecure.”

My honesty and intentional sweetness seem to throw her—both the flattery and the truth-telling finding purchase somewhere inside this powerful woman. I follow up, pressing my advantage. “Do you know Maxen very well? Did he hurt you too? I want to please him, but I’m still new to our, um, arrangement.”

Every word sings with earnest honesty, sings with submission. *You are so beautiful and worldly*, my words whisper to her. *You know more than I do, you know this man better than I do.*

It works. Her pleased smile remains, but it’s no longer shrewd, merely satisfied. “I have to admit, I’m surprised he chose you,” she says, glancing at me again. “The young academic, the granddaughter of the famously liberal and feminist Leo Galloway. You seem like the last girl on earth who could handle Maxen Colchester. Not to mention the last girl on earth who would *want* to—surely it will be hard to glad-hand all the Democrats in the Congressional Women’s Caucus with belt marks on your ass?”

Her dig falls so short of the mark that I almost laugh, but I resist. She’s revealed a profound ignorance about me in just a few sentences, and more importantly, she’s revealed the reason she’s needling me to begin with. She wants to know why me, why Ash chose *me*, and her barbs reveal that it’s about something deeper and fiercer than mere political curiosity.

“I’m actually registered with the President’s party,” I say mildly. “Not my grandfather’s.” I changed my affiliation the day Ash announced his intention to run for President as a third-party candidate. Merlin had laid the foundation for a third-party run for years leading up to it, at the state and national level, and when the nation’s favorite hero had emerged as the face of the new

party, I wasn't the only one turning in my old party card. "And," I continue, keeping my face open and earnest as I move my next chess piece, "I've never found any problem mixing what I want in bed with feminism. Did you? Is that why you and Maxen aren't together?"

Check.

Her lips press together, revealing a flash of irritation, and then she leans in, her voice truly cold for the first time. "Be careful, Greer. You're in over your head with Maxen Colchester. You have no idea the things he's capable of, the things he's done. The secrets he keeps. The lies he tells."

I remember Abilene's warning, Merlin's evasiveness, and there's a shot of ice water running through my veins. How many people know these secrets about Ash? Why am I the only one in the dark?

Morgan sees that she's finally landed a blow, and her voice is both cold and pleased when she says, "And have you ever thought about the reason why you and Maxen haven't had sex yet? Maybe he's told you that he wants to wait, that he wants to take things slow, but no man can take things that slow, trust me. Not unless he's getting it from somewhere else."

Checkmate. And the match is hers.

I can't hear my own thoughts over the roar of the pulse pounding in my ears, the jealousy and the fear—because she's found my real weakness, my real insecurity—and I feel a stupid, ridiculous burning at the backs of my eyelids. *Focus!* I order myself. *Don't let her see you upset!*

I'm saved by a heavy hand on my shoulder, and I look up to see Embry smiling down at me and Morgan. He has a hand on her shoulder too, and she doesn't look confused by it, only irritated in the bored way that familiarity and habit breed. I stare at them both—Morgan in her pale gray Dior gown and Embry in his low-waisted tuxedo—both of them so stylish and elegant, their posture suffused with confidence and privilege. Something finally trickles in from the back of my memory, a wisp of information from years ago, something from a speech Morgan gave in the Senate a few years ago.

Something about a loved one who fought in Carpathia.

"Greer," Embry says. "I see you've finally met my sister."

Chapter Eighteen

“*Step*-sister,” Morgan corrects icily.

“Step-sister,” Embry concedes cheerfully. “But we both have the same winning personality, don’t we?”

“There’s no need for sarcasm,” Morgan says, glancing away from us as if bored. “We all know you’re here to rescue the princess from the evil witch.”

Embry’s smile grows wider. “Your words, Sissy, not mine.”

Morgan actually looks mortified. “Don’t call me that here.”

“Did you know,” Embry says, as if he didn’t hear her, “that Sissy here personally requested to sit next to you once she heard you were attending the dinner? A fun fact I just learned from Belvedere, who learned it from the social secretary. Now, why would that be, Morgan? You weren’t planning on causing any trouble, were you?”

“I simply wanted to meet the soon-to-be-famous Greer Galloway for myself.” Morgan’s eyes sweep back to me, appraisingly. “See the girl that has the President so preoccupied.”

Embry’s hand curls protectively around my shoulder.

Morgan doesn’t miss that, and she raises an eyebrow. “She has you preoccupied too, then? How interesting.”

There’s a blink of something on Embry’s face—worry, maybe—and then it’s gone. “They’re starting up the dancing, Morgan, so as delightful as this little reunion is, I’m afraid Greer and I must abandon you.”

Embry helps me stand, but before we can make our escape, I feel Morgan’s cool hand on my wrist. “Don’t forget what I said to you,” she says quietly, and there’s no malice in her voice, only a kind of urgency. “You’re in over your head.”

“That’s enough, Morgan,” Embry tells her. “You’ve done your worst. Now leave us alone.”

Morgan sits back with a pretty frown, and I withdraw my wrist and let Embry lead me away, my stomach churning.

“Don’t let her upset you,” Embry says as we weave through the tables to the far corner of the dining room, where Ash stands with a circle of dignitaries talking and sipping premium vodka. “She’s jealous. She and Ash...well, there’s a history there. And it’s not a pretty one.”

“I gathered that much.” I take a deep breath. “They used to fuck?”

Embry winces at the word. “I hate such a wonderful word being applied to such a short-lived, stupid thing. They met the first year Ash was deployed, three or four years before Caledonia.”

Three or four years before he met me, I think, doing the math.

“And it wasn’t anything more than an R and R fling. Over in a week. Fourteen years ago.”

I’m not often struck by the age difference between Ash and me, but for a moment, I’m stunned by it. Stunned by the fact that he was fucking Morgan Leffey while I was an eleven-year-old skipping around my grandfather’s penthouse.

“So there hasn’t been anything between them since then?” I ask. “Because that’s not the impression I got.”

Embry’s face has a purposefully open expression, and his voice is so carefully honest and casual. “That’s the last time they fucked, I’m certain of it.”

He's lying. Or he's not telling the whole truth, but before I can press him further, he tucks my hand in the crook of his elbow and squeezes it. "Let's not talk about my sister now. I just ate like thirteen pierogies in front of the Polish president in order to impress him, and I'm already about to throw up. Besides, we have much more important things to talk about, like how many times are you going to dance with me tonight?"

I smile up at him. "As many times as you'd like."

His eyes glow. "You have to dance with Ash first. But then after that, you're mine."

In his words, I hear the echo of our night together, and my blood stirs to a boil.

You're with me, not him.

That's it. All mine.

He looks away, clearing his throat as if realizing how intense that sounded. "I mean, for dancing, of course. Hey, maybe we can convince the quartet to play Rihanna—they probably already have the sheet music for that, right?"

I give a small laugh and so does he, but it doesn't dispel the sudden uncomfortable tension between us. It's almost a relief when we reach Ash and the Polish dignitaries.

Embry untucks my fingers from his arm and, with exaggerated ceremony, places them in Ash's outstretched hand. "Your lady, milord."

Ash's fingers tighten around my hand, and he easily pulls me into him, his other hand holding his tumbler of vodka perfectly steady.

"You must trust this man very much to allow him unfettered access to such a beauty," the Polish president says in a thickly accented voice.

I feel Embry's posture stiffen behind me, feel the rush of blood to my cheeks.

"I do," Ash responds. "I trust him with my life."

"Really, it's that I trust the Vice President to have such unfettered access to Maxen," I joke to cover over Embry's and my discomfort, but Ash doesn't laugh along with everyone else.

Neither does Embry.

I look to him and then back to Ash, catching them glancing at each other. My heart crashes against my ribs, and for no reason at all, I'm reminded of how tight and hungry my cunt feels right now. How empty.

"Greer, I don't think you've formally met the president of Poland," Ash says, picking up the thread of conversation before our guests could notice the troubled tension hanging between the three of us. "Greer, this is Andrezej Lewandowski. President Lewandowski, this is Greer Galloway, a lecturer at Georgetown and a very important woman to me."

Lewandowski leans in to brush a quick kiss against the back of my hand before releasing it, and it's right then that Belvedere comes up to us. "Mr. President, they're ready for you on the dance floor."

"I suppose that's our cue," Ash says. "President Lewandowski, would you and Mrs. Lewandowski care to join us?"

The foreign leader looks less than thrilled, but nevertheless he finds his wife, and the four of us take to the dance floor. The band strikes up an orchestral version of a famous Polish folk song, and then I'm in Ash's arms, my hand curled around his warm neck and his hand on my waist. We start moving, and I giggle a little at how woodenly Ash dances.

He makes a face at me. "Don't make fun of me. I had to work hard to be this bad; I used to be much worse, you know."

"I don't see how," I laugh as I steer us clear of the Polish couple. "I think I need to have a word with your teacher someday."

“Any time you want,” Ash says, eyes twinkling down at me. “He’s right over there.”

I glance over to where Ash tilted his head and then laugh even harder. “*Embry* taught you to dance?”

“There’s a lot of dead time to fill when you’re deployed,” Ash says mock-defensively. “We had to entertain ourselves somehow.”

“So he taught you how to dance?”

“We took turns being the man, if you’re wondering.” Ash says it jokingly, but I can’t help but remember his hand fisted in Embry’s tuxedo jacket, Embry’s knees on the floor between Ash’s shoes.

Ash notices my flushed cheeks before I do, reaching up and brushing my cheek with the backs of his fingers. “You’re blushing,” he remarks.

“I—” No. There’s no way I can tell him the things that are flashing through my mind. “I’m just warm.”

He looks at me for a moment, and I see him shelve this away for later. Instead he says in an offhand voice, “You and Embry seem to have become fast friends.”

Well, if I was flushed before, I’m sure my face is bloodless now. I can only manage a nod as a voice inside my head screams *tell him the truth, tell him the truth!*

“It makes me happy to see you get along so well,” he continues. “You’re the two most important people in the world to me, besides my mother and sister, and I want us all to be close.”

You have no idea how close Embry and I are, I want to say. *I should* say. But the words stick in my throat.

Embry and I aren’t together and we’ll never be together now...so what difference does our past make? If I tell Ash about that night in Chicago, it will just add more tension between the three of us, and apparently there’s enough of that already.

Stop rationalizing. You know lying is wrong. Tell the truth.

But the moment has passed, and we’re spinning across the dance floor and then Ash says, “I heard you also had the pleasure of meeting Senator Leffey.”

“Yes,” I answer, a bit sourly. “She and I are *not* going to be fast friends, in case you were wondering.”

He laughs. “No, I didn’t think you would be. What did she say to you?”

Here, I decide to be honest. “She told me that you two used to fuck. She told me you’re a liar. And she warned me that I was in over my head with you.”

Ash blinks in surprise. “Wow. She really dove right in there, didn’t she?”

“Yeah.”

His face turns pensive. “Morgan doesn’t like me very much, I’m afraid.”

“Why?”

He sighs. “Lots of reasons. Too many to name. In fact, she has so many reasons to dislike me that it almost feels like fate. We’re destined to be enemies.”

“I’m guessing those reasons weren’t around when you fucked her?”

His hand is suddenly tight and possessive on my waist, pulling me so close that I can feel my dress catching on his legs as we move. “Jealousy looks good on you,” he says, leaning his head down to speak into my ear. I shiver at the feeling of his warm breath on my skin.

“But you don’t need to be jealous,” he finishes, straightening up again. “It was a very long time ago. We haven’t had sex in fourteen years.”

I’m about to exhale with relief when he admits, “But we have been sexual together since then.”

There's that jealousy knifing between my ribs again. "And when was the last time you were 'sexual' together?"

His eyes find mine in the dim light of the dining room, green and intensely apologetic. "A month ago."

"A month ago?" I repeat. I want to rip myself out of his arms, I want to storm away, but I can't, I can't, I can't. There are too many eyes watching, too many reputations at stake, and besides, I don't get to have any claim on Ash's sexual history. Any claim on what he did before we kissed at St. Thomas Becket.

Ash holds me tighter, leaning his head in close. Goddamn him for being so fucking handsome right now, all chiseled planes and full lips. It makes it impossible for me to pull away, to ignore him.

"After Jenny died," he says in a low voice, "I was in a bad place. The cancer came on so fast—she was diagnosed and then two weeks later she was dead—and there was no time to grieve or to process and there was still this campaign to run. This campaign I didn't even want to run any longer. After the funeral, I felt like an imposter in my own life. Like I'd woken up in another man's body. I didn't see myself in the mirror. I couldn't hear my own voice. I would be fastening my cufflinks and then realize I didn't recognize my own hands. They felt like puppet hands. Like some sort of clever wooden machine and not flesh and blood."

It's the first time he's really talked about Jenny to me, and my heart is rupturing for him, for that Ash of last year who felt so alien and adrift. I squeeze his neck and he sighs into it, as if the gesture comforts him.

"Morgan and I had encountered each other countless times since that week we were together. She's my best friend's stepsister and a powerful senator on the Armed Services Committee...our worlds collided a lot. And a week after Jenny died, our worlds collided again. Merlin had coaxed me back on the campaign trail, a stump speech in Virginia—it should have been easy. A message I'd been touting for a year in a state that loves the military. And I fucked it up. I stumbled and stuttered, and it was fine that time—everyone was so eager to give me the grieving husband pass—but it wouldn't be fine for long. And I knew it, I knew if I couldn't get my shit together, I would lose, no matter how many pictures were tweeted of me laying roses on Jenny's grave.

"I went home that night planning to get drunk. And I decided the next day I'd call Merlin and tell him it was over. I would withdraw. It had been a pipe dream anyway, to run on a third party ticket, and there was no way I could win like this. Like...a shell. A ghost."

"But you didn't call him," I murmur. "What changed your mind?"

His eyes are pinned to mine. "Morgan."

Ugh. Knife. Ribs. Ugly, jealous pain.

"She showed up at my door that night. We hadn't exchanged civil words in fourteen years, and yet there she was. 'I know what you need,' was all she said. And then she took me to a place she goes to here in town. A sex club."

A sex club?

He pauses his story to smile at my stunned expression. "For a self-admitted submissive, angel, you seem pretty shocked by the idea."

"No, no," I rush to downplay my surprise. "That's totally cool. I'm sure lots of people do that and go places like that and stuff..." I stop babbling, realizing how ridiculous I sound.

A small laugh. “It’s easy to forget,” he says, “how young you are. How little experience you have. It’s okay to be shocked. Just...I want you to understand what I was going through then. Why it all happened the way it did.”

He takes a deep breath to continue. “I’d known for a long time that my tastes in bed ran a little...extreme. It had always been there, I suppose, but the war—” he closes his eyes for a moment and then opens them again “—the war made it necessary. It grew and grew and became impossible to ignore, a need that felt like fire in my veins, and I couldn’t douse the flames of it. I couldn’t cut it out of me, no matter how hard I tried. And I tried. With Jenny, I tried for years. She wasn’t like you, Greer, not in the least. She loved me so much and wanted to please me, but I could see her wincing whenever I accidentally got too rough, could see how unresponsive her body was to anything other than tenderness. I loved her, Greer. I gave her tenderness, as best as I could, and then after she fell asleep at night, I’d lie awake and think of you.” A shadow crosses his face. “I’m not proud of that. But it was like the more I tried to fight it, the stronger the need became, the more elaborate the fantasies grew. I’d think about venting my frustration on you. All the things I couldn’t do to my wife—in my mind, I did a thousand times to you. Bit you, spanked you, ropes, whips, lube. And in my fantasies, you’d thank me. Covered in welts and my cum, with makeup smeared on your face, you’d thank me. And then I’d fuck you again.”

“Jesus Christ, Ash,” I say, my breath coming fast.

“Too much?” he asks, brow furrowed with concern.

“Can we leave the dinner? I want you to do all that to me right now.”

A little pinch at my waist. “Behave. I’m confessing to you what a terrible husband I was to Jenny, and if you’re smart, you’ll rethink attaching yourself to me.”

“Did you ever hurt Jenny or do anything without her consent?”

“No.”

“Did you do your best to love her and take care of her?”

He closes his eyes. “Yes.”

“Then I’m not rethinking anything,” I assure him, stroking the side of his neck. “You should have been honest with her, and I don’t think it’s right that you fantasized about me so much while you were married to her. But given the circumstances, it’s forgivable, and not something I think will happen between us.”

“Fuck no, it won’t,” Ash says softly, and God, that filthy word on his tongue. My nipples pull into tight buds at the sound of it.

“So what happened when Morgan brought you to this sex club? After years of denying yourself the kind of sex you needed?”

“First things first, Greer. I didn’t have sex at the club that night. I haven’t had sex with a woman since Jenny died. You’ll be my first.”

A flutter of relief, of flattered excitement.

“But yes, the club was where I was able to dominate openly for the first time. Morgan introduced me to experienced Dominants who showed me how to exert control and inflict pain safely, and then I was able to meet submissives there who wanted control and pain from me. That first night though, I hadn’t met anyone else yet. We got to the club, and right there in the open, Morgan stripped naked and put a flogger in my hand.”

“What happened then? Did you hit her?”

“Yes, I hit her.” He smiles ruefully at me. “I was hard after three strikes. After five, I could remember the sound of my own voice. And after ten, the hands that held the flogger were my own hands again. I was back in my body. Somehow.”

“But you didn’t have sex?”

A look of fierce distaste, so fast and fleeting I almost wonder if I imagined it. “It was the dominating, not the woman, that got me hard. I didn’t touch her, and if I hadn’t been so fucked up from Jenny’s death, I never would have allowed it to go that far in the first place. I dropped the flogger and called a cab home, left her naked in that room. And when I called her the next day, I told her I wouldn’t touch her again, but that I needed to come back. Which suited her well enough—she’d rather be on the other side of the flogger—and since then, I’ve been to the club many times with her, but never like the first time. We never touched again, via whips or otherwise.”

This satisfies me, but only a little. “I don’t understand how she can hate you so much but still be willing to be flogged by you. Especially if she’s a Domme.”

“It was a big gesture for her,” he concedes, “although all the Dominants at that club are required to submit to whippings and beatings at least once or twice as part of their training. But as for the why...Morgan and I are unfortunately connected in unique ways that we can’t help or change.” Ash shrugs. “I imagine that as much as she hates me, there was a part of her that felt compelled to offer sympathy or relief. And I think it’s the way she knew best, and she remembered enough about our time together to know it was what I needed, too. We may be enemies here, but on neutral ground, we respect each other. We have a lot in common, after all.”

I nod. I think I’m beginning to understand Morgan’s place in Ash’s story, although the understanding does nothing to dull the jabs of envy I feel thinking about them at a club together, knowing they’ve had sex.

“So have you been flogged as part of your training?” I ask curiously. It’s hard to imagine my tall, muscular soldier bound in place, submitting quietly to whips and paddles.

“I have had everything done to me that I would want to do to someone else. I didn’t think it was safe or fair to do something to another person without knowing exactly what it would feel like.” He leans close to my ear. “And *everything* was a pretty long list, Greer. I hope you’re ready.”

“God, yes.”

He pulls back with a smile. “I knew you would be.”

“And this club—your identity is safe? Morgan can’t go to the press and tell them that you were there? There aren’t any pictures floating around?”

He laughs. “My little political princess. Of course that’s where your mind goes, straight to potential scandal. Yes, my identity was—and is—safe. This club caters to congresspeople, ambassadors, and foreign dignitaries. Their non-disclosure agreements are damning; violate yours and you’ll find yourself ruined in every possible way. Trust me—the man who runs this club is more powerful than I am. And I’m not the first president who’s been a guest there.”

I make a face, thinking about the previous president, a balding, squat Democrat with wild eyebrows and rumpled suits. “Ugh.”

“Yeah.”

“Mr. President,” comes a voice from nearby. We stop dancing and turn to see a tall black woman walking towards us, a silky emerald dress clinging to her slender curves and fluttering around her ankles. The entire room seems to watch her cross the nearly empty dance floor; partly because she’s beautiful—dark, dark skin, high cheekbones, natural hair several inches long that bounces as she walks—and partly it’s because she’s Kay Colchester, Ash’s foster sister and his chief of staff. She wouldn’t interrupt our dance unless it was for something crucial.

“Kay,” Ash says. “What is it?”

“There’s been military movement along the Carpathian border with Ukraine. No borders have been crossed, but there’s definitely an increase in the number of troops. Our satellite experts only just now picked up on it; it was that well camouflaged, which means this isn’t for show. They’re planning something and they don’t want anyone to know about it.”

The man I was dancing with disappears, and in his place is someone calm and detached. Coolly powerful. “Where will I be briefed?”

“The Situation Room. It will be short. Twenty minutes at most.”

He nods. “After that, I’ll need to speak to our people in Ukraine and Poland. Maybe Slovakia too. I’ll call from the Residence.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get it arranged.” Kay’s eyes slide over to me, and her businesslike expression opens up. “You must be Greer. I can’t tell you how excited I am that my brother is dating someone.”

I shake her hand as Ash lets out a huff. “Everyone keeps saying that. It’s not like I’ve been a monster to work with.”

“Well, let’s just say that I’m glad you have Embry as your whipping boy, or the rest of us would have suffered a lot more.”

“I only whip him when he asks for it,” Ash says, flashing a smile at me, and I give a shaky smile back, knowing it’s a joke but unable to stop myself from biting my lip at the thought.

“Anyway,” Kay says with a roll of her eyes at Ash’s answer, “my brother here has been a whole new man this last week. You have to understand, he’s always polite and respectful, never mean. But definitely not chatty. He’s always serious and all about work. However, since last week, I’ve caught him *smiling*. In front of *other people*. Even *laughing* sometimes. And the thousand-yard stare is gone.”

“Ash smiles all the time,” I say, looking up at him.

“When I’m with you,” he says, his voice warm. He leans in and I expect a kiss on the cheek, but instead he kisses my neck and I have to keep my knees from failing. I hear murmurs around us on the dance floor, and I can only imagine how many cell phone pictures were just snapped of the President with his lips on my neck.

But I can tell he doesn’t care. He presses his forehead against mine and speaks quietly so Kay can’t hear him. “I have to go to the Situation Room now. And there will be some work to do after that.”

“I can leave,” I offer. “I know you said we’d spend time together after the dinner, but—”

“Stay,” he says. “I want you to stay.”

“And wait for you?”

“God, yes.” There’s something rough around the edges of his voice. “Will you?”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“I’ll have Belvedere take you back to the Residence, and I’m going to text you instructions. Have your phone ready.”

“I will.”

“That’s my good girl.” Another kiss on my neck, and he’s already turning away. He and Kay sweep out, and I see Embry’s tall frame as he follows them.

I take a deep breath, and with all the dignity I can muster among the crowd of curious onlookers, go to search for Belvedere.

Chapter Nineteen

Even though I can find my own way back upstairs, I'm grateful for Belvedere's presence as he wards off guests and journalists and steers me expertly through the crowd.

"So how was your first official event?" Belvedere asks as we finally make it to the stairs.

I think of Morgan Leffey and Ash's story about the club. "It was illuminating."

He seems to know exactly what I'm referring to. "I am sorry about Senator Leffey. If I'd known sooner, I would have had her moved. But the social secretary knows now, and it won't happen again."

I put my hand on his arm as we climb up. "There's no need for that. I can handle her, especially now that I know who she is and how she'll act."

"Just be careful," Belvedere says. His thick hipster glasses do nothing to hide his worried expression. "Senator Leffey is a dangerous enemy to have."

"She's not my enemy," I object. "Just because we are two women with connections to the same man doesn't mean we have to hate each other."

"That's very socially enlightened of you, but it's not only up to you, you know. It's up to Leffey too. And she has a history of cutting down anything or anyone in her path."

"I'm not in her path," I say with a certainty I don't feel. "How could I be? I'm not a political rival, I pose no threat to her."

We reach the top of the stairs, and Belvedere looks at me. "I think you pose more threats than you realize." And it sounds so much like Merlin's curse that I have to remind myself to relax. Why is everyone convinced that I'm dangerous?

"I don't want to pose any threats," I say. "I'm not going to do anything to hurt Senator Leffey. I just want to be with Ash."

His worry softens into affection. "I know. And I'll do everything I can to help." He glances at his watch. "But right now, I should get down there and wait for the President to finish his briefing. Do you have everything you need?"

I wave him away. "I'm a big girl, I'll be fine on my own."

He gives my elbow a squeeze, and then he's trotting down the stairs, taking them two at a time, his floppy brown hair moving with each step. It's then that my phone gives a buzz in my dress pocket. And then another. And then another.

I pull it out as I walk down the hallway. It's Ash, and my stomach flips over when I see the first message.

Get undressed.

You're allowed five minutes to freshen up and prepare yourself however you need and then I want you wearing nothing but one of my button-down shirts.

I see the three little dots appear and then disappear, and I wonder where he is right now. In the Situation Room? Looking at satellite photographs of troop movements while he types out exactly how he wants to find me when he gets done?

you will kneel on the floor in the middle of the room, hands behind your back, eyes down, and wait for me

and when I get there, we are in scene. You are only allowed to refer to me as Sir or Mr. President. Understood?

I'm already kicking off my heels as I answer. Yes, Sir.

There's another pause, then: good girl.

I have a little trouble unzipping my dress, but I finally manage to peel off the layers of silk and tulle and wriggle out of my thong and strapless bra, laying out the clothes in the dressing room so they're out of sight. And then I brush my teeth and use the restroom, hunt down one of Ash's shirts, and by the time my five minutes are up, I'm kneeling on the carpet, shirt buttoned and sleeves rolled up. I put my hands behind my back, grabbing each forearm with the opposite hand like I've seen submissives do on Tumblr, and tilt my face to the floor.

It's almost immediately uncomfortable. The carpet presses into my knees with hundreds of fibrous little twists, and the muscles in my arms strain with the ache of holding them in such an unfamiliar position. A thousand million itches spring up on my skin, and every tiny sensation—thirst, the slightly-too-cool air of the room, the faint hunger left over from my half-eaten dinner—is magnified and made all consuming. I can't use my phone to distract myself, I can't even use my eyes to distract myself, there's nothing between me and being inside my own body. No other person, no other thoughts. No work or family or friends or responsibilities—there's only me and one directive: to wait.

And so I wait, trying not to twitch with the agony of it. I'm used to keeping my mind and body busy, used to filling any empty time with grading or preparing lectures or research for my book, and this is worse torture than anything else I can think of, to keep my body still and *wait*.

Without a clock or my phone, time seems to stretch and warp, and I have no idea how long I've been kneeling in this silent room—minutes or hours or years—and I have the creeping sense of loneliness that comes with silence and stillness. How long would I have to kneel here? Surely, Ash wouldn't expect me to wait longer than a few minutes? Surely he wouldn't want me to ache and itch and feel crazy with the pressure of my own thoughts?

Except I know that's exactly what he does want.

Control. My submission flavored by discomfort, by my desire to please him.

And I do want to please him, so badly.

And with that realization, the position becomes easier to hold, the stillness easier to bear. There's purpose in it now, a reason, and the reason is Ash, the only reason I ever want. I think of him as my knees whine at the press of the carpet, as my mouth gets drier, as goose bumps erupt over my skin at the chilly air of the room. I dismiss each sensation as it arises, my thoughts shrinking down to Ash and the low fire kindling deep in my core, and eventually everything else does fade away, leaving behind a distilled version of myself. A version that waits.

I'm floating in place like this when the door to Ash's bedroom finally, finally opens, and I don't look up, but I do eagerly watch those shiny dress shoes as he walks in. And then stop breathing when a second pair of shoes follows.

That second pair freezes in mid-stride, as if their owner is arrested by the sight of me kneeling on the floor with my arms behind my back and my nipples poking through the thin fabric of a man's shirt.

The door shuts and then Ash is squatting down in front of me. "You may lift your head now, angel."

I look up at him, at the man who has changed not at all over the minutes we've been apart even though I feel like an entirely different person. But then my eyes move past him to Embry, and I feel nothing but blind panic. Panic at being so exposed in front of him. Panic that mirrors the panic on his own face, the speed of his breathing as he looks at me and looks at me and looks at me.

“I hope you trusted me,” Ash says. “And I hope you knew that I’d keep you safe while you submitted to me. I made sure no one else came up here while you waited.”

I tear my stare away from Embry. “But you brought someone else with you. Sir,” I add at the last minute.

Ash nods. “We have a couple phone calls to make, but I can make them from here. I didn’t want to leave you alone a second longer, but I also wanted Embry close by while I talked to our people near Carpathia.”

“I can leave,” I say. I *plead*. “Or I can go wait somewhere else while you call.”

Don’t make me be like this in front of Embry. I’m too weak to hide how much I’ll like it.

“No,” Ash says. “I want you to stay.”

“Ash…” Embry says from behind him, his face pale. “We can call first thing tomorrow morning. There’s no need for me to intrude—” His voice breaks off as Ash runs a finger up my thigh to my pussy and carefully slides it inside of me. Despite the deep unease at Embry’s presence, my deprived body responds immediately, and I try to push myself down onto the finger, squirming for more contact and more friction.

“So wet,” Ash murmurs.

Embry makes a strangled noise from his place by the door.

Ash withdraws his finger and places it in my mouth for me to suck clean, which I do without question, lust overriding my better sense, the better sense that tells me there’s no way I can do any of this in front of Embry. It will hurt me and it will hurt him, and then Ash will see why it hurts us, and then *he’ll* be hurt.

Ash wipes his hand on his tuxedo jacket and stands up. “Embry, we’ll use the phone by the sofa,” he says, gesturing to the two small sofas next to the television. “If you want to have a seat.”

Embry looks at Ash and then looks to me. I feel the ghost of his hips between my thighs, the slickness of blood on my skin, his blindly passionate kisses that consumed us both with their single-minded want. My body keens for him, just as it’s keening for Ash, aching for one or both of them to the point that I can’t even identify how I actually feel any longer. There’s only the need. The want.

“Embry,” Ash says. “The sofa, please.”

Embry steps over to Ash, studiously keeping his gaze away from me on the floor. “Are you sure this is what you want?” he asks Ash quietly.

Ash gets closer to him, angling his body so that I can’t see Embry any longer, and leans in to speak in his ear. I can’t hear what he says, but I see Embry’s posture tense up, see his hand flex and clench, as if he’s keeping himself from doing something violent. Except when Ash pulls back, the look on Embry’s face isn’t violence. I don’t know what it is, but it makes me shiver and makes the memory of his body against mine all the stronger.

Without another word, Embry goes to the sofa and sits, his face unreadable, his posture strangely easy. As if he’s done this before.

Has he?

Have *they*?

Ash watches him, facing away from me with his hands in his pockets. His shoulders are relaxed, and his stride is full of unconscious power as he walks to the opposite sofa and sits, crossing his legs. His long, skillful fingers set to work tugging his bow tie free, and as he’s pulling at the fabric, he gives me a dismissive glance. “Crawl to me,” he says.

His voice is offhand, his expression coolly indifferent, but all I feel is swelling desperation. This is something I've fantasized about for years, and he *knows* it, he has that letter memorized. So why dangle this in front of me when I obviously can't do it? I can't crawl in front of Embry; the overt submission and humiliation makes the act so undeniably sexual that it feels unfaithful to do it in front of anyone else.

But if Ash is asking me to do it...then does that make it right?

"Crawl, Greer," Ash says, impatiently this time.

I find my voice. "But Sir, Embry is here—"

"He's Mr. Vice President to you right now," Ash interrupts.

"Sir, *Mr. Vice President* is here," I correct myself. "He'll see me."

"And?"

I don't know how to answer that. It is its own explanation, there is no *and*. Embry is here and he'll see me, and I'll see him seeing me, and everything we've tried to keep suppressed the last week will surface.

"Why are you doing this?" I whisper.

Ash locks gazes with me. "Because I want to," he answers simply.

"But—"

"No *buts*, Greer. Do you have something you'd like to say to me?"

The safe word. He means the safe word.

I search his face and find no trace of irritation or anger, and I know that he's giving me the option to end things right now, no questions asked, no wounded feelings or resentment. *He's trusting me*, I think, trusting me to vocalize my needs. To advocate for my boundaries. And that's the heart of this, isn't it? I trust him with control and he trusts me with my voice. I trust him to stop when I ask him to stop, and he trusts me to say *stop* before I'm hurt. His control means nothing without my consent, and my consent is meaningless if I don't trust the man I'm giving it to.

So do I trust him?

And do I feel safe?

Yes.

And yes.

I lower my face from Ash's. "No, Sir, there's nothing I'd like to say."

From his couch, Embry exhales—a sound of relief or dread, I don't know.

"Good," Ash says. "Then crawl."

I crawl. Keeping my head down, so I can't see whether Embry is looking at me or not, and doing my best to keep my breathing even, I make my way over to Ash's feet on my hands and knees. I should feel demeaned—it's meant to demean, after all—but knowing that both men are affected by the sight of me slouching across the floor like a cat makes me feel strong. Sensuous. Female. There's the air on my exposed cunt, the shirt riding up over my ass, the stray tendrils of hair hanging down around my face, and I can't help it, it all makes me wetter. Hotter. Hungrier.

Ash's hand comes to rest on my head as I reach him. "Well done," he says warmly, and I feel a flush of pleasure at his praise. "Up here," he commands, patting his thigh.

I manage not to look at Embry as I climb onto the couch, but I can hear him behind me, restless shifting and rustling fabric, as if he's tugging at his bow tie as well.

Ash takes my hips in his hands and sits me down so that I'm straddling his leg, my bare pussy flat against the hard muscles of his thigh, and I let out a low moan the minute my full

weight settles on him. The pressure there is like gasoline to an already burning fire, and I have to force myself not to grind down against him.

"I told you I'd take care of your orgasm tonight," Ash says. "This is me taking care of it."

"Sir?"

"Ride me, rub against me, whatever you need to do to come. But you have to be quiet, since I'll be on the phone."

I can't help it; I look over my shoulder back to Embry. His eyes are on my ass, where it rests against Ash's thigh, and when he realizes I'm staring at him, he lifts his eyes and flushes with shame. I flush with shame too; I wanted to catch him watching me. I look back to Ash, who's watching me closely, those clear green eyes missing nothing. The shame goes deeper than my cheeks, sinking down to my stomach.

"Is this some kind of test?" I ask, my whispering voice trembling on the last word.

"It's not a test," Ash replies. But he says nothing else, merely keeps looking at me with those searing, perceptive eyes.

A ping of real alarm now. He's watching me carefully, and Embry too, and does he suspect? That we have a history? Or only that we're attracted to each other?

"Sir," I whisper. "I don't know if I can do this in front of him. Come in front of him."

Even though I've done it a few times before...

"I think you want to," Ash replies. "Deep down, there's a part of you that wants him to see you all flushed and tousled, that wants him to see how well you can obey me, how pretty that pussy is. Isn't that right?"

The tear is formed and spilling out from underneath my eyelashes before I can stop it. "I don't want to ruin what we have," I mumble, looking down and away from his face. "I don't want to displease you, I don't want you to leave me. Over this."

"Oh, angel," he says, voice soft. "You'll never displease me. If this is too much, tell me. But if it's not too much...then I want you to trust me."

I do trust you.

I hesitate still, but then the phone rings, and Ash holds up a finger indicating I should be silent. I press my lips together as he reaches over to the phone and presses a button so that it picks up the call on speaker. "Colchester here."

Belvedere's voice comes through. "Mr. President, I have our ambassador in Ukraine on the phone, and she's on a non-secured line. May I put her through?"

"Yes."

There's a click, and then the voice of an older woman comes over the line. "Diana Cotter speaking."

"Hello, Diana," Ash greets her. "I'm sorry for the unexpected call, but I wanted to touch base with you before the next couple days play out. And we have someone here without a Need to Know, so we need to keep it light."

"Of course," she says.

Embry, Ash, and the ambassador start talking, Ash quickly explaining the need to feel out the current political climate around Carpathia. True to his word, Ash doesn't delve into anything requiring high-level security clearance, but it's still fascinating. I'm listening in with my eyes glued to the phone, when I feel a thumb against my clit, hard and rough, rubbing small circles against the swollen bud. In an instant, all the banked desire from the last week is there. All-consuming, obliterating past and present, obliterating the future, destroying everything that isn't the painful ache in my cunt as I push into Ash's touch.

He pushes back, hard, giving my clit a light pinch that sends my eyes rolling back into my head. He does it again for good measure and I gasp, clapping my hand over my mouth once I realize my mistake, eyes darting back to the phone.

Ash arches an eyebrow at me—a *can you keep quiet* eyebrow—and I nod, a little frantically, desperate for him to keep doing what he’s doing. His thumb rubs steadily, the rhythm never breaking as he and Embry talk about border agreements and the UN and the Carpathian president, and I find myself rocking into his touch, squirming down onto his thigh to increase the pressure. His thumb stops as he leans over to end his phone call, but I keep rocking, tilting forward so that I’m rubbing my clit directly against his leg. It’s so shameful, so obscene and immodest, to be driven to the point that I don’t care that I’m rubbing against Ash’s leg like a dog in heat. That I don’t care that Embry is watching me debase myself so much, act so mindlessly carnal. There’s only the need, and if this is the way I’m allowed to slake the need, then I’m fucking doing it.

Ash sits back, watching me with his elbow on the arm of the sofa and his head braced against his forefinger and his thumb. The erection tenting his slacks is massive, all the more erotic for the expensive tuxedo that frames it, but Ash’s face is perfectly controlled. Only the pulse beating at the side of his neck betrays his excitement. “Does that feel good?” he asks calmly as I grind against him.

“Yes,” I pant.

A sharp slap on my ass. I jolt and moan.

“Yes, *Sir*,” I try again.

“Good. My thigh is all you get right now. If you behave, you can earn more. My mouth maybe. Would you like that?”

My shudder is all the answer he needs. He looks past me to Embry. “She’s a good girl, isn’t she, Embry?”

His friend’s voice is hoarse when he answers. “Yes.”

Ash looks at his friend, his finger rubbing at his forehead. “Do you still want to go, Embry?”

Once again, Embry takes a long time to answer, but when he does, it’s definitive. “No. I want to stay.”

A smile curls Ash’s mouth. “I thought so. Would you like to see more of her? Maybe without the shirt?”

There’s a pause, a pause that seems to last forever, and in that pause I hear five years’ worth of agony.

“Yes,” Embry finally replies.

Ash looks back to me, and while there’s not satisfaction in his face necessarily, there is something else. Confirmation, maybe. Like it wasn’t what Embry said but how he said it that told Ash what he needed to know. “You heard the Vice President,” Ash says, running a finger down the placket of the shirt. “Take it off.”

Even in my need-to-come haze, I hesitate. “Can...can you take it off, please?”

“No.”

He’s going to make me do it. Just like the crawling. Each step of tonight is a crossroads—past what, I don’t know—but Ash is making sure that *I’m* the one taking each step. That I’m acutely aware of my own role in this.

I meet his eyes, every pleading, angry thought written on my face, and I feel his hand slide up my thigh and give it a reassuring squeeze. His eyes are so clear and so green, his pupils

dilated into huge black pools of hunger. He doesn't say anything, doesn't push, but keeps his eyes on mine, his hand gentle and sweet on my thigh.

He's giving me a chance to safe out. One word, and I could end this misery for all three of us.

But oh God, I can't bear to. Sometimes misery is better. Sometimes the forbidden fruit is just too sweet not to bite.

I lift my hands and begin unbuttoning the shirt, and both men exhale simultaneously. I should hate the rush of power that gives me, the rush of lust, but I don't. It feels right. As right as kneeling, as right as crawling. As right as standing before a class or thumbing through books older than the college I teach at. Like I was born for it.

I take my time, not to be intentionally seductive, but because my hands are shaking so much that each button is a struggle. It's worth it though, when I finally tug the shirt free from my shoulders and I see Ash's control almost break. He shifts underneath me, his hand squeezing my thigh so hard I know I'll bruise, and he bites his lower lip.

"Touch your tits," he orders after he regains his composure. "Slide your hands over them and then pull on your nipples. Yes, like that. Fuck."

He shifts again, that erection looking so mouthwatering even inside his pants, and I want it. I want it in my mouth, I want it in my pussy. I want to ride it until my legs shake, I want it so deep inside me that I can't feel anything else. When will we have sex? Surely tonight. Surely he can't bear to wait any longer, because I know I can't. I started birth control the moment we started seeing each other so we wouldn't have to wait a moment longer than we had to.

"What is it, angel?" he asks, eyes lifting from where my hands are on my breasts to my face.

I don't answer right away, and he gives me a light pinch on the ass. "You can always answer me honestly, Greer. I won't ask if I don't want to know."

"I want your cock," I blurt. "I want to be fucked by it. Please. Please fuck me. Please, Sir."

His eyes glow with something like amusement, but his voice returns to the nonchalance of earlier. "My cock is a privilege, angel. Being fucked is a privilege. And all privileges have to be earned."

I must visibly deflate at this, because he strokes my arm. "When I take your pussy, it's going to be special. We only get one first time together, and I know exactly when I want that to be."

"What's wrong with right now?" I whine.

That earns me another swift smack on the ass. "Turn around and face Embry. He wants to see those gorgeous tits of yours. He wants to see your face when you come."

I'm past protesting, past hesitating. I can blame it on the lust, blame it on Ash and my submission, but the real reason is both simpler and more complicated than either of those. The answer is I want to. I want Embry to see me. And whether it's a test or a gift, Ash is giving it to us.

When I flip myself around so I'm facing Embry, a change comes over the room. It's no longer Embry as the outsider. Now Embry and I are looking at each other, my breasts and my cunt on display for him, my pleasure a performance for his pleasure. And underneath me, I feel waves of power and desire rolling off Ash, as if controlling Embry as well as me arouses a different side of his dominance. As if watching me perform for Embry is more erotic than when I perform for him alone.

The phone rings again, and Ash tells me, "Get to work," before he answers the phone. And then he picks up, and he's talking and Embry is talking too—albeit in a choked, forced voice—and I start grinding against Ash's leg, my eyes on Ash's friend the entire time. As he watches

and attempts to talk along with Ash, I slide my hands up my stomach to my breasts, squeezing them hard, the way he squeezed them that night in Chicago. The way he touched me like he'd never get to touch a woman again. His eyes follow my hands, his teeth digging deep into his lip, and when I start fucking Ash's thigh again, his hand curls into a fist on his knee.

I imagine I'm fucking him, I imagine I'm fucking Ash, I imagine I'm fucking both of them. I imagine them fucking each other, I imagine all three of us in a tangle of sweat and thrusting, all barriers stripped away, every hot inch and sweet hole available without question.

And it's this final image that sets the gears of my climax whirring, spinning tighter and tighter until I can feel it poised in front of my womb, a ticking thing ready to explode. My hands drop down to Ash's knee for balance as I lean forward, drop my head, and chase the orgasm I've been waiting for all week. I hear the phone call end, and through the tendrils of hair hanging down around my face, I see Embry sitting on the edge of the sofa, that fist unclenching and clenching over and over again.

"Give it to me," Ash says. "To *us*."

And so I do. I press hard against Ash and ride the swell as I rub against him, crying out as I feel the wick light and the bomb detonate deep inside my womb. Shudders radiate out, pulsing quakes as I tremble on top of Ash's thigh, as I pant and gasp and continue rubbing myself against him to milk every last ounce of pleasure out of this. It goes on and on, all the pent-up longing from this week, all the angst over Embry, just adding fuel to the fire. And when I do finally stop moving, my body wrung out, I become aware of Ash's hands in my hair, tugging my head back.

"That was beautiful, angel, but we're not done yet," he informs me. With his hands moving to my waist, he lifts me and sets me on the ground, so that I'm kneeling in front of him. There's a large wet stain on his tuxedo pants where I sat. A stain that I left.

"Look at what you did."

I cast my eyes around for something to clean him with, but he stops me with a hand fisted in my hair. He guides my mouth to his leg. "Lick it clean."

I close my eyes for a moment, overwhelmed by the deliberate humiliation, the dehumanization of it, overwhelmed by the way I respond to it like it's a warm blanket on a cold night. I want to wrap myself in it, burrow into it and never leave. Nothing is more natural than this, nothing has ever been as close to what I dreamed about as a teenage girl. Whatever happens between Embry, Ash, and me after tonight will just have to happen, because I don't want to stop.

I open my eyes and begin licking at his pants, feeling like a cat and even more like one when Ash puts a firm hand between my shoulder blades and presses me down so that I'm on all fours. The air is cool on my swollen cunt, revealing every single fold and curve where I'm wet, and with a tremor, I realize Ash has posed me like this so Embry can see my sex on display. I wish I could see his face or hear his voice. I wish I could tell if he liked what he saw, if he also remembers that night in Chicago when he crawled down the bed and ate me like a starving man at a feast.

As I'm licking up the traces of myself, Ash says to Embry, "You're hard."

Embry doesn't speak, but he must nod, because then Ash says, "Pull it out. Show Greer what she's done to you."

Ash doesn't have to tell me to look or force me to turn my head. My heart pounds a beat so strong I feel it in my cunt as I turn to see Embry with his shaking hands on his fly. I recognize the misery in his face immediately. The misery of wanting something so badly even though you know it's wrong. Even though you think it might be a trap. Yet here we are, unwilling to stop, however dangerous it might be.

There's a furrow in Embry's elegant forehead, as if he's concentrating as he slowly unfastens his pants and reaches inside. Then I see the tip of him—the dusky, flared cap with a bead of moisture at the slit—and I lick my lips, thinking of Chicago. Remembering the way that cock invaded me and claimed me. Tore me and fucked me.

Embry sees me lick my lips, and his head drops back against the sofa with a moan.

“All of it, Embry,” Ash admonishes. “You show us all of it.”

With a couple of quick, jerky movements, Embry shoves his pants farther down his hips so that all eight hard inches are exposed. His balls are high and tight, like he's already close to losing it, and when he puts his thumb at his root and slowly pushes his cock towards us so that it points straight to the ceiling, I see the muscles tensing in his stomach and thighs.

He's breathing fast, his eyes on Ash as he keeps himself displayed for us. “Like that?”

I'm surprised at the huskiness in Ash's voice as he answers. “Yeah. Just like that.”

But by the time I've swiveled my head back to Ash to study his face, his control has returned and his attention is on me again. He looks at my face as he addresses Embry. “Wasn't I so nice to let Greer come like that?”

“Yes,” Embry responds after a pained second.

“Shouldn't she thank me?” Ash runs a finger along my jaw as he stares at me. I shiver under his caress. “Wouldn't that be polite?”

A breath. “Yes.”

“How should she thank me, Embry? With her mouth? With her hands?”

“I—” A heavy breath. “With her mouth. She should thank you with her mouth.”

“I like that idea very much,” Ash agrees. “Put my dick inside your mouth, angel. Show me your gratitude.”

Oh, thank God. I attack his groin with so much enthusiasm that he chuckles, but the laughter dies in his throat the minute I get my hands on the erection I've been craving all night. I waste no time in sucking him; I pull him into my mouth right away, taking him as deep as I can go, swallowing against his crown as it brushes the back of my throat.

“Oh, fuck me,” Ash groans, his large hand sliding through my hair and resting on the back of my head. “Yes, angel, just like that. Holy shit.”

“What...what does it feel like?” Embry asks.

“Hot. Wet. Her lipstick is smearing around my base. *Shit*,” he swears as I start sucking up and down as fast as I can. “She's so fucking eager. Look at this.”

“I am,” Embry answers softly.

I brace my hands on Ash's thighs, loving the hard feel of the muscle under my hands, the tensing and straining that reveals what his stoic face doesn't. I'm oblivious to everything—my tits bouncing and my hair coming undone—as I focus on my one goal: thanking Ash. I go back to the deep, long pulls, letting him fuck my throat, and that unravels him. Within only two or three minutes, he's taken control from me, gripping my head with both his hands and fucking up into my mouth, letting me breathe on every other thrust. I'm gasping, tears smudging my cheeks, and there's drool, but Ash doesn't care.

“That's right,” he hisses, his head falling back once more. “Drain me. Take it, take it all. Oh fuck, angel. Here it comes.”

Hot spurts hit the back of my throat, thick and long pulses of him, a deep animal grunt leaving his mouth at the apex of his climax. He holds my head over him as he thrusts through the rest of his orgasm, making sure I've had every last drop of his milk, before he finally loosens his grip and lets me go. Without being asked, I lick him from root to tip, cleaning his satisfied flesh,

until I feel a finger under my chin. I lift my face to his, and his face is filled with so much warmth and pride that fresh tears prick at my eyelids.

“Well done, my little princess,” the President says. “I’m so proud of you.”

Only in this world, only in this context, only with this man, does this wreck me. I have my own life and my own goals and my own power, and yet here in this room, none of that applies. Tonight *was* hard, tonight *did* seem impossible, and so Ash’s praise and the emotional fallout of having a scene in front of my former lover triggers a wave of tears I can’t fight off. I bury my face in Ash’s lap so the men won’t see me cry.

I want Ash to be proud of me in these scenes. So much.

He strokes my hair but then abruptly stops, gently but quickly moving me aside so he can jump to his feet. I look up, confused and vision blurred, and I realize that Embry has stood up and is walking to the door, fumbling his fly closed as he does. Ash strides across the room and slams his hand against the door as Embry tries to open it, closing the door again and effectively pinning Embry between his body and the wood.

Embry turns to face Ash. “Please let me go,” he says wretchedly. “Please.”

“You’re still hard,” Ash tells him. “Aren’t you?”

“I can’t stay here.”

“I’ll let you leave if you can show me you’re not erect,” Ash says, and I’ve never heard anything so soft and menacing and filthy. “Pull it out and show me. Prove to me you don’t want this and you can go.”

Embry’s handsome face is twisted with delicious torment, his stubbled jaw tense with suffering. “I know what game you’re playing, and I know that I’m going to lose.”

Does he know because he’s played a game like this with Ash before? What history do the two of them share?

Embry asks again, his suffering turning into anger. “Please, Ash.”

“You and I don’t have a safe word,” Ash says. “And if we did, it wouldn’t be *please*. Do I need to have Greer come over here and help?”

“No!” Embry bursts out. “No. I...okay.”

There’s complete silence in the room as Embry bends to Ash’s will and unfastens his pants and slowly withdraws his penis. It’s harder than ever, swollen and dark and angry, throbbing with every beat of his heart. Even though I just came moments earlier, my pussy gives a whiny little throb of its own.

“Happy?” Embry demands.

Ash doesn’t answer him but turns to me. “Go get your dress. The one you wore tonight. Bring it to me.”

I scurry up from the floor to obey, hurrying into the dressing room and returning with the pile of blue silk. Embry and Ash haven’t moved, but there’s so much precum at the tip of Embry’s cock that it glistens in the ambient light of the bedroom, and Ash has kept his hand against the door, splayed against the wood right next to Embry’s head. The posture is intimate somehow, even though they aren’t touching, and the way they’re looking at each other is suffused with the kind violence that only comes from real anger.

I hand the dress to Ash and he hands it to Embry. “Relieve yourself.”

“What?” Embry’s voice is a study in breathless incredulity.

Ash nods towards the dress. “It’s soft, isn’t it? The dress? And Greer looked so beautiful in it, didn’t she? Like a fucking princess, you said when you saw her. Did you think about fucking her in it tonight?”

I freeze. Embry's blue eyes flare with torment.

Ash goes on. "Did you think about what it would be like to rub your bare cock against all that silk before you finally shoved inside her little pussy? About how the silk would feel fisted in your hands while you pinned her to the ground and fucked her?"

"Ash," I choke out.

He ignores me. "She would have liked it, I think. Watching you defile that expensive dress as you defiled her. And it would have felt so good, wouldn't it? All that blue silk and that sweet pussy. The most beautiful woman in the room a slave to your cock."

Embry stares at him. "I know why you're doing this."

"I know."

And that's all there is to it. There's no explanations, no defenses, no logic. It's what Ash wants, and therefore in this scene, it's law.

"Now wrap that dress around your cock and relieve yourself." Ash's voice turns seductive. Dark and tempting. "I bet it would only take a couple of pulls, don't you? And it will feel so good, fucking that dress you've been obsessed with all night. Marking it. It will feel so good to have Greer see how big your cock gets as you pretend to fuck her, how much cum you could fill her with if she'd only let you."

"Jesus," Embry pants, the muscle in his arm bunching as he slowly fists his erection with the skirt of my dress. The silk slides easily over his straining flesh, whispering softly on his cock. "Oh, Jesus." The last word breaks into a moan. His head falls back against the door as he's lost to himself, but he can't resist seeing his cock on my dress, and he looks back down. All three of us watch as it moves in and out of the silk, rude and male against the pretty blue flutters of fabric.

Ash was right, it doesn't take long, and with a shuddering exhale, Embry releases. Thick ropes of cum spray my dress, spurt after spurt after thick spurt, each pulse accompanied by a savage jerk of his hips and a ragged groan. My nipples are so tight it hurts, same with my cunt, and oh God, how I wish Embry's cock were inside me now. That those savage jerks were plowing into me. That all that cum was mine.

After a few more thrusts into the silk, he slows, slumping back against the door, dropping the dress to the floor.

"Don't you feel better now?" Ash asks. "Didn't it feel good to get rid of that ache?"

Embry nods wordlessly, eyes still closed, pulse still hammering in his throat.

"Greer liked it too. Didn't you, Greer?"

My cheeks flush red with shame but I answer honestly. "Yes, Sir."

Embry tucks himself into his pants and fastens them up, running a hand over his jaw. He looks dazed, as if he's just woken from a long sleep, his blue eyes unfocused and his voice uncertain when he says, "I'm going home now."

"Good night, then."

Embry looks at me and then looks at Ash, that dazed expression more pronounced than ever. "Good night."

Ash moves his hand so Embry can open the door, and then Embry leaves, closing the door behind him. Ash stares at the door for a minute and then faces me, his face apologetic. "I'm sorry, angel. But I need your mouth again." His hand is already on my head, forcing me to my knees, and his other hand digging out his cock, and he's so hard already, viciously, violently hard.

Watching Embry made him hard, I realize. And the jolt of jealousy comes concurrent with the jolt of arousal.

Ash doesn't go easy on my mouth, but before he comes, he pulls out and reaches down for me, picking me up easily in his arms and carrying me to the bed. He spreads my legs and drapes them over his shoulders, pressing his hot, skillful mouth against my pussy and devouring me. I come with his dark head and wide shoulders between my thighs, and then he's straddling my chest, fucking my mouth to get his cock wet and then fucking my tits. When he finally comes, his hands savage and bruising as he pushes my breasts around his cock, it's with something almost like a roar, like the orgasm is torn from him.

And later that night, I wake out of a deep sleep to find Ash wrapping my small hand around his throbbing erection. He closes his large hand over mine, guiding me to jack him off with short, hard pulls, the way men do it to themselves. The way men do it to other men. He comes with a quiet grunt, and after I clean him with a warm washcloth from the bathroom, he folds me into his arms and drifts off to sleep immediately, whatever monster he awoke within himself tonight finally, finally sated.

Chapter Twenty

Six Weeks Later

The snow is falling thick and fast outside as Embry walks into the room with a bowl of fresh popcorn. “Can you explain this to me again?” he asks, setting the bowl down on the coffee table in front of Ash and me. “Is this like a Martha Stewart thing? Is this because cranberries are disgusting and serve no other purpose?”

Ash looks up from the cranberry and popcorn garland spilling out of his lap and around his feet, a needle poised in one hand. “Did your family really never do this?” he asks skeptically.

Embry arches an eyebrow at the mess of popcorn and cranberries and thread. “No.”

Ash goes back to his work, reaching into the bowl of warm popcorn to thread another piece onto his garland. “I suppose you and Morgan had servants to decorate your family Christmas tree.”

“Actually,” Embry says, “we did. The trees were too big for us to put up ourselves, and the one in the main hall had to be decorated using scaffolding.”

“Sounds like it would have taken a lot of popcorn,” I comment, not looking up from my own garland.

“The hidden costs of wealth,” Ash remarks drily.

“We did have the mistletoe, though,” Embry says. I glance up at the doorway where our own bunch of mistletoe hangs; Ash insisted on putting it up there the minute we got to the lodge, and then kissed me for several long, sweet minutes underneath it as Embry watched with a troubled expression and his hands in his pockets.

“We need someone to kiss you under the mistletoe, Embry,” I say.

“I agree,” he replies. “Maybe one of the Secret Service agents will be lonely later tonight.”

We all laugh, but a wave of sadness goes through me for Embry. The perennial third wheel. *I’d kiss you if I could*, I wish I could say. Maybe he already knows.

Embry grabs a handful of popcorn for himself and throws his body onto a low sofa nearby, and for a few minutes, there’s only the sound of the fire in the fireplace and the snow against the windows and the rustle of popcorn in the bowl. Then I ask Ash, “Have you heard from Kay about the Carpathian treaty yet?”

He shakes his head. “I told her to give it a rest tonight. There’s no point in her spending her holiday chasing down senators who are ready to enjoy theirs.”

It’s Christmas Eve, and Ash, Embry and I are at Camp David. Kay and Ash’s mother are coming for Christmas dinner tomorrow night, but for now, it’s just us and the Secret Service. Even the nation is quiet right now—there have only been a handful of texts from Kay and Belvedere since we got here this morning. Ash and his staff have been working hard to get Senatorial advice and consent for the new Carpathian treaty, in the hopes of having it inked and signed before spring comes and a land offensive from the Carpathians becomes possible.

Other than the work on the treaty, though, it’s been a quiet December. Quiet for the three of us as well—six weeks have passed without a repeat of what happened between us the night of the State Dinner. We haven’t even talked about it.

But even without talking about it, something seems to have shifted. Embry—widely famous for having a different date for every event—still has a new woman on his arm almost every

night, and there are times he comes into the Oval Office or the Residence with swollen lips and tousled hair, smelling like sex. Knowing he's fucking other women—and lots of them—hurts a secret corner of me that I refuse to let anyone see, but it's a secret corner that's used to it. During the campaign especially, Embry's playboy status was a running joke among pundits, and unlike Ash, he's never brought up his sexual history to me, never made me any promises, and he doesn't have to, because we aren't together. I have no claim to his sex life, and I've accepted that, even though it stings.

Embry's fucking his way through the Beltway elite aside, he's seemed more attached to Ash and me than ever since the State Dinner. At night, he'll leave whatever party or gala he's at and join us at the Residence, freshly fucked and still wearing a rumpled suit or tuxedo, and watch television with us or help me sort through medieval research. On Sunday mornings, he's there next to us in church, and on Sunday afternoons he's stretched out on the sofa in the Residence living room, yelling about football with Ash, and teasing me about Nathaniel Hawthorne or whichever American writer we've decided to hate that day. In the mornings, when I'm getting ready to sneak out of the Residence without being seen, Embry is there with coffee and a newspaper, and the three of us share a quiet breakfast before the sun breaks over the horizon, sipping coffee and waking up for the day. Embry's sewn himself into the rhythms of our days, so much so that whenever he's gone, it feels like something's unraveled.

And through all that, Ash and I still haven't slept together. Something that bothers me more and more every day.

No man can take things that slow, trust me. Not unless he's getting it from somewhere else.

Ugh.

I push Morgan's words out of my head and try to focus on my popcorn and cranberry garland. Try to focus on how happy I am to be here, snowbound and as alone with Ash and Embry as I've ever been. I get to have them both to myself for an entire day and night, and I mean to enjoy every minute of it.

"Anyway," Ash says after a minute, going back to our conversation about the treaty, "I think I mostly convinced the senators we need."

"Convinced is a kind word for it," I tease. He's spent the last five weeks meeting personally with every senator on his list, wooing, cajoling, threatening, leveraging—you name it, Ash has done it in order to keep the United States from going back to war. "I hear some congressmen are actually physically frightened of you right now."

Ash shrugs, but he smiles down at his garland. "Whatever works."

"No work talk," Embry complains, flinging an arm over his face. His voice is muffled when he speaks again. "I hate work."

"Says the man who read my daily briefing out loud to us in the car."

"I did it to stop you from playing more of that awful music," Embry says from under his arm.

"Christmas music?"

A stifled groan. "Yesssss."

"Bah humbug," Ash says, leaning down to bite off the string with his teeth. He makes a knot at the end of the garland and then puts his needle on the table. "Are you going to help us hang these up or what?"

"What do you think?"

But then he heaves himself off the couch and helps us anyway, criticizing our garland placement before pushing us out of the way and doing it himself. Ash laughs and pulls me back,

standing behind me and wrapping his arms around my stomach. He rests his chin on my shoulder. “This should be every Christmas.”

Embry scoffs, long fingers plucking at the garland to make it drape evenly along the boughs. “Shitty decorations and the three of us bickering?”

I feel Ash smile, feel the genuine longing in his voice when he answers. “Yes.”

* * * *

That afternoon, as the snow lets up and the December sunlight begins to wane over the woods, Ash asks me to go on a walk. Embry is stretched out on the floor asleep after a lazy afternoon watching *A Christmas Story* and drinking scotch; there’s a white puff stuck in his hair from when I threw popcorn kernels at him to try and wake him up.

“He’ll be fine,” Ash says, handing me my coat. “He never gets to nap since I forced him to run for office with me. We should let him sleep.”

I pull the coat on and wind a scarf around my neck, which Ash uses to tug me close enough to kiss. “You’re beautiful,” he murmurs. “Even all bundled up.”

I press my lips to his, letting him part my lips with his own. I taste him—all mint and scotch and a hint of popcorn—and sigh happily. But when we pull apart, there’s something resigned in his face.

“Ash?” I ask. “Is something wrong?”

He looks at me for a long moment, his brow creased and that gorgeous mouth turned down at the corners. He doesn’t answer my question. Instead, he says, “Let’s go on that walk.”

After a brief word to Luc, the lead agent on duty, we head out to the woods, following a narrow trail into the trees. The snow is deep and thick, untouched, and walking through it soon has our breath coming out in huge puffs of smoke. Ash looks like a model in his scarf and wool coat, belted jeans and boots. For a moment, I stop walking and just look at him as he continues ahead, long legs making easy work of the snow.

How is this my life? Stringing garlands with the President, watching the Vice President fall asleep like a teenaged boy on the floor? It feels so surreal, dreamlike, like I fell asleep in my office at Georgetown and conjured this new life for myself.

Ash notices I’m not with him and turns to me. “What is it, little princess?”

“Nothing.” I shake my head and smile. “Just thinking about how blessed I am.”

This should make Ash smile in return, make him happy, but instead there’s a new shadow in his eyes. He walks back to me and takes my hand, the leather of our gloves creaking together in the cold. “This way,” he says, pointing to an opening through the trees. “There’s a spot I like right through there.”

We move in that direction and come upon a sweet little rill, lined with ice but still running, tracing a silver path through the woods. There’s a massive stump next to it, which Ash brushes the snow off of, and then we sit together, pink noses and frosty breath, listening to the narrow stream trickle past.

Ash doesn’t speak for a long time, and I don’t push him, even though his uncharacteristic unhappiness has me worried.

Is he going to end things between us?

The thought slams into me like a meteor, sending buried fears and insecurities flying like debris. Is this about Embry? About the glances we can’t help but exchange in the hallways or those mostly accidental brushes of the shoulder in the elevator?

Or was Morgan right? Is he sleeping with someone else?

Oh God, what if it's her?

I knew this was too good to be true. I *knew* it. And I chose to believe anyway, because I wanted it so badly.

I'm curling my fingers against my palms, trying to control the panic racing through me, when Ash finally speaks. "Do you believe we're responsible for the sins of our fathers?"

I'm startled by the unexpected topic. "No, not at all."

"Original sin?"

"As much as I like St. Augustine, no."

He smiles at me, small lines crinkling around his eyes. "You're a bad Catholic."

"I love the Church, but it's hard to convince me that two words can sum up human nature. Especially since Jesus himself never mentioned it."

The crinkles go deeper. "Hippie."

I put my hand on his leg, squeezing the firm muscle. "What's wrong?"

The smile fades and he looks away from me, stretching out his legs, making it impossible for me to keep my hand there. As if he doesn't want to be touched. By me. That meteor is still glowing hot and destructive in my chest, and my cheeks flush red with embarrassment and fear.

"I wanted this to be a happy getaway. Just the three of us, no work or stress. No papers for you to grade. Just us and popcorn garlands and the snow."

"It is happy," I say, trying to search his face for answers. "*I'm* happy. Are you not?"

He lets out a long breath. "No. I'm not."

I'm being burned alive with fear now. There's no way this conversation will end happily, no way he brought me out here to tell me something good. I reach for him. "Ash, if this is about—"

He holds up a hand. "I guarantee you that whatever you think this is about, it's not."

"I don't know," I reply slowly. "I'm thinking a lot of things right now."

He pauses, and then speaks. "It's about Morgan Leffey."

My hand freezes in midair. "What?"

"I know. I know."

I drop my hand, and my voice trembles when I ask, "Are you...are you sleeping with her?"

His head snaps to mine. "Excuse me?"

"Is that why we haven't slept together? Because you're sleeping with her? Because you go to the club with her, and maybe you secretly want someone less submissive in bed and—"

In an instant he's straddling the stump so he can frame my face with his hands. "Angel," he says. "I haven't been to the club since I saw you that Sunday in church. And I certainly haven't slept with Morgan again—and I can vow to you right now that I *never* will. You'll understand why in a few minutes, but I just want you to know right now that you are perfect for me in every way. In bed and out of it."

"Then why are we talking about this?" I whisper.

"We're not. We're talking about the sins of our fathers. Well, just my father, actually."

His father. Penley Luther.

"Merlin told me he explained the whole story to you, except I think...well, I know he didn't tell you the whole story."

I wrinkle my forehead. "There's more?"

He blows out a big breath. "Yeah. One thing more. The name of my birth mother. Do you know it?"

I shake my head. Presidents live on in history books and Vice Presidents live on in crossword clues, but senior advisors certainly don't live on anywhere. Much less a senior advisor that died before I was born.

"Her name was Imogen." He closes his eyes. "Imogen Leffey."

"Leffey," I repeat.

"Yes." He opens his eyes. "Leffey. She was also Morgan Leffey's mother."

There it is. The rumors Abilene and Merlin alluded to. The crucial fact I had forgotten about Morgan at the State Dinner. The fact that her dead mother used to work in the Presidential Cabinet. And that indescribable something I saw in her that reminded me of someone else...it hadn't been Embry at all. It was Ash I saw in her face, Ash's green eyes and black hair and high cheekbones and sensual mouth.

Ash, Ash, *Ash*.

Her *brother*.

"You and Morgan had the same mother?" I ask slowly, numbly. "You're...you're brother and sister?"

"Half-brother and half-sister, yes."

"And you...*you*..."

All the disgust I could ever feel, all the horror and revulsion and judgment, all that and more is in his voice when he answers. "Yes. I fucked her. I fucked my own sister."

He looks up to my eyes, and in those green depths I see wells of self-hatred and guilt so deep they scare me. "I didn't know the truth at the time. I still don't know if she did. What is it that T.H. White says in *The Once and Future King*? 'It seems in tragedy that innocence is not enough'? Well, it's true. She came to visit Embry while we took an R and R in Prague, the first woman out of uniform I'd actually talked to in months, and I pursued her. Fucked her against an alley wall with the Prague castle looking down over us. Took her back to my hotel room and we barely left it the whole week. She was the first woman who ever let me dominate her. Who encouraged it. And I took that encouragement and spent the week using her every way she'd let me."

He chews on his lip, the guilt practically slicing up from under his skin. "So you see, it doesn't matter that I didn't know. I still did it. I *chose* it. I *enjoyed* it. I even had fond memories of it until Jenny's funeral."

I remember Merlin's story. "That's when she told you."

He smiles bitterly. "Yes. The perfect time for her, I suppose. A way to gut me and try to ruin my campaign. But then why take me to the club and try to help me the very next week? Sometimes I think she herself doesn't know how she really feels about me."

"Merlin said her father raised her to hate you."

Ash shrugs, looking down to where the gold of my hair spills out from underneath my hat. He twines the ends around his leather-clad fingers. "That's true. I don't doubt that in the least, but..." a pause "...she hates me because of something else. Something I did in Carpathia."

"To her? But I'm sure you didn't mean to. You helped so many people there, saved so many lives."

He swallows. "I'm not a hero, Greer. I hate it when people say that. I did the best I could, I tried to win battles and save my fellow soldiers and as many civilians as I could, but I did bad things there. All those men I killed...so many...and God, I wish I'd shot them all. *I wish*. But so many of the battles were in villages and towns, we were clearing out places building by building, room by room. I stabbed them. Strangled them. Beaten them to death. At the end of the war,

they'd resorted to using teenagers, just barely tall enough to fit into their uniforms, and not just boys, but girls too. Do you know what it's like to be attacked in the dark, to stab or punch or choke and then get out your flashlight and realize you've just killed a teenaged girl?"

"Ash," I say softly. "I had no idea."

A joyless laugh. "Now you know why I can't sleep."

"So what happened with Morgan?"

He keeps his gaze studiously on my hair. "She came to visit the base a few months after that week in Prague. It was a little outside official channels, but the Lefeys are a powerful family, the kind that can pull strings whenever and wherever they want. And it was a secure base—we thought—before war was declared, before we knew there would be a real war.

"One day...well, there was a town famous for its medieval church nearby, next to a little lake. Morgan went that morning to tour the church, and we didn't think anything of it. Except that evening, we got word that the separatists were getting close, and we had to evacuate the civilians in the town. But we were too late. The separatists got there first. It ended up being the first real battle of what would become the war. *My* first real battle.

"They'd locked up all the men and women they could find in the church while they looted the homes. All the children they'd put on a boat. For security, I think. To keep the adults of the town compliant while they pillaged it, to force the men to join their militia. But maybe there was a miscommunication. Or maybe it was never just for security. By the time we got to the village, the boat was on fire."

My hand flies to my mouth. "With the children?"

Ash nods, grimly. "That's all we knew at first. Hostiles present, civilians locked in the church, children on a burning boat."

"What did you do?"

"I was only barely in command then. Just a second lieutenant. I was so young, and I..." He looks hopeless. "I chose the children. I sent four men to the church. But the rest of us went to the docks. We were dodging enemy fire the whole time, trying to find a couple boats to steal, going across the lake. But we made it. We got to the boat and found an older child fighting off the fire with an extinguisher. We got all seventeen children off safely."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank God."

"But the adults in the church..." his voice is tight, tormented. "I should have known better. I should have realized it was a trap. I should have sent more men. All four killed, and all of the civilians, the church lit on fire. We fought our way to the church, chased off the separatists, and opened the doors to complete carnage and flames. Almost forty men and women shot. Only one survived."

"Morgan?" I guess.

"I knew she was there. I knew the odds of her being in the church were high. But the boat..." Ash spreads his hands out, palms up, as if pleading with me to understand.

"She survived, though. She lived."

Ash slumps those powerful shoulders. "Barely. Shot in the shoulder. She played dead. When we found her, she was underneath two other bodies, unconscious from blood loss and surrounded by fire. When she woke up, the story she heard from the army doctors was that we'd chosen to rescue another group of civilians, even though we knew she was in the church. I don't think any other circumstances mattered to her after that."

"But that's so unfair!" I explode. "Anyone would have chosen the children!"

“Greer, she almost died. It was mere luck that the bullet missed anything vital, and even more luck that we managed to pull her out before the church burned down around her. She would have died because I didn’t properly allocate my men, because I didn’t think about the situation critically enough. Yes, I had to choose those children, but there was a way I could have saved everyone, and I didn’t see it. I was too panicked and inexperienced, and it almost cost her life. Of course she hates me. I knew she was in danger and I chose not to come after her.”

“I still think it’s unfair,” I maintain. “You did the best you could.”

“You’ve been in politics long enough to know that sometimes our best isn’t good enough.”

I turn so that I’m straddling the stump as well, scooting forward so that I can slide my legs over Ash’s legs and wrap them around his waist. I put my arms around him and press my face against his neck. “It’s good enough for me,” I say against his skin. “*You* are good enough for me. Always, always, always.”

He pulls back to look at me, brow furrowed. “I’m telling you that I fucked my sister and almost killed her, and you’re comforting *me*? I thought you’d want to run away. I told you this so that you could...escape.”

I press my hand against his jaw, my thumb touching his lower lip. It’s so soft and firm all at once, just like Ash. Strength and beauty and determination combined into one heady mix. “Is this why you were so unhappy earlier? Because you thought telling me about Morgan would make me leave you?”

He nods miserably. “I’d deserve it, Greer. And I couldn’t let us move forward without you knowing the worst of me. It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“Even if it wasn’t fair, I’d still stay. I’d endure anything to stay. But I don’t see this as the worst of you. These sins are the sins of a good man, not the sins of a cursed one.”

“I feel cursed sometimes.” His lips move against my thumb. “Only when I’m with you and Embry do I feel some sort of sanity. Like there can be good things in life for me, even after all the evil I’ve done.”

“Oh, Ash.” I look up into his eyes. “War may be evil, but you’re not, and if it took killing all those people to bring you here to me, then I won’t allow you to torment yourself with these things any longer. I don’t care what you’ve done, I care what you *do*, and that you’re here with me now.”

He sucks in a breath and searches my face. I see the faint sheen of unshed tears in his eyes, hear the swallow of his throat. “Do you really mean that?” he whispers.

“Yes.” It comes out clear, honest.

The truth of my answer hits him like a bullet to a Kevlar vest. Blunt force, ragged exhale, fractured man. He collapses into me, his arms pulling me so close that I can feel him even through the heavy wool of our coats, and he buries his face into my hair. “What did I do to deserve you?” he mumbles.

I’ll always love the other versions of Ash—the cool-headed politician, the beloved hero-President, the fierce Dominant—but this version? This broken-down, vulnerable man? There isn’t a word strong enough. There’s this vibrating in my bones, in my blood, somewhere on the cellular level, a vibration like every single one of my atoms wants to fly away and fuse to his atoms. This is more than wanting to bleed or bruise or kneel, this is more than listening to the same speech over and over, sacrificing sleep and time to go over policies and strategies. This is wanting to come apart for him, literally. This is wanting to burrow so deeply inside of him that he has to carry me with him forever. This is being flayed open, bleeding, whipped, scourged, just wounds on top of wounds on top of wounds, each wound a whisper of promise.

*you can own me
because now I know I own you
give me more
and I'll give you everything*

And that's when I find the courage to finally say it. "I love you."

"God, those words from your mouth," he says with feeling, moving his mouth from my hair to my lips. "I don't deserve it, but *fuck*, I'll take it."

He kisses me, that trembling honesty heating into a molten urgency. "I love you," he breathes into my mouth. "Surely you already know that. You must know."

"I do now," I pant in between kisses, cursing all the leather and wool that keeps our bodies from pressing together the way I need. But the moment I start rocking my hips against his, he straightens up and smiles.

"I have something for you," he says, biting his lip like a shy child.

"A Christmas present?"

"Yes. I wanted to wait until after I told you about Morgan to give it to you...I didn't want you to think I was trying to manipulate your reaction."

I roll my eyes at his incessant chivalry. "You are so circumspect for a man who spends his nights spanking me until I can't breathe."

"That's precisely why I'm circumspect," he says and slides off the stump, and I immediately miss his warmth. Then I realize what he's doing, and my entire body flushes with hot, happy disbelief.

He's kneeling.

In two feet of snow, he's kneeling.

Behind him, the stream is a twisted silver wire, the trees are leafless sentinels, the snow is a never-ending cloak of glittering fleece. There's color high in his cheeks—from the cold or emotion, I don't know—and he's still boyishly chewing on his lip, nervous and excited. Between his leather-clad fingers is a ring, platinum and diamond, glittering in the fading light.

"I wanted to do this later tonight, but I can't wait," he says. "Greer Galloway, will you marry me?"

My heart thuds painfully against my chest, like it's trying to punch its way out, and I feel my molecules leaving my body, blowing away like leaves before a storm to seek out Ash. Our breath, our life, it's already tangled, and finally, finally, finally I understand what people mean when they talk about destiny. What they mean when they talk about *meant to be*. Why the fairy tales didn't waste time explaining how the prince and the princess fell in love, because all along it was as natural and inevitable as breathing.

I join him in the snow, ignoring the cold, wet bite of it through my jeans. I cup the hand holding the ring with both of my own, and then drop kisses along the exposed line of flesh between his sleeve and his glove. I lift my head, dizzy with happiness.

"Yes."

Chapter Twenty-one

Embry's nowhere to be seen when we get back to the lodge, and after we shuck our coats and unwind our scarves, Ash puts a finger to my lips. I nod to show that I understand, and then he's leading me by the hand through the lodge, back to our bedroom. It feels like sneaking, like we're cheating on Embry somehow by creeping so quietly back to our room, but I have no idea why I feel like this. Ash and I have every right to go to bed together, and maybe hiding it from Embry is the kindest thing to do...given the circumstances.

Oh God.

The circumstances.

I have to tell Ash about Embry and me now. After his confession about Morgan, after his firm insistence that we move forward without secrets, it would be shamefully dishonest of me not to tell him. But if I'm truthful with myself, I recognize that I'm afraid. Afraid Ash will be angry...and maybe I'm a little afraid that he won't be angry enough. I'm afraid Embry will feel betrayed that I told our secret without asking him. I'm afraid that if I admit what happened in Chicago, Ash will suspect I still have feelings for Embry, and that will be the end of any real trust between us. Because really, how can the three of us ever trust each other once the truth is laid bare?

Trust without truth isn't actually trust, I remind myself. And if there's any time to rectify that, it's right now. With a ring on my finger and Ash's confessions still echoing in my thoughts.

But when I walk into our room and Ash shuts the door behind me, he presses his finger to my lips again.

"I've wanted to do this since the first time we met," he speaks, pushing close to me. His erection presses into my belly. "I've been fantasizing about it for ten years."

I take a short, stilted breath beneath his finger. Is he saying what I think he's saying?

His other hand drops down to find mine, to play idly with the new ring on my finger. "It's not going to be easy, being my wife. There will be so much scrutiny and so much sacrifice, and I'll forever be asking you to step between public and private roles—sometimes with no transition or warning. But right now...right now, it's just the two of us. Right now those things are far away. And right now, I'm going to make you completely mine."

I look up into his eyes. "Is it...are we..." I feel like I can't catch my breath.

He grins down at me. "Yes, my impatient angel. I'm not going to torture us any longer."

I drop to my knees. Not because he's going to fuck me—although that's part of it too—but because I love him so much. Because I'm so grateful. Because he's Ash and I'm Greer, and when we're alone, I belong on my knees.

It's as simple and as complicated as that.

He strokes my hair, tangled and messy from the hat I wore outside, and allows me to rub my cheek against his thigh. "My beautiful angel," he murmurs down at me. "My little princess. How have I lived so long without you?"

I don't know, God, *I don't know*, but now that we're together, I don't know how I lived this long either. Survived, yes. But *living*—how did that ever happen before I was able to sit at Ash's feet?

Reluctantly I pull back, bowing my head and placing my palms flat on my thighs. He lets out a long breath, and his hands leave my hair. And then he kneels down in front of me, his hands covering mine, his head ducking so he can meet my eyes.

“Greer, I want to give you what you want. This first time, I want you to let me serve you, and I want you to let me take care of you. There’s no need for our first time to be...well. You know.”

I’m shaking my head before he even finishes. So fucking chivalrous. So fucking wary of himself. It’s both commendable and painfully exasperating—especially now, with my nipples pulled into aching beads and my pussy already swelling with the thought of Ash inside of me. Part of me distantly recognizes that this is a first for him too—he’s been married and he’s dominated in a club setting, but this is the first time he’s ever mingled love with kink, and he wants to make sure that I get both in equal balance.

But still.

“I want what *you* want. You know that you aren’t forcing me, right? You know that I’m not merely playing along? I *choose* this. I choose you. Every time I kneel, I know that I can stand back up, and every time you push me, I know I can say your name and make it all stop. And when you do things to me, I have just as much power over them as if I were doing them myself, because I can stop you at any time. I’m choosing what I want, and what I want is you how you are.”

He’s peering deep into my eyes now, and I hope he can see the truth there, just like he always can. A tiny flume of anger courses through me, and I give it passage through my words.

“You want to know what else I want? I want what I dreamed about ten years ago too. I want to be dragged to the edge of shame and fear and darkness, I want to not recognize myself, and I want you to be the glorious, demanding beast that you are. You want to take care of me? Then fucking own me. Wreck me. Tear me up and sew me back together the way that only you know how.”

His lips crash into mine, a kiss not meant to convey love, but a kind of deep gratitude, a sort of hot joy. “You perfect thing,” he says huskily, his voice already melting into his Other Voice, the one that haunts my sweetest dreams. “You unimaginably perfect thing.”

And with the ease and grace that comes with strength, he rises fluidly to his feet. “Take off my shoes.”

Relief, happiness, *rightness*, it all twines around the arousal, making it sharper and brighter.

I do as he asks, trying to hide my happy smile behind my curtain of hair as I tug at the laces, but he sees the smile anyway.

“Are you a happy angel?” he asks. “Serving me?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“I’m happy when you serve me. It pleases me to see you on your knees.” He resumes his idle caresses of my hair as I carefully lever one shoe off and start on the other. After I finish with that, he bids me to stand up and he starts undressing me, his fingers sliding between fabric and skin and lingering there before he peels the clothes from my body, his eyes hot on every new inch exposed. He strips me like you’d strip old wallpaper or faded carpet to get to the antique house underneath, utilitarian and anticipatory and disdainful and reverent all at the same time. And soon I’m completely naked, shivering in the cold room.

His fingers brush against my nipples and I squeak, my body starving for real stimulation.

He gives a chuckle. “Eager, are we?”

I don't dare answer. Every time I play this game with Ash, it feels like the first time, like I'm peeling back a new layer of myself with every humiliation I endure, revealing a woman pink-skinned and raw and glowing underneath.

"Hands on the footboard of the bed. Legs spread."

I obey, swallowing. I know what's coming next, and sure enough I feel a large hand between my shoulder blades. It runs a gentle, almost exploratory, path down my spine, and then rubs circles on my ass and flanks.

"Breathe, angel."

Crack.

The first one is never that bad. No, the first one is fun in a way, like being scared at a haunted house or jumping into a cold pool on a hot day. Startling, bracing, sending sensation sparking down your legs.

Crack.

Crack.

Crack.

"Breathe," my master repeats.

I breathe in.

Crack, crack, crack.

I breathe out.

"Again."

I breathe again.

Ash deliberately disrupts the rhythm, making sure I relax before he strikes, or that he strikes several times in quick succession so that my body has no choice but to yield to his dominance. Pain shimmers behind my sternum like a living entity, pulling at my lungs and stomach, and my hands shake as they try to grip the footboard. My whole body shakes, and there's heat glowing in my eyes. I'll be crying soon. Very soon.

My feet scabble at the floor as Ash continues his assault, a leg involuntarily kicking up and trying to cover my ass with my foot. Ash pushes it back down with a noise that can only be described as evil delight, and spans me all the harder for my resistance. *Crack* goes his hand, and there's the heavy panting of his breath, and the pain in my chest like a familiar houseguest, rifling through my feelings like a pantry, tossing out fear and anger and humiliation and leaving behind a deep mindlessness that feels almost like bliss. There's only the pain and Ash, and everything else shrinks to a pinpoint and vanishes.

Crack, crack, crack.

And then Ash is folding his body over top of mine, his jeans scratching painfully at my raw ass, his thick cock hard as steel against my flesh. He fists my hair and yanks my head back so he can kiss my cheeks.

No...so he can kiss the *tears* on my cheeks. The visible and undeniable proof of my submission.

In a wrenching instant, his body is gone over mine, and I actually moan a little at the loss. Only to moan again as I feel his mouth somewhere other than my cheek, somewhere much, much better.

It starts with a kiss on my pussy, an almost chaste one, if such a thing can exist. Then it blossoms into wet, warm caresses, his tongue tracing up from my clit to my entrance, firm on one stroke, flat and wide on the next. The pain where I was spanked flares around the hot point

of his mouth like the corona of a sun, like the halo around a saint, the golden thing that highlights the beauty within its circle.

He rubs my back as he tongues me, pets my thighs as if I were a horse that needed gentling, and God help me, I love it. I buck into his touch, practically purring as he runs his warm hands over my abused flesh, and occasionally I hear him chuckle to himself as I get especially eager. The pain subsides, but the bliss stays, and all that nibbling and licking and sucking is stirring a twisting pressure in the cradle of my pelvis. I'm going to come soon, the delicious kind of orgasm that can only happen after pain and pain-triggered endorphins, but then something unexpected happens. Ash's hands come to rest on my ass, and slowly, ever so slowly, they spread my cheeks apart so that I have no secrets from him. I'm completely exposed.

The twisting pressure freezes mid-twist, discomfort and embarrassment managing to gouge their way past the bliss.

"Ash, I've never—"

He silences me with one lick. One brush of his tongue against my darkest secret. The sensation is like nothing I've ever felt, too shallow, too slick, too dirty, too *everything*, and I squirm frantically away from him. A hundred *what ifs* run through my mind, only to be chased away by a fingertip and Ash's stern voice.

"This is *mine*, little princess. My hole. Yes?"

The fingertip is probing. Pushing. Gradually and almost lazily breaching my most elemental barrier.

His other hand comes up to slap my ass, right on top of the spots still raw from the spanking. My leg kicks up and he impatiently pushes it back down. "I asked you a question. Is this mine?"

Oh, the invasion. How small it must look and yet how big it feels. "Yes, Sir," I answer, my voice cracking on the last word.

"That's right," he says arrogantly. "This one and this one" —a finger enters my pussy — "and your mouth. Every hole belongs to me, doesn't it?"

"Y-yes, Sir."

The finger finally tunnels past the first ring of muscle, sinking up to a knuckle. I sputter and pant and kick my legs, and all I get for my pains are more spanks.

"And this ass—this is mine to bite or to spank. And the hole there, that's mine to lick. Mine to play with. Mine to fuck. Isn't that right?"

"That's right," I gasp.

"Mine to show off, mine to display. I could order you to display yourself in the middle of the Oval Office, to pull down whatever pretty pencil skirt you're wearing and have you bend over for inspection, like a prize animal at a show. Would you like that?"

The thought is so degrading, so awful, that of course it triggers a wave of submissive lust.

"You don't have to answer, Greer. Your pussy just answered for me."

I press my face into the bed, humiliated, shaking, on the precipice of orgasm. The finger leaves, replaced by his tongue again, but this time he doesn't stop at licking. This time he pushes the tip of his tongue into the pleated rosebud, sending a frisson of filthy electricity straight to my clit.

The pleasure is undeniable and immediate, but so is the shame, the reflexive resistance. My hands fly back instinctively to push him away, my legs trying to close, and that earns me an angry growl. Ash wrestles my wrists away from myself and kicks my legs back open with a grunt.

"I could fuck you like this," he hisses. "Holding you down. Is that what you want?"

My answering moan fills the room.

His arm wraps around my waist like an iron bar and then I'm lifted bodily from my feet and tossed onto the bed, as if I weighed nothing more than a sack of flour. "On your stomach. Show me your face."

Moving my limbs takes a strange kind of effort, as if the leashed-up orgasm inside my body is weighing me down, but I manage, and there's a moment of unfiltered tenderness when I feel Ash's fingers gently brushing my hair away from my forehead, sweeping it over my head so it won't tickle my face. He drops a light kiss onto my jaw. "Doing okay?"

"I'd do better if you'd fuck me."

He laughs. "I love it when you get desperate. What's your safe word?"

"Maxen."

"Keep it close at hand. We're going to try something new."

He straightens up, and from my vantage, I see his strong and certain fingers as they work his belt open and slide it from the loops. I swallow as I watch him double up the belt and run it through his palm.

My mouth parts, protests rise to my lips. I've never been belted before, never had anything more intense than a hairbrush, but before I can run through my options, before I can rationalize this or ask him to stop or to pause, he lets fly with the belt and a leather stripe of pain hits my upper thighs.

It's agony. It's unbearable. The breath leaves my body as I arch backwards and my mind goes blank. There's nothing but pain, nothing but the sparking static of it, and when I finally draw in a breath, it comes in and back out as a choked sob.

Maxen.

For the first time ever, my safe word is there on my tongue, ready to be spoken.

"Too much?"

He asks right as a shot of endorphins hits my bloodstream, right as a pulse of swollen arousal hits my cunt.

"Don't you dare stop."

The belt flies again, slicing through the air with a whistle, higher up on my thighs this time, on the crease between my legs and ass. A real sob comes out, an actual cry, and I'm writhing and burying my face in the bed.

"Angel."

I sense rather than see his arm pull back, and I know—I just *know*—this one will be on my ass, on the skin already inflamed and welted from his hand. The moment hangs in the air like the belt, and as I draw in another shuddering breath, I realize this is my chance to say his name. My chance to end this.

But I won't.

I press my lips closed, sucking in my crying breaths through my nose. The belt falls, and my lips open right back up in a scream.

All across my ass there's fire, not just where the belt's hit, but *everywhere*, as if the skin ignited under the leather and the flames spread instantly everywhere else. My scream dies into a sobbing groan, the blanket underneath my face is wet with tears, and I'm rubbing my face against it without even knowing it.

I hear the belt drop to the floor. "Oh, Greer."

His voice is as broken as I feel, as flayed raw.

“My little princess,” he murmurs, crawling onto the bed over me. His hand slides between my stomach and the bed, and then I’m turned over as gently as child so that I’m on my back. “Such a good angel. Such a sweet, obedient princess.”

Through my tears, I see his eyes like green fires in the dark.

“Ash,” I choke out.

His head bows and then his mouth is at my cunt, eating me like a man possessed. Wildly, with noises coming from his throat as he tastes me, with the passion of worship. And somehow, magically, my orgasm is fusing itself back together, ten thousand times stronger for all the pain, as if all the nerve endings singing along my skin had now all joined together to sing in pleasure.

My groans turn into moans, moans into whimpers, and I hear Ash say with his lips against my clit, “Come on, angel, take it. Take it from me.”

He slides a finger into my vagina, and then another, and then a third probes at the tight hole underneath, and I explode. Into a tornado of misery and shame and pain and sensation, into a storm of bliss and pleasure so raw and fierce that my womb cramps hard as it contracts. I think I’m screaming again, and I’m definitely crying as this climax tears through me, punches a hole straight through me like a hammer through sheetrock. I can barely see, barely hear, it’s just feel, feel, *feel*, as I come with my skin on fire and my muscles sizzling.

I’m not finished orgasming when Ash moves up over me, one hand working his fly open. He doesn’t bother to undress all the way, just yanks his pants down far enough to expose his cock and then finds my still-clenching hole and presses his tip to it. I’m so wet that he’s able to notch himself at my entrance with no effort, and then he pushes into my swollen pussy with a grunt that curls my toes.

Or maybe it’s his giant cock curling my toes. It’s hard to tell.

He pulls back and shoves back in—it’s a tight, tight fit—and I whimper at the stretching feeling as he buries himself to the hilt.

“Fuck, I’m so hard for this,” he pants. “Feel how hard I am. Feel how big.”

I can, I *do*. I’m impaled on his bigness, speared on eight throbbing inches, and I might as well be a virgin again. It’s the same kind of perfect discomfort that I felt with Embry, a pain that seems to scratch a deep, deep itch on the inside of my body, the kind of pain that draws me towards pleasure almost against my will because it’s so very, very right.

He’s still wearing his sweater over a button-down shirt, and the fabric brushes against my erect nipples every time he thrusts and moves over me, reminding me that I’m naked and he’s not, I’m vulnerable and he’s in control. Sex with Embry was wildfire, uncontrollable lust, two storm fronts colliding in an eruption of electricity and noise. But sex with Ash is different—harder and deeper, more intense and more controlled and more spiritual and more everything else possible, and it feels as though he’s everywhere inside of me, all over me. His hard body covers mine, his marks burn my ass and thighs, his mouth is hot and biting at my neck and jaw and breasts as his cock possesses me from the inside out.

“Am I bigger than him?” he rasps in my ear. “Do I make you come harder than him?”

I forget for a minute that he doesn’t know it’s Embry, that to my Sir, *him* is just a mysterious male-shaped silhouette from my past, and I’m nodding. I’m gasping yes. Yes, yes, it’s all true, because in this moment, there’s no man bigger or harder than Ash. There is no man other than Ash, and he makes me feel like there’s no other woman, as if his entire life and purpose is to hold me down and fuck the life out of me.

He keeps talking; he tells me how beautiful I am, how precious, how good I make him feel. How tight my sweet cunt is, how it squeezes him, how much he likes making my tits move with each shove of his hips, how he's going to fill me up so full that I'm dripping for days.

I reach for him, for his sweater or for his hips, but my hands are wrestled back down over my head, and Ash pins both forearms there with one hand. The submissive pose unleashes something dark in him, some animal intent on ravaging and marking, a monster that saws its perfect dick in and out of me so fast and so hard that a stream of words escape my mouth, nonsense words mixed with uncontrolled noises and grunts, *yes* and *no* and *oh oh oh* and *please more please Sir please please*.

I'm being hammered, I'm completely at his mercy, and he's so big, it *hurts*, it hurts. Even I can't tell if the whine from my throat is pain or pleasure, and then he changes the angle of his hips, and the entire world flips over. Suddenly, like before but even stronger, the pain joins forces with the building orgasm, rendering me senseless. Speechless. I'm nothing, I'm everything, I'm the light and the dark and the air and the void. Strong force, weak force, gravity, electricity, magnetism are all pinning me underneath this violent, tragic soldier, and as he fucks the literal breath out of me and as I see stars and as I squirm in abject pleasure, I know everything is true. String theory, magic, multiple lives, miracles, God, parallel universes, it's all true and it's all real and it's all happening inside me right now at this very instant as my climax detonates like a dying star inside me.

It's not a gratification, this orgasm, it's gospel. It's good news. It's revelation and apocalypse. It's joy and judgment and the answer to every question I've ever asked. Everything in my life has led to this one moment, this one exchange, this one feeling of my body shuddering uncontrollably under Ash's.

"Take it," he's saying into my ear. "Take your pleasure. Take *me*." And I do, I do, I take my pleasure and I take him and I take me, and then like the most poignant sacrifice, like the most tender death, Ash pulls me close, and his body rigid and frozen over mine, erupts inside me. He's got one hand cradling my head and the other holding my hip down, and his mouth hovers above my mouth, so every soft grunt and needy pant is warm against my lips. I feel every throb and every pulse, every hot spurt of him, and there's so much that he's spilling out of me.

He keeps himself buried to the hilt until he's finished, and then he kneels up without pulling out, stroking himself slowly with his tip still inside me, eyes locked on mine.

The act is so biological, so possessive, that my cunt gives an involuntary clench, ready to come again. He shakes his head at that and pulls out, leaning down to give my pussy a reverent kiss before he climbs off the bed.

And then...and then I'm not sure what happens. He turns on a light and somehow he ends up undressed and in bed cuddling me and crooning to me, stroking my arms and hair and back, and murmuring words of gratitude and pleasure—*he's pleased with me*, I think somewhere deep inside myself and the thought makes me happy. But I can't speak. My hearing feels fuzzy, like I'm hearing everything through earmuffs, and my thoughts are nonexistent. Like I'm floating, blank and warm, but I'm also shaking, trembling like a leaf in the wind.

Bit by bit, layer by layer, I swim up towards consciousness.

"You," I murmur to Ash. It was supposed to be *I love you*, but the words are so fleeting and so hard to form.

"You," he says back to me in a voice so filled with love that I ache. He wraps his body more securely around me and pulls the blankets tighter around us. My shivering slowly, slowly stills,

but I become aware of the wet pillow underneath me, my cheeks cool against the air, and realize I've been crying.

Ash holds me as my tears leak out, like a slow, dripping rain. "I love you," he whispers over and over again. "I love you."

Eventually, after a few minutes or a few hours, my tears stop and I feel warm again. I roll over so that I can nestle into him, and he lets out a satisfied growl, as if it made him happy that I sought his comfort. "My princess," he says, holding me tight. My world is this. My world is him. "My angel."

I nuzzle my face against his chest. "Will you hold me for a while longer?"

He kisses my hair. "As long as you want. I could hold you for the rest of my life." He lets out a small laugh. "And anyway, I've never seen someone drop that far and that hard into subspace before. I'm not letting you out of my sight until you've got both feet back here on planet Earth."

Subspace. It's happened a few times after Ash and I have scened together at the Residence, but never like this. Never like a waking blackout, never to where I cry and shiver without feeling either.

But as my mind returns to my body, it also returns to my worries from earlier.

Namely to Embry.

I should have told Ash as he was proposing, before we had sex. I should have told him six weeks ago. I should have told him that day at St. Thomas Beckett. I should tell him now.

"Ash," I say, keeping my face away from his. "There's something I need to say."

"Yes?"

"You're not going to like it."

"Try me."

I have no choice. It has to be done. "You know the man who I slept with before? My first time?"

He stiffens around me. "Yes."

"It was Embry."

The world seems to freeze, time ticking on as everything waits in bated stillness. And then Ash says in a wooden voice, "I know."

He knows.

He knows.

Shit.

Fuck.

He kicks the blankets off his legs to climb out of bed. I feel his warmth pull away from me, watch his naked form as he pads into the ensuite bathroom and flips on the light. I hear the sink running.

Panic squeezes my throat like a sadist, choking off enough air that I feel dizzy, but keeping me conscious enough to witness the almost-certain end of my relationship with Ash.

Ash comes back out of the bathroom with a glass of cold water, which he hands to me. "Drink."

Even though we just had the raunchiest, roughest sex imaginable, I still cover my body with a sheet as I sit up. I drink and he sits on the side of the bed, watching me with his President eyes, the ones that miss nothing. His war eyes. I can't read his face.

I finish drinking and move to set the glass down on the end table, but he reaches forward and takes it from me. For a moment, he looks at the imprint of my lips on the rim of the glass, a muscle ticking in his jaw.

“You know?” I finally ask, my fingers knotting in the sheet.

“I guessed,” Ash admits softly.

“How did you guess?”

He pulls his lower lip into his mouth and then releases it. “Let’s start at the beginning and work our way up to that. When?”

“Chicago,” I answer.

He nods, as if this is confirmation for something he already knows. Maybe it is. Maybe Embry did tell Ash about us, and I just didn’t know about it. He rotates the glass in his hands a few times and then sets it down on the table himself.

“It didn’t mean anything,” I start, but he holds up a hand.

“Don’t lie to me. Please.”

His tone is guarded, but there’s something starkly exposed in his words. As if he wants to beg me for something, but doesn’t know how or what or even why he needs it.

I take a deep breath and start over. “It meant something to me. How could it not? It was my first time, and it was so good—” I stop and pivot, realizing Ash probably doesn’t want to hear about how good that night was. “—But Ash, he never even called me after. I left my number and everything, and I heard nothing for years, not until you sent him to me. It must have been the worst lay of his life,” I try to joke.

The joke falls flat because Ash is already frowning. “It wasn’t.”

“Well, that’s kind of you to say—”

“I’m not being kind,” he snaps. “I know it for a fact.”

I stare at him. “How?”

He runs a hand through his raven hair. “Embry called me that morning, wanted to grab coffee. He wanted to tell me all about this...*angel*...he had in his bed. He thought he was in love, even though it’d only been one night. If I had known that his angel was *my* angel, that it was you, I would have thrown myself in front of a train.”

“But you didn’t know?”

He presses his palms together, fingertips pointing down to the floor, and stares at his hands. “Before he could tell me about his night, I told him about mine. About how this girl I’d met four years before had shown back up in my life. About how I’d been too much of a coward to tell her about Jenny right away, and then she’d discovered it in the worst way possible. I told Embry that this was Email Girl, that those letters I’d kept in my breast pocket all those years in Carpathia had been from her, the letters he caught me reading time and time again. I told him this girl’s name.”

My mind spins. Embry had known my name too. Which meant...

“And after I finished, and tried to be a good friend and ask him about his angel, he changed the subject. And he never mentioned that night again.”

“That’s why he didn’t call, didn’t try to find me...” I trail off.

“How selfless of him.”

“Back to you guessing. How? We’ve never...we haven’t done anything other than what you wanted us to do that night of the State Dinner. We haven’t kissed, haven’t even hugged.”

“I know,” Ash says. He crawls forward on the bed and slowly pulls the sheet down, baring my breasts to him. My nipples harden the minute they touch the cool air. “It was that night that

helped me see it. He was obviously attracted to you, but...well, there was something else there. Something deeper. And after that, you two were so careful around each other. Never getting too close, never talking too long. Never alone. That's what people do when they're in love with someone they shouldn't be, Greer."

"I'm not in love with Embry."

"I told you not to lie to me." The sheet is all the way pulled down now, and then his hand slides up my sternum to circle my throat. He doesn't squeeze or press, but he makes a collar of his fingers, a collar not of leather or metal, but flesh and blood. *You're mine*, the hand says. *You're mine and not his*.

I'm fiddling with my new engagement ring without realizing it, and then his other hand comes down on top of both of mine. "Stop," he says. "You're not giving that back to me. You're not taking it off. As long as you still want it, I will be your husband."

"Yes, Sir," I say, relief pricking at my eyelids. He doesn't hate me now, he doesn't want to end our relationship. If nothing else, I can live with that.

His hand presses at my throat, forcing me to lie back.

"How did he do it?"

"Do what?"

"How did he fuck you that night?" Ash is kneeling over me right now, his cock rock-hard and angry looking. "Did he flip you over so he could see your ass? Take you up against the wall because he couldn't wait?"

Maybe I shouldn't answer that. But I do. "It was...like this. Him on top."

Quick as lightning, Ash is stretching his body over mine, his cock pressed against my clit. I can't stop the moan that I let out.

"What else?" Ash asks. His voice is rough. Rougher than I've ever heard it. And his eyes are so dark, no longer green but black.

"He, um, he sucked on my breasts. Bit them. Like he was nursing, but hard and kind of desperate."

Ash lowers his head and nips at the tender curves of my breasts, sucking and teething and kissing, and within half a minute, I'm panting.

"What else?" Ash growls against my tits. "What else did he do?"

"I didn't tell him I was a virgin until he was trying to get inside. And when I did tell him, he got...*mean*. Like it turned him on too much for him to control himself."

In the here and now, there's a wide cock pushing against my folds and then Ash stabs inside so hard I gasp. "Mean like this?" he asks, punctuating his question with several savage thrusts.

"Yes," I cry out. "There was blood. He liked it. I liked it."

Ash stills, his cock quivering. "There was blood?"

"A lot. It hurt. I came so hard."

"I bet you did," Ash says, jabbing in again. "It should have been me, my cock. That blood and pain should have been mine."

"Everything can be yours now, Mr. President."

"Yes, it can," he growls, rolling his hips and grinding against my clit. I make a low keening noise. "How did he come—on you? Inside you?"

"Inside me," I say, my voice breathless. "He wrapped his arms behind me and put his weight on me. Oh God, yes, just like that."

Ash feels entirely different than Embry—wider, stronger, more deliberate—but in this position, I can so easily summon the memory of Embry’s body over mine. I can so easily pretend.

“I want to feel what he felt,” Ash tells me, his lips against the place where my jaw and my neck meet. “I want to pretend I’m him. Are you pretending, angel?”

“I...I don’t know.” And I don’t. One moment it’s Ash over me, the next moment it’s Embry, and the moment after that it’s both of them, and I’m the center of a hurricane of hands and mouths and eager flesh.

“I believe you,” he says, his hips rolling so perfectly in and out. This third orgasm is like a key turning in a lock; there’s an abrupt shift and suddenly everything in me is open and ready, and the climax rushes in, vicious and cruel, each pull so painful and bright that I can’t catch my breath. It’s my orgasm that sends Ash over the edge, and he gives a rough grunt and releases, this time fucking his way through the orgasm with those slow rolls, his entire body shaking.

And then he moves off me, disappearing into the bathroom and returning with a washcloth. He cleans me carefully, meeting my eyes.

“Are you okay?”

I nod. “Are you?”

“I don’t know.”

He returns the washcloth, and to my great relief, joins me back in bed, wrapping me in his arms. “Are you mad at me? At Embry?” I ask.

He lets out a long breath, his chin resting against my head. “No.”

“But you’re feeling something.”

“Oh yes,” he answers. “Definitely that.”

“Jealousy? Because you don’t need to be jealous, I swear to you.”

“I know you believe that.” A hand sweeps up my back and strokes along my spine. “Jealousy is such a limiting word, isn’t it? Because there’s so many kinds of jealousy. There’s feeling possessive, which I do of you...but then again, I also feel possessive of Embry. There’s insecurity—that maybe Embry was able to give you something I can’t, and that you’re able to give Embry something that will change his relationship with me. And then there’s this strange kind of desire—thinking about you with him makes me hard. I don’t know why. It just does. And I know desire doesn’t always make logical sense, that it’s inherently politically *incorrect*, that sometimes we crave depraved things.”

The hand moves to my hair, loving and lazy and indulgent. “But even knowing all that, I couldn’t have predicted how I would actually feel knowing that he fucked you. Desperate and a little angry and scared and...excited. Jealousy on its own can’t hold all of those feelings, but I don’t know what other word can. So I suppose it’s good enough for now to say that yes, I am jealous. Of both of you.”

I know how that feels, don’t I? To be jealous of Embry and Ash at the same time, jealous of them having each other in a way that I’ll never have, with their war history and fraternity and close working relationship. It’s a circle I’ll never be inside of, and it stings, stings, *stings*.

“Go to sleep, Greer. We have all the time in the world to think about this.”

I want to protest, want to resist him, because there’s no way I can fall asleep after our first time having sex, after he learned about Embry and me. No way at all, no matter how languid my limbs are, how thoroughly and utterly wrecked my body is, no matter how warm Ash’s arms are and how steady and reassuring his breathing is...

* * * *

I wake up alone, the bed cool next to me. Ash must have gotten up to work—is it morning already? I blink at the clock on the nightstand for a moment, waiting for the numbers to make sense. 11:13 p.m. I've been asleep for three or four hours, and my stomach reminds me that I didn't eat before that. I sit up and stretch, and then hunt through the room for pajamas and slippers.

I won't bother Ash if he's working, but I plan on bothering the shit out of some crackers and cheese. I open the door and head out towards the living area, seeing the twinkly-gold light of the Christmas tree spilling out around the corner. There's nothing better than that light on cold winter nights. Cozy and quiet and joyful.

I turn the corner with a smile on my face and then freeze.

Ash is standing underneath the mistletoe.

Kissing someone.

My blood pounds in my ears and my throat is immediately tight with pain, but I can't look away and I can't interrupt. I'm as useless as a pillar of salt, doomed by my inability to look away.

Ash is wearing a thin T-shirt and low-slung pajama bottoms that highlight his flat stomach and narrow hips. His hair is tousled and even from here, with only the light of the Christmas tree, I can see the stubbled outline of a day-old beard. His hand is fisted tight in the shirt of the person he's kissing, yanking that person close and holding them there.

And when they turn I see that the person is—inevitably, fatefully, tragically, wonderfully—Embry. Still in his sweater and jeans, barefoot and rumped, with his hands underneath Ash's shirt and digging into the small of his back.

The kiss is so slow and lingering and deep. They meet and explore, and then their lips pull apart and there's fluttering eyelashes and long breaths, and then they're kissing again. There's both a familiarity and a hesitation there, as if they're relearning something they used to know. Ash will come in, his lips a breath away from Embry's, his body and face painted with longing, and then Embry will press forward, all passion and no thought, kissing hungrily until Ash slows him down, his hand going flat on Embry's chest and his mouth pulling back just the tiniest bit until Embry cools off. And then Ash moves in again, these soft, gorgeous noises coming from his throat.

After a few minutes of this, Embry's hand finds the waistband of Ash's pajama pants and moves down. I can't hear what he says to Ash, but I hear a small groan and I can guess.

And with that groan, my brain sputters back to life like a neglected engine, and I wish I could turn it back off because there's too many thoughts, too many questions, all contradicting each other, all fighting each other.

I'm aroused.

I'm angry.

I'm curious.

I'm betrayed.

I don't ever want this moment to stop.

And seeing this now, in this way, I realize I already knew. Not consciously maybe, but the knowledge was there like a shipwreck waiting for the sands to shift, waiting for me to finally turn my head and see what part of me has suspected from the beginning.

Suddenly what Ash said back in the bedroom makes sense. *Jealousy* is a word with too many meanings. It's a TARDIS of a word, bigger on the inside, a small, mean thing on the surface, but a complicated dance of emotions and negotiations within. I'm suffering with every single meaning of the word *jealous*.

I'm relieved that now I'm not the only one in this engagement that kept an important secret. I'm terrified of what happens next. Because really. What could possibly happen next? This was supposed to be my fairy tale, with me as the princess and Ash as the prince, but there's a third person here, a person we both want and who wants both of us.

None of the fairy tales I read as a girl had three people.

My thoughts are interrupted by another groan from Ash, but he's stepping back and adjusting himself inside his pants. Both men have bee-stung lips and wide, dark eyes, both men seem a little thunderstruck with each other, awed and incredulous and as yet unsatisfied.

"Merry Christmas, Embry," Ash says in a roughened voice.

Embry's voice is husky too. "Merry Christmas."

Ash turns away, his thumb at his forehead and then touching his lips, and Embry stands stock still under the mistletoe as Ash leaves and walks toward the office. He stands there for several long minutes, his eyes on the hallway where Ash disappeared, and then he finally turns around and goes to his bedroom, his hands scrubbing through his hair.

And me, I'm left alone the cold hallway. Confused, wanting, hurt.

Jealous.

In love.

Chapter Twenty-two

The Colchesters arrive Christmas morning, bringing presents (and bags of groceries since Ash's mother refused to let anyone else prepare Christmas dinner.) She and I spend the day in the kitchen while Kay, Embry, and Ash huddle around the table and work. I'm hopeless with cooking—Grandpa had a full-time chef when I was a girl and my meal prep in college consisted of eggs and instant noodles—but even so, she gives me a big hug after dinner and proclaims me “one of the family.” And when she learns that my mother died when I was seven, she holds me tight, smelling like the piecrust she just rolled out and Elizabeth Taylor perfume, and tells me to call her Mama. I almost cry.

The day is so busy from start to finish that I never have time to bring up last night to either Embry or Ash, even though I can feel a kind of fracture in me, a fissure across the surface of my soul, and wisping from that fissure are all sorts of questions. Was that their first kiss? Do they kiss often?

Do they do more than kiss?

Have they fucked before, and are they fucking now?

It's like I woke up and the world was sideways, but I'm the only one who notices. I'm dizzy and fragile and uncertain, while everyone else is as steady and normal as ever. Because the men don't know that I know. And Embry doesn't know that Ash knows about us. And probably there's something else I don't know, and what if it *is* that Ash and Embry are cheating on me with each other?

Is a kiss cheating?

Is it cheating if they haven't fucked each other but want to?

And there go all the different jealousies again, flying like an evil witch's monkeys to swarm my mind, filling my head with memories of the kiss and also images of them fucking. Fucking naked, fucking in their tuxedos, fucking in their army uniforms...

And at one point, that train of thought sent me to my bedroom with the excuse of a headache, although really I had to relieve another kind of ache, rucking up my sweater dress and pulling my panties aside the moment the door closed, coming in less than a minute to the image of those two strong bodies grinding together.

(And of course Ash knew—*somehow*—that I came without him, and I spend that night biting his belt while he switches my ass with nettles he found growing next to one of the lodges.)

The day after Christmas, the world explodes. There's a pipeline leak in central Wyoming, and the day after that, a terrorist attack in Germany. Colombia falls apart, the VA reform bill needs to be reworked, and Ash is set to give an important speech on sex trafficking in front of the United Nations. And suddenly I go from having Ash and Embry all to myself to not seeing them at all. Both are hopping all over the country, both are working non-stop, and the one night I get to spend with Ash, he wraps his arms around me and falls asleep immediately, even before I've had a chance to turn off the light.

Two weeks mostly without him, and I'm a fidgeting, daydreaming wreck, twirling my ring on my finger, sighing at the snow, sleeping in a shirt of his I borrowed and never returned. So when Ash invites me to join him and a few others—Merlin and Embry and the Secretary of State—at a public meeting between the United States and Carpathia in Geneva, I jump at the chance. Maybe I'll finally find a way to extract the answers to all my questions.

At the very least, I can steal another shirt.

* * * *

“Thank you for letting me bring Abilene.”

Ash looks up from his desk, a surprised smile lighting up his face. “You’re awake.”

Air Force One thrums around us, and I’m constitutionally unable to resist white noise and soothing vibrations. Once the plane took off, Ash insisted on tucking me in for a nap in the Executive Suite, a nap that lasted almost as long as the flight itself. I’m currently standing in the doorway holding my briefcase with one hand while the other tries to untangle my messy blond waves.

“I am, and I’m going to get some work done, but I thought I would tell you thank you first.”

“Of course.” He leans back in his chair. “I’ll probably be busy most of the trip. It seemed like it would be more fun for you to have your friend nearby. Speaking of...any chance you’ll reconsider the sleeping arrangements?”

I grin at him. “God, I wish. But Merlin said absolutely under no circumstance could we room together.”

Ash drops his head back against the chair. “You would think being engaged would be enough for propriety’s sake.”

“Apparently not.”

His eyes slide to my briefcase. “What work do you need to do?”

Sigh. What work don’t I need to do? “I’m finalizing the syllabi for my three classes this semester, and pulling together their initial assignments. Plus I told myself I’d work a little more on the book before the semester kicks in. *Oh*, and your social secretary won’t stop emailing me.”

“About the wedding?” His eyes are soft when he says the word, and it drains the annoyance right out of me.

“Yes. She wants it to be as big as the royal wedding. Bigger, if she can manage it.”

“And what do you think?”

“That I don’t care as long as my dress is pretty and I have time to teach.”

Ash looks thoughtful when I say the word *teach*, but he doesn’t say anything. I didn’t ask for his input about me continuing to teach because it felt too much like asking for permission, and I would have done it no matter what he said anyway. I know Ash supports my decision, but I don’t know about everybody else...especially the American public. As far as I know, I’ll be the first First Lady to have a job that isn’t giving speeches or writing the occasional column.

Merlin certainly doesn’t like the perception it sends out, but while I’m willing to wait to move into the White House and willing to sleep in different hotel rooms, my career is not up for discussion. And as far as perception goes, who would have more respect for the White House than Leo Galloway’s granddaughter?

“What do *you* think about the wedding?” I ask.

“Come here and I’ll tell you.”

“I’m not falling for that old trick,” I say, and yet I’m crossing the office to his desk anyway. He spins in his chair so that he’s sideways to his desk, and he pats his knee. I climb up there, all my stress about the work and the wedding dissolving away in the strength of his arms.

“When it comes to the wedding, I want two things,” he tells me, his tone unusually serious. “If you’re not attached to having it in a particular place, I want it to be at the church I grew up going to in Kansas City. And I don’t want to see you the day of the wedding. I know it’s

parochial and a little superstitious, but I want that moment where I see you for the first time at the foot of the aisle.”

“Okay,” I agree, entranced by his solemn mouth. “Whatever you want.”

The solemn mouth breaks into a smile. “Those words are so delicious on your lips, angel. Can I have whatever I want all the time?”

“Of course,” I say, fluttering my eyelashes at him.

“You flirt. What about right now?”

“Yes, Sir.”

His breath hitches as I smooth his tie down his chest. “Go close the door, little princess. I have an idea about what I want at the moment.”

* * * *

Abilene is polished as always in knee-high boots and a cut-out blue dress that only a willowy redhead can pull off, her pretty features arranged into an expression of cool boredom. But I see her blasé facade thin as we’re ushered around by the Secret Service, when we’re surrounded by the most powerful people in the world arguing over who gets the last clementine on Air Force One. She’s eager and girlish, even though she’s trying to rein it in, and nowhere is it more apparent than when she is around Ash.

I’m almost grateful we are taking a different car than him to the hotel; watching her around him is difficult. She clearly lied earlier when she said her crush on him was over, and I’ve clearly been lying to myself that I’m not still insecure around Abilene. She’s so beautiful and so vivacious compared to me, and especially with the mistletoe kiss in the back of my mind, it’s hard not to worry about what Ash really wants, ring or no ring.

We pull up to our hotel, an agent opening the door for us and helping us out of the car, and Abilene looks up at the marquee with a puzzled frown. “I thought we were staying at the Four Seasons?”

I shrug, tipping the doorman as we walk through the front doors. “Merlin asked the Secret Service to float a few different hotel names and go through the process of vetting each one, so that it was impossible to tell which would be picked. He was worried about the Carpathians trying to infiltrate the hotel staff.”

“So you don’t know where you’re staying in a city until you get there?”

“I think this is rare. But Merlin and Ash both worry about the Carpathian president, and they thought this was safer.”

Abilene makes a noise of understanding, and it’s the last time she brings it up.

That night, strung out from jet lag, we get ready for the diplomatic dinner with the Carpathians. The next few days will be filled with negotiations and bickering and barely veiled acrimony, but tonight we’re all supposed to play nice, give the world lots of pretty pictures, maybe a nicely framed shot of Ash shaking Melwas Kocur’s hand. I know how important peace is to Ash, and how tormented he is by the years he spent fighting in Carpathia, so if the one way I can help make this treaty happen is to attend a dinner by his side, then I’m more than happy to do it. But I have no illusions about how congenial or enjoyable the evening will be; I’ve been to enough “bipartisan” events with Grandpa Leo to know that people very rarely lay their swords down for the sake of Italian wine and brandy flambé.

“Is that what you’re wearing?” Abilene asks, stepping out of the bathroom as she fastens her earrings. She’s wearing a skin-tight gold dress with a plunging neckline, her scarlet hair

cascading down in sultry waves, and for a moment, the old fear hits me hard. That she'll always be the sexy one, the lovely one, while I'm stuck as her shadow.

I look down at my dress, a one-shouldered flowing thing, gauzy and with thick bands of intricate detailing around the neckline and hem. It's a color between white and silver, and I liked the way it set off my naturally golden skin and hair when I tried it on.

But now I'm having doubts. "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing," Abilene says in that voice that means there's definitely something wrong with it.

I squeeze past her to go into the bathroom to look in the full-length mirror. I mean, compared to Abilene's long red curls, my up-do does look a little modest. And yes, my dress isn't form-fitting like hers, but I like the way it flows as it moves, the heavy hem and soft chiffon layers giving the occasional hint of my waist and breasts underneath, not to mention the sheerness of the fabric, which can only be seen in the right light or when the dress moves just so. There's a very short shift underneath all the layers of chiffon to keep things from getting too scandalous, but overall it's very sensual, in a muted, diplomatic dinner kind of way.

"It just seems a little flat," Abilene says. "Did you bring another gown?"

"No," I say, suddenly having doubts.

"Greer Galloway! You always have a back-up gown! Always, always!" There's a knock at the door, and Abilene sighs. "I'll get it."

I'm still turning and frowning into the mirror when I hear the door open and Ash's gravelly voice say, "Hello. May I come in?"

I step out of the bathroom to see Abilene standing in front of Ash, staring at him. She's breathing hard, frozen in place, and for a moment, I have the strangest feeling that she's going to take a step forward and touch him. That she's going to try to kiss him.

But she doesn't. After a few seconds, she steps back and lets him walk inside. When he sees me, he stops, his mouth parted as if he was about to speak and then forgot the words.

"What's wrong?" I ask, paranoid that his expression means he has all the same doubts about the dress that I now do.

"What's wrong is that you're fucking perfect, and I want to have you all to myself tonight," he growls, stepping forward and caging me against the wall with his arms. I'm acutely aware of Abilene standing right behind him, watching, and I'm also acutely aware that I almost don't care. "That color makes your eyes look silver. And your skin looks so fucking edible..." He leans down and bites my exposed collarbone, and agonized pleasure spreads through me like a toxin, hijacking my nerve endings and my capacity for higher thought.

But I still manage to put my hands on his chest and give a meaningful glance in Abilene's direction. She's turned away, pretending to go through her clutch, but I know she's as painfully aware of us as my body is of Ash.

Ash looks very much like he doesn't give a fuck about Abilene being there, but he still drops his arms and takes a step back. "I suppose we should get going," he says reluctantly.

"We should," I say, ducking past him to grab my heels and clutch, and as I do, he turns to Abilene.

"You know Embry doesn't have anyone to walk in with," he says kindly. "Would you like to walk in with him?"

"Like his date?" Abilene asks. I think I'm the only one who can hear that note of flat panic in her voice, that tug-of-war between pleasing Ash and having to spend the evening with a different man.

"Embry is an excellent date, I promise. Greer can attest to that."

I send him a sharp look, and he returns it with a mild look of his own.

“Which definition of jealousy did that come from?” I mutter as he opens the hotel door for me.

“All of them.”

* * * *

When we arrive at the ballroom where the dinner’s being held, we meet Embry at the door looking cold and resigned in his white tuxedo. But when he sees me, he straightens up and presses his lips together, as if to keep from licking them.

Ash surprises me by spinning me into a little twirl in front of Embry, as if to show me off. “Doesn’t she look divine, Mr. Moore?”

I can tell by the way Embry’s eyes follow me that he’s able to see my body through the dress. “Good enough to eat, Mr. Colchester.”

And my answering shiver has nothing to do with the cold.

“And Abilene is doing a year’s worth of charity and consenting to be your date,” Ash adds. “So you see, we’ll each have a granddaughter of Leo Galloway on our arm tonight.”

Embry smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Wonderful.” He extends an arm to Abilene, who takes it gracefully, although she looks equally miserable. “Shall we begin?”

Ash and I walk behind them, and Ash leans in to whisper, “You’re cruel to wear this in front of Embry, you know.”

“Abilene thought I should change.”

“You look like a goddess. It’s pure torment to be around you in that thing.”

I stroke my fingers up his bicep. “And what would you do if we didn’t have to be here?”

He flashes a wicked smile. “I’ve always wanted to fuck a goddess in the ass.”

I blush so hard that he laughs. “Stop,” I mumble, embarrassed and hot between the legs. “Someone might hear you.”

“You’re the one who started it. And do you really think I’d be the first world leader to fuck someone’s ass? There’s at least two or three English kings who’ve beat me to it.”

I slap his arm, trying to get him to lower his voice. “Well, they didn’t do it to their wives. And they *definitely* didn’t talk about it in public.”

Ash’s eyes sparkle but there’s a husky catch in his voice when he says, “We really need to raise your comfort level with sodomy. And I can think of a few ways we could start.”

“Also,” I continue in a low voice, making sure my voice doesn’t carry down the long candelabra-lit hallway, “you’re not allowed to stir me up. Because I’m not wearing anything under my dress.”

Ash stops walking, right there in the middle of the hallway. His entire body is a study in masculine interest. “What?”

“It’s for dress-logistic reasons, you pervert. But it does mean I need my body to behave.”

In the blink of an eye, I’m crushed against him, a large hand between my shoulder blades and the other on my ass, pressing my pelvis against his. With my heels, I’m tall enough to feel his swelling erection right against my mound, and it’s enough to make my knees weaken.

“What’s your safe word?” he asks, his breath hot against my ear. I feel the faint scratch of his jaw against mine—even only an hour after shaving, he has a five o’clock shadow.

“Maxen,” I swallow.

“That’s right. It’s yours to say, yours to use.”

I nod, feeling his face against mine, melting into his searing certainty, his undeniable lust. We're alone in the hallway save for the Secret Service agents who are staring studiously at the entrances and exits and not at us.

"Good. Now that's out of the way, know this: your body is mine, and when your body behaves? That means it's obeying me. If I want your nipples so hard I can see them through your dress or your pussy so wet that you leave a mark on your seat, then you'll do it. Got it?"

"And what if I don't?" I murmur in a teasing voice.

He pulls back a little to search my eyes, and then squeezes me when he sees that I'm kidding and not trying to express a limit. "Then maybe we'll revisit our sodomy conversation earlier than planned."

"You can't punish me with something I want."

"Oh," he breathes in my ear, "but isn't that what makes it fun?"

He presses his lips to the sensitive spot behind my ear and then straightens up, taking my hand into the crook of his elbow and starting us down the hallway again. "Just wait until I tell Embry that you aren't wearing anything underneath that dress."

"What?"

Ash smirks. "You didn't really think I'd keep that kind of amazing information away from him, did you?"

I stare at him, puzzled and horrified and—I know, isn't this always the case?—turned on. "Ash...do you really think that's fair?"

"Fair to whom?"

"Goddammit, fair to any of us. We still haven't talked about—"

"And we're not going to here. We will talk, I promise, and we will navigate all this history between us. But for now, don't make Embry suffer for loving you. I'm not."

"He doesn't love me," I protest. (A little weakly because, oh, how the thought of him loving me makes my heart beat faster.) And then I remember the men kissing under the mistletoe. Is that included in the history Ash is referencing?

I open my mouth to ask him, to tell him I know, but then we're at the door to the ballroom and the moment is lost.

Chapter Twenty-three

Melwas Kocur and his wife Lenka are the last to arrive. They sweep in grandly, like movie stars, and even I have to admit, they look the part. Melwas has dark blond hair and a square jaw, his wide face offset by a strong nose and arrestingly dark eyes, and Lenka is a human doll, bird-boned and delicate with a little pointed chin and bow-shaped lips. But also like a doll, she has glassy, vacant eyes, and when they come up to Ash and me for formal introductions, I see that she's been crying.

I look back to Melwas and the way his fingers dig into her skinny upper arm, and I see all I need to know.

The introductions are tedious and time-consuming, because there are advisors and Vice Presidents and Cabinet members, and only a few of us speak Ukrainian and only a few of them speak English, and so almost everything has to go through translation. But I was raised to smile and pretend and find common ground and shake hands and quietly spy, and so that's what I do.

And finally, thankfully, it's time to sit down and eat. I'm seated next to Lenka, with Melwas on my other side, and Ash next to him. The idea, I suppose, was to give Melwas and Ash ample time to informally converse, but the effect is that I'm sandwiched between a human shell and a man I suspect is a monster.

It's not pleasant, but again, I was raised for moments like this. I take a drink of wine to preemptively reward myself and then I turn toward Lenka. "Do you speak any English?" I ask.

Her eyes dart up to me, then back down to her plate. She's barely touched her salad, and a soft roll lies buttered on her plate but uneaten. This makes me profoundly sad for some reason. No matter how dark my life has gotten, I've always seen carbs as one of life's few real gifts.

She finally shakes her head. "No English," she manages.

"I don't speak Ukrainian," I apologize. Dammit, why wasn't my boarding school education more useful? All those hours translating Cicero and Rousseau, and not a single one focused on any language in the Slavic family tree. "And I suppose you also don't speak Old English or Middle English then. But maybe...Francais? Deutsch? Latin?"

Lenka's head snaps up and the faintest pulse of life shows in her eyes. "*Ich spreche Deutsch.*"

I give her a big smile. "*Wunderbar!*" Another sip of wine and a decision to forgive Cadbury Academy a little. "My German is very rusty," I explain to Lenka in German. "I haven't used it much since college, when I transitioned to medieval languages."

"I haven't spoken it in many years either," Lenka says softly, also in German. I recognize instantly that her accent and pronunciation is much stronger than mine.

"You must have learned it very young. You sound almost like a native speaker."

Lenka picks up her fork and pokes at her salad. "My grandmother was German. She looked after me while my mother worked, and I grew up speaking both Ukrainian and the language of my mother's family. But," she shoots a glance across me to where Melwas and Ash are talking in a mix of Ukrainian and English, "my husband does not like for me to speak in German because he doesn't understand it."

"Will it bother him to know we're speaking in it now?" I ask as gently as I can.

She gives a small nod, swallowing. The action looks almost painful given how slender her neck is.

“But surely he would be proud to know that his wife was performing her diplomatic duties so well,” I say.

She looks confused.

“Think of it. Here you are, charming the soon-to-be First Lady, who will go back to the President of the United States tonight and tell him how kind and intelligent the Carpathians are,” I explain. “You are proving what an asset you are, what special gifts you bring to his position.”

“I did not think of it like that.” She chews her lip for a moment. “But perhaps my husband would not like you to be charmed. He might think that I have undercut his power, his wish to make the Americans afraid of him.”

“Do you want me to act intimidated instead?” I ask honestly. “I can. No one will know but you and I.”

“You’d do that for me?” she asks, those doll-blue eyes disbelieving. “But why?”

“Even if our countries are barely at peace, I think loving a president puts us in a very small club. I think that makes us friends. Don’t you?”

“I don’t know,” she says uncertainly. “I don’t have very many friends.”

I reach under the table and squeeze her small hand. “You have one more tonight.”

And for the first time, I see a tentative smile on her face. It’s gone almost immediately, but it was most definitely there and I reward myself with more wine.

After dinner, there are a few requisite speeches and polite applause, and then the dancing is set to begin. I’m to dance with Melwas and Lenka with Ash, and she’s shaking as we stand up.

“I’m not sure what you’ve heard about my fiancé,” I tell her in German, “but he is very kind. Unfortunately he is a miserable dancer and you will have to protect your feet.”

This wins me another smile. “I will try.” But the smile quickly fades. “My husband...he can be unkind. I am sorry in advance if he’s unkind to you.”

“It’s not your fault if he’s unkind. Nothing he does is your responsibility,” I tell her seriously, searching for precisely the right words in German to express this. “And I promise when it comes to your husband, I can take care of myself.”

“You may think that now,” she says sadly, “but he has a way of getting what he wants when it comes to hurting people.”

And at first, I think she’s wrong. Melwas leads me out on the floor as Ash and Lenka take their positions, and there’s nothing but charm on his face as he takes me in his arms and we begin dancing. In fact, he’s a very good dancer, and for a minute or two, we are so focused on dancing and maintaining smiles for the photographers that we don’t converse. But just as I’m beginning to relax, he speaks.

“You are a very beautiful woman,” he remarks. His English is remarkably clear. “Your President Colchester is a very lucky man.”

“Thank you,” I answer politely. “But I consider myself equally lucky.”

“Do you now?” His wide forehead wrinkles in mock-puzzlement. “But of course! The great American hero, the soldier no one could defeat. They say that America never lost a battle when he was there on the battlefield. Is that true?”

I don’t like where this conversation is going. “You tell me if it’s true,” I say, pleasantly enough to mask the challenge in the words.

“You know, he and I once fought face to face,” Melwas says, steering me expertly into an elaborate spin. There’s impressed applause around us as he guides me back into place. “A small village called Glein. And he was willing to let a church full of civilians burn that day. That

doesn't sound very heroic to me, but then again, maybe you Americans care more about winning than how you win."

I can't help the itchy hot indignation that prickles across my skin, and frankly, I don't want to help it. "Are you saying their deaths are on President Colchester's hands and not on the men who shot them? On the men who lit a boat full of children on fire?"

To my surprise, Melwas smiles widely. "You've got spirit in you. I like that in a woman."

I think of Lenka and seriously doubt that.

"So if you were there," I continue, "were you the one who gave the order? Did you personally shoot any of the civilians? Set fire to that boat?"

"Do you think I'm such a monster?"

I think of Lenka. I think of the treaty. I think of the mental chessboard my grandfather taught me to hold in my mind as I spied for him, and yet I throw it all out in favor of honesty. "Yes. Only monsters try to kill children, President Kocur, and a real man wouldn't pass the blame onto someone else."

Anger flashes quick on his face at the dig at his masculinity, and his shoulder tenses under my hand. "You test me, Miss Galloway," he says, and his hold on me tightens. "Do you also test your hero in this manner?"

I lift my chin. "I don't need to."

"You know, if you were my wife, I'd make sure you never talked this way to me again." He yanks me close to him and I stumble with a small gasp. "And I would enjoy giving you that lesson very much."

Another yank and I feel him. Feel *it*. He's hard.

If I ever wanted to know if there was something wrong with me, if I ever felt confused by the dynamic between me and Ash, all of that blurriness is wiped away. I see it clearly now, the difference between consensual power exchange and the actual violence men can do to women. I know immediately what Melwas means by *teaching a lesson* and it wouldn't be playful spankings bounded by a safe-word and affection. All I feel at Melwas's words is nausea and the urge to run.

I try to pull back, but he doesn't let me, making sure I feel exactly how much stronger he is than me. "I didn't mean to be ugly," he apologizes suddenly, as if struck with a sudden mood swing. "Not to such a beautiful woman. Perhaps you could visit me tonight, and I could make amends."

I refuse to struggle against his hold, even though the erection pressing into my stomach is triggering all sorts of instinctual alarms. I look him in the eye. "You know that won't happen."

He gives a shrug that is so very Slavic. "Maybe not tonight. But someday I'll see what the great hero gets to enjoy every night."

He's jealous of Ash. It's so obvious that I'm surprised I missed it, but it makes so much sense. Melwas fought in the same war, emerged as his fledgling country's ruler, and yet outside of Carpathian borders, Ash is the one venerated like a saint.

"And your wife?" I ask, looking over to Ash and Lenka. Lenka is leading Ash through the steps, and they're both laughing—the smile and color in her cheeks doing wonders for Lenka's beauty.

I feel rather than see the irritation run through Melwas' body, although I'm not sure if it's at Lenka's happiness or the fact that Ash is the one giving her the happiness.

"She has no say in these things. I've made that very clear to her."

Poor Lenka. Does she pretend not to see Melwas with other women? Or is she secretly relieved that she alone doesn't have to bear the brunt of his lust?

And then for no reason at all, I think of Embry and Ash under the mistletoe, Ash's fist in Embry's shirt and my heart pounding in the dark. Am I like Lenka? Standing passively by while my partner cheats on me?

The thought is like a tuning fork, humming along my bones, deep into my teeth, and all of my priorities fall right back into order, and I'm Greer Galloway again, the professor, the spy, the political princess.

"I suppose you have made that clear to her. And I will make it clear to you—I'm not interested. Tonight or ever."

"A challenge," he says, his accent growing thick. "I have not had a challenge in a very long time."

"You will lose," I say, and I say it with such certainty and calmness that it throws him. His grip on me loosens.

"May I cut in?"

I look up to see Embry next to us, unsmiling and warlike, all of the meanings of his interruption obvious.

Get away from her.

She belongs to someone else.

I'm not afraid of you, and I don't give a shit about diplomacy.

I don't think Melwas really gives a shit about diplomacy either, which he makes apparent by stepping forward and pointedly adjusting his tuxedo jacket to cover his erection. Embry sees this, his face contorting into an expression of wolfish rage, and for a minute, I wonder if he's going to take a swing at the Carpathian leader. But then Ash and Lenka are coming up to us, and Ash is saying something in Ukrainian as he bows and kisses Lenka's hand and then gestures to Melwas.

Lenka giggles. *Giggles*. And the sound jars Melwas out of his locked stare with Embry. He says something brusque and demanding in Ukrainian and then stalks off the dance floor, Lenka scurrying after him.

"I'm going to kill him," Embry says quietly once they're gone, his hands curling into fists.

Elsewhere, I see other couples spilling onto the dance floor, more or less oblivious to the crisis that was just averted by a giggle. Adrenaline is pumping through me like I've been fighting, like I've been attacked, and Ash steps to me and takes my head in his hands.

"Are you okay?" he asks seriously, searching my face. "I came over as soon as I saw something was wrong. I'm sorry I wasn't there to help you when you needed me."

"I'm okay." I take a deep breath and realize my hands are shaking. "He...it doesn't matter. I'm fine, and I didn't need help."

"You're not fine though," Embry hisses, turning to Ash. "Did you see how he was holding her? Touching her? We can't let him near her again."

Ash looks at me thoughtfully, on the surface all cool analysis while Embry seethes and mumbles threats next to him. But when I meet his eyes, there's nothing cool or composed in their deep, clear depths. In them, I see the soldier. I see lead and fire and blood.

"He wants you," Ash says finally. "That much is clear. I'm doubling your security for the duration of your stay, and you tell me the moment he says or does something untoward again. Understood?"

"I can take care of myself," I say, a little snappishly. "I don't need you to rescue me."

Ash looks impatient. “This isn’t a game, Greer. You were just sexually assaulted by the leader of a country hostile to ours. Like it or not, you are an extension of my office now—your safety and the safety of our country are intertwined, and aside from all that, you are the most precious possession of my heart. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

I don’t even know why I’m so riled up right now, so peevish, because none of this is Ash’s fault, but I bite off a caustic, “I’m not anyone’s possession” and glare at him.

And then he’s leaning into my ear, his hand on the small of my back. “That’s right, you’re not my possession. You’re going to be my *wife*. My wife who kneels at my feet, who presents her cunt to me without question when I demand it, who trusts me with her heart and soul and future. You think it’s *either/or* that you belong to yourself or belong to me, but I’m telling you right now that it’s *both/and*. You belong to yourself *and* you belong to me, and I don’t fucking care that it seems like a contradiction because we both know it isn’t. Now if you can’t accept that, then say my name right now and we will step back and renegotiate our relationship. But if you are willing to submit to the fact that I will move fucking heaven and earth to keep you from harm, then say *yes, Sir*.”

My irritation leaves instantly, my emotions taking a crash as the adrenaline in my blood begins to plummet down to pre-Melwas levels. “Yes, Sir,” I say, feeling instantly guilty for taking out my fear and anger on him. “I’m sorry, Ash. I’m not angry with you. I’m just shaken up.”

“I know.” He gives me a lingering kiss on the lips, parting them with his own and sliding his tongue inside my mouth. I taste mint and whiskey and Ash. “I love you,” he whispers, pulling back. “I have to go talk to Merlin, though. This...complicates things.”

“Please don’t let me undo all the work you’ve done for the treaty,” I say, instantly filled with unease.

“You haven’t done anything wrong,” he says flatly. “This is on Melwas. The treaty must go forward, but I think more precautions need to be put in place immediately. Stay with Embry—you don’t leave his side, got it?”

The irrational desire to pick a fight with him has disappeared. “Got it.”

He gives me another quick kiss and then he’s off to find Merlin.

Chapter Twenty-four

“Shall we dance?” I ask Embry, taking one of his still-fisted hands in both of mine. He still looks like he’s squaring off for a duel, and people are going to notice soon if he doesn’t stop.

“Dance?” he asks blankly, like I’ve just asked him to donate a kidney.

“We are still on a dance floor,” I point out. “And we still have to pretend that we’re here for diplomacy.”

“I guess,” he scowls.

“Come on,” I coax, sliding a hand up his shoulder to his neck. I did it to make him dance, but the second my hand touches his neck, I realize what a mistake it was. It’s the first time I’ve really touched him since he came to my office at Georgetown. Firm, deliberate touch.

And it’s the first time he and I have been mostly alone together, without Ash.

His lips part and his pupils dilate into black pools of lust. I make to drop my hand, but his hand covers mine, and he moves it back up to his neck as we slowly start dancing. Both of us are good enough dancers that we don’t need to pay attention to the steps or the music. “That feels good,” he murmurs. “Having your hand on me.”

I want my hand to be everywhere on him—his flat abs and curved ass and thick penis—I want him trembling underneath my touch as sweat springs up on his forehead, I want him so desperate for me that he can’t form words, I want to sit on his face and have him eat me while he reflexively tries to fuck the air.

The brief fantasy is so vivid and so unlike me that I have trouble catching my breath. Is it possible to be a different person with two different lovers? For a woman to be different with one man than she is with another? With Ash, I never want anything other than what we have. But for some reason when I think of Embry, I think of him moving beneath me, of blind passion without negotiation, him sometimes rough and fast and me sometimes cruel and teasing. Not a power exchange, but a power dance, back and forth, side to side, mindless and spontaneous.

“You okay?” Embry asks, eyebrows slanting together, and I snap back to reality, my cheeks warm.

“Yes,” I say, and then add quickly, to steer us away from more dangerous topics, “Where’s Abilene?”

Embry sounds weary, not sarcastic, when he answers. “You mean my date?” He tilts his head to the side, and I follow the gesture, seeing her dancing with one of the men from the Carpathian delegation. He can’t stop staring down her dress, and there’s a certain satisfaction on her face that I can’t quite read. “I hope she’s having fun,” I say. “I hope they hit it off. But I am sorry she wasn’t a very good date.”

Embry looks down at me. “I’m afraid I wasn’t a very good date either. The whole time I was wishing I was with someone else.”

My throat tightens. Does he mean me? Or Ash?

Does it matter?

“I told Ash about us,” I blurt out for no reason. Well, no reason other than the thought of him longing for Ash’s touch across the ballroom sends electricity skating across my skin, almost more than the thought of him longing for me does. Electricity quickly followed by betrayed anger.

God, what the fuck is wrong with me that I’m turned on and jealous at the same time?

Embry sighs. "I know."

"Have you guys talked about it?" I ask. "I feel like it's this big thing looming over us, the fact that I've slept with both of you."

He looks miserable. "I feel like that too. And no, we haven't talked about it much. He told me on Christmas Eve. He told me that he knew and that he was jealous and that..." He stops, his vision growing hazy and his skin hot under my touch, and I realize he's remembering the kiss. My skin also gets hot as I remember it. "Anyway, we haven't had a chance to talk since then. So I don't know where we stand."

"Neither do I," I say.

"And sometimes he'll say things—like he's trying to needle me or test me. Or maybe torture me."

"Like what?" I ask, puzzled.

Embry's eyes close, his skin still impossibly hot. "Like that you're not wearing anything underneath your dress tonight."

My breath stutters and he opens his eyes.

"Do you know what it's like," he says in a hollow voice, "to have him tell me things like that? Or to be in the same building and know that, at that very moment, he's inside you? Or to remember what you taste like and not even be able to hold your hand?"

"Embry," I whisper.

"I couldn't go back to you in Chicago, not after he told me about seeing you. You know he read those emails every day? Rain or snow, hot or cold, on base or sleeping on rocks and pine branches. I'd find him with his miniature flashlight in his teeth and his hand on his belt. I'd hear him grunting in the shower stall next to me and know he was thinking of you. That went on for years...and then to find out this mysterious email girl was *you*. The girl I'd decided to marry after less than eight hours together."

The girl I'd decided to marry...

His words sink like anchors, finding my most vulnerable depths, but I push them aside as typical Embry hyperbole. I have to. The alternative is taking them seriously, and if I take those words seriously, I might fly apart.

"I thought you didn't want me," I say slowly. "It...well, it hurt a lot. For a long time. Because I gave you something, and I don't mean my virginity necessarily, but myself; you were the first person I allowed myself to be vulnerable with. That I exposed my heart to. And then you just vanished, like it had meant nothing to you."

He gives an empty laugh. "You thought I didn't want you...Greer, I burned with wanting you."

My stomach flips over.

And then his lashes lower. "I still burn with wanting you."

"Don't do this," I beg. Because if he says the words out loud, if we drag this out into the open—

"I can't pretend any more," he croaks. "I thought it was just an infatuation—who wouldn't be infatuated after a night like we had? But all the time I've spent with you these past few months has made me realize it's worse than that. I'm in love with you. I'm consumed with you. And I'm in hell watching you with Ash."

I look away, fighting the pain in my throat. He's in love with me. And I think I might still be in love with him. Which puts us both in hell.

“But all the women...all those dates...” I can’t keep the pain and jealousy out of my voice, even though I’m desperate to. I keep my eyes on the other dancers, trying to distract my mind from the endless rotation of longing and betrayal. I see Belvedere dancing with Lenka, Melwas talking with our secretary of state, no trace of Abilene, who must be off grabbing a drink with her new acquaintance. But even an entire ballroom of political leaders can’t keep my eyes from sliding back to Embry. His sharp jaw and high forehead and invitingly wicked mouth, which is currently tight with emotion. “I just didn’t think you could want me if you were fucking all those other women.”

He looks at me helplessly. “I *ache* with wanting you. All the time. And at the end of the day, you two get to go fuck, and I have to know about it.” His voice grows frustrated. “Don’t I get something to take the edge off?”

A childish part of me wants to stamp my foot and yell “No!” Which is ridiculous and selfish for every reason under the sun, especially if he loves Ash too, if he’s aching for two people instead only one. I don’t answer him because I can’t answer with the thing I should say, which is *do what you want*.

“I won’t any more,” he breathes suddenly, “if that’s what you want. I won’t see anyone else. I won’t fuck anyone else. I’ll be completely celibate so that you can know exactly how fucking lost I am to you. Oh, Greer, please. Please just tell me if you feel the same way. Tell me this is eating you alive too and that I’m not alone.”

I should lie. I should lie and tell him that I don’t love him, that I don’t want him, that being around him isn’t torture. Because I see in the flutter of those long eyelashes and the agony written on his Darcy-esque brow that despite the carefully applied veneer he’s adopted as Vice President, he’s still no more in control of his emotions than he was five years ago. His passions and urges master him, drown him, and I see now that Ash has been trying to protect him. That he tells Embry things about me not to torment him, but to share what he can of me. To help soothe the constant storm contained inside this beautiful, vulnerable soul.

Don’t make him suffer for loving you. I don’t.

Ash knew all along. Ash always knows. And instead of reacting in any number of fair or understandable ways—with demands or denial or coldness—his reaction instead has been to be honest about his feelings. To share. To stay and not pull back. To remain in a relationship with a best friend and a fiancée who secretly love each other.

All of a sudden, my heart hurts for Ash most of all. As if it weren’t enough to be President, to have to shoulder the burden of us, Embry and me, and still remain loving and honest as he did so?

Well, honest about everything except whatever exists between him and Embry.

I feel impaled with all these contradictory feelings, and I can’t fight it any more.

“Yes, I love you,” I admit brokenly. “I fell in love that night in Chicago and I couldn’t stop being in love, even after you abandoned me. I couldn’t stop being in love with you even when I started seeing Ash. Yes, I want you. All the time. I want you both, I want you and Ash, and I can’t stop myself from all this wanting, even though it’ll damn me to hell. And I almost like it when you fuck all those other women because it gives me a reason to hate you, to feel like, just for a moment, I’m free from loving you. But I’m lying to myself. I’m never really free. You could walk in smelling like another woman—*tasting* like her—and if I could, I’d still throw myself at your feet.”

I can see that I’m hurting him, every word a slice across that beautiful face as we whirl across the dance floor.

“It makes me desolate, Embry, hollow and hurting and I hate myself sometimes but I can’t stop wishing for you. I feel like a liar. Like a snake or a...I don’t know, a man eater or something.”

That coaxes a faint smile to that perfect mouth. “I don’t think you can be a man eater if you only eat two men.”

I look up at him and at that smile, and my courage finds me.

Now.

Tonight.

It can’t wait any longer.

“I saw you and Ash on Christmas Eve.”

He actually stumbles as we dance, missing a step and quickly correcting himself. “What?”

“Under the mistletoe. I had been asleep, but I woke up and decided to go find something to eat...and instead I found you kissing him.”

He lets out a breath. “Greer. Wait. It’s not...”

“It’s not what I think?” I look up into those blue eyes. “The two men I love aren’t also in love with each other?”

Eyelashes down and then back up. “I don’t know if he loves me,” Embry says, as if that’s a real answer. “And it hasn’t happened since. Or before. I mean, before like when you and Ash were dating.”

“So it was the first time since Ash and I started dating. But you have kissed before that?”

“This really should be something you and Ash talk about,” Embry says, and there’s a wild discomfort in his voice, the repressed panic of a cornered animal.

“But it’s your story too,” I point out. “And now it’s mine. I deserve to know, Embry. We haven’t so much as talked about the weather without Ash in the room, but you think it’s okay for you two to sneak off and make out in the dark?”

The words are angry. Hell, I’m angry all over again.

“No,” he says wretchedly. “It’s not okay.”

“Then tell me the truth! Don’t I at least deserve that?”

He gives a ragged sigh. “What do you want to know?”

“All of it. Everything. Why you kissed that night. Your first kiss. If you’ve fucked. If you still want to fuck.”

The expression on his face is a mangle of panic and apology and lust, and on him, it looks beautiful. Sensual and haunted. Before I can stop myself, I slide my hand up to his face, my fingertips ghosting across his perfect cheekbones and chiseled jaw. He swallows.

“It started in Carpathia,” he says. “In the village of Caledonia. Do you remember it?”

“The battle where he saved you.”

“It wasn’t a battle. Not like you’d normally think of. It was almost a massacre, a complete ambush. The village was evacuated, and we thought it was empty. Our plan was to establish a presence there and then begin moving up the valley, to where we thought the Carpathians were encamped.”

“But they were there.”

“They were there,” Embry confirms, his face shadowed with the memory. “They waited until we were doing a building check, this apartment tower, and then they started picking us off. We sheltered inside to fight back, which had been their plan all along. You couldn’t walk through this place without tripping claymores left and right and they’d taken out the windows on the lower floors so they could shoot in grenades.”

“Jesus Christ,” I say, shaken. It’s one thing to watch war on television, to listen to the generals testify in Congress, to read articles from embedded journalists. But to hear a soldier speak about it is such a stark reminder that all those explosions and fires, all that rubble and broken glass—that happened around people. *To* people. Real men and women, dead or injured, exposed to the most depraved barbarity imaginable.

The music changes to a slow waltz, and Embry unconsciously changes his steps to match the music. I follow suit, and he keeps talking. “Ash saved us. He was the only one to think of the elevator shafts. Everyone wanted to go up to the roof, wait for a helicopter, but Ash insisted it was too dangerous. What if a Carpathian helicopter came first? He sent everyone down to the service floor and told them to go out the basement windows, but only if they faced the forest and only once he said so.”

“What happened?” I ask, as caught up as I would be if I didn’t know the end of the story.

“I got shot,” Embry says with an unhappy shrug. “Ash wanted to be the last one down the shaft, and I refused to let him wait alone, and then the Carpathians began shooting their way into the building. Ash called for the troops downstairs to take their chance and escape into the forest, and then told me to get down there. I wouldn’t, not without him, and then the Carpathians appeared. I got a bullet to the calf and another in the shoulder—which meant no climbing down the elevator shaft. Ash pushed me behind him and fought off the Carpathians until I could crawl to the stairwell. And then...well, I suppose you know the rest. While I was a useless pile on the floor, Ash managed to keep the Carpathians off of us long enough to discover an outside exit on the ground floor. He carried me out and we managed to get to the forest.”

I relax a little, and then remember my original question. “But what does this have to do with you and Ash being together?”

Embry glances away from me, not out of avoidance or embarrassment, but as if he’s searching for the right words to explain something. “There’s kind of a...high...from fighting like that. Cheating death. It’s the adrenaline, I think. For some people, it slows them down, makes them dazed. Other people get amped up, like they can’t stop talking or laughing or moving around. But not Ash. It makes him restless in a different kind of way. It—it makes his blood hot.”

Dark spots of color appear high on Embry’s cheekbones, and I realize that he’s *blushing*. He’s also gone someplace deep inside himself, remembering something that makes him tremble a little under my hands. “Embry?”

His gaze snaps back to mine, his eyes going clear again but his cheeks still flushed. “He saved my life. I wanted to show him how grateful I was.”

“Oh,” I say softly, feeling my own cheeks warm as I imagine the scene. Blood and torn fabric and Ash’s hard body pressing Embry’s into the ground. “Did you fuck each other?”

“He fucked *me*. A few times. Once wasn’t enough to calm him down.” A harsh laugh, but the harshness isn’t only bitterness, it’s need and sarcasm and regret. “He screwed Morgan a few years before that and then he screwed me. Like *Brideshead Revisited* in reverse. Except we make the Marchmains look like the fucking Brady Bunch.”

“Did you like it?” I ask a little breathlessly. I don’t know why I need to ask, why I need to know, but I do, I do. “Did you come?”

“Would you believe I came as many times as he did? With a bullet in my shoulder and morphine burning through my blood? The first time I came almost immediately, rubbing against the rucksack he’d bent me over. And when we got to base...it kept going for a while. A couple years. And then he met Jenny...” A long breath. “And then after Jenny died...”

My mouth goes dry. “You fucked after Jenny died?”

“Several times. Until this fall. That’s when we stopped again.”

“But he told me...” Tears burn at my eyelids “He lied to me. He said that he hadn’t been with anyone since Jenny died.”

“Did he say that, or—” Embry’s voice is careful “—did he say that he hadn’t been with any women?”

I try to find my breath again, but it’s somewhere down at my feet. “Yes. That. No women.”

Embry searches my eyes. “Are you upset?”

“That you slept together? Or that you guys have been on and off again for nearly a decade and I had no idea?”

“Either. Both.”

“I’m angry that you and Ash haven’t told me about your history. I’m torn apart with jealousy to think you two have been wanting each other while I’ve been here.” I lower my voice. “And I’m shaking with how hot it makes me to think about the two of you together. I wish I could have seen it. I wish I could have been there, taking you in my mouth while he fucked you. I wish I could have seen his face as he came.”

“Jesus, Greer.”

The stark arousal in Embry’s voice is ragged and hungry, and I’m trying to fight off my own hungry reaction. But I can’t—not entirely. I make sure to press against Embry as the dance brings us closer, confirming what I suspected: he’s rock hard.

He gives a soft, surprised grunt as my body grazes his erection, and his eyes are hazy once more. “You guys do that to me and it’s so confusing.”

“Do what?”

“You—you mix up my feelings for you and Ash. I get hard thinking about him, and then you touch me. Or I’m aching at Camp David listening to you scream for him, but then he’s the one who comes out and kisses me. I can’t keep track of what or whom I want any more. I just...*want.*”

I grip his tuxedo lapel, both excited and a little frightened that he’s just articulated something I haven’t been able to articulate for myself. “That’s what’s happened to me.”

Those aristocratic eyebrows rise in happy astonishment. “Really?”

“Really. From the beginning, even, I couldn’t separate wanting you from wanting him. When we had sex in Chicago...well, part of the reason I did it was because I was hurting so much about Ash.”

“Me too,” he confesses.

I look at him in confusion, and then I remember that night on the Ferris wheel, his broken voice.

They aren’t my someone. No matter how much I plead, no matter how much—how much I give of myself.

“Do you think he knows?” I ask. “That we both love him so much that we ended up falling in love with each other?”

Embry sighs. “Would it change anything if he did?”

We move again for the dance, my hip brushing past his penis again—accidentally this time—and he hisses.

“Sorry,” I say, knowing I don’t sound sorry at all.

He shakes his head. “I’m just as bad as Melwas. Hard for you at a fucking diplomatic event.”

“Yes, you’re both incurably prurient, but there’s a key difference.”

“What’s that?”

I lean up to his ear, using his lapel to pull myself higher. “I like it when you’re incurably prurient.”

He grins down at me, the guilt and torment vanishing for a moment and leaving behind the rich playboy who’d charmed me on a Chicago sidewalk.

But as we finish our dance, as we find new partners to dance with and the night grinds unbearably on, as my own betrayals and post-confessing-forbidden-love-shock wears off, something heartbreaking occurs to me.

Ash sent Embry to get me. Ash sent Embry to get me even though he and Embry had been fucking right up until then. How cruel must that have felt to Embry? Like he was good enough to secretly fuck, at least until the right fuckable woman came along, but then he wasn’t wanted anymore? I haven’t ever thought of Ash as homophobic, as brutal in a way that went past the bedroom, but now I feel a righteous sense of anger on Embry’s behalf. All those years together, and Ash just tossed him aside for Jenny. And then picked him back up and tossed him right back aside for me.

No wonder Embry is tormented. Ash has been savage to him. Unforgivably dismissive.

And as I perform all the duties I came to do—charming and chatting and almost absentmindedly gathering tidbits and gossip for Ash—I slowly decide to confront him. About all those carefully worded not-lies, about his cruelty to Embry, about the three of us.

About what the fuck happens next.

Chapter Twenty-five

Ash hasn't returned to the dinner by the time it comes to a close, so Embry and I are the ones to make the formal goodbyes and excuses for Ash's absence, even though we have no idea where the hell he is. In my current mood, that makes me angrier than ever, so angry that I barely nod at Luc when he informs me that both Abilene and the President are back at the hotel and I'll be riding there alone.

And when I get to the hotel, Luc says, "The President has requested that you grab your things from your room and join him in his."

I stop right there in the lobby and glare up at the giant Quebecois man. "And what if I don't want to sleep in his room tonight?"

Luc looks uncomfortable. "I understand that he and Merlin are concerned that you'll be a target for Melwas. They both feel better with you in the President's room."

"And my cousin? If Melwas decides to attack my room—which won't happen—he'd still find her. It's okay to let her stay there but not me?"

The agent looks like he really, really doesn't want to have this conversation, and I sigh, taking pity on him. It's not his fault that Ash is a controlling asshole and I mean to confront him about it. "Fine, fine. Let's get my things."

When I get to my room and open the door, Abilene jolts off the bed, as if she's been electrocuted. "Greer!" she says, her voice far too bright. "You're back."

I give her a strange look, and she gives me a toothy smile—the one she learned from watching the Duchess of Cambridge tour the Commonwealth in heels with a baby on her hip.

"Ash wants me to change rooms," I say, a little peevisly, and start tossing things into my suitcase.

She shifts on the bed. "Did he, uh, did he say why?"

"Something about security and Melwas, but the reason doesn't matter because it's rude to just order people around like their feelings don't matter." I seal my mouth closed, realizing I'm perilously close to yelling or crying, and then the whole mess about Embry and Ash will spill out, the whole sordid fucking triangle.

"Oh, just the security then? That's not a big deal."

She still sounds strange, and part of me thinks I should ask her what's wrong, that I should sit down on the bed and put my arms around her shoulders and coax her into opening up. It wouldn't take long because Abi always wants to open up. All she needs is the faintest invitation inside your attention and then she's wailing in your lap, like some sort of emotional vampire.

But I'm my own emotional vampire right now, and I have to go drain Ash's blood before I burn everything down. I zip my suitcase closed. "I'll see you in the morning, Abi."

"Right," she says faintly. "In the morning."

Luc holds the door for me as I give her a little wave and wheel the suitcase back out into the hallway, and then he takes it from me without asking, lifting it as effortlessly as I'd lift a bag of bread. "This way," he says, and we walk down the hallway to the elevator to take it one floor up to Ash's room.

After walking past legions of Secret Service agents, Luc swipes the hotel keycard to access the presidential suite, and then we're inside, Luc trundling off with my suitcase and me walking

straight for the large armchair where Ash is sitting. I'm still in my gown, and it flutters and glints in the low golden light of the room as I stride towards him.

I'm ready to draw blood, but then I see how tired he looks. His jacket is off and thrown carelessly over the table, his bow tie unknotted. He's balancing a tumbler of scotch on his knee, and something about the color in his cheeks tells me that it isn't his first. And the weariness in his face is so profound, so deeply etched, that I can't bear to add to it, which irritates me. How dare he be tired when I need him to be strong? When I need him calm enough to weather the storm I want to scream into existence?

He looks up at me, green eyes nearly liquid with exhaustion. "You're angry about something," he comments.

I don't ask how he guessed, because even if it weren't written all over my face, he'd still know. "Yes."

"We have a few things to talk about then." He takes a sip of his scotch and then waves over toward the bar. "You want something to drink?"

"Actually, I think I do."

As Luc leaves and we're left alone, I make myself a small glass of single malt, walk over to the chair across from him and sit down. I don't choose to sit at his feet, a choice he notices but doesn't remark on.

A choice that hurts me more than it hurts him, I think.

But still, stubborn and cranky, I stay perched on the chair, refusing to give him anything until he gives me some answers.

"I think you should go first," he says, twirling the glass on his knee. Even slumped back in his chair, he looks powerful. Even exhausted he looks in charge. It's both marvelous and terribly unfair.

"Fine," I say. "Okay."

And then realize I have no segue into the things we need to talk about, no warm-up. I just have to dive in. I take a deep breath and look Ash square in the face.

"Embry told me he loves me tonight."

"I believe I told you he loves you tonight as well, only you didn't believe me."

"I told him I love him too."

Ash takes this like a blow he knew was coming but still wasn't entirely prepared for. A look of hurt—real, awful hurt—crosses his face, and he lifts his glass to his lips and drains the entire thing in a few practiced swallows. When he's finished, he sets the glass on the table next to him and looks at me with eyes the color of pain. "So you did," he says softly. "And then what did he say?"

"Not much of anything, because right after I told him that, I told him that I saw you two kissing on Christmas Eve."

The blood drains from Ash's face. This he hadn't expected, he hadn't seen coming. "Oh my God, Greer," he says in a horrified voice, "why didn't you say anything?"

I nearly explode. I shoot straight to my feet, towering over him in my stupidly tall heels. "Why didn't *I* say anything? Why didn't *I* say anything about my fiancé cheating on me? Why didn't *I* say anything about the only men I've ever been with, the two men I love, being in a secret relationship for ten *fucking years*?"

I don't know what I expected Ash to do, but it wasn't to grab my hips and yank me down onto his lap. His arm is an iron bar around my back, his hand implacable and heedless of my carefully styled up-do as he fists my hair to make sure I'm looking at his face.

But his face isn't angry. It's hurt and regretful and tired, but not at all angry, and for some reason, this unlocks my own hurt and tiredness, my own regret. My anger ebbs away like the tide, leaving behind a dirty residue of confused betrayal.

"When I saw you two under the mistletoe," I whisper, "I thought my heart was literally breaking. Like my aorta had twisted and my valves had clamped shut. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think."

"You have every reason to hate me," he says, his eyes locked on mine. "Every reason to be angry. I have asked you to trust me, and then I betrayed that trust in the worst way possible. I'm sorry, Greer. I'm so very, very sorry. If this...changes...things between us, I completely understand. I'm at fault, and I deserve whatever you want to do to me."

Normally, I'd applaud a man who apologized without excuses, without desperate defenses of himself, but right now? Tonight? I want to know what Ash was thinking that night under the mistletoe, what he was feeling. I want him to fight and rage, argue and plead, so that my own tangle of emotions won't feel so alone and oversized compared to this graceful defeat.

"No," I say. "I want more. You're not supposed to give up. You're not supposed to submit. You're supposed to fight for me! You're supposed to explain all this away and make me feel better!"

His eyes search mine. "But I can't explain it away. I *did* kiss Embry. I kissed him, and I enjoyed it. I kissed him because I'd just learned about you two sleeping together, and when I saw him that night, all rumped and lost-looking under the mistletoe, I just..." He stops and shakes his head. "I'm not going to try to justify what I've done. It was wrong to kiss him that night, and it was wrong not to tell you. I'm so, so sorry."

I want to hit him. I want to scream at him. I settle for glaring. "Stop saying you're sorry. I don't want your *sorry*."

His eyebrows pull together. "Then what do you want?"

"You. Him. Us. I want it all to make sense. Do you love him?"

He blinks, the act making him look younger, more vulnerable. "Greer..."

"I saw you that night, Ash. You weren't kissing him like he was a friend or an old fuck, you were kissing him like you needed it. Like you'd been waiting months for it. You were *trembling*, and you looked at him like...like you look at me sometimes. Like you can't decide whether you want to kiss me or make me cry."

He's still blinking, those eyelashes long and dark, those bottle-green eyes bright and aching behind them. "Greer, this doesn't need to be...what good will it do—"

"I'm not the fucking public," I say, narrowing my eyes. "I'm not a poll, I'm not a key demographic. Stop trying to spare my feelings and just tell me." I pause, and then add because I think Ash needs to hear it. "Embry loves *you*, you know. He told me that too. He told me about the first time you were together, he told me that you were together after Jenny's death. He thinks that you don't love him back, and why wouldn't he? With the awful way you've treated him?"

Ash freezes, his hand still fisting my hair, his arm still anchoring me down against him. "What?"

I'm simmering again, biting off words and not caring how they land. "You know what I'm talking about. He's good enough until you meet a woman, right? You could fuck him until you met Jenny, and then you dropped him, and then after Jenny, you were back to using him again. Until you had me. Until *you sent him* to fetch me for you. How do you think that makes him feel? How could you?"

Ash's lips part and close and then part again. "Greer, I asked Embry to marry me. Twice."

I was all ready to continue with my excoriation on Embry's behalf, but Ash's words filter their way into my consciousness and stun me. "What?" I whisper.

"I asked him to be my husband. Twice. And do you know how many times he said no?"

I shake my head mutely.

"Twice," Ash says.

"He—he didn't say anything about that."

Ash makes a noise that could be called derisive—if it wasn't so wounded. "No. I suppose he didn't."

"When did you propose?"

Ash loosens his grip in my hair, and unconsciously I reach back to make him tighten it again. This draws the first smile I've seen from him since I came in the room. But he stays on topic and answers my question.

"The first time was in Carpathia. We'd been dating for two years. He insisted we didn't tell anyone, and I agreed because I loved him. But I thought maybe if he saw how serious I was about him, how much I wanted to be with him, he wouldn't be so intent on having a secret relationship. I had a buddy of mine buy a ring in Rome when he went there for leave and bring it back. I planned it so just the two of us would be out in Embry's favorite valley by that base—you could stand at the top of this ridge and see for miles. I got down on one knee while we both had guns slung over our shoulders."

Ash smiles at the memory, but then his smile falters. "Embry said no. It wasn't legal then, you see, and I think—I don't know. Maybe he was worried about our careers or maybe what his family wanted. He didn't give me a reason. He just said no and told me we should stop seeing each other."

Even now, seven or eight years later, I can hear the bitter heartache in his voice.

"Merlin introduced me to Jenny not long after, and we gradually fell in love. She wasn't at all like Embry, she wasn't at all like you, and maybe that felt safe to me. She wasn't the strange girl who coaxed my darkest self to the surface, she wasn't the man who'd faced death with me. She was...easy. Uncomplicated. She loved like normal people loved, she desired like normal people desired. With her, I was a different kind of man, a kind that didn't have such twisted feelings inside. After I'd been wrapped up in you so long, only to have my first real relationship end like that...well, I guess I'm just trying to explain why I fell in love with Jenny when I was still in love with both of you."

I turn that over in my mind for a minute. So many networks of love and heartbreak, so many deep folds and layers to a person's heart. But it made a strange kind of sense to me, that he could love me and Embry and Jenny all at the same time. Not very many people love like Ash loves, as fiercely and fully, and maybe one person alone could never have held all that he needs to give.

"And then you proposed to him again?" I ask, trying to figure out what happened next.

Ash lets go of my waist and rubs his forehead with his thumb. "After Jenny died. That night Morgan took me to the club and had me flog her, I left and I went straight to Embry. He gave me so much that night, more than any person should have to give another, because I unleashed it all on him. My grief, my pain, this new sister that was also his sister whom also I'd fucked...I was a tornado. And he welcomed me."

I pull his hand away from his forehead so I can see his eyes. My touch stirs him; he shifts in the chair and meets my stare again. "He wanted to keep us secret again. Merlin wanted it to be secret. But it was legal now and I didn't fucking care about the election—but I did care about him. Five months ago, I asked him to marry me again. I thought for sure this time..." He trails

off and gives me a watery smile. “Well. The best laid plans and all that. And then I saw you in that church a few weeks later and it felt like fate. I wanted to see you, and the moment I told Embry about it, he volunteered to help me. I thought he wanted to make amends for rejecting my ring a second time...of course, now I know better. He wanted to see you.”

“Oh God, Ash,” I say, my chest hurting for him. This incredible man who’d been rejected twice by the person he loves.

“Greer, I’m—I’m not telling you this so that you feel like you were in any way a second choice. You know that I love you, that I’ve been obsessed with you for years. But I just want you to know that what I had with Embry was serious to me. It was the realest thing I’d ever felt until I finally had you. I didn’t kiss him because I wanted to hurt you, I kissed him because even though he’s broken my heart twice in ten years, I still think he looks beautiful in the winter moonlight. Because sometimes I think I might literally die from wanting to feel his lips on mine.”

A few heavy minutes pass as snow blows against the window next to us.

“Okay,” I say in a whisper after I can’t stand the quiet any longer.

“Okay what?”

“I think I understand now. You and him. Us.”

His hand leaves my hair and traces a warm trail from behind my ear to my shoulder. “I deserve the worst, Greer, but I don’t want it. I don’t want you to leave me.”

I startle. “Who said anything about leaving?”

He frowns. “You were so angry—and with good reason—I just thought—”

“That I’d leave you? Like Embry did?”

“Yes,” he confesses.

I squeeze his hand. “I’m angry. I need to be able to be angry sometimes. I need to be able to demand answers. But that doesn’t mean I don’t love you. It doesn’t mean I don’t want to stay.” A deep breath with the next admission. “Especially because I love Embry too. He and I haven’t...please believe me, Ash, we haven’t touched since that night in Chicago.”

“Oh, I believe you,” Ash says in a voice I feel down into the pit of my stomach. “That’s something neither of you could hide from me.”

And there’s something about the way he says that, possessive and omnipotent and maybe a little cruel, that sends cold bolts of fearful desire through me.

“So what happens now?” I ask. “Where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know,” he admits.

“Where do you want to go from here?”

He looks up at me, and then all of a sudden he’s standing with me in his arms and we’re walking toward the bed. He lays me on my back and crawls over me, brushing the hair out of my face as his hips settle into the cradle of mine. I try to stifle my moan at the feeling, but it doesn’t work.

“What else were you feeling that night?” he asks.

“What?”

“On Christmas Eve. You said your heart was breaking, but what else did you feel when you watched Embry and me? Did you feel...” his fingers dance down from my face to my breast, where my nipple hardens instantly through the soft chiffon “...curious? Did you wonder what it might feel like to be in between us? Did you wonder what it would look like to see Embry’s mouth wrapped around my dick?”

I don't know how to answer, I don't know which answer is best for our future or what he wants to hear, so I tell him the truth. "Yes. Yes, I was curious. I was—" Ash's fingers are moving down to my hip now, burning warm trails through the fabric, and it's hard to concentrate "—I was turned on."

"Did it make you wet?"

"Yes," I whimper.

"Are you wet right now?"

But he doesn't wait for me to answer. He finds out for himself, and I can tell by his pleased grunt that he likes what he's found. I spread my legs wider for him, and within a few heartbeats, he's got his flushed erection in his fist, stroking it and kneeling up over me.

"On your stomach," he orders. I flip over, shivering when I feel my dress dragged up over my ass, and shivering even more when I feel the fat tip of his cock against my folds. He pushes in, just the right amount of rough, and I practically purr with the sensation of his thick shaft spearing me.

He brings his body down over mine, his lips near my ear and his arm under my breasts so he can grab and squeeze all he likes. Only his hips move, deep and powerful, all muscle and deliberate, unhurried strokes.

"I don't know what the future looks like," he says, his breathing still calm and even, as if he were sitting on a couch and not shoving eight inches of hungry flesh inside me. "I don't know what we're supposed to do next. The three of us are never going to stop loving each other and we're never going to stop being jealous. But at least we all know now."

He shifts the angle of his hips and I gasp, and then the hand that was plumping my breast slides down to my clit and starts rubbing. I bury my face in the covers and moan.

"Would you like it if Embry were here right now?" Ash asks. I can hear the smallest ragged edge in his voice, as if he's aroused by his own words. "Underneath you while I'm on top? The two of us pressing against you, demanding satisfaction and attention? And when we've taken everything we can from you, would you like to watch us fuck each other? You should see how fast Embry comes when he's being fucked, Greer, it's really quite something."

I'm moaning almost non-stop now, squirming into the blanket, the image of the three of us fucking too much for me to bear. The image of Ash buried in Embry's ass lighting me on fire. I come suddenly and hard, clenching around Ash's cock as my hands claw at the blankets.

"Oh, so you do like that," comes Ash's voice in my ear. I can tell by the erratic thrusts of his hips that he's getting close himself. "I like it too. The thought of you two together makes me so fucking hot—" He breaks off and pulls out, and the bed shakes as he strokes himself to a hard, furious finish.

He lets out a rough groan, and wet heat shoots onto my ass and the small of my back, and I realize I'm smiling into the blankets. I don't know if it's the catharsis of Ash and I coming clean with each other or the mild display of dominance or just the good old-fashioned sex hormones, but all the feelings from earlier tonight are washed clean and hung out to dry. Still there, not vanished, but no longer so dirty and unsettling, no longer secret.

Something cool and silken dabs at the semen on my skin, and I turn my head to look up at Ash. "What are you using to do that?" I ask scoldingly. "It better not be your bow-tie."

Ash gives me a sweetly sheepish look and tosses the stained bow-tie onto the ground. "Oops."

"Oops?"

“Shh.” He crawls up next to me, sliding a hand under my stomach and turning me so that I’m facing into his chest and his strong arms are wrapped around me. “Stay here with me a moment.”

“My shoes are still on,” I protest. “And we’re sideways on the bed.”

“Don’t be so conformist. And about the shoes…” I hear a clunk followed by a second clunk as he toes off his dress shoes, and then he tugs off my high heels with his feet. “Better?”

I flex my toes. “Much better.”

“Good.” He pulls me tight, kissing my hair, and for a few moments we just hold each other and listen to the wind blowing off Lac Léman.

I press my lips to the exposed slice of skin near his collarbone. “What are we going to do?” I ask again, my whisper barely audible over the wind.

Ash’s hands rub my back, and when he speaks, he speaks slowly, like he’s still figuring it out for himself. “I don’t think we can decide that without Embry. Whatever happens next, it should be a decision between the three of us, something that the three of us can agree on and live with. If you’re still going to have me as a husband and I’m still going to have him as my Vice President, then we’re stuck together. And I think until this conversation happens, we should make sure there’s nothing physical or even verbally sexual transacting between anyone other than the two of us. Embry is off limits until we sort this out.”

I nod against him. He’s right. He’s almost always right.

“Also—until we can find a time for all three of us to talk, I want the two of us to be honest with each other. I made the mistake of hiding and lying before, and I don’t want to do that again.”

“Honest like…?”

“Like when we’re thinking of him, we tell each other. No more hiding our feelings for him, even if it feels wrong to admit them out loud. Because really, who would understand better than me how you feel?”

I sigh-laugh. “I guess that is true.”

“I know it is.”

“Okay,” I agree. “I trust you, and I think you’re right. You and I will be honest and we’ll only be sexual with each other until we talk with Embry.” I chew on my lip. “Does that mean…after we talk, you want to be sexual with him?”

“Honestly? I want the three of us together. But I also want you all to myself. And I want him all to myself. My feelings are very intense and wildly inconsistent about this. All I know is that it’s not only up to me. And not only up to you or Embry. It has to be together or not at all.”

Tiredness hits my body all at once. There’s been so much to unpack tonight, so much that I’ll still be processing it for weeks to come, and there is so much work ahead. But if that work means the three of us could—

No. I refuse to entertain fantasies about it or about Embry until things are settled. I’m engaged to Ash, and even if we have a non-traditional dynamic beginning to flourish, I’m still determined to remain emotionally dedicated to him until we openly decide otherwise.

I yawn and Ash starts stroking my back again. “There’s one more thing,” he says, and he sounds as tired as I feel.

“What is it?” I ask over another yawn.

“I want you to be careful around Abilene.”

I definitely wasn’t expecting that. “Abilene?”

I can feel Ash hesitate next to me, his body going still as he searches for the right words. “She accosted me tonight at the dinner, after I’d spoken to Merlin. She...well, this is uncomfortable and awkward to say, but I think she has feelings for me. She tried to kiss me and she told me—it’s not important what she told me, actually, but it gave me the impression that she’s not going to look out for your best interests.”

Oh, Abilene. No wonder she seemed so nervous when I went to pick up my suitcase.

“What did she say?”

“Greer—”

“Please, Ash. She’s my cousin and my best friend and if she’s harassing you or disparaging me, I need to know.”

He relents with a sigh. “She said she’d make a better wife to me than you would. That she could make me happier. And I told her that simply wasn’t possible. You are the perfect woman, objectively speaking, and also the perfect woman for me, and I told Abilene that. She was understandably upset, and I’m guessing humiliated. She left me without another word.”

“Oh my God.” I roll away from Ash to stare up at the ceiling. “I’m so mortified. And I’m so sorry.”

“You had nothing to do with it.” Ash is still on his side, and he twirls a tendril of my hair around his finger. “And I am endeavoring to forget about it. But I thought you should know that she seems to harbor some deep resentment of you. I tried to make it unequivocally clear that I loved you and nothing would change that, but I don’t know if it will be enough.”

“I don’t know either,” I say, thinking of the way Abi has nursed her obsession with Ash through the years. “She can be quite determined when she wants to be.”

Ash’s lips are on my hair now, and then on my face, and then on my lips. “She’s not more determined than I am. Rest assured, she holds no allure for me.”

That does ease my mind a little, although I’m still uneasy about this latest development. It almost seems unhinged, unstable, especially for a woman who’s spent years trying to perfect the most charming, put-together personality imaginable.

But then Ash’s hands are back under my dress, his stiffening cock warm against my hip, and everything else slowly bleeds away.

Chapter Twenty-six

It turns out that finding a time for the three of us to talk is harder than it sounds. The rest of our stay in Geneva is busy, with Ash and Embry gone from six in the morning to one o'clock the next morning, and all the hours between are filled with helping Kay put out fires back home.

Abilene avoids me so expertly that I don't see her until we fly home, and when we board the plane, she apologizes for her absence, blaming it on the Carpathian man she spent her days with. I watch her eyes as she tells me about him, as she asks me how much I've seen or talked to Ash since the dinner, and I realize she doesn't know I know.

It's dishonest, but I feed that belief, telling her everything she wants to hear. I act innocent, I act like I have no idea she's still in love with Ash or that she tried to kiss him at the dinner, and it makes me a little sad to see how easily she swallows what I say. I think about the way she acted when I first told her about Ash and me, about the way she lied about something as trivial as how I looked in a dress.

Maybe Ash is right to say I shouldn't trust her.

But once we get back home and settle into the fast-paced rhythm of work and life, I also settle back into loving her. She's just Abilene—passionate and fierce and impulsive. And I'm the last woman to judge another for making mistakes because of a man like Ash. I forgive her, go on loving her and having weekly lunch and sometimes grabbing cocktails after work on Thursdays, although I try not to bring Ash up around her any more than I have to, which seems to work for her just fine. She even acts happy when I ask her to be my maid of honor, though I can see the brittle displeasure in her face when she thinks I'm not looking.

But what can I do?

The wedding consumes every waking minute. There's the planning, of course, but then there's the endless rounds of interviews and photo shoots that Merlin and Trieste—the Press Secretary—keep signing me up for. Overnight, I'm transformed into America's Sweetheart, the granddaughter of a former Vice President marrying the youngest President in history. My face is everywhere in print and online, to the point where I'm recognized on the street and where students I don't know stop me on campus for Snapchat selfies. It's flattering the first few times, but slowly it becomes a nuisance and then a real burden. All the work I did, all the choices I made to build a life of quiet solitude, it's all undone in a matter of a few weeks. Even Grandpa Leo calls me to warn me about the dangers of constant press attention.

Both Embry and Ash are incredibly busy too, and it's only once or twice a week that I get to sneak into Ash's bed, and it's only on Sundays that all three of us are together for church and sometimes football. But I'm usually grading papers or working on the book, and Belvedere and Kay and Trieste and Merlin are constantly in and out, and the moment just never comes, that moment where the three of us are alone and have unlimited time to just *talk*.

At first it's agony, every missed day that turns into a missed week that turns into a missed month. Ash and I keep our word to each other and we both act carefully around Embry. He acts carefully around us in return, especially after Ash informs him of our decision to have an agreement created by all three of us. Ash tells me that Embry agrees to that, and I smile at the irony that we have all talked about talking but still haven't *talked*.

I wonder if Embry knows how often we bring him up when we're alone, sometimes as we're having sex, but other times as we're falling asleep or even as we're simply working in silence

together. Ash will set down his pen and rub his forehead and say my name in the kind of pained, quiet voice I know means that right now he's missing Embry. And I'll crawl onto his lap and whisper *me too me too me too*, and kiss him until we both feel better again.

And so the days pass, interminable and yet blinding in how quickly they fly by, until I find myself holding Ash's hand as Air Force One touches down in Kansas City the day before our wedding, a warm day in May. Ash's mother greets us with a big hug on the tarmac, and then we begin the painstakingly photographed dance of the rehearsal and the rehearsal dinner. All the while being achingly aware of Embry watching us, of Embry there like the unseen shadow of our future marriage.

He said it was hell watching Ash and me. Was watching us walk through the ceremony worse than hell? *Is there anything worse than hell?*

Yes, I decide as we make our toasts and speeches at the rehearsal dinner. Loving two men but only marrying one—that's worse than hell. Watching Embry quietly die is worse than hell. Watching Ash watch Embry, and wondering if he wishes he was walking down the aisle with him instead of me—that is much, much worse than hell.

Ash and I part that night with a chaste kiss. And I go to bed in my own room, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what new hell tomorrow will bring.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The Wedding Day

Abilene went to find the veil and some lunch, and so for the moment, I'm alone. I stand in my hotel suite, which also serves as my bridal dressing room, so silent and calm after all the rustling of tissue paper and the chatter of women and the noisy comings and goings of every single female relative Ash or I have. I turn to the mirror for the thousandth time, and for the thousandth time, a cold dagger slices through my heart, slicing it right in two.

One side, still red and healthy, pulses with joy. The other side, black and frozen, feels nothing but icy despair.

It's really happening.

It's really happening.

The one thing I want most in the world—to marry Ash—and the one thing I want least in the world—to be separated from Embry.

I can't cry—I spent too many long hours in the makeup chair for that—so instead I smooth my hands along the expensive fabric of the dress and turn away, the huge skirt of my wedding dress turning with me.

Don't look in the mirror, I tell myself. You'll only want to cry again.

Most women wouldn't cry to see themselves as I look right now. Custom gown embroidered with Swarovski crystals and silver thread. My white-gold hair coiled into a sleek ballet knot at the nape of my neck. Diamonds glittering at my ears and throat. There is a princess in that mirror...and I can't bear to look at her.

I walk over to the window and press my hands to the glass. The hotel room looks out on an unfamiliar skyline, a healthy and contained cluster of skyscrapers, old brick warehouses and architectural oddities. Kansas City's skyline. Ash's skyline.

Ash.

Has any woman loved a man like I love my Ash? If he ceased to love me or I ceased to love him, my entire world would shrink to a singularity and then explode. I need him like I need air, like I need the sun or like I need God.

I can't *not* marry him. Every cell in my body cries out for his presence, pines for the slightest brush of his hands or words or eyes; I am as destined to marry Ash as much as I am destined to have my gray eyes or my blond hair.

So why the tears, Greer?

But of course I know why. Ash would know why too if he could see me right now. Because I can't help loving Embry, because neither can Ash, because the three of us have some sort of twisted, fucked-up love that no church would agree to sanctify, much less the American electorate.

I'll marry Ash as Embry watches, as Embry hands Ash the ring that will seal our vows, and the three of us will quietly ache together, quietly die together, even as Ash and I are quietly born anew as man and wife.

There's no way around this, nothing that can be done, at least nothing that I can see. I can't not marry Ash. I can't stop craving Embry. Both of them love me, and both of them love each other. Whichever way we move, there will be heartbreak, and Embry knows—has always known

maybe—that if he forces me to choose, if he drags my choice into the open air and says *me or him*, then it would be Ash.

It would always be Ash.

And maybe that's why I want to cry, because my heart is breaking for Embry just as much as it's breaking for me.

A knock sounds at the door, and I shake off my thoughts, expecting Abilene and the veil. "Come in," I call, blinking a few times to rid myself of the lingering tears.

I hear a keycard *snick* in the lock, and the heavy door opens. I step away from the window, prepared to fake a smile and a laugh for Abi, prepared to take the veil from her and pin it to the delicate tiara set in my hair.

But it isn't Abilene who walks through the door.

It's the best man.

"Embry," I whisper. I breathe his name like it's the last breath I'll ever take.

He walks in and turns to close the door behind him, shutting it and carefully swinging the deadbolt closed.

We haven't been alone together for so long, weeks and weeks and months and months, but now here we are, alone at last. But I'm dolled up to be the American Bride of the Century and he's in his tuxedo, and so the wedding hovers in the air like its own entity, a third presence in the room.

I train my eyes on the floor, not trusting myself to look in his face, not wanting to see the torment I know will be written there. Not wanting him to see the torment written on my own face. Isn't this hard enough as it is? Why is he here? Why come and force this moment between us when we could have simply gone on as we always did—ignoring, denying, avoiding? Silently dying?

Embry steps deliberately toward me—so unlike him, so unlike the turbulent, impulsive man he is. He stops just out of reach, his dress shoes black and gleaming against the carpet.

"Greer," he says quietly.

I force my eyes up to his, trailing up his long legs, up that perfectly-fitted tuxedo jacket which highlights the lean, hard lines of his waist and shoulders, and then finally up to his face, where pain is stamped onto every handsome feature.

The moment my eyes lock with his, I know it doesn't matter that we aren't touching. The electric heat in his eyes is desperate, and I know he can see the same in mine, and in that instant, in my mind, we share a thousand scorching kisses, he trails caresses over every inch of my skin, I come a thousand times under his slender, muscled body.

Those ice-blue eyes blaze with heat and I shiver. "What are you doing here?" I ask in a whisper.

"I wanted to see you. You know...before..." he trails off.

He steps closer, lifting a hand. I shouldn't let him touch me, not on my wedding day, not in my wedding dress, but my chest is filled with that tight ache, and so I close my eyes and hold my breath as he reaches forward.

The backs of his knuckles graze against my cheek, sending shivers chasing down my back, and every brush of his fingers over my skin makes me want to scream, makes me want to cry.

My eyes flutter open to find him staring intently at me, those blue eyes glacial with pain. My gaze drops down to his mouth, where his lips are parted ever so slightly, as if he has to catch his breath.

I can't stop staring at them, those firm, straight lips with their barely-there tilt at the corners, the tilt that can turn from a smirk to a sneer to a smile, depending on his moods. I want those lips. I want them against my mouth, I want them pressed to my throat, I want them between my legs. I want his lips and his hands and his cock, and I want him to rip off my wedding dress and do what his searing stare promises and fuck me. Ash be damned.

Except...

Except I love Ash. Except I promised him I wouldn't touch Embry until the three of us had finally talked.

I suck in a breath and take a step back. It's too dangerous, Embry here and my heart so twisted in knots. Embry notices my step back, and his eyebrows draw together the tiniest amount, confusion and hurt simmering under the surface of his expression. I hate hurting him, and I hate myself for doing it, but what's the alternative? How can there be any other way?

"You have to go," I choke out, turning away from him, unable to look at his wounded face any longer. "You can't—and I can't—just. Please."

"I can't go yet," Embry says, and his voice has lost its earlier husky uncertainty. In its place is the dispassionately icy tone he usually uses with recalcitrant senators or the puerile hordes of reporters and paparazzi that follow his every move. It's his Vice President voice, and it makes me shiver. "Ash asked me to deliver a present to you. I made sure Abilene would be occupied so I'd have enough time to give it to you personally."

I let out a long breath, wondering if this is how it will always be. Alone together only when there's a pretext, forever divided by the one man we love more than each other or ourselves.

"Greer." The ice in Embry's voice thaws the tiniest amount when he speaks my name. "Please let me give you your present. You know how Ash was about seeing you today, so he asked me to deliver it."

I finally turn back to him and he holds out his phone, indicating that I should take it. Confused, I reach for it, and then the screen lights up with Ash's name.

My heart soars at the same time that it sinks. I grab the phone and touch the *accept* button, pressing the phone eagerly to my ear as if it has been weeks since we last spoke instead of hours.

"Ash," I say, my voice hiding nothing. I know he can discern every doubt, every guilty thought, every needy pang I've felt in the last six hours and he can do it all just from that one syllable. What's more, I welcome it. With Ash, I never need to be shamed. He knows each sin the moment he hears my voice or looks at my face, and then all is immediately forgiven.

"Greer," he says, his voice soothing and sure. "I wish I were with you right now. I miss you."

"I miss you too," I say, ignoring the way Embry's eyes are pinned on me as I speak.

"I know you look beautiful right now," Ash says, his voice going a shade deeper, a shade rougher. "I won't be able to keep my hands off you after you walk down the aisle to me."

"Can't you come see me before then?"

A warm laugh. "You don't care for this particular tradition?"

"What point does it serve, other than to keep our guests waiting longer while we take pictures?"

"It serves the point of marking the moment I first see you. When I first lay eyes on my bride, I will be surrounded by our family and friends and watched over by God. I want the first moment I see you to be special and apart from any other moment, just like today is special and apart from any other day. Greer, today is the most important day of my life."

My throat tightens. "Oh, Ash."

“And,” he adds in a voice heavy with promise, “patience is always rewarded, my little princess. Always.”

His voice—and the murmured *little princess*—makes my cunt ache and my pulse pound, and when I think about tonight after the wedding, when I think about Ash’s broad, muscled body pinning mine to the bed, I can barely breathe.

“I miss you so much,” I say. I’m repeating myself at this point, but I don’t care.

“Greer, I want to give you your present now.”

“The phone call isn’t my present?”

That warm laugh again. “I’m not that stingy. No, it’s not your present. I want you to hand the phone to Embry for a moment.”

I obey, as I always do with Ash, and Embry takes the phone. He paces away from me, back towards the suite’s sitting room, so that I can’t hear what he’s saying to Ash. They speak for a few minutes together and when Embry returns, his face reveals nothing, although I think I detect a hint of a frown on that perfectly shaped mouth.

He hands the phone back to me, and I hold it up to my ear. “Ash? What does this have to do—” I break off my words.

Embry is getting to his knees. In front of me.

“Greer,” comes Ash’s voice through the receiver. “I want to be there so badly right now. I want to touch you and taste you and tell you how beautiful you are. I want to make you feel good.”

While Ash speaks, Embry tilts his face up to mine. Something pulls at the edges of his calm mask now, but I can’t tell if it’s pleasure or pain, joy or contrition. And then his elegant hands with their long fingers reach for the skirt of my wedding dress.

I freeze.

“Embry...?” My voice is no louder than a raindrop coursing down a window, but both men hear it. Embry bites his lip but starts lifting the hem of my dress.

Ash, on the other hand, says, “Stand still, Greer. Are you standing still?”

“Yes,” I say, unable to tear my eyes away from Embry’s, unable to move away from this terrible, terrible, delicious thing. I tremble with a molten heat low in my belly as Embry’s able hands slowly gather up all of the layers of petticoat under my dress.

Ash continues talking. “I kept thinking about what I wanted to give you today, and honestly, Greer, there isn’t really anything I couldn’t give you. Jewelry or exotic vacations or rare editions of the books you love, anything I could have dreamed of, I could get for you—but they were just *things*. I didn’t want to get you a thing for a curio cabinet or a jewelry box. I wanted to give you something that you could carry with you through our new life together. Something that would make you a promise.”

Embry’s hand brushes up against my stocking-covered ankle and I gasp.

“What is it, princess?” Ash asks in a low voice.

“Embry...I mean, Ash, I—” I can’t find the words just then, because Embry’s hand slides up my calf and everything stops. My thoughts, my feelings, my guilt—my world shrinks to Ash’s voice on the phone and the fingers moving past my knee and Embry’s face, so controlled. But lust and anger and determination are fissuring across that control, and I can see his wide pupils and the pulse pounding in his neck and the trembling of his lips.

What is happening? I think distantly to myself. What am I letting happen...and all while I’m on the phone with my soon-to-be husband?

And then the world slams back into motion, and I make a strangled noise, stumbling backwards, away from Embry. He starts to stand and come toward me, and I hold out one of my hands, moving backwards until my back is pressed against the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the skyline.

Embry looks down at my shaking hand and then back up to me, those fissures in his control now full-on fractures, and he says, “Greer...”

“Don’t test me,” I whisper, not sure if I’m whispering to the groom or the best man. “Don’t test me like this.”

Ash’s voice comes into my ear. “Relax, Greer. I want to give you this. I want to give you something you want...something you deserve.”

This isn't happening. I missed a connection somewhere, misunderstood something vital, because there is no way, *no fucking way*, that Ash is offering his best friend to me as some sort of wedding present, not when we agreed that Embry was off-limits until we figured everything out. This is my wishful thinking turned toxic, this is my darkest fantasies turning into delusion—

“I want you to let Embry give you my gift,” Ash tells me. “While I listen. That’s what you’ll give me in exchange: every single moan, pant and cry will be for me.”

“You can’t be saying what I think you’re saying,” I say. “We agreed...you know what we agreed to. This isn't it!”

“I know, but I can't wait any longer,” Ash says with a growl. “Today is hard enough without denying ourselves.”

“But what about you—”

“Oh, don't worry, angel. I'll have something out of this for me too.”

I hear the dark roughness in his voice and I realize I'm so very, very wet.

As if he knows, Ash asks, “Are you wet right now? Are you wet from Embry reaching under your dress?”

I lick my lips. I can't lie—Ash would know. But how can I admit the truth? Yes, I am wet. Yes, I want Embry’s mouth on me. Yes, yes, yes to all of it.

“Close your eyes,” Ash orders.

I do, my panting somehow louder in my head when I can't see anything. The glass window against my back is cool and strong, just like Ash’s words in my ear.

“I know you’re wet. I know it like I know Embry is hard right now, just from the mere thought of touching you. You want it, don’t you? You want it so much that you’re shaking with the effort it’s taking to hold yourself back.”

I feel the hem of my skirt lift again. Embry is back in front of me, but this time I don't try to move away. I keep my eyes shut, wishing I had the strength to open them and tell Embry to stop. The strength to flee temptation.

“Answer me,” Ash demands. “Are you wet right now? Do you want it?”

“Yes.” The word comes out strangled and hopeless.

“I knew you did,” Ash says. “I knew you wanted it. Spread your legs, sweetheart, and let Embry make you feel good.”

“But I don’t want to hurt you.” It’s my final plea, my final argument, my final grasp at some semblance of sanity. My skirts are almost up at my waist now, and I know the moment Embry catches sight of my delicate, hand-embroidered French panties because he takes in a sharp breath, as if punched in the gut.

“It all hurts,” Ash says. “It hurts watching you two watching each other. It hurts watching him with other people. It hurts knowing that I've asked him to walk down the aisle to me twice

and he's refused me both times. There's no part about this that doesn't hurt, but what's the alternative? Living without the pain means living without each other."

My eyelids burn with unshed tears, and it takes all my willpower to keep them from falling.

"At least this way," Ash says, "I can have some control over it. At least this way, I can make it feel good just as much as it hurts."

You're breaking my heart, I want to say, but that's a lie, because my heart is already broken. Instead, I just say, "I can't bear to hurt you any more than you already are, please. Please don't do this."

"No." The word is final. "I want this. God, Greer, I'm so fucking hard right now, it hurts. If I were there—" He stops and I hear one long sigh. "Tonight," he says instead of finishing his thought. "Tonight."

It is a promise. A gift and a curse, because tonight when my cravings are relieved by Ash, it will be in our wedding bed, and Embry will be somewhere else, alone.

Or worse, not alone.

My chest tightens with unreasonable jealousy at the thought.

Embry transfers the heavy material of my skirt to one strong hand, and then I feel his other hand run up the inside of my thigh.

I let out a soft whimper. My skin cries out for Embry, just as the rest of me cries out for Ash. What I wouldn't give to have Ash here, ready to take all my pent-up lust and mold it into something that won't kill me with guilt.

Because I will die with guilt.

But somehow it doesn't stop me from squirming with want as Embry's hand runs up my other thigh. And then it happens. With one deliberate, grazing touch, Embry's fingertips skate across the lace covering my folds, and I gasp. Embry looks up at me with hooded eyes, and I stare back.

"I can smell you," he says, his voice cracking a little at the end. "It smells so good."

I shiver. A thousand voices, a choir of warnings, seem to sing in my mind. *Stop this. Stop this. Stop this.*

But his words, the way his voice roughened, as if being able to smell my need is the one thing that can break him...

I don't stop him. In fact, I reach down and gather my skirt into my arms so that Embry's hands can be free, something he immediately takes advantage of by sliding his palms to my ass and squeezing. The groan he lets out when he does goes straight to my clit.

His fingers once again graze over my folds, tickling the lace, and it feels as if everything has become electric. The air, his skin, my skin, everything hums with insatiable need.

Embry leans forward so that the only thing I can see below the heavy bunches of fabric is his light brown hair, and then he kisses the tops of my thighs, lingering soft kisses that trace the lines of my stockings and the clips of my garter belts. I'm already panting by the time his lips brush against my mound.

"Oh my God," I breathe. "Oh my God."

"Tell me what's happening," Ash demands. "Tell me everything."

"I shouldn't be doing this," I mumble, "I have to stop."

"Don't you fucking dare," Ash says.

"Ash..."

This time, Embry doesn't stop after hearing my hesitation. He keeps going, kissing the line of my panties, kissing along the swirling lace patterns, nuzzling into me. The nuzzles turn

aggressive, rough and hard, punctuated with sharp nips at my flesh through the lace. Each bite pulls a noise out of me, and each noise pulls an intake of breath from Ash.

“Tell me, Greer.” It’s a command that doesn’t brook argument.

“I—he’s biting and kissing me through my panties.” *I should stop him. I should push him away. We will all regret this after it’s over, me most of all.*

And I even get as far as putting my hand on Embry’s head, thinking I would push his mouth away from me, but right at that moment, he licks me right through the lace and I practically dissolve. My fingers instead wind into his thick hair and tug sharply, making Embry groan so loudly that Ash can hear it.

“Fuck,” Ash breathes, hearing Embry’s noise. “What’s happening now?”

“He’s licking me,” I say, “he’s licking me through the lace. His mouth is so warm and *oh—*”

My fingers tighten in his hair as Embry begins sucking my clit through the lace. I squirm against him, holding his mouth fast to where I want it, feeling the licking flames deep in my core.

“He’s sucking my clit now,” I say, barely recognizing my own voice. Who am I, so brazenly telling my future husband about what his best friend is doing under my wedding dress? Who is this woman who leaned against a window and opened her legs for this? But I’m too far over the edge now, too wet, too sensitive, too sinful to let this end. Regret seems like a distant thing on the horizon, fuzzy and irrelevant, and with every lap of his tongue and kiss of his lips, Embry wipes the guilt from my body.

And then his deft fingers are at the clasps of my garters, easily unhooking them, and memories of another night, years and years ago, surfaces in my mind.

And like that night, Embry looks up at me as he pulls my underwear to the side, exposing my wet, pink cunt.

“I need,” he says quietly to me, and the *déjà vu* hits me so hard that my knees almost buckle, because of course that’s what he said to me the night he took my virginity too. And the way his eyes blaze, the way he slowly licks his lower lip tells me that he remembers exactly what he said that night too.

That he hasn’t forgotten.

“He’s pulled aside my panties now,” I tell Ash. “He’s looking at me there.”

Not just looking. *Looking*. Devouring with his eyes. Making plans, marking possession with his stare, as if by memorizing every curve and glistening fold of my pussy, he can claim ownership somehow. *This* is the male gaze that academics always talk about, *this* is what they meant. Because in this moment, I feel objectified, branded, almost dehumanized.

Fuck if it doesn’t make me wetter than ever.

“He’s taking off my panties now,” I say, the soft scrape of the lace on my thighs almost more than I can bear. And then Embry helps me step free of them, afterwards putting one warm hand on each thigh and parting my legs so that I stand in a wider stance.

Embry groans at the sight of my exposed pussy.

“He’s looking at me again. He can see that I’m all the way bare. And I’m so wet, Ash. Do you remember the time I rode your thigh in front of him?”

“God, yes,” Ash says, and I think I can hear the rustle of fabric, as if he were parting the fly of his tuxedo pants to palm his cock.

“I’m wet like that. *Oh*. Oh God.”

“Tell me, princess.”

“He...” I swallow, my fingers finding Embry’s hair once more. “He put his finger inside me. And another one. They’re sliding in so easy, Ash, I’m so wet, but I’m swollen and it’s so tight.”

Ash rumbles in response, and I hear more movement, the sound of skin moving over skin. The mental vision of Ash rubbing himself to my narration of being finger-fucked by his best friend makes the flames at my core lick higher and higher.

Embry curls his fingers, pressing against the sensitive nerve endings clustered near the front and I moan. He leans forward and sucks my clit into his mouth again, this time without the barrier of the lace, and the hot, wet contact is almost shocking in its intensity.

“Sling your leg over his shoulder,” Ash tells me. “And push his face against your cunt. Grind into his mouth.”

I do as he commands, and the moment I begin fucking myself against Embry’s mouth, his control shears away. One hand grips my ass, his fingers digging into my flesh, while the other hand continues to fuck me mercilessly. And his mouth...

“It’s like he’s starving,” I breathe into the phone, watching his head move below my skirts. “Like he’s trying to eat me alive. His fingers are so deep in me, so fucking deep. I can feel them in my belly.”

“God, I wish I were there,” Ash growl. “I’d watch you come while he shoved his fingers in you. I’d make him kiss you while his mouth still tasted like your cunt. And then I’d make you kiss me.”

Ash’s words are like curtains catching fire, sending the clenching burn of my cunt streaking upwards towards my chest. I’m going to orgasm, I know it, but I won’t be able to stand, my knees are about to buckle as it is, and as if Embry can sense this, I’m all of a sudden being tugged down by my waist. Tugged down to the floor as he lies back, and then his fingers are digging into my hips, planting my pussy firmly over his mouth. I’m straddling him, riding his face, and the minute his tongue slides into my hole, I know it’ll be mere moments before I lose it.

“Embry pulled me down to the floor,” I manage to say into the phone. “I’m riding his face, my knees are on either side of his head. His hands are groping my ass.”

Ash’s voice sounds scraped and scratched, as if he can barely talk. I imagine his massive hand moving up and down on his long, thick erection as he speaks. “You’re going to come this way, aren’t you? Like a queen, riding what’s yours. Fuck his face hard, baby, that’s what he wants. He’ll have your smell and taste still on his lips when he watches you put my ring on your finger. He’ll remember the feeling of your thighs cradling his jaw when he watches us dance our first dance at the reception.”

“Jesus,” I half moan, half pray, burning up from the inside. I happen to look up right at that moment and catch our reflection in the floor-length mirror on the wall. Me, flushed and panting, necklace and tiara flashing in the light, kneeling in a cloud of white silk and tulle. The fabric almost completely hides the strong, tall male beneath me, except the wandering hands that are now roaming up to my corseted breasts to squeeze and grab. The bride riding the best man’s face. The groom, alone as he rubs himself listening.

The fairy tale, gone up in flames.

I am gone up in flames too. There’s nothing left but a burning silhouette of need, and I forget everything but the hot mouth I’m fucking and the thick breaths of my fiancé at my ear, peppered with his murmured commands—*ride him hard* and *grind, sweetie, grind till it feels good* and *push your clit in, make him suck it*.

Heat crackles, flames rise, buildings and civilizations collapse into blistering beds of coals as at last release snaps free from my womb.

"I'm—" I can't finish, can't speak, can't breathe, contractions so fierce they make my eyes water centering in my pussy.

"I know, angel," Ash rasps. "You don't have to tell me."

And then everything explodes outwards. The contractions multiply, the walls of my cunt pulse, my clit throbs against Embry's tongue. I cry out and cry out again because it feels like a living thing has a hold of me, puncturing me in the best ways, sending tingling heat to the roots of my hair and the tips of my toes. My cries slowly turn into whimpers, and beneath me, Embry's mouth goes from ravenous to tender, gently sucking and kissing my pussy.

"My cock wants you," Ash says raggedly. "It's getting thick now. Dark and shiny. It wants to be in that wet pussy, but I can't have it right now. So I'm using one of your silk blouses to jack myself off with."

I moan at his words, aftershocks still traveling through me.

"I'm going to come," he tells me, "and when I do, I'm going to pretend I'm standing over you right now, while you look all messy and flushed and ashamed. I'm going to pretend you're looking at me with those big, gray eyes, looking guilty and scared, as I shove my cock down your throat. I'm going to pretend that you're licking me clean after I come."

"Oh God," I whisper. The image sends my cunt fluttering again, a second, milder climax now chasing through me as I imagine Ash, his tall frame looming over me, his face implacable and angry as he fucks my mouth. As he punishes me for accepting his own gift.

And maybe that's the most fucked-up part of all, that I find that follow-up scenario just as arousing as what just happened.

Ash grunts, an unashamed, male sound, and I know he's coming right now. Know long spurts of cum are erupting into the soft silk of my blouse, probably ruining it, but I don't care. The mental image of him defiling my clothes, all because he's so aroused by listening to Embry and me, is worth it.

A thousand times worth it.

But as his breathing returns to normal, as my orgasm subsides but I still allow Embry to kiss my cunt, I look up in the mirror at myself and panic.

What the hell will happen next? What will happen to the wedding and marriage that the press has already dubbed the second Camelot? Ash calls me his princess, and maybe I looked like one before I let the best man under my skirt, but this is no fairy tale.

Or if it is, it's the most fucked-up fairy tale I've ever heard of.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The Wedding Day

Love endures all things.

I marry Ash with Embry's bite marks on my thighs, and Ash marries me with his bite marks on Embry's neck. There's something kind of beautiful about that, I think dazedly as the priest recites our wedding mass. Something kind of beautiful and fucked up. Who needs a ring when you have bite marks? Who needs vows when you've literally bled for one another?

Then there comes the moment where the priest asks for Embry to furnish the ring—*my* ring—the one that will mark me as Ash's wife and bind me to him for the rest of my life, and my tears threaten to return. I'm not sad, I'm not afraid or overjoyed or angry or guilty or excited or jealous or suspicious, it's that I'm *all* of them. Every single feeling, all at once, a carnival of flashing thoughts and emotional noise inside my head. And that it has to be Embry to hand Ash that dainty platinum band...

Embry pats his pockets dramatically, and the crowd ripples with laughter at the "best man lost the ring" gag. Father Jordan Brady—a handsome young blond with that unmistakable Christian hipster vibe—is too polite to roll his eyes, but I sense he goes somewhere deep inside himself to escape the threadbare frivolity of the old joke.

Embry finally removes the ring from his pocket and starts to hand it to Ash. And instead of holding out his palm to take it, Ash turns to Embry and slowly uncurls Embry's fingers from the ring. To everyone else, it looks like Ash is simply being careful with the small piece of jewelry, but I see both the promise and the apology in the gentle way Ash touches Embry's skin. What does it feel like to take a ring from a man who refused yours? And for Embry, what does it feel like to still be in love with a man you couldn't bring yourself to marry?

Despite the circus of whirling questions and emotions, the moment Ash takes my hand, I feel everything go quiet and slow and right. His hand is warm and certain around my own, his fingers sure and careful as he slides the ring onto my finger, and when I look up to his eyes, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that he will do everything in his considerable power to keep me safe and loved.

And I know with the same certainty that I will do the same for him.

We exchange vows, we take communion, we sing the hymns and chant the chants. And at the end, when Ash lifts my veil and kisses me firmly on the lips, I feel the faintest flickering of the one emotion I haven't been able to muster yet today:

Hope.

* * * *

"Congratulations."

Ash and I look up from the bridal table to see Embry in front of us. He's already given his speech, but there's still cake and dancing to be had in the massive reception pavilion. It's set high up in the river bluffs, overlooking the dun ribbon of water below, and less than a mile off, the skyline twinkles merrily. All around us are nearly seven hundred guests laughing and eating and drinking while the press hovers nearby like moths near light.

But Embry looks pale. Tired. He's still in his tuxedo jacket, even though Ash has long since ditched his, and I can tell that he hasn't had anything to eat or drink.

"Embry," Ash says warmly. "Pull up a chair and eat with us."

"Actually, I think I'm going to head back to the hotel," Embry says, not looking at either of us. "I'm not feeling well. A bug, I think."

"Stay," I say, reaching for his hand. "Please. Drink with us. Dance with us."

He glances at me and then at Ash, at us together at the bridal table with our rings glinting in the twinkling lights. "I can't. Congratulations, again. I wish you both all the happiness in the world."

And with those hollow words, he leaves.

I stand up, about to chase after him, but Ash takes my hand and stops me. "Greer. The press."

"Fuck the press," I grumble, but I allow him to tug me back down to my chair anyway.

"And besides," Ash continues, "it would be cruel to ask him to stay and endure his pain so publicly."

Love endures all things. The Bible verse from the church floats into my mind. But perhaps love shouldn't have to endure all things. Perhaps it would be cruel to make Embry stay.

"Angel," Ash says, taking both my hands into his. His fingers find my ring, and I smile at the possessive way he rubs it with his fingertips. "*Wife.* What's your safe word?"

"Am I going to be belted in order to earn my piece of cake?"

A small smile but he doesn't take the bait. "Say it so I know that you have it close. That you know it's yours to use for any limit. *Any* limit."

I look down to where his fingers are playing with my ring. "Maxen."

"Good." He leans down to kiss the ring, letting his lips linger at the junction of metal and flesh. "Tonight's our wedding night, Greer."

"I know," I sigh. "Can't we just leave these people and start it now?"

He hesitates, his lips still on my hand.

"What is it? Were you planning on doing something extreme tonight? I'll try it. You know I'll try anything you ask me to."

"That's what I'm afraid of. You have to agree to this because you want it, not just because you think I want it."

He straightens and takes a deep breath. "I want Embry to join us tonight."

I don't answer. I can't answer, actually, because I've forgotten how to breathe.

"Today was perfect," he says in a low voice. "Listening to you on the phone while he touched you was...electrifying. And marrying you, Greer, saying those words to you was the happiest moment of my life. Today feels like magic—*tonight* feels like magic—and I want more of it. I want us, all three of us, to feel it together. If today was about the two of us making vows, then tonight should be about the three of us taking the next step together."

I finally find my voice. It's dry, threatening to crack. "And what's the next step?"

"I don't know," he says, giving me a smile so beautiful it breaks my heart. "But I'm ready to find out."

* * * *

The evening passes in a blur. We dance, my grandfather cries, Abilene flirts. There are too many senators and heads of state and businesspeople and celebrities to keep straight, and it's

impossible to keep track of time or the number of people who wish us congratulations. When I glance at Ash's watch, I'm shocked to see it's past eleven p.m.

"It's late," I say to Ash, squeezing his hand.

He squeezes back. "I'm having a hard time being patient too. Just a little while longer, angel."

Finally, Ash waves Belvedere over, who passes word to the wedding planner that we're ready to leave. The party is still in full swing, the band having packed up and a DJ having come in, and any other time, I would have wanted to stay. But tonight, Ash's bed waits for me.

And maybe Embry will be in that bed too.

Ash and I hold hands and leave the pavilion as people line up and wave sparklers, glittering fire spitting and dancing around us, hissing down into the soft green grass below. We wave, kisses are blown, and then we're packed into the Beast, the black Cadillac designed specifically for the President.

My dress surrounds us in clouds of silk and tulle, and Ash is laughing as we try to smash it down so Luc can close the door. The door closes and then I'm being dragged into Ash's lap, tulle and all, and we're surrounded by walls of wedding dress.

"We're supposed to wave goodbye through the window," I whisper, although I like the sudden, if ridiculous, privacy we have right now.

Ash groans but nevertheless wrestles the gown out of the way so that we can wave some more as we pull away and drive towards our hotel. The minute we're away from the crowd, Ash lets the dress swallow us again.

"This reminds me of playing with a parachute in kindergarten," he says, glancing at the fabric.

"A parachute?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Did you not do that at your fancy boarding schools? Is my plebeian public school background showing?"

"I went to a Montessori school outside of Portland. We used parachutes more than most kids use pencils. But we sat underneath them rather than drag them inside a Cadillac."

Those dark eyebrows slant together as I get a wicked smile. "I'm happy to sit underneath your skirt, if that's what you're asking."

I'm sideways on his lap, with my legs slung over the large wooden hump in the middle of the seat that houses Ash's communications systems, and he takes advantage of my position, reaching for my legs under my dress and then following the lines of my stockings until he reaches my bare cunt.

"You never put on more panties?" he asks huskily. "Your pussy was bare this whole time?"

"Why do you think I had you pull the garter from my knee instead of my thigh? I was trying to make sure the essentials stayed covered."

His fingers probe the soft skin of my lower lips. "Did it bother you that I had your panties in my tuxedo pocket?"

I lean my head back against the window, parting my legs to give him better access, though he stays away from the flesh that wants him the most, opting instead for the soft creases between my vulva and my thighs. "I thought it was unbearably hot."

"Me too."

"Did you and Embry..." I look for the right words and can't find them. English has more words than any other Western language and yet I can't find the ones that convey curiosity and arousal and permission and jealousy all at the same time.

All the same, Ash seems to know what I'm asking. "We kissed. In the groom's dressing room at the church. He walked in and I took one look at him, and then I had him up against the wall." Ash leans his head back against the headrest of the seat. "We kissed for a very long time, until I made sure that I had tasted every trace of your cunt on his mouth, and then I marked his neck. Did you see? I wanted you to see. I can't decide if that was cruel of me or kind."

"I can't decide either," I whisper.

Ash's fingertip lightly runs up my seam, exposing how very, very wet I am. "Maybe it doesn't matter."

"Or it does matter, but I don't care."

But we're interrupted by our arrival at the hotel, a modern construction with a coldly fashionable decor. As we walk through the back entrance, my phone buzzes inside my small purse and I pull it out.

Abilene: tell me when u get to ur hotel safely so I don't worry about u

Me: just got here! It's so pretty!

Abilene: which hotel did u end up at?

Just like in Geneva, the security team vetted a few hotels before picking a final one only hours before we left the venue. It's an inconvenience and a lot of extra work and not part of the normal protocol, but Merlin with all his mysterious sources of information advised Ash and his security team to go to the effort since it was such a high-profile event.

I don't think twice about it as I text back, we're at the Sorella.

Abilene: sounds amazing, I'm so jealous! Enjoy ur wedding nite!

"Who are you talking to?" Ash asks. We're in the elevator now, riding up to the Presidential Suite, alone at Ash's insistence and at Luc's obvious displeasure.

"Abilene." I notice he's sliding his own phone into his tuxedo pants. "Who were *you* talking to?"

"Embry. I invited him up to our room to talk."

"Ash..."

I step into him, tilting my head back so I can peer up into those stunning green eyes. "No matter what happens tonight, I want you to know that I will never regret marrying you. If I had to choose, it would be you. Every time."

"You don't know how much I wanted to hear those words," he says roughly, sliding his hands through my hair. "Oh Greer. What have I dragged you into?"

His lips on mine are hungry and searching, and I let him take my mouth like I've let him take everything of mine, the simple surrender of the act clearing my mind and stirring my blood. We're still kissing as the elevator doors open, and Ash kisses me all the way down the hallway to our room, past the agents pretending to not to see us making out like teenagers. Luc opens the door to the suite, Ash kicks it closed behind us, and then we're alone.

"Do we wait for Embry?" I ask as soon as Ash lets me up for air.

"I'm not waiting to do what I've wanted to do all day, which is this," and then he lowers his mouth to my neck. The scooped neck of my dress—modest enough to pass Merlin and Trieste's "America's Sweetheart" test—still dips low enough to give Ash access to my collarbone and the tops of my breasts, which he bites and sucks with pleasure. And then he's back to my neck, kissing and nibbling and sucking until my knees are weak and he's supporting all of my weight in his arms.

"This dress," he murmurs. "I've been staring at this perfect neck all day. It's been driving me crazy."

My hands fist his lapels as he continues taking his pleasure, appreciative noises coming from the back of his throat as he tastes my skin. He's coming back up to my lips for a proper kiss when we hear a soft, tentative rap at the door.

We look at each other, and then I let go of Ash's jacket and go to the door, not even bothering to check through the peephole before I open it.

It's Embry.

He gives a quick look over his shoulder at the Secret Service agent standing nearby. "May I come in?"

"Please do," Ash says from behind me, and Embry steps inside. He's lost the tuxedo jacket and vest, although his bow tie still hangs loose around his neck. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, exposing strong, sinewed forearms that flex and harden as he closes the door behind himself and then shoves his hands in his pockets.

"You wanted to see me?" he asks. There's something almost defensive in his posture, in the way his shoulders are ever so slightly hunched, in the way he squares off to face Ash.

"Yes," Ash says. "We did."

And then he walks right over and kisses his friend, cupping a hand around the back of Embry's neck to hold him there.

Embry's eyelashes flutter and a small breath leaves him, but he doesn't pull his hands out of his pockets, he doesn't relax. "What are you doing?" he asks as Ash pulls away. "I thought today was to get it out of our systems before the wedding ceremony. Not...more."

"I told you the last time I asked you to marry me," Ash says softly, "that I don't want you out of my system. No matter how many times you want me out of yours."

Embry looks away, emotion ticking in the muscles of his cheek and jaw. "It was for the best I said no. You know that."

"Greer says you told her that you loved me. Is there a reason you can't tell me that?"

Embry doesn't speak, doesn't look at Ash.

"Because I love you," Ash confesses in a torn-up voice. "I'm sorry if I didn't say it enough before. I'm sorry if I made you feel like I only wanted to use you, to fuck you like I owned you. I do want to use you and own you, but because I love you."

"Stop it," Embry whispers, squeezing his eyes closed. "Just—*stop it*."

Ash takes a step forward, changing tactics. "The three of us—we all love each other. We've all tried to live without each other. It obviously didn't work." A rueful smile. "So we need to try something different."

"Like what?" Embry asks, still turned away from us.

"We need to find a way to be together."

"What the fuck does that mean?" Embry asks, turning back to Ash. There's a scowl on his face, but his eyes are wet. "You and Greer are married now. There is no *together* for us three."

"Says who?" Ash responds. "We know what happens when two people fall in love. It's happened between each of us. We have to find out what happens when three people fall in love. All together, all at once."

"This is fucked up." And then Embry frowns. "And I don't want to be the third wheel in your marriage. A guest who gets kicked out when he wears out his welcome."

"You're not and you won't be," I speak up, and Embry turns toward me. It's the first I've spoken since he walked in. "It's supposed to be the three of us, can't you see that? Can't you *feel* it? Today in my dressing room or the night of the Polish State Dinner—couldn't you feel what

was happening between us all? God, Embry, don't you want us? Don't you want to fuck me again? Have Ash inside you again?"

His cheeks flush red against his fair skin. "Of course I fucking do," he says. "Of course I fucking want it. That doesn't mean it's right."

"Just because it's not common doesn't mean it's wrong," I say, pleading almost. I walk up to him and take his hand in mine. "I can't live the rest of my life like this. Torn between the two of you. Watching Ash watching you. It will rip my soul in half."

Embry exhales.

"But we can't do anything without you wanting it too," I say. "If you can't be one of three, then you have to be one alone. We have to decide the boundaries here and now, because when Ash and I get back from our honeymoon, we will need to know exactly where we stand with you."

"This can't work," Embry says, looking down to where I'm holding his hand. "You understand that, right? There's no possible way the three of us could make this work."

"It will be hard," Ash says, coming up next to us. "It won't be easy at all."

"People will suspect. They'll learn the truth. If it ever gets out, all three of us will be ruined. Forever."

"That's right," Ash says, and he takes Embry's other hand. "We'll have to be extremely careful."

"And we'd have to have boundaries of our own. For the sake of your marriage and my sanity, everything would have to be crystal clear about what's on and off limits."

"Yes," I agree, looking at Ash. "We would have to figure that out too."

"And the minute it hurts too much, the minute it stops working, we have to be honest about it," Embry says, and his tone has shifted from resistant to something quiet, begging. "We have to be able to stop it if it ends up wounding us."

Ash and I are holding hands now too, the three of us standing joined in a circle. It feels very solemn, very surreal, with the low sconces throwing off patterns of gold light and the patter of May rain sounding on the window.

"Yes," Ash affirms. "But we have to promise each other that we'll try to make it work. That we won't run away when it gets hard. That we will love each other as best as we can in all the ways we can for as long as we can."

His words hang in the air, serious and spiritual.

I take a deep breath and go first. "I promise."

"Me too," Ash says.

Embry looks at us, our faces, our wedding outfits, our joined hands. He looks down to where we hold his hands too. He takes a deep breath and a tear spills over and races down his cheek so fast that I barely see it before it falls to the floor.

"I promise too," he says finally, heavily.

The moment is almost more sacred than the actual marriage vows I recited earlier, almost like God knows that this is the real promise that needs to be made.

This is the real wedding that will happen not with incense and boutonnieres but with words and skin and sweat.

Chapter Twenty-nine

The Wedding Night

Ash is the first to move, and he lets go of Embry's hand, gesturing towards the large bed at the end of the room. Embry nods wordlessly, and they both lead me back to the bed, each one holding one of my hands. I have to remind myself to breathe, seeing both of these powerful men in front of me, muscled arms straining against their shirts as they tug me to the bed. Together.

We reach the bed, and Ash turns me to face Embry.

"Kiss her," he orders his friend softly.

And Embry, looking like a sinner already in hell, cups my face in his hands and does as the President asks. When his lips brush against mine, I taste scotch and need, but he's too eager to stay on the surface for long, parting my lips with his own and licking into my mouth with searing intensity, making me stumble back.

Ash catches me, positioning me so I can rest against his chest as Embry kisses me like he'll never be able to kiss me again. I feel a tugging in my hair and I understand why Ash had me face Embry: he wanted to pull the elegant ballet bun loose and have my hair down and available for him. It spills over my shoulders in silky waves as Embry continues to ravish my mouth, his tongue firm and seeking, his breaths in between kisses fast and desperate.

We didn't kiss earlier today, I realize. This is our first kiss since Chicago.

I've waited five years for this man, and he kisses me like he's waited one hundred and five years to kiss me.

There must be a signal I don't see, because then Embry pulls away and Ash is coaxing me onto the bed, onto my back. The men lay on either side of me, propped up on their elbows, stretched out in long lines of muscle and expensive fabric.

And I forget to breathe again.

Ash reaches over me and takes Embry's hand, and Embry lets out a low groan as Ash guides his hand to my leg and presses it against my calf. Slowly—so slowly that I think I might perish—Ash moves Embry's hand higher and higher and higher, lingering at the lacy tops of my stockings, and then moving up to the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. The sight of both of them reaching under my skirt, my husband forcing his best friend to touch my pussy, threatens to rip the breath right from me, and when I feel the tangle of warm, blunt fingertips against my quivering flesh, I come to life, gasping in a breath and spreading my legs.

Ash smiles down at me. "What do you want, angel?"

"We'll give it to you," Embry whispers. "We'll give you anything you want."

I chew on my lip a moment, hoping he means that. Because I want to be finger-fucked and eaten, I really do, but there's something I want even more than that. Something I haven't had before. "I want to see what happens when you two do more than kiss."

"Oh really?" Ash asks, and two thick fingers slide inside me. I sigh happily. "Would that turn you on?"

"You have no idea."

"I might have some idea. Feel how wet she is, Embry. Feel it." A third finger, this one from a different hand, slides in and my hips lift off the bed at the sensation.

Embry nuzzles his face into my neck, I think at first to kiss me. But as the seconds pass with his lips lingering on my neck, I begin to wonder if it's because he's nervous about kissing Ash.

"Embry," I murmur. "Let me see you and Ash together. Let me have that."

And when he lifts his head, I see his eyes are glassy again, like melting glacier ice. His hand leaves me and he gets to a kneeling position. Ash mirrors him, and I'm the luckiest woman in the whole goddamn world to be witnessing the President of the United States deliberately palming his cock through his pants as the Vice President watches with his lip between his teeth.

"I'm sorry," Embry finally says. His voice is throttled, his eyes glazed with unshed tears. "I'm sorry I said no. I never stopped loving you. I just wanted to do the right thing."

"You're here now," Ash answers gruffly, one hand still on his erection as his other reaches for Embry's shirt. "You're here now."

I think they're going to kiss, that they're going to come crashing together over me in a tangle of muscle and long-stifled desire, but they don't. Instead, Embry traces Ash's mouth with his forefinger—the finger that was just inside me. And then he pushes it past Ash's lips.

Ash sucks on the finger, shoving two of his own in Embry's mouth, the two that he felt my wetness with, and I watch them as they lick the taste of my cunt from each other's fingers the same way I'd lick melted chocolate from my own. Ash's eyelids are hooded as Embry takes his fingers deep into his mouth, and Embry is breathing hard at the sight of his own finger between Ash's lips. He lets his hand fall free, and then suddenly the kiss happens, fast and hard like a clap of lightning.

"Ash," Embry breathes. "Oh, Ash."

Ash grunts in response, leaning into Embry's neck and biting the mark he made earlier. Embry practically buckles in response, and then Ash is off the bed and hauling Embry off too. Ash kisses him again, this time pressing the length of his body against Embry's. They are thigh to thigh, stomach to stomach, chest to chest, and I can tell the moment their cocks brush against each other's because they both let out identical noises, twin *unfs* of helpless pleasure. Embry's hands are all over Ash—fumbling with his vest buttons and shirt buttons—while Ash is the one holding Embry's neck, his other hand running possessive lines up and down Embry's back that make Embry shiver.

Ash moves his attention to Embry's throat again, and Embry's eyes close. And then fly open in near-agony as Ash presses his wide palm to Embry's cock.

"Jesus," Embry moans, pushing against Ash's hand. "Jesus, that feels good."

"You like that?" growls Ash. "You like having my hand on you?"

Embry nods, his mouth opening to make words, but they don't come out. And I've gone from lying on the bed to kneeling, fighting the urge to run my fingers over my clit as I watch. I want to spend all my orgasms all on their bodies, not waste one on my own. But *fuck* it's hard to hold back, especially with the rough way Ash rubs Embry, rougher than I would ever dare to be with a man.

And Ash is different with Embry than he is with me, not just rougher but faster and more demanding, like he's less afraid of hurting Embry than he is of hurting me. He fists a hand in his best friend's hair and yanks him down to his knees, while his other hand undoes his fly in a few jerky, savage motions. Embry and I exhale in unison as he draws out his erection, which is so hard that the skin on his shaft looks shiny. There's already pre-cum beaded at the top of the swollen, fat tip. His cock is so obscene like this, framed by his tuxedo pants, dark and hungry as it bobs in front of another man's mouth.

And that other man opens his mouth obediently, training his eyes on Ash's. Ash waits a moment, one hand in Embry's hair, the other on his own cock, looking like some sort of vengeful king meting out the most humiliating justice possible. And then he shoves his penis down Embry's throat without warning, without mercy, drawing out only when he feels like it and pushing in as hard and as fast as he likes.

"Pull yours out," Ash tells Embry. "Pull it out and rub it while you suck me."

Embry does as he's told, unfastening his pants and tugging them down far enough past his hips that he can expose himself. His dick is hard and shiny like Ash's, slightly more slender with a slightly less flared helmet, but just as long and veined and hungry.

My mouth waters, and I slide one leg off the bed to move closer, to see how Embry would taste, but Ash's voice stops me in my tracks. "Stay there, little princess."

"But—"

"This little show is for you, remember?" He turns his gaze away from Embry's handsome lips wrapped around his dick and looks at me. "I *will* tie you to that bed if you can't follow directions. Understood?"

I pout. "Yes, Sir."

"Good girls get rewarded, Greer. And bad girls get what's coming to them. Just remember that."

"And what exactly do the bad girls have coming to them?" I ask a little coyly, fluttering my eyelashes.

Embry laughs around Ash's cock, and it must feel good because Ash swears violently and then narrows his eyes at both of us. "*Behave.*"

Reluctantly, I obey, sitting back on my heels in a pile of lace and silk and watching Embry stroke himself as Ash mercilessly fucks his mouth. And as abruptly as he pulled Embry to his knees, he forces him back to his feet and pulls him into a wet, searching kiss.

And then he wraps both of their cocks in his huge hand and squeezes them together.

"Holy shit," Embry mumbles, breaking away from the kiss and dropping his head onto Ash's shoulder. "Fuck."

Ash says nothing, but his jaw is clenched tight as he begins to work his hand up and down their dicks, the undersides and heads slippery and rubbing against each other with each punishing pull of Ash's hand.

Embry is mumbling feverishly into Ash's neck and Ash is nodding at his words, but his hand doesn't let up, doesn't slow or slacken its grip. He jacks off those two cocks as easily as if it were just his own, and more and more pre-cum comes out as he works, making things slippery. Messy.

Neither of them mind the messy, the slippery, the bare biology of stimulation and compression and release. Instead, Embry is rocking into Ash's grip, moaning into his shoulder, and Ash is staring down at the two cocks in his hand like he's never seen anything like it, like he's awed and humbled at the same time.

And me? I'm as tight as a snare drum, my cunt so hot and aching that it feels like a wound between my legs. It's beyond *sexy* or *sexual*, those words are for a different woman in a different place. This is pure physiological need, this is body instead of mind, this is feeling without thinking.

"I'm gonna come," Embry says, his voice muffled by Ash's neck. "I'm gonna come."

"Me too, little prince," Ash says, almost soothingly. "It's okay. Just let it happen. Just give it to me."

God. Does it get any fucking better than this?

Also, it's the first time I've ever heard him call Embry that, *little prince*, and it makes me wonder about all the times he calls me *little princess*. Which of us got our name first, I wonder, and where did the nicknames even come from? And then I decide I don't care. I like that Embry and I are the little prince and little princess, the king's matched set of consorts. I like that we belong to Ash, that our names belong to Ash, that he considers us special and royal and apart from everyone else, but still miles below him, at least in the bedroom.

And Embry must like it too, because Ash murmurs, *it's okay, little prince, you don't have to be strong anymore*, and Embry erupts with a pained cry, shooting thick, pulsing spurts over Ash's fist. Ash strokes up once, strokes down once, goes up one more time, and then he gives a soft grunt and ejaculates onto his semen-covered fist, his other hand reaching for Embry's hair and pinning Embry's face against his neck as he shudders his release all over his hand and Embry's flesh. And then he pulls Embry's face to his, rewarding his little prince with soft, sweet kisses even as their cocks still twitch in his hand.

Embry moans into the kisses, clutching his fingers into Ash's shirt, and it's such a moment of extreme vulnerability, these men with their sticky, softening flesh and open, history-laden eyes, that I almost feel guilty watching this moment, more so than any other moment that led up to it.

I don't stop watching, though.

When they pull apart they both look at me, pupils wide and lips parted. I crawl up to the edge of the bed, and Ash says in a voice so even and calm you'd think nothing had even happened, "It's up to you, little princess. What happens next?"

I run my tongue along my teeth as I think. "Can you take off your clothes and then come back to bed?"

Embry nods dazedly while Ash smiles. "Your wish is our command, angel."

They both head into the bathroom, and I hear the sound of clothes hitting the floor and the sink running, and then they both come back out, cleaned off and completely naked. Even with their recently-sated cocks swinging heavily between their legs, they're still deliciously hard and male otherwise. Wide shoulders and tapered waists, notched lines of muscle along their stomachs. Both men have that perfect trail of hair leading from their flat navels to their dicks, Embry's a dark brown and Ash's a jet black, and they both have long legs that look carved from stone.

I watch happily as they stalk toward the bed, their eyes on me, and when they reach me, I press a hand to each of their chests, feeling powerful and powerless all at once.

"I should tell you that I've never done this before," I joke.

"Neither have I," Ash says, and though he's smiling back at me, his voice is serious.

I look between the two of them. "You two never...shared a woman before?"

"We've never shared a woman, and I've never been in bed with more than one person," Ash says. He glances over at Embry, who still seems slightly come-drunk from his release at Ash's hand.

"I have, um, been in bed with more than one person," Embry admits, a little sheepishly.

But I'm not jealous—at least for now. I'm curious. I let my hand drift down from his chest to circle his navel. "And was it ever like this? Two men and one woman?"

Embry's beginning to breathe faster, his blue eyes cloudy. "Yes."

“Hmm.” My hand drifts lower, following that trail of hair all the way down to the thick root of his penis. He shudders as my playful fingers walk their way around him, stroke along his testicles and probe the sensitive skin of his perineum. “Did you like it?”

His breath catches as I press a gentle knuckle into the soft patch of skin below his scrotum. “Yes.”

“Did you make her come?”

My hand moves back to his shaft, which is thickening and growing once again. Embry’s head drops back. “*Fuck*. Yes, I made her come.”

“You made it feel good?”

“So good,” he chokes out. I’m squeezing his crown now, feeling him stiffen and fatten in my hand. “So fucking good.”

“Are you going to make me feel good?”

“Shit *yes*, I am,” he growls.

Ash’s hand circles behind me, sliding down my back and rucking up my skirt to grab my ass. “What do you want, Greer?” he asks gruffly. “What do you want us to do?”

I look up at him, at the tension lining his shoulders and neck, at the semi-hard cock slowly growing between his legs, and I know that it’s taking everything he has not to take charge. Not to simply throw his little princess and his little prince down and do whatever he likes with them.

As if he knows what I’m thinking, he pulls me closer, pressing me into his chest. “This is a big step,” he murmurs. “I’m asking a lot of you tonight, and I want you to feel safe, if not comfortable.”

Just like our first time.

But unlike our first time, I realize there are a couple things that I genuinely wouldn’t be ready for if they happened, along with a couple things I really need.

“I want you to take charge,” I tell him. I’m still stroking Embry’s cock as Ash and I talk, and I can tell Embry’s struggling to focus on the conversation happening in front of him instead of on the small hand fisting his length. “But I want...”

I bite my lip. I’ve never had to set boundaries with Ash before, I’ve always been able to fling myself right into his depraved claws and know that my safe word was enough, and I find that it’s hard to actually say the words out loud.

“You have limits,” he finishes for me softly. “Of course, angel. What do you need?”

I feel shy as I say this, although that’s fucking ridiculous given the circumstances—these men have seen every part of me there is to see. What can I possibly have to feel shy about? “We haven’t done anal yet. And I don’t know if I can do my first time with two men...” I blush “...you know. *Inside*.”

“That’s a good idea,” Embry agrees hazily. He raises his arm to slide around my back, and then he’s grabbing my ass along with Ash. I feel his fingertip graze the small rosette between my cheeks and I shiver. “No one’s been inside here?”

I shiver again as he presses against it. “Ash...Ash licked me there. And his finger...*oh*—” Embry’s finger breaches me as I talk. “But he hasn’t fucked it.”

“Yet,” Ash adds in a voice full of dark desire.

“*Fuck*,” Embry says, pushing his finger in to the knuckle. I arch in pleasure-pain. “I can’t fucking wait. But if we’re going to make it feel good for your first time, we’ll have to do it right. Just one inside at a time. And then—” the finger goes deeper, and I have to let go of his cock and put a hand on his chest so I don’t fall over “—we can work you up to taking us both at once. Would you like that?”

“Yes,” I gasp, and then his finger is gone, swatted away by Ash.

“No playing while she sets her limits,” he scolds and then turns back to me. “What else, little princess?”

I look back at him and then to Embry, and my voice is very small when I say, “I want you both to hold me and kiss me. I know there will be times when we’re rough with each other, when we’re fast and dirty and there’s nothing romantic about it at all. But it’s my wedding night tonight, and I just want...I don’t know. I want to feel like a bride. I want to feel cherished.”

There was nothing else I could have said that would have had such an impact. Ash seizes my waist and yanks me close, burying his face in my hair as Embry drops his head on my shoulder with a noise that sounds ripped from his chest.

“Oh princess,” Ash says roughly. “I vow to God that we will make you feel cherished. We’ll make our bride feel loved and perfect.”

Embry makes another helpless noise at *our bride*, and so do I, the idea of being a bride to both of these men heartbreakingly joyful and arousing.

“My sweet angel,” Ash murmurs in my hair, still holding me tight. He almost sounds near tears. “Without a second thought, I would have given you half my kingdom had you asked. But you asked for the one thing I most desperately want to give you.” His lips press into my hair and then he steps back, scrubbing a hand through his hair and chewing on his lip. I see the moment he goes from vulnerable to strong, from gutted by my honest request to taking charge to see my wishes carried out.

He snaps his fingers and I scramble off the bed to kneel at his feet. “Stay here,” he orders, his eyes twinkling even though his face is serious. “I have to take a meeting with the expert.”

He and Embry step away toward the window and begin talking together in low voices. I only catch a few words, but it seems like he’s asking Embry questions and Embry is answering. I hear the words *both* and *comes first to get her as wet as possible and it should be you, you know it should be*.

And then Ash turns and walks over to the large armchair on the other side of the room, taking a seat with his bare feet planted firmly on the floor and his thighs spread wide. Even naked, he looks regal and kingly, his hard cock reaching up to his navel and resting against his belly, the sack below his penis large and heavy-looking.

“Crawl,” he instructs.

I crawl.

In my wedding dress, with Embry trailing like some sort of palace knight behind me, I crawl to my lord and master, hyperaware of every sensation. The diamonds still heavy in my ears, the sound of lace and tulle rustling along the carpet, the prickling awareness of Embry stalking along behind me, as if to make sure I don’t escape.

Like this, it’s easy to pretend that I am some sort of captured princess being hauled before her captor-king, or the bride in an arranged marriage facing the tyrant she now belongs to. A frisson of excited fear shoots down my spine at the thought.

Leave it to Ash to cherish me by making me crawl.

When I reach his feet, I know better than to look up at him. Instead, I gracefully settle back onto my knees, my toes tucked together underneath my dress and my arms behind my back in a box position. I keep my eyes down, even though I know the slightest flick upwards would reward me with the sight of that thick, delicious cock and those hard, hair-dusted thighs.

I stare at the carpet.

“She’s well-trained,” Embry remarks.

“Well, she wanted to be trained, unlike other people I know.” The words are pointed. Then I feel his finger on my chin. I look up and meet his eyes, the color of sharp bottle glass. “On your feet, princess.”

I rise, feeling the expensive skirts of the dress unfold around me as I do.

“Beautiful,” is all he says. And then his gaze moves to Embry. “Undress her for me.”

Embry obeys, his fingers easily working through the buttons and laces at the back of my gown, plucking them loose and freeing them. The dress opens up in back, and habit causes me to put my hands on the bodice to keep it from falling. Embry forces them both down and then roughly tugs the dress down past the petticoat underneath, tossing the gown carelessly aside. The petticoat comes next and then I’m standing there wearing only my corset, my stockings and my garter belt.

“The corset too,” Ash says. “I want to see her breasts.”

Embry unlaces the corset as easily as he did my dress, making me wonder how much practice he’s had getting women out of outfits like this. And then I decide I don’t want to know.

The corset loosens and is peeled away, revealing my breasts, which are high and firm and aching. My nipples, already tight little furls, grow even tighter in the cool air, under the gaze of both these men.

Ash’s cock jumps at the sight, but he seems otherwise unaffected, and his voice is casual when he says, “Turn around, princess. Just like that. You really are so beautiful.”

When I’m facing him again, he lifts a finger and gestures to Embry. “Show me her pussy.”

I shiver as I feel Embry press against me, his cock so hot against my hip it feels like it could brand my skin. He hooks a hand behind one knee, lifting it up and then spreading me wide, so that I’m balanced on the ball of my foot while Ash leans forward to inspect my cunt. He doesn’t say anything, just looks and probes with two indifferent fingers.

“Hold still,” Embry whispers in my ear. “Because if he likes what he sees, he’ll put his cock in you. Would you like that?”

I nod, whimpering as Ash continues his nonchalant inspection of my cunt. His fingers make a wide vee and separate my folds while he reaches up with his other hand to pull back the skin of my clitoral hood, exposing the swollen bud underneath. He presses a thumb against it—doesn’t rub it or strum it, just presses—and I practically collapse. Embry keeps me upright.

“Responsive,” Ash comments, removing his thumb and fingers. I moan at the loss.

“Would you like me to see if she’s wet inside?” Embry asks.

Ash leans back and gives an indifferent nod. Only the painful-looking throb of his cock and the heat in his eyes tell me that he’s only playing a game, setting a scene, pushing all of my buttons in exactly the way only he knows how.

Embry reaches around from behind me, still keeping my leg slung over his other arm, and slides his hand over my mound. The moment he makes contact with my pubic bone, I whimper. The moment he pushes two fingers inside me, I cry out, reaching back and grabbing at his neck for balance.

“Oh yes,” Embry rasps. “She’s wet.”

“Wet enough for my cock?”

“Most certainly.”

Ash purses his lips and thinks for a moment, then says, “You have ten seconds to get her dripping.”

I don’t understand what he means, but Embry does, setting my leg down and dropping to his knees in front of me. Without so much as a glance upwards, he presses his face into my cunt and

begins licking me. Long, flat strokes, the apex of each stroke ending with a gentle suckle of my clit. My hands go to Embry's hair at the same time my eyes go to Ash's face, and for the moment, the mask has dropped and I see exactly how he feels. On the arm of the chair, his hand is clenched into an angry fist and his jaw is tight with restraint. But the slit at the top of that perfect dick is glistening with pearly drops of arousal and his pulse is pounding in his neck and those green eyes finally meet mine with searing, furnace-like love.

"Show me your wedding ring," he commands. "Show it to me."

I slide my left hand over the top of Embry's head so Ash can see the ring.

"Whom do you belong to?"

"You, Mr. President."

"You're fucking right about that. Ten seconds are up," Ash says. "She better be soaking wet."

Embry pulls back with a reluctant groan. "She is. I made sure of it."

"Good." Ash spreads his legs a little wider. "Put her on top of me. And then put my cock inside her."

The color is back on Embry's cheeks, color that I know is mirrored on my own cheeks, and I feel his hands shaking as he tentatively brackets my waist.

Ash makes an impatient noise. "*Now*. I'm not accustomed to waiting."

Embry's hands tighten on me and then I'm being lifted onto Ash's lap, as easily as if I were a doll. He arranges me so that I'm straddling Ash's hips, and even raised up like this, I can feel the heat rolling off Ash's erection. It takes everything I have not to reach down and impale myself on the perfect member right now.

Embry goes down to one knee, biting his lip as he keeps one hand on my waist and drops the other to fist Ash's girth. With a shuddering breath, he brushes the tip of Ash's cock against the lips of my pussy until he finds the wet, inflamed flesh of my entrance. And with no warning, I'm shoved down onto the huge cock, the invasion so sudden and so big that sparks of pain fly through my chest, stealing my breath.

"Oh, now that is some good pussy," Ash says with a groan, his hips shifting underneath me. "Make her come on me," he tells Embry. "I want to feel what it's like when she comes."

Embry's trembling hands return, this time to my hips, and he slowly moves me back and forth on top of Ash. "Lean forward," he says in a ragged voice. "It will rub your clit against his body."

I do as Embry says, glancing back over my shoulder to see him. His normally perfect hair is tousled and messy from my hands and Ash's hands, and there's sweat gathering along the lines of his clavicle and in the furrowed lines of his stomach. His face is like it was that night in Chicago—gone. Lost. Swallowed up by his own lust. I can tell that following Ash's commands takes all of his focus, and Ash must be able to tell too because he says, "You're doing such a good job, my little prince. You're making me so proud."

Embry's hands tremble even more, but he keeps at his task, moving my hips and fucking Ash's cock with my pussy. I feel like a toy or a sex doll, a tool, an extension of Embry's body, and the feeling is deeply, awfully thrilling. To be just a thing to these men, just a tight pussy, the thing they use to relieve their needs—the thought sends knots of lust pulling deep in my belly, right where Ash's thick cock rubs mercilessly against my womb.

"Does it hurt, Embry?" Ash asks softly. He looks meaningfully down at where Embry's dark red cock is leaking in long drops. "Do you wish you could touch it? Just once?"

Embry drops his head against his chest. A single nod.

"She feels so good," Ash says, with just a hint of cruelty in his face as he does. "You did such a good job making her wet for me. You're moving her so good on top of me. It's too bad you can't feel it too."

"You're mean," Embry whispers. "I forgot how mean you could be without even raising a hand." But he doesn't sound hurt. He sounds like Ash's meanness is water in a desert, like he can't get enough.

"You better make her come fast, Embry. It would be embarrassing if you came without even being touched, wouldn't it? You want to save your seed for her pussy, don't you?"

"Jesus," Embry grinds out. "Jesus, Ash."

But then he's moving my hips harder, helping me fuck Ash while Ash tucks his hands behind his head and watches the two of us work my cunt on his cock like he's watching the evening news.

Embry knows instinctively what I need, not a fast up-and-down but a rolling grind back and forth, and between Ash's hard cock against my womb and the grind of my clit and seeing Ash so aloof and detached and in complete Dominant mode, it doesn't take long before that lust finally knots itself so tightly that it breaks.

"You're getting tighter," Ash remarks, a flicker of interest in his eyes as he looks down at where we're joined. "Are you going to come on me?"

I nod, unable to find words, unable to find the strength to do anything but grab onto the arms of the chair as the climax tears loose inside of me. I grind myself down as far as I can go, feeling Ash's testicles against the cradle of my ass, desperate for that hard presence inside of me, that hard spear piercing right through the epicenter of my need. And Ash, who can read my body better than I can read my own, leans forward and wraps his arms around me, pulling me down onto him as he thrusts up.

Both Embry and Ash are holding me in place as I shudder and quake uncontrollably, holding me pinned against Ash so that there's no escaping the overwhelming pleasure, the vicious waves of heat racing down to my toes and up to the top of my scalp. "Ash," I gasp. "Embry. Oh God. Oh my God."

It's there on Ash's cock, it's everywhere that I have nerve endings, and it holds me tighter even than my men are holding me. And as I come down, I see that Ash's jaw is clenched tight and his eyes bright, and then Embry is reaching underneath us, and I feel him circle Ash's testicles and tug them down.

"Shit," Ash hisses. "Fuck."

But slowly, agonizingly, I feel him relax underneath me, his stomach unknotting and his face losing that taut expression of pain.

"Ouch," he finally says, with a laugh, his laugh jabbing his cock into my still tender cunt. "Thanks for that."

"You deserved it after teasing me about coming early," Embry sniffs.

And then I'm pulled off Ash's cock and swept into his arms. He carries me so easily, his strong arms like steel underneath me. "You aren't going to come?" I ask fuzzily, still dazed from my orgasm.

"Oh, I am, doll. All three of us are going to come again. But that was to warm you up for the real show."

"The real show?" I ask, confused, as he lays me carefully on the bed. And then he climbs in next to me and I feel Embry on my other side, two hot-blooded parentheses surrounding my naked body. "Oh," I say, breathing hard. "I see."

"Yes," Embry says, turning me so that I'm facing Ash. Embry nuzzles the back of my neck. "I told Ash you'd need to come first. We both thought that little scene might set you off nicely."

I blush.

Ash moves closer to me, running a hand from the nip of my waist to the curve of my hip. "Don't be embarrassed, angel. I know exactly how you need to be cherished." And then he pulls my leg up to his hip, opening up my wet pussy. He doesn't enter me though. Instead, he uses my leg to pull me so close that our bodies are completely pressed together, his erection crushed against my belly, my breasts crushed against his chest, and then our lips meet in a scorching kiss.

"My wife," he murmurs against my lips. "My little princess."

His mouth is demanding, needy, and as soon as I think I've adjusted to the sensation of his firm tongue sliding against mine, I feel Embry's mouth on my neck. His cock is pressed against my ass, his hips grinding it into the peach-like skin there, and his hands are everywhere—forcing their way between Ash and me to roughly palm my breast or reaching over my leg to pluck at my clit or spanking my ass with hard, sporadic spans that made me gasp and grunt into Ash's mouth.

And then the two of them show me the meaning of the word *cherish*. My hair is coiled around hands and kissed from the ends to the roots. My stomach is caressed and my back is rubbed, my thighs are chafed while my feet and hands are massaged. My lips are gently bitten and kissed by one male mouth while another mouth marks love behind my knees and on the small of my back and behind my ear. My nipples are sucked, both at once, by mouths so soft and warm, and those mouths move to my inner thighs, biting and kissing and nibbling. Those same inner thighs are chafed and teasingly scratched with stubble as the men fight over my pussy, both of them taking turns suckling my clit and tongue-fucking my channel and tracing letters of love across all the wet, swollen flesh. The sight of those heads wrestling for space and impatiently nudging each other out of the way sends my toes curling.

Time disappears, becomes nothing, and there's only them. My men. My husband and his best friend, the President and the Vice President, two ex-soldiers who couldn't help falling in love with each other.

Who couldn't help falling in love with the same woman.

Twice they bring me to the brink of orgasm, and twice they back off, their hands and mouths suddenly preoccupied with sucking my fingers or tugging my hair, and by the time they move back up to their original positions—Embry behind me and Ash in front—I'm squirming and bothered and mindless with need. You could have asked me any question, and I wouldn't have known the answer. The only word I can remember is *more*.

More

and *more*

and *more...*

More hands. More stubble. More quiet grunts and insatiable mouths. I need it all, want it all, will die without it, and it's at that moment that Ash slings my leg back over his hip and brushes his lips across mine.

"Okay," he says, his eyes on me but his voice directed at Embry. "It's time, little prince."

"Thank you," Embry breathes. He presses so close behind me that I can feel the rough hair of his thigh against the back of mine. And then he reaches down, and with a groan that I can feel all the way down to my toes, he guides himself to my pussy, all eight straight inches sliding in with one thick thrust.

I come immediately. I'm so on edge, so wound up from the last however many minutes and hours of their attention, that the second I feel Embry inside of me after all these years, I release.

"Oh fuck, Greer," Embry groans in my ear as I convulse around him. Ash is chuckling to himself as he kisses my face and neck. Embry thrusts in deeper, my ass smashed against his hips, and he holds himself still so he can feel each flutter and wave of my walls. "I've been waiting so long," he says breathlessly. "So long to feel you come around my cock again. So long to fuck you. And oh God, it's so much better than I remembered."

The pulses eventually stop, and then Ash kisses my forehead. "I'm going to finger you while Embry is inside of you, okay?"

"Okay," I say, so languid and limp after my climax that I'll agree to anything.

"It will be uncomfortable at first," Embry warns in my ear. "But we'll go slow and we'll make it good for you."

"I'll be checking in with you," Ash says. "This is...new. For everyone except Embry at least."

I feel Ash's fingers against my clit, rubbing past the too-sensitive flesh and making me jolt as he finds the place where Embry's flesh meets my own. Embry grunts and I know that Ash is doing something to him that I can't see, something that makes the man behind me stiffen and growl. "If you want me to last," he grits out, "you're going to have to stop that."

Ash gives a dark little laugh and returns his attention to me, pushing one finger inside of me. "That's not so—*oh fuck*." Ash added two more fingers in the middle of my sentence, and now my back is arching, my body bucking automatically to get away from the foreign pressure.

"Talk to me, angel," Ash says calmly. "Open your eyes and talk to me."

I didn't even realize my eyes were closed. I open them and try to find the breath to speak, reaching past the pain swirling behind my sternum. "It's uncomfortable," I manage. "Embry was right."

"It will get better," Embry assures me. "But if you need to stop or take a breather, just say the word."

But I don't want to say the word. I want to have both of them inside of me, I want to have a moment where all three of us are completely joined. Ash presses his forehead to mine, looking at me through his long, dark eyelashes. "Breathe with me," he coaches quietly. "Follow my breathing."

It's nearly impossible, but I manage it, I manage to bring a breath deep into my stomach and slowly let it out, mimicking Ash's exaggerated breaths. And as I breathe and the pain gradually turns into something else, Ash moves his hand so that his thumb can rub against my clit while his fingers massage the spongy front wall of my channel.

"Oh," I exhale. "Oh *God*."

"There you go," Embry croons. "That's not so bad now, is it?"

"No." I shake my head a bunch of times and both men laugh. "Not so bad at all."

"I'm adding my last finger now," Ash warns me. "Keep breathing into your stomach and try to hold still."

It's to the point where I can't discern what flesh is finger and what flesh is cock, there's only the pressure and the pain and the orgasm lurking out of sight, feeding off of both. But I keep breathing and I hold still, and as Embry nuzzles the nape of my neck and Ash keeps his forehead against mine, the sharp pain fades away, leaving behind the pleasure, now stronger than ever.

Embry drops a kiss on my shoulder. "Greer, it's going to be tighter when he puts his cock inside of you, but not that much tighter. It will be just like this, where the pain is followed by pleasure, but it's easiest if you hold still. Do you think you can do that?"

I feel drunk. Or drugged. Or maybe this is just what joy feels like, a thick cock and an extra four fingers. "I don't know," I reply shakily.

"Okay," Embry says soothingly. "That's okay. We can help you hold still. Would you like that?"

"I—I think so."

"Okay, sweetheart. We're right here with you, okay? You just keep talking to us, and tell us if you need to pause for a moment. We're right here with you and—" His voice gets thicker, rougher. "—And we love you. We're going to take care of you."

I give a dazed nod, and both of them move to wrap their arms around me, Embry's arms tight around my waist and Ash's wrapped around Embry's shoulders, pinning me fast between them. My face is in Ash's neck and Embry's face is in the back of mine, and there's nowhere to move, nowhere to go. I dredge up my safe word from the depths of my mind, but I won't use it. No matter the pain, I won't use it, because I *want* this pain.

I'll die without it.

"Breathe, Greer," Ash reminds me as he takes himself in hand and guides himself to my pussy. "There you go. Just like that. Good girl."

"The first part is the hardest part," Embry promises, his mouth moving against my skin. "Once his crown is inside, the rest gets easier."

Embry is right. Ash presses his cock against Embry's cock and my entrance, and I have this sudden moment of cold fear when I realize this won't be the gentle pushing and sliding of normal sex; Ash is going to have to wedge himself in, Ash is going to have to shove and thrust and punish.

I don't breathe.

And then he stabs inside of me with a merciless grunt.

I think I scream. I *know* I buck and thrash against them, my body trying to drag itself away from the brutal invasion, but their huge arms are clamped tight around me and my body is held still for their cocks to fuck.

"Greer, Greer," Embry soothes, and Ash does the same, his handsome face in front of mine crooning meaningless words to me, like I'm a skittish horse—*stay and good girl, there's a good girl and it will be over in just a minute, just another minute, baby.*

It's impossible. It's unlivable. I'm being split apart like an atom and my pain will burn down the world.

"You're forgetting to breathe," Ash says gently.

I'm still trying to move away from the pain, still straining against their iron arms, and all of us are sweaty with the effort of it.

"Hurts," I manage to get out. "It hurts."

"I know, baby," Embry says lovingly from behind me. "I know. But it won't in a minute, I promise."

"Breathe," Ash repeats sternly, and his President voice reaches me where his gentle voice can't. I suck in a sudden deep breath, and the rush of oxygen clears my head.

I burst into tears.

The men kiss me and murmur to me, their teeth and lips and words making up for all the pain their bodies are causing, and I don't know how long the minutes pass like this, with me

sobbing and sweaty between them, and them hard and brutal inside of me, repeating over and over again how much they love me, how beautiful I am, how good they'll make me feel.

I surrender. Completely. I lose myself to the pain, sobbing against Ash's throat. I stop struggling against it, stop fighting it, and let it become me. Not for them, not even for my Sir, my President—not this time.

This time, the surrender is mine and my own. My choice, my need. My destiny.

"Breathe," Ash reminds me over and over again, and over and over again I do, each breath a gift, a chemical, astonishing gift. Each breath anchors me to myself, to this moment, to the two men I love, to the matching metal on Ash's and my fingers, to the rain outside. Each breath anchors me to the pain, and the moment I allow that fusion to happen, the pain disappears. Bit by bit, as if dissolved by my surrender, the pain is swallowed up by the swell of building pleasure, mere raindrops swallowed by a vast and endless sea.

"There she is," Embry says wonderingly. "There she is."

At some point their grip on me has loosened, freeing their hands to rub soothing paths along my thighs and my waist, and I realize that I'm staying there completely on my own, opening myself to their bodies not because they are forcing me but because I want it. Because it's starting to feel like more than pain, more than the sharp pressure of being so viciously stretched. It's starting to feel *good*, good like earlier.

Good like a different way to be cherished.

"Oh, angel," Ash says roughly, pulling back enough to see my tear-lined face. "You are too fucking beautiful like this." He kisses my hair, my cheeks, my lips. "You are amazing," he murmurs in an awed voice. "My amazing princess."

I can't speak. I can only nod.

"I want to fuck you now," my husband says with a yearning look down at my body. "But I need to know you're ready."

I nod again and he smiles. "Words, princess. I need to *hear* you say you're ready."

It's so hard to find the right words, like catching fireflies in the velvet dark that's become my mind. "Yes," I finally manage. "I'm ready."

They begin.

Ash goes first, pumping his hips experimentally, sliding the length of his cock against the length of Embry's, and I feel Embry shudder behind me and mumble something unintelligible.

"Fuck, that feels good," Ash grunts, thrusting in again. "It's like I'm fucking you and her at the same time."

I feel Embry nod against my neck, as if he's as lost in the sensation as I am.

Because I am.

Lost.

And then both men begin moving, going slow to find the rhythm that suits us all best, because of course it's not about finding the best way for two people, but for *three*, and then they find it, that perfect tempo, their two cocks rubbing together inside my pussy the same way they rubbed together inside Ash's fist earlier tonight. Underneath me, I feel the way their sacks press and rub against each other's, the tangle of my legs with theirs, the slippery wet way our skin moves against each other's—so wet I know we might have to call housekeeping for new sheets after this is all done.

I'm shaking now, shaking from fullness, shaking from endorphins and adrenaline, and I feel feverish—hot and cold and sweaty and covered in goose bumps, and the men are the same way, just long, lean expanses of sweaty, shivering muscles, and when Ash finds my hand and drags it

to his mouth to kiss my wedding ring, I know it's almost all over for me. I know that the feverish pleasure is about to surge past every lingering ache and doubt and drown me as I lie.

"Ash," Embry groans. "God, Ash, your cock. And she's so tight, Jesus *fuck*, so fucking tight..."

"I know," Ash grunts, shoving into me, sweat dripping from his face. "Believe me, I know."

"I'm—" I can't find my breath or my words or my thoughts, all there is inside me is the wave, the shuddering, tangy, metallic threat of an orgasm too strong to withstand.

"I know, princess," Ash says. "We'll follow you. Be brave and go first, and we'll follow you."

I want to respond, I should respond, but I can't because I don't exist any longer. I'm nothing but electricity and chemicals and fuel, I'm nothing but a barely held together collection of molecules about to fly apart. Embry is sweating and desperate behind me, Ash all forceful grace and strength in front, and then both of them shove up at the same time, both perfect, flared tips kissing against my womb at the same time, and once again I'm being split apart like an atom, once again I burn down the world, but this time when I cry out, it's from pure, helpless joy, it's from pleasure and love and perfection and eternity and marriage, this very real marriage happening between the three of us.

They keep their word and they follow me, Embry first with a series of grunts that send my bones vibrating with an aftershock orgasm, and Ash with a pant and a moan that hits me square in the chest, cracking my ribs and puncturing my heart with the heavenly music of it. They keep fucking through their orgasms, masculine grunts and curse words as their semen spills inside of me, as everything inside of me is slippery and warm and intimate.

Minutes pass, minutes where it's just the rain and the pounding of our pulses, and everything is wet and sticky but we just can't bear to unspool this moment, to pull apart what we've just shared, to separate what we've just joined together.

I stare up into Ash's eyes, which are clearer and happier than I've ever seen them, and then I start laughing, not because there's anything funny, but because I'm so happy that I'll cry if I don't laugh, except I've already started to cry again too.

My laughing forces both softening cocks to slip out and Embry groans, but he's laughing too, and Ash joins in as warmth spills out of me.

"We need a shower," I say in between laughs.

"We need a *nap*," Embry says, rolling onto his back and yawning boyishly.

"Shower first," Ash insists. "Our poor princess needs a little aftercare."

Except that once we get into the shower, the aftercare somehow turns into more sex, Ash and Embry together, and then me and Embry, and then the three of us again, and Ash makes me swallow double the recommended dose of Advil for my poor cunt before we strip the bed of the ruined sheets and curl up together on the bare mattress, my prince on one side of me, and my king on the other.

Embry falls asleep immediately, and I turn to face Ash, who's blinking slowly and worshipfully at me. "Happy getting married day," I tell him.

"Happy getting married day," he says back.

"What happens next?" I ask, knowing he has to be sick of that question from me, but he just smiles.

"I was wondering when you were going to ask that," he grins.

"I don't know why I ask...you always say you don't know."

"Except I do know this time." Ash wraps his arms around both me and the sleeping Embry, gathering us close to him. I press my face against his neck and hear the gentle rumble of his throat as he speaks. "What happens next is we all live happily ever after."

Chapter Thirty

I wake up sore, sweaty, and happy.

Embry has flopped over onto his stomach, one leg bent, snoring loudly, and Ash is still wrapped around me, although his arms are slack and he's hooked a leg around the cover to cool off. His breathing is even and steady, and I know if I could see his face in the dark, it would be that rare expression of vulnerability that squeezes my chest every time I see it.

I blink in the dark for a few minutes, content and safe and transformed. I feel like a different person. A realer person. Like a fairy tale princess awakened from slumber. But this fairy tale also comes with an aching pussy and a powerful thirst, so I carefully wriggle out of bed to go find some more Advil and a glass of water.

It's only been a couple of hours since we collapsed onto the bed, and it's a deep dark outside the windows, even with the city glowing around us. *Plenty of time to snuggle back in*, I think as I use the restroom and swallow the pills. *A perfect way to end a perfect night*.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and since I'm up, I go check it.

Abilene: I know it's the middle of the nite but I need to talk. can u come down to the lobby? It's important.

I'm already grabbing my robe and putting it on, searching for hotel slippers to go with it.

Me: omg, are you okay? I'm coming down now.

Abilene: I'm okay, I just need to see u.

With my hand on the door, I think about waking up one of the men and telling them I'm going downstairs, but they both look so perfect and boyish stretched out on the bed that I hate to wake them. I'll tell Luc or one of the other agents waiting in the hallway, I decide. And if Ash wakes up, then he'll be able to find me right away.

But when I open the door and step out into the hallway, I don't see Luc. Or any of the other agents. I slip my phone into my robe pocket and walk further down the hallway, puzzled. Even while we sleep, there's usually perimeters of agents guarding the room. We're never really alone.

I turn the corner to see the elevator, and again—no one. Even though I know for sure there's always an agent at the elevator.

Something's wrong, I think, and the moment I think that, I know I need to get back to the room, back to Ash. It was stupid of me to come this far down the hallway in the first place, but the best thing to do now would be to—

Oh shit.

There's a man standing in front of me wearing a hotel employee uniform and blue latex gloves, a cleaning cart at rest behind him. His uniform says *Daryl*, but I know he's not a hotel employee. Because I've seen him before.

At the Carpathian diplomatic dinner.

I take a deep breath, preparing to run. And he steps towards me with a cold smile.

American Prince

Ready for Embry's Story?

I've been many things.

I've been a son and a stepbrother. An Army captain and a Vice President.

But only with *him* am I a prince. His little prince.

Only with Maxen and Greer does my world make sense, only between them can I find peace from the demons that haunt me. But men like me aren't made to be happy. We don't deserve it. And I should have known a love as sharp as ours could cut both ways.

My name is Embry Moore and I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States...for now.

This is the story of an American Prince.

Find American Prince [here](#).

Books by Sierra Simone:

The American Queen Trilogy:

[*American Queen*](#)

[*American Prince*](#)

American King (coming this fall)

The Priest Series:

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Sinner (2018)

Co-Written with Laurelin Paige

[*Porn Star*](#)

[*Hot Cop*](#)

The Markham Hall Series:

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[*The Seduction of Molly O'Flaherty*](#)

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About the Author

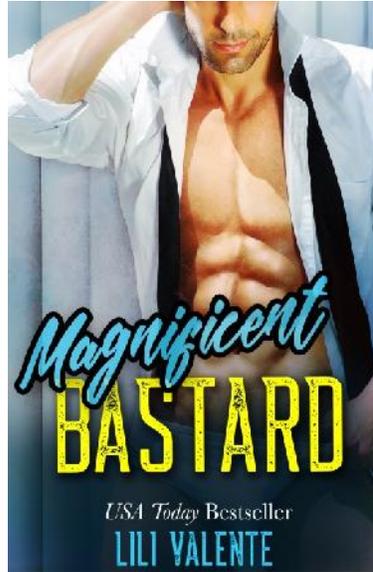
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Sign up for her newsletter to be notified of releases, books going on sale, events, and other news!

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MAGNIFICENT BASTARD

By Lili Valente



PROLOGUE

Picture this: it's a rainy spring day in the city. The streets are covered with a fine layer of mud and soggy garbage, the sun is a distant memory from another, brighter time when you were still stupid enough to believe in happy endings, and you've just been dumped so hard your heart looks like it's gone three rounds with Mike Tyson.

You're ugly crying in a corner with a box of wine and a chocolate bar the size of your forearm, wishing Prince Charming would come swoop you up on his white horse and carry you far away from all those nasty memories of Mr. Wrong, but I'm here to tell you, ladies—

You need to stop that shit.

Stop it. Right now.

Why? Because Prince Charming is a crock of shit. Like unicorns, mermen, and other fairy tale creatures, he doesn't exist.

When you're down and out and your heart has been ripped to shreds by an asshole with a dickish-side a mile wide, you don't need Prince Charming. You need a man who's not afraid to get his hands dirty, a man who can teach Mr. Wrong a thing or two about what it feels like to be deceived, betrayed, and laid low by the one person in the world you thought you could trust. What you need is a Magnificent Bastard, your very own one-man vengeance machine.

Love isn't a fairy tale, sweetheart; it's war, and now you've got a soldier with an anti-asshole missile on your side.

Want to ruin your ex's reputation? No problem. Every true asshole has a few skeletons in his closet and I specialize in spring cleaning. Want to send that human come stain to jail? A little harder, but often still possible. I only accept cases involving the very worst examples of mankind, the most miserable liars, cheats, and scoundrels. Truly terrible people tend to be good at covering their tracks, but I've delivered exes in cuffs before.

Want to make your former lover green with envy? Make him wish he'd never kicked you off the love wagon, spat in your face, and walked away? Well, that, cupcake...

That's what I'm best at.

I've been blessed with a face that turns heads, worked hard for a body that inspires shudders of lust at twenty paces, and honed my envy-inspiring skills into a razor sharp weapon I wield with ruthless efficiency. I will make you feel like a queen and ensure your ex doesn't miss a minute of it. You'll be treated like a treasure, pampered like a princess, and kissed like a slut who can't get enough of my magnificent dick.

In reality, of course, things between us will never go further than a kiss, but your ex won't know that. He'll see your flushed cheeks, lust-glazed eyes, and wobbly legs and think I'm giving it to you hard every night.

He'll imagine my hands on your ass, my fingers slipping between your legs, and your pussy slick just for me. He'll imagine you screaming my name while you ride my cock and remember all the times he was lucky enough to be balls deep in your incomparable snatch. Before long, he'll have a jealousy hard-on so bad he'll come crawling back to you on his belly, begging for a second chance.

But you won't give it to him.

Did you hear that?

Even so, it bears repeating—

You. Will not. Give that loser a second chance.

By the time I'm through with you, you will know deep down in the marrow of your bones that you're better than that. You'll realize that you deserve a man whose eyes won't wander, whose hands won't hurt, and whose heart belongs to you and only you. You'll be able to look down at the sniveling, pathetic, limp-dicked excuse for a man you used to love and tell him that he has no power over you.

Not anymore. Now you're free to move on with your life without any of the bad breakup, psychic baggage.

And that, gorgeous, is the most important of the services I deliver. I give you back to *you*, the only person who can be trusted to steer your course as you ride off into the sunset.

But if for some reason, you break this all-important rule, if you sour the gift you've been given by going back to Major Dickweed, don't bother contacting me again. No amount of money will convince me to pick up the phone.

A Magnificent Bastard intervention is a once in a lifetime opportunity. One and done, no exceptions.

None.

Not even for her, the woman who made me break all my rules, the woman who made me think—for one amazing week—that even magnificent bastards can live happily ever after.

CHAPTER ONE

From the e-mail archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: Two-Year Anniversary

What’s up Buttercup?

Congratulations on surviving two years of ten-a-day e-mails, late night phone calls, crazy client vetting interviews, and general insanity. When I first sent out a call for a virtual assistant, I had no idea I’d end up with someone like you. You make the work possible and ten times better.

They said we couldn’t do it, kid, but last I checked, we were laughing all the way to the bank.

Speaking of the bank, check your PayPal account for a token of my appreciation.

Here’s to another year of kicking ass and taking names,

Bash

From: Penny4YourLobsterPot

To: MagnificentBastard1

Re: Two-Year Anniversary

Dear Bash,

I’m pretty sure you were drunk when you sent that bonus, but ha ha joke’s on you, I’m not giving it back!

But seriously, thank you for your generosity and your trust. I know it was a leap of faith to hire a cultural anthropologist with close to zero employment history as your assistant, and I appreciate it.

Love my job, love the work you’re doing, and can’t wait to grow the business in the coming year!

**doing the two-year anniversary celebration dance*(contains twenty-percent more running man than the one-year anniversary dance.*

Penny

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: Two-Year Anniversary

At least it wasn’t thirty-percent more running man.

That would have been weird....

;))

B

CHAPTER TWO

It's the perfect day for a messy, public breakup.

The sun is glittering on the Central Park reservoir, the New York City skyline stretches like a work of art across the cloudless horizon, the cherry blossoms are in full bloom, and I'm looking like six feet three inches of Sex on a Stick in black track pants, a skin tight, moisture-wicking blue running shirt, and obscenely expensive reflective sunglasses.

I usually opt for the just-rolled-out-of-bed-and-hit-the-pavement look for my morning jog, but this run is special. It's Caroline's final appointment with Magnificent Bastard Consulting and I intend to make sure she gets everything she paid for, right down to a tear or two if I can squeeze them out.

If not...well, that's what the sunglasses are for.

"You ready, gorgeous?" I ask, as Caroline and I circle around the half-mile marker, moving steadily closer to a large gathering of people practicing Tai Chi in the grass beneath the trees.

Caroline, a forty-five-year-old betty who deserves much better than the slimy ex-husband I've recently helped her ruin, slows beside me. "Maybe we should do another lap. I haven't gotten my heart rate up yet."

"This isn't about getting your heart rate up, doll," I remind her. "It's about dumping your lover in front of the man of your dreams and letting Gary know that you're fierce, fabulous, and back on the market."

"But he's doing Tai Chi," she frets, running a nervous hand over her blond ponytail. "What if he's annoyed by the interruption?"

"Then he'll be annoyed with me. I'm the one who's going to be obnoxious."

Caroline chuckles. "I find that hard to believe, Bash. You're the least obnoxious man I've ever met." She pats my shoulder with an affection that makes me glad her crush is too absorbed in his moving meditation to be paying attention to the couple running toward him. "You're the very best. And if you ever break things off with your girl, I'd love to introduce you to my daughter's best friend, Lola. She's lovely and talented and just a few years younger than you."

"Thank you, but Penny and I are very happy together." It isn't a lie. Penny—my virtual assistant and the force of nature who keeps Magnificent Bastard Consulting running like a well-oiled machine—and I *are* very happy together.

The fact that she's my employee and we've never met in person, let alone formed a long and lasting love relationship, is none of Caroline's business.

I care about my clients and give a hundred and ten percent while I'm managing their cases, but I learned early on that keeping fantasy separate from reality is much easier if the women I work with believe I'm in a committed relationship. Even when a job doesn't require handholding and lingering kisses staged for the benefit of an ex who needs to be taught a lesson about the gem he let slip through his fingers, a certain level of intimacy develops when working closely with someone in a fragile emotional state.

Take Caroline for example. We've kissed exactly twice: once during our practice session, and once in front of her husband's office, as he was led away in cuffs after being indicted in an ongoing insider trading investigation. But she's already taken to hugging me goodbye and trying to set me up with her daughter's friends. As much as I've enjoyed our time together—Penny makes sure the women whose cases are accepted by MBC are the sweetest and most deserving—

it's time for Caroline to spread her wings and hop out of the nest.

Right into Gary Donahue's strong, Thai-Chi-steadied arms.

Dropping my hands to my hips, I jog to a stop about ten feet from where Gary and the other peaceful exercise enthusiasts are slow-motion ninja fighting and turn to Caroline, a scowl tightening my face. "You've got to be kidding me, Caro. You're not doing this here. In the middle of the park. Ten minutes into our fucking run."

Caroline's blue eyes go wide and her gaze darts nervously toward the people gathered in the patchy spring shade.

"Don't look at him, keep your eyes on me," I whisper for her ears only before adding in a cutting tone, "Tell me I'm hearing things, Caroline. Because from where I'm standing it sounded like you said you wanted to break up with me."

"I'm s-sorry, Sebastian," she stammers, crossing her arms at her chest only to uncross them when I shoot her folded hands a pointed look. We've talked about this. She's not a victim anymore. Not even a pretend victim. From now on, she rolls her shoulders back and stands up for herself.

I watch with pride as her spine stiffens and fire flashes in her eyes. "But my decision is final," she continues in a firmer voice. "I want more from a relationship than this."

"More than what?" I shake my head, brow furrowing as I jab my thumb in the direction of the subway entrance. "I took the train twenty minutes so we could run by your apartment instead of mine. And I agreed to go to coffee afterward, and I don't even like coffee."

"And I don't like going to night clubs," Caroline counters. "Or whiskey bars. Or having to wave my hand in front of your face to pull your attention away from your phone. What is *wrong* with people under forty, anyway?" She thrusts out her arms as if to embrace the entire park. "The whole wide, wonderful world is rushing by in all its heartbreaking beauty and glory and all you can think about is texting or swiping left or whatever it is you're doing on there."

I blink. Ouch.

I haven't been on a dating app in a while, but I have an addiction to refreshing my e-mail that I've indulged freely during my time with Caroline, earning my share of heavy sighs from her that I've ignored the way I ignore the heavy sighs of my own mother. But the fact that Caro has brought something real into a fake fight stings a little.

The sting helps add an extra layer of asshole to my words as I sneer, "Well, maybe if you weren't so boring, sweetheart, I'd have a reason to look up from my phone once in a while."

Caroline's jaw drops and her next breath emerges in a huff, accompanied by a flap of her arms at her sides. "Well, if I'm so boring, then you should be glad I'm breaking up with you! Instead of yelling at me in the middle of the park."

My lips part to form a retort worthy of a swift kick in the ass from Gary—if he's listening and has any balls at all—but Caroline jumps in before I can speak.

"You're just an overgrown child," she says, propping her hands on her hips. "You're so used to getting your own way that you don't know how to behave when someone calls you on your bullshit. But I've already raised three children, Sebastian, and I have no desire to raise any more."

She lifts her chin, somehow managing to look down her nose at me despite the fact that I've got six inches on her. "Now it's time for you to go before you make any more of a fool of yourself than you have already."

I shake my head, concentrating on keeping an outraged expression on my face even though I'm so proud all I want to do is scoop Caroline up in a big hug.

This isn't the same shattered, broken woman who sat down across my desk six weeks ago. This is a woman who has taken her vengeance on the man who abused and demoralized her for nearly twenty years. A woman who has learned to feel beautiful and confident in her own skin.

A woman who is going to knock Gary, who is finally moving across the grass to come to her rescue, off of his feet.

Because Caroline doesn't need rescuing anymore. She just needs the man she hired to help her reclaim her life out of the picture so she can move forward with the coworker she's had a crush on for months.

"Fine." I whip off my glasses and pin her with a wounded glare. "But don't come begging for a second chance when you realize you've dumped the best lay in Manhattan."

Amusement flickers in her eyes, but she manages a cool nod. "Goodbye, Sebastian."

"Goodbye, Caroline," I say, before adding in a whisper. "And good luck, gorgeous. You're magnificent."

CHAPTER THREE

Knowing my work here is done, I turn on my heel and jog across the gently rolling hills toward Central Park West, ignoring the male voice shouting that I should “keep walking, asshole!”

Gary, I assume, the Prince Charming too dense to notice the beautiful woman making eyes at him across the art gallery for the past six months.

Color me unimpressed.

Caroline is more than a decade older than my thirty-two and not even close to my type—I prefer brunettes with dark eyes and curves to slim, willowy blondes—but I wouldn’t be able to pass her on the street without taking a second look, let alone work alongside her every day and remain oblivious to her charms. A pretty face is only one of the many things Caro has to offer. She is also kind, thoughtful, generous, and an excellent conversationalist.

I advised her to expand her dating options, but she was determined to catch Gary’s eye, and who am I to turn down the consulting fees it took to throw the two lovebirds together?

I have an investment portfolio that would make the King of Persia weep with envy and Magnificent Bastard Consulting has never been about the money—if I wanted a more extravagant lifestyle than the one I already enjoy, I would still be working as a corporate raider—but I do enjoy the finer things in life.

Things like a few thumbs of Laphroaig Triple Wood Irish Whiskey at the end of a long day. Or at the beginning of one.

It’s Sunday, an excellent day for day drinking, and I’m a free man for the next week. I’m taking my first vacation since I started the business and see no reason not to start celebrating.

And chances are I won’t have to drink alone.

As I reach the edge of the park and turn left on the sidewalk, moving south along Central Park West, I glance over my shoulder to see my tail still following at a discreet distance, though nothing about Aidan could be called inconspicuous. Six feet five, with the shoulders of a linebacker, a lumberjack beard, and full sleeve tattoos on each arm, Aidan is the type that turns heads. Men want to keep an eye on a potential threat and women just want to keep an eye on him. Period.

He’s going to be the perfect addition to MB Consulting...as soon as I convince him to sign on the dotted line.

Hopefully, this morning has been educational for my furry-faced friend.

I turn and lean against a graffiti-covered mailbox, grinning as I wait for Aidan to catch up. When he does, his first words—

“You were a fucking asshole back there.”

—make me smile even wider.

“I prefer bastard,” I say. “It’s important to stay on brand. Want to hit Highland Fling? I like to celebrate the end of a job with scotch. My treat.”

He grunts. “Sure, I’ll drink with you, but I still can’t believe that woman actually paid you for that.”

“For that and the rest of the package.” I clap him on the shoulder. “But I take care of the detective work and the behind the scenes revenge elements. All you’ll have to do is look pretty and put on a good show for the exes.”

“I don’t know, man.” Aidan scratches at his beard. “I’m a tattoo artist, not an actor. I don’t know if I could pull off something like that.”

“That’s why we practice with the clients ahead of time,” I say, waving away his concern. “And you’ll be amazed how gullible people are. As long as you’re saying the right things, nine of out ten times no one will notice if you’re saying them the wrong way.”

“Comforting words coming from the man who’s been my best friend since middle school,” he says dryly. “Careful, or I’m going to think this entire bromance has been a lie.”

“Our bromance is my only truth,” I deadpan. “And I only lie to people who don’t deserve better.”

He grunts again, proving he’ll be the perfect rough-around-the-edges foil to the smooth, sexy, successful businessman experience I provide.

“But there’s no need to make a decision now,” I assure him as we start toward Midtown and one of my favorite whiskey bars. “Let me hook you up with Penny. I’ll text you her phone number and you two can discuss all the semantics while I’m soaking up the sun in the Hamptons. Get the facts, think on it, and you can let me know at the end of the month.”

“Who goes to the Hamptons the first week of May?” he asks, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Isn’t that a summer thing?”

I shrug. “Usually. But I enjoy the beach on a sixty-degree day. I enjoy not dealing with the fucking summer crowds even more. Penny booked me into a guesthouse at a winery in Southampton.”

“Sounds epic,” Aidan says, amusement in his voice. “Bet you’ll get laid like crazy out there with all the blue hairs on vacation.”

I shoot him a narrow look. “I get laid plenty around here. I’m looking for peace, not pussy.” He snorts. “And that’s not weird at all.”

I don’t dignify that comment with a response. There’s nothing weird about wanting to unplug for a few days, especially after the past two years.

I’ve been working—and playing—non-stop. If I wasn’t with a client, I was with one in a long line of beautiful women who were all too eager to help me forget the one who got away. Not to be an arrogant son of a bitch, but I’ve never had trouble getting laid. I bear a striking resemblance to a certain square jawed, blue eyed, super-hero-playing movie star but with better hair, and I’m every bit as magnificent in the sack as I am at the vengeance business.

The Incredible Bulk delivers on all levels—size, appearance, and performance. My cock has been called magical in four different languages and I have no doubt that if there is a single beddable girl in the Hamptons, I could get her naked and underneath me with a minimal degree of effort.

But I don’t want to bang a stranger in my vacation cottage. I just want peace, quiet, and some time to think.

Time to consider why, over two years after things ended with Rachael, I still haven’t met a single girl I want to keep around for longer than a few weeks.

At first, playing the field was therapeutic, a way to forget how much it hurt to know I’d been dumped in favor of a man who gives new meaning to the phrase Heartless Douchebag. But now I’m beginning to wonder if I’ll ever get out of the serial dating rut. I never aspired to be a manwhore, but somewhere between Savanna the cocktail waitress, the first woman to take me home post-ugly-breakup, and Wendy from the gym last week, I’ve slipped into a disturbing pattern.

A pattern that, while pleasurable, has left me feeling...adrift, unsatisfied, and maybe just a

tiny bit lonely.

It's time to step back and take a long hard look at my life. I'm actually looking forward to some time alone away from it all. And if things get uncomfortable below the belt while I'm reflecting, I'll take care of it myself.

Despite what Aidan seems to think, a week of spanking it out to porn never killed anyone.

"Fine," he says, with a sigh. "Hook me up with Penny and I'll give it some serious thought. I'm not going to raise the money to open another Ink Addicts location working twelve hour days in the West Village."

"Smart man." I pull my phone from my pocket, refreshing my e-mail, frowning when I see there's nothing new from Penny. She usually checks in at least once by ten a.m. and I haven't heard from her since last night.

Concerned, I shoot her a quick text—

What's up buttercup?

Just finished with Caro and am a free man. Heading to Highland Fling in Midtown with Aidan.

Let me know if you want to join. Drinks before noon are always on the boss and Aidan wants to pick your business brain before he agrees to join the fun.

As I slide my phone back into my pocket, my fingertips tingle.

Will today be the day Penny finally decides to take me up on my offer to meet in the outside world?

For the past two years, we've averaged ten e-mails and numerous texts every day and several epic phone conversations each week. But despite the fact that she only lives across the river in Brooklyn, we've never met in person. Like any good Manhattanite, I loathe leaving my preferred stomping grounds, but I would hop an L train for her.

Aside from Aidan, the woman is my best friend. She's been with me from day one when people were still telling me I was insane to abandon a successful career to take up shop as a detective/male gigolo—minus the fun parts of being a gigolo.

When I'm with a client, things never go further than a kiss.

It's the first of the ground rules Penny helped me put together in the early days. She's been invaluable at making Magnificent Bastard Consulting, and my life post-corporate America, a success.

I would very much like to buy her a whiskey before I go on my soul-searching vacation. Or a coffee. Or an ice cream—we both have a weakness for any brand made with whole milk and containing obscene amounts of fat.

I know that and a hundred other things about her, but I've never seen so much as a selfie of the woman who vets my clients.

I don't know when it started to bother me so much that I don't have a face to put with Penny's unexpectedly sweet voice or the snarky e-mails that litter my inbox, but recently I've started to wonder if there's something wrong with me.

What kind of man puts implicit trust in someone he's only interacted with over the Internet and the phone? Penny could be a fifty-five-year-old man with a weirdly high-pitched voice and a porn addiction for all I know. Or a cat lady whose entire apartment has turned into one gigantic litter box.

The thought makes my stomach turn.

Penny has strong hermit tendencies and probably a greater chance of becoming a cat lady than anyone else I know, but I don't want that to be true. I don't like the thought of my friend

drowning in kitty litter.

As if summoned by my thoughts, my cell vibrates. I slide it from my pocket just as a series of Penny texts—they tend to come in clusters of six to twelve—begin to chime in, filling the screen.

Actually, I was hoping to run into you before then.

I'm waiting at the corner of Central Park West and 73rd street and I'm pretty sure you're walking straight toward me. I mean, assuming you look like the picture we send out to clients, then that's definitely you.

And Aidan. He does kind of look like a lumberjack, doesn't he?

Ha!

Okay, I know this is kind of weird, but don't freak out. I'm not stalking you. I mean, I am stalking you, but that's only because you told me where you would be this morning.

Shit, that looks a lot creepier on the screen than it did in my head.

I'm going to stop texting now because you're totally close enough to hear my voice.

I force a smile as I glance up to scan the sidewalk in front of me, but I'm feeling anything but calm. My pulse is pounding and my stomach is snarling and scotch isn't sounding nearly as good as it did a few minutes ago.

Fuck, I don't know why I'm so nervous.

Okay, fine, I know exactly why I'm nervous.

I'm afraid meeting Penny will be a letdown. I've had it happen before—you make an online connection with someone who seems amazing, only to find out later that they have a donkey laugh and smell like industrial cleaner. Or there was the girl who gave great phone chat but was a dead-eyed sociopath when we met up for drinks. Not to mention the woman with the amazing textual flirting skills who was incapable of making eye contact or the husky-voiced real estate broker who turned out to be a man.

Fuck it.

If Penny is weird or smells funny or has a dick, you'll deal with it.

You have to deal with it. You know damned well you can't manage without her.

The thought has scarcely tripped through my mind when my gaze lands on a petite woman with big brown eyes and silky brown hair pulled into a knot on the top of her head. Her hair is messy, her face is make-up free, and she's wearing a baggy off the shoulder tee shirt and leggings like half the other women walking the park this morning, but even looking like she just rolled out of bed, she's fucking stunning.

I'm talking take your breath away beautiful, with an angel face and melted chocolate eyes and curves for miles. Curves for days. Curves that not even that baggy tee shirt can conceal and you can bet the Incredible Bulk sits up and takes notice. He's not ripping through my boxers, insisting you're going to love him when he's angry, but things are definitely getting tighter below my waistband.

I can't help myself.

This woman is exactly my type, from the tip of her turned up nose, to her way-more-than-a-handful breasts, to the curve of her phenomenal ass.

I'm already scheming a way to get her number—I don't leave for the Hamptons until Tuesday, the city will still be here when I get back, and my manwhore ways can wait to be mended until after I've shown this gorgeous creature a very good time—when our eyes meet and my throat locks up. I curse beneath my breath as my palms begin to sweat.

“What's wrong?” Aidan asks, but I only shake my head.

There's no time to explain. We're barely a foot away from the bona fide sex kitten, and she's already thrusting out an arm and saying in a way too familiar voice, "Surprise! Happy meet your assistant in person day."

CHAPTER FOUR

From the e-mail archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: Internet Dating

Penny,

The next time I decide to log on to my LetsGoLove account, please arrange for a hairy Italian man to come beat the shit out of me, steal my wallet, and piss on my semi-conscious body.

The experience will probably be equally enjoyable to the date I had tonight and I won't have to bother replying to half a dozen e-mails, graduating to text messages, and upgrading to an awkward phone call before meeting Ms. Shifty Eyes Who Is Probably An Ax Murderer In Her Spare Time for drinks halfway across town.

Please nail down the next client ASAP so I have an excuse to stop dating.

Dating is dumb and then you die,

Bash

From: Penny4YourLobsterPot

To: MagnificentBastard1

Re: Internet Dating

Bash,

10-4 on the hairy Italian. There are a few wandering my neighborhood. Will get their contact info so I'm ready next time you fall off the dating wagon.

Details on your next client attached. Your orientation meeting is on Monday.

Penny

p.s. I agree that getting pissed on is preferable to making small talk with strangers. This is why I am committed to full-time hermitting and solo ice cream eating.

CHAPTER FIVE

Without my conscious permission, my hand reaches out to enfold Penny's.

Penny, who is a stone cold fucking fox. Whose palm is warm and soft and whose skin feels way too good against mine for someone who is off limits.

Because she is. Off fucking limits.

Verboten. Forbidden. Completely out of bounds.

That's been decided even before she laughs nervously and says, "And now's the part where I tell you I'm a liar and beg you to forgive me." Her eyes dart to Aidan as I force myself to release her hand. "Hi, Aidan. You *must* be Aidan. He's told me all about you. I'm Penny, his assistant." Her fingers flutter to her chest as she adds in a shakier voice, "Or maybe his former assistant. If I get fired today."

"Hi, Penny. Nice to meet you." Aidan clears his throat and arches a brow in my direction. "So should I hit it? Give you two some time alone?"

"No," I insist, just as Penny says—

"Yes, please. That would be great."

I turn back to her, wondering what the hell she's lied about and how I'm supposed to go back to thinking of her as my work friend who writes me goofy e-mails when she looks like *this*.

Jesus, even the way she fidgets, causing her breasts to bounce lightly beneath her shirt, would be enough to get me hard if I let it.

But I won't. Not now, not ever again.

"I'm sorry, I've just got a lot to tell you," she says. "Some of it's private and all of it's embarrassing. And if there's even a chance Aidan and I will be working together in the future, I would prefer not to spill my dirty laundry during our first meeting."

She nibbles her lip, drawing my attention to her beautiful mouth. It really is perfect. I can almost imagine the way her plush bottom lip would feel trapped between my teeth while I'm kissing her breathless.

Fuck, this is ridiculous.

Aidan can't leave. I need him here for cock-blocking support.

But Aidan, the traitor, is already backing away. "Of course. No problem." He thumps me twice on the back in the universal sign for "glad it's you and not me, brother" and lifts a hand. "Catch you later, Bash. Take care, Penny."

And then suddenly I'm alone with my no longer virtual assistant.

Alone with Penny, who is not a cat lady or in possession of a secret penis. Penny, who is a beautiful, irresistible liar, just like the last woman who ripped my heart from my chest, shredded it, salted it, and ate it raw and bleeding with a nice Chianti.

"I need you to start talking." My voice is cool and distant, one of the many side effects of thinking about Rachael. "And if I don't like what you have to say, you can consider your vacation time the start of your two weeks' notice."

Her throat works as she swallows, but she nods. "I understand. And I won't blame you if you decide I've broken the cone of trust. But is there any chance we can get that drink you mentioned before we talk? I never drink before noon, but I've never told anyone this story before, either, and I'm not sure how I'm going to manage it sober."

"I'll call a car." I tap the Uber app on my phone, suddenly not in the mood for a long,

leisurely walk to Midtown. I'm in the mood to discover exactly what Penny has been hiding and to decide whether or not I can forgive her ASAP.

When it comes to forgiveness, I don't fuck around.

I either grant it immediately—we all make mistakes and I've screwed up enough in my life to understand the importance of second chances—or I cut the offender off without a second thought. I learned the hard way how much it hurts to be betrayed again and again, to think you've finally gotten through to the person who's fucking your heart up the ass, only to have them bend you over and go at it a third time.

But never again. These days, *I* do the bending over.

I don't take shit from anyone, not even someone I depend on and care about as much as I do Penny.

CHAPTER SIX

From the e-mail archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From: Penny4YourLobsterPot

To: MagnificentBastard1

Re: Your assumption that I am not enjoying a robust and varied nightlife

Dear Bash,

Pursuant to your last e-mail, insisting that I am a sad clown living in the lame circus because I happen to enjoy staying in on Saturday nights, I draw your attention to the attached article on the dangers of NYC nightlife. Including bed bugs in lounge cushions, assault with a deadly stiletto, and packs of wild and possibly rabid/werewolf dogs prowling lower Chelsea.

Enjoy your life on the edge. I'll be safe at home with Netflix and leftover quinoa salad, the dinner of champions.

Sincerely,

Penny

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: Your assumption that I am not enjoying a robust and varied nightlife

But if you don't get out and about, how are you ever going to be bitten by your werewolf mate and live happily ever after?

And don't even try to pretend you weren't all over that series.

I bet you read those books until the pages were in tatters.

Bash

From: Penny4YourLobsterPot

To: MagnificentBastard1

Re: Your assumption that I am not enjoying a robust and varied nightlife

At least I read more than one book a year!

You should be ashamed of yourself. A true Magnificent Bastard would be well read on a variety of subjects.

At least, that's what I would want in an MB, were I ever to acquire one.

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: Your assumption that I am not enjoying a robust and varied nightlife

I'll keep that in mind...

CHAPTER SEVEN

Outside the spring sun is warming Manhattan to a pleasant sixty-something degrees, but inside the dark brick, windowless walls of Highland Fling, there is a chill in the air.

Penny and I make our way past the solid mahogany bar to a cluster of couches gathered around the fireplace where a fire is crackling in the hearth. At ten fifteen in the morning, the bar is deserted. We have the establishment to ourselves, save for the twin deer heads mounted above the mantel of the fireplace, who seem to look down their noses at us as we settle onto the blue couch closest to the fire.

Under normal circumstances, I would make a joke about the disembodied heads' opinions of day drinking, but nothing about this morning is normal. Penny has thrown me off my game and the longer I have to wait for an explanation, the more irritable I'm getting.

I'm short with the waitress who takes our drink order and can barely force a smile for the manager as she drifts by on the way to her office in the back. I have to literally bite my tongue to keep quiet until our scotch on the rocks is delivered.

The second our server wiggles away on her high heels, headed back toward the bar, I turn to Penny and order her to, "Spill it. Now."

Her eyes go wide over the rim of her tumbler, but instead of putting the drink down, she tips it up, draining half the glass in one go.

"Jesus," she gasps, wincing as she sets the tumbler down on the wooden arm of the couch. "That'll put hair on your chest. How do you drink that every night?"

"It's not meant to be guzzled." I take an appropriately sized drink of my extremely expensive scotch. "It's meant to be savored, enjoyed."

Penny nods, her dark eyes scanning my face, an indecipherable expression tightening her features. I submit to her inspection, allowing the silence to stretch on for an uncomfortable moment before I ask, "Is something wrong?"

"No." Her lips pucker before sliding to one side. "You just look...different than I expected."

"I thought I looked like the picture we send to clients."

"You do," she says, still frowning. "But different."

I lift a brow. "How so?"

"I don't know." Her open, vulnerable gaze meets mine, and for a moment, I'm tempted to assure her I won't bite, but then she adds, "Less friendly, I guess? You're always so laid back on the phone and in our e-mails."

Clenching my jaw to keep my temper in check, I lean forward, bringing my face closer to hers before I say in a controlled voice, "Being ambushed in the middle of Manhattan and having one of the people I trust most in the world tell me she's a liar doesn't put me in a friendly mood, Penelope. If you don't start explaining yourself soon, I will fire you for driving me out of my fucking mind with frustration and we can call it a day."

"Right. Of course." Her breath rushes out. "I'm sorry. I'm just so stinking nervous."

Taking a deep breath, she lifts her glass to her lips and downs the rest of her scotch. Before the tumbler returns to the arm of her chair, she's spilling the beans. "It started a few months before I moved to the city. I'd just finished grad school and was home for the summer, trying to decide what to do with my very useful masters degree in cultural anthropology. I'd only been back for a few days when I ended up reconnecting with my ex-boyfriend. I guess you could say

we were high school sweethearts.”

She crosses her arms, her shoulders curling in a self-conscious way that reminds me of Caroline, pre-Magnificent Bastard intervention. “Phillip was the first boy I ever loved. Things didn’t end well, but you know how it is, you never really get over your first.” Her gaze drops to the cushions between us, and when she speaks again, her voice is soft, wounded. “I fell back in love with him stupidly fast. Stupidly, stupidly fast. It would have been dumb even if he hadn’t been a complete jerk to me the first time around. As it was...”

I fight the urge to nod encouragingly. So far, this story is all too familiar, but I need to know more before I let down my guard.

She shakes her head. “Anyway. I guess some people would say I got what was coming to me. But in my defense, Phillip was very convincing. He made me believe he was head over heels. He even hinted about getting engaged. He never said anything flat out, but he majored in musical theater so he’s practically a professional when it comes to subtext.”

“Musical theater? And you’re sure he’s straight?” I ask, trying to lighten the mood. She hasn’t laid it all out there yet, but the reason for this meeting is becoming pretty clear. At least clear enough for me to want to make this confession easier for her.

Her cheeks flush. “Yeah, I’m sure. He was my first in *every* way. And even if he hadn’t been, the day I walked in on him and my mother going at it in the pool house, he was clearly having no trouble performing.”

I wince. “Ouch.”

“Yeah. So. That’s how our second chance at happily ever after ended.” Penny rolls her eyes toward the ceiling. “I caught my boyfriend banging my mom and then I kind of...went off the rails.”

“Off the rails.” I take another sip of my drink, sensing I’m going to need a buzz before this story is through. “In what way?”

“Well, first I went down to the local dive bar and got spectacularly drunk,” she says, her words beginning to slur a little, making me think she’s already feeling her double shot of scotch. “And then I cried on the bartender and spilled beer nuts all over the floor. And when the bartender refused to serve me because I was snotty and sad and making a huge mess, I bought a fifth of whiskey at the liquor store down the street and got even more spectacularly drunk in the alley behind the gas station.”

She sniffs. “There was a homeless couple sleeping by the garbage cans and we passed the bottle around for a while. I made sure not to wipe the bottle between swigs because I knew it would drive Phillip crazy. He’s a huge germophobe.”

Pressing her lips together, her gaze slides down to the bricks above the fireplace mantel. “And so I cried on the homeless couple, too. And they cried because they were homeless and had real problems. And then we all decided to go get tattoos to commemorate our misery. So we stumbled down the pier to the tattoo place that doesn’t care if you’re drunk or underage or want something really stupid tattooed on your body and I got a really stupid tattoo.”

“Of what? Can I see?”

She laughs, a sharp burst of sound that seems to surprise her. “Um, no.” She shakes her head, her lips losing their curve. “Never. There’s a reason my upper thighs remain covered at all times.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” I say, thinking that she has very nice thighs. Usually, I would say as much—a compliment is always a good thing—but I can tell she’s not in the headspace to find flattery helpful.

“Yeah, so...” Her hand drifts up to her face, her middle finger and thumb digging into the hollows behind her eyes. “After that, things get kind of fuzzy, but if local gossip and the Coast Guard are to be believed, I decided to go swimming to celebrate my terrible new tattoo and almost drowned. I was rescued a mile offshore.”

“Shit, Penny,” I say, throat tight. “You could have died.”

She nods a little too quickly but still doesn’t lift her gaze to mine. “I know. I could have. But I didn’t. Instead, while the Coast Guard was busy saving the stupid drunk girl, a couple whose boat had gone down a few miles off Gin Beach stayed in the water an extra hour and a half waiting for rescue.”

She pauses before adding in a whisper, “The wife almost died of hypothermia. She was in the hospital for three days. Every afternoon her husband would call my cell and remind me that it was my fault that the woman he loved was about to die. I don’t know how he got my phone number, but I didn’t try to change it. I knew I deserved those calls. I deserved his anger and his hurt and to suffer for all the stupid things I’d done.”

I stop fighting the urge to offer comfort and reach out to take her hand. “You did not. You didn’t deserve any of it. You’d just had your heart broken and you made some less than stellar decisions. It happens.”

“Maybe.” She slides her fingers from beneath mine and cups her sweating tumbler, setting the ice to clicking in the glass. “But when it happens to other people it isn’t plastered all over the tabloids.”

My brow furrows. I scan her face again. It’s as beautiful as it was the moment I first saw her—maybe even a little more beautiful now that I know my friend is attached to it—but it’s not a familiar face.

“My mother is Anastasia Pickett,” she says, waiting a beat before adding, “the actress?”

I search my mental pop culture database but come up empty. “Sorry.”

“You’re kidding. She was *super* famous in the nineties.”

I shrug. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

“She was in *Out of Water*,” Penny supplies, clearly stunned. “The mermaid movie? The one with the jaded businessman who finds a beautiful blond woman washed up on the Jersey shore and she’s naked for the first twenty minutes of the movie before he buys her a tee shirt at a souvenir shop and brings her back to Manhattan?”

“Hmm.” I hum around the rim of my glass, nodding as the last swallow of scotch slides down my throat.

Shit, the naked mermaid movie. I absolutely remember it now. And I’m absolutely sure I beat off to Penny’s mom a couple of times during my early teens before I discovered a way to get around the porn blocker on my laptop.

Not that I’m about to admit that to Penny, of course...

“*Out of Water*. Right. I remember it.” I let my glass rest against my chin as my gaze plays up and down Penny’s petite but curvy frame.

“Don’t say it,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “I know. I look nothing like my mother. Believe me, you aren’t the first to notice.”

“No, you don’t,” I admit. “You’re beautiful in a different way.”

“Well, thank you,” she says, looking flustered though I’m sure it isn’t the first time she’s been told she’s beautiful. “But I’m not adopted though sometimes I wish I were. That would make the fact that my mother is marrying the boy who took my virginity fifteen percent less disturbing.”

This time, my wince becomes a full-body cringe. “Jesus, Penny. They’re getting married?”
“Yep.” Her soft brown eyes begin to shine. “The wedding’s this weekend. I’m the maid of honor.”

“Like hell you are.” I plunk my glass down on the floor beside the couch. “You’re not going anywhere near that wedding.”

And I mean it.

Even if I have to throw her over my shoulder, haul her back to my place, and keep her locked up until next Monday, I’m not letting her subject herself to that kind of nightmare. I wouldn’t let that happen to my worst enemy, let alone one of my best friends.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I'm about to tell her that she's coming to the Hamptons with me so I can cheer her up somewhere far from the scene of the crime when she says—

"I have to go. I've got two little twin half sisters, Bash. And my mother has made it clear that if I'm not at the wedding, I'm no longer allowed access to the rest of the family. That includes my sisters coming over to my place on weekends." Penny scowls, anger flashing in her dark eyes. "To prove her point, Mom kept Francis and Edna home the past two weekends, even though she barely spends any time with them when Phillip's home."

"Francis and Edna," I repeat.

"She's a terrible person," Penny says flatly. "Forget sleeping with my ex-boyfriend and then marrying him. What kind of mother names her daughters Francis, Edna, and Penelope? Even if they are family names."

I smile. I can't help it.

Still, I feel bad for finding humor in her horrendous situation until she smiles back. It's a halting, shy grin that spreads across her face in fits and starts, but when it finds its footing, it transforms her.

She's no longer simply beautiful; she's irresistible, and I know I'm going to do whatever it takes to help her even before she says in a sweet voice, "Now this. *This* is what I imagined you'd look like."

My brows lift.

"Kind," she says. "As kind as you are handsome."

Now it's my turn to feel flustered though I don't know why. I'm well aware I've been gifted in the looks department, but something about hearing it from Penny makes me feel...off kilter. "Well, thank you."

"Don't thank me," she says, her smile fading. "Please don't. I'm a terrible person. I lied to you about availability at the condos in Miami. They still had plenty of room, but Miami isn't five minutes away from where my mom and Phillip are getting married this weekend."

So *that's* the lie. It isn't what I was expecting.

I frown. "Why didn't you just ask me for help? I know we've never met in person until today, but I think of you as a friend, Penny. A good one."

"Me too," she says, eyes filling with unshed tears. "That's why I feel so awful about this. I knew from the start that there was no way I'd be able to pay your fee. My family's wealthy, but I don't—"

"Forget about the fee." I swipe a hand through the air. "You know I've waived it before."

"Yes, but only for candidates I've vetted for you, and there's no way I can objectively vet myself."

I roll my eyes. "Please. Consider yourself vetted. If even half of what you told me is true, you more than qualify for a pro bono intervention."

Her shoulders sag with obvious relief. "Thank you, Bash. Thank you so much. I swear everything I told you is true. And I promise I'll pay you back in installments, even if it takes me ten years to do it."

"You'll do no such thing." I tap my finger and thumb together as I tick through all the things that need to be done. "But we'll have to bust our asses to get all the prep work finished. You

haven't left us much time. You said the wedding's this weekend?"

"Yes," she says, before adding sheepishly, "but there's a wedding shower on Wednesday, a bachelorette and stag party on Thursday, and a rehearsal dinner on Friday before the ceremony Saturday afternoon."

I curse beneath my breath and lift my arm, signaling for the waitress to bring us another round. We're going to need it.

"I'm sorry." She sinks lower against the leather cushions. "I was hoping I would be able to pull it off solo, but the more I thought about going to the wedding alone the more I just wanted to crawl into a hole and die." She stares down into her empty glass. "Seriously die. And I don't want to feel that way anymore."

"You won't have to." I scoot across the couch, putting my arm around her shoulders and drawing her close. "No worries, beautiful. We've got this."

She leans into me, her body soft and warm against mine, and for a moment, I'm aware of her the way I was when I first saw her standing on the street. She's a gorgeous woman and her breast is pressed against my ribs and she smells like lavender and something addictively sweet and I'm only human for God's sake.

But stronger than the desire buzzing beneath my skin is the need to help her, heal her, to make sure my friend doesn't have to face the ugliness of the world alone.

This is why I do what I do.

After all the things I've seen, I'm pretty sure romantic love is the stuff of fairy tales and bad porn, but friendship is real. And helping people who feel they've got no one on their side is what gets me up in the morning. My corporate friends can mock MB Consulting until the cows come home, but I know the dark places in my soul got a hell of a lot lighter the day I walked away from Wall Street for good.

Still, the fact that Penny is my assistant and also happens to be the kind of curvy, brown-eyed girl that is the Incredible Bulk's personal kryptonite will create certain...challenges.

Challenges like controlling my body's response when she turns and wraps her arms around my neck, whispering, "Thank you, Bash," into my ear in this sexy as hell voice while she turns the moment into a full-fledged hug fest.

"My pleasure," I say. But it isn't. It's torture.

Torture to wrap my arms around her and hold her close, offering her comfort even as I struggle to get my damned cock under control. I think of dead puppies and my college roommate who picked his nose pretty much constantly, but it isn't until I bring up a vivid mental picture of the recently delivered goats at my grandmother's farm eating their own afterbirth that the bulge in my pants finally begins to soften.

And just in time. The server is here with our second round, and Penny is settling back onto her side of the couch, giving her an excellent view of my lap.

"Here you go." The raven-haired waitress hands Penny a fresh tumbler. "Two more Laphroig double shots on the rocks. Anything else for you guys?"

"This will do for now, thank you," I say, accepting my fresh glass.

"Drinks are my treat, by the way," Penny says as the server drifts away to check on a group of newcomers settling in at a table for four across the bar. "I insist. It's the least I can do to thank you."

"Absolutely not. These shots are obscenely expensive."

She grimaces. "How obscenely?"

I let my voice go low and rough, "Dirty, filthy, wrongly expensive."

“Wow.” Her eyes glitter, and for a second, I wonder if she feels it too, the crackle of potential energy in the air every time our eyes meet. But then she laughs, a light, airy sound that makes me feel silly for reading too much into the moment. “Then I’ll let you get this and I’ll pay for pizza tonight while we work.”

“Sounds good.” I take a fortifying swig of my drink, determined to keep my mind on business. “We’ll have to make the most of every minute before we leave on Tuesday. We only have forty-eight hours to cram in a week’s worth of preparation.”

“We can do it. I mean, it’s not like we’re complete strangers. We already know a lot of each other’s backstory.” Her mischievous grin makes a dimple pop in her cheek. “I even know your LetsGoLove password so I can change it for you on days when you want to be locked out of your account.”

“You do,” I agree, even as I think of all the things I intend to keep secret from Penny. Things like how sexy she looks sipping scotch at eleven o’clock in the morning in her running clothes and a messy bun and how much I’d like to pull her back into my arms.

Or onto my lap.

Or roll her beneath me on this couch and discover every inch of her incredible body.

But none of that is going to happen.

Penny knows the Magnificent Bastard rules better than anyone—never get emotionally involved, never confuse fantasy with reality, and never, ever, take things further than a kiss.

CHAPTER NINE

From the text archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From Bash: *Let’s talk about the monkey piss you were drinking last night.*

It has come to my attention via your last e-mail that you have been subjecting your taste buds to the unfiltered night sweats of an unwashed homeless man—aka Bud Light—with your pizza.

That shit will cease immediately.

Your salary has just been raised two hundred dollars per annum in order to afford you the luxury of purchasing Labatt’s Blue Light, the true king of light beers.

You’re welcome.

Penny: *Thank you!*

I’m so grateful I’m not even going to ask how you know what monkey piss or the night sweats of a homeless man taste like.

Bash: *A wise decision. Some stories are best left untold...*

Penny: *LOL! Color me intrigued...*

I wonder if I’m the first assistant in the world to get a beer snob raise...

Bash: *I doubt it. Good bosses know that life’s too short to drink bad beer.*

Penny: *Amen.*

CHAPTER TEN

By the time we finish our second round of drinks, Penny and I have made it through a quick refresher course on the basic who, what, where, when, and why of our personal histories—Penny’s twenty-five, born in Los Angeles, raised in the Hamptons, and a graduate of Vanderbilt, Boston University, and the school of hard knocks; I’m thirty-two, born and raised in Manhattan, a graduate of NYU, Columbia, and the school of reformed corporate land sharks—and we’re both a little buzzed.

Penny’s giggles are coming more frequently and I’m finding it harder to keep my eyes from straying to her lips and my thoughts from straying to territory as obscene as the price of our drinks.

Much, much harder.

So hard that I know there’s no way we can tackle the next stage of orientation until I’ve had the chance to decompress, sober up, and take a long, cold shower.

After settling the bill, I put Penny into a car headed toward Brooklyn with a promise to be at her place at six p.m. and aim myself toward the West Village, hoping a long walk will help me get my head on straight.

Thankfully, after logging several miles, chugging a liter of water, and enjoying a long shower and a longer power nap, I’m feeling like my old self. The self who knows business and pleasure are separate roads and never the twain shall meet.

By five o’clock, I’m dressed in dark jeans, a gray tee shirt, and a deceptively simple-looking jean jacket that was nearly as pricey as our morning bar tab, and I’m itching to get back onto the streets. My apartment is enormous by Manhattan standards, an open concept two-bedroom loft purchased with the spoils of my first career tearing embattled companies apart piece by piece, so it’s not like I’m squeezed into an efficiency and can’t wait to escape. Still, I always feel most at home surrounded by the bustle of my favorite city.

I grab a coffee with extra cream and sugar on my way to the L train and settle in for the ride across the river to Williamsburg.

I was surprised this morning to learn that Penny dwells deep in the heart of the hipster jungle—she doesn’t seem the type to pay sky high rents in order to live closer to her favorite artisanal donut shop. But when I find her building and climb the steps to one of the last crumbling brownstones on a street filled with renovated million dollar homes, my mind is put at ease.

Penny’s not a closet hipster; she’s a true New Yorker, hanging on to what is likely one of the last rent-controlled apartments in the area.

I don’t know why that matters, but for some reason, I hate the thought of Penny insisting on drinking organic, locally sourced, handcrafted microbrews or dating men with questionable hygiene, tight tee shirt fetishes, and patchy facial hair. The trend toward social acceptance of men who walk the streets looking like they just rolled out of bed *four days ago* is offensive.

I pity the twenty-somethings whose dating pool is composed purely of such poorly groomed posers, even as I appreciate the edge granted to Yours Truly simply for utilizing a razor and getting a hair cut every six weeks.

Women deserve better. Especially Penny.

After all she’s been through, the girl deserves a Magnificent Bastard on her side protecting

her from the failed Prince Charmings of the world.

I knock on her door and call through the opening where the peephole lens is supposed to be. “MB Consulting. Here for my six o’clock.”

“Just a second!” A moment later, a breathless Penny opens the door, her face flushed.

Her hair is hanging in glossy waves around her shoulders, she’s wearing a touch of makeup—just enough to make me realize how long her lashes are—and a pair of fitted jean overalls that shouldn’t be sexy, but somehow, they are. Still, I manage to keep my mind on business and my gaze from drifting to where the jean straps stretch tight over the swells of her breasts.

I am a fucking professional, and I can handle this.

“Come in!” She motions for me to enter a cozy apartment filled with floor to ceiling bookshelves, a micro-kitchen with vintage 1940s appliances, and a window seat made up into a daybed, covered with obnoxiously colorful pillows. On the far wall are vintage ice cream ads framed in seashell frames and a motivational poster that declares “Let’s Make Today Suck Less than Yesterday!” in a decorative font.

The place is very homey, very welcoming, a little bit weird, and all Penny.

“I just finished cleaning up. The scotch knocked me out. I was asleep until an hour ago.” She bustles around the kitchen island toward the ancient fridge. “Would you like something to drink? I’ve got water, lemonade, ice tea, cheap box wine, and a few bottles of Labatt’s Blue Light.”

“The True King of Light Beers,” I observe with approval.

She shrugs. “Yeah. My boss made me quit drinking beer that tastes like a homeless man’s night sweats. He’s a total drag.”

I chuckle. “You shouldn’t have needed that intervention. If something tastes like any part of a homeless man, you don’t put it in your mouth, Penny. That’s rule number two of being a grown-up.”

She turns to face me, one hand braced on the fridge and the other propped on her curvy hip. “Oh yeah? And what’s rule number one?”

“Don’t shit where you eat,” I quip without thinking, only to realize it’s the perfect advice.

Penny is invaluable to my business. I can’t afford to shit where I eat. If I screw up our working friendship because I can’t stop thinking about how much I’d like to have the weight of her breasts heavy in my hands, I’ll never forgive myself. I’m a thirty-two-year-old man, for God’s sake. I should have more control over my thoughts, not to mention my dick.

But the Incredible Bulk has been semihard since the moment Penny opened the door and shows no sign of softening in the near future.

Which means anything that might impede my self-control is a bad idea.

“I’ll take a lemonade, thanks.” I move to face her across the island. “And then let’s start with wardrobe. If we get in a crunch for time, we can always sort out the love story on the way to the Hamptons, but I’m not familiar with the shopping out there and it doesn’t sound like there will be much time to go searching for battle armor with all the events your mother has planned.”

“Battle armor.” Her full mouth curves into a half smile as she fetches the lemonade from the fridge and two glasses from the tiny cabinets above the sink. “You really think clothes matter that much?”

“I know that clothes matter that much,” I say without hesitation. “You know what they say, looking good is the best revenge.”

Penny wrinkles her nose. “I thought the quote was living well is the best revenge.”

I accept the glass of lemonade she pushes across the counter. “You’ll live well after the revenge is over. For now, we’ll concentrate on making your mother green with envy and Phillip want to kick himself repeatedly in his own ass for letting you go. From the moment you step out of my car Wednesday, to the moment we drive off into the sunset on Saturday, we want all eyes on you, the lovely duckling who has turned into an even more stunning swan.”

“You remember that my mom is a famous movie star and former model, right?” Penny asks, a dubious expression on her face. “She might be forty-two, but she sure as heck doesn’t look it.”

“She doesn’t look twenty-five, either.”

“I don’t know.” Penny takes a considering drink of her lemonade. “She could easily pass for early thirties. She exercises four hours a day, eats superfoods for every meal, and can afford *all* the lotions and creams.”

“Lotions and creams?”

Penny nods seriously. “Some might tell you that plastic surgery is the path to eternal youth, but truly rich people know it’s all about exclusive lotions and creams. The more snail goo, ground up beetle shells, and whale semen in them, the better.”

I barely avoid spitting lemonade all over the counter.

“Bull semen, too,” Penny adds, with a grin. “Semen is kind of a big deal. Or so I hear.”

Fixing her with a mock glare, I swipe my sleeve across my mouth and point toward a door on the other side of the room, which I assume leads to her bedroom. “Quit stalling and go put on something pretty.”

She lifts a shoulder and lets it fall. “Fine. But I’m warning you, this fashion show is going to be brief. I pulled anything even remotely appropriate out of my closet, and everything that still fits after my close encounters with several pints of ice cream this spring is out of style, boring, or has grass stains on it.”

“Why grass stains?” I ask as she flounces around the island, looking so much like a kid being sent to her room I can’t help but smile.

“I used to like reading books stretched out on the great lawn at grad school. Back when I left the house more than once or twice a week.”

Before I can think of how to respond, she disappears into her bedroom. As the door shuts behind her, I scan the apartment. It gives off a cozy, homey vibe, but would it still feel that way after being cooped up in it for months?

Maybe even years? Penny said it has been over *two years* since the incident.

Has she been hiding away from the world in this tiny room ever since? Is that why she turned me down every time I tried to get her to meet me for happy hour drinks or bike riding in the park or the newest exhibition at the Met?

I had assumed she was one of those Brooklynites who loathe crossing the river or maybe thought it was creepy to meet her boss in real life. But maybe it’s more than that. Maybe she’s been serving a self-imposed prison sentence for a crime her mother and slimy ex-boyfriend committed.

My stomach tightens at the thought.

And then Penny emerges from her room in a floor-length goldenrod dress that makes her olive skin look a sickly shade of yellow and the tightness becomes a full-fledged intestinal cramp.

Holy mother of pearl, what the hell has she put on her beautiful body?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

My tongue curls at the back of my throat and I fight the urge to gag. “Jesus H. Christ.” Penny’s hands come to rest on her hips with a huff. “Oh come on. It’s not that bad. The fit is nice.”

“The fit is adequate; the color is horrendous,” I say, fighting the urge to shudder. “Take it off and toss it out here when you’re done. I’ll throw it away.”

“You will not throw it away.” She scowls at me over her shoulder as she stomps back into her bedroom.

“You’re right,” I agree. “Better to burn it and make sure it never has the chance to inspire nausea in anyone else ever again.”

“Not everyone has hundreds of dollars to spend on clothes, you know,” she calls from the other room, her voice muffled. I concentrate on the memory of how sallow her skin looked in that dress, the better to keep from imagining her pulling it over her head, baring the killer curves beneath.

“If that dress was free, you still paid too much.”

“Are you this sweet to all your clients?” she asks in a lilting tone.

“If you’re asking if I lie to my clients, then no. I don’t.” I settle on the couch with my lemonade. “I’m here to do a job, Penny, not blow smoke up your ass. And even if I weren’t, I wouldn’t let you leave the house in that dress. Friends don’t let friends wear goldenrod.”

She laughs. “Your mother was an interior decorator, you said?”

“Yes. I knew the difference between pink and fuchsia years before the other boys.”

“I’m not sure most boys ever know the difference.” She throws open the door, revealing a sundress composed of yards and yards of heavy black fabric that overwhelms her petite frame. “How about this? Plain, simple, linen. A classic choice.”

“It’s a wedding, not a funeral,” I say, twirling one finger in the air. “Next.”

She rolls her eyes as she slams the door. I take a drink of lemonade and pray that she’s got at least something we can work with. There’s a boutique in Chelsea that usually comes through for my clients in a pinch, but I’m not sure even Sheila, my favorite personal shopper, will be able to outfit Penny in not one, but four ex-slaying outfits in one morning.

Penny and I repeat our open door, repress gag reflex, roll eyes, slam door routine through four more hideous dresses, and I’m beginning to think she needs a fashion intervention as much as a Magnificent Bastard one when the door creaks open, my breath catches on an inhale, and I forget how to exhale.

The white, sleeveless gown is silk and chiffon and hugs her breasts before falling in asymmetrical waves around her knees. She’s paired it with white kitten heels that emphasize the strong, sculpted curves of her calves and pearl chandelier earrings that peek through her dark hair as she flips it over her shoulder.

“This is the last one. I know it won’t work,” she says, tugging at the hem. “But I figured I’d show it to you anyway.”

“Why won’t it work?” I set my drink on the coffee table and stand as she moves into the room. “It’s gorgeous. You look beautiful.”

“It’s white,” she says with a nervous laugh. “I can’t wear white. I’m not the bride.”

“You can’t wear white at the wedding.” I motion for her to turn and she does, proving she

looks just as stunning from the back. “But this will be perfect for the rehearsal dinner. The night before the wedding, you’ll remind Phillip of the beauty he could have had on his arm if he hadn’t been such a fool.”

She turns back to me, a troubled look on her face. “I don’t really blame him. I mean, I blame him for using me to get to my mom and lying to me and playing ugly games with my head, but he’s not the one who broke my heart the most.”

I nod. “I figured.”

“You did?” She tilts her head back, curious brown eyes finding mine.

“My dad left when I was twelve. For the first few months he would still come to my baseball games and pick me up from school once or twice a week, but eventually, he lost interest.” I shrug. “By the time I was thirteen I saw him maybe once a month and he was usually after money to support his Percocet habit. By the time I graduated, we hadn’t talked in years. I have no idea where he is now.”

Penny’s brow furrows. “I’m sorry. I never knew my dad, but I know fathers are important. Especially to sons.”

“It’s all right. I got over it a long time ago.” I smile as I reach up, brushing a few stray hairs back to join the rest of the waves tumbling over her shoulders. Her hair is as soft as I imagined it would be. “Just wanted you to know that I get it. The way it hurts when one of the two people in the world, who are supposed to be on your team more than anyone else, decide they don’t give a shit about your feelings.”

“Thanks,” she says, the wrinkle between her brows deepening. “Do you really think we can pull this off?”

I nod reassuringly. “Not a doubt in my mind.”

“But I’m so bad at pretending.” She nibbles her bottom lip. “And my mother and Phillip are both actors. They are exceedingly good liars and like most exceedingly good liars they are very good at sensing when other people are lying.”

“Relax.” I bring my hands to her shoulders, gently kneading the knots there, ignoring the warm buzz of pleasure that hums up my arms. It just feels so good to touch her. So weirdly...right. “You might be new to this, but I’ve fooled evil exes dozens of times.”

“But not with me,” she frets, clearly working her way into a full-blown panic attack. “Maybe we should just go as friends.”

“Stop this. Right now.” I move my hands to grip her upper arms and lean down until my eyes are level with hers. “You don’t want to go as friends. If you did, you wouldn’t have booked us both into the same cottage in Southampton.”

One cottage, with one queen-sized bed, that I’m doing my best not to think too much about. Spending four nights in a tiny cottage with Penny is going to be torture. Even if I take the couch and give her the bed, I’m never going to be able to forget that a woman who affects me like no other in recent memory is half naked and only a few steps away in the other room.

“You’re right, I don’t.” Her tongue sweeps across her lips, sending another sizzle of awareness flooding through me against my will. “But now that you’re here I can’t imagine doing it. Especially not in public, in front of my mother and Phillip and everyone else.”

I shake my head, fighting to keep my gaze from dropping to her lips. “Doing what?”

“This.” Before I realize what’s on her fretful mind, she throws her arms around my neck, pushes up on tiptoe, and presses her lips to mine.

And then suddenly, I’m kissing Penny.

Really kissing her.

This is no friendly peck or tentative exploration. The second her lips touch mine, electricity forks through my body and my blood ignites.

I've wanted to do this since the second I laid eyes on this woman, and maybe even before. I would be lying if I said there weren't times when I was reading one of Penny's e-mails or texts—the flirty ones that made me laugh or the ones where she just got me, in a way not many people ever have—that I didn't wonder what it might be like to kiss the smart mouth behind those words.

And now she's pressed against me with her breasts flush against my chest and her lips hot and urgent against mine, silently begging me to show her that I know what I'm doing, and there's no way I'm going to let her down.

CHAPTER TWELVE

My tongue slides across the seam of her mouth, slipping between her parted lips and stroking against hers. She tastes like sugar and lemons and all things clean, good, and wholesome, but there's nothing wholesome about the way her kiss affects me. Two seconds in and my cock is rock hard and pulsing inside my jeans, straining against the fabric in an attempt to get closer to the sinfully hot woman in my arms.

But I don't cup her ass and pull her closer to where I ache.

I mold my palms to her ribs and hold her tight, maintaining the last few inches of distance between her hips and mine.

This is a kiss with built-in boundaries, a kiss meant to promise far more than it will ever deliver.

I will never cup her breasts in my hands or tease her nipples with my fingers. I will never spread her thighs and kiss her where she's salty and wet or hear her cry out as she comes on my mouth, begging me to put my cock where my tongue is. I will never feel her legs locked around my hips or her heels digging into my ass as I thrust inside her heat, fucking us both into the happiest place on earth.

But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy this moment, this kiss, her taste, and the perfect way her lips slide against mine.

I drive my hand into her hair, fisting my fingers in the thick, silky strands, taking control as I ratchet this up to the next level. I shift the angle of my lips, gaining deeper access to the sweetness of her mouth. She makes a soft, needy sound that is so honest, so hungry, and so exactly what I'm feeling that my control begins to slip.

The kiss grows hotter, wilder until our teeth are grinding together through our lips and I'm fucking her mouth with my tongue and I'm so turned on I don't realize I've let my hands move down to squeeze her ass until it's too late.

By the time my logical mind shouts for me to step away from my client, employee, and friend—three very good reasons not to let this woman know I've got a hard-on for her that won't quit—I've already hauled her hips to mine.

She groans against my lips, her breath coming fast as she wraps one leg around my waist. And then she rocks against me, and suddenly I'm two steps away from an ugly fall and not certain I'll be able to drag myself away from the edge.

If I let myself pull Penny down to the couch and fuck her through our clothes, I know it won't stop there. It won't stop until that little white dress is off and her panties are on the floor and I'm actually fucking her. Jeans off, boxers gone, cock hot and hard and sliding inside one of my best friends.

If this goes even one step further, I won't be able to stop.

Professional rules and personal ethics won't matter. All that will matter is getting between Penny's legs and making her come on my cock again and again until I go inside her so hard I see stars.

She rocks against me as her tongue dances with mine, each movement promising we would fit together with absolute perfection, and my heart blazes inside my chest. I swear I can feel the heat of her pussy through my clothes and I can't remember ever wanting to be inside someone the way I want to be inside Penny.

The rules, asshole. They're there for a reason.

Abort mission. Abort!

Pull away from this woman right now before you set a bomb to explode in both of your lives.

The inner voice is right—maddening as all hell, but totally fucking right.

With the self-control of a monk or a ninja or someone capable of eating only half a container of Ben and Jerry's ice cream, I rip my mouth from Penny's and stagger back a step. Then another. And then one more because *shit* all I want to do is reach out and pull her back into my arms and straight into her bedroom.

She's breathing fast and so am I, and for a moment, we both stand there staring at each other. She looks shell-shocked and I know I'm not pulling off anything resembling calm, cool, or collected, but I can't think of a thing to say.

My brain has shut down and all I can hear is the racing of my pulse in my ears. Though I'm sure the Incredible Bulk would be letting loose a steady stream of profanity if he could speak. I can't remember the last time I was this worked up, and I have never, I repeat *never*, gotten that close to dry humping a client.

"Convincing," Penny finally says in a breathy voice, her head nodding loosely. "That was very convincing."

"Good." I clench my jaw, willing my raging erection to dial it back a notch, but I'm too far gone.

"So I guess that part will be fine." She swallows, blinks, and then swallows again as her gaze drifts from my eyes to my chest and then continues the journey south.

Shit!

"It will all be fine." I grab my jacket from the back of the armchair, using it as a shield to conceal my suffering, throbbing, desperate condition as I back toward the door. "Just meet me at the Good Bakery in the Chelsea Market at ten a.m. tomorrow. We'll grab a late breakfast and coffee and then go shopping for armor for the rest of the week. With any luck, we'll be done by two or three and you'll still have plenty of time to come home and pack."

"Okay," she says, eyes flicking back to mine. "Are you leaving?"

"I should get home before it's too late."

"But you just got here." She takes a step toward me that I counter with another step back. I can't let her get any closer, can't let her lavender and sugar cookie smell start swirling through my head, or there's no way I'm making it out of here without breaking the rules. "And the pizza hasn't been delivered yet."

"Sorry, I'm just beat. We've evaluated the clothing situation; there will be time for everything else later." I reach for the door but pause before jerking it open and fleeing into the night.

She still looks worried and I can't walk out on a client, or a friend, without putting her mind at ease.

"And seriously, don't stress," I say, forcing a smile. "This will be the easiest job I've pulled in months. I'll get to spend the week hanging out with a friend, eat too much wedding food, and make a couple of assholes feel terrible about themselves. Sounds like my kind of vacation."

Her lips quirk. "Well, at least you won't have to do any of the usual detective or hacker stuff. I don't want to air my mom's dirty laundry or get Phillip arrested. I just want to be able to keep my chin up during all the stupid festivities."

I meet her gaze and hold it as I promise, "And you will. By the time we head back to the city, every woman at that wedding will wish she was you."

Penny's cheeks flush and her chest rises and falls and I'm forced to exert another Herculean amount of will power to keep my gaze from drifting to places it shouldn't.

But it's worth it to see the look in her eyes as she says, "Thank you, Bash."

"You're welcome, Penny." I smile, a real one this time because I can see that I've made someone I care about very happy, and then I finally make my escape.

I pound down the stairs and out into the cool spring evening and set off at a jog toward the subway, hoping that putting some distance between us will help me forget how right it felt to have Penny's body pressed tight to mine.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

From the e-mail archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: This e-mail address

Okay, I give,

What’s with the lobster pot in the e-mail, buttercup? Are you from Maine? Did you grow up a lobster farmer’s daughter? Or do you just have an inordinately strong love for large saltwater crustaceans?

Bash, who is bored and drinking alone because Aidan is working and you refuse to get out of your house and come enjoy the happiest of hours.

From: Penny4YourLobsterPot

To: Magnificent Bastard1

Re: This e-mail address

If I told you, I’d have to kill you.

Sincerely, Penny

p.s. Just say the word and I’ll share the new password for your LetsGoLove account. I’m sure there are some mildly psychotic women in Manhattan you haven’t been out on a date with yet.

Text from Bash to Penny: :p :p :p :p

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I get home, I head straight to the shower even though I showered less than five hours ago and I certainly didn't work up a sweat riding the train to and from Brooklyn.

But I need something to take the edge off.

Even after the walk to the subway station from Penny's place, a twenty-minute train ride, and another ten-minute walk to my own apartment, I'm still hard. Every time my erection starts to subside, my glutton-for-punishment brain flashes back to the feel of Penny's leg wrapped around my waist and her pussy rubbing against my cock and I'm right back where I started—hard, aching, frustrated, and desperate to come, preferably inside my assistant.

It's wrong.

It's so, so wrong, and the thoughts buzzing through my brain, the ones that wonder if Penny was as turned on as I was and if she laid down on her comfy blue couch and slipped her hand down the front of her panties after I left, are not helping me regain control.

I should not be thinking about Penny getting herself off, one hand rolling her nipples while the other strokes the slick flesh between her legs. I should be thinking about something else, anything else.

Or more accurately, *anyone* else.

Even if I can't help having sex on the brain, I could certainly shift the direction of my thoughts. I've got plenty of spank bank material stored up. I've even got a sex tape or two lurking in the depths of my hard drive. Betsy, the woman I dated last summer, had a thing for watching homemade porn. We made our first video on our second date and by the time we went our separate ways a few weeks later, I had close to three hours of high definition fucking shot from every angle in my bedroom.

I could have some hot and filthy material pulled up on my laptop in a few minutes. But I don't want to jerk off to the sight of Betsy's ass rippling while she rides me reverse cowgirl.

I want Penny's dark eyes flashing as I spread her legs and settle between them. I want to imagine the way her pretty face would twist with desire as I go to work, driving my tongue deep into her pussy as I reach up to tease her nipples between my fingers. I want to hear her calling my name in her sweet and sexy voice as she comes on my mouth and feel her hands clawing at my shoulders as she begs me to fuck her.

I want it so bad that as I step into the shower and take my cock in my hand, I swear I can almost see her standing in front of me, her chest rising and falling the way it was when I left her apartment.

But this time, she isn't wearing a dress. She's naked, her full breasts bared to my gaze, her dusky nipples pulled tight, and the look in her eyes leaving no doubt how much she wants me.

"Please, Bash," she breathes, her fingers trailing down my chest. "I want you inside of me. I want it so much."

"How much?" I palm her breasts, rubbing my thumbs across her puckered tips. She gasps and arches into my touch as her hands continue their journey south.

"It's pretty much all I can think about." She wraps her fingers around my shaft and strokes me up and down, drawing a groan from low in my throat. "I'm so wet for you. Feel."

Penny takes my hand and guides it between her legs before her attention returns to my cock.

"Damn," I curse, my breath hitching as I let my fingers glide through her slick flesh, teasing

through her folds before I bring two fingers to her entrance and push inside.

Her head falls back with a sigh as I finger fuck her, granting me a heart-stopping view of her nipples only inches away from my chest. "I can't wait to be with you. I seriously can't wait, Bash. If you make me, I'm going to go out of my mind."

"I won't make you wait, sweetheart." I'm panting now, breath rasping in and out and my dick leaking pre-come into her hand as she jerks me off, just as desperate to fuck as she is. "Come here."

A second later, I've picked her up, hitched her curvy legs around my waist, pressed her back against the slick wall of the shower and shoved my aching cock into where she is so hot and wet I'm pretty sure I've died and gone to heaven.

"Fuck, Penny." I groan against her mouth as I push deeper. "We should have been doing this months ago, years ago."

"Yes, fuck, yes," she agrees as I begin to move, sliding in and out while she rocks against me, taking more of me with every thrust. "You're so fucking good, you're going to make me come so hard. So fucking hard!"

Fantasy Penny drops the eff bomb way more often than Reality Penny, but it doesn't matter. By the time my phone starts to ring, blaring like a foghorn from where it rests on the back of the toilet, I'm so turned on I'm seconds away from coming hard enough to drown a small country.

There's no way I'm stopping to answer the phone. Whoever's calling is just going to have to leave a fucking message.

I pump into my own hand, trying to recapture the feeling of being inside Penny's slick, tight pussy, but I've lost her. I come staring down into one unblinking eye instead of Penny's soulful brown ones.

My cock jerks in my fist and my balls call out Hallelujah as the pressure that's been building inside them for the past hour is finally released, but the orgasm isn't what it would have been. It's a release, a relief, but it isn't the soul shattering, earth-shaking, come-a-geddon I was on my way to achieving before I was so rudely interrupted.

"Fuck," I grunt, gritting my teeth as I ride out the final waves. Breathing hard from a mixture of relief and frustration at having my fantasy ripped away seconds before the main event, I turn into the spray, letting the warm water wash away the evidence of my complete lack of professionalism.

I just busted a nut while thinking of an employee. I'm ashamed of myself, but not so ashamed I don't have plans to try to recapture that fantasy again later tonight while I'm in bed.

But first, to track down something for dinner.

Five minutes later, I'm clean, dry, and plucking my phone from the back of the john to see I've received a voice message.

From Penny.

My pulse picks up. I feel like I've been caught come-handed even though of course there's no way Penny could have known she was calling while I was busy screwing my fantasy version of her against the wall of the shower. Still, I can't deny that anxiety tickles along my nerve endings as I bring the phone to my ear.

"Hey, Bash. Sorry to call," she says, sounding a little out of breath. "I know you said you were beat, but I just wanted to tell you again how thankful I am for your help. You would have had every right to yell at me for lying and ruining your vacation and fire me on the spot. But instead, you're helping me and I appreciate it so much. I promise I will make this as painless for you as possible, which includes not giving you any more crap about the clothing stuff."

She laughs uncomfortably, and my mind spits up a mental picture of her nose wrinkling and her mouth shifting to the side of her face. We've only spent a few hours together, but I'm already memorizing her expressions.

I'm not sure what that means, but I'm guessing it isn't good.

"So anyway," she continues. "Just wanted you to know that from here on out I'm going to be the most painless client ever. No more stressing or causing you stress or worrying about things that I shouldn't be worrying about because obviously you know what you're doing. And um...everything is cool."

The line is quiet for a moment and I expect to hear her hang up, but instead she suddenly blurts out in a rush—

"And I'm so sorry about getting a little enthusiastic with the kissing practice. I'm mortified that I did the thing. With the leg. *My leg.*" She clears her throat. "And I've been sitting here thinking about it and wondering if you think I'm a crazy person who can't follow the rules. But I am well aware of the rules and I am all about following them. It's just been a while and the physical contact went to my head."

She sucks in a breath. "But my head is in the game now and it will stay there. I hope we're good and nothing will be weird. Because even though we just met in person, you're a big part of my life and I don't want to lose your friendship. Or my job. But probably your friendship even more. Because I don't have many friends and you're a good one. The end."

She hangs up, leaving me standing holding the phone, feeling terrible for being a filthy minded fucker who barely put up a fight before giving in to the temptation to jerk off to fantasies of a fragile, vulnerable woman who is in no place to be fending off the inappropriate advances of her boss.

Yes, Penny is funny and sharp and one of those high energy people who makes you feel a little bit more alive just by being around her. But she's also been suffering through some seriously heartbreaking drama with her mom and her ex, been deprived the company of the little sisters she loves, and from the sound of it, been living like an agoraphobic spinster instead of a gorgeous young woman who should be taking the angsty hipster men of Brooklyn by storm.

She needs friendship and support, not more drama. It doesn't matter that she isn't paying me. I've done pro bono work before and those women received the same high quality, professional treatment that the women who can afford to pay my retainer receive. Penny deserves no less.

Feeling properly ashamed of myself, I type in a quick text—

Just got your message. I was in the shower. Don't worry about anything that happened tonight. We were both tired and weird things happen when you're tired. Everything is going to be fine.

Get some rest and I'll see you at ten a.m. tomorrow.

Oh, and bring some heels to try on with the dresses.

And just so you know, my friendship and this job are yours for as long as you want them. No matter what.

Sleep tight.

I wait for a response, keeping my phone close as I change into my softest pair of pajama pants and make a BLT with a side of carrot sticks and call it dinner. But my phone remains silent.

I finish my meal and settle down to watch Sports Center with a container of Salted Caramel Crack ice cream, but my team is already out of the playoffs, and as I watch the clock tick closer

to ten, all I can think about is how much I want to hear Penny's voice. But I don't pick up the phone. I need to show her that I can honor her boundaries. And my own.

So when I slip into bed a few hours later, I don't let my hand anywhere near my dick or my thoughts anywhere near Penny.

Both things are hard, way harder than they should be.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I arrive at the Chelsea Market's Good Bakery a few minutes after ten, but Penny is nowhere to be seen. I do a lap of the repurposed industrial complex, once home to bakeries churning out Oreo cookies, but now housing dozens of gourmet shops and restaurants. I'm concerned that Penny might be waiting at one of the other bakeries, which are also good, though not with a capital G, but she's nowhere to be found.

I'm about to text her and ask if she needs directions when my phone hums against my thigh. I glance down at the screen, expecting a message from Penny, saying she's on her way, but see Sheila's name instead.

Just met your assistant!

My brows snap together. What the fuck?

Oh my God, Bash, she's divine! So sweet and funny, with the most darling figure. And those eyes!

Gah! I swear they could melt panties at fifty paces. Right?

An emoji of a smiley face with hearts where its eyes should be pops up, making me frown harder even before the rest of Sheila's message filters through.

We got her all set up with four AMAZING outfits and I gave her your usual discount so no worries. She's going to knock everyone's socks off at that wedding.

And just in case I totally misread her and she is actually into other women and not in a serious relationship could you please, please, please give her my number? I would never ask if she were one of your clients, but since she's just a friend and employee you're helping out as a favor...

Tell me if I'm crossing a line because your business is always my number one priority but damn, Bash, that girl is something else.

An emoji of another smiley face, this time with its tongue hanging out, pops up, inspiring a confusing mixture of irritation and...jealousy.

Surprised, I take a closer look at the greenish tinged, sulfurous-smelling emotion swirling through my chest.

Yep. It's jealousy, an emotion that has no place in my relationship with Penny or Sheila, especially since I have no idea if Penny swings in that particular direction.

Sure, she seemed pretty into kissing me last night, but that was just practice for deceiving her smarmy ex-boyfriend and she admitted in her message that her reaction was a result of being deprived of human contact, not meaningful attraction. And even if she does enjoy men in the bedroom, that doesn't automatically mean she might not enjoy women, too. For a lot of women, sexuality can be a fluid thing and Penny might very well be among them, especially when a woman like Sheila is the potential partner in question.

Sheila is five feet nine inches of elegant redhead, with alabaster skin, sky blue eyes and an infectious smile, who always smells like she's been walking through an herb garden instead of shuffling around a filthy city. She also happens to be as lovely on the inside as she is on the outside, and until this very moment, I would have insisted it was impossible for her to inspire a negative emotion in anyone, especially me.

But it takes a surprising amount of will power for me to thumb in a civil—

No worries, no lines have been crossed. Thanks for helping her out.

I'm not sure where she stands on other women, but if she asks for your number, I'll make sure she gets it.

I hit send with gritted teeth. My jaw is still clenched when my phone begins to ring. This time, it's Penny.

"So I hear you went shopping without me," I say by way of greeting, not surprised that I sound grouchy.

I feel grouchy. Sure, I was a little anxious about how a shopping trip with Penny would play out after the awkwardness of last night, but I still don't enjoy being cut out of the loop.

More than that, I just wanted to see her, damn it.

"Don't be mad," she says. "I knew if you went with me you would try to pay the way you did for the last pro bono case and I didn't want to get into an argument. I promised I was going to be the easiest client ever, remember?"

I step into an alcove beneath a brick archway, staying out of the way as the traffic through the market increases. "I don't consider it easy to be heading into this having no idea what you're going to be wearing. I understand that you find the concept of armor silly, but it's an important part of what I do."

"I don't find it silly. I know it's important. But I know you trust Sheila, so I made sure she approved every outfit. I was in there for over an hour."

I grunt. "I would have made you try on skirts for an hour. We wouldn't have even gotten to the dresses, not to mention shoes and accessories."

"Oh, well," she says, falling silent for a moment. "Well, I wasn't quite *that* thorough, but I tried on everything in the store that was in my size. And Sheila picked out the accessories and shoes. She was so sweet and helpful."

"I bet she was," I grumble beneath my breath, imagining Sheila gushing over Penny's "darling figure" and not enjoying the fantasy one little bit. "Did you, at least, take pictures? So I can see what color palette I need to work with when I pack?"

She laughs. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious," I say, bristling. "It's important that we match, but not match too much. There's a science to this, Penelope."

"I'm starting to get that," she says, her tone still entirely too glib for my liking.

"I could write you a paper on the psychological impacts of enclotted cognition and the effect it has on power dynamics," I say, coolly. "But until I get around to that you'll just have to trust me when I tell you that I need to know what you're wearing so I can pack accordingly."

"I'll text pictures as soon as I get home," she says, before adding in a softer voice. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause friction. I was just trying to help."

I run a hand through my hair, silently cursing myself for making things awkward again. "No, I'm sorry. I'm a control freak."

"I know, and that's part of why you're so good at what you do," she says. "I should have realized that you wouldn't like me messing with your pre-game routine. I promise it won't happen again. From here on out, you're calling the shots. I was going to jump online and book a train ticket so you wouldn't have to drive me all the way out to the Hamptons and back, just in case you decide you want to stay longer, but I'll—"

"That's actually a great idea," I cut in, my wheels already churning. "If we take the train, I'll be able to concentrate on quizzing you on our romantic backstory instead of fighting traffic."

"Oh." She sounds surprised and maybe a little nervous. "Well, great. Then I'll book two tickets when I get home."

“No, I’ll book them.” I step out of the alcove, a spring in my step now that a plan is beginning to form. “You’ll need the rest of the afternoon to study. Expect notes to arrive in your inbox in an hour or two. It shouldn’t take me long to whip up the story of how we fell in love. Assuming you trust me to come up with believable material on my own.”

“Of course,” she says. “I haven’t been home since the summer it all happened. And I haven’t been in contact with my mom much beyond scheduling times for Edna and Francis to visit. All the people in Southampton know is that I’ve been living in the city so they won’t be in possession of any details that might conflict with your story.” She laughs, the sound momentarily eclipsed by the drumming of a jackhammer drilling pavement. She raises her voice to be heard over the din, “I could have been dating the entire Trenton Thunder for all they know.”

“The Trenton Thunder?” I step out into the crisp spring air in time to hear the same hammering sound on my end of the phone before it abruptly cuts off. I scan the street in both directions, wondering if I might run into Penny after all.

“Feeder team for the Yankees,” she says. “I had a college boyfriend who was recruited there.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, beautiful. You’re much too fine for the minor leagues,” I say, spotting Penny’s floppy bun bouncing atop her head on the other side of the street. She’s wearing leggings and a bright red tank top and toting a garment bag, an oversized purse, and three Swanky Boutique bags.

I’m on my way across the street to offer to help carry the spoils of her shopping trip when she laughs and I freeze.

“Thank you, Bash.” A sweet, vulnerable, heart-stopping grin lights up her face. “But I’m warning you, if you keep saying things like that, I might just start to believe them.”

“You should believe them,” I say softly, no longer wanting to be seen. I don’t want her to know I’m here. It feels like a violation of her privacy to observe her without her knowledge, but I can’t seem to look away. There’s something about that smile, something that makes me want to do whatever it takes to keep it on her face. “Get home safe, buttercup, and I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Okay. Talk soon.” She ends the call and drops her phone back into her purse, her grin growing wider as she leans her head back to look up at the sky.

She looks excited, hopeful, like a dream she’s had for a long time is coming true.

The expression sets my stomach to cramping for reasons that have nothing to do with the fact that I’ve yet to have second breakfast.

I’ve never failed a client before and never really stressed about it too much—I’ve always been confident in my ability to deliver—but suddenly I’m worried. What if something goes wrong? What if our lack of preparation time comes back to bite us in the ass?

Normally, I would refund her fee—Magnificent Bastard Consulting’s policy has always been satisfaction guaranteed or your money back—but Penny hasn’t paid me a dime. And this is about something much more important than money. This is about bringing a warm, funny woman back to the land of the living, about assuring Penny that there is no reason for her to spend another day cooped up in her apartment hiding from the world.

If I fail to deliver the closure she needs to make that happen, I’m going to regret it for a long, long time.

As Penny walks away, I stand in the shadows of the entrance to Chelsea Market, watching until she turns the corner and disappears from sight, my infamous confidence shaken by a smile.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

From the e-mail and text archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

*From: Penny4YourLobsterPot
To: MagnificentBastardI
Re: The luckiest woman in the world
Hey Mr. Wonderful,*

Thought I'd drop you a line to let you know that I'm apparently the luckiest woman in the world. I was out-processing Mitzy Stevens today—she left us both a VERY nice tip, btw—when she felt compelled to give me a twenty-minute lecture on how lucky I was to be your “girlfriend.”

According to Mitzy, you are one in a million, a unique mixture of brains, brawn, heart, and singularly magnificent forearms that has no match in the known world. I was warned that if I'm ever stupid enough to screw things up with you, I will regret it for the rest of my life and probably have to undergo extensive therapy.

I thanked Mitzy profusely and swore I was well aware of the treasure I was lucky enough to call mine.

I thought we were finished with the uncomfortable stuff, but then she launched into another twenty-minute lecture on how to discover (and fulfill!) your wildest sexual fantasies.

I blushed so hard my entire body turned red.

If possible, I'm planning to make sure you never take on a sex therapist as a client again.

Your mortified fake girlfriend,

Penny

p.s. I'm also pretty sure she was trying to get me to tell her how big you are... ehem...below the belt. I pretended to be oblivious, but this line of questioning inspired more blushing and now I have a heat rash all over my chest.

I'm blaming this completely on you.

I may need to take a sick day to recover.

*From: MagnificentBastardI
To: Penny4YourLobsterPot
Re: The luckiest woman in the world
You poor thing.*

Do you need me to come over and rub cortisone cream on your chest? I can flex my magnificent forearms for you while I tend to your rash and we'll have you back to normal in no time.

Your grateful boss,

Bash

p.s. She was definitely trying to find out more about the situation below the belt. No one stumbles and reaches out to brace herself on a man's junk that often. I barely escaped with the Incredible Bulk intact.

*From: Penny4YourLobsterPot
To: MagnificentBastardI*

Re: The luckiest woman in the world

spits coffee all over her keyboard and new shirt

is now rashy and covered in hot coffee

The Incredible Bulk, huh?

A part of me wants to believe you just made that up on the spot as a joke, but I bet that's actually what you call it, isn't it? You've named your man parts after Bruce Banner's rage-y alter ego.

laughs until her stomach hurts

p.s. This is venturing into highly unprofessional conversation territory, but if any part of the Incredible Bulk is actually green, you need to head to the doctor and get that situation checked out immediately.

Text from Bash: The Incredible Bulk is unfazed by your mockery.

And no, no part of him is green.

But women do love him when he's angry...

From Penny: I bet they do...

And now I'm bowing out of this inappropriate work conversation before I say something I'll regret...

Bash: Chicken...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Back at my place, the history of my love affair with Penny pours out of me with unexpected ease.

Usually, this is the hard part—I'm far more adept at playing a role than I am writing a script—but two years of working with Penny has given me a window into her personality I've never had with another client. I know what makes her laugh, what sets her off, and what makes her soft heart get even softer. And perhaps most importantly, I know how unlikely it would have been for her to meet Mr. Right while exploring “full-time hermitting.”

What are the chances that the *perfect* man would choose her out of over one hundred applicants to help him start his new business? Surely it was fate that threw us together, or so we'll tell anyone who asks.

I tap out the last few lines of the memo with a smile, do a quick proof—who cares if there are spelling mistakes, Penny knows I'm as dyslexic as I am brilliant—and send it whooshing out over the Interwebs. By then, Penny has already texted photos of her wardrobe for the week and I'm set to pack.

Pleased with Sheila's choices for Penny and with my own solid work of romantic fiction, I don't worry when my inbox is still empty an hour later. I remind myself that Penny has packing of her own to do and might not have had a chance to check her e-mail and put it out of my mind.

Two hours later, I'm finished packing and cleaning up the apartment, but there is still no word from Penny so I head out for a run to help focus my thoughts on the job ahead. Three hours later, after I've hit the free weights, put in a torturous fifteen minutes of abs, and showered, I pad into the kitchen in bare feet and a towel to grab a coconut water. On the way out, I snag my phone from the counter and refresh my e-mail.

Still no message from Penny. No missed calls or texts either.

Hmmm...

I'm about to shoot her a quick line, just to make sure she received the memo when my phone dings and a message from Penny appears—

So you know how I've been after you for two years to get a P.O. Box?

So that the contact information on the newsletter doesn't have your home address at the bottom?

Frowning, I type, *Yeah?*

You should have listened to me, she types back. And then you wouldn't have strange women popping up on your doorstep unexpectedly....

Before I can respond, a familiar voice calls from the other side of my front door—

“You might want to file a complaint against your doorman, too. He let me in even though I wasn't on your approved guest list.”

Penny?

What the hell is she doing here?

For a moment, I debate running back to my bedroom to throw on some clothes, but my curiosity gets the better of me. Besides, the towel covers more of me than the track shorts I wore for my run, and people who drop by unannounced should be prepared for other people to open doors in a state of undress.

“Just a second,” I call, tucking the damp Egyptian cotton more tightly around my waist and

popping my water back into the fridge.

“Thanks,” Penny says. Her voice is still muffled, but I swear I can hear a hint of anxiety in her tone. “I mean, in Bob’s defense, I told him that I wasn’t a serial killer, but that’s probably what a real serial killer would say. You know? To throw him off the scent before she came creeping up here to kill you.”

“Is that right?” I swing open the door, my smirk slipping when I see Penny standing on my welcome mat dressed in a tight brown tank top and a long, filmy white skirt that flutters around her ankles as a breeze sweeps in from the open window at the end of the hall.

My mouth goes dry and I’m sure how amazing I think she looks shows on my face, big time. But thankfully, she doesn’t seem interested in anything above my neck. Her big brown eyes are fixed on my bare chest, growing wider as they slide down my abdomen to the towel hitched around my hips.

Silently, I thank my bi-weekly core power boot camp instructor for keeping my body in drool-worthy condition. Nothing can happen between Penny and me, but that isn’t going to stop me from relishing the hungry expression flitting across her face.

Fuck.

The way her eyes glaze over and her cheeks flush and her lips part just enough to slip a single finger inside her pretty mouth...

Lust looks damned good on her.

All I want to do is pull her across the threshold, press her back against the wall, and kiss her until our lips fall off. Instead, I shift to the left, moving behind the door and ask, “So, are you here to kill me?”

She shakes her head and states dryly, “No, not today.”

With obvious effort, she wrenches her gaze from my chest to my face. “But I am here to confront you with some evidence.” She digs into her purse, parting a folder and pulling out a small stack of papers. “May I come in?”

“Sure.” I nod toward the living room. “You want to take a seat on the couch and I’ll run and throw on some clothes?”

“No, that’s okay. This won’t take long.” She dumps her purse on the entryway table as she breezes past me, wafting the scent of lavender and something spicier that I’ve never smelled on her before. It’s smoky, forbidden, and sexy, making it practically impossible to keep my eyes off of her ass as she sashays to the kitchen island and lays a single sheet of paper on the marble. “I give you Exhibit A.”

I cross to stand beside her, strongly regretting the decision to answer the door in this fucking towel. Just feeling her body heat warming the air beside me is enough to get me thicker. Unless I make a serious effort to concentrate on something other than how irresistible she is, I’ll be pitching a tent before I can get her back out the door.

“What’s Exhibit A?” I focus hard on the sheet of paper. After a moment, I realize that it’s a printout of the love story I drafted earlier, with almost the entire page highlighted in yellow.

“Our love story.” She taps one elegant finger to the top of the page. “Did you realize that almost all of it is true?”

I frown harder. “I know. I did that on purpose. The closer we stick to the real story, the fewer lies we’ll need to remember.” I shrug. “And the best lies always have a kernel of truth in them somewhere. It’s what makes them believable.”

“This isn’t a kernel of truth. It’s half a bag of popcorn,” she says, pushing on before I can argue my case any further. “We did meet over the Internet, we do send each other dozens of e-

mails a day, and we do talk on the phone more than most couples who are dating.”

Crossing my arms at my chest, I lean a hip against the island. “And? I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“You also gave me access to your LetsGoLove account, just like it says here. And you made sure that I knew how disappointed you were with most of the women you were dating.” She tilts her head back, studying me with an intensity that makes me feel more naked than I am already. “And, though you’ve never said it in so many words before today, I’m pretty good at reading between the lines. I know that sleeping with half the women in Manhattan is getting old and that you secretly wish there was someone special in your life.”

My throat goes tight and I have to fight to swallow.

Holy shit.

Does Penny think that load of mushy bullshit I wrote was some kind of confession? Does she think that I’m secretly in love with her and this is the way I’ve chosen to declare myself?

If so, what the fuck am I going to do about it? I’ve cared about Penny for a long time and I’ve lusted after her since the moment I met her in the flesh, but that’s all this is—friendship, with a heaping helping of physical attraction. I don’t know if I’m capable of falling in love again, but if I am, it sure as hell isn’t going to happen like this.

That memo she’s fixated on is pure fiction.

But how do I tell her that without breaking her soft, clearly romantic heart?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Which got me to thinking about Exhibit B.” Penny continues her display of the alleged evidence, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

With crisp flicks at the corners, she places four more sheets of paper on the counter side by side, next to the first. “These are pulled from our e-mail and text archives from the past ten months. If you’ll skim through the highlighted sections, you’ll see that the innuendo is pretty rampant.”

“Innuendo?” My brows shoot up and my face suddenly feels hotter.

Surely, I’m not blushing. I haven’t blushed since fifth grade, when Jennifer Pruitt and I French kissed for the first time on the jungle gym, and she told everyone watching from behind the slide that I had rotten taco breath.

“Yes, Bash,” Penny says, her gaze lifting to the ceiling. “It’s like normal flirting, but with more mentions of your potentially green penis.”

A startled laugh makes my stomach contract so hard my towel slips free. I barely catch it in time. The heat burning my face spreads down to enflame my neck as I tuck the fabric back around my hips.

“I’m not sure I agree with that, Penny.” And I’m not sure what this is anymore, a declaration of love or an announcement that she plans to sue me for sexual harassment, but I’m certainly hanging on her every word. “But I’d really like to know where this is going.”

She nods, her own cheeks pinker than when she showed up at my door. “I’m getting to that but first, Exhibit C.” Pulling in a bracing breath, she places her final sheet of paper on the counter with a trembling hand. “This is how long it’s been since I was um...with someone.”

“With someone,” I echo, glancing down at the neatly typed words centered on the page.

“You know.” She circles one hand in the air, her cheeks growing so red she starts to resemble an animated woodland creature. “Smphx.”

“Pardon?”

“Smphx,” she mumbles, before responding to my head shake with, “Sex, Bash! That’s how long it’s been since I had sex.”

My jaw drops. “Thirty-two months?”

“Almost three years,” she confirms with a wince. “The last time was with Phillip, and I can’t shake this feeling that the second he lays eyes on me, he’ll know that I haven’t rebounded yet, let alone fallen in love with someone else.”

I blink, still having a hard time wrapping my head around this number she’s provided. “So you really haven’t been with anyone at all? Not even a one-night stand? Some nice hipster boy you picked up at brunch over Bloody Marys and took home for a quickie?”

She arches a wry brow. “No, Bash, I haven’t. Believe me, if I’d tripped and fallen onto a penis, even a hipster penis, I would remember it. I’ve been a nun, and Phillip is going to take one look at me and see it written all over my face.”

“No, he won’t,” I scoff as I give her a once-over, silently deciding that she’s holding up pretty damned well. If I hadn’t had sex in nearly three years, I would be trembling in a corner somewhere, jerking off and crying in a nest I’d fashioned from a stack of old Playboy magazines and my own tears.

“Yes, he will. When I look in the mirror, *I* can see it.” She jabs a thumb at the center of her

chest. “I don’t look like someone who’s been rolling around in bed with a gorgeous man. I look like the most action I’m getting is forcing my cat to snuggle with me before bed.”

“But you don’t have a cat.”

Her melted chocolate eyes widen. “Exactly. I haven’t even been getting cat action, let alone Incredible Bulk action.”

“Shit, Penny.” I drive a hand through my hair while my pulse begins to beat harder, faster. “Are you asking what I think you’re asking?”

“Before you say no, just think about this.” She steps closer, flooding my head with her scent, the one that’s made me crazy since the second it hit my nose. “Remember that e-mail about Mitzy? The sex therapist?”

I nod, too taken off guard to have any idea where this latest tangent is headed.

“Well, she was your client for almost three months and she clearly had no idea the size of...certain things.” She pauses, her eyes dropping pointedly down to my towel and back up again, just the touch of her gaze enough to make me ache. “But we’re one session in, Bash, and I already do. I know.” Her tongue slips out to dampen her bottom lip, sending my racing pulse into overdrive. “When we kissed last night... Well, let’s just say it was kind of hard to miss.”

I make a noncommittal noise even as I curse myself for losing control.

“At the time, I explained it to myself as an unavoidable natural reaction,” she continues. “But after reading the back story you sent me and going over our e-mails, it became clear to me that this is something more.”

“More?” I shake my head, pretending more confusion than I’m actually experiencing. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in all my years of dating, it’s to never jump to conclusions with a woman, especially if she’s talking about sex.

“We’re attracted to each other.” She motions between us, her face edging toward crimson again. “But we’re also friends and coworkers, so we know attraction will never become something more. Which is why what I’m proposing makes perfect sense.”

I blink. Innocently, I hope. “And what you’re proposing is...?”

“Oh stop. Don’t play dumb,” she huffs, proving she’s no fool. “You’re tired of banging anonymous strangers and I’m tired of not banging anyone. Neither of us is on the fast track to love, but that doesn’t mean we have to be celibate or sad while we’re waiting to find that perfect person. As long as we go into this with our eyes open, we can—”

“So let me get this straight,” I interrupt, needing to make damned sure I’m understanding her. “You’re saying you want to be fuck buddies?”

She lets out a breathy laugh. “Well, yes, I guess. But that makes it sound so cold and...efficient. It doesn’t have to be like that.”

“Oh, but it does.” I plant one hand on the counter to her right before slowly and deliberately placing the other on the counter to her left, trapping her in the circle of my arms. “If you want to fuck, I can most certainly oblige.” I bend closer until I can feel her increasingly rapid breath warming my lips. “I’m happy to strip you bare right here. Right now. Lift you up on this counter and fuck you until you come so hard you see Jesus.”

“I’m Jewish,” she murmurs, swallowing hard. “Or at least, I was raised Jewish.”

“That’s how epic the fucking will be,” I continue, my cock swelling beneath the towel as I imagine slipping my fingers beneath Penny’s skirt, pulling her panties to one side, and sliding my fingers inside where I’m pretty damned sure she’s already wet for me. “It will make you a believer in the holy pleasuring powers of my cock.”

“Amen,” she breathes.

Any other time, I would smile at the joke, but I need her to understand how dead serious I am about what I'm about to say.

"But that's all it will be, Penny. We'll fuck and come and pleasure each other until one of us decides it's not fun anymore. And when we end it, that's it. It's just done. No harm, no foul, no messy emotions or screwing up the good thing we have going. Because I can't have that."

And I'm not sure I'm capable of anything more than a physical relationship anymore, anyway.

Falling in love with me would probably be just as bad for you as when you fell for that walking canker sore your mother is about to marry.

For a moment, I almost confess the ugly truth aloud, just to be sure she knows what she might be getting into, but Penny's already nodding enthusiastically.

"Right! We'll keep it casual. We can do what you wrote in the memo. We draw up a contract promising that when things are over you won't fire me and I won't quit—at least not without training a replacement of your choosing—and we're good to go." She tilts her chin back, making me keenly aware of how close her lips are to mine. "But instead of falling in love the way we did in your story, we'll have a good time and let it end when it ends. We already know we can work perfectly well together without ever setting foot in the same physical space. We did it for two years. So even if it's weird for a while after one of us calls things off, we can just cut back on the texting and e-mail until it isn't anymore."

My lips part, but before I can remind her what a serious hole that would leave in both of our lives—we really do talk more often than some married couples—she's rushing on—

"But I seriously don't see it getting weird. I know you, Bash. I know I'm not the kind of girl you're going to fall in love with and I know better than to think something physical between us would ever become anything more."

I frown. I should keep my mouth shut, but I can't help playing devil's advocate, "And why aren't you the kind of girl I could fall in love with?" I bend my head closer to hers until I can smell the hint of sugar and coffee on her breath and I remember how perfect it felt to fuck her pretty mouth with my tongue. "You're beautiful, smart, funny, and one of my best friends. What about any of that knocks you out of the running for Mrs. Prince?"

Her eyes widen. She looks as surprised by my mention of a future Mrs. Prince as I feel—I certainly hadn't intended to take things there; it just slipped out that way—but she recovers quickly.

"Okay. Well. If you really want to know, I'll show you." She bends her elbows, bracing her palms on the counter behind her. A moment later she's boosted herself up to sit on the island, bringing her knees even with my waist.

She's now in the perfect position for me to wrap her curvy legs around my hips and take her right here in the kitchen. For a moment, as she begins bunching her skirt in her hands, I think that's exactly what she has in mind. I'm seconds from ripping my towel off and giving her what she's asking for when she shakes her head.

"Just watch," she whispers as the skirt rises higher on her thighs, sending my blood pressure skyrocketing right along with it. "Look. Don't touch."

"I'll warn you right now, buttercup," I say, my voice thick. "If we decide to do this, I'm not the kind who takes orders. When I'm in bed with a woman, I take control. It won't be any different with you."

"That's what I assumed." Her breath hitches and her nipples tighten beneath her tank top, making it nearly impossible to keep from bending to bite one of them through her shirt. "That's

one of the reasons I want this. I know, when I'm with you, there won't be room in my head for anything else. I'll finally be able to forget all the things I don't want to remember. Maybe even this. At least for a little while."

She tugs her skirt higher on her right side, displaying a patch of blue and gray as long and wide as my forearm. My forehead wrinkles, my brain torn as it attempts to process the conflicting sights of a woman's sexy, curvy thigh bared to the hip and the ugliest tattoo I've ever seen.

"Go ahead and say it," she whispers. "It's the ugliest tattoo you've ever seen."

"It is not," I lie as I tilt my head to one side, trying to figure out what the fuck it is. I see eyes, a large set of teeth, and maybe...flippers? "It's unique."

"Uniquely hideous." Her hands clench the fabric in her hands until her knuckles go white. "Manatees don't even have tusks."

A manatee. Shit.

Even falling down drunk, what on earth possessed her to get a giant manatee tattoo? And how could any alleged artist, tattoo or otherwise, dare to mar such a perfectly stunning thigh by inking an eighteen-inch blob with fins on it? I've never committed to ink, but I've seen Aidan fill in enough tattoos to know this amount of work in one night must have hurt like a son of a bitch.

Suddenly, the pity filling my chest transforms to rage and I have a vivid mental fantasy of punching the man who did this to Penny in the face.

Repeatedly.

"It's so huge and dark there's no way to cover it up and lasers would only fade it. The consultant I talked to said the color goes too deep for me to be a good candidate for removal," Penny continues in a defeated voice. "So it's going to be there for the rest of my life, reminding me of what an idiot I am and making every man who sees it wonder what the hell is wrong with me."

"Stop it." I cup her face in my hands, fingers digging lightly into her jaw until she lifts her gaze to mine. "You are not an idiot and there is nothing wrong with you. You had a bad night. That's it. One night."

"I know," she says softly. "And it could have been so much worse. I could have drowned. Or that other woman could have died. But that's part of the reason it hurts to look at this stupid thing. Every day this blob reminds me of how close I came to losing everything, all because someone I loved wasn't who I thought he was."

Her lips tremble, but her eyes stay clear and dry as she adds, "And that's why you couldn't fall in love with someone like me. When you fall, it's going to be for a strong, gorgeous, amazing woman who is as magnificent as you are. It's not going to be for a girl who's been so afraid of explaining her crazy tattoo that she's bailed on every LetsGoLove date she's agreed to go on for the past thirty-two months."

My fingers slide into her hair, cradling her skull in my hands, wishing I could reach into her brain, find those ugly thoughts keeping her from seeing how fantastic she is, and toss them into the trash.

"But that's okay," she says, lips curving into a shaky smile. "I'm not looking for love. I just want to be close to someone again. Someone I trust, who I know won't laugh or ridicule me when he sees Mr. Whiskers."

I smile, shaking my head affectionately as my hands slip free of her hair. "You named it. But of course you did. Of course you named it."

She wrinkles her nose. "A man with an Incredible Bulk has no room to throw stones,

Prince.”

Grin taking up more real estate on my face, I ease closer, moving between her thighs, loving the way her breath hitches as my hands come to rest on her hips. “But you have to admit it’s pretty incredible. And bulky.”

And getting bulkier by the moment as I imagine how amazing it’s going to feel to get Penny’s curvy body beneath mine. I’m going to drive her crazy, show her all the ways I can make her forget Phillip, Mr. Whiskers, and anything else that’s plaguing her beautiful mind.

“I admit nothing,” she says, breasts arching closer to my chest as she tilts her head back. “I’m reserving judgment until Mr. Bulk and I have been properly introduced. Which isn’t going to happen this afternoon.”

Before I can hook my fingers around the back of her knees to hold her in place, she’s scooted backward, spun around, and jumped down on the other side of the island.

“I want you to have some time to think before you make your decision.” She turns to face me, smoothing her skirt down around her legs. “I know this is a big shift from your usual and I don’t want you to jump into something you’ll regret just because you’re a sex addict and a willing woman showed up on your doorstep.”

“I’m not a sex addict.” I prowl around the island toward her, “And I don’t need time to think.”

“Yes, you do,” she says, backing away toward the door. “And I don’t think sex addiction should be ruled out. You forget that I’ve seen all your LetsGoLove messages.”

“Then you know women always come back begging for more.” I continue my pursuit, lips curving in a smirk. “Aren’t you curious, buttercup? Want to make any bets about how many times I can make you come before dinner?”

“Stop it, Bash.” She snatches her purse from the entryway table and clutches it to her chest like a shield. “I’m serious. I won’t feel right about this unless you have time to—”

“I’ll use my fingers the first time,” I say, swiftly closing the distance between us. “I can’t wait to get my hand up your skirt and feel how wet you are.”

An almost pained expression flashes across her face as her shoulders collide with the front door. “Please, Bash.”

“Please, what?” I press my palms to the wood on either side of her face, making damned sure there’s no way she’s escaping. “You are wet, aren’t you?” I whisper, my lips inches from hers. “Wet. For me. And I haven’t even kissed you yet.”

“Stop, Bash.” Her breath shudders out as her lids slide shut. “You’re so bad.”

“I’m not bad, sweetheart, I’m very, very good,” I promise, my cock so hard it’s pointing straight at Penny, a pussy-seeking missile ready to fire. “And I’m going to prove it to you. First, I’ll kiss you until you can’t stand, and then I’ll carry you into my bedroom and take you all the ways I’ve been dreaming about taking you.”

“You’ve been dreaming about me?” Her eyes flicker open, her shocked gaze connecting with mine, momentarily throwing me off my game. “Really?”

I clear my throat, mentally scrambling for a response that won’t give too much away, but none of my usual material fits this particular moment or this particular woman.

“It’s okay,” she says, clearly reading my discomfort. “I’ve been dreaming about you, too. And I was only asleep about half of the time.”

She lifts her hand, touching fingertips to the center of my chest as she continues in a soft, sexy voice, “The other half I was wide awake, telling myself how wrong it was to fantasize about my boss, my friend, but I couldn’t stop.” Her fingers trail down my chest to my stomach, getting

close enough to my cock that it jerks beneath the towel and an almost painful surge of lust tightens my balls. "As soon as you left last night, I had to touch myself. I closed my eyes and pretended my fingers were you inside me and came so hard it felt like I was going to die."

"God, Penny." Now it's my turn to fight for breath. I lean more weight into my hands, fighting for control. "I want to see it. I want to watch you get yourself off and know I'm going to be inside you as soon as you go. I want to pull your wet fingers into my mouth and suck them dry while you ride my cock."

Her fingers wrap around the top of my towel, mere centimeters from my rock hard dick, summoning a groan from low in my throat. "And I want to stay and let you show me how incredible you are because I know you'll be incredible...but I need to go. I need you to think about this, Bash, really think about it and make a decision when you don't have a hard-on. I care about you too much to take advantage."

Despite the painful pressure building low in my body, the words are so unexpected I can't help but laugh. I smile down into her sweet face. "I'm your boss, seven years older, and about a hundred times more experienced than you are, Penny. Most people would say that I'm taking advantage of you."

"Most people don't know you the way I do." She presses up on tiptoe, planting a kiss on my cheek before whispering into my ear, "I'll see you tomorrow. My suitcase isn't going to pack itself."

Feeling strangely exposed, and not in a way I enjoy, I shift my weight back onto my heels and step away from the door and the woman in front of it. "Fine. Tomorrow, then."

"Don't be mad," she says, holding my gaze as she reaches for the door handle.

"I'm not mad," I say, voice tight. "Honestly, I'm not sure what I'm feeling right now, but I'm not mad." I force a smile. "It would take a lot more than a case of blue balls to make me mad at you."

"Good." Her lips press together. "Sorry about that. But you're not alone. I'll be suffering all the way home."

"Then are you sure you won't stay?" I ask though I know she won't, and I'm not surprised when she opens the door.

"I can't." She steps back into the hall. "After all the bad stuff, I made myself a promise not to hurt anyone else if I could help it. I know I'm important to making your life run smoothly. If you decide you don't want to risk that, I'll understand and things can go back to the way they were before."

"All right." I let my gaze skim up and down, memorizing how beautiful she looks with the light from the window behind me reflecting in her eyes. "See you soon."

"Soon," she echoes before moving away down the hall. I watch her go, knowing deep down in my gut that it's too late to step back from the ledge.

If we don't see this through, I'm never going to be able to hear her voice on the phone or read a message she's written and not think about this afternoon, when I was so close to being inside her. When she was standing in the circle of my arms, giving as good as she got, driving me crazy with every word that came out of her mouth, making me so desperate for her it feels like my balls are going to explode.

I'll honor her request for time, but my decision is already made.

I'm going to have her. I'm going to have her naked in my bed, writhing beneath me, screaming my name as I fuck her into her first non-self-administered orgasm in three long years.

There's no longer a question of if we're going to be lovers.

Only when.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

From the e-mail and text archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: Do you want to lose your job?

I'm assuming you must or you wouldn't have turned me on to Ample Valley Creamery's Salted Caramel Crack Butterscotch ice cream. Five days later, I have spooned down five pints and am heading out the door right now to make another run to the store to stock up on my drug of choice.

At this rate, I'll have an ice cream paunch before the month is out and will have eaten myself out of my career field by January first.

No one wants a Magnificent Bastard with Dad bod, Penelope.

This is something you should have considered BEFORE sending me that link to Ample Valley's five most orgasmic flavors.

Sincerely,

Bash, who encourages you to start shining up your resume

From: Penny4YourLobsterPot

To: MagnificentBastard1

Re: Do you want to lose your job?

HAHAHA!!

I knew it! I knew you would be powerless against the creamy deliciousness! Welcome to my world. I've gained five pounds since they opened a location on my block. I've had to take up jogging to compensate and, as anyone with double D breasts will tell you, that is an exercise in pure bouncy agony.

Don't worry about getting Dad bod.

You'll still be hot from the neck up ;).

Penny, who is confident in your ability to be magnificent even with an ice cream paunch

Text from Bash: Maybe we should go running together sometime. We could inspire each other...

From Penny: What do I get out of this running arrangement? Do you have any bouncing body parts I'm going to find inspirational?

Bash: I can go without a shirt and let you watch my paunch jiggle...

Penny: Oh, stop it. You do not have a paunch. You're too much of a control freak to let yourself go. I'll believe this paunch nonsense when I see it.

Bash: Come over. I'll get an extra pint of Salted Caramel Crack for you. We can eat it on the couch while watching late night and you can see my paunch grow in person.

Penny: *It's too late for me. I would fall asleep on the train.*

Bash: *Liar. You're just determined never to hang out with me. There go my plans for an office Christmas party...*

Penny: *Lol. Can you still call it a party if only two people are invited?*

Bash: *Three if you count my paunch.*

Penny: *Five if you count the bouncing betties.*

Bash: *Double Ds you say? Hmmm...*

I guess they can each be counted as their own separate entity. I'll arrange invites for all three of you.

How's December 23rd work? I have another party on the 22nd and the 24th belongs to my mother and her new boyfriend, but I can pull together an office party by the 23rd if you'll promise to come out.

Or I can come to your side of the river if that's easier.

It's been over a year of working bliss. I think we should meet in person, don't you?

Penny: *I think you don't like being alone. That's what I think.*

Bash: *...okay then.*

Guess I'll let you go.

Enjoy the rest of your weekend.

Penny: *I'm sorry... I was just kidding. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings.*

I would love to party with you on the 23rd, but I've got company coming for the holidays. Can I take a rain check?

Bash: *Sure. Consider yourself rain checked. 'Night.*

Penny: *Seriously Bash, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.*

That was way more about me than you.

As you've obviously noticed, I don't get out much, but I'm going to start. I promise. And when I do, you're going to be the first person I want to see.

I think it's time we met, too.

It's kind of strange that the person I say good night to almost every night is someone I've only seen in pictures.

Bash: *Try having no idea what your good night person looks like... *side eye**

Penny: *Okay, fine! See attached picture of my feet at this very moment.*

Bash: *Wow! Feet!*

And they're wearing some very nice reindeer socks with separate compartments for each little toe. At this rate, I'll have a good mental picture of what you look like below the knees by the time I'm forty.

Penny: :P. Good night, Mr. Prince. Enjoy your ice cream.

Bash: Good night, buttercup. Keep those toes cozy. Touch base with you Monday.

CHAPTER TWENTY

By morning—after hours of tossing and turning and dreaming about fucking Penny in every filthy way I’ve ever had a woman and a few new ways my subconscious whipped up specifically for her—I realize that this has been coming for a long time. Way longer than last Sunday, when I finally laid eyes on more of Penny than her adorable little toes.

Even her toes are sexy. As sexy as her quick mind and the way she makes me laugh and how she’s not afraid to call me on my bullshit.

But then that’s part of the problem...

I’m not a fool or the kind of person who lives his life with his head completely in the sand. Since Rachael, I’ve been jumping from short-term relationship to short-term relationship, keeping my emotional investment low in order to avoid getting hurt. I might not have wanted to face it, but I realized that particular truth a long time ago. I’m also fully aware of the fact that Penny has come to fill the female friendship and late night couch-chat hole that Rachael left behind.

What I didn’t realize until yesterday, however, is how flirtatious my relationship with Penny had become.

At five a.m., having given up on sleep, I’m at my computer combing through our correspondence, trying to pinpoint the moment when our friendship took a turn. I isolate several conversations about six months into our professional relationship that seem to be the tipping point, but it’s hard to tell which of us was the driving force. There are a few teasing remarks on Penny’s side and some innuendo-laced jokes on mine, but from there things seem to flow organically into something else.

Something flirtatious and surprisingly...intimate.

If I didn’t know for a fact that these messages were between an employer and his assistant, they could easily be read as the sexy banter of a couple. They’re practically foreplay. My hard-on for Penny has been staring me in the face from a computer screen for months and I had no idea that somewhere in my subconscious I’ve been fantasizing about what it would be like to have her.

I’m not a sex addict—I don’t engage in destructive sexual behavior or lose interest in a woman once the thrill of the chase is over—but there are clearly things going on in my psyche that I’m not aware of.

And I don’t like that. Not one fucking bit.

The part of me that values reason, order, and professionalism demands that I call this whole thing off—the intervention, the fuck buddy plan, the texting, the flirting, seeing Penny in person, all of it. If she’s going to remain my employee, then we need a swift and immediate return to the friendly, but impersonal dynamic we had when we first started working together.

My dick, however, has enjoyed the walk down memory lane and is more ready to service Penny than ever.

The Incredible Bulk remains semi-erect all morning and when I see Penny standing on the Long Island Railroad platform, the last thing I want to do is tell her she’s going this alone. She’s wearing one of her new dresses—a knee-length brown spandex number with ruffled layers around the hem that emphasizes her curves, flashy gold earrings, and gold sandals that display her sexy little toes—and looks good enough to eat.

I'm working up a full-fledged hard-on even before I get close enough to see the gloss on her lips or smell the addictive scent of her perfume. The moment that light, lemon, sugar, and sea salt smell hits my nose I'm a goner.

"Hey, you made it!" She lifts an awkward hand, the anxiety in the gesture making it clear she isn't sure what verdict I came to overnight.

Under normal circumstances, I would want to allay her fears as soon as possible, but thanks to Penny's "time to think" mandate...I've had time to think. And I haven't enjoyed it or the way it's complicated what should have been a combustible, no-strings-attached fuck.

So instead of leaning down to whisper that I hope she isn't wearing her favorite panties because I plan to rip them off of her as soon as we reach our private car, I greet her with a cool nod and motion toward the front of the train. "We're one down from the dining car."

"Oh, okay." She falls in beside me, dragging her roller suitcase behind her. "Good morning."

"For a few more minutes anyway."

She clears her throat. "Good for a few more minutes? Or morning for a few more minutes?"

I smile, but keep my attention fixed on the platform ahead. "Morning for a few more minutes. Then it will be afternoon and we'll be cleared to have a glass of champagne. A bottle comes complimentary with the private car."

"You shouldn't have," she says, her voice brightening. "The sleeping cabins are so expensive. I'm fine with coach."

"Good," I say, still smiling. "Because I booked you a general boarding ticket as well. In case you decide you would rather not ride in my car."

I've done nothing of the sort but hearing her say, "O-okay. Of course. If you would rather be alone," in a way that makes it clear she's no longer certain how her plan is going to pan out makes the lie worth it.

I like Penny, and I want Penny. I want her so badly that my cock is already straining the front of my dark wash jeans, making me grateful for the erection-concealing protection of my briefcase. But I'm not happy with the position she's put me in. And I don't care if it's unprofessional and bastardly in a way that isn't magnificent, I want to make her suffer through at least a few minutes of the torment I've endured for the past fifteen hours.

At the entrance to the sleeping car, where ten private luxury cabins have made train travel something to seriously contemplate again, a woman in an LIRR uniform, with a mass of blond hair coiled atop of her head, and wearing too much lip liner, takes our tickets.

And a few moments to check me out.

"Welcome, Mr. Prince. I'll be your in-car concierge." Her blue eyes track from my face to my where my white button down's sleeves are folded up to reveal my forearms and back again. Penny, who has stopped by my elbow, she ignores. "Right this way. I've already got the champagne chilling in your cabin."

"Thank you..." I drop my eyes to the nametag on her blazer, letting my gaze linger on her chest long enough to ensure that Penny will notice. "...Patrice. I'm sure you'll help make the journey very comfortable."

"Absolutely." Patrice reaches out to squeeze my bicep before leading the way up the steps into the car and down a surprisingly wide hallway. "That's what I'm here for! To make sure your journey is as smooth as possible. Each cabin is equipped with a concierge phone that comes straight to my cell so I'm always just a call away."

Pausing before the second door to the left, she opens it with a suggestive smile. "Anything

you need, anything at all, Mr. Prince, you just give me a call and I'll be here in a jiff."

"What might he need?" Penny asks sweetly as she shifts in front of me, demanding the other woman's attention. "Other than the champagne that comes with the private car?"

Patrice glances down, her smile growing brittle around the edges. "Well, I deliver food from the dining car and drinks from the bar. I can also help arrange for transportation to meet you at the station or help you book excursions with our sister company that offers sunset wine tasting cruises around the island."

"Oh, well that sounds great," Penny says with a soft laugh and a self-conscious roll of her eyes. "For a second, I thought you might have been talking about sex. But I'll be taking care of that."

"Well n-no," the concierge sputters. "Of course I wasn't, I—"

"Of course you were, but seriously. I'm doing you a solid." Penny's eyes grow almost comically wide and I have to fight to hold back the laugh shoving up my throat. "He's too much of a good thing if you know what I'm saying." She holds her hands out, palms at least a foot apart, and mouths, *Huge. Seriously. Huge.*

Before our concierge's jaw can do more than jog up and down in shock, Penny has grabbed a fistful of my shirt and shot me a hard smile over her shoulder. "Shall we darling?"

"We shall," I say, following her into the compartment.

The second the door closes behind us, I pull her into my arms, intent on showing her there's no such thing as too much of a good thing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Our luggage goes flying, knocking the champagne bucket to the floor, but we don't stop to pick it up.

I've already got Penny's legs wrapped around my waist, holding her fine ass in one hand while I pull the foldaway bed out of the wall with the other. I could care less if there's ice all over the floor and our champagne has rolled under one of the seats. I'm not worried about anything but how fast I can get my hands beneath Penny's dress.

"Sure you don't want me to go ride in general seating, Mr. Prince?" Penny asks, lips moving against mine as I lay her down on the bunk and lengthen myself on top of her. "So you and Patrice can get to know each other better?"

"Christ, no." I kiss my way down her neck as I cup her breast through her dress. "All I want is your pussy all over my face."

Her breath catches. "Really? That's all?"

"And then your pussy all over my cock." I pinch her nipple, drawing a gasp from her throat. "And then my cock deep inside you, fucking you until you realize what a mistake it was to leave my apartment last night."

"If I didn't know better, I would think you were mad at me." She threads her fingers through my hair, stopping me before I can pull her dress down and get my teeth on her tight little nipple. "You aren't, are you?"

"I'm not a fan of thinking." I slide a hand up her thigh. "It makes me cranky."

"I can see that," she says, lashes fluttering as I cup her through her panties. "But that probably means that thinking was something you needed to do."

"You're hot, Miss Pickett," I say, not in the mood to talk about thinking, either. Talking is overrated, especially when I've got a beautiful woman beneath me. My teeth dig into my bottom lip as I curl my hand tighter around her mound. "Hot and wet. I can feel you through these satin panties."

"S-silk." Her tongue sweeps across her lips. "They're silk."

I rub my finger back and forth across the fabric, teasing lightly over her clit. "That they are. My apologies."

"Bash?" she asks, eyes going wider. "Are we really going to do this?"

"Unless you tell me to stop, then yes, Penny, we're really going to do this." Fingertip still teasing her through her panties, I continue in a voice soft enough not to be heard outside in the hall, "First, I'm going to pull these very nice panties to one side and fuck you with my fingers."

She swallows, her throat working as her chest rises and falls faster.

"I'm going to get you wetter than you've ever been in your life," I continue, "make you so hot and desperate for my cock that you're begging me to fuck you. And then, if I'm in a merciful frame of mind and not in the mood to torture you a little more, I will rip these very nice panties down your legs and fuck you until you scream."

Her lips part, but I cut her off before she can speak.

"And you will scream." I thumb her clit harder until her eyes dilate and her hips begin to pulse against me of their own accord. "You won't care that there are people on either side of us who might hear you. You won't even remember that they're there. All you're going to remember is that no one has ever fucked you as well or as thoroughly as I'm fucking you."

“Shit.” Her brow furrows as she shakes her head gently back and forth. “You’re too good at that.”

“I’m even better at this,” I say, taking her lack of protest as implied permission. Drawing her panties to one side with my thumb, I slide two fingers inside her.

“Oh God,” she says, eyes fluttering closed as I push in to the first knuckle.

Fuck, she feels amazing. She’s wet, hot, and clearly aroused, but she’s also insanely tight, so tight that the thought of being inside her makes my head explode a little. It’s going to be incredible, so incredible I don’t want to wait. But I will. A pussy this tight is going to need some warming up before it’s ready for what I’m packing below the belt. No matter how irritated I was with Penny last night, the last thing I want to do is cause her any real pain.

When we’re in bed together, the only pain she’ll experience will come from delayed satisfaction, from pleasure so intense it’s just this side of unbearable.

“I hardly slept last night,” I say, capturing her lips for a kiss as I continue to fuck her with my hand. “All I could think about was getting you wet and under me.”

“I dreamed about you all night.” Her hands slide down my back, caressing me through my shirt. “About your hands and your mouth.”

“Was my mouth doing anything like this?” I bring my attention to her breast, using my teeth to pull the spandex of her dress and the bra beneath down, baring one dusty pink nipple. I hum my appreciation for its beauty, its hardness, its sweetly puckered tip, before taking her into my mouth.

“Yes.” Penny gasps as I begin to suckle her with deep rhythmic pulls as my fingers mimic the tempo between her legs and my thumb glides back and forth across her clit. “Oh yes, you were. Oh my God, Bash. Oh my God!”

I would smile against her breast, but that would interfere with my suction and clearly it’s doing the job. She’s no longer stiff or shy beneath me. She’s bucking into my hand, clawing at my shoulders, writhing on the bunk until just as the train lurches into motion and the whistle goes off so does Penny.

“Yes!” She cries out as her pussy throbs around my fingers, her wetness flowing out to coat the back of my hand. “Oh God, yes. Yes!”

Yes, indeed. Fuck me, she’s so hot like this, out of her head with lust and singing my praises loud enough that there’s little doubt our neighbors have a good idea of what’s going on in our car. My cock is hard enough to pack gunpowder and my balls are aching like I’ve been sucker-punched, but I’m not ready to put an end to my suffering yet, not until I’ve made her go again.

A minute later, I’ve got Penny’s dress shoved up around her hips and her panties pulled down to dangle around one ankle. I hitch one of her legs over my shoulder as I shift onto the floor beside the bunk. And there, from my knees, an appropriately worshipful position, I bear witness to the sweetest pussy I’ve ever seen. The dark pink lips of her sex are swollen with desire, plump petals that provide a lightly curled frame for the well of wetness between them. And above her pussy, her clit stands at attention, a pretty pink button just begging for me to lick, tease, suck, bite. To do all those wicked things I do so well because I fucking love to eat pussy.

I do. I love it.

Some men don’t, I hear.

I don’t understand these men. They are alien to me in the same way people who think ice cream is gross or people who don’t exercise because they don’t like to sweat are alien. Ice cream is godly, a hard sweat is the only thing that comes close to a hard fuck in terms of pure bliss-level, and eating pussy is a little piece of heaven. A sweet, salty, slick, scrumptious slice of

heaven, and I can already tell Penny is going to be off-the-charts delicious.

“Bash,” she whispers, shuddering lightly beneath my palms. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything is perfect,” I say, not moving my gaze from the paradise between her legs. “Better than perfect. I’m just having a moment with your beautiful pussy. I think I’m in love with her. She’s...stunning.”

Her breath rushes out. “The look on your face right now might be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Not for long.” I glance up at her, holding her gaze as I spread her thighs wider, bringing my mouth close enough for her to feel my breath warming her aroused flesh, and inhale.

Immediately her scent makes my mouth water. It’s light and fruity, like mango slices sprinkled with salt, with an undercurrent of waterfall rushing over slick rocks and exotic flowers blooming in an undiscovered corner of an ancient rainforest.

Yes, I get that precise when describing the way a woman smells. I am a connoisseur of poose, and I can detect the top, heart, and base notes of a particular pussy in ten seconds flat.

“I love this,” I tell Penny, inhaling again, watching her eyes darken and her breath speed as she waits for me to touch her with something more than my breath. “I love smelling you. You smell so good it’s all I can do not to take you right now. To drive my cock deep into this beautiful pussy.” I exhale, cock throbbing behind my fly as she moans softly in response. “But I won’t. Do you know why?”

She shakes her head, clearly already beyond words.

“Because the only thing better than smelling you,” I say, mouth moving closer to the needy place between her legs, “is tasting you.” My tongue sweeps out, tracing the seam of her from pussy to clit, confirming her taste is every bit as heavenly as the rest of her.

Penny’s head falls back with a gasp of pleasure, and I set to work at the best job in the world—making a woman come until she’s boneless, senseless, helpless to do anything but writhe beneath my mouth and beg me to fuck her.

Deliberately avoiding her clit after that initial sweep, I set to sucking the swollen flesh surrounding her entrance, drawing on the slippery skin with pulsing suction, summoning more blood to the surface, making Penny squirm and moan. I wait until her breath is coming in swift, ragged pants and her nails are raking across the thick gray blanket beneath her before I finally plunge my tongue inside her.

She shudders as I drive deep, coating my tongue with her incredible taste before pulling out and plunging back in. I wrap my hands around the back of her thighs, hook them around her hips, and go to town, using the leverage of my grip to pull her into more intimate contact. I ram into her again and again, fucking her with my tongue until my chin is dripping with her wetness and Penny is making moaning, whimpering, on-the-verge-of-coming sounds, and then and only then, when I know she’s primed for the flight, do I transfer my mouth to the top of her and suck her clit like it’s the last sliver of ice on a boiling hot summer’s day.

Almost instantly, Penny screams my name—screams it, just like I promised that she would—and launches into orbit.

Her hands shoot down to tangle in my hair, pulling my face tight to her pussy as she grinds against me, riding out her orgasm with an abandon that slays me. I’ve caught glimpses of her sensual side before, but now the raw, carnal, hungry part of her is taking center stage and it’s sexy as hell. So sexy all I can think about is getting my painfully hard dick buried inside her and making her go all over again.

“Are you ready for more?” I ask breathlessly.

“Yes,” she pants. “Oh God, yes. Please tell me you brought a condom.”

“Does the Tin Man have a metal cock?” I reach for my briefcase and the condom in the side pocket, cursing myself for not making time to buy more on the way to the train. This morning, one condom for the train ride had seemed like enough, but now I know it’s not even close. I can already tell that having Penny once is only going to make me want her more. I’ll be hard again in ten minutes.

So I’d better make this first time last.

Already planning all the ways I’m going to torture us both before we’re allowed to get off, I rip open the foil packet. What I see inside hits me like a punch in the gut.

“Fuck,” I curse, holding the condom up to the light streaming through the window beside the bed, proving the tear is even bigger than I initially realized. “The condom’s ripped.”

“Get another,” Penny says, fingers curling around the top of my pants.

“I can’t. This is the only one.”

“No, way.” Penny bolts into a seated position, tugging the neck of her dress up to cover her breast. “You can’t be serious, Bash. This is the saddest thing that’s ever happened!”

Inclined to agree with her, but trying to be strong, I stand, running a determined hand through my hair and tucking my shirt back into my pants. “Don’t worry. I’ll go check the dining car. Sometimes they have toiletries for sale behind the cashier’s desk.” I lean down, pressing my lips to hers, moaning as the taste of her kiss and her pussy mingle in my mouth.

“Hold that thought, beautiful. I’ll be back before you can get those panties on so don’t even try.” I turn and bolt out the door, worried that if I look back at her, I won’t be able to resist pushing her onto the bed and making her come on my mouth all over again.

Out in the hallway, Patrice is nowhere to be found, which is probably good because I’m not sure I have the self-control to refrain from offering her a one hundred dollar tip in exchange for begging, borrowing, or stealing me a condom. I hurry down the deserted hallway and through the door leading into the dining car. On my way to the cashier, I casually grab a napkin from the dispenser on an empty table and wipe my face. I’m inclined to enjoy pussy on my face for a few minutes after the main event, but considering my mission, it’s probably best if my chin isn’t glistening.

I spot what looks like a full arsenal of personal products behind the counter and my whip-tense muscles begin to relax. But when I ask the doughy-faced cashier for a box of condoms, he informs me that they’re out.

“Out,” I echo, my dick insisting my ears must have heard incorrectly.

“Yep,” the man says, looking at something on his computer screen. “We should have some more in by Friday.”

Shooting him a look that I hope makes it clear how little fucking good a condom on fucking Friday is going to fucking do me, I thank him and start toward the bar at the back of the train. By the time I make my way through twenty-five cars of squalling children, bickering old people playing cards across the aisle, and an entire car of overgrown frat boys on their way to a bachelor party, I’ve lost what’s left of my sense of humor.

Hearing the bartender inform me that they don’t carry condoms, but that I “should try the dining car,” is enough to make me want to put my fist through the nearest wall.

“You sell liquor, which loosens inhibitions,” I force out through a tight jaw. “Shouldn’t you, in good conscience, also sell condoms?”

The man shrugs. “We didn’t have sleeping cars with private rooms until a few months ago. It wasn’t much of a problem before.”

“But now it’s an epidemic,” the man’s female counterpart offers as she refills the ice bucket, her upturned nose wrinkling until I can see far more than I would like of her nostrils. “Think about that, man. Think about a dozen nasty strangers doing exactly what you’re trying to do on that same bunk. If that doesn’t kill the mood, I don’t know what will.”

With a grimace her way—I don’t care if a hundred nasty strangers fucked on that bunk, I still want to be balls deep in Penny on it more than I want to draw my next breath—I turn and make my way back to our private car. I arrive to find Penny’s panties no longer around her ankle and the woman herself tipping back a half empty glass of champagne.

She hiccups as she lifts a tortured gaze to mine. “Nothing, right? I figured you’d struck out or it wouldn’t have taken so long.”

Miserably, I nod, too distraught to form words just yet.

With a commiserating wince, she takes a second glass of champagne from the small table set into the arm of her chair and holds it out toward me. “Here, take this. It might not drown your sorrows, but it dulls the pain. A little.”

I sit down hard in the chair across from her and lean in, taking the champagne as I assure her, “As soon as we get to Southampton, I’m buying all the condoms. All of them.”

“Every single one,” she echoes.

“Every fucking condom in town.”

She nods seriously, her eyes sparkling as she adds, “And if that’s not enough, we’ll drive over to the next village and buy all the condoms there.”

“Hell, yes, we will,” I say, grinning in spite of myself. “Because I need to fuck you Penny. I need it like I need air. I need it as soon as physically possible.”

“Me too.” Her smile fades as she glances toward the door. “But I’m not sure I’m going to be able to face anyone else riding in this car. I’m going to have to wait until they get off and scurry out with my head hidden under my scarf.”

“Why’s that?” I ask, sipping my champagne.

Her lips pucker. “I was busy having an out of body experience so I don’t quite remember, but considering how raw my throat feels, I’m pretty sure I screamed. Didn’t I?”

I don’t even try to keep the smug, or the wicked, from my grin. “Like you were on fire,” I confirm.

And if I have my way, it won’t be long before she’s screaming again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The train pulls to a stop in Southampton a little after two o'clock in the afternoon. Having convinced Penny that getting condoms ASAP is more important than her shame over being overhead mid-orgasm, I hurry her out of the sleeping car ahead of the rest of the passengers, settle her at the edge of the platform with our bags at her feet, and promise to be back with provisions so fast she'll never know I was gone.

I'm already jogging away, headed for the mom and pop shop across the street, praying to all the gods in the known universe that they'll have a box of condoms for sale when a male voice calls out Penny's name.

I turn to see a man about my age with a five hundred dollar haircut wearing a lobster print button down shirt lift a hand to Penny. "Hey! I wasn't expecting to see you here."

One look at Penny's expression and I immediately reverse direction.

Her eyes are saucer-sized, her lips are working their way into a horrified "O", and her already pale skin has gone alabaster white. Though arsenic white might be a better description. Alabaster is too pretty a word for the deathly absence of color stealing across Penny's features. She resembles a vampire caught out in the daylight, seconds from exploding into flames, and is clearly in need of an immediate intervention.

"What are you doing here?" the man asks with an uncomfortable laugh as he starts across the platform toward her. "Anastasia said you weren't due in until tomorrow afternoon."

Penny's mouth opens and closes like a very beautiful, very pale fish, but no words come out. She looks like she's about seconds from fainting at Lobster Shirt Guy's feet.

I jog faster, determined to reach her before she collapses.

No matter what was causing her distress, I would have run to her rescue, but it's especially important right now. I didn't have a chance to do my usual background check on the ex I've come to torture, but there's no doubt in my mind that this douche canoe is Phillip. This human skid mark with the feathered haircut, offensively preppy clothes, and pitying expression on his admittedly handsome-as-shit face is the person who broke Penny.

I hate him on sight.

Which makes it a pure pleasure to wrap my arm around Penny's waist and draw her close, pressing a kiss her cheek. "Sorry, sweets. The station shop didn't have anything that would be good for a migraine. Let's get you to the cottage to lie down and I'll run out and get whatever you need."

"Oh, it's okay, I can make it to the cottage." Her hand fists in the back of my shirt and holds on for dear life.

She's trembling and all I want to do is sweep her into my arms and carry her as far away from this Shitlord as possible, but she's not here to run. She's here to face her demons. It's just bad luck that this one squirmed out of the woodwork while her guard was down.

"I just hate to see you in pain." I cup her face in my hand, meeting her panicked gaze, willing her to see that she doesn't have to be afraid. I'm here and I'll stay glued to her side until she's strong enough to tell Phillip to go straight to hell and rot there. "I'd take the migraine for you if I could."

"I know you would." Gratitude and affection fill her eyes as she brings a palm to rest on my chest. "But I'll be fine."

She takes a breath, her lips curving in a clearly forced smile as she motions toward the human spunk bubble. “Bash, meet Phillip Davies, the groom. Phillip, this is Bash Prince.”

“Sorry. I didn’t see you there. Nice to meet you, Phillip.” I turn my head, fighting to keep my contempt for this fucker from showing on my face.

If he sees that I’m angry, then he’ll assume Penny has told me about his betrayal. Furthermore, he’ll assume that she was sufficiently damaged by the things he did to her to get her new lover pissed at her old lover, and I refuse to give him that power or satisfaction.

For the purposes of our work here this week, Penny mentioned the story of her ex-boyfriend hooking up with her mother in passing during one of those “my family is weirder than your family” conversations. We discussed it briefly and moved on. It was barely a blip on our relationship radar and had completely left my mind until Penny asked me to be her date to this wedding.

And as for Penny, I make her so happy she doesn’t have any room in her heart to hold on to bullshit from the past.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Phillip says, a calculating look in his eyes as he shifts his gaze from me to Penny and back again. “Glad you’re here. Penny didn’t mention that she was bringing someone.”

“Initially, I had a business conflict.” I offer him an easy smile. “But I canceled my trip. I couldn’t stand to be away from Penny for four whole days.” I hug her closer to my side, casting a loving glance down at her upturned face.

“Of course,” Phillip says, but I don’t miss the skeptical note in his voice. “Anastasia will be thrilled to hear you’ve got a plus one, Penny. We can see about getting you and Bash settled into one of the rooms in the guesthouse. We were going to put you in your old room, but a twin bed won’t work for two.”

“Thanks, but we won’t be staying at the house.” I smile harder. “We’ve booked a cottage nearby. We didn’t want to make any extra work for the busy couple on their wedding weekend.”

Phillip waves a hand through the air, seeing my smile and raising me a breezy laugh. “Oh, it’s no trouble. We’ve hired extra staff. And I know Anastasia will want to spend some quality time with you. She’ll be thrilled to learn that Penny has someone special in her life.”

On the surface, the comment is genuine and polite. But somehow he manages to hit “special” in just the perfect way to make it sound like I’m a not-so-bright child who still needs help blowing his own nose that Penny has adopted out of the goodness of her heart.

This douche is good. I didn’t anticipate such a formidable opponent, but I’m not intimidated. I thrive on a challenge. And you know what they say—the bigger the prick, the more it hurts when you cut their dick off.

“And I can’t wait to meet Penny’s mother.” I make sure to hit “mother” in a way that will remind Phillip he’s banging someone old enough to have squeezed him out of the pussy he’s sticking his pecker in every night. “I’ve heard so many fascinating things about her. But it’s too late to cancel the cottage reservation and we’re looking forward to some alone time. You know how it is.”

“Of course I do.” Phillip’s smile becomes a smirk. “I know exactly how it is.”

Penny’s breath rushes out with a soft, shocked sound and it’s all I can do not to grab this dick nugget by the front of his stupid shirt and shake him until his too-white teeth fall out of his head.

Penny was right, he is a master of subtext, and the subtext right now is that he had Penny before I did. And not only did he have her, but he had her harder, deeper, and better because he

had her before she was shattered. Before she was scarred and cast out of her own family by a mother who cared more about Phillip's dick than her own daughter.

There is no remorse in his pale green eyes, no regret. There's only a sociopath who wants to have his cake and eat it too. He wants to marry Penny's mom and move on with his life while retaining bragging rights as the only man Penny loved before she was too broken to love anyone in that same, innocent way again. He stole her innocence and hope away and the man is proud of it.

It's so low, so ugly and selfish, and so not at all what a woman like Penny deserves, that for a second, my character slips.

My gaze narrows and how much I want to hurt him comes flooding into my eyes.

Never in two years of staring down cheating, lying, wife-beating, life-ruining sons of bitches have I ever wanted to punch someone as much as I do right now. And I don't want to just punch him once. I want to keep punching him, slamming my fist into his face again and again until he isn't capable of making a smug expression for a damned long time.

Instead, I tighten my grip around Penny's waist and nod as pleasantly as possible. "Well, good. I'm glad we understand each other. I look forward to learning more about you, Phillip."

"Same here." Phillip's smile spreads to take up more real estate on his face until he's grinning like the cat that gave every dog in town a bad case of crabs. "Talk soon Penny. We'll see you at the shower tomorrow, I assume?"

"Wouldn't miss it." Penny's voice is still faint and weak. "Unless I can't kick this headache for some reason. I have the worst migraine. So if you'll excuse us, Phillip, we're going to head out."

"Of course." Phillip's brow knits in an excellent parody of real concern. "Take care of yourself, Peeps. Hope you feel better soon. I'm so glad you're here. Can't wait to catch up."

And then the sewer-sucking slime ball has the gall to lean in and press a kiss to Penny's forehead. I'm so stunned there isn't time to shift her out of the way. He darts in and out, striking like a snake, leaving Penny wide-eyed and pale all over again.

I nod again, just once.

That's it.

That is the last bit of evidence I need to seal his fate.

"See you soon," he says, smiling pleasantly as he circles around us, calling out to someone else farther down the platform.

"Not if we see you first," I call after him in a jovial tone before adding beneath my breath, "you nasty, petty, lobster shirt wearing son of a bitch."

"It's my fault," Penny whispers, her hands shaking as she hitches her purse over her shoulder and reaches for the handle of her roller suitcase.

"That was not your fault." I scowl down at her, wondering if I need to shake some sense into her while I'm shaking Phillip's teeth loose from his smug, evil head. "That was your horror show of an ex being horrible."

"No, not that. The shirt." Penny sniffs as she tilts her head down, sending her hair falling around her face. "I gave it to him for his birthday. He used to say it made him think of me every time he put it on."

And then her shoulders start shaking and crying noises begin to drift from behind the curtain of her hair and I know I have to get her out of here before Phillip sees. If he witnesses her falling to pieces after the first battle, it's going to make it impossible to win this war.

Wrapping my arm around Penny's shoulders to conceal as much of her as possible, I grab

my garment bag and briefcase and haul ass toward the rental car office at the end of the next block. I hustle my sniffling companion along beside me, feeling like absolute shit, hating myself for not finding a way to spare Penny that hellish interaction.

This isn't the first time I've had a client break down after a confrontation with an ex, but it's the first time it's hurt this much.

At that moment, I silently promise to make this revenge as brutal as possible. Penny might not want the full Magnificent Bastard package, but she's going to get it. Phillip the shit stick deserves nothing less.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

From the text archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From Penny: *Are you still alive?*

Please respond to this text before tomorrow morning or I’m going to call the police. In an entire year of being your assistant, you’ve never gone more than forty-eight hours between e-mails.

It’s been eighty-three. I’m starting to worry...

A lot.

Bash: *Hey. *checks pulse* Yep. I’m alive.*

Penny: *Okay...*

Are you all right?

Bash: *I’m fine. It’s just the anniversary of something I would rather not remember. Put me off e-mail—and life—for a while.*

Penny: *I hear you. I have one of those anniversaries. They stink.*

Is there anything I can do to help?

Bash: *Nah. But thanks for checking in on me.*

It’s nice to know that if I fell in the shower and broke my neck, my body would be discovered before it had decomposed too badly. I don’t want to deprive all the ladies of an open casket funeral.

Penny: *Not funny, Bash. At all. I don’t like funeral jokes.*

Do you need someone there with you?

Bash: *Why? Would you come over if I did?*

Penny: *If you’re as deep down in the despair pit as you seem, then yes, I’ll be there in twenty-five minutes. Thirty-five if I hit the trains wrong.*

Bash: *Wow.*

You really are worried about me, aren’t you?

Penny: *Yes, you jerk. Now promise me you’re not going to do anything stupid before I get there.*

Bash: *You’re worried for nothing, buttercup. I’m not that far down the pit, not even close. As much as I would love for you to come over, I can’t let you come because you’re scared.*

I don’t like scaring people for no reason.

*Especially people I like.
I'm fine and will be back to normal by tomorrow morning. I promise.
But if you would still like to come over, I'll give your name to the front desk and leave a
glass of wine on the counter for you.*

Penny: Are you sure you're okay? You swear you would tell me if you weren't?

*Bash: Yes, I swear I'm okay and that I would tell you if I weren't.
Does this mean you aren't coming over?*

Penny: Well, it is pretty late...

*Bash: *farting cat emoticon**

Penny: That's cute. And mature.

*Bash: *farting dragon emoticon**

*Penny: Where do you get those? I need them for my phone. I have a couple of younger
friends who are obsessed with emoticons.*

*Bash: I'll send you a link.
Sleep tight, buttercup, and thanks for checking in.
It means a lot.*

Penny: Of course. Anytime, boss. I've got your back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Checking in to the cottage couldn't be easier—the keys are waiting in a basket on the porch when we arrive—and the setting is as stunning as it looked in the pictures. The cottage sits on a rise at the edge of a vineyard with a sweeping view of the vines stretching away toward the main house and the sea beyond. The rear of the cozy, white, almost painfully cute structure is shrouded by ancient oak trees with gnarled trunks and limbs covered with bright green spring leaves that seem to promise it's never too late for a fresh start.

Penny, however, is not in such an optimistic frame of mind.

"We should go home," she says, her voice thick though she stopped crying not long after I pulled away from the station in our rental car.

"We are not going home." I tug my laptop from my briefcase and glance around for some sign of the Internet access code, determined to start searching for dirt on Phillip as soon as humanly possible. "We're going to stay and make that cock juggling thundercunt wish he'd never pulled the shit he pulled today."

"It's pointless. He's too good. I forgot how good he is. God, I'm so stupid." She drops her suitcase to the hardwood floor just inside the front door with a thunk, takes five steps, and collapses face down onto the yellow couch in the center of the room.

And there she lies. Unmoving. Like a very nicely dressed corpse.

She doesn't stop to take in the sunny yellow kitchen to our left or the back deck overlooking the woods or to peek into the bedroom, where a fluffy white bed is waiting to welcome travelers in need of rest.

Or of a hot and heavy dose of afternoon delight.

But I didn't even mention stopping by a drugstore on the way to the cottage. Getting into my pants is obviously no longer on Penny's radar. Phillip killed our afternoon of sex-capades. It's enough reason to hate him if I didn't have plenty of other reasons already.

But I do. I hate his cheesy haircut, his smug smile, his attitude of absolute entitlement, and his mile-wide mean streak. But most of all, I hate what he's done to my friend. Penny is no longer the vixen who rode my face in our private train cabin. She is decimated, wrecked, all her joy and fighting spirit sucked away by the first meeting with her evil ex.

Yes, Phillip was terrible, but this isn't the Penny I know. She doesn't give up when the going gets tough; she digs in until she gets my schedule nailed down, the proper forms filled out, the clients talked down from the ledge, and the retainer fee deposited two weeks prior to the start of a new client orientation.

I snap my laptop shut and drop it on the entryway table, deciding that getting the dirt on Phillip can wait.

Arms folded at my chest, I cross to stand beside the couch, staring down at Penny's inert form. "You are not stupid. And you're not a quitter, either. So come on. Get up. Let's talk strategy."

"Discretion is the better part of valor," she moans, her face still pressed into the couch and her voice muffled by the cushions.

"It's too late for discretion. We're already here and the enemy has been engaged. Now there's no choice but to pick up our weapons and storm the shoreline."

"I can't," she says, still not moving a muscle. "I'm just going to die here on this couch. Use

my savings to pay the cottage rental fee through the end of the summer. I should have decomposed enough by then for someone to come fetch the body.”

My lips curve up on one side. “I imagine the cottage has other bookings that might interfere with that solution. And you’ll ruin the couch if you decompose on it.”

“Then wait until I’m dead and you can drag my corpse into the forest for the animals. They get hungry around here. All the rich people lock up their trash.”

I prop my hands low on my hips with a sigh. “I’m not dragging you anywhere, buttercup. You’re going to get up, shake this off, and get back in the ring. Come on.”

“No,” she moans.

“Yes,” I insist. “Get up. Right now.”

“I can’t. I’m in the depths of despair.”

“On your feet, Pickett,” I demand, delivering a swat to her ass that finally gets her face out of the cushions.

“Ow!” She rolls over to shoot an outraged glare in my direction. “That hurt!”

“Had to get through to you somehow,” I say, knowing I didn’t hit her hard enough to do even momentary damage. When it comes to spanking, I’m no amateur. “You need another to get you out of your pity puddle?”

Her eyes narrow as she sits up, tossing her hair out of her face. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Why not?” I step closer, forcing her to tilt her head even farther back to maintain eye contact. “Might take your mind off your troubles. Haven’t you ever wanted to be turned over a man’s knee? Have your pretty ass spanked until you realize how pleasurable a little pain can be?”

“Maybe at some point in time, yes. But not right now, Sebastian,” she snaps, surging to her feet, her face flushing with anger. “Now, when I feel small and stupid because the man who helped destroy my life cares so little about me that he still wears the shirt I gave him to pick up friends at the train station. Do you have any idea how that feels?”

I hold up my hands, palms up. “Relax, okay? I wasn’t trying to—”

“I will not relax,” she snaps, fingers curling into fists at her sides. “And I’ll tell you how it feels. It feels like being slapped and then having the person who’s supposed to have your back offer to slap you again to make you feel better.”

My lips part, but she’s already barreling on.

“It feels like running away from the playground to punish your mother for ignoring you only to come back three hours later and realize that she didn’t even know you were gone because she’s passed out drunk in the car with some guy who isn’t Daddy Steve.”

“I’m sorry,” I say gently. “I really am.”

“Well maybe I don’t care,” she says, pitch rising as tears fill her eyes. “Maybe I’m sick of people saying they’re sorry and people *not* saying they’re sorry and being jerked around by everyone because I don’t know how to play the stupid games.”

“I’m not playing any games, Penny, I’m just—”

“Oh, shut up, Bash,” she shouts. “You’re all about games. Like that shit by the train this morning, acting all aloof and then staring at that stupid woman’s stupid boobs just to get a stupid reaction out of me.”

“I get that you’re angry,” I say, my own volume building. “And you have every right to be, but it’s not me you want to lose your shit on.”

“I’m not losing my shit!” She lifts her hands, shoving both palms into my chest with surprising strength.

Unprepared, I stagger back a step, but she doesn't stop coming.

"You're a jerk!" she sobs, tears spilling down her cheeks. "You think you know everything, but you don't." She shoves me again, but this time, I'm ready for her and hold my ground.

"You don't know anything!" she snaps, putting so much force into her next shove that her feet completely leave the ground. "You have no idea what it's like on this side of your stupid business!"

She goes for me again, but this time, I catch her wrists and haul her to my chest. "Then tell me, Penny. Tell me what it's like."

"Let go." Her expression twists with anger as she tries to squirm her hands free, but I've got too firm a grip. "Let me go!"

"Not until you tell me what it's like," I insist, tightening my grip. "Tell me what I'm missing. I'd truly like to know. I'd also like for you to stop lashing out at me when I know for a fucking fact I'm not the one you're angry with."

"Screw you, Bash," she says, aiming a kick at my shins that I dodge. A moment later, I've swept her feet from beneath her and taken us both to the floor.

"Screw you," she growls again as we land and I roll on top of her, pushing her arms over her head, pinning her wrists to the carpet.

"If you insist," I say, crushing my mouth to hers.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

For a split second, Penny goes stiff beneath me, but when my tongue traces the seam of her lips, demanding entrance, she opens with a sob I feel echo through all the tight, aching places in my chest. And then suddenly she's kissing me with the same passion with which she was attempting to kick my ass.

Her tongue wages wild, hungry war with mine, flooding my mouth with the taste of champagne and sadness and this woman who is so much more than anyone gives her credit for. Our teeth grind together through our lips and it hurts, but this pain is so much better than all of the emotional shit.

This pain is going to lead to pleasure. The other will just suck her down to the bottom of a dark hole she might never crawl out of.

She doesn't realize it, but I know exactly what she's feeling. I never let myself cry, but after it had ended with Rachael, I spent my share of hours lying on my couch wondering if there was any point in getting up.

What was the fucking point? I didn't want Rachael back anymore, but I didn't want anyone else either. I didn't ever want to expose myself to that kind of hurt again. The first time I'd been a naïve fool walking a tight wire, ignorant of how far there was to fall. No woman had ever broken me, so I'd assumed I couldn't be broken. I'd thought I was invincible and then Rachael had proven I wasn't.

Not even close.

Now, two years later, I still haven't had the guts to get anything but my dick involved in an intimate relationship, and Rachael was just a woman with a weakness for assholes. She wasn't cruel or manipulative and she sure as hell never would have alluded to our sexual history in front of a woman I was presently dating.

Penny has every right to be having a come apart. And though I might not be the person she's angriest with, she wasn't talking pure nonsense, either.

"I'm sorry." I work the words in between kisses as I release her wrists, moving my hands to cup her breasts through her dress, squeezing each phenomenal handful. "You're right, I was a jackass. You made me take a hard look at myself last night and I didn't like it, so I took it out on you this morning."

"I don't want to talk." Her breath comes fast as she fumbles with the buttons of my shirt. "I want you naked and inside me. Right now."

"We still don't have condoms," I remind her even as I help her finish the buttons and shrug my shirt off my shoulders.

"I'm on the pill. I didn't want to risk it before, but as long as you swear you're clean." She works frantically at my belt, fingers brushing against where I'm marble hard, diamond hard, titanium hard. The sexual tension we stoked into a roaring fire in the train car combines with the wild, unsettled feeling swirling through my chest to make it absolutely imperative that I get inside of Penny.

But something about this doesn't feel right.

"I was tested last month," I assure her. "And I haven't had sex without a condom in years, but—"

"No buts." She grabs the hem of her dress, squirming on the floor until she's able to pull it

over her head and toss it aside. “Just fuck me, Bash. Fuck me right now.”

And then she’s lying beneath me in nothing but that black lace bra and her barely there silk panties, reaching for me, and I forget everything but how much I want her. Need her. Need to remind her that the world is as full of pleasure as it is pain.

My lips slam back onto hers. I kiss her with all the hunger roaring inside of me as I slip my hand down the front of her panties, groaning when I feel how ready she is. She’s hot and lifting into the fingers I stroke inside her with an abandon that makes my cock throb with its own painful heartbeat.

“Now,” she pants against my mouth as she hooks her toes in the top of my boxer briefs and pushes them down over my ass, freeing my swollen length. “Now, Bash. Now!”

“Wait.” I pull my hand from between her legs, not wanting our first time together to be on the floor with her bra and panties still on and my jeans around my knees.

But then her hand is between our bodies, wrapping around my dick, and rational thought becomes a slippery thing to hold onto. She yanks the crotch of her panties to one side and fits the head of my cock to where she’s so wet. Suddenly I’m skin to skin with a woman for the first time in years and it’s Penny, this woman who drives me absolutely out of my mind with lust, and control is a thing of the past.

With a groan of surrender, I thrust forward, sinking into her inch by inch and God she feels so good. So perfect. She’s insanely tight, her body pressing in on my cock from all sides, gripping me so fiercely I know I’m going to have to pull it together and slow the hell down or I’m going to go in ten seconds like a fucking teenager.

“Yes,” she hisses, her nails digging into my shoulders. “More. I want more. Give me all of you.” Her heels dig into my ass, pulling me closer, deeper until I’m buried to the hilt in her pussy and it feels like she’s about to squeeze me in half.

I know I must be hurting her, at least a little, but she clearly doesn’t want this slow and easy. She’s already grinding against me, silently urging me with each shift of her hips to take her, fuck her, ride her until I make her forget all the things she wants to forget.

And suddenly—just like that—I realize what’s wrong.

“Wait.” Pinning her hips to the floor with one hand I pull away to look down at her, but her eyes are closed. “Look at me, Penny.”

“Please, don’t stop,” she begs, her eyes squeezing tighter together. “Please don’t. Please.”

“I’m not going to stop, but I need you to look at me,” I say, sweat breaking out between my shoulder blades and the heavy, aching feeling in my balls edging closer to pain than pleasure. It’s taking all my will power not to move, not to thrust into her again and again until we both explode, but I’m not going to fuck her like this. “Please, buttercup, look at me. Open those pretty eyes.”

Her lips press into a thin line and the furrow between her brows deepens, but finally, after another long, silent, aching moment her lashes sweep open. Her gaze meets mine, pulling me into the center of her storm, into the middle of the hurt and the regret and the fear that nothing is ever going to make it all go away. It’s a sad, scary place, but I know we don’t have to stay there, not if she’ll let me take her somewhere better.

“From now on, I don’t want you to think of anything but me.” My free hand skims from her waist to mold to her ribs, silently letting her know that I’ve got her. “This isn’t about forgetting something or someone else. This is about learning how it’s going to be with us.”

Her breath rushes out. “I-I don’t know if I can,” she whispers, swallowing hard.

“Yes, you can, just keep your eyes on me.” I slide her bra strap down her shoulder, baring

one of her breasts, holding her gaze as I find her tight nipple and roll it gently between my fingers. “Do you know how much I love your breasts?”

Tongue slipping out to dampen her lips, she shakes her head slightly from side to side.

“I am obsessed with them. They’re the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen.” I bring my thumb to my mouth and sweep my tongue across it, loving the hunger that flickers in her eyes as I return my newly slick fingers to her nipple, upping my pressure. “From the moment I laid eyes on you, I wanted to touch you like this. I took one look at you and knew you were the kind of woman who was going to bring me to my knees.”

“Liar,” she says, but the furrow between her brows has vanished and I can tell her attention is shifting.

“I’m not a liar.” Slowly, deliberately, I bare her other breast and begin to give her other nipple the same attention. “I would beg, borrow, or steal to get these in my mouth again and as soon as I make you come the first time, it’s going to be your turn on top. I want to feel you grinding on my cock while I lick and suck and bite you, right here.” I pinch her nipple, making her breath catch, before resuming my slow, firm circles. “I want you to ride me while I worship your breasts until you come so hard you can’t hold yourself up and then I’ll have my turn on top again. Because I want you so much, I know I won’t ever want to stop.”

“You’re still good at that,” she breathes, hips rolling against mine.

“You like dirty talk?” I force myself to remain motionless, even though my spine is buzzing with an overload of sensation and my cock is pulsing angrily inside her, desperate to move.

“When you do it.” Her hands smooth around my waist to cup my ass as her movements grow increasingly urgent. “You give really good dirty talk.”

“It’s just the truth.” I match the circles of her hips, keeping my cock buried deep as I nudge my pubic bone against her clit, knowing I could become addicted to the way her eyes melt as she begins to unravel. “I’m crazy for your body and your mind and I can’t wait to watch you come. Are you going to come for me again, Penny? Are you going to come on my cock?”

“Yes,” she gasps, lashes fluttering. “Yes!”

“Don’t close your eyes,” I beg, desperate to see her, every part of her, when she goes. “Keep looking at me. God yes, baby, like that. Just like that.”

Her lips part and a sexy as hell gasp-cry-whimper escapes from her pretty mouth as she comes, but her eyes stay wide open. And this time, as I hold her gaze, fighting not to lose control as her pussy grips me with an exquisite tightness that is by far the best thing that has ever happened to my cock, there is no sadness in her eyes. There is only wonder and something I don’t have a name for, but that knocks me off my feet, making me helpless to look away.

And as I begin to thrust inside her, taking her hard and fast while she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me down for a kiss that destroys me, there is nothing but her.

“Oh God,” she mumbles against my lips, kissing me with the words. “It’s so good, so perfect. Don’t ever stop, don’t ever, ever stop.”

I groan against her mouth as I slide my hands beneath her ass, cupping her in my palms, tilting her hips until we click into that perfect-for-us-position and, holy shit, it’s heaven. It’s paradise. It’s the best place I’ve ever been. She’s right, this is perfect, and I don’t ever want to stop.

But when she arches in my arms, her breasts pressing tight to my chest as she comes again, I can’t hold on another second. I come like a rocket shooting into orbit, a low, pained sound rumbling through my chest as pleasure floods through me. I’m drowning in bliss, drowning in her, in Penny who—when it’s over and we’re lying fused together, our breath still coming fast—

wraps her arms and legs around me and holds on tight, silently letting me know that she's got me.

As soon as I regain motor function, I roll over, pulling her on top of me, my softening cock still inside her pussy, and stroke her from neck to ass with my still-trembling hand as our heartbeats begin to slow.

Neither of us speaks, but she presses a sweet kiss to the center of my chest and I mold my hands to her spectacular ass with a reverence usually reserved for holy objects and it becomes clear that whatever we're doing together it's going to be a lot more intense than I expected it to be.

I'm still digesting that and trying to figure out whether to be disturbed by it when she props herself up on her arms and says in a blissed out voice, "And now we should go buy wine and a picnic basket from the winery, then come back here, get tipsy, and do that four or five more times. Maybe six."

"Hell, yes, we should." Screw getting disturbed. That sounds like the best night I've had in years. "I think we can manage six. It's still early and, not to brag, but the Incredible Bulk has the recovery skills of an eighteen-year-old."

"Yeah, about him..." She smiles, her eyes darkening as she shifts her hips, reminding me that I'm still balls deep in her pussy. As if I could forget. "Please tell him I'm sorry I mocked him. He absolutely deserves his title. He's incredible."

"You can tell him yourself," I say, squeezing her ass. "Maybe in the shower after we eat?"

"Sounds perfect," she says, smile fading as she adds, "I'm sorry about the other, too. I've never shoved someone before. Not in my entire life."

"I'll survive." I brush her hair away from her face. "You're half my size, buttercup. You couldn't hurt me if you were really trying. And you weren't."

"I know, but I still feel terrible about it."

"Don't." I cradle her jaw in my hands and run my thumb over her kiss-swollen lips. "I don't want you to feel terrible. In fact, I'm willing to do just about anything it takes to keep you looking just like this."

"Freshly bedded?" she asks, lips quirking up on one side.

"Happy." I slide my fingers into her hair and make a light fist. "And freshly bedded. Orgasms look good on you."

She laughs, her lashes sweeping down. "Well, thank you. They feel pretty good, too."

"I can't wait to give you more. To feel you go on my cock, my hand, to taste you in my mouth again..."

Her gaze lifts from my chest to my face, a shocked, but delighted look in her big brown eyes. "You can't be. Not already."

"I told you I wanted you on top." I flex my ass, thrusting my rapidly thickening cock between her legs. "Here's what going to happen: you're going to roll away just long enough for me to get my jeans off and for you to toss those panties on the floor and then you're going to get back on my cock, and your tits are going to be mine."

Breath already coming faster, she arches one brow. "Are you always this bossy?"

I reach back, popping the close of her bra. "No," I find myself confessing. "Not always. Sometimes it's better if no one's in control. If it's just a wild, sweaty, wonderful free for all. Don't you think?"

"I think I..." She swallows, blinking as she braces her hands on my chest. "Yes, I do. And I think I'm glad you're here." Her tongue slips out to dampen her lips. "Thank you for being my

friend.”

“My pleasure,” I say, as I slide her bra down her arms. “Truly. Every minute.”

And then I guide her down until her breasts are even with my mouth and set about proving it, one kiss at a time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The next fifteen hours pass in the best possible way. I have Penny on the bed, in the shower—where she bestows upon the Incredible Bulk a blow job he won't soon forget—on the couch, and then again on the bed before we both pass out from orgasm-induced exhaustion.

It's been a long time since I've shared a bed with a woman and I don't expect to sleep well, but I'm out like a light the second my head hits the pillow and don't wake until the sun is shining through the curtains. By then, Penny's hand is already wrapped around my cock, coaxing a case of morning wood into something more serious.

This time I spread her out on her belly and ease into her from behind, sliding my hand beneath her hips, finding her clit and teasing it with my fingers until she comes so many times she's begging me to stop, to never stop, to keep fucking her until her bones melt through her skin.

"That sounds painful," I breathe, pressing a kiss to her neck.

She groans. "Less teasing, more biting."

"I live to serve," I say, trapping the flesh at her shoulder between my teeth and biting down.

"Oh God, yes. Now. Right now! My bones are melting right now!" she cries out, making me laugh.

But soon I'm too busy coming to laugh, my cock milked dry by the sweet, tight heat of her body locking down around mine, taking me back to that flawless place I find every time we come together.

When it's over, we roll onto our sides and I spoon her close while we catch our breath, pretty sure I could stay in this bed with her all day and be completely happy.

"I think I achieved enlightenment," she says, making me smile against her neck.

"I told you I'd make you see Jesus."

She hums. "No, no Jesus. Just light and goodness. Pure goodness, with no thoughts or stress or worries in the way. For a few minutes, I seriously wasn't thinking anything at all."

"Are you saying I fucked you stupid?"

"Yes," she says with a happy sigh before shaking her head. "No, I think simple is a better word. Simple is pretty amazing when you think about it. Something that's so right it doesn't inspire any questions. It just is. And it's good."

I do think about it and decide I like her snuggly and philosophical. "You may be right, but I would prefer a different adjective."

"Is that right?" She rolls over, resting her cheek on the pillow next to mine, a grin curving her lips. "Good isn't good enough for you, Mr. Prince?"

"Not nearly good enough. Not from where I'm sitting." I brush a wavy lock of hair from her flushed face. "You're much better than good, Miss Pickett."

"You too," she says, leaning in to press a kiss to my cheek. "I'm starving. What about you?"

"Famished. I'll go see if they've delivered breakfast and start coffee."

"Perfect. I'll grab a quick shower and be right out." She rolls out of bed with another happy sigh and floats into the bathroom. I watch her go, admiring the heart-shaped curve of her ass before slipping from between the sheets and into a pair of track pants and a tee shirt.

I head out to the front porch to fetch the basket of breakfast foods included with our stay, and by the time Penny emerges in a fluffy white robe, I have coffee made and poured. We take

our mugs and plates filled with fresh fruit and homemade blueberry muffins to the sunny back porch where the spring morning is warm enough to hint at the summer around the corner and watch the squirrels go crazy while we eat.

It's a simple thing—shared food in the sun with rodent entertainment—but I can't remember the last time I felt so content.

The contentment lasts until Penny reminds me that the simplicity isn't going to last forever. "I've been thinking about round two with Phillip." She props her bare feet on the top of the railing enclosing the back deck, pops a raspberry between her lips, and chews thoughtfully. "I definitely have to up my game."

"You do," I agree, "but I'm going to up my game, too. As soon as we're finished eating, I'm going to run a background check on the ass goblin. If we get lucky, the basic search will turn up something, if not I should have time to—"

"No, no background check." Penny shakes her head, her attention trained on the squirrels bouncing back and forth between the trees. "I appreciate the thought, but I don't want to take it there. I don't want to ruin Phillip. And if I did, I wouldn't need the background check. I could just leak the details of our past relationship to the press and let the gossip machine run wild."

My eyebrows arch. "You mean they don't know that you and Phillip were together before he and your mother were together? What about the tabloids? I thought you said they covered the story when you nearly drowned."

She nods. "They did, but it was just a star's kid goes wild piece. Nothing about Phillip and me. Back when we dated the first time, we spent most of our time hanging out at my house. Not many people at school knew about it and the second time we dated it was only for a few weeks. As long as Phillip and I both keep our mouths shut, chances are the truth will never come out."

"Unless—"

"And that's just fine with me," she interrupts in a firm voice. "And better for my sisters, who shouldn't have to live with Anastasia when she's in the middle of press-induced drama." She lifts one terrycloth-covered shoulder and lets it fall. "Besides, like I said, I don't want to ruin Phillip's life; I just want to escape the shadow he casts."

I nod patiently. "I understand. And I understand not wanting to spill information that would draw negative attention to you or your sisters. But cutting a human spoon full of herpes down to size has been known to reduce the length of his shadow. Just something for you to think about..."

I shrug like I couldn't care less what she decides, even though I'm dying to dig into Phillip's past and see what other incriminating, non-Penny-related dirt I can find on him. The smug prick needs to be taken down and I'm just the bastard to do it.

Penny chuckles. "No. But I do enjoy your names for Phillip. I would like them gathered into a coffee table book, paired with horrifying illustrations." She sticks out her tongue, shuddering before she pops another berry between her lips. "I can't believe I ever found him attractive."

"Really?" I study her covertly while pressing the muffin crumbs from my plate onto a finger. "He's a good looking guy. A shit stick, but good looking, I'll give him that."

Her nose wrinkles and she seems to have trouble swallowing. "Ew. No." She reaches for her mug, taking a healthy swig of coffee. "I can't see it. At all. When I look at him now, all I see is evil. Gleeful evil. He doesn't regret a single terrible thing he's done, as long as it gets him closer to being as famous as my mother."

"How's that going for him?" I ask, pleased by her response. I've been telling myself I don't care if she's still as hung up on Phillip as she is hurt by him, but that's a dirty lie. I don't want

her to be hung up on another man, especially a slimy taint biscuit like Phillip. It would be just like Rachael.

The thought freezes me mid-chew.

No, it wouldn't be anything like Rachael. Rachael and I were in love, planning a future together, and taking the occasional cruise through the nicer Manhattan jewelry stores, slowing as we passed the engagement ring section. Penny and I are just friends and co-workers.

And now lovers...

I shoot her another sideways glance to find her studying me expectantly. I blink. "What?"

"I asked if you ever watch TV."

I clear my throat with a laugh. "Sorry. Haven't had enough coffee. Yeah, I watch the important stuff, like Sports Central, Comedy Connection, and the Earth Channel."

"Really?" Her eyes light up. "I'm addicted to the Earth Channel. They have some amazing programming. As a cultural anthropologist, I'm pretty fussy about my documentaries on indigenous cultures, but they do it right. A lot of integrity and a commitment to recording a way of life without imposing western mores on the narrative."

I hum around the rim of my mug, holding her gaze as I set it back down on the glass table between us. "You're sexy when you use big words."

She bites her lip as she smiles. "Well, thanks. You, too. I did a little googling on the psychological impacts of enclotted cognition the other day after you mentioned it. I'll confess I was a little turned on by the time I was finished."

"How about you come over here and I'll get you a lot turned on." I reach for her, but she laughs and swats my hand away.

"No, we have to focus. We've only got a few hours before we have to be at the luncheon. So, as I was saying, if you watched television you would have recognized Phillip from Law and Love, Violent Crimes Unit. He's in his third season and was nominated for an Emmy award this year. He's also headlined a couple of different Broadway revivals."

The information makes me grumpy. My lip curls. "And you're sure you don't want me to do something about that? A little scandal goes a long way when someone's in the public eye."

"No, Bash." She levels me with a stern look. "I'm serious, I don't want any of that. It's not necessary. He isn't happy with his achievements, anyway. He wants a big screen career. I'm sure he's hoping my mom is going to help with that. She's been out of the business for a while, but she still has a lot of valuable connections. Though she knows better than to hook him up with her people until she's gotten what she wants from him."

I frown. "And that is..."

"A handsome young husband," Penny says softly. "She's never had one of those before, not even when she was young. Back then she was too busy marrying to advance her career or increase her bottom line. I guess now she wants to marry for love."

"You think she loves him?"

"I think so." She curls her hands around her mug, shoulders hunching as she huddles deeper into her robe. "As much as she loves anything. Anastasia spends so much energy on Anastasia she doesn't have a whole lot left for anyone else." She shivers. "Are you cold?"

"No, but we can go inside."

"No, I like it out here." She sets her mug down. "I can just go grab some socks. My body is warm, but my toes are always freezing."

"I know this about you." I wave a hand, motioning from her feet to my lap. "Give them to me."

“But you’re eating.”

“I’m done eating and my hands are always warm. It’s one of the many magnificent things about me.”

“Well, in that case...” She transfers her feet to my lap, her lips pressing together as I wrap my hands around her frigid little toes.

“You are cold-blooded, aren’t you?” I bring one foot to my mouth, breathing on her toes before rubbing them gently between both palms. “All right, so no background check and no ruining his career, but there are still things we can do. What you said about your mother is important. Phillip has to know that he’s in a quid pro quo situation. He’s not in control, at least not complete control, and even from our brief meeting, I can tell that he prefers to be the one pulling the strings.”

“Absolutely,” Penny agrees, cheeks flushing as she watches me bring her other foot to my mouth. “I’m sure that’s part of why he behaved the way he did. He was always able to call the shots with me. I’m not much of a manipulator.”

“One of the many things I like about you.”

“Thank you. Um...so...” Her breath rushes out. “Damn, I forgot what I was saying.”

“Should I stop?” I tease. “Are my foot-warming skills getting you too worked up to concentrate? Are your cute little toes your secret erogenous zone?”

“No,” she says, face going even pinker. “It’s just...intimate.”

I arch a brow. “You do remember what we were doing half an hour ago.”

“I do.” She glances up at me through her lashes as I continue to rub her feet. “But that fell under the banging buddy umbrella of mutual pleasure. This is different.”

I hold her gaze and the air between us thickens with questions I’m not sure either of us knows how to answer. Finally, I clear my throat and force a smile. “It’s not different. It’s part of being in-person friends. You’re my friend and your feet are cold and friends shouldn’t let friends have cold feet.”

“So you rub Aidan’s feet?” Her brow curves to mirror mine.

“I do,” I lie. “But don’t tell anyone. He’s not comfortable sharing that part of our relationship publicly. He’s not as secure in his masculinity as I am.”

She nods, grinning. “Right. I should have known. The sexy beard and all those big, bulgy muscles and tattoos. He’s obviously compensating for a lack of confidence in his own manhood.”

“Exactly,” I say, eyes narrowing. “My muscles are as big and bulgy as his, you know. The tattoos make his look bigger, but that’s all smoke and mirrors.”

She laughs, a light, tinkling sound that makes me smile despite how little I enjoyed hearing her use the word “sexy” to describe my best friend. “You’re funny,” she says, laughter still coloring her voice. “And unexpectedly cute at times.”

“I am not cute.” I exaggerate my bristly response and squeeze her feet hard enough to make her yip before she giggles again. “I’m the man who made your bones melt and don’t you forget it.”

“I won’t.” She pauses, her gaze turning inward. A moment later, she sits up straight, eyes widening as she pulls her feet from my lap. “And that’s exactly it. *That’s* the answer!”

I nod. “Of course it is. What was the question again?”

“How to up my game,” she says, reaching out to slap my shoulder in her enthusiasm. “How to handle Phillip!” She stands, grabbing her mug and plate and gathering our crumpled napkins in one hand. “Come on. Back inside. There’s no time to waste. I need to practice.”

“Practice what?” I ask, hoping it has something to do with me making her bones melt again. She stops at the door, turning to flutter her eyelashes in my direction. “Looking like I’m desperately in love of course.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

From the e-mail archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: Something to keep in mind during interviews

Hey P,

Happy Sunday. You’ve been quieter than usual this weekend. Hopefully, that means you’re out somewhere having fun. No need to reply until tomorrow, but I’ve just finished my first date with Cheyenne and it brought up some things I want us to discuss before we sign our next client.

I think we’ve been overlooking an important part of the interview process.

Helping women who are deserving and in need is my first priority, but we have to make sure our clients are capable of holding up their side of the arrangement.

Once we were out in public, Cheyenne cringed every time I touched her hand, Penny.

Visibly cringed, like I was that creepy uncle at the family reunion.

I finally talked her through it, and by the time her ex noticed we were seated at one of the tables in the garden at his favorite restaurant, she was pulling off “Not Completely Repulsed By My Presence,” but we’ve got a long way to go before we’ll be inspiring epic jealousy.

So from now on, I’m going to add a public outing to the orientation side of things, and I would love for you to dig deeper with the interview questions. If someone has social anxiety or any past trauma that might make it difficult (or impossible) for them to pull off pretending to be madly in love with me, that’s something I need to know.

Thinking back on it, it’s amazing we haven’t run into a situation like this before. I guess we’ve just gotten lucky that our first few clients had a knack for the dramatic.

Don’t worry about Cheyenne—I’m not giving up on her until we give her the justice she deserves—but I want to step up our vetting process going forward. I don’t want to turn people away, but I don’t want to fail them, either.

I felt like shit today, sitting there, wondering if I was going to make things worse for this woman who’s already had it so rough. I don’t want to put a client (or myself) through something like that again.

Talk soon,

Bash

From: Penny4YourLobsterPot

To: MagnificentBastard1

Re: Something to keep in mind during interviews

Oh Bash,

I’m so sorry. I feel like I’ve failed you.

Cheyenne and I met for coffee down the street from my apartment for our in-person interview and I noticed that she seemed a little anxious in a social setting, but I didn’t even think about that being an issue with you.

I guess I just assume that everyone who meets you is going to fall a little bit in love and that

won't leave any energy left for anxiety. I think that's been the key factor with our other clients. Not that they had a flair for the dramatic, but that by the time they finished the Bash portion of orientation, they were crushing hard enough to make pretending to be crazy about you look real.

So...maybe you just need to turn up the charm with Cheyenne?

I'm no flirting expert, but you are. Maybe she just needs a little extra attention to get over the worry hump?

Let me know if there's anything I can do to help and I will draw up an addendum to the interview questions and get that to you later this week for feedback.

Sorry again.

hugs

Penny

p.s. You are the furthest thing from a creepy uncle that there is.

From: MagnificentBastard1

To: Penny4YourLobsterPot

Re: Something to keep in mind during interviews

You didn't fail me.

Don't be silly. Adjustments are a normal part of running a business, especially a new business.

I appreciate the hugs, the advice, and the faith in my flirting skills. I haven't thought about the "little bit in love" thing before, but you may be right. I never set out to manipulate anyone, but flirting is the way I instinctively put people at ease...

To employ that deliberately, however...

Would that make me a creep? Or qualify as a conflict of interest? Will they think I'm leading them on? Or am I worrying too much about something that is a natural part of this weird career I've decided to pursue?

Full of questions,

Bash

From: Penny4YourLobsterPot

To: MagnificentBastard1

Re: Something to keep in mind during interviews

Your career is a little weird, but it's also a lot great.

You're like a fairy godfather, but with more sex appeal ;).

I think the fact that you're asking these questions proves that you're going to be just fine. You'll know when to establish boundaries and when to take a time out if needed.

And you could always tell the clients that you have a long-term girlfriend. Let it slip during orientation that you're in a committed relationship with a wonderful girl. If they believe you're taken, that might help them separate fantasy from reality.

We'll figure this out,

Penny

Text from Bash: That's a brilliant idea! And I have the perfect fake girlfriend in mind...

From Penny: Yeah? That's great!

Bash: *Yeah, she's a lovely girl, and the women will feel a vested interest in our relationship since she's the woman who connected them with me in the first place.*

Penny: *Oh no. Not me!*

Bash: *Why not? All of our clients talk about how sweet and wonderful you are. And all of them are sweet enough not to want to make a move on your boyfriend. It's the perfect arrangement.*

Besides, it was your idea. You can't say no.

Penny: *Ugh. Fine. But I want fake flowers on Valentine's Day.*

Bash: *You'll get real flowers on Valentine's Day and cupcakes on your birthday. My small way of saying thank you for your fake girlfriend assistance.*

Penny: *Make those cupcakes a subscription to the pint of the month club at Ample Valley Creamery and you've got a deal.*

Bash: *Consider it done. You can be bribed with ice cream... I'll keep that in mind.*

Penny: *But only the good stuff.*

Bash: *I wouldn't think of sending anything less than the best, pookie-kins.*

Penny: *Thanks, sugar tits.*

Bash: *I just spit water all over my phone.*

Penny: *I'm good at picking out pet names. What can I say?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

After half an hour of making faces at herself in the mirror while I observe from the doorway to the bathroom, offer advice, and try my best not to laugh, Penny is ready to practice her hopelessly in love expression on another person. We spend the next two hours gazing lovingly into each other's eyes, laughing our asses off, and doing a dry run of some sickeningly sweet "private" conversations we fully intend for Phillip to overhear.

I don't know why I didn't think of it before, but Penny's absolutely right.

With a man like Phillip, a sociopath who feeds on his ability to manipulate other people, it won't matter how enamored I seem of Penny. He's going to be looking to *her* and gauging *her* reactions. As long as she still seems vulnerable to his influence, he won't give a shit if I get down on one knee and beg her to marry me at that wedding shower lunch.

I've dealt with exes like him before and had to coach my clients through the kind of performance needed on their part to get under their former lover's skin, but for some reason, with Penny, I didn't make the connection right away.

Maybe it's because I'm so used to thinking of her as a friend that I've let my professional focus slip. Or maybe it's because I was so busy making love to her like my cock was about to fall off that there hasn't been time to think about anything else.

As much as my dick wants to make fucking Penny every few hours standard operating procedure, it's time to hone in on the problem at hand. As we practice our lovey dovey routine, I resist indulging in more than a few affectionate touches and a lingering kiss on her cheek.

By half past ten, I can tell Penny is feeling a hundred percent more confident than she did the day before.

We take turns in the bathroom, arming ourselves for battle, and step out the door into the sparkling spring day looking ready to slay. I'm in custom fitted gray slacks and a navy button-down that hugs my ribs as it tapers to my waist—simple clothes intended to showcase the Magnificent Bastard beneath. Penny's wearing a navy and white striped dress with a full skirt and a red belt that cinches at the waist, accentuating her curves. Her hair is pulled up in a sleek ponytail tied with a retro-inspired red linen bow, her toes are encased in red peek-a-boo sandals, and as we emerge into the sunlight, she slips red-framed sunglasses onto her face and pushes them up the bridge of her nose.

She looks adorable, fashionable, and sexy, and it's all I can do not to drag her back into the house and have her one last time before we engage the enemy.

Instead, I reach out to squeeze her ass as we walk toward the car and promise, "As soon as we get back, I'm going to push this skirt up around your waist and have you against the nearest wall."

"Is that right?" she asks, a smile curving her red lips. "Are you going to take my panties off this time?"

"Maybe." I consider the stunning view of her cleavage provided by the low, but not too low, neckline of her dress. "Maybe not. It depends on how badly I need to fuck you. You look incredible. Prepare to have every pair of eyes at that party glued to you when you walk by." I open the passenger door for her and wait for her to slide inside.

She pauses, gazing up at me in the bright midday sun. "That's not going to happen with my mother anywhere in the vicinity, but that's okay." With a coy tilt of her head, she reaches out to

twine her fingers through mine, making my heart squeeze in my chest. “I don’t need every pair of eyes, baby. I just need yours.”

“Damn.” I shake my head, laughing as I realize what she’s done. “That was good. For a second there, I forgot you were pretending.”

She makes a fist and pumps it in the air. “And the student becomes the master.”

“I wouldn’t go that far, buttercup,” I say dryly, nodding toward the car. “Now sit your pretty ass down. The sooner we get to the luncheon, the sooner we’ll be back here celebrating your victory.”

“Naked,” she adds with a grin.

“As naked as the day you were born,” I say, smiling my approval. The student might not have become the master, but she’s definitely on her way.

Fifteen minutes later, we’re pulling through the gates of the South Side Yacht Club and following wooden arrows with the words “Pickett and Davies” painted on them down toward the marina.

There, at the end of the road, on the wide lawn rolling down toward the water, we discover a lavish spread. Two white tents, with flaps fluttering in the breeze, flank six long banquet tables decorated with white tablecloths, navy runners, and accented with yellow flower arrangements. Beyond the elegant dining area are several Maypoles strung with ribbons where children are already running back and forth getting tangled in the yellow silks, an elaborate dessert table piled with cakes and cookies featuring a champagne fountain, and archways covered in yellow flowers.

I spot Phillip and Penny’s mother, a tall, striking blonde, who does look amazingly young for her age, and steer Penny away from the small crowd gathered outside the bar tent, clutching martini glasses filled with vibrantly yellow liquid. During our preparation, Penny said that she would normally go to greet her sisters first and today is all about showing that Penny is still the same person she’s always been, with one very important exception—she’s crazy about me and doesn’t care who knows it.

“Of course, the drinks match the party’s color scheme,” she mutters beneath her breath. “I shouldn’t be surprised. I wonder if anyone will have the guts to tell her those martinis are the color of radioactive urine.”

“Remember, only happy thoughts, sweet pea.” I wrap my arm around her waist, holding her close as we make our way past the tables toward the Maypoles. “We can discuss the urine-colored martinis at a later date.”

“Right. Thanks for the reminder, Doodle Cakes.”

I smile. “No problem, Honey Bear.”

“You’re the best, Snuggle Butt.”

I snort. “I like that one.”

“I like your butt. I like it so much I might snuggle it later,” she says, hand slipping down to pat my ass through my pants.

Before I can return the favor, high-pitched voices squeal, “Penny!” and a moment later, two small, but solid missiles connect with Penny’s midsection, propelling her out of my arms.

“Hey, you guys!” Penny laughs as she wraps her arms around the little girls who have latched onto her waist like barnacles. “I’ve missed you!”

“Us too, the weekends are so boring without a trip to Brooklyn,” the slightly taller, dark-haired little girl says, pulling back to gaze adoringly into Penny’s face. “You look so pretty,

sissy.”

“I love your dress.” The blond sister—clearly they’re not identical twins—runs a reverent hand down the fabric of Penny’s skirt. “You should wear it all the time.”

“Well, maybe not all the time, but thank you. Both of you.” Penny hugs them tightly again before lifting her gaze to me with a smile. “Now there’s someone I want you to meet. This is Bash, my boss who I’ve told you so much about.” She glances down at the blonde. “Bash, meet Edna.” She tucks a brown curl behind the taller girl’s ear, revealing a face remarkably like her mother’s. “And Francis.”

“Hello,” the girls say in stereo, surveying me with unconcealed curiosity. Penny and I agreed not to draw the kids into the false relationship drama if we can help it, but I can’t resist saying—

“It’s so good to meet you two. Penny is one of my favorite people. You got lucky in the big sister department.”

The twins’ smiles make me glad I spoke up. They clearly love Penny and, therefore, love to hear that other people appreciate their big sister’s many fine qualities.

“Penny is the best big sister,” Edna agrees.

Francis wrinkles her nose. “She’s our only big sister.”

“But even if she wasn’t, she’d still be the best,” Edna insists. “She lets us sleep in our blanket fort when we go to her house and have ice cream for breakfast on Sundays.”

“Yeah, and if Anastasia finds out I’m feeding you anything but organic, gluten-free, non-dairy rabbit food she’ll have my head on a spike,” Penny says, pinning both girls with a pointed look. “So let’s keep a lid on all that when Mom is around.”

“Keep a lid on what when Mom is around?” a musical voice from behind us asks. A second later, the twins bolt, taking off across the lawn like they’re fleeing the wrath of Zeus.

Penny’s face scrunches and she mouths a curse word, but by the time she spins around she’s smiling again. “Hi, Mom. So good to see you!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Bracing myself for battle, I turn to meet the electric blue gaze of Anastasia Pickett, movie star, former model, and nominee for Shittiest Mother of the Year. Calling upon my reserves of self-control, I resist the urge to glare daggers at her on Penny's behalf.

But it's hard, especially when the woman's eyes sweep from my head to my toes and back again in a way that makes it clear she's mentally undressing me, finding me fuckable, and wondering what the hell I'm doing with her daughter.

It's a lot to convey with a look, but the woman is an actress and an accomplished one at that.

She's so good that I almost believe her when she pulls Penny in for a hug and says, "It's good to see you, too, sweetheart. I'm so glad to finally have you home for a visit." Her gaze shifts back to me, the laughter in her eyes inviting me to share in a private joke. "And this must be your friend. Phillip enjoyed meeting you yesterday, Sebastian."

"Call me Bash, please. And did he? I'm glad," I observe coolly, not interested in her joke, especially since Penny seems to be the butt of it. I've only known this woman for a few seconds and I can already see why Penny has no idea how stunning she truly is. With a mother like this, it's a wonder her self-esteem isn't completely in the shitter. "I'm afraid I can't remember much about our chat. Penny had a migraine. I was so worried about her I wasn't paying much attention to anything else."

"Really?" Anastasia raises a brow. "That sounds serious, Penny. Do you need to see Dr. Green while you're home?"

"No, I'm fine now." She pulls away from her mother and moves into my arms, gazing up at me affectionately. "I think it was just a pinched nerve from sleeping in a weird position on the train. Bash worries too much."

"I do not, I worry just enough." I lean down, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "That's what you do where precious things are concerned."

"Cheeser," Penny accuses, making me grin.

"Guilty," I say. "Love makes me cheesy. I can't help it."

"That's okay. I like you cheesy. Just don't let the girls hear you or they'll tease you until you beg for mercy."

"I can handle eight-year-old teasing. I'm a grown-up."

"That you are. One of the many things I love about you." Penny sighs happily, her eyes sparkling with the perfect degree of lovesickness. So far she's knocking this out of the park. All that's left to do is to get her in front of Phillip without our act falling to pieces and we'll be back on track to victory.

"How sweet," Anastasia coos. "You two are adorable."

Penny blushes. "Thanks, Mom. It's nice to finally introduce you and Bash. He's been a big part of my life for a while now."

"Clearly. I'm so happy for you both. But especially you, baby. You deserve a beautiful man who's crazy about you."

I shift my attention Anastasia's way to find her beaming at Penny with what looks like genuine happiness. I note the soft smile and love filling her eyes and wonder if maybe I misjudged Anastasia Pickett. Maybe she's not a monster. Or not purely monstrous, anyway.

"Would you mind going to grab your sisters?" Anastasia asks. "And tell them they're not in

trouble for whatever you three were whispering about? I want them to enjoy the festivities, not worry they're going to lose privileges."

"Does that mean I can let them steal a cupcake from the dessert table before lunch?" Penny asks. "You know they both hate salmon."

Her mother's mouth puckers as it shifts to the side, making her look just like Penny when she's reluctantly giving up ground. "Fine. But only one. And don't let them get icing on their dresses. We haven't had a chance to do any family photos yet."

"Will do." Penny tips her head back, grinning up at me. "Want me to kill you a cupcake while I'm hunting, handsome?"

"No, thanks, buttercup. I'm holding out for ice cream."

"Of course you are." She laughs before pushing up on tiptoe for a quick kiss. "Be right back, baby."

I watch her go with a smile that's not purely for her mother's benefit. The bounce in her step as she crosses the lawn, seeking out her sisters, is cute as hell. And though she's clearly oblivious to it, heads *are* turning as she passes by. They probably always have, she has just been too busy playing Ugly Manatee to her mother's Self-Indulgent Mermaid to notice.

"I'll still have the last laugh." Anastasia shifts to stand beside me, gazing after her daughter. "All the baked goods are organic, vegan, and gluten-free. But I'm not going to tell Penny until she and the girls are finished with their cupcakes."

"Diabolical," I say, playing along, more open to giving this woman a chance than I was before. Nothing can make up for the fact that she's marrying her daughter's ex-boyfriend. But love goes a long way, and she does seem to love her daughters, a suspicion she confirms when she says—

"Just so you know, Penny doesn't have access to any of my money. She's sent back every check I've mailed for the past two years and insisted on being cut out of my will. I didn't want to do it, but after the pain I caused her, I felt I had to honor her wishes."

I nod slowly, torn between being glad to see Anastasia trying to protect her daughter from a potential gold digger and pissed that she assumes that's the only way Penny could end up with a devoted partner. "Penny started out working for me as my personal assistant. I'm well aware of her financial situation."

"Is that so? And what do you do, Mr. Prince?"

"Business consulting," I say, sticking to the lie Penny and I decided upon. "But I used to work on Wall Street where I had a successful career as a corporate scumbag. I won't be looking for a house in the Hamptons anytime soon, but I've done well. I don't need to date women for their money."

"Then I apologize," she says, inclining her head. "I hope you won't hold this conversation against me."

"You shouldn't apologize to me. You should apologize to her." I turn to watch as Penny, Edna, and Francis tiptoe toward the dessert table, pausing to whisper to each other every few steps, clearly having turned the quest for cupcakes into a game. My lips curve even as my chest begins to ache.

She's so good with them, and they clearly adore their big sister. It's pure bullshit that Anastasia threatened to keep them apart if Penny didn't show up for this farce of a wedding.

The memory makes my voice cooler as I add, "She's one of the sweetest, sincerest, funniest people I've ever met. But you almost broke her. And that would have been a fucking shame. The world needs people like Penny."

Anastasia nods. “I know. And believe it or not, I know my daughter. When we were younger, we were like sisters.” Her voice softens. “Or best friends. I know I leaned on her more than a mother should, but I was a teenager when I got pregnant and I had no support from Penny’s father or my family.”

She sighs. “I should have been the grown-up, but I wasn’t ready. And no matter what kind of support I needed, Penny was always there, offering help before I could think to ask. Sometimes I think she raised me as much as the other way around. That’s why it’s been so hard, to be shut out of her life for the past few years.”

I turn to face her. “And what exactly did you expect?”

She meets my accusing gaze with a level one. “Mistakes were made and the situation was mishandled, but you can’t help who you love, Mr. Prince. Surely you can understand that if you’re as in love with my daughter as you claim to be.”

Before I can assure her that I am head over heels for Penny, that I would kill for her happiness and die for another chance to be buried balls deep in her incomparable pussy, one of the twins screams, “Help! Help! She can’t breathe! Penny can’t breathe!”

I spin to see Edna jumping up and down on the grass, pointing at Penny, whose fingers are wrapped around her throat in the universal sign for choking. Francis is behind her, with her tiny arms wrapped around Penny’s waist, but she’s too short to be in the right position for the Heimlich maneuver and Penny’s face is already bright red, hedging toward blue.

Panic sending my pulse rocketing into overdrive, I sprint across the grass, reaching Penny’s side long before any of the other guests can get close.

“Move, Francis,” I bark, grateful when the little girl quickly steps away.

A moment later, I’m behind Penny with my fist positioned just below her diaphragm, shoving sharply in and up with my other hand. Penny’s lips part with a “humph” as the blockage—something small that flashes in the sun as it arches through the air—is expelled onto the grass.

Startled cries erupt from the crowd that has gathered to observe the drama and one of the other kids attending the party shouts, “Ew, gross!” but I’m too worried about Penny to waste time glaring at the brat.

She pulls in a ragged breath and sags back against me.

“Are you okay?” I run a shaking hand up and down her torso, needing to feel her belly rise and fall to prove to myself that she’s breathing. “Penny? Are you all right? Talk to me.”

“I’m all right.” She turns in my arms, shaking as hard as I am. “But I thought I was going to die, Bash. I really did. I couldn’t breathe.”

“I know.” My heart is still slamming against my ribs as I cup her face in my hands. “You scared the shit out of me. What happened?”

She blinks fast. “I don’t know. One second the girls and I were having a cupcake-eating race and the next there was something hard in my throat and I couldn’t get it out. There must have been something inside the cake.”

“It’s the bride-to-be cupcake.” Edna holds up a soggy-crumbs-covered ring between Penny and me. “It means you’re going to be the next person to get married, Penny! You’re so lucky!”

Penny casts an incredulous glance at the gaudy ring with the oversized fake diamond. “That’s me, all right. Lucky.” Her eyes return to mine and that’s all it takes to set us off.

We both burst out laughing, giggling so hard that Penny’s face turns red again and my stomach starts to hurt, but even though we’ve attracted a crowd of curious onlookers, I can’t seem to stop. Every time I think I’m regaining control, I catch her gaze again and I’m off.

We laugh until there are tears in our eyes and we're leaning on each other for support to keep from falling to the grass, and by the time we finally get a hold of ourselves, I feel like I've run a half marathon.

"Jesus, that was painful," I breathe, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I'm glad you're not dead, you crazy person."

"Me too." She smiles up at me. "Thanks for saving my life."

"Anytime, buttercup." I brush a stray lock of hair tenderly from her face, not wanting to think about a world without Penny in it, and then she says—

"I love you, Bash."

—and without thinking of the pretend or the reason I'm here or anything but this woman and how much I need her to keep living and breathing, I say—

"I love you, too, Penny."

And for a second time stops and so does my heart and I wonder if maybe....

Just maybe...

Then I see Penny's eyes flicker to my left.

I shift my head to catch a glimpse of Phillip's sun-streaked blond locks fluttering in the wind, and with a pang of displeasure I remember this is all pretend. Pretend for the benefit of a turd burglar, who looks none-too-happy when I pull Penny in for a hug amidst clapping from the assembled guests.

And then someone at the back of the crowd calls for me to, "Put a ring on it, son!" and Phillip's cold glare turns arctic.

"I just washed it off with water!" Edna says, bouncing up and down with the gigantic ring held over her head. "It doesn't have crumbs on it anymore! Put it on her finger, Bash!"

"Oh my God," Penny mumbles against my chest, shoulders beginning to shake all over again.

I nod seriously as I scan the smiling crowd, deliberately avoiding Phillip's gaze. "All right. I guess when the perfect moment presents itself, you just have to go for it."

"No way." Penny squirms free of my embrace, laughing as she points a firm finger at my chest. "Don't you dare, Bash. Don't you dare propose with the ring that almost choked me to death."

"But it's so romantic," I tease, taking the ring from Edna. "It's probably got trace amounts of your DNA lodged in the prongs from where it scraped against your throat on the way out."

"Ew. No! That's terrible!" Penny laughs harder before pulling in a deep breath and forcing her eyes wide. "I'm serious, Bash. Don't! This is not the story I want to tell our grandchildren. It's too embarrassing."

"She's right," Francis says seriously. "It was scary and the sound she made when it came out was gross."

"Penny couldn't be gross if she tried," I say, but I go ahead and tuck the ring into the front pocket of my pants. "But since it's two against one..."

"Two against two." Edna takes my hand, smiling up at me as she adds, "And I almost never vote against Francis."

"Well, thank you." My fingers curl around her little palm as I nod, touched by her support. "I appreciate that, Edna."

"You can call me Eddie, all my friends do."

"All right, Eddie. But I think I'd better listen to Penny. Since she's the one I want to say yes."

“I’ll say yes.” Penny threads her fingers through my free hand. The laughter has vanished from her expression and she’s gazing up at me like I’m the only thing she needs in the entire world. “Offer me any ring that hasn’t been down my throat and I’m yours, Snuggle Butt. For life.”

Eddie launches into peals of laughter. “Snuggle Butt!”

Penny’s lips curve, but the shine in her eyes doesn’t dim. She’s still looking at me like she can’t wait to be mine, and God help me, at this moment I think I would like that. I would like to know that these fingers are going to stay twined through mine and that my hands won’t just be the first to touch her since Phillip broke her heart but the last.

But before I can pull her back into my arms and whisper something crazy that I can’t take back, bells tinkle from the direction of the tables behind us and a deep baritone voice announces over the loudspeaker, “Ladies and gentlemen, if you’ll please take your seats, luncheon is served.”

And then Penny and I are being hustled toward the tables by Edna and Francis, who take the liberty of swapping our placards with the two children seated next to them. We end up eating at the children’s table, surrounded by kids moaning about yucky salmon, tweens making fart jokes, and two frail looking teenagers making uncomfortable eyes at each other, but I don’t mind. I’m grateful for the distraction. I clearly need a reminder about the difference between reality and fantasy.

The reality is that Penny is my employee, my friend, and a woman who has no interest in a relationship beyond that. That was the whole point of getting involved with me. She doesn’t want a bunch of emotional baggage; she just wants to be close to someone again.

Physically close.

This is about sex, plain and simple. And suddenly I’m feeling more like a real gigolo than I ever have before.

“You going to eat your roll?” Eddie asks, reaching over to bury her little finger in the golden ball on my bread plate.

“Nope,” I say. “It’s all yours, Ed. Enjoy.” I feel a hand on my thigh and turn to see Penny smiling up at me. She mouths, “Thank you,” and passes her roll from her plate to mine.

But I don’t want her roll. I’m not sure what I want, but it’s not that roll.

Unfortunately, it’s also probably not something Penny is willing to give, which means this has to stop. Penny and I can enjoy the rest of this weekend, fuck each other until we’ve built up some good memories for a few hundred solo flights, and then things will go back to normal.

We’ll go back to the city, back to our separate lives, and I’ll eventually forget that, for a day or two, I was pretty sure I was falling in love with my best friend.

CHAPTER THIRTY

As the party winds to a close two hours later, we say our goodbyes to Edna and Francis, thank Anastasia for a lovely time, and wander toward the car.

As soon as we're safely inside, Penny throws her arms around my neck and squeals, "We did it! Oh my God, it was so perfect, Bash, I can hardly believe it. Phillip bought it hook, line, and sinker. Did you see the way he pouted all the way through lunch?"

"I saw." I hug her close, ignoring the sad, churning feeling in my gut. There's no sense in telling Penny about my decision to end the sexual part of our relationship as soon as we leave Long Island, not when she's happy and celebrating her well-earned victory.

This is what I'm here to deliver, a positive revenge experience for a woman whose old lover did her wrong. I should be celebrating right along with her not wallowing in my own current lover angst.

In an effort to be more festive, I suggest, "Want to head into town, grab a gallon of ice cream, and get crazy with some mint chocolate chip in honor of your success?"

"No." She eases back into her seat but keeps her arms looped around my neck. The look in her eyes is pure, sexy trouble. "I would rather get crazy with you. I've never gotten naked with a hero before."

"I'm not a hero," I say, even as I twist the key in the ignition, ready to be back at the cottage, naked with Penny, ten minutes ago. If I've only got a few more days, I'm going to make the most of every minute I have alone with her. "There were two doctors there today. If I hadn't gotten to you first, one of them would have done the honors."

"Bash, you saved my life." She twines her fingers through mine as I steer the car up the paved road leading away from the bay. "Maybe that's not a big deal to you, but it is to me."

"Of course it's a big deal. I can't imagine life without you." I squeeze her hand. "Actually, that's a lie. I can imagine it, and I don't like it. You're no longer allowed to die. I'm adding that to your contract."

"Sounds good," she says with a happy sigh. "We make a good team."

"The best," I agree, ignoring the pang in my chest as I add, "You were perfect today. Nailed it and then some. If I didn't know better, I would think we really were going to be the next couple down the aisle."

"I know." Her feet tap happily on the floor as she giggles. "I'm never going to forget the look on Phillip's face after I said that I loved you. He looked like someone had stolen his balloon and popped it right in front of him."

And I'm never going to forget the way the lines blurred when you said those three little words.

"And I owe it all to you," she continues. "Thank you for the best time I've had in ages." Leaning in, she presses a kiss to my cheek before whispering against my skin, "Now get us home fast, Snuggle Butt. I can't wait to be with you. I've been daydreaming about your cock all day."

Focusing on her sexy words, and the hard-on they inspire, I reach over, sliding her dress high enough for me to get a hand wrapped around her bare thigh. "Your wish is my command, Googly Bear."

Screw feelings. There will be time for feelings and regrets later, after I've had Penny against the wall and on the floor and bent over the back of the couch with her beautiful ass in the air.

I push the speed limit all the way back to the cottage and as soon as I cut the engine, Penny and I are out of the car, racing each other up the steps.

The moment the door closes behind us, we crash into each other, mouths meeting with an urgency worthy of two shipwreck victims marooned on separate islands. My tongue sweeps between her lips and her fingers claw into my shoulders, and within seconds, I've got her panties off and her legs hitched around my waist as I press her back against the wall.

"Yes, now," she says in a pained, breathless voice. Her hand dips between us, reaching for the close of my pants, brushing against where I'm hard enough to shatter glass. "I need you. Right now. Slow later."

"I don't want to hurt you." I groan as my hand finds the heaven between her legs and my fingers slide through where she's already weeping for me. "Fuck, Penny. You're so wet."

"I told you, I've been thinking about this all day." She drives her fingers into my hair, nails scratching my scalp as she bucks against my hand. "About you and me and how perfect it is. How incredible it feels to have you inside me." Her breath rushes out across my lips, smelling like the strawberries and champagne she had for dessert, making me ache for another taste of her. "Please, Bash, I—"

Her words become a moan as I cover her mouth with mine and slide my tongue back between her lips. She's so sweet, the sweetest thing I've ever tasted and it has nothing to do with what she had for dessert. It's all her, all Penny, and with every kiss, I'm getting more addicted to her taste, her touch, and the way she fits against me with such fucking perfection.

But I've only got a few more days to get my fix and I don't intend to rush a single minute of it.

I'm going to fuck her against this wall, but first, I'm going to have her with my mouth, until the evidence of how much she wants me is dripping down my chin and I can't think about anything but how good it is to know I'm about to be buried balls deep in her tight little pussy.

"Arms up," I order as I set her back on her feet and reach for the bottom of her dress. "I need to see what's mine." She obeys, proving she is mine, at least for tonight, and with a few swift movements I've disposed of her dress and the white strapless bra cradling her breasts.

"That's better. These should never be covered up when we're together." My teeth dig into my bottom lip as I cup her breasts in my hands, teasing my thumbs across her already erect nipples, cock jerking as her breath shudders out. "Now spread your legs and lean back."

"But Bash, I—"

"Not today, buttercup." I move one thumb to cover her lips even as I intensify the pressure on the nipple still trapped between my fingers. "Today, I'm in control and you're going to do what I tell you to do. And in exchange, I'm going to make you come until you can't remember your own name. Can you get on board with that?"

Her eyes hooded with desire, Penny nods as her tongue slips out to lave the pad of my thumb, making my jaw clench. I slip my thumb between her lips and she sucks me deep, her tongue working against my skin, mimicking the way it rolled against my cock yesterday in the shower. My dick swells with approval.

She's so insanely sexy, so ripe and ready for pleasure, and I can't wait to give her everything she's silently asking for.

"All right then, sweetheart." I pull my thumb from between her lips. "Then lean back and spread those pretty legs."

I step away, working the buttons on my shirt as she braces her hands on the wall and shifts her weight, sending her breasts tilting up toward me. Wearing nothing but those red heels and a

fuck-me expression, she's stunning.

And this is exactly what I needed, to take back control, to remember I'm not at the mercy of anyone or anything unless I allow myself to be.

I've spent the past two years with my heart stashed in a bulletproof case beneath my bed. I'm a Sex Without Feelings professional. I have a terminal degree in Casual Fucking, and from now on I'm going to make sure things stay casual.

Casual, but still hot as hell.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Wider.” I strip off my shirt, nodding my approval as Penny spreads her legs wide enough for me to see a hint of glistening pink between them. “Perfect. You’re fucking beautiful.”

My gaze sweeps up and down, from her kiss-swollen lips to her cherry-colored toes, as I do my best to commit this moment to memory. I want to remember the way she looks right now, with every inch of her on display just for me.

“Now I want you to make me a promise,” I move closer, bracing my palms on the wall on either side of her face.

“Anything,” she whispers, the word sending a jolt of electricity straight to my cock, confirming that it was in the best interest of my self-control to leave my pants on.

I reach down, taking her hands in mine and bringing them to her breasts. “I want you to touch yourself. Play with these beautiful tits while you rock against my face, but don’t let yourself come until I give you permission.”

“All right.” She cups her breasts, the sight of her fingers lightly squeezing her nipples enough to make my dick strain the close of my fly.

“Good girl.” I run my hands down the curve of her waist to squeeze her hips as I lean in for one last kiss. I fuck her mouth with my tongue, owning every inch of her sweet heat, silently promising that I’m going to do the same to her pussy.

I wait until her breath is coming fast and a soft whimper vibrates against my lips before I abandon her mouth for her throat, biting and laving at the elegant column of her neck. I kiss a path between her breasts, pausing to flick my tongue across her nipples, where her fingers are still obediently rolling and plucking, before moving lower. I circle the hollow of her navel with my tongue, nip the soft curve of her belly beneath, and then pause with my mouth hovering above the thatch of dark curls between her legs.

I open my mouth, warming her with my breath as I inhale the scent of her arousal. Today she has a light, sweetly pungent scent that reminds me of a sake factory I visited in Japan. Like fermenting fruit and sour apples and cool, clear water drying on wooden spoons. For a moment, I think that I would like a coffee table book filled with nothing but descriptions of the way Penny’s pussy smelled on any given day but push the thought aside before it can escape my lips. This isn’t the time for teasing or jokes. Teasing and jokes lead to laughing and feeling things, and right now, I just want to fuck.

Turning my head, I trace the seam of her thigh with my nose, my eyes closed as I memorize her scent. She smells like something new, yet ancient, something so mysterious I’m not sure I’ll ever understand it, yet so simple I feel like I’ve known it my entire life.

Like I’ve known *her* my entire life. Or maybe I’ve just been waiting to know her.

So much for fucking without feelings.

My lids open with a sigh, bringing me face to face with a pair of poorly tattooed manatee eyes. Mr. Whiskers. Fucking Mr. Whiskers.

It’s a terrible tattoo, but there’s no reason for her to be ashamed, or to hide her beautiful body and prettier heart because of something like this. This is only skin deep and Penny is so much more than skin.

On impulse I press a kiss to Mr. Whisker’s forehead, then to each of his poorly rendered tusks, moving back and forth until I’ve kissed every inch of ink from top to bottom. I’ve just

finished running my tongue along the curdled rose-petal of the manatee's creepy-looking tail when Penny whispers my name.

I lift my gaze, meeting her shining eyes, my breath catching.

She's looking at me the way she looked at me this afternoon, but now there isn't anyone else here to observe. There are no exes to make jealous, no mothers to manipulate, no one to fool or deceive. It's just her and me and those soft eyes that promise things no one else ever has.

Things like enough and safe and home. And maybe a little piece of forever.

"You're so beautiful." I lay my hand on her thigh, covering the tattoo, feeling the steady, urgent pulse of her blood beneath my fingers. "Don't ever doubt how beautiful you are. Every part, inside and out."

Her throat works as she swallows. "You make it seem so easy."

"It is easy. It's the truth."

"It feels like the truth," she whispers, brushing my hair from my forehead with gentle fingers. "When I'm with you."

"Then you should stay with me." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. But fuck it. I don't want to stop them. I don't want to stop this. I want more than a long weekend or a few months of casual sex and if I have my way, by the time Penny and I head home on Saturday, she'll want the same thing.

And there's no time like the present to start making my case.

Holding her gaze, I slide my hand between her thighs, urging her legs farther apart as I cup her ass. "You should also put your hands back on your breasts," I remind her. "I want to watch you touch yourself while I devour every inch of this beautiful pussy."

"Yes, sir," she says, making me hum low in my throat.

"I like that." I press a kiss to her damp curls as her fingers find her nipples. "I like it a lot."

"And I like tha—oh my God."

My tongue finds her clit, sending a shudder working through her as I lick and kiss and suck and tease. I make shameless love to her pussy, confessing all my secrets into the warm, wet, sweetness of her body. And it's about so much more than getting her off—though I do. Twice.

It's about breaking down walls and letting hearts out of boxes and throwing open curtains and letting the sun shine into all our dark, sad corners. And it's mind-blowing, bone-melting. It's been so long that I'd almost forgotten what it's like to fuck with feelings, forgotten the way they turn something good into something that can save the world.

Or maybe just a man.

By the time I stand, tearing at the close of my pants, I'm thinking of nothing but how much I need to be even closer to her, so close I forget that there was ever a time when she wasn't mine. I'm so far gone, so desperate to be inside her, that all thoughts of moving this to the bedroom have vanished.

The second my cock is free, I hitch Penny up around my waist and drive inside her, groaning as I push into where she's molten hot and still pulsing from the second time I made her come on my mouth. And she's paradise, perfection, everything I've ever wanted and everything I've been too stupid to want.

As I drive deep into her welcoming body, I'm filled with the explosive surety that this is where I'm meant to be. Right here with her because nothing else matters the way this matters.

She sobs against my neck, wrapping her arms and legs around me so tight I can feel the echo of her heartbeat in my chest. "I love this. I love this so much."

"Me too. It's so good with you. So perfect." I drive between her legs, fucking her hard and

fast, unable to take things slow, no matter how much I want to make it last. But I'm already too far gone, desperate to come, to lose myself so deep inside of her she'll feel me for days.

The best I can hope for now is to hold on until I bring her over a third time.

"Are you going to come for me again?" I drag my teeth across the sensitive skin where her shoulder meets her neck, biting down as I feel her pussy tighten around me in response. "Are you going to come on my cock, baby?"

"Yes," she gasps, rocking against me, meeting me thrust for thrust. "I'm so close. God, it's so good."

I clench my jaw, fighting the wave of bliss bearing down on me, threatening to pull me under, refusing to come until I feel her go. I hitch one of her knees even higher and grab a fistful of her ass, leveraging her closer until I'm grinding against her clit at the end of every thrust and the air fills with the sounds of our joining.

Hot, sticky, urgent, wild sounds that make the pressure in my balls unbearable. I'm moments away from losing the fight against my own orgasm when her body locks down around me, squeezing my dick so tight I'm helpless to do anything but pin her to the wall with my last thrust and come like the world is ending.

I roar something unintelligible as my cock begins to jerk inside her pussy, throbbing against the entrance to her womb. I can feel the hard ring against the tip of me and for the first time in my life I'm keenly aware that, without the interference of the pills she takes every morning, we could be making a baby right now.

Surprisingly, the thought gets me off even harder.

I've never considered the prospect of getting a lover pregnant anything but terrifying—even with Rachael, I wasn't ready for baby makes three—but the thought of Penny big with my baby takes my orgasm to a completely new level. I imagine the way her breasts would swell along with her belly, her entire body transforming because of what we did together, and keep coming. Waves of bone-deep satisfaction surge through me until my knees go weak and I would have slid to the floor, taking Penny with me, without the wall there to hold me up.

Finally, my cock begins to still and the last of the tremors rocketing through me abate and I'm left clinging to Penny, heartbeat gradually slowing in the wake of our hottest fuck ever.

Maybe *the* hottest fuck ever though, at the moment, I'm too orgasm-stupid to make that kind of call.

"Wow," she finally says, her breath still coming faster against my cheek.

I make a too-satisfied-to-do-anything-but-grunt sound that Penny answers with a hum of approval. Usually, the exchange would make me smile. But there's nothing funny about the thoughts in my head right now, thoughts of taking Penny bare with no protection, no pills, nothing to stand in the way of getting her knocked up, from making her mine in the most primal, basic way.

Just imagining it is enough to get my blood pumping faster and my cock thickening again, two minutes post coming my brains out.

Clearly, I need an intervention.

Or, at least, some time to think.

Having more-than-friends feelings for Penny is one thing. Wanting to fuck a baby into her so the entire world will see she belongs to me is entirely too caveman for my liking. That's not who I am and not who I want to be. Considering becoming a dad should be something discussed rationally with the person you love, preferably long after you've said, "I do."

I've got to get out of here, away from Penny and the crazy-making lust spell she casts over

my body and get some perspective.

With one last kiss to her cheek, I pull out and set her feet back on the floor.

“I know you said no to ice cream.” I fight to keep my tone light as I pull my pants back up around my hips, not wanting Penny to have any clue I’m on the verge of a meltdown. No need to upset her with my crazy. “But the only thing that could make this afternoon better is an obscene amount of ice cream. I’m going to go kill a few cartons. Do you have any special requests?”

“No, but I’ll get dressed and come with,” she says, smiling dreamily up at me. “I don’t like the idea of being away from your cock for more than a few minutes at a time.”

“I don’t like that idea, either,” I say, thinking fast. “But I *do* like the idea of you relaxing in a bath while I hunt dessert. I think you deserve a little pampering after a job well done.”

Her brow furrows lightly. “Are you sure? I don’t need to be pampered.”

“I insist.” I kiss her forehead before moving away, grabbing my shirt from the floor as I head for the door. “It’s all part of the Magnificent Bastard customer service experience.”

I’ve already scooped the keys up in one hand and am reaching for the doorknob with the other, seconds from making my escape, when Penny calls out—

“Is everything all right, Bash?”

I turn back to her with what I hope is an easy grin. “Of course. Why wouldn’t it be? I just had a great day and a great fuck with one of my favorite people. Things couldn’t be better.”

She nods, but she doesn’t look convinced and the eyes that were so clear and open a few minutes ago are clouded. A part of me wants to turn around, carry her back into the bedroom, and kiss that vulnerable expression back onto her face, but the other voice, the “what the fuck is wrong with you” voice, is louder.

So instead, I wink and promise, “Be back soon.”

Closing the door, I hustle down the steps, trying not to think about how much my speed walk toward the car resembles running away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

From the text archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From Bash: *Hey, remember the other night when you said I didn't like being alone? Well, I just ended things with Christie and left halfway through our date because I'm so okay with being alone.*

Take that, Pickett.

Loner, out.

From Penny: *Christie, the woman who owns the bookstore?*

Bash: *The same. Christie with the sexy librarian thing going on and the amazing taste in grilled cheese condiments. But I left because it wasn't working and I am so INCREDIBLY OKAY with being alone.*

Penny: *This is the same Christie with a much younger brother she adopted after her parents died, right?*

The little boy you were supposed to meet this weekend?

Bash: *Your point?*

Penny: *No point. Just making sure I had the right woman.*

Bash: *Are you as bad a liar in real life as you are via text?*

Penny: *I'm not lying...*

I'm withholding.

There's a difference.

Bash: *You shouldn't withhold from your boss.*

I'm pretty sure that's illegal in a few states.

Probably New York.

Lots of things are illegal in New York that you wouldn't think are illegal. Like throwing a ball at someone's head for fun or walking around with an ice cream cone in your pocket.

Penny: **farting unicorn emoticon**

Bash: *I'm not that easily distracted. Though that's cute. I like unicorns, especially when they fart.*

What are you withholding?

Penny: **farting panda emoticon**

Bash: *So you think I shouldn't have called it off with Christie? Is that what you're implying with the farting animals?*

Penny: *I can't speak to that. I don't know Christie.*

Bash: *Just say it, Penny. Whatever it is. Say what you want to say.*

Penny: **heavy sigh**

Fine, but if you get pissy the way you did last time, I'm never telling you anything you don't want to hear ever again.

Deal?

Bash: *I've never been "pissy" in my life. I experience manly anger that arises from justifiable causes.*

But yes.

Okay...

If I had plans to be pissy, I'm canceling them now. I just want to hear the honest opinion of a friend.

Penny: *You don't like being alone.*

But you don't like being too close, either.

And maybe beautiful Christie, with her big brain, grilled cheese skills, sweet little brother, and complicated life that is just begging for a commitment was tempting you to let down your guard and....get close.

But close doesn't have to be bad, you know, Bash.

Maybe it might even be good for you. Some day. When the time and the woman are right.

I would just hate to see someone I care about, who I know is a kind, wonderful man, who also clearly needs people, spend the rest of his life in a series of superficial relationships and wonder why, when he's on his deathbed, his assistant is the only one who sends flowers.

Though I will. Send flowers. And hold your hand. And anything else you need.

Because you are worthy of that kind of loyalty and much more.

I just hope you know that.

The end.

Bash: *That was the longest text ever.*

But thank you.

If I'm on my deathbed, there's no hand I would rather hold.

And at least, that way I would get to meet you in person. :P

Penny: **farting starfish emoji**

Bash: *That's my favorite one yet.*

Night Penny.

And...thank you. Really.

Penny: *Good night, Bash. You're welcome.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

By the time I get back to the cottage an hour later—after a drive around Southampton that does very little to illuminate why I’ve suddenly gone full-on caveman—Penny is gone.

But there’s a note on the kitchen counter—

Bash,

The girls called and wanted me to meet them at the beach for a walk and some shell collecting. They were so pitiful I couldn’t say no.

I took one of the winery’s bikes and headed over to Sandcastles Park. I’ll bike back in an hour or two.

Call me if there’s anything you want me to pick up on the way.

Excited to see what flavors you chose!

Xo

Penny

Simultaneously disappointed and relieved—maybe enlightenment will come while I’m sitting on the porch alone eating ice cream—I resign myself to an afternoon of high fat intake and a pile of Men’s Health magazines I haven’t had the time to read.

The hours crawl by and Penny’s return time comes and goes with no sign of her. I go for a run, work my way through my trainer’s most grueling series of circuits using a pair of wrought iron turtles I steal from the cottage’s front garden as weights, and then undo all my good work by eating a second pint of chocolate covered cherry fudge dream for my evening meal. Huddling in my sweat-damp shirt, I spoon my dinner while watching the light fade until the tree limbs behind the cottage are shadowy fingers straining toward a sky they’ll never touch. With every hour that passes without Penny’s smile, her smell, her body warm and within potential-fucking distance, I grow increasingly depressed.

By six thirty, when I step out of the shower to find a text saying that she’s agreed to sleep over in a tent in her mother’s backyard tonight, I’m feeling low enough to text back a petulant—

But what about Phillip?

Aren’t you worried he’ll see you there and assume there’s trouble in paradise? Why would a woman as “in love” as you are want to spend the night camping with two eight-year-olds, instead of at home with her sexy almost-fiancé?

Penny: Phillip and Mom are out having dinner with friends. They don’t even know I’m here and we’ll be asleep by the time they get back. Nanny Helms has promised to keep the overnight a secret and help me sneak my bike out of the golf cart garage in the morning.

I think it’s important that I stay.

I don’t know if it’s the wedding or the fact that they haven’t seen me in a few weeks, but the girls are being pretty clingy. I think they need a night where I put them first. A little spoiling from their big sister, you know?

But I’m sorry to leave you there alone with all that ice cream.

Forgive me?

Frowning, I text back, *Of course. Nothing to forgive. Tell the girls hello for me. Hope you all have a wonderful time.*

And I do. I hope they have a wonderful time.

Without me. While I sit here alone, wondering if Penny is really doing this for the girls or

because I ran like a fucking coward the moment things between us got heavy.

I spend the night tossing and turning in sheets that smell of Penny and wake up determined to un-fuck things.

I still don't know why I'm running hot and cold or what it means that I'm dying to get a woman pregnant after years of dreading that outcome with the same fervor I dread a case of chlamydia or the inevitable rise of a super-flu that will turn New York City into a snotty breeding ground for death, but I know I don't want to spend another of what might be my few remaining nights with Penny alone.

When my phone dings at eight fifteen and a text pops up from Penny asking if I want to meet for brunch at the Fiddling Crabs, I can't text back—*hell yes, I'm starving*—fast enough.

I type the address into my phone, promise to meet Penny there at nine and practically sprint to the shower. Thirty-five minutes later, I'm clean, wearing a Hamptons-approved uniform of khaki shorts and a designer blue polo and swinging into the Fiddling Crabs to learn that Penny, *and guests*, have already been seated at a table for five near the windows.

Francis and Eddie wave enthusiastically as I cross the restaurant while an older woman with her gray hair pulled into a braid seated next to Penny—Nanny Helms, I presume—glares at me like I just farted in church. For her part, Penny looks happy but tired, and... guarded.

Her gaze, as she lifts a hand in greeting, is warm but not *too* warm, and my hunch that she was using the twins as an excuse to avoid spending the night with me is confirmed. I am in the doghouse and likely to stay there until I do something to make up for making love and then making tracks.

With so many witnesses, there won't be a chance to apologize during brunch, but at least, I'm being offered a foot in the door to Penny's good graces.

Determined to make the most of it, I force a big grin for the table at large.

"Hello, ladies." I lean down to peck Penny gently on the cheek, hoping she can feel the "let's make up" vibe in my kiss. "I'm not sure what I did to earn four beautiful dates for breakfast, but I'll take it."

Nanny Helm's lips prune in response, Francis rolls her eyes, and Eddie laughs and says, "You sound like our dad. He's soooooo cheesy."

"Oh hush," Penny says as I slide into the seat beside her. "Daddy Frank is the sweetest man in the world."

"I know." Francis nods, sending her brown ponytail bouncing. "But he's also cheesy. You should see him with Kate. All they do is make melty, gooey eyes at each other all day long."

"And say gross love stuff." Eddie crosses her eyes and sticks out her tongue.

"The girls' dad remarried last year," Penny offers for my benefit. "Kate is their new stepmom, who is also very sweet. They spend holidays with them in L.A. Now stop that!" She reaches out, ruffling Eddie's hair until her little sister uncrosses her eyes. "Your face will stick that way and then you'll be sorry you made fun of people who are in love."

"Gross." Francis wrinkles her nose. "I'm never going to fall in love. I'm going to become a botanist and study the Amazonian rain forest."

"If it isn't deforested by the time you're grown," Nanny Helms says in a voice as dour as her somber face. "Current projections aren't good. Conservation efforts aren't as aggressive as they should be."

"That's why I don't eat meat," Francis said, picking up her menu. "Cattle ranching is the number one cause of deforestation."

Eddie casts a mournful glance my way. "I like meat, but we hardly ever have it. It's all fish

all the time. Or quinoa.”

“Or egg white omelets,” Francis says with a heavy sigh. “I’m going to turn into an egg white if I have to eat anymore. Can’t we have pancakes, Nanny? Just this once?”

“Your mother said no sugar today. Not if you want cake at the wedding.” Nanny Helms sniffs critically though I’m not sure if it’s Anastasia’s no-sugar policy or the girls’ whines in response to her announcement that displeases her.

Probably both. She seems like a person who is displeased by a number of things.

From there, the discussion turns to what the girls are allowed to have for breakfast, whether or not they’re too old to be forced to order from the children’s menu, and what to do with the rest of the day.

By the time my coffee and OJ are delivered, it’s become clear that Penny has promised herself to the twins until the bachelorette party tonight. Which means odds of a proper reconciliation between Penny and me, the kind that involves her coming on my cock multiple times while I assure her I’ll never fuck and dash again, look less than promising.

I’m going to have to take my opportunity to apologize where I can get it.

So when Penny gets up to use the restroom halfway through the meal, I wait a few moments and follow, lurking in wait behind a wooden statue of two fiddling crabs in the hallway outside the ladies’ room until she emerges.

“Hey.” I slide from my hiding place, startling Penny enough to make her jump.

“Oh my God.” Her hand flies to her chest with a breathy laugh. “You scared me. What were you doing back there?”

“Lurking,” I say, with a reconciliatory smile. “I was hoping for a private moment to say I’m sorry.”

Her brow furrows as she blinks up at me. “For what?”

“For yesterday.” I angle my body closer to the wall as a pack of giggling pre-teen girls smelling of sunscreen and strawberry bubblegum surge past us toward the bathroom.

Penny shifts out of the way, too, casting a glance over my shoulder toward our table as we move. “Yesterday? Yesterday was great.” Her attention returns to me with a puzzled smile. “Wasn’t it?”

“Well, yeah. Yes. It was.” I press my lips together and rub them side to side as I study Penny’s face, looking for signs that she’s hiding her feelings. But her smile is warm and transparent.

Could I have been reading angst into a situation where none exists?

At least on her side?

“But, well, I—” I break off with a nervous laugh. “I mean, after the—”

“If anyone should be apologizing, it’s me,” she cuts in, tugging the elastic from her hair and smoothing it back into a fresh floppy bun.

I realize I’ve grown fond of that bun. I love her hair long and loose, but there’s something artlessly elegant about all that hair piled into a silky nest atop her head. And it bares her neck. Her beautiful, sweet-smelling neck that I could be kissing right now if I had stayed put after taking her against the wall.

“I feel terrible about leaving you on your own,” she continues. “If it makes you feel any better, my air mattress deflated sometime during the night and I woke up freezing with my back so sore I could barely move. Eddie had to push me into a seated position and Francis decided I’m old before my time and need to take up Tai Chi or Hatha Yoga or some kind of ‘old person’s exercise.’ Her words.”

“She’s a character,” I say, laughing. “But no, that doesn’t make me feel better.” I tuck a lock of hair she’s missed behind her ear, grateful for the excuse to touch her. “I could give you a massage later if we sneak away from the rest of the group a little early. I’m pretty good with my hands.”

“I know you are,” she says, eyes twinkling. “And you’re sweet. But I promised the girls they could have me until I need to run back to the cottage to get dressed.” Her forehead wrinkles. “I know they can be a little obnoxious, but they’re my sisters and in a few weeks, I won’t see them much. They’ll be at their dad’s house for the entire summer this year.”

“Okay. Sure. Sounds great.” I nod with more enthusiasm than I feel. “Then group fun day it is.”

“Great,” she says, beaming. “Thank you.”

She leans in for a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. The kiss is nice, but it’s not the kind of kiss I want and it’s over way too soon. Before I can get my arms all the way around her, she has already pulled away.

“Just embrace the crazy and you’ll have a great time.” She turns to go, but stops and spins back to me, adding beneath her breath, “And ignore Nanny Helms. She’s always like this when she meets someone new. It’s not personal. She’ll warm up to you. By the end of the day, she’ll be offering to mend your socks and telling you all her favorite fart jokes.”

I arch a wry brow. “Well, you know how much I love socks. And fart jokes.”

Penny’s eyes narrow as she shakes her head. “Oh, don’t even try. Don’t even try to play it cool with me, Prince. I know better. My farting emoji collection was one-fifth the size before I met you.”

I grin. “I’m a bad influence.”

“Clearly,” she says, lips quirking.

My throat goes tight. I want to say something about there being a difference between being a fun kind of bad influence and the sort of man who runs from his feelings. Even if she’s fine with the way things went down yesterday, I want her to know that *I know* that I fucked up.

And that I don’t plan on fucking up again.

But before I can find the words, she reaches out and loops her arm through mine.

“Come on.” She takes off across the faded carpet, leading the way back to our table. “We should finish up and take care of the check. We’ve got an appointment with a seamstress to measure the girls’ dolls for custom clothes in twenty minutes. Then we’re heading to a princess party at the new toy store and finishing up the girl-fest by getting our nails done.”

I swallow hard. “Sounds great.”

“You don’t have to come.” Penny chuckles. “If you fear that much exposure to the color pink, I completely understand.”

“I fear nothing,” I say, “except spending the day without you.”

Penny stumbles, but I shift my grip on her arm, catching her before she falls. Once she’s recovered her feet, she lifts her gaze to mine, studying me through narrowed eyes.

“What?” I ask, clearing my throat.

She shakes her head. “Nothing. I just…” Her tongue slips out to dampen her lips as she shakes her head again. “Just hope I won’t end up tripping all over myself at the party tonight. I’m such a klutz when I’m tired.”

“I could come with you. Ditch the stag party. I have no urge to hang out with Phillip and after all the exposure to estrogen today, I’ll be mostly girl anyway.”

She smiles. “You’ll never be mostly girl. And thank you, but—”

“Penny!” Eddie appears at her elbow. “Hurry up and finish your bagel or we’re going to be late.”

“But I’ll be fine,” Penny finishes before letting Eddie tow her away.

The rest of the day passes in a blur of little-girl-centered activities that are unexpectedly...pleasant.

Francis and Eddie are fun kids and the princess party features a pretty cutthroat cell-phone-photograph scavenger hunt. After years of undergrad scavenger hunts through the city, I’ve got the skills to lead our team to an easy victory over the competition, earning the twins a twenty-dollar gift certificate to their favorite bookstore and me honorary uncle status. Afterward, I sit between them at the nail salon and let them each pick out a color for me—Eddie on the left hand, Francis on the right. They choose pink with white hibiscus flowers and black with red skulls and giggle pretty much constantly while I’m getting manicured and Nanny Helms looks on with a healthy dose of judgment.

Despite Penny’s promises, the older woman hasn’t warmed up to me, but I don’t care. Penny’s smile as she sits at the pedicure station, watching Francis, Eddie, and me gossip while we get our nails done is worth every minute it will take me to get the nail polish off before the bachelor party.

And as we leave the salon, when she wraps her arm around my waist and says, “Thank you, Uncle Bash. They had an amazing time,” I realize that I had an amazing time, too.

Sharing Penny is almost as much fun as having Penny all to myself. It’s like watching a baseball game at the stadium instead of at home alone. Sometimes it’s nice to share your passion and enthusiasm for something you love with people who get where you’re coming from.

Something you love...

As Penny and I say our goodbyes and start back to the cottage, the words haunt me. We’re quiet on the drive. I don’t know what Penny’s thinking, but I’m thinking about that piece-of-forever feeling that almost brought me to my knees while I was buried inside her yesterday.

It isn’t what I felt back when Rachael and I were together, but Penny isn’t Rachael. She’s sweeter, deeper, and she just...gets me. With Penny, I never have to explain why I find something funny or hide my soft underbelly. Rachael wanted all alpha male all the time, but Penny accepts me for who I am, whether I’m taking control in the bedroom or making dumb jokes or getting my fingernails painted with her little sisters.

That means something. It means a lot and I intend to pay very close attention to the way I feel the next time I’m making love to this woman.

Hopefully, in the very near future...

As soon as we shut the door to the cottage behind us, I reach for her, pulling her close. She comes to me, but instead of wrapping her arms around my neck, she presses her palms flat against my chest, holding me at a distance.

“We don’t have time for this,” she whispers.

“I realize I’ve impressed you with my staying power, Miss Pickett, but I *am* capable of pulling off a quickie.” I press a kiss to her throat, where her pulse is already beating faster. “And don’t worry. You’ll still come at least twice.”

“I’m not worried,” she says, sounding worried. “But I promised my mother I wouldn’t be late. I’m helping set up the party games.”

I pull back, studying her face. Her gaze is on the clock above the stove and her thoughts apparently far from me, but still I ask, “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” she says, lips curving in a smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “Just have

a lot on my mind.”

“Like what? You should tell me.” I cup her cheek in my hand, fingers dipping into her soft hair. “Then I can have it on my mind and free up more room in yours.”

“I don’t think it works that way, Sebastian.” It’s the first time she’s said my full name in a while and I find I don’t like the sound of it on her lips. It sounds formal, distant, like she’s pushing me away with a word.

“But we should talk later,” she continues. “After the party. Do you want first shower or can I go ahead and jump in?”

I nod toward the other side of the cottage. “Go for it. I’ll probably just change. I showered this morning.”

“Okay, I’ll be quick.” She moves out of my arms, crossing the space without looking back over her shoulder. When she reaches the bathroom, she closes the door firmly behind her, making it clear I’m not invited in to chat while she gets ready the way I was yesterday.

I stand in the middle of the quaint room where I first made love to Penny, feeling alone even though she’s in the next room, fighting the ugly feeling that unless I do something soon, my new lover may become my ex-lover before the night is through.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

From the text archives of Sebastian “Bash” Prince and Penny Pickett

From Bash: *My client asked what your favorite flower was today and I realized I didn't know. It made me think I probably need to get some background information on my fake girlfriend.*

So what's the favorite flower, buttercup?

From Penny: *Stargazer lilies. Even though I'm allergic to them.*

Bash: *Tragic.*

Penny: *It really is. Ours is star-crossed, star-gazing love.*

Bash: *Lol. Favorite food?*

Penny: *As if you need to ask. Ice cream. Always and forever ice cream.*

Bash: *I really should have known that.*

Penny: *You really should have.*

Bash: *Favorite book, movie?*

Penny: *I have a hard time picking favorites with things like that, but I love anything sad with a happy ending.*

I like to have my heart broken a little before it's healed up again.

Bash: *Hmmm...*

Me too, I guess. Though I've never really thought about it that way before. I also enjoy films that mix jokes and blowing things up.

Penny: *Of course you do. It's the testosterone.*

Bash: *Guilty as charged. So what about music? Any guilty pleasures?*

Penny: *Ukulele. I can't get enough. Especially if there's a punk rock influence.*

Bash: *I think I just fell in love with you.*

Penny: *I figured it was only a matter of time.*

Bash: *Seriously, I love ukulele punk rock. I have every album Uke-clear Attack ever put out.*

Penny: *Me too! That's so incredibly weird.*

Bash: *Maybe we're soul mates.*

Penny: *Maybe. But if we are, you should probably know some of my uglier secrets, too.*

Bash: *Lay them on me. I can take it.*

Penny: *I'm afraid of birds. It's not a full-blown phobia anymore, but when I was little, I used to have a panic attack every time seagulls flew over my head on the beach.*

Bash: *I can see how birds could be scary. I mean, with all the feathers and those beady little alien eyes.*

Penny: *And the claws. Don't forget the creepy clawed feet.*

Bash: *Totally creepy. Agreed.
Any other dark secrets?*

Penny: *Not too many. Though I do have a hard time keeping my thoughts to myself sometimes.*

Bash: *No. No way. You?*

Penny: *You're so good at sarcasm. Like, a professional really. You ought to give workshops.*

Bash: *Thank you. But you know what they say—those who can't do, teach.*

Penny: *Indeed. And you certainly do.*

Bash: *I do.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The only thing worse than being forced to go to a bachelor party where you know no one except your maybe-soon-to-be-ex-lover's ex-boyfriend is being close enough to hear your maybe-soon-to-be-ex-lover and her friends laughing it up while you try to play nice with slimy Hollywood types and a dozen overgrown frat boys.

The bachelorette party is taking place out in the garden at Penny's childhood home while the bachelor party has been confined to the large basement, AKA Phillip's "man cave."

The moment I hear the term pass his lips, I decide to arrange to have myself shot if I ever have such a thing in my home. After the briefest "thanks for having me, congrats on your impending marriage" exchange possible, I disappear to the far corner of the room to play pool, as far from Phillip and the group of men watching the Yankee's season opener on the big screen as possible.

I've just beat my third douche named Matthew along with one Kip and a Baxter Sloan—two names, don't use just one or he'll remind you that there are two—and am considering throwing the next game to have an excuse to sneak outside to spy on Penny when Phillip materializes from the shadows, a blond nightmare in a salmon polo.

"I hear Francis and Edna had a great time with you today," he says, taking a pool cue from where they're mounted on the wall.

"They're easy to have fun with." I silently curse myself for waiting a few too many minutes to make my escape. "They're good kids."

"They are," Phillip says. "I don't see as much of them as I would like, what with filming in the city and flying to the west coast for auditions. But we're close. I've known them since they were babies. Penny and I used to take turns burping them when they were newborns."

"Bet you had no idea you would be their stepfather back then, huh?" I ask with a shit-eating grin. After Penny's performance yesterday, I'm feeling free to fuck with Phillip a little, now that's it's clear he has no power over his former flame.

He meets my shit-eating grin with a seemingly easy chuckle. "No, I didn't. But love tends to surprise you. I bet it was like that for you and Penny, right? I mean, she's that kind of girl."

"What kind?" I take my time racking the balls, hoping he'll get bored and leave before I'm forced to start a game with him.

"The kind that sneaks up on you," he says. "She's so friendly and easy to be around that you let your guard down. And then all of a sudden you realize that girl, the sweet, funny friend you used as an excuse to sit at Tawny Regis's lunch table, is the one you really want to be with." He smiles, his gaze going soft and distant as if he's watching sepia-colored memories of high school aged Penny flit by in his mind's eye.

"Not really," I say, determined to derail this trip down memory lane as fast as possible. I'm not going to fucking reminisce with him, and I'm sure as hell not going to admit that Penny snuck up on me, too. The only thing I want to share with this prick is a knuckle-crushing handshake when I tell him goodbye. "But I don't think it's appropriate for me to discuss how I fell for Penny with you. No offense."

"None taken." His green eyes hone back in on my face, serpent-like in the dim light above the pool table. "But you have to admit she's an acquired taste. I mean, the way she just says whatever she's thinking. It's like there's no filter."

“I find it refreshing,” I counter. “I’m pretty sick of all the bullshit in the world. It’s nice to be with someone who doesn’t traffic in it.”

He laughs beneath his breath. “That’s another way of looking at it. Though when you factor in the ornithophobia it’s easy to think there’s something more serious at work than eccentricity.” His grin hardens. “You know, if you didn’t know better.”

I nod, still smiling.

I see what he’s up to now. He thinks he can scare me away and prove that he knows Penny better than I do, all in one fell swoop. But if there’s going to be a “who knows Penny best” pissing contest, I’m going to win it.

I prop my cue on the floor and lean one hip against the pool table. “The fear of birds is pretty common, really. I was more concerned about her perpetually cold feet. It’s not normal to wear two pairs of socks to bed in the summertime.”

Phillip’s lips part, but I rush on before he can speak.

“And then there’s the ice cream addiction, but considering I suffer from the same weakness, I consider that one of the more adorable things about her. Kind of like the way she names things that get on her nerves, how she carries granola bars around in her purse to give to homeless people, and how excited she gets about camping out in the living room with her sisters.”

Phillip smiles. “I remember when we were in high school, one weekend we—”

“And then there’s her taste in entertainment,” I continue with a happy sigh. “I never thought I’d meet another person who loved ukulele punk rock as much as I do. Let alone another adult under the age of sixty who finds the Earth Channel riveting viewing. I can’t tell you how tired I was of watching reality show shit with my ex-girlfriend.”

“Well, Penny *is* a cultural anthropologist,” Phillip says dryly, his grip tightening on his pool cue.

“She is!” I agree enthusiastically. “And I love that about her. I love that she’s so interested in what makes humanity tick that she spent years studying it. I love how smart she is and compassionate and eager to learn new things.” I pause, holding his gaze, feeling like we should be clutching something more dangerous than pool sticks. Though if it comes to it, I’m confident in my ability to take him in cue-to-cue combat. “But my favorite thing about Penny is how ready she is to laugh.”

Phillip lifts his chin. “She does have a lovely laugh.”

“It’s more than that,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s not the sound or how pretty she is when she laughs, it’s the way she looks at the world.” I step closer, forcing him to tilt his head even farther back to maintain eye contact. “No matter how fucking low I am, she always knows the perfect thing to say to make me laugh. She gives me perspective and never lets me forget how lucky I am to have all the things I have. To have her.”

To have her.

It’s so true and suddenly I have to see her. I have to see her and tell her that we can talk when we get back to the cottage, but we’re not going to be talking about putting an early end to our friends with benefits status. We’re going to talk about how we move forward. Together. I don’t want to let Penny take a single step away from me. I want to keep her close and make her happy and memorize another few hundred things to love about her.

Because I do love her. I *love* her. Maybe I’m even *in love* with her.

I don’t know for sure, but I know I can’t stand to waste another second in Phillip the scum guzzler’s company.

“So if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go find that wonderful, one-of-a-kind person you were

too stupid to hold on to and show her how grateful I am to be the man in her life.”

I drop my stick onto the table, too eager to get to Penny to relish the stunned, angry expression on Phillip’s face.

Fuck, Phillip. I no longer give a shit about getting revenge on this bastard. All I care about is making sure I’m not the next name on the list of Men Dumb Enough to Let Penny Go.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

I've just stepped out onto the patio and started up the stairs toward the pool and the garden beyond when my phone begins to ring. I tug it free from my back pocket, hoping it will be Penny saying she's ready to leave, but it's a number I don't recognize. Local.

I tap the green button. "Bash speaking."

"I was hoping you would answer differently," a familiar, female voice says. "I wanted to see if you could say Magnificent Bastard Consulting without laughing." The woman chuckles. "I can't believe Penny had the guts to hire an escort, but good for her. Good for her."

"Who is this?" I pause at the top of the stairs, my stomach dropping.

Another throaty laugh drifts over the line. "Your future mother-in-law."

Fuck. Anastasia. Pretty much the last person I want knowing my secret identity. This could ruin everything, absolutely fucking everything.

"I'm calling for help with your client," she continues before I can respond. "She can't handle her liquor any better at twenty-five than she could at fifteen. Would you meet us in the library, please? Penny may need some help getting to the car and I haven't been able to carry her for quite some time."

"I'll be right there." I hang up without saying goodbye or offering any explanations.

I don't know how Anastasia found out about MB Consulting, but this isn't good. If she tells Phillip, Penny's victory will be ruined. It's already half screwed to hell—proving to her mother that she's moved on was almost as important to Penny as proving it to her ex. Judging by Phillip's behavior tonight, I seriously doubt Anastasia has spilled the beans yet, but if her pattern of ruining things for her daughter holds true, it's only a matter of time.

I have to do something, have to figure out a way to cut this off at the pass.

I'm so busy plotting what to say to Penny's mother that I pass the library by and have to retrace my steps. By the time I push through the heavy wooden door into a room that manages to be both grand and cozy at the same time, Anastasia is thumbing through a book in a leather armchair and Penny is nowhere to be seen.

"Where is she?" I turn, scanning the floor to ceiling bookshelves and the portrait wall covered in elegantly framed photographs.

"She went to the restroom," Anastasia says, smiling as she points toward the ceiling. "Upstairs because apparently I give her bladder performance anxiety." Her laughter is warm and rich, like a hug from an old friend. "That girl. I worry about her inability to hold her liquor, but she's funny when she's drunk."

"You don't have to worry about her tonight," I say. "I'll get her home safe and make sure she's hydrated."

"Is that one of the many services you provide?" She sets her book down and stands, crossing the room with her lavender dress swirling around her ankles. "Revenge against the people who wronged Penny and water and ibuprofen by the bed when she wakes up with a hangover?"

"Not usually, but Penny's special."

Anastasia arches a blond brow. "Is she?" She studies my face intently. "Does that mean you're sleeping with my daughter?"

My jaw clenches. I've worried about being exposed—that's one of the reasons I'm looking to hire new consultants like Aidan; I know I can't play the game myself forever—but this is

worse than I imagined. If only it had happened with any other woman. “That’s none of your business.”

“I think it is,” Anastasia counters. “Penny may be an adult, but if she’s hiring male prostitutes, as her mother, I have a right to be concerned. Cheyenne said you don’t have sex with your clients, but I’ve seen the way you look at my daughter. The way you touch her. And I’m not so sure she’s right about that.”

Cheyenne. Damn it. Social anxiety sufferer or not, I make a mental note to sue her for breach of our nondisclosure agreement. “Penny is my friend. She isn’t paying me to be here.”

“But you are here in your Magnificent Bastard capacity, correct?” She folds her arms across her chest. “I didn’t ask Penny. She doesn’t know that I’ve discovered what she’s up to. I thought it was best to get more information from the source before I confronted her with all of this.”

Thank God. Penny doesn’t know.

Which means there’s still a chance to un-fuck this whole thing.

“There’s nothing to confront her about,” I insist. “I’m here as her date. That’s it.”

“Right.” Anastasia’s lips twist. “Honestly, I don’t know whether to be amused or disturbed. With a company name like yours, at first, I was inclined to laugh, but Cheyenne assured me that you’re very good at your job.”

“Cheyenne should have kept her mouth shut. And if my lawyer has anything to say about it, she’s going to be sorry that she didn’t.”

Anastasia’s eyes narrow. “Right. I understand that you have a nondisclosure agreement. Cheyenne knew she was taking a risk, telling me who you really were, but she’s been my interior decorator for almost a year. She cares about the girls and me. When she saw the pictures from the luncheon on my profile page, she felt she had no choice but to warn me that you might be here to cause trouble.”

“I’m not,” I assure her. “Like I said, this is about being here for Penny. Nothing more.”

She tilts her chin, silently taking my measure. “So you aren’t planning to ruin Phillip? You don’t have a skeleton to pull out of his closet before the wedding on Saturday? Or maybe something for me, some punishment for stealing my daughter’s boyfriend?”

“She asked me not to,” I say, a sour taste filling my mouth. I curse myself for listening to Penny. I should have made sure I had something on both Anastasia and Phillip, just in case. It would be nice to have leverage at a moment like this.

Anastasia nods. “She’s kind. It’s one of the best, and worst, things about her.”

“I don’t see anything bad about being kind.”

“It makes her weak,” Anastasia says calmly. “She tries so hard to make everyone happy that she ends up turning her anger in on herself. If she doesn’t learn to fight back soon, she’ll spend the rest of her life getting shit on by the entire world.”

“Including the people who should have her back the most,” I counter, unable to hold my tongue. “You know who teaches us we’re worth standing up for, Anastasia? Our parents. By loving us and fighting for us before we’re capable of fighting for ourselves.”

She laughs, an uglier sound than her movie-star laugh from a few moments before. “You think I had parents like that? My father was a drunk, my mother was a coward, and both of them couldn’t wait to get rid of me. The second I started to show with Penny, they put my suitcase at the end of the driveway and changed the locks.” She taps two elegant fingers to the center of her chest. “I was seventeen and I had no one. Nothing. I had to fight for everything I have. No one handed me happiness or safety or a career or anything else. I had to fight for it all, all by myself.”

“But I’m assuming your mother didn’t fuck your boyfriend. Did she?” This woman needs a

wake-up call and it looks like I'm the only one around willing to give her one. "But you did. You did that to Penny, and then you insisted that she be in the wedding or you would cut her off from her sisters: two little girls she loves more than anything else in the world."

Anastasia shakes her head. "You don't—"

"What kind of mother does that?" I insist, cutting her off. "Hell, I wouldn't do half the things you've done to my worst enemy, let alone someone I'm supposed to care about. You aren't the victim anymore, Anastasia, your daughter is. And you're the one who's hurt her the most."

She crosses her arms, blinking fast as her eyes begin to shine. "I know I've hurt her. I never said I was going to win mother of the year."

"No, no one would ever make that mistake." I step closer, adding in a softer voice. "But you can show that you give a shit about her. Don't let on that you know about my consulting business or what I do for my clients. And don't tell Phillip. Let this play out the way it should. Let Penny have her victory and walk away with her head held high. You and Phillip still get your dream wedding, Penny gets to put this nightmare behind her—everyone wins and no one gets hurt more than they've been hurt already."

Her breath rushes out. "It's not that simple."

"Please," I say, ready to beg if that's the only way to keep her from ruining this for Penny. "Just do the right thing. For her. She deserves that much. She's not weak; she's a good person. One of the best I've ever met."

For a moment, Anastasia's mask slips and I see the woman beneath, the scared mother who knows that she's already lost her daughter in all the ways that matter. "But she can't forgive me, can she?" she asks in a small voice. "Not really. Not even Penny can forgive the things I've done."

I press my lips together. "I don't know. But if anyone—"

Before I can finish, the door opens and Nanny Helms sticks her head into the room. "Miss Ana, I—" She breaks off when she sees me, her gaze cooling as her eyes track back and forth between the two of us. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had company."

"Oh Bash isn't company, he's practically family." Anastasia laughs, that same, cozy fireside laugh from when I first stepped into the library, as if we haven't spent the past twenty minutes locked in verbal combat. "What is it, Nanny?"

"It's Miss Penny," Helms says, her tone still cautious and controlled. "I found her asleep on the bathroom floor upstairs."

"Is she okay?" I ask, pulse speeding.

"She's fine. I helped her into her bedroom and tucked her in." Nanny Helms holds up a calming hand, but I don't feel calmed. Somewhere up there Penny is passed out with no one watching over her.

"I'll go get her." I take a few steps toward the door, but stop when I realize I don't know where I'm going. I didn't get a tour of the upstairs rooms. I glance from Anastasia to Nanny Helms. "She shouldn't be alone. She's going to need someone to watch her while she sleeps and make sure she doesn't get sick."

"I'm going to sit with her," Nanny Helms says. "I just wanted to let Miss Ana know that Penny will be staying the night and that I'll be in her room instead of my own. I've left a note for the twins in case they wake up and need me for any reason."

"That sounds perfect. Thank you, Nanny," Anastasia says before I can say thanks, but no thanks, I would rather carry Penny to the car and take her back to the cottage with me. I know

she doesn't want to stay here, but I can't very well tell Anastasia that, not when I'm trying to get her to play nice for Penny's sake.

"Don't worry, we'll take good care of her." Anastasia moves toward the door as Nanny Helms disappears back into the hall outside. "I'm sure she'll call you in the morning as soon as she's awake."

"I'd like to see her now," I say, hands curling into fists at my sides, not liking this feeling, like Penny is slipping through my fingers. "I want to make sure she's okay."

"She's fine, Bash. She's sleeping." Anastasia pauses with her hand on the door handle and turns back to me. "But thank you for caring so much about her. And for the things you said. I think you're right. It's best to let this go, let things take their natural course and move on. I'll sign a nondisclosure agreement if you'd like, but I give you my word that I'll keep your secret and advise Cheyenne to do the same."

"Thank you." My shoulders relax away from my ears. "I appreciate it."

"I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it for Penny," she says standing up straighter. "I assume you can show yourself out. Unless you're interested in returning to the bachelor party?"

I shake my head. "Not even a little bit interested. But tell the douchebag you're marrying goodbye for me."

She smiles, a sad, tired smile that makes me think her life isn't as picture perfect as she would like people to believe. "I'll give Phillip the message."

Lifting one elegant arm, she points toward the wall filled with photographs. "Be sure to take a look at the pictures on the bottom left before you go. When she was little, Penny was Miss July for a baby calendar. I show the pictures to all her friends when they come over. She'll assume something is wrong if she finds out we were in the library and I didn't do my best to embarrass her."

"I'll take a look," I say. "And please call me if she wakes up and needs anything tonight. Sprite or aspirin or something for her stomach. Anything at all."

This time, her smile is warm. "I will. Good night, Sebastian."

"Good night." When she's gone, I turn, ambling past the framed photographs, scanning them until I find the ones Ana was talking about. When I do, I smile.

There, dressed in a lobster costume, is a cherub-faced baby with dark curls and a toothless smile who can only be baby Penny. In one, she's lying on the sand, caught mid-giggle as a wave crashes onto the shore. In another, she's sitting in a pot, brown eyes wide, as if contemplating her own mortality. And in the last, she's making her escape from the pot, claws reaching for the ground as the costume falls down around her legs, revealing her bare little bottom.

"Penny for your lobster pot," I whisper aloud, finally understanding her e-mail address. It's another piece of the Penny puzzle.

Another something to love about her, I think, my chest going tight.

This isn't how I wanted this night to end, with Penny out cold and me going home alone without having said any of the things I need to say. But I should know by now that life rarely works out as planned. If it did, there wouldn't be a need for Magnificent Bastard Consulting in the first place.

I stand staring at the pictures of the beautiful baby my beautiful girl used to be, foolishly hoping that Penny will wake up and come downstairs to look for me. But the house remains quiet and finally, I'm forced to admit defeat.

I let myself out the mammoth front doors and walk down the path leading to the circle drive where Penny and I parked just a few hours ago.

I pause, checking my watch. No, not even three hours.

Just a little over two, in fact.

My forehead bunches. How the hell did she get passed out drunk that fast?

I turn, gazing back up at the house, scanning the windows on the second floor. But there are no lights on and no movement behind the gauzy white curtains. Finally, after a long, tense moment in which my gut does its best to convince me I'm being watched, I shake my head and hurry toward the car.

I'm getting paranoid. Penny isn't trying to avoid me. We didn't have time to grab dinner before the party and now she's paying the price for drinking too much champagne on an empty stomach. That's all.

But as I start the car and drive away, I can't shake the feeling that I shouldn't be. I should be storming the castle and fighting for the princess asleep in her tower, not taking my sorry ass back to our romantic cottage alone.

But then, I don't have much experience playing Prince Charming.

"Prince Charming is a crock of shit," I whisper to the dash lights. "He doesn't exist."

But maybe he should. Maybe he fucking should.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

And now something from
Penny Elizabeth Pickett...

I'm watching him walk away, admiring how damned beautiful he is and the way he walks like he's never known what it feels like to be anything but perfectly at home in his own skin, when he turns and looks up, scanning the second-floor windows.

I freeze, terrified he's going to see me hiding behind the curtains and terrified that he won't. God, I don't want him to leave without me.

I don't want to spend the night alone in my childhood bedroom, haunted by the ghost of the girl I was back when I believed that the people I loved would never hurt me—at least, not on purpose. At least, not on purpose and then come back for seconds, blackmailing me into being the maid of honor at this nightmare wedding when I proved that I could take the “you're sleeping with my boyfriend” punch without hitting the mat.

I want to go back to the cottage with Bash and pretend we belong there. Pretend he's mine and I'm his and he's never going to run from me again.

Please, see me, I silently beg. See me and come back and make me stop pushing you away. Don't go. Please don't go.

But after a moment, Bash tilts his head down, casting his eyes in shadow, and starts toward the car. He walks faster than he did before as if he can't wait to get away from this house and all the crazy inside of it. The crazy fading movie star, the crazy douchebag ex-boyfriend, and the crazy client/assistant/friend he made the mistake of letting get too close.

I press my lips together, fighting the tears filling my eyes, blurring the taillights of the rental car as Bash drives away.

Too close. I knew better than to get too close. He always runs when he starts to feel something real. Every single time.

But I couldn't help myself. I couldn't help falling in love with him.

Looking back, I realize I've been falling in love with him a little bit every day for years. It wasn't watching him kiss my horrible, awful, very bad tattoo or the way he looked at me after we made love yesterday that started this; it was what sealed the deal. Sealed my fate. Sealed the slow, painful death of our friendship because there's no way I can go back to the way things used to be now that I know what it's like to make love to him.

To wake up next to him. To share meals and conversations and silly jokes and watch him get his fingernails painted because he knows it's making two little girls I love happy.

Today almost killed me—pretending I wasn't hurting, that I didn't miss him already. Fighting the urge to grab his big, stupid, beautiful shoulders and shake him until he realizes that when you find something like this you should run *toward* it, not away.

But shaking him wouldn't do any good and it wouldn't be fair.

I knew this was the way Bash conducted business. I knew it going in. I've read the “It's not you, it's me,” e-mails in his LetsGoLove account, the ones where he bid a gentle, kind goodbye to any woman who got within spitting distance of his heart. I've been the buddy he texts while he's walking away from another shot at something more, the hand he holds until he's out of firing range.

But I won't let things go that far with us. Not now.

For the first time in years, I'm free. When I ran into Phillip on my way to the bathroom tonight, I felt nothing at all. No hatred, no shame, no longing or regret, just a mild irritation that I was forced to chat with him for a few minutes while my bladder was uncomfortably full. The ugly spell he used to be able to cast over me has lost its power. I'm finally out of the dark shadow of one man who didn't want me and there's no way in hell I'm going to crawl into another.

Not even for a man as wonderful as Bash.

I'm finished with people who think I'm a stepping stone on the path to something better or a little mouse so desperate for love that she'll chase after it on her hands and knees. I'm not chasing or cowering or settling for being someone's second best ever again.

Bash might not love me the way I love him, but he gave me enough of a taste of what it feels like to have it all that I refuse to settle for less.

I don't want good enough or almost wonderful. I want love and happiness and safety and passion and a home in someone's arms. I want to feel like the most beautiful woman in the world because one man loves me so much he's gone blind to my flaws. And I want to make him feel the same way.

If Bash would let me, I know I could love him like that. Like a king, like the center of a world built for two.

I would love him until he's not afraid of close, until he knows that he can trust me with every bossy, sweet, silly, scared, passionate, perfectly damaged part of him. Until he realizes that the parts of himself he tries to hide are the parts that make me love him the most, the parts that make one strong, seemingly flawless man my perfect match. I see him, the *real* him, beneath the glossy, seductive Magnificent Bastard persona.

And I love him.

But I love myself, too. I love myself too much to chain my heart to a man who runs when things get heavy. After years of hiding from the world and my feelings and myself, I don't want to run. I want to live. Fully. Authentically. No holding back.

Which is why I have to tell Bash goodbye.

I should have told him it was over before we came to the party tonight, told him the friends with benefits situation is finished and that I'm handing in my notice, but I wasn't sure I would be able to hold it together. It's better to wait until we're back in the city, away from Mom and Phillip. And my sisters, who I know will be disappointed that "Uncle Bash" won't be coming for another visit.

Then I'll tell Bash that I'll stick with him until I train an assistant who will meet or exceed all of his expectations, thank him for all that he's done for me—for the job, the friendship, the intervention, and those moments when he showed me what it must feel like to be completely, beautifully loved—and move on with my life. I'm not sure what "my life" is going to look like post-Phillip, post-Bash, post The Years of Shame, but it will be mine and it will be real.

And maybe someday, when I meet the right man, it will have love in it.

Enough love to make up for how hard it's going to be to tell Bash goodbye.

With a final sigh, I turn away from the window, crawl into my twin bed, and close my eyes, willing myself to sleep and not to dream of things I'll never have.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Dear Penny,

I'm writing you this letter because you're not here to talk, and e-mail and texts just won't cut it for something like this.

I haven't written a real letter in years, but when I got back to the cottage and saw the stationery sitting on the desk in the bedroom, it seemed like the smart thing to do.

To write down all the things I'm thinking and feeling before they drive me crazy.

So here I go, writing down what I'm thinking right now, when I think of you, my friend.

My very good, very sweet, very beautiful friend...

I work on the letter for hours, writing like a man possessed, pouring out the story of the pissing contest with Phillip and how I realized that I loved her. Loved her more than Rachael, more than any of the girls I practiced loving in my early twenties when I was still too full of shit to love anyone but myself.

More than I've loved anyone in my entire life.

I write down all the things I would normally be too much of a guy—or too chicken shit—to say out loud. I confess that I'm scared, that I'm not sure I know how to do love the way I want to be able to do it for her, but that I promise to work at it like I've never worked at anything. I promise to try to be Prince Charming, to slay her dragons and be there to swoop her up onto my white horse and ride into the sunset on days when she needs swooping or sunsets or just feels like going for a ride.

And I put some dirty stuff in there, too, because that's all part of what I feel for Penny.

I tell her that I'm a slave to her body, that I'm going to dream about having her tonight, that I'm headed to bed jonesing for the taste of her pussy in my mouth, and fully expect to wake up hard and miserable because she's not next to me, warm and sweet and ready for me to fuck her into a few good-morning orgasms.

After five pages, my hand begins to cramp, but I push on, getting it all down while it's pressing up inside me, like lightning in a bottle, demanding to be free.

By the time I finally finish, it's almost midnight and the wind from earlier in the day is gone. There's no creaking from the trees out back or rushing outside the windows. The night birds in this part of the world are good at keeping quiet—the better to sneak up on the things that need to be killed and eaten—and the morning birds are still asleep.

As I flop into bed and turn out the lamp, the cottage is deathly still.

I lay in the dark for what seems like forever, staring up at the shadows on the ceiling, feeling like the last living person at the ends of the earth.

I feel alone. Powerfully, incredibly alone.

There are people I could call—Aidan, who never goes to sleep before two, and my mother the night owl—but I know no conversation with a friend or family member could ease this ache. This is the kind of loneliness that comes from being separated from the one you love. I haven't felt it since Rachael.

That should scare me, I guess, but it doesn't. It makes me even more determined not to fuck this up. First thing tomorrow, I'm going over there and telling Penny everything I wrote down.

Or maybe I'll give her the letter, let her read it all in blue ballpoint pen.

The thought makes my throat close up a little, but if I'm going to trust anyone with my emo, midnight feeling-ravings, it's going to be Penny.

I close my eyes, willing sleep to come so the night will pass faster and I'll be that much closer to getting back to her. But my brain keeps racing around in circles. Finally, it gets around to racing through a very detailed recollection of when Penny sucked my cock in the shower and I pull the crazy train in for a stop.

Slipping my hand beneath the waistband of my pajama pants, I visualize the way her breasts framed my cock as she knelt on the floor of the tub.

I see her pink lips parting as she takes my swollen head into her mouth, the way her eyes roll up to meet mine, sending an electric shock through my entire body. Her technique is stellar—she may have taken a sabbatical from sex, but she clearly knows what she's doing—but it isn't how deep she takes me or the perfect suction that makes it so hard not to come.

It's how close I feel to her, how much she clearly wants to please me, the way she moans in pleasure as I cradle her head in my hands and thrust between her pretty lips.

I'm not just fucking her mouth, I'm fucking *her*, my friend, my girl, this woman who makes me laugh and think and feel things. Feel so much. I feel so much that my imagination cuts into the memory, changing the course of past events.

This time, I don't come in her mouth or watch her swallow, her throat working with a raw sensuality that slays me. This time, I pull out and reach for her, drawing her up my body, hitching her legs around my waist so I can slide inside her.

And then I take her with all the passion and lust and feelings, too. I thrust in and out of her sweet, tight heat, murmuring things I haven't said to any woman—in bed or out of it. I tell her that I love her and that I need her and that she's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I tell her that I'm never going to let her go or let her down and when she comes I swear I can feel her pleasure like it's my own.

I keep my eyes closed tight, holding on to dream Penny as I come in my own hand, pretending that I'm with her.

And finally, finally, I'm able to sleep. To sleep and to slip almost seamlessly into a dream where Penny is resting in my arms.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

I arrive at the Pickett mansion just after eight o'clock the next morning, my palms sweating and my mouth filled with the sweet and sour taste of hope laced with fear, to learn that Penny has already left for the spa with her mother and sisters.

Apparently the mother-daughter spa day has been planned for weeks.

At least according to Nanny Helms, who barely opens the door wide enough to stick her face through the gap and deliver the bad news before slamming it closed again.

"But what about last night?" I ask, raising my voice to be heard through the thick wood. "How is she feeling? Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Helms calls from inside. "Come back at four o'clock and bring her dress for the rehearsal dinner and her overnight bag. I'm sure she'll want her own makeup and hair things."

"Why can't she come to the cottage to get dressed?" I demand, the ugly fear that Penny is trying to avoid me creeping back in on spider feet. "Ms. Helms? Hello? Ms. Helms?"

I wait, but there's no answer from the other side of the door and when I try the handle, I discover it's been locked.

I've been locked out. Like a vacuum cleaner salesman or a Jehovah's Witness or some creepy pizza delivery guy no one wants inside the house.

"Well, fuck me very much," I mutter beneath my breath as I spin away from the door, a scowl clawing at my forehead. I stride toward the car, typing in a text to Penny as I go.

Why didn't you tell me about the spa day?

I just got to your mom's place to check on you and you aren't here. Is something wrong? Are you okay?

I almost type—*Are we okay?*—but think better of it.

That's not something I want to get into via text, especially if Francis and Eddie are on Penny's phone scrolling through her emoticon selection the way they were several times yesterday.

Standing by the rental car in a patch of shade—the sun rose in a cloudless blue sky this morning and it's starting to feel like summer—I wait for a response that doesn't come. It doesn't come and doesn't come and doesn't come, and by noon, I'm pacing around the cottage, gnashing my teeth, fighting the urge to send Penny another half dozen texts of varying degrees of concerned, confused, and pissed the fuck off.

How dare she do this? How dare she freeze me out when all I want to do is tell her how much I love her?

Maybe because she knows you better than you know yourself, jackass.

Maybe she saw the writing on the wall and decided to run before you beat her to it.

"Fuck that," I growl, pointing an accusing finger at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. "That's not how it's going down. Not this time. No one's running."

Keep telling yourself that, the voice in my head sneers, and by the time you pull your head out of your ass she'll be so far gone you'll never catch up.

"I will catch up." I spin away from the mirror, deciding it's crazier to talk to myself while looking into my own eyes than while prowling around the cottage. "And when I do, I'm going to convince her to give this a shot," I tell the couch. "I'll tackle her to the sand and sit on her until

she hears me out if I have to.”

That’s one good thing about a wedding rehearsal on the beach. Lots of nice soft sand for tackling the woman you love to the ground and sitting on her.

You’re losing it, Prince. And once it’s lost, all you are is a loser.

Ignoring the voice of doom, I lace up my running shoes and head outside to pound pavement, deciding that’s a better use of my time than pounding my head against the wall. It’s only four more hours until I get to see Penny. No one ever went completely out of their goddamned mind in four hours.

But by the time four o’clock rolls around and I arrive back at the house to have Nanny Helms confiscate the items I’ve brought for Penny and disappear upstairs after encouraging me to, “join the rest of the wedding party on the veranda,” it’s all I can do not to push past her and charge up the stairs.

I’m about to make a break for it, in fact, when I see Francis and Eddie run past the landing in fluffy pink dresses with curlers in their hair and force myself to turn and walk to the back of the house. I emerge into the warm, late afternoon sun to see the cater waiters putting the finishing touches on the outdoor tables and the audio-visual team stretching a giant screen into place for the slideshow the girls helped put together for their mother. The patio is already buzzing with people, an excellent reminder that life doesn’t happen in a vacuum.

As much as I would like the world to consist of no one but Penny and me, at least for the next few hours, while I convince her she would be stupid not to fall in love with me, too, there are other pieces in play. Including two little girls who don’t need any more drama in their lives and a wedding party that needs to keep assuming that Penny and I are happily in love.

No matter what happens between us, I’m not going to ruin this for Penny. She deserves this victory lap, the chance to leave all the ugliness behind and emerge from the Hamptons a fully-blossomed swan.

“Swans don’t blossom, idiot,” I mutter as I collect a mojito from a passing waiter.

“What’s that?” The words are flat and tight, nothing like the smugly lilting tone of when we first met at the train station or last night at the bachelor party, but I recognize Phillip’s voice immediately.

I turn, forcing a smile. “Just wondering about the flowers. Flowers are my favorite part of a wedding. Except for the cake. Preferably with ice cream. Do you take your cake with ice cream? Or are you doing the sugar-free, gluten-free, joy-free thing along with your fiancée?”

Phillip frowns, shooting me a look that makes it clear he thinks I’m crazy, fucking with him, or both, but I don’t bother explaining myself. I let my eyes rake over him, observing the transformation of the groom-to-be.

For the first time, Phillip’s hair is looking less than perfect—flat on one side and fuzzy on the other—and the skin beneath his eyes is a sickly shade of yellow and blue. He looks like he’s hung over, or possibly still drunk from the night before, and when he smiles his lips are a shriveled scrap of stir-fried chicken tossed into the center of his face.

He looks sour. Like he’s curdling from the inside out.

If I weren’t feeling a little sour myself, I would take great pleasure in his apparent suffering. As it is, I can only manage mild gratification and a half-hearted wish that he throws up at some point during the evening’s festivities.

Judging by the way he’s sucking down his mojito, it’s a wish that has a decent chance of coming true.

“I’ve been thinking about what you said last night.” He takes another healthy swig of his

half-empty drink, bloodshot eyes watching me over the rim of the glass. “And maybe I’m not as stupid as you think I am.”

I cant my head to one side and then the other as if considering the point before pursing my lips. “No, I don’t think so. All signs point to stupid. But don’t worry about it.” I clap him on the shoulder, enjoying the way he flinches and his already tight jaw muscle flexes beneath his pallid skin. “You’re marrying a beautiful, rich, powerful woman, and all of your dreams are coming true. I’m sure you’re the happiest bastard on the block. Or on the street, since your wife owns the block, huh?” I laugh, pretending I don’t see the murder flashing behind Phillip’s eyes.

“We’ll see,” he says, shriveled meat lips curling. “We’ll see who’s laughing when it’s all over. You put on a good show, but you’re not fooling me, Prince. You don’t have what it takes to see this through.”

I narrow my eyes, wondering if Anastasia decided to tell him what I do for a living, after all, but quickly decide I don’t give a shit.

Who cares if he knows about Magnificent Bastard Consulting? My presence here today no longer has anything to do with work, a fact which will become abundantly apparent once I have the chance to talk to Penny. I’m going to convince her our pretend is the realest thing at this wedding rehearsal and then make out with her in every dark corner of the backyard until there is no shadowy nook we haven’t christened and no doubt in anyone’s mind that I am completely smitten with Penny Elizabeth Pickett.

“All right then, Phillip,” I say with a shrug. “I guess we’ll just have to agree to disagree.”

His green eyes glitter. “Sure. That’ll work. Until you have to admit you’ve failed.”

Before I can respond, Phillip has spun, nearly knocked over a waiter as he exchanges his empty drink for a full one, and disappeared into the house.

All around me, the other members of the wedding party—nearly a dozen beautiful women, many of whom I recognize from various movies and gossip magazines, and their dates, along with Phillip’s crew of Hollywood goons and overgrown fraternity brother types—quickly avert their eyes, pretending they weren’t observing the tense exchange between the groom and me. Luckily, the string quartet playing on the lawn below the patio fills the uneasy silence and soon conversations resume.

After securing a plate of appetizers from the buffet set up near the entrance to the house, I wander away from the main party, joining the ring bearer’s parents on the deck overlooking the beach, where the harried wedding planner is finalizing the arrangement of the chairs and altar for the rehearsal. I met George and Yvette and their son, Eli, at the luncheon. They run a local hair salon and are refreshingly normal compared to the Hollywood power players and trust fund babies that make up the rest of the wedding party.

We pass an easy half hour consuming tiny sandwiches, chatting in the sun, watching Eli roll down the grassy dune into the sand over and over again until the four-year-old oozes beach out of his pants pockets every time he stands up, and wait for the bride, maid of honor, and flower girls to appear. We wait and wait as the sun sinks lower in the sky and the air takes on a chill. Finally, just after five, Yvette excuses herself to take Eli to the bathroom before his practice run down the aisle and George and I go in hunt of fresh mojitos.

I’m circling around the dinner tables, aiming myself at a bored looking blond girl with a full tray of frosty glasses, when a loud honk of feedback sounds from the speakers near the slideshow screen.

A gasp ripples through the crowd, followed by nervous laughter as the audio-visual techie wrestling chords near his laptop shouts, “Sorry about that, folks. Having a little trouble with the

setup. Think I've found the right signal now."

The clusters of nicely dressed people are already returning to their conversations when Phillip's voice sounds from the speakers, begging someone to—"Please. Hear me out. Just give me five minutes. Please!" I turn, wondering what the hell is going on, to see a watery image flicker to life on the screen.

"Or maybe that's not my signal." The tech blinks, his brow furrowing.

There, ten feet tall, in living color, are Phillip and Penny. They're standing in the middle of a glassed-in room, and Phillip is clutching one of Penny's hands in both of his. She's wearing the white chiffon dress I brought from the cottage for her, the one that makes her look like a glamorous, curvy, nineteen fifties movie star, and Phillip is dressed in the same clothes he was wearing when he cornered me on the patio.

If this is something the twins recorded for their slideshow, they must have done it just a few minutes ago.

But even before Penny shakes her head and begins to speak, I have a feeling this has nothing to do with the wedding celebration.

"No, Phillip," she says, her voice strained. "This is insane! You're getting married in less than twenty-four hours. To my mother!"

"But I don't have to be," Phillip says, sending an uncomfortable murmur rippling through the crowd as more of the guests begin to realize something is wrong and the audio-visual guy taps frantically at his laptop, trying to put an end to the unplanned performance.

"Please, Penny, I know I screwed up," Phillip continues, clinging to her hand. "I never should have followed your mom into the pool house, let alone let things go this far. I never should have done anything to screw up what we had."

Penny shakes her head faster, clearly panicked. "Are you crazy? Is this some kind of a sick joke, because I don't—"

"It's not a joke. But yeah, maybe I am crazy." His voice breaks and he swallows with visible effort before adding, "Everyone thinks I've got it all, but I've got nothing. Seeing you again, I realize that without you, my life is empty. You're the only woman I've ever really loved, Penny. The only person who knows me, inside and out. And I can't stand the thought of spending another day, let alone the rest of my life, with anyone but you."

He falls to one knee, eliciting gasps and deep, disapproving grumbles from the guests glued to the unfolding drama, while Penny rears back in obvious shock, her expression telegraphing abject horror.

Unfortunately, Phillip is either too drunk or too arrogant to read her cues. He continues in an impassioned voice, worthy of an Emmy-nominated actor, "Penny Pickett, will you marry me? Please. Run away with me, Peeps. Right now. Tonight. And I swear I will spend the rest of my life making sure you aren't sorry you chose me to be your forever."

Penny's jaw drops, but before she can speak, the audio-visual guy finally pulls the plug on his malfunctioning computer. This time, the crowd moans in disappointment, a studio audience cheated out of the climactic moment in an especially riveting TV drama.

But this isn't television. This is real life and no matter how the rest of that scene plays out, real people are going to be hurt.

The thought has barely flitted through my mind when a blur of yellow chiffon streaks past in my peripheral vision. I shift my gaze to see Anastasia running out of the kitchen door at the far side of the house and dashing through the cherry trees shading that side of the estate. She stumbles, tumbling to the grass amidst the fallen pink petals, but quickly regains her balance,

swiping her arm across her face as she flees between the guest houses and down toward the beach.

She's clearly devastated and it doesn't take much imagination to guess why. She must have seen the video and heard her fiancé begging another woman—her daughter—to run away with him.

No matter what Anastasia did to Penny, or how selfish she clearly is, I feel bad for her. For all her bullshit, she seems to love Phillip and he just proved her a fool in the worst possible way, in front of fifty of her nearest and dearest, a flock of cater waiters, and one of the most expensive wedding planners in the tri-state area.

With a last glance at the house, where I hope Penny is telling Phillip “hell, no” without bothering with her Sunday manners, I turn and follow her mother down toward the beach.

Penny is the strong one, now. She's free of Phillip and whether or not she chooses to take it easy on him, she'll never let him hurt her again.

I'm not so sure about Anastasia's mental state and I'm not going to let anyone get hurt on my watch.

Unselfishly, my heart goes out to people who have been spectacularly dumped, even people like Penny's mom. Selfishly, I know that the sooner I can get Anastasia calmed down, the sooner Penny and I can get out of here and spend our last night in our cottage the way we should have spent every night—tangled up in each other with no plans of letting go.

CHAPTER FORTY

At the edge of a cluster of breeze-blocking dunes, I spot a pair of gold sandals. Not much farther on, gold bracelets are scattered between two mountains of sand like forgotten pirate treasure. And as I step out from between the dunes, I spot Anastasia's dress as it catches the wind and takes flight.

I freeze at the edge of where the sand becomes a carpet of white leading down to the ocean and watch the yellow chiffon spin toward the sky, twisting like a Chinese dragon in the breeze.

"Shit," I mutter, wincing as I glance back toward the ocean, already having a pretty good idea of what I'm going to see.

Sure enough, there's Anastasia wading into the frigid ocean in her strapless bra and white thong, charging into the waves like a mermaid determined to return to the sea. As I run toward the water, I vaguely recall part of that movie she was in, a similar scene in which a younger Anastasia was being forced to give up her human lover for the ocean.

But this isn't a movie. If she stays in for long she's going to risk hypothermia or worse—the water is barely sixty degrees this time of year—and Phillip isn't worth losing a finger over, let alone her life.

"Anastasia, wait!" I come to a stop at the edge of the waves, toeing off my shoes and praying she'll listen to sense. I've made a commitment to playing Prince Charming for Penny, but I really don't want to have to swim into the freezing ocean to rescue the wicked queen.

"Anastasia! It's too cold to go in the water!"

"Go away!" She glances over her shoulder, granting me a glimpse of the mascara streaking her cheeks. "Just go away."

"I can't." I raise my voice to be heard over the waves. "Not until you get out of the water. It's too cold. It's not safe."

"That's the whole point." She pulls in a ragged breath. "I'm going in and I'm never coming out. Never! And I don't care if the fish eat my body."

"Come on now," I cajole, the moment reminding me of when Penny was facedown on the couch. Seems like she came by her dramatic streak honestly. "He's not worth it, Ana. You know he's not."

"Goodbye, Sebastian." She crosses her arms at her chest, her teeth chattering as she points a finger back at the house. "Go tell Penny that I hope she and Phillip are very happy together. I won't bother them, or anyone else, ever again." Her face crumples on the last word as she swipes a trembling arm across her eyes.

"That's ridiculous, Anastasia." I peel off my socks and move closer to the water, close enough to feel how cold the wet sand is beneath my bare feet.

Fuck, I really don't want to have to perform a daring rescue, but it's starting to look like I won't have a choice. There's no one else on the beach and a glance back at the house shows that both trails leading down to the sand are still deserted.

"Penny doesn't want Phillip," I continue, willing Anastasia to see reason. "He's a slimy son of a bitch and she knows it. Now get out of the water and let's go find your dress before it blows into the ocean and strangles a baby dolphin or something."

Anastasia shakes her head back and forth, backing away until the waves rise to the center of her chest. "I can't. I can't ever face anyone ever again."

“Of course you can. Phillip is the one who fucked up.” I motion back toward the house. “He’s the one who just proved to everyone up there that he isn’t worthy of you, Ana. Not your love or your trust, and he sure as hell isn’t worth freezing to death for.”

Her lips tremble, but her gaze softens. “You don’t really believe that. You think I’m a terrible p-person.”

“No, I don’t,” I say, deciding it’s worth pushing the truth a little in order to get her out of the waves. “I think you fell in love with a terrible person and it made you less than you really are. But now Phillip is on the way out. You can kick him to the curb and get back to what matters. Your family, your daughters, and the friends who love and appreciate you.”

She sways back and forth in the water.

I circle my arm, using my warmest voice to seal the deal and get her moving toward shore. “Come on back here, girl. You’re a survivor. You’ve got this. No way is a human come stain like Phillip going to bring down Anastasia Pickett.”

Her lips quirk and I answer with a smile. “Now get out of that water and let’s go take care of business.”

“You’ll help me?” she asks, shuffling a step forward. “Really? Even though I hurt Penny? All for nothing, for a man who doesn’t really love me?”

“Any enemy of Phillip’s is a friend of mine,” I assure her, breathing easier as she continues to struggle through the water. “I’ll even take care of kicking him out the door. It will be my pleasure to shove a shoe up his ass.”

Her eyes shine and a tentative smile curves her lips. “Can I watch? I would like to see him get a shoe up the ass. I’m not normally a violent person, but I think he deserves that at least.”

“At the very least,” I agree, working open the buttons on my dress shirt as it becomes obvious that, thanks to a good soaking, her white bra and panties are now transparent.

She clearly has no issues with parading around naked in front of her daughter’s boyfriends or whoever else happens to be around, but I would like for her to be covered up when we head back to the house. As she takes the last few steps onto the shore, shivering in the cool breeze rushing in off the water, I shrug off my shirt and hold it out for her. She threads her arms through the sleeves and I lift it up onto her shoulders.

But when she turns, I see that she’s made no effort to hold the shirt closed in front.

In fact, in the time it took my hands to fall to my sides she has somehow managed to dispose of her bra. It drops down onto the sand with a soft plop as she allows my shirt to gape open farther, displaying a scandalous amount of inner-side-boob.

The moment I make eye contact with the inner-side-boob, I immediately glance away, clearing my throat uncomfortably. “All right then. You might want to—”

Before I can finish, Anastasia flings her arms around my neck and presses her nearly bare chest against mine.

“Thank you, Bash.” She arches into closer contact, rubbing against me in a way that makes my balls shrivel and my dick try to crawl back between my legs because—

She’s not Penny.

She’s Penny’s mother.

She’s freezing cold and wet.

Did I mention that she’s the *mother* of the woman I’ve been fucking—the only woman I want to fuck in the foreseeable future—and that it feels utterly and completely wrong to have her body this close to mine? It would feel wrong to have anyone else this close, but especially the woman responsible for giving birth to Penny.

I'm gaining a new level of appreciation for just how nasty Phillip is for going straight from daughter to mother and am trying to gracefully detangle myself from Anastasia without hurting her feelings and sending her running back into the ocean when suddenly her lips are on mine.

I don't see it coming; I have no idea I'm about to be lip-locked until she seals the deal.

I flinch in shock and open my mouth to tell her this isn't going to happen, but before I can speak her tongue is in my mouth and she's going at my shocked, stiff appendage like she's trying to poke it back to life. The kiss lasts maybe ten, fifteen seconds before I put my hands firmly on her shoulders and push her away, but I know it's fifteen seconds that are going to haunt me for the rest of my life.

"Shit, Anastasia." I swipe my hand across my mouth, tempted to spit the taste of her out onto the sand. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry." Her bottom lip trembles as she pulls my shirt closed in the front. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I didn't mean to do that. I was just so grateful to you for offering to help and then you took your shirt off and I thought—"

"I took my shirt off because you were naked and I wanted to help cover you up." I jab an emphatic thumb back toward the house. "I'm your daughter's date, for God's sake."

"I'm sorry." Tears fill her eyes. "I really am, Bash. I'm so sorry and embarrassed. I have some unhealthy behavior patterns when it comes to men, especially when I'm feeling vulnerable." She huddles deeper into my shirt. "I probably need to go back into therapy."

"You think?" I run a clawed hand through my hair. "Or maybe you could just devote a little less effort to avoiding gluten and a little more to avoiding kissing your daughter's boyfriends. I think that would be a good place to start."

She nods swiftly. "I will. I promise. Please don't tell Penny. I don't want to upset her and I swear it will never happen again."

"I can't make that promise." I bend to retrieve my shoes and socks before the incoming tide can soak them. "I don't believe in lying to the people I care about."

"Even if the lie makes things easier for everyone?" she presses, tailing me as I start back toward the house. "Please, I've already messed up so much with Penny. I just want to make things right with my daughter. And now that Phillip and I are over, maybe we can have that chance."

She grabs my elbow and I stop, facing her over the bracelets still littering the sand. "Please," she begs, fear in her eyes. "Let something good come out of all this. Don't doom my relationship with my daughter because of one stupid kiss while I was half frozen and feeling sad and pathetic. If you give me a chance, I swear I won't screw up again."

I sigh. "I haven't known you long, Ana, but even I know better than to believe that."

Her brow furrows. "Okay. You're right. I will screw up again. But I won't screw up in the same way. Not like this. I give you my word, Sebastian, and that does mean something. Ask Penny. I mess up a lot but when I make a promise, I keep it."

I study her earnest expression, having no idea if she's telling the truth or just showing off her acting skills, but in the end, it doesn't matter. This family needs a break from the constant drama and if that means keeping what happened on the beach a secret—at least until all the rest of the angst blows over—I can do that.

For Penny.

But not for free...

"All right, I'll keep the kiss between us," I say, hurrying on when she tries to thank me. "But in exchange, you agree not to use Penny's sisters to manipulate her. No more threatening to

withhold visits or coming between them in any way.”

“Done,” she says with a firm nod. “I felt terrible about that anyway. I’ve felt terrible about a lot of things the past few years, but all that is going to change. Right now. I’m ready to lose one-hundred and eighty pounds of pure trouble and get my life back on track.”

I nod and hold out an arm. “After you.”

I follow Anastasia through the dunes and up the path toward the house. We’ve just rounded the corner and are moving between the two small guest bungalows when Ana stops dead in the middle of the trail with a soft gasp.

I don’t have to ask what’s the matter. I’ve already seen them and no matter how much I want to, I can’t seem to look away.

I can’t tear my eyes away from the sight of Penny—*my* Penny—making out with Phillip under the awning of the guesthouse, wearing the white chiffon dress she was wearing when we first kissed. Her arms are around his neck, his hands are on her ass, and her lips are parted while she kisses him the way she should only kiss one man. *Me*. But that’s not me and clearly Penny hasn’t told Phillip to go to hell and rot there and take his marriage proposal with him.

No, it looks like Penny and Phillip are back together.

She’s gone back to the man who set off a dirty bomb in the middle of her life, the fuck stick who treated her like shit on his shoe right up until the moment it became clear someone else was in love with the girl he’d thrown away.

Like Rachael. It’s exactly like Rachael, except it hurts so much fucking more.

I thought Penny was different.

I thought she was one in a million. *My* one.

For a moment, I have the strange urge to sit down and put my shoes on, so I can run away from her faster, but Penny isn’t even looking at me. She has no idea I’ve seen what I’ve seen or that she’s broken the fuck out of my heart.

So I don’t run. I turn and walk away, back down to the beach, up around the side of the mansion—where Penny and Phillip may end up living happily ever after if Anastasia decides to take that suicide swim after all—and down the drive to my car. And then I pull away and I don’t look back.

I’ve broken almost all of my rules with Penny. But I won’t break this one.

One and done. A Magnificent Bastard intervention is a once in a lifetime opportunity. No exceptions.

Not even for her, the girl I already know I’ll never be able to forget.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

And now something from
Francis and Edna “Eddie” Pickett-Baxter

Dear Sebastian,

Mom told us not to write you a letter.

She said that some things are better left alone and that you probably wish you’d never come to the wedding or heard the name Pickett. But since we’re half Baxter—that’s our dad’s last name—we figured we would write anyway.

(And Francis loves to do things she’s told not to do.

Our psychiatrist says she has oppositional defiant disorder, but I think she just doesn’t like getting bossed around. I don’t care as much about getting bossed around because I don’t have a lot of strong opinions the way she does. This is Edna writing this part, by the way.

Eddie, to you, because we’re friends. At least, I hope we still are.)

Back to the point! This is Francis writing the main letter because I have better handwriting, but the words are from both of us.

And we both want to say that we’re very, very sorry.

We should never have set up our nanny cam in the sunroom. We only did it because Penny said that Mom threw up in a flowerpot right before she walked down the aisle at two of her wedding rehearsals and we thought that would be a really funny thing to get on video. We could have sent it in to America’s Wackiest Home Movies or just uploaded it to the cloud and used it as blackmail to convince Mom to let us have sugar whenever we want.

Or at least on weekends.

We know too much sugar isn’t good for us and no matter what Mom says we aren’t animals who would run wild without rules.

(At least, I’m not. Sometimes Francis is like a wolverine when she’s angry. She has a big temper. She let me write this because she’s proud of it. She’s also proud of how bad her farts smell.

This is still Eddie, by the way. You can tell because my pen is blue.)

ANYWAY!

The point is, we’re sorry. We would take it back if we could. We never meant to cause trouble or make everyone angry and sad. Mom says it isn’t our fault and that nothing was ruined that shouldn’t have been ruined, but we’re not sure that’s true.

We just know that we wish things had happened differently.

And we hope we can still be friends.

Mom says that’s never going to happen, either, but Mom has been wrong about things before.

Here’s hoping this is one of them.

Here’s hoping it a LOT because we like you and think you make a great uncle.

Your friends?

Francis and Edna “Eddie” Pickett-Baxter

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Two Months Later...

Text from Aidan: *Heading out to grab brunch in about an hour, you want to join?*

From Bash: *No thanks.*

Aidan: *Come on, it's this new place. Supposed to have the best Bloody Marys in Brooklyn.*

Bash: *Definitely no. I hate Brooklyn.*

Aidan: *Since when?*

Bash: *Since forever. That borough is dead to me. I'm never going there again, not even for ice cream.*

Aidan: *Dude. This has to stop. It's been two months.*

Bash: *I don't know what you're talking about.*

Aidan: *Bullshit.*

You know exactly what I'm talking about. This is even worse than after Rachael, and Penny wasn't even your girlfriend.

Bash: *I don't want to talk about Penny.*

Aidan: *But you know she didn't marry that guy, right?*

In fact, according to the tabloids, it seems like she and her mom sent him packing not long after you left the Hamptons.

Bash: *So?*

Aidan: *So maybe you have this all wrong.*

Maybe there's been a misunderstanding. Maybe you're wasting your life holding a grudge over something that didn't even happen.

Maybe you both are.

Bash: *Don't take this the wrong way, man, but why don't you shut the fuck up about stuff you don't understand.*

Aidan: *Why don't you get off your ass, come meet me for brunch, and help me understand it.*

Bash: **middle finger emoji**

Aidan: *I'm your friend, Bash. This is what friends are for, to talk you through the you-broke-up-with-your-assistant pain so you can move on with your life.*

Bash: *Maybe I don't want to move on. Maybe I don't see the fucking point.*

Aidan: *Okay. Then maybe I won't be able to meet that woman for orientation tomorrow.*

Bash: *Hell, no. Don't you dare pull that shit with me!
You WILL be at that orientation, Aidan, or I will fucking fire your ass.*

Aidan: *Then fire me. I don't want to work like this anyway.*

When I signed on, this outfit was run by a Magnificent Bastard who left the house once in a while and knew how to enjoy his life. Not a Cranky as Fuck Bastard who would have died on his couch if it weren't for Thai food delivery.

Bash: *Papers have been signed with this woman! Legal fucking papers!
And she happens to be a fucking LAWYER.
If you don't show up tomorrow, she could sue my ass, Aidan.*

Aidan: *Then I guess you'd better meet me for brunch and let me be your friend.*

Bash: *Fuck you, you son of a bitch.*

Aidan: *Come on now, friend. Let it happen.
You know you want brunch. And friend time.*

Bash: *This is blackmail, not friendship.*

Aidan: *You say to-may-to, I say to-mah-to.*

Bash: *Fuck...*

Aidan: *Brunch is on me and I'll have a spicy Bloody Mary waiting for you when you get there...*

Bash: *Fine, text me the address. But if I eat brunch with you, then you meet with this woman tomorrow. No more bullshit.*

If you want to back out of the job, you're going to have to wait until after this assignment. I can't take over with Beth. She needs a Spectacular Rascal, not a Magnificent Bastard.

Aidan: *Deal. Oh, and Bash...*

Bash: *What, asshole?*

Aidan: *Wear something nice. I like it when you look pretty for me.*

Bash: *That reminds me...*

One time I told Penny that I rubbed your feet when they were cold, but that you were too macho to admit it.

Aidan: *I'm not macho. I'm a real man, the kind who has never had his feet rubbed in his entire life. But if rubbing my feet will bring you back to the land of the living, we can work something out.*

On the down low, of course.

Bash: *Nah, that's okay.*

But thank you. And Aidan...

Aidan: *Yes?*

Bash: *She was a lot more than my assistant.*

Aidan: *I know.*

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The sun is brighter than I remember. And it's hot as fucking hell.

As I emerge from the subway stop near Prospect Park, I wish very much that I'd worn shorts instead of jeans. But that's one of the hazards of not leaving the house in several weeks except for butt crack of dawn morning runs and late night foraging for alcohol and ice cream—one forgets that summer in the city is all about misery and sweat pouring from your balls.

I'm contemplating buying some shorts to spare myself a case of swamp crotch and hoping Aidan got a table inside this stupid trendy brunch place instead of out on the sidewalk facing the park when a voice straight out of my dreams calls my best friend's name.

I see Aidan first.

He's standing on the sidewalk, turned toward the park so he can't see me coming. He smiles as he lifts a hand to the woman on horseback, guiding her mount along behind a row of other Sunday morning riders, down one of the many trails running through the park.

He doesn't look in the least bit surprised to see Penny.

My Penny, looking even more fucking beautiful than I remember in a white tank top and a flirty little red skirt that's completely inappropriate for horseback riding—I spent summers growing up riding at my grandmother's farm upstate and know a thing or two about saddle chafing—and a big grin for my best friend.

I'm already smelling a rat when she reaches down and pulls that inappropriate little skirt up on one side, sending a shock of awareness bolting through my body as she bares some brightly colored, sexy new ink on the thigh where Mr. Whiskers used to be.

"Look," she says, raising her voice to be heard over the sound of a taxi rushing down the otherwise quiet, Sunday morning street. "All the swelling has gone down! And you can't see any of the old tattoo. I'm so in love with it!"

"It looks great," Aidan calls back, grinning like a fucking lying asshole who tattoos his best friend's heartbreaker, ex-assistant behind his back. "I've got a table for us in the garden. Just come on through when you're done."

"Will do," she says. "I just need to..." She trails off, spine going stiff as she tilts her head, lifting her adorable nose into the air. Then, like she's scented Magnificent Bastard on the wind, she turns, shifting in her saddle to gaze over her shoulder, looking straight at me.

And for a second, the world stands still and there's just her and me, two people who have a connection that sizzles across time and space and humidity-soaked summer air. Two people who share a secret no one else knows because no one else understands the way it is between us when our clothes are off and her breath is my breath and there are no more questions, just answers, and every single one is her name.

Penny. My Penny, who ripped my heart out of my chest, hacked it into pieces with a machete, and threw it into the Dead Sea, which has nine times the salt concentration of a normal sea, which is of course why she chose it because she wanted me to hurt nine times more.

And just like that, the spell is broken and time jerks back into motion as I remember that her secrets were all lies.

The friendly light in her eyes goes out, her mouth tips down at the edges, and her lips part to say something I'm sure I'm not going to enjoy hearing. I'm working up an I-don't-care-how-beautiful-you-are-or-how-much-I-miss-you-you-are-fucking-dead-to-me glare and a few choice

words of my own when the cop across the street shouts—

“Hey, you! Use the fucking crosswalk!”

—to a jay-walking hipster stepping off the curb.

But the hipster doesn't reverse direction and the cop, out in the heat in head-to-toe polyester, assigned to police people too stupid to use a crosswalk, is clearly at the end of his rope.

Face going beat red, the officer lifts the air horn in his hand overhead and blares it loud enough to wake the dead.

A second later, the peaceful morning is shattered by the shrieks of frightened horses and the startled cries of the riders across the street trying to keep their seats as their mounts twitch, dance off the trail, and rear back on their hind legs. But Penny's horse doesn't do any of those things. Penny's horse screams like it's been thrown into a vat of boiling oil and bolts across the park like a bat out of hell.

I watch, my heart lurching into my throat, as she's almost thrown. She slides off the saddle to the right, but at the last minute, she grabs onto the saddle horn and locks her legs tight around the horse's middle, hanging on for dear life as the terrified animal streaks away through the trees.

Before I realize what I'm doing, I'm sprinting into the street, earning another shout from the officer policing the crosswalk.

But I don't stop to tell him he's a fucking idiot or that I'm coming back to beat the shit out of him if anything happens to Penny because of his stupid air horn. I'm too busy jumping the fence near the trail, running across the grass, and snatching the reins from an older man who has just slid to the ground beside his horse, looking grateful to be alive.

“I'll bring him back,” I assure the man before swinging up into the saddle and digging my heels into the horse's sides, spurring the well-fed beast after Penny.

Leaning into the wind, I urge the animal on with my legs, applying pressure behind his barrel until we're flying along beneath the trees, following the divots Penny's horse left behind in the grass. It only takes a few seconds for Penny's horse, and Penny, who is still clinging to the horse's side, to come into view.

But those few seconds are enough to make me feel like I'm having a heart attack. My chest is tight, my ribs squeeze, and I break out in an all over cold sweat as the reality that Penny could be stomped to pieces by a spooked horse at any moment penetrates with enough force to chill me to the bone.

She could die and I will never get to see her smile again, never get to look into her eyes and feel that connection I've never felt with anyone else, never get to tell her how much it hurt to see her with Phillip, but that I love her anyway. That I'm always going to love her, from now until the day they put me in the ground because she's it for me. My one, the one who has ruined me for all other women.

“Please,” I beg, breath coming faster as my horse gains ground.

Please let me get to her in time.

Please let me get her off that horse.

Please let me get her safe in my arms and figure out a way to hold her there because I know that once I touch her, I'm never going to want to let her go.

My thoughts become a constant prayer, a fevered, incessant mantra begging the horse and the universe and any gods out there who have pity on poor lovesick bastards to let this be okay. Let me *make it* okay. Somehow. Because with Penny's head inches from flashing hooves and her life on the line, my rules don't seem so fucking important anymore.

Fuck the rules. Fuck no more second chances. Fuck one and done.

I just want Penny. I want to find a way to forgive her and be forgiven and make this work because nothing works without her.

“Please, please, please,” I mutter as I pull up alongside her horse and lean over in the saddle, reaching for her lost reins while fighting to keep my own seat.

I am not a cowboy or a stunt rider or a member of the Cirque de Soleil’s equestrian troupe. I am not a knight in shining armor or a prince who lives to save maidens whose horses have gone wild and run into the forest. But at that moment, I channel them all. I become something braver and better because I need Penny to be safe more than I need anything else.

And as I grab hold of the reins and pull our horses to a swift stop at the edge of Prospect Park Lake, I realize that this is what it means to be someone’s Prince Charming. It means putting another person ahead of yourself and your ego and all the other bullshit. It means giving everything you have to protect the one you love.

But unfortunately, not even Prince Charming can protect against the laws of physics. An object in motion is inclined to stay in motion and apparently Penny’s arms must have run out of clinging power.

As the horse grinds to a halt, Penny keeps moving, losing her grip on the saddle and flying out across the lake to land with a splash.

One second I have a scandalous view up her skirt as she soars through the air; the next she’s under the water, sinking out of sight.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Vaulting out of the saddle, I run into the lake without bothering to chuck my shoes, scared to death that Penny's hit her head on something beneath the surface and is going to drown.

But by the time I near the place where she went under—charging into water that reaches the bottom of my ribs—she's breaking the surface, sputtering and coughing and wonderfully, perfectly alive.

"What the hell are you doing here," she spits, coughing as she swipes water from her face and struggles to find her feet.

"Saving your life. What does it look like?" I grab her around the waist and drag her into the shallows until the water laps around our knees and something deep in my bones melts with relief that she's all right.

Still whole, still breathing, still Penny.

And still angry with me for some reason, judging by the glare she shoots my way and the hands that grab my wrists with enough force to snap the tendons of a lesser man. "Let me go, Bash. I don't need your help."

"Oh, really?" I hold tight, something primal inside of me refusing to let go. "Because it looked like you were on a runaway horse."

"And now I'm in a lake," she shouts, "with the world's biggest asshole. I'd rather be on the horse!"

"I'm the world's biggest asshole? Me?" My brows furrow into the world's deepest frown. "You're the world's biggest asshole. I saw you kissing Phillip. I saw your fucking tongue in his mouth and it was so disgusting I still have fucking nightmares about it. But I still tried to save your life because I can't—"

"And I saw your tongue in *my mother's* mouth," she shoots back, sending an unexpected ripple of shock through my well-earned rage. "I saw you holding her while she was wearing your shirt and nothing else! I saw you kiss her just like Phillip kissed her and even though she swore she kissed you and you wanted nothing to do with it, I don't believe her!"

She pulls in a rough breath as her eyes begin to shine. "Because I saw it, Bash. I *saw* it and it sure as hell didn't look like you were putting up much of a fight."

"I was in shock!" My thoughts click madly as my brain begins to put together a hypothesis, a wonderful hypothesis that might mean all isn't lost, after all.

"In shock for five minutes?" she counters, scowling at me with a ferocity that would be cute if she wasn't clearly so upset.

"It wasn't five minutes! It was ten seconds. Fifteen tops."

"Liar," she sobs, shoving at my chest. "You're such a liar."

"I'm not a liar. Maybe it seemed like five minutes, but it wasn't, Penny. Penny, listen to me," I beg, holding tight to her waist as she struggles to get free and I fight to get through to her. "I swear, it was less than thirty seconds and your mom is telling the truth. I yelled at her after. I was totally repulsed and traumatized and if I could wipe the memory from my mind, I would do it in a heartbeat. I wanted no part of that."

A tremor of doubt flashes across her angry face. "That's not true."

"It *is* true," I assure her, before adding in a softer voice, "But clearly you thought otherwise. Is that why you did...the thing with Phillip?"

“It wasn’t a thing,” she said, swiping away the water seeping from her soaked hair. “It was a kiss. One kiss, to show you what it feels like to have your heart go rotten inside your chest and the person you trust, the person you care about, your very best friend, turn on you in the worst way imaginable.”

“But, I—”

“Seriously,” she snaps, her cheeks flushing red. “The worst way imaginable, Bash! I can’t imagine anything more horrible than running down to the beach to save my mother before she drowns herself only to find you kissing her. *You!* The only one I ever—The only one—” She cuts off with a huff and a sniff before pressing her lips into a thin, troubled line. “You know. You know what you were.”

“No, I don’t,” I say, my grip gentling on her waist. “Because I got scared and ran like a coward and then you pushed me away and then...”

I shake my head. “Then this insanity happened and I never got to find out what I was.” I draw her closer, heart skipping a beat when she lets me. “I never got to tell you what you were, either. What you *are* because there’s nothing past tense about what I feel for you.”

Her throat works as she lifts doubt-filled eyes to mine. “I don’t believe you.”

“I haven’t said anything yet,” I argue, pressing on before she can reply. “And you don’t have to believe me. You can believe Bash from the night of the bachelor party, the one who went back to the cottage and spent hours writing you a letter telling you how sorry he was for running, how much he wants to be worthy of you, and how he loves you and wants you and needs you like nothing else.”

Penny blinks faster, her beautiful mouth trembling. “No, he didn’t.”

“Yes he did,” I say, throat tight. “I still have that letter in my desk. We can go back to my place right now and I’ll put it straight into your hands and you’ll see that I’m telling the truth.”

“You...” Her chin dimples and her blinking grows even faster. “You love me? Really?”

“I do.” I cup her face in my hands, knowing that there is nothing more precious or irreplaceable than this soggy woman standing in front of me. “I love you. I love you so much I’ve been a fucking miserable wreck without you.”

“Me too,” she says, tears sliding down her cheeks. “I’ve been trying so hard to be fine and to live my life and not be hurt and learn to ride horses and fly kites and be with other people, but I couldn’t. It just hurt so much.”

“I know.” I lean my head closer to hers. “But it doesn’t have to. Not anymore.”

She shakes her head, pulling back before I can kiss her. “Maybe not today. But what about tomorrow, Bash?” Her brow furrows. “What about when you decide you don’t like the burden of knowing that another person’s happiness is all wrapped up in you? What happens then? When the stress of knowing that I’m miserable without you starts to itch and chafe and you want to run?”

“The only thing that chafes me is not having you in my life,” I insist, holding her troubled gaze, willing her to believe me. “Seriously, Penny. I’m never going to forget these past two months without you. It’s like all the air went out of the room, the sun out of the world. There was no reason to get out of bed in the morning, nothing to look forward to. My life was a fart without a cute animal attached.”

“But that’s when you thought I didn’t want you,” she says, not the slightest bit derailed by my attempt at a joke. “What about when I’m just boring old Penny who you’re used to seeing every day?”

“You’re never boring.”

“Yes, I am,” she insists. “I’m pro level at being boring.”

“Do you know why I ran that day in the cottage,” I say, knowing now is the time to confess everything and pray it’s enough to get her back.

I wait until she shakes her head, before I continue in a husky voice, “I ran because I kept thinking about how hot it would be to get you pregnant. To see you big with my baby, your belly a sign to the whole world that you belong to me. For keeps.”

Her eyes go wide. “No way.”

“Yes way.” I slide my arms around her waist, drawing her back against me. “I was possessed by this overpowering lust to get you knocked up and it scared the shit out of me.”

“That is pretty scary,” she says, breath rushing out as I cup her ass in my hands. But this time, she doesn’t pull away. “Why do you think that happened?”

“At the time, I had no idea.” My cock thickens in my soaked jeans as her hips brush against mine. “But after having some time to dwell on it, I think my body was just a few steps ahead of my brain. My cock realized that you’re it, the only woman I’m ever going to want to make a baby with, and well...he’s never been known for his caution or forethought. He’s more action oriented.”

She bites her bottom lip. “That’s why he’s called the Incredible Bulk.”

My lips curve. “Not anymore. I decided only assholes name their dicks.”

“I like it,” she says, arms coming around my neck. “It’s ridiculous, but I like it.”

“Yeah?” I dig my fingers into her ass, fighting a groan as she rocks her hips forward, nudging against where I’m hard and aching, the Incredible Bulk desperate to be back between her legs, where he belongs.

“Yeah.” Her eyes darken as she runs a tender hand down my cheek. “I like just about everything about you. More than like really.”

“Is this where you tell me that you love me, too?”

“Yes, Sebastian Prince,” she whispers, pressing up on her toes, bringing her face closer to mine. “This is where I tell you that I love you, too.”

And then I kiss her. My lips cover hers and my tongue slips into the sweetness of her mouth and I hold her tight against me and just like that everything is right with the world.

It’s so fucking right. The only way it could be better is if she were naked and underneath me, her body gripping my cock while I show her how much I’ve missed her. How much I need her.

“I want you so much.” I cup her breast through her wet clothes, groaning as her nipple pulls tight beneath my touch and her breath rushes out in this sexy little gasp.

“Then take me,” she says, fingers working at the close of my jeans. “There’s no one but the horses here to see.”

Blinking in surprise, I glance around us to see that she’s right. Wherever we are, this section of the park and the lake are deserted. Not to mention shrouded by the trees growing along the shore, spreading their branches wide, as if they’ve been placed there on purpose, to shield people desperate to fuck in the water.

“We shouldn’t,” I say, even as I help her tug my zipper down and shove my wet jeans and boxers down around my thighs, freeing my feverish cock. “Or maybe, at least, move into the deep water in case someone comes by?”

She shakes her head. “No way. Sex in the water is the worst.”

I arch a brow. “Oh yeah?” I’m about to ask her if she’s had a lot of sex in the water, and what other sexy secrets she’s keeping, but then she reaches beneath her skirt and shimmies out of

her underwear and I forget to ask stupid questions.

I lift her up, her legs go around my waist, and in seconds I'm inside of her, sliding into her slick heat while our lips meet in a kiss that's even hotter, deeper, better. Because I'm home again, I'm with Penny, feeling her heart beating against my chest as we strain together, getting closer and closer, higher and higher, until she comes, moaning dirty, sexy, sweet things against my lips.

And no matter how much I want to hold on to make her go again, I can't. I come with a groan, my cock jerking inside of her, celebrating the return to the best place I've ever been while I fight to keep my knees from buckling.

I'm doing a pretty good job and have decided chances are good I won't drop Penny back into the water when an enraged voice calls from the shore—

“Put the girl down and come out with your hands up. You two perverts are under arrest!”

Penny pulls away from our kiss, her wide, frightened gaze crashing into mine. “Oh shit,” she whispers.

We turn our heads, spotting the crosswalk cop, who has evidently decided to take his law enforcement to the next level, on the shore.

“That's right,” he says, face going purple as he wags a finger our way. “You two. Out of the water. I'm sick of this shit. This is a park, not a fuck factory.”

“Whatever that is,” I say, drawing a nervous giggle from Penny as I set her down and we both hurry to rearrange our clothing.

“There are children in this park,” the cop continues. “Kids who don't need a show and tell about where babies come from.”

“Shit, shit, shit.” Penny trembles as I take her hand. “Are we about to get arrested? I've never been arrested.”

“Just look repentant and upset and let me do the talking,” I whisper as we start toward the shore. “It's this dick weed's fault that you were almost killed. If he hadn't scared the shit out of your horse with his air horn, it wouldn't have run, I wouldn't have chased you, and we wouldn't have ended up fucking in the lake. So this is basically on him.”

She hums thoughtfully. “Yeah, I'm not sure the blame game is the best idea, Bash. He looks pretty pissed off. His face is not a healthy color.”

“Good. Then maybe we can talk him into a heart attack and make a run for it.”

“I guess that's an option, but—”

Before Penny can finish her thought or either of us can get close enough to the shore for Officer Purple Face to slap on the cuffs, the quiet of our isolated corner of the park is once again shattered.

“Running naked!” A deep voice shouts from the glen where our horses have ambled off to graze. “Full grown man streaking through the park! Indecent exposure! Breaking the law!”

My jaw drops and Penny mutters, “Oh my God,” as Aidan runs by the lake right behind our arresting officer, wearing nothing but his Timberland boots and a smile.

A shit-eating grin, really. He's cupping his dick with one hand; the other he holds out to Penny and me, giving us a thumbs up as he streaks by Officer Angry Eyes.

“You two, stay there,” the officer shouts. “I'll be back for you.”

The moment he turns to chase after Aidan, Penny and I exchange a look, nod, and make a break for the shore. I climb onto dry land before she does and run up the hill to grab our horses' reins. I turn, wondering if she feels ready to ride, or if we should bet on Aidan leading the officer on a merry chase and walk the horses back, to find her staring after the two men with a

thoughtful expression.

“Penny for your thoughts?” I ask.

“I was just thinking that Aidan might be better at the consulting stuff than I thought,” she says, still gazing into the distance. “His intervention with us certainly worked. And he’s got an unexpected...ballsy streak.”

“No, I think he had his balls covered. Mostly.”

She laughs and I smile, reaching for her hand. “Come on, let’s get out of here, make sure his brave sacrifice isn’t in vain.”

She falls in beside me as I lead the horses up the hill. “He will get away, right? He’s pretty fast.”

“As long as Officer Cranky is too out of breath to call for backup, he should be all right. But if not...” I shrug. “Well, a little arrest is no less than he deserves for consorting with you behind my back and keeping it a secret.”

“Oh, Bash, please,” she says. “He was clearly trying to help. And he fixed Mr. Whiskers.”

“What is that, by the way? I saw colors but couldn’t see what it is from across the road and then I was too busy fucking you to pay attention.”

She pulls up the damp fabric of her skirt with a grin, baring her sexy thigh. “Just a bunch of flowers floating on water. He turned Mr. Whisker’s body into a reflective pool and worked the flowers in throughout and on either side.”

“It’s beautiful,” I say sincerely, knowing that I owe Aidan a thank you for this as well as for sacrificing himself to the po-po so that Penny and I could escape.

“I love it,” she says, smoothing her skirt down. “But I had him leave one of Mr. Whisker’s eyes, hidden in the patch of buttercups. I wanted a piece of him to stay. It seemed right.” She sways closer. “As crazy as it sounds, not all my memories of him are bad.”

I squeeze her fingers. “That’s not crazy. I think I was kissing Mr. Whiskers when I finished falling in love with you.”

She sighs happily. “That sounds wrong in so many different ways.”

“It does,” I agree with a smile, holding tight to Penny’s hand as we cross the park, pretty certain nothing will be wrong again.

Not as long as I’ve got this girl right next to me.

EPILOGUE

Five months later

From: FrancisAndEddie2Gether

To: MagnificentBastard1

Re: The top secret plan

Dear Uncle Bash,

That is the most perfect plan ever!!! Perfectly perfect!! Funny and awesome and so ROMANTIC but not in the gross way.

Penny is going to love it!!

And don't worry—our lips are sealed.

Cross our hearts and hope to die.

Xoxox

<3 <3 <3

**farting ninja emoji* (because ninjas are the best at keeping secrets)*

Francis and Eddie

The Ample Valley Creamery's seasonal ice-cream tasting event is packed, which is insane because it's thirty-eight degrees outside, with a fifty percent chance of snow before morning. I was thinking Penny and I would be the only ones crazy enough to want to taste ice cream in the dead of winter, but apparently I was wrong.

And now I am warm.

Very, very warm, and wondering if my plan can be pulled off while elbow-to-elbow with sixty other ice cream addicts.

Outside the parlor's front window, people hurry by wrapped in coats and hats, their breath crystalizing in puffs as they rush from store to store, finishing up last minute Christmas shopping. But inside, it's sweltering, the combined body heat ratcheting up the temperature until we're racing to spoon in our samples before they melt. Penny has chucked her coat, her sweater, and is down to a clingy black turtleneck that makes it hard to keep my eyes on the dishes being set out on the bar before us, but I manage to maintain my focus.

I have to be ready. I checked the tasting menu weeks ago and there's only one flavor that will serve my unique purpose.

"This was a bad idea," Penny says, twisting her hair into a coil and trapping it on top of her head with one hand.

"Too crowded?" I ask, doubt flashing through my gut. Maybe tonight isn't the night. I've spent weeks planning, but if the vibe is wrong, it's just wrong, and I would rather wait than screw this up.

Second chances are good and all, but some things you want to get right the first time.

"You want to go?" I ask, nodding toward the door.

"No, not at all! We're staying," she says, eyes going wide. "I just don't see how we're possibly going to be able to go home with only four pints. I know we made a promise to each other before we came and that moderation is important when it comes to certain things, but all the flavors are so, so good, and... Oh, I don't know..." She trails a sexy red fingernail down my

chest as her lips press into a pout. “Maybe we could break a silly little promise just this once?”

I shake my head in mock judgment as I twine my arm around her waist, pulling her closer. “Are you trying to seduce me into buying more ice cream?”

She bats her lashes, a slow sweep up and down that kicks up the heat in the room another notch. “I don’t know, is it working? If so, I was thinking that the Peppermint Stick flavor would taste amazing licked off of certain body parts.”

“Oh yeah?” I ask, teeth digging into my bottom lip. “Like...your foot?”

She nods with a sexy smile. “Or your...elbow.”

My next breath hisses in through my teeth. “Don’t start that in here, Pickett,” I whisper, fingertips digging into the curve of her hip. “You know how hot I get when you talk about licking shit off of my elbows.”

She laughs, fanning her face. “Okay. I’ll stop. It is hot in here. I don’t want to make it any worse.”

She sighs as she reaches for a fresh spoon from a mason jar at our corner of the ice cream bar. “But seriously, sexual favors are on the table if we can take home a pint of every flavor. I don’t think ten pints is too much when you consider that it’s the holiday season and a time of love and good cheer. And what, I ask you, says love and good cheer better than ice cream in the freezer?”

“Maybe the Santa and Mrs. Claus bellies we’ll have after we eat all that ice cream?” I tease, chuckling when she crosses her eyes and sticks out her tongue in response. “Be careful. A smart girl I know once told me your face can stick that way.”

“She wasn’t a girl; she was a woman,” Penny says, lifting her nose into the air as the sample deliveryman reaches our section. “A woman who knows what she wants and isn’t afraid to ask for it.”

Before I can tell her how much I love it when she asks for what she wants, the bearded man with the holly suspenders places two small bowls of handcrafted cream in front of us. “All right, folks. Thanks for your patience. Here we’ve got a half-scoop each of another seasonal flavor, Reindeer Droppings.”

Reindeer Droppings.

This is it. The flavor I’ve been waiting for, the only one with pieces of candy in it, candy that could cause a person to choke if they aren’t careful.

Pulse speeding, I casually slide my free hand into the front pocket of my slacks, finding the ring and slipping it onto the tip of my finger. I’ve practiced enough to know I’ll be able to seamlessly slip the ring into my mouth while pretending to take a bite of ice cream, but I’m still nervous. I don’t want Penny to see what I’m up to.

Recreating the time she choked on a fake engagement ring with a real one won’t be nearly as much fun if she catches me and asks why I’m sticking jewelry in my mouth.

“Hot chocolate flavored ice cream,” Beard Guy continues mildly, having no clue I’m about to pop the question, “with a fudge swirl and chunks of malted milk ball candy and toffee bark scattered throughout. All made on site. All sinfully delicious.” He grins as he pats his hands on the bar. “Enjoy.”

“Oh, we will.” Penny’s tongue sweeps across her lips in anticipation as our deliveryman heads off to service other guests. She slips her spoon between her lips, closing her eyes as she savors the first bite, making a sexy moaning sound that momentarily distracts me from my purpose.

But I’ve recovered and am about to launch Operation Heimlich Maneuver Proposal when

Penny's brow furrows and her eyes fly open. She coughs, covering her mouth with her fist, then coughs again, harder than before.

"You okay?" I ask, sliding my hand from her hip to her back.

She shakes her head. "I don't know. I just—" She breaks off with another cough. "My throat is so tight and my tongue is on fire."

"Let me ask for more water." But before I can signal to one of the servers behind the counter, her spoon clatters to the bar.

I turn back to her to see her hands grip the base of her throat and her eyes slide closed. A second later her knees buckle and she sags against me.

I curse, terror flooding through me as I catch her beneath the arms and guide her down to the ground. In the few seconds it takes to realize that she's unconscious and in trouble, my mouth fills with the taste of panic and metal, my heart does its best to punch a hole through my ribs, and my stomach turns inside out. My throat clenches and the back of my tongue goes rigid and when I turn to shout for someone to call 911, it feels like I'm choking on the words.

The first time, no one hears me over the roar of conversation, laughter, and the clinking of spoons.

The second time, I pull in a deep breath and shout like a madman, "Hey! My girlfriend is unconscious. You in the red sweater." The man in question jabs a thumb at his chest, not looking nearly as upset as I would expect him to be after seeing a woman out cold on the floor. "Yeah you," I snap. "Call 911! Tell them there's a woman here who passed out after a bite of ice cream. No known allergies and she's breathing but I don't—"

The sweater man chuckles and his date, a rosy-cheeked woman with dreads, lifts a hand to cover her mouth in a half-assed effort to conceal her smile.

I'm about to lose my shit on them—Penny is in trouble and I will fucking kill them both if the time they're wasting ends up hurting her—when Penny shifts in my arms.

"Relax, Bash," she says, patting my shoulder as she sits up. "I'm okay. No one needs to call 911."

My forehead wrinkles hard enough to send pain flashing through my temples, but before I can ask Penny what the fuck is going on, she puts a hand to my lips.

"Before you freak out, I want you to think about how you felt when you thought I was in trouble, even for just a minute." She holds my gaze before her eyes dip pointedly to my left hand. "And then think about whether pretending to choke on that engagement ring on your pinkie finger was really such a great idea."

I freeze, jaw unclenching as I realize what's happened. "Francis and Eddie sold me out."

Penny shakes her head. "No, my mom sold you out. She reads the twins' e-mail."

"That's shitty," I say, fear slowly transforming to mortification.

"It's normal," Penny says, lips curving gently. "They're only nine years old. And clearly not the best judges of perfect plans. Did it ever occur to you three that the rest of the innocent people in here might be scared to see a man pretending to choke?"

"Right. Um, well...yes. Maybe." I shift my gaze, glancing back at the people gathered around us, sensing that this will probably end up being one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. "But I figured it would be over before anyone had a chance to get upset."

"We're not upset," Red Sweater Man says. "Your girlfriend wrote a note warning everyone of what was going to happen. We got them with our tasting menus."

"Now we just need to know if you're going to say yes," his date says, grinning as she leans in to squeeze his arm.

I blink, but before I can rally and remember all those romantic things I planned to say after fake-choking on the engagement ring, Penny is kneeling in front of me, pulling a plain silver band out of her back pocket

“Clearly, you need me around to keep you from doing dumb stuff,” she says, a tentative smile spreading across her face as she holds the ring up between us. “And I need you for lots and lots of things. Like making me laugh and making me happy and making me excited to wake up every day to see what kind of fun we’re going to have together. Because I never have more fun than when I’m with you. You’ve changed my life so much. And all of it for the better.”

She pulls in a shaky breath as her eyes begin to glisten. “Because you’re not just about the good times. You’re there when I’m sad and when I’m ashamed and when I’ve forgotten, just for a little while, how lucky I am. But you always make me remember. I am so grateful for you, for us, and for every day I get to spend with my best friend. And I really hope tonight you’ll make me the happiest girl in Brooklyn.”

I swallow hard, fighting the unexpected stinging at the backs of my eyes. “By letting you take home ten pints of ice cream?”

Her breath huffs out, but she’s smiling when she nods. “Yes, by letting me take home ten pints of ice cream. And saying that you’ll be mine. Forever.”

“Forever sounds about right,” I say, before adding in a softer voice, “Yes, Penny Pickett, I will marry you and spend the rest of my life feeling like the luckiest bastard in the world.”

I pull her in for a hug and then a kiss while the tasting room erupts in applause.

Penny and I finally manage to stop making out long enough to get our engagement rings slipped onto their respective fingers. Mine fits perfectly. Hers is a little loose, but she says she’ll fix that by eating more ice cream. And we laugh and pretend we aren’t crying a little, too, and finish eating our mostly melted Reindeer Droppings and three more fantastic flavors that are not nearly as fantastic as my girl.

My fiancée.

This amazing woman who will one day soon be my wife.

By the time we head for home, with ten pints in a freezer bag held between us, I’m already accustomed to the new weight around my finger and looking forward to all the wonderful things to come. Like wedding cake tasting and wedding ice cream tasting and being married to my best friend.

My love. My Penny.

* * * *

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lili Valente has slept under the stars in Greece, eaten dinner at midnight with French men who couldn't be trusted to keep their mouths on their food, and walked alone through Munich's red light district after dark and lived to tell the tale.

These days you can find her writing in a tent beside the sea, drinking coconut water and thinking delightfully dirty thoughts.

Lili loves to hear from her readers. You can reach her via her website at www.lilivalente.com

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On behalf of 1001 Dark Nights,

Liz Berry and M.J. Rose would like to thank ~

Steve Berry
Doug Scofield
Kim Guidroz
Jillian Stein
InkSlinger PR
Dan Slater
Asha Hossain
Chris Graham
Fedora Chen
Kasi Alexander
Jessica Johns
Dylan Stockton
Richard Blake
BookTrib After Dark
and Simon Lipskar