

SIDNEY BRISTOL • DARCY BURKE
T. GEPHART • STACEY KENNEDY
ADRIANA LOCKE • JB SALSURY
ERIKA WILDE

1001 Dark Nights

Discovery Authors Bundle 3

Introducing:
Sidney Bristol
Darcy Burke
T. Gephart
Stacey Kennedy
Adriana Locke
JB Salsbury
and Erika Wilde

1001 Dark Nights



1001 Dark Nights Discover Authors Bundle 3

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Featuring stories by

Sidney Bristol, Darcy Burke, T. Gephart

Stacey Kennedy, Adriana Locke

JB Salisbury, and Erika Wilde

Table of Contents

<u>Foreword</u>
<u>Dangerous Attraction by Sidney Bristol</u>
<u>So Good by Darcy Burke</u>
<u>#1 Crush by T. Gephart</u>
<u>Heartbreaker by Stacey Kennedy</u>
<u>Lucky Number Eleven by Adriana Locke</u>
<u>Fighting For Flight by JB Salsbury</u>
<u>The Marriage Diaries by Erika Wilde</u>
<u>Discover 1001 Dark Nights Collection 5</u>
<u>Discover 1001 Dark Nights Collection 1</u>
<u>Discover 1001 Dark Nights Collection 2</u>
<u>Discover 1001 Dark Nights Collection 3</u>
<u>Discover 1001 Dark Nights Collection 4</u>
<u>Discover the World of 1001 Dark Nights</u>
<u>Special Thanks</u>

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: شهریار, "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.*

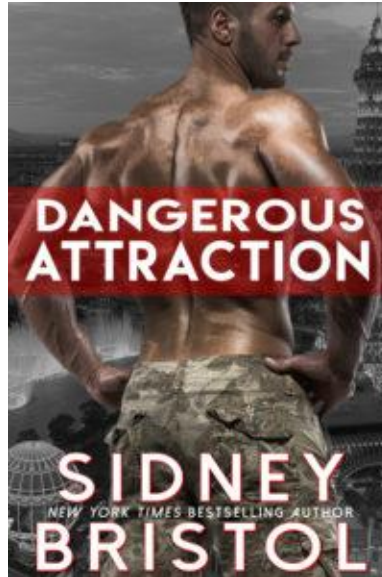
Every night the King calls for me and listens as I spin tales.

*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.*

Dangerous Attraction

Aegis Group 1
Sidney Bristol



Acknowledgments

Thank you, Dayna & Jessica.

Thanks to Jodie for catching my formatting mistakes!

Author Note: Dangerous Attraction first debuted as a three part serial. It has been combined into one, novel, edition to reduce reader confusion.

Love is a fire. But whether it is going to warm your hearth or burn down your house, you can never tell.

JOAN CRAWFORD

Dangerous Attraction: Part One

1.

Travis Ration hunched over the hotel desk and flipped to the first page of the autopsy report. The lights from the Vegas strip cast globes of colored light onto the paper, but the glitz and glamour held no sway for him. Only the poor woman in the photo.

She was blonde. Like the rest. Pretty. A Vegas native named Linda. She'd been social, so her disappearance had been noted within hours by friends and family, but by then it was too late. Whoever was abducting blonde, attractive young women was good. And if the list of missing blonde women was a hint, the perpetrator had operated in the Las Vegas area for years—without anyone connecting the dots. Or maybe LVPD had and didn't want to face it. They wouldn't be the first to ignore a killer to preserve tourism. A killer who only took one victim a year was easy to hide.

There was a serial killer in Las Vegas, and no one wanted to admit it.

"Hey man, ready to go?" Mason Clark, a new hire to the Aegis Group security firm, stepped into Travis' room, one hand braced on the door.

"No, man. Hit the strip without me." Travis didn't glance away from the report.

The autopsy read almost exactly like the last one. The cause of death, to a one, was blood loss, coupled with trauma to the head and abdomen.

It was the differences that mattered.

Judging by the time of death, the women lasted for anywhere from seven to twelve months before being murdered and dumped. Except Linda. She was an exception. She'd only been missing for two months. Why keep her so short a time? Had something gone wrong? The dead woman's corpse might tell him more.

What was really telling, though, was that from the time of death to the next abduction was somewhere in the twenty-four hour mark, which meant these crimes were well thought out. The perpetrator organized and focused on the details.

"No? What are...No, you are not on that again." Ethan Turner, Travis' best friend, groaned and shouldered past Mason. "I thought you were going to take a break from this."

"I said I was taking a break from work." Travis picked up the hotel pen and jotted down the injuries and observations that were different from the previous victims. That was where he'd find the clues. The guy doing this was too methodical to deviate from his plan, so when and where he did things was important.

This was a different kind of skill set than his typical jobs with Aegis. If things were different, Travis might have retired from the SEALs and become a private investigator, if it hadn't been for the felony conviction and dishonorable discharge. No one trusted a felon. He was just lucky the management at Aegis knew him. A couple of the guys he'd served with had vouched for him, gotten him a spot on the elite team the company threw at the worst of problems. It wasn't a bad gig, all things considered.

"What are you doing?" Mason crossed the room and peered over Travis' shoulder.

"He's playing hound dog for the FBI." Ethan popped the top on a longneck from their freshly stocked mini fridge.

"What is this?" Mason snagged the first page of the report with the autopsy pictures clipped to it and dropped it almost immediately onto the ground. "What the hell?"

Travis punched Mason in the thigh, not hard, but enough that the other man bent over and

rubbed the spot.

“Don’t fuck with my stuff.” Travis grabbed the piece of paper and the photographs. He straightened the documents out, ensuring all of the pieces were securely in place before putting it back in the folder.

“What the hell *is* that? Why do you have pictures of a dead woman?” Mason’s eyes were wide, his lip curled. They’d all seen death. Everyone who worked for the Aegis Group had served overseas. They’d all killed. But they weren’t all good at it. Travis had reservations about Mason’s hire, but he wasn’t the boss.

“None of your damn business,” Travis replied.

“Is this a job or something?” Mason glanced between Travis and Ethan, who shook his head and took another swig of his beer. The Aegis Group was a private security company—on paper. In reality, they performed a wide range of services that often skirted the law from abduction retrieval to protection details, extraction services to product procurement.

“Don’t worry about it,” Travis said.

“The fuck we won’t.” Ethan gave Travis the thousand yard stare. Travis was pretty sure Ethan was about to try to deck him for the hell of it.

“I thought we were here for a protective detail,” Mason said.

“You are. I’m not.” Travis flipped the folder closed. FBI and CONFIDENTIAL were stamped across the front of the brown surface.

“What did you get us into this time?” Ethan took two steps toward Travis, and stopped, the beer clenched in his right hand.

“You aren’t involved,” Travis replied.

“The hell I’m not. What is this?” Ethan pointed at the folder.

“Just something I’m looking into.”

“Is this why you wouldn’t go home for Christmas?” Ethan’s gaze narrowed.

Travis studied Ethan—the bloodshot eyes, the clenched hand.

This wasn’t about Travis, or his side gig researching potential cases for the Behavioral Analysis Unit, a specialized FBI team that tracked down the worst kinds of killers, something he’d gotten involved with after a copycat murderer recreated the horrors from his family’s past.

“Molly refused to split Christmas with you, didn’t she?” Travis shifted his weight onto the balls of his feet, ready to move if Ethan rushed him. The worst fight they’d had happened the day Molly told Ethan she wanted a divorce. Some emotions could only be worked out with fists.

For a second, no one moved or spoke. Travis was not looking forward to the hotel bill for trashing the place.

Ethan blew out a breath and sat down on Travis’ bed as if a one-ton weight were on his back. The spring squeaked, and the pillows bounced under the man’s bulk.

“Yeah, she did,” Ethan mumbled.

Mason’s brows rose, but he didn’t comment. The kid had some brains.

Travis stood and stretched. No fight then, which was a good thing. He’d hate to have to break Ethan’s nose, and then take his place on the protective detail because Ethan was too scary looking as a result.

“When will you get to see Nate?” Travis crossed to the mini fridge and grabbed his own beer. The case weighed heavily on him, but he’d gone through SEAL training with Ethan. Travis had been the best man at Ethan and Molly’s wedding and the first one there to load out boxes of Ethan’s things when he moved out. They were brothers in every sense of the word save blood.

“Before he goes back to school. The second through the fourth. Three days. Three fucking

days.” Ethan took another long pull on his bottle.

“Make the most of those days. Don’t dwell on what you don’t get.” Travis clinked his bottle to Ethan’s.

Travis knew what it was like to have an absent father. At least Ethan wanted to be in his son’s life. Travis was pretty certain his father hadn’t wanted to live, but he hadn’t wanted to die bad enough to do something about it. That was the kind of mark a serial killer left on a person, and it was the same darkness that passed down to Travis.

“What’s the deal with the FBI?” Mason picked up the folder from the desk and looked at the cover. “This is the real deal, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. Leave it alone.” Travis watched Mason, though not because he didn’t trust the kid. Anyone who worked at Aegis underwent a thorough background check and multiple people had to vouch for a new hire. In the field, Travis would trust Mason with his life, but he didn’t know the guy.

The younger man seemed to consider his options for a moment, and then he did the smart thing and laid the folder on the desk.

“What’s the case this time?” Ethan asked.

“Some sick fuck is kidnapping young blonde women. He keeps them for months, maybe a year, then kills them.” He left out the horrific parts about the abuse and the pregnancies. Some things the others didn’t need to know.

What did he do with the babies?

“Why is this your problem?” Mason asked.

“Ever heard of TBK?” Ethan glanced at Travis.

If Mason hadn’t already known, he would find out. It was only a matter of time until someone told him.

“Wasn’t that on the news a while back? Last year?” Mason screwed up one eye and pressed his lips together. “I was getting out of the SEALs about that time. It’s all kind of a blur.”

“Nah, man, TBKiller and that dude are two different people. TBKiller was a copycat,” Ethan said.

“My old man’s family was murdered by a serial killer. Called himself TBK. Torture. Blind. Kill.” Travis peeled part of the label off his beer. Murdered was putting it lightly. They’d been tortured in the most sadistic fashion, then before their deaths, their eyes were removed.

TBK had terrorized Oklahoma City before Travis had been born, but he had shaped Travis’ life. TBK’s last victims were Travis’ grandparents, and his father had been forced to watch it all. His old man had never fully recovered. Travis and his half-sister Emma often bore the brunt of the dysfunction.

“Fuck. I didn’t know,” Mason said.

“It happened before you or I were born.” Travis shrugged. “Last year this guy goes apeshit. Starts copying the TBK murders and leaving these sick notes for my half-sister, Emma. They killed him trying to finish Emma off. Turns out this guy, who’d worked at the corner gas station she went to all the time, is part of this...serial killer club. The BAU is—”

“BAU? What?” Mason blinked.

“Behavioral Analysis Unit. They’re the FBI unit that specializes in serial killers. They’re trying to track down the club members, but no one wants to have a serial murderer on their hands.”

“And that’s where Travis likes to help out.” Ethan thumbed at Travis.

“How?” Mason asked.

Travis could see the skepticism in Mason's eyes. The kid had been around Aegis long enough to hear rumors, stories about the Zed Team. He was probably wondering what a felon like Travis could do that the FBI couldn't.

Well fuck him.

"I let their team know where I'm working. If they have any leads, I'll look into it." Travis sipped his beer and stared at the mirror.

"Why?"

"Why the fuck do you want to know?" He scowled at Mason, but couldn't blame him. The whole gig was strange. "The FBI has to be invited into an investigation, unless it crosses state lines. Like I said, no one wants to have a serial killer on their hands."

"So you, what? Find a reason for them to come here?" Mason asked. "Why you? You're just a bodyguard."

Travis gripped the edge of the dresser.

Just a bodyguard.

"What the fuck do you know?" Ethan flipped Mason off.

He was right. All Travis was good for these days was an under-the-table gig and to catch the bullets meant for someone else. But that was his own fault. Reputable people didn't hire a felon, even an ex-Navy SEAL felon, no matter what his credentials were. How he wound up in prison didn't matter, only that he'd done time. But some jobs were made for him. He'd tracked some of the worst kinds of people across deserts, oceans, and mountains. This serial killer wouldn't know what hit him.

* * * *

She was perfect. Better than the others. She would make him a good wife and give him the child he desired. Maybe this time it would live.

Daniel checked his rearview mirror, but the street was empty and dark this late at night. The quaint old shops lined what had once been a major retail area for Las Vegas, before the casinos and the strip lured business away.

He parked the Buick Electra along a curb and killed the engine.

Wendy sat perfectly still and serene in the passenger seat.

This girl was different. He almost clapped his hands in giddy excitement. She was older, had already borne one son, but that meant she was capable of giving him what he needed. Her energy was better, too. At this point he was normally still dealing with the sobbing and the fighting back.

Wendy would make the perfect bride. She wouldn't betray him, she wouldn't fight him. They would remake history together.

Linda hadn't been good enough. She'd been selfish and unworthy, right to the end. His shoulder ached from where she'd stabbed him, so it was only fair she'd died by the same blade.

Wendy, on the other hand? He was looking forward to spending a year with this bride.

One year. One pregnancy. That was the rule. That was how he kept them from betraying him. He'd studied the greats, how they did it, what their methods were. Nothing good came from keeping her more than a year.

"What do you want?" Wendy's voice was quiet, soothing. She would be a gentle creature, which meant he needed to be mindful about how he handled her.

"I want you to marry me. Give me a son."

"I'm already married." She turned her head, and he stared into her dark brown eyes.

He punched the dashboard. The old car was sturdy and took the abuse.

How dare she speak of the other man in her life! That one was gone. She was his, now.

"I'm sorry." She recoiled, pressing her back against the car door.

"You marry me, or I kill your family. I think I'll start with your sister." He pulled a photograph of Wendy and a dark-haired woman out of his jacket pocket and laid it on the seat between them. His hidden cameras had snapped the candid shot of the two at the sister's apartment just last week.

Wendy gasped and covered her mouth.

"Or maybe I kill little Paul first?" He tossed another picture down. This time it was of a rosy-cheeked baby grinning up at the camera in his crib.

"Oh my God. How did you get that?"

"I took it. There is nowhere your loved ones will be safe from me. I'm in their lives." He laid down three more pictures. Her husband at work. Her parents in their kitchen. And lastly, a photograph of Wendy asleep in her own bed. "What'll it be, Wendy? Do you want to marry me?"

Her tears glistened in the moonlight, so precious. Each wife had to be broken so that they could be molded to his will, becoming the woman they were destined to be. The radio began playing the holiday classic White Christmas. He hummed a few bars as he took in his bride. She'd make the right choice. They always did.

Wendy nodded and swiped at her cheeks.

"If I marry you, do you promise not to hurt them?"

He leaned across the car and bumped Wendy's chin with his knuckle.

"I don't care about them, Wendy. I care about you. What do you say? Want to be Mrs. White? I like that last name. I think it'll remind us of this season."

She nodded and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Just don't hurt them," she whispered.

"I've always wanted a Christmas wedding." He shifted into drive, steering them back toward the strip and the drive-through wedding chapels, humming along to the radio.

2.

Bliss stepped into the Vegas Police Department and removed her sunglasses. She blinked away the sunspots and glanced around. The place was hopping first thing in the morning—people picking up their drunken friends, prostitutes and petty thieves posting bail. Most hadn't even been to bed yet, but that was the nature of Vegas.

She strode to the counter, twisting the strap of her purse in her hands.

Why had she waited?

"Excuse me?" she said when the officer at the counter didn't acknowledge her.

"Yeah?" The man didn't even look up from his paperwork.

"My sister, she's missing." She laid a photograph on the counter and slid it across.

"How long has she been gone?"

Gone. Not missing.

Bliss swallowed her irritation. Popular theory was that a person had to be MIA for seventy-two hours before they could be considered missing. Popular theory was wrong, and so was the idea that Wendy was just—gone. Someone needed to be searching for her now.

"She's not at her house, and she's not answering her phone. I've been trying her since last night." Bliss loved her little sister fiercely. Ever since Wendy gave birth and fell into a depression, they'd begun the habit of getting together every couple of days, sometimes to just sit on the couch and say nothing.

"When was the last time you spoke with her?"

From the bored manner of the officer's questioning, she could guess how much attention the cops were going to pay her. As soon as she mentioned the depression, they would just roll their eyes and tell her to wait.

"Yesterday afternoon. Maybe five o' clock?"

"She's been missing, what?" The officer glanced at his watch. "Sixteen hours? You sure she isn't sleeping late?"

"No." Okay, that was a lie. Wendy could be sleeping in late somewhere, just not at her house. Maybe a hotel or a spa somewhere? But she'd have at least let Bliss know.

"Ma'am, you can fill out a report, but chances are she'll show up later today." He gestured to the line of people behind her. "Forms are on the right."

"But...she's missing. She's not well. What if something happened to her? Maybe you've seen her? My height, but skinny, blonde, brown eyes. Come on."

"Fill out the paperwork, and someone will look into it. Next." He gestured to a man and woman behind her. They shouldered past, and all Bliss could do was stare at them.

Was this happening? Her sister was missing. And no one cared.

Wendy was the fragile one. Their parents coddled her, and Bliss became her protector through school. She even transferred colleges to make sure Wendy had someone in her life she could lean on. It was a relief when Grayson fell madly in love with Wendy because it meant she'd never want for anything in her life. She was completely taken care of, thanks to Grayson's lucrative career designing buildings. But since the baby, Wendy was even more delicate than usual. If Bliss didn't find her soon, oh God, she couldn't live with herself. What would she tell Grayson when he came home? At least baby Paul was with his grandparents for a few days.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" A big, hulking man loomed over her. She took a step back

instinctively. Something about him telegraphed danger in big, bold letters. He held out a slick white business card.

She glanced at the card. *Aegis Group* was printed on it in a neat type, no nonsense, no logo. Thick cardstock, with that fancy grain that spoke of understated money. These weren't bargain business cards some scam artists got off the Internet. It was the nice stuff only those who dealt with rich people used.

Her gaze traveled up the arm to his face. His short-cropped brown hair was slightly bleached, as if he spent a lot of time outside. Dark aviators hid half his face, but what she could see was his strong, angular jaw. If he were selling a product, it would be something dangerous and manly. Not guns though, he was someone who liked to use his hands. A knife, maybe something more covert.

"Can I see that picture?" He gestured to the photo she held clutched in her hand.

"Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Travis. I work with a private security company. I want to see if I can help. What's your name?"

Was this a scam? Grayson had a lot of money. What if someone picked up Wendy with the intent to ransom her back?

"Officer?" She raised her voice and side-stepped the man.

The officer sighed audibly and glanced at her, then the hulking brute.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"Some PI." The officer shrugged.

Great. Lot of good the cops were going to do her today.

"How do I know you're telling me the truth?" Bliss was running out of options. She didn't have the kind of resources Grayson did, but if she had to hire a private investigator, well, she wanted someone scary on their side, and this guy fit the bill. Hadn't he said his name? Travis?

He turned the business card over.

"Call this number. Ask them to verify for you who I am. What I do."

She took the card and studied the numbers. It was out of state. Illinois?

"Long way from home?" She dug in her purse for her phone.

"I'm here looking into a case."

"Why do you want to help me then?"

"The man I'm looking for abducts pretty blonde women born and raised in Las Vegas." She couldn't see his eyes, but the way he tipped his chin, she could feel his gaze travel the length of her body. "If your sister is anything like you, she fits the victimology."

"We're nothing alike, that's just it."

"I don't mean in looks." He leaned toward her, staring deep into her eyes. It was an intense sensation to be the focus of this man. "It's in the eyes. I can't explain it."

Bliss stared at him.

Their parents relocated to Vegas after her birth. Wendy was born in Vegas. They hadn't lived anywhere else. One of Wendy's problems, if they could be called that, was that she drew too much male attention. She was stunning, with a model's body and the sweetest disposition. People always said she had the most beautiful eyes.

"Keep talking," she said.

"The picture?" He held out his hand.

Bliss shoved the snapshot of them at him. It was from just before Wendy had given birth. She'd been tired, but happy.

Travis stared at it for several moments.

“What happens to the women?” she asked. Her mind could fill in the blanks, but she wanted to hear him say it. This couldn’t be real. This kind of thing didn’t happen in real life.

“Want to grab a seat? Maybe some coffee?”

“What happens to the women?”

He stared down at her, and the muscle on the left side of his jaw twitched.

“You should sit before I answer that question.”

“Fine. Where?”

“I saw a café down the street.”

“Lead on.” She gestured the way she’d come. For some reason she didn’t want Travis at her back. He gave her the shivers, but not in a creepy kind of way.

He nodded and strode back to the entry, pausing to hold the door open for her. She stepped out into the sunshine and shivered. Despite the clear blue sky, the breeze was unseasonably chilly. She shoved her hands in her pockets and gripped her phone with one hand, the business card with the other.

How crazy was this?

They were supposed to be planning Christmas...not this.

Her phone vibrated against her palm. She glanced at the screen and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

“Shit. It’s Grayson—uh, her husband. What do I tell him?” The same panic she’d been fighting all morning wrapped around her throat, making it hard to breath. She glanced up at Travis and she had her anchor.

“The truth,” he said.

Bliss squeezed her eyes shut and answered the phone.

“Hey,” she said.

“Morning. Sorry for calling so late. Things got out of hand this morning. My morning. Your night. How is she?” From the ambient sounds and echoing footsteps, Bliss was willing to bet her brother-in-law was doing some sort of site walkthrough.

“I’ve got some bad news.” She stared at Travis, who gave her a nod.

“What is it?”

“Wendy...is...she’s...Oh, God, Grayson...” She nearly collapsed right there on the sidewalk. Travis caught her around the shoulders while she sobbed and guided her to a bench. He perched next to her, one arm slung around her in a protective embrace.

“Give it to me,” he whispered.

“Hold on.” She thrust the phone into his hand and covered her face, leaning against him.

“Grayson, my name is Travis Ration, I work for the Aegis Group, a—” He paused and glanced away. “Well, at least we don’t have to do that. Sir, I’m sorry to tell you like this, but your wife appears to have gone missing...Last night. I met Bliss at the PD a few minutes ago, looking into a case I think might be involved...That won’t be necessary...That would work...Here she is.” Travis thrust the phone into her hands. “I’ll be right over there.”

He got up, and she missed his warmth and protective presence immediately. She watched him walk away, hands in his pockets, head swinging side to side, as if he were already on the lookout.

“Bliss?”

“Hey, sorry, it’s me.”

“Is he...is he serious?”

“Dead serious.” She cringed at her poor word choice.

“I’m catching the next plane home. It’ll take me at least sixteen hours from London. We’re going to retain Aegis Group to find her. I don’t care what it costs.” He didn’t skip a beat. There wasn’t any shock or dismay, no denial, he just...hired Travis, a complete stranger, to do it.

“Is that...smart?” She turned and pitched her voice lower. “Who is this guy?”

“I don’t know who he is, but Aegis is the best. Worth every penny.”

What the hell kind of job was he doing that was that dangerous? Didn’t Grayson build offices or something?

“I’m going to lose you. I’ll call back in a bit. I want to know everything.”

She hung up the phone and leaned forward, planting her elbows on her knees. They were supposed to be shopping today for presents. Bliss had even planned to coordinate with Priscilla to make sure the house got decorated and presents wrapped so Wendy didn’t feel the crush of organizing it herself.

What if she never saw her sister again?

* * * *

Wendy sat with her back to the wall of the cave. Metal bars blocked her path out of the cave or farther back into the rocks. It wasn’t wide, maybe ten or twelve feet across. The bottom was smoothed out. A few rugs and pieces of furniture took up the rest of the space. It was a far cry from the Vegas mansion her husband built for them following their wedding, but at least there was no draft. There was also no light unless Daniel came back.

Her *husband*.

She shuddered and squeezed her eyes shut. The darkness spun around her, and she pitched sideways, landing on the soft, inviting bed.

Wendy scrambled to her feet and backed toward the cave entrance. She couldn’t touch the furniture. For a brief period of time when the lights overhead had illuminated her prison, and she did her best to take stock of what was there. That was when she found them. Three pairs of women’s panties stashed under the mattress. All different sizes.

Grayson was her husband, not this crazy psycho. Grayson, who she loved. They had a baby together. Paul.

Oh, Paul.

Her heart clenched and in that moment, she’d have given anything to hold her baby. Anything at all. She never wanted something so bad before, and now it might be too late. Her previous baby boy.

“Hey. Hey.”

She pressed her hands over her ears, willing the voices to go away. She couldn’t handle them. Their smell. She couldn’t even deal with being there.

“Where did Linda go?”

“He killed her.”

“Are you sure? She said, but Linda said there were others before us. I mean, I just thought he kept the women a long time.”

“What do you think?”

“Is she Linda now?”

Wendy squeezed her eyes shut. The three men were in smaller cells behind hers, which meant that in order for Daniel to get to them, he had to go through hers. She could smell the men,

or maybe it was their bandages. Was that her fate? What was going to happen to her? Would he chop off parts of her like he'd done to them?

She didn't dare attempt an escape, not when he'd kill her baby.

* * * *

Travis was far too big to fit in the only unoccupied booth in the café. He didn't dare suggest somewhere farther from the PD for fear the woman across from him might faint or cry or something. She'd seemed on the brink of falling apart outside, but she'd rallied and followed him to the café without so much as a tear.

"Here's your coffee. Can I get you anything else?" The waitress deposited a carafe on the table along with cream and sugar.

"No, thank you," he replied.

The woman across from him shook her head. Her shoulder length brown hair swished around her face, all glossy looking. For some crazy reason he wanted to touch it. To run his fingers through her pretty hair and see if it felt as soft as it looked. He kept his hands to himself. Girls like her didn't need men like him in their lives.

"Bliss, right?"

She nodded her head, sending those strands moving again.

"Yeah, sorry, I didn't introduce myself did I? I'm Bliss Giles." She cupped the empty ceramic mug with both hands.

He picked up the carafe and poured her some coffee first, then himself. This wasn't his thing. He didn't deal with clients, he wasn't the person to offer comfort or hope. His history hadn't wired him that way, but for her he'd try.

"Tell me about the last time you saw your sister. Do you mind if I take notes?"

"You said you'd tell me what happened to the other women." Her dark brown eyes focused on him. She was no longer on the verge of tears or lost in thought. He kind of liked being the center of her focus.

"You don't want to know that."

"Yes, I do. And I want to know why you think my sister might be one of them." She tapped the photograph of Wendy he'd laid on the table.

The two sisters couldn't be more different. At least on the surface level.

Wendy was petite, blonde, and almost breakable looking. Bliss was shapely, luscious, and that dark hair set off her pale, perfect skin. The one thing the sisters shared was their dark brown, almost black eyes. He'd heard someone call eyes that dark soulless eyes, but looking at Bliss, that sentiment couldn't be further from the truth. It was the intangible quality the camera captured that he'd seen in the other victim's photographs pre-death. A light. An inner brightness. This killer snuffed out truly bright flames, and for what?

He was going to find out.

"Tell me." She leaned closer.

He'd have to give her the Cliff notes version. What would he tell his sister?

No, that was a bad gauge. His sister kept a living collection of TBK documents and coverage. He'd likely tell her everything, because they'd lived through worse.

"Over the last seven years nine Las Vegas women, all blonde, have gone missing. They turn up between a couple months to a year after they were abducted. Dead. About twenty-four hours after the time of death, another girl is taken."

“What aren’t you telling me? I could find that out for myself.”

“Some things you don’t want to know.”

“I have a right to know. That’s my sister.”

“Then tell me about the last time you saw her. Let me find her.”

“I want to know what you aren’t telling me.”

She was a stubborn little thing.

Travis cleared his throat and made himself relax. Their knees bumped under the table and she shifted, bumping into his other knee. Her cheeks tinged pink, and she finally looked away from him. Interesting. She’d challenge him, but a little knee bump was too much? Women were a mystery.

And better off far away from him.

He had no business thinking about Bliss that way. He was a felon. There was no place for a woman in his life.

“When was the last time you saw Wendy?” He picked up his pen. As fun as it was to share coffee with a pretty girl instead of Ethan’s ugly mug, this was about life and death.

“Yesterday, around five. I left work and stopped by her place to check on her.” She tore open sugar packets one at a time and upended them into her coffee. Her fingers were small, nimble, with nails in three shades of purple. The bangles on her wrist clanged and chimed as she moved, drawing his attention back to her smallest movement.

“Check on her? Was something wrong? Did she tell you anything?”

“Wendy...” Bliss bit her lip and glanced out of the window, tucking her hair behind her ear. There was a small tattoo there, partially hidden. It made him wonder if there was more ink on her body. Not that it was any of his business. “Wendy has post-partum depression. Her in-laws are babysitting Paul while her husband is out of town. They’re looking for a nanny to take care of him. Well, both of them, really. She’s been very out of sorts since his birth.”

“She just had a baby?” He swallowed.

Fuck.

“Yeah. Why? Is that important?”

“Is the baby missing?” His gut rolled, and he gripped the pen so tight the plastic buckled under his fingers.

“No, he’s with his grandparents.”

“Poor kid,” he muttered. “Did she say anything about seeing anyone? Someone following her? Anyone giving her the creeps?”

“No. Wendy barely leaves the house unless someone makes her. The depression is really bad.”

“Have you been to her house?”

“Yeah, she was supposed to meet me this morning, but she didn’t show, so I went to get her out of bed. The house is perfect. Clean. The beds all made.”

“Could she be at a hotel or somewhere?”

“I don’t think so. If Wendy didn’t have to leave the house, she wouldn’t. This depression, it’s bad. If we didn’t make her eat, she would starve.”

“Could I take a look at the house? I might see something you don’t.”

“What’s so bad you won’t tell me?” Once more, those dark eyes focused on him, compelling him to share the worst of it with her.

“We’re going to find her before that’s an issue.”

What the hell?

He couldn't promise her that, and yet he just had.

3.

Blood.

The stone below the bed was stained with blood.

Wendy gripped the bars as her stomach revolted. Bile coated her mouth, and the muscles in her abdomen and chest tensed in irregular rhythms. Dying might be less painful.

“Lady, hey lady, you got to calm down.” Stumpy was in the cell right behind her. He only had one foot. The other leg was mostly gone.

“Take a deep breath.” That order came from the old one. He sat on the floor, never moving out of his pile of rags.

The lights were back on, which wasn’t much of an improvement. It illuminated the horrors her mind had created, making them real. Like the blood.

“Is he going to kill us?” she asked.

It was the first time she’d spoken directly to the men.

“Us? Probably,” Stumpy said.

“Why?” Her knees gave out, and she sat down with her back against the bars drilled into the stone and faced her fellow prisoners. For the first time in months, she wanted something.

She wanted to live.

Depression had clouded her judgement and sucked the life out of her for so long, she forgot what it was like to feel. Emotion swirled within her. Sorrow at never being able to hold her baby and love him like he deserved. Her beautiful, miracle baby. Regret at not answering the phone when Grayson called the night before. He was so patient with her. She didn’t deserve the kind of life he’d given her. Shame for leaning on her sister so much. Bliss practically managed Wendy’s life, and for what? Wendy was so selfish and wretched she couldn’t even say thank you. So many things.

“You don’t want to know.” Stumpy smiled at her. It was a sad expression. Under the dirt and flecks of blood he had a kind face, sort of boyish and round.

“Us he’ll kill. You, he’ll rape until you’re pregnant, and keep you locked up until you give birth.”

Wendy stared at the old man. Was he serious? She pressed her knees together. It had taken her four years to get pregnant with her husband, whom she loved and adored.

And now some sicko wanted her to give him a baby?

“Hush, don’t tell her that,” Stumpy snapped.

“She needs to know. If Linda was right, we’re next. He’ll clean house so she doesn’t know anything. She needs to know.”

“Oh God.” The tears trickled down her cheeks.

Stumpy used the bars to hop-walk his way to the corner. He knelt and whispered something at the older one. There was a third behind them, but she hadn’t heard more than moans coming from his cell since earlier. The two spoke in hushed voices.

Wendy wasn’t going to survive this. She’d never been strong like her older sister. If Bliss were here, she’d be halfway to figuring out how to break the iron bars. The very least Wendy could do was stay put. Ensure that Bliss, Grayson, and Paul got to keep living. That was the bargain she’d made Daniel. If she kept up her part of it, he’d let them live.

“Hey, look at me.” Stumpy crouched down, peering at her from across the cave. “What’s

your name?"

"Wendy," she replied.

"Robert is right." Stumpy put his forehead against the bars. "Daniel's probably going to kill us. Our only hope is to pass the story along, the one Linda told us. Do you think you can listen? Can you remember it?"

"Do I have to?" She shuddered. The last thing she wanted in her head was a gruesome story about her captor.

"There's not much time." Stumpy glanced behind him. "That one's dying. I've still got my leg and both my arms left, but he's going to take those soon."

"He cut your leg off?" Wendy gaped in new horror.

"He started with my toes."

"Oh, God," she chanted and covered her face.

"I have a family. They probably aren't looking for me, though. I was an addict, couch hopping. No one cares about me, but I'd like my family to know what happened."

"Why are you telling me this? If I die, too..."

Robert leaned toward her. Part of the blanket fell away and she realized...his arms were gone. "Girl, someday one of us will live, and that one has to know the story, so we all live beyond this nightmare."

She wanted to be the girl who lived, but she wasn't that strong.

* * * *

Bliss led the way up the walk to Wendy's Las Vegas house. Or mansion. The place was big enough to fit her apartment in the entry alone.

"Have you considered this is a ransom job?" Travis asked.

"That was my first thought when I saw you, actually." She fit the key in the lock. "You should know, I have zero access to their money. I'm the poor one of the family." She meant it as a joke, but it fell flat. Her living might be modest, but she didn't want for anything. Okay, so she wanted a hunky guy, but she could get that on pay-per-view.

Travis did that thing again—she could feel him looking her over, but now, without the sunglasses, she knew just where his gaze lingered. There was something about it that made her pulse jump.

It had to be the coffee.

"If someone wanted money for her, you'd have heard from them by now."

"What exactly is it you do? Why does a PI work ransom cases?" She slid the key into the lock and twisted. The door swung inward, and she stepped over the threshold. The alarm beeped at her, and she left Travis to close the door while she entered the code.

"Was the alarm armed this morning?" Travis closed the door and spent a moment flipping the locks and studying the frame.

"Yes."

"Any security cameras?"

"No, but the security office should have some. Grayson was adamant they only build in a gated community with real security."

"What does Grayson do? Any enemies?" He slowly walked a circle, his gaze traveling all over the foyer, up the stairs to the second level.

"He designs buildings. Big ones."

“Where is he now?”

“He’s hitting three or four big meetings all over the place. Chicago. New York. London and...Mexico City? His company is putting in bids, and he has to go present designs or whatever it is they do. Why? You think it’s connected to him? I thought you said it was this other guy.”

“I don’t want to rule anything out.” He turned to face her, those green, unreadable eyes on her now. Hot damn, he was good looking.

And yet...

He wasn’t answering her questions. She didn’t know what horrible things had happened to the missing women, or what this guy actually did.

“I just let you into their house, and I have no clue who you really are. Grayson seemed to know who Aegis is, but—you could be lying.” Boy, was she dumb. He’d given her a card and what had she done? Gone for coffee.

“I told you, my name is Travis.”

“Travis what?”

“Travis Ration. I work for Aegis Group.”

“What the hell is that? What do you do?”

“It’s a private security firm.”

“And you’re their PI?”

“Not...exactly.”

“Then what are you?”

“You know the guy they send in to get a job done, no matter the cost?”

“Yeah?”

“That’s me.”

The way he said it...so cold, stark...it sent a shiver down her spine.

“Then why this case? It doesn’t make sense to be here if you’re a finisher.”

“I’m doing a favor for a friend. They asked me to look into this for them, so here I am.”

“What kind of friend asks you to look into murderers?”

“The kind with a badge.”

“You aren’t giving me real answers.”

“Call the number. I’m going to look around the house. They’ve probably already processed the paperwork for this gig.” He turned and strode through the double archway into the football-field sized living room.

She watched him go, her gaze drawn to his ass. If she were a normal girl, she was sure there would be other thoughts in her head, but she’d spent all last week helping supply dildos for a porn movie filming down the block from her warehouse. Those were always the worst. The producer was a nice woman who got way too excited about her job and overshares raw footage Bliss did not need to see.

Right. She had things to do. Like find her missing sister.

The business card was at the bottom of her purse already. She dug it out and punched in the numbers.

“Aegis Group. How may I direct your call?” The voice was professional, male. He sounded like he’d sell soap products or something domestic. Not at all sexy like the big brute stomping through her sister’s house.

“Hi, yeah, I need to verify this guy I met actually works for you.”

“I can do that. Do you have a case number?”

“Uh, what? No. He said paperwork was processing. I want to know what it is you do.”

“Okay. Well, Aegis Group is a private security firm. Let me pull up our new cases.”

“He said that much. What do you really do?”

For a moment he didn’t answer.

“What do you need done?” he asked. A bit of the soap bubble clean faded away and she could hear an edge in his voice.

“My sister is missing and my brother-in-law just hired him over the phone. He wants to help me find her. I think. Or do you have her?”

“Who is your sister and who is he?”

“Wendy Horton, and he said his name is Travis Ration.”

“Ah. Travis. I saw that request come through. It’s marked urgent so it’ll be processed before noon. Travis will find her.”

“How do you know that? And how do you know this is really Travis?”

“Does he look like someone you wouldn’t want to meet in an alley at night?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s Travis. Ask him about Port Said.”

“What the hell is Port Said?”

“It’s a city. In Egypt. Anything else I can do for you?”

“What the hell do you really do?”

“What we are paid to do. Travis can fill in the blanks. Good luck.”

“What does that mean? Hello?” Bliss looked at the screen.

Call ended.

What the hell had she gotten herself involved in? Who was Travis? What kind of company was this? She couldn’t waste her time with this nonsense, except he was all she had as a means to find Wendy. She glanced at the time. Grayson would expect her or Wendy to check in soon. What would she tell him?

She searched the first floor, but Travis was nowhere to be found. How could a big man like him be so hard to find?

Bliss used the servant’s stairs to get to the second floor. She paused on the landing and listened.

Nothing.

What did she know about this guy? Why was she trusting him? And how did Grayson know all about this company?

She crept toward the master bedroom on the east side of the house. The double doors were open and so were the curtains. She peered into the room, and found herself staring at a hard wall of man chest.

“Who is that outside?” he pointed at the windows.

“Shit. You scared me.” She laid her hand against her pounding heart and strode to the window. “Oh. Landscaper.”

“He has a key?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Who else has a key to the house?”

“Priscilla, their housekeeper. The landscaper. The launderer. Um, I think there’s an assistant of Grayson’s. Then my parents. Oh. The babysitter service has one on file, too.”

“Shit.” Travis scrubbed a hand over his face.

“Why?”

“That’s a lot of people to trust with things like security codes and keys. Too many chances

someone got access your family didn't want here."

"What about Port Said?"

Travis' head jerked up and his gaze narrowed. She resisted the urge to take a step back. Damn, he was hot, but in a scary way. The guy on the phone was right. Travis wasn't the kind of person she wanted to meet in a dark alley, that was for sure. Or maybe she did, but only if he used his mouth.

God, she needed some alone time with her vibrator, soon.

"Who told you about that?"

"The guy who answered the phone. I didn't get a name." She shrugged. Okay, maybe asking him that was a set up.

"Christ." He shook his head.

"So...going to tell me about it?"

He sighed and took a seat on a dainty, padded bench under the windows.

"We got this emergency job once. Middle of Arab Spring. These girls were vacationing in Italy, decided to hop a boat to Egypt and got themselves kidnapped. The people who abducted them weren't the ransom kind. We had to get creative with how we found them. Nearly lost two guys on that job."

"Why would anyone want me to know that?"

"Beats me. It's not the kind of thing nice girls need to know."

Nice girl? Ha!

Somehow Bliss didn't think he was telling her the whole story. But there had to be something there. A reason why he was the person to help her find her sister.

"I think I know how the suspect got in," he said.

"What?" She stared at him. There was proof? Something they could take to the cops? "Show me."

Travis led the way back downstairs and to the rear wall of windows that provided a lovely view of the pool. He went to a knee next to the French doors and pointed at what looked to be a scuff on the wood paneling.

"What am I looking at?" she asked.

"The security lines have been looped back on themselves. Open the door."

She unlocked the door and pulled it open.

Silence had never unnerved her more.

Bliss closed the door, and opened it again.

"The system is supposed to announce when a door is opened. I was here two days ago and when Priscilla came in from the pool it announced, back door." She stared at Travis.

"Did they do any security upgrades recently?"

"I...uh....I don't know. Maybe? Around the time Paul was born, they had a lot of people in and out, prepping the house for the baby." She pressed her hand to her head. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't be right.

"Bliss?" Travis gripped her shoulders and guided her to an armchair. He took a knee and stayed right by her side.

"Oh, God. I think I'm going to throw up. What happened? Where is she? Who did this?"

"I don't know. Do you...have someone you want to stay with?"

"You are not looking for my sister without me." There were a dozen very good reasons why she should let the man do his job, but this was her sister they were talking about.

"I understand your concern. I'm very good at what I do. I'm going to go to the security

offices. It's clear whoever got in here knew what they were doing. How to do it. And were able to motivate Wendy to leave with them without a struggle."

"Okay." She stood. "Ready."

Travis blinked at her.

"I meant, I'll go handle that. You should take it easy. Stay here in case someone calls."

"Wendy is my sister. Whenever she's needed help or gotten herself in trouble, I've been there for her. You will have to lock me up to keep me out of this." Bliss didn't care how big or scary he was, she would always be there for Wendy. Especially now.

4.

Travis drove through the gated community, acutely aware of the tense silence between him and his passenger. He watched Bliss from the corner of his eye. She sat straight up, her hands in her lap, posture tense.

He'd had to face down a number of men and women who thought their dollars bought them a shotgun seat on the jobs Aegis was hired to do. The problem was that the moment an untrained civilian was put in the mix, things changed. Their unit was pulling bodyguard detail in addition to whatever they were hired to do. It just didn't fly. They couldn't risk being divided like that.

Then why was she sitting shotgun in his rental?

Back at the house, he'd backed down, even when every shred of training and experience said that Bliss Giles needed to stay right where she was.

He didn't need help. If a situation required backup, both Ethan and Mason were in Vegas. No doubt now that Wendy's husband was retaining their services, the others would be briefed. Which meant Travis needed to have a sitrep with the BAU. He was no longer their man on the job. His loyalty would always be to Aegis first. The management had given him a chance when no one else would.

It was the conviction. The way Bliss had stared him down, he'd known that he'd either keep her close or spend precious time checking up on her following him. He just hoped she could keep up.

"We have to have some ground rules," he said.

Bliss turned her head toward him, but didn't speak.

"If we don't find Wendy in the next forty-eight hours, chances are we won't find her. I need you to agree to do what I say, when I say it. And if you think you can't do that, stay behind."

"I understand," she said.

"Some of our guys are good with clients. They know how to keep them positive, calm. That's not me. I'm not a people person."

"Never would have guessed that, sunshine. Pull in here." She tapped the window. "If you promise to not keep secrets, then yes, I'll do whatever you say."

Secrets. His life was built on them. She didn't know what she was asking.

"First thing, don't tell anyone else Wendy is missing." He pulled into the parking spaces outside the security office and killed the engine.

"Why?"

"Whoever took her knew what they were doing. They've done this before. If the cops or FBI get involved it might escalate the situation, and he could end up killing her before his appointed time."

"Boy, you are cheerful."

"Let's go."

"Wait."

"What?"

"What's the second thing?"

He stared at her.

"You said first thing, what's the second?"

"I'll tell you when I know."

Bliss met him in front of the SUV, and together they entered the security office. An older man eyed him with obvious distrust.

“What can I do for you?” the guard asked.

“Hi. I need to review some footage from last night.” Travis fished out another business card and offered it to the guard.

“Afraid I can’t do that,” the guard said.

“Actually, you have to. In that HOA my sister signed, it said residents can access the footage. Mr. Ration here has been hired by my brother-in-law. Grayson Horton, you know him?” Bliss leaned against the desk and smiled. He’d seen mercenaries who looked friendlier than she did right now.

“What exactly is it Mr. Horton is looking for?” The guard hadn’t moved, but they had the upper hand.

“The footage?” Travis prompted.

“Over here.” The guard got up and walked around a partition.

Travis followed him to a bank of monitors that showed the streets and entries into the community. It was a fairly common system.

“I can take it from here, thanks.” Travis squeezed past the man and pulled out a chair. Bliss was right behind him and gave the guard a pointed *get lost* stare.

“Let me know if you need anything.” The guard looked like he’d just sucked on a lemon, but he gave them space.

Travis opened the files containing the last twenty-four hours of footage for each entry and cued them up.

“What are we looking for?” Bliss bent and peered over his shoulder.

“Something that doesn’t belong.”

He started with one gate at five o’ clock, the last time Bliss had seen her sister, and put the footage on fast forward through the night. He made notes about cars, the movements of people, anything out of the ordinary. He was starting to think the kidnapper must have used another point of entry by the time he got to the front gate. It was the least appealing entrance, based on traffic and the face to face time with the guards, and yet...

“There.”

Travis paused the footage on the car leaving.

“What? What is it?” Bliss sat forward and looked up from her phone.

“This car. It arrived with a man inside, and is leaving with a passenger. Even the help drive better cars than this.”

“Are you sure?” Bliss squinted at the screen.

“Yes.”

He jotted down the make, model, and license. The image was too dark and grainy to get a facial on either person in the car, but it was a start.

“Come on.”

Travis stood, and Bliss yelped. Her arm shot out, and her eyes went round. He reached out and snatched her before she landed on the tile floor. Her hands gripped his biceps, and her face was so close he could smell lemon on her breath and see lighter flecks of color in her dark eyes. Her body was soft, fitting against him in ways that would haunt him later.

“Everything okay?” the guard called.

“Fine.” Travis cleared his throat and took a step back, putting Bliss at arm’s length. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you were going to move that fast.” She laid a hand on her chest and blew out a breath. Her cheeks were pink again.

Damn. He could have touched her hair if he’d thought about it. Now that was a creeper idea. He needed to convince Bliss to stick to the sidelines, or she was going to become a distraction he couldn’t afford.

“Let’s get out of here.” He gestured behind her, and this time, waited for Bliss to lead the way out of the guard shack.

On the way out to the SUV, he pulled out his cell phone. Did he call Aegis? They were technically on the case to retrieve Wendy. He’d updated the chain of command via text after speaking with Grayson. But the FBI might have better intel. He wouldn’t mention that to their guys—it would chap their asses. Why not make two calls?

He hit dial, climbed into the truck, turned it on and flipped the heat to high. The Bluetooth activated almost instantly, and the call rang through the speakers.

“Ration!”

“Gavin?” Travis frowned. “Where’s Zain?” The kid was another Zain in the making, except he had both hands. But Zain had ten plus years on Gavin and the kind of experience in covert and black ops that couldn’t be bought. Plus he could tech circles around anyone, even the FBI and other government agencies who regularly courted at least half of the people on Aegis’ payroll. Even Gavin.

“Captain Hook took the week off for some spacey, blue box thing. You know him, can’t resist the geek beacon. He forwarded your text to me.” Gavin muted whatever was playing in the background before speaking. “Zain forwarded your text. Pulled the info on the girl. She’s cute for a chubby girl. Did you know she works for a sex toy store? Man, some of those things—”

“She’s listening,” Bliss announced at the same time Travis disconnected the Bluetooth.

“Keep your fucking opinions to yourself. I’ve got a license plate I need you to run,” he said.

“Uh...Right, okay.”

Sex toys?

He kept his gaze straight ahead, but his mind was already working overtime. What exactly did she do for them? Product testing?

“Can she hear me?” Gavin whispered. If it were possible, the kid had worse customer service skills than Travis.

“License plate.” Fuck. Why did Zain have to be off on one of his nerd things?

“Right. I am so sorry, man. I’ll email the stuff to you. She’s clean. Well, I don’t know her medical history, but otherwise, nothing hinky going on there. Unless it’s in the bedroom. You think—”

Travis rattled off the plate number. Normally he wouldn’t care what shit came out of Gavin’s mouth, but this time it mattered. Without even looking at Bliss he was aware of her tense posture, the way she’d sat up straighter, smoothed her clothes down.

Chubby? That was not the word Travis would use. Gavin needed to grow the fuck up and stop looking at skin mags as his guide to women. Bliss was...real.

“Right. That plate traces back to a truck that was stolen,” he said.

“The plates were on a car. Buick Electra, 1970s make I think, beige.”

“Okay. Um, let me see what I can look up.”

“Fine.”

“Ration?”

“What?”

“Are you going to bang her?”

Travis rolled his eyes and ended the call.

Fucking Gavin. The guy was freakishly smart, but not where it counted sometimes. Travis remained still, waiting for the feminine explosion of rage. When Bliss didn't react, much less respond, he glanced her way. She'd pulled out her cell phone and was otherwise occupied. Should he apologize? He hadn't done anything wrong, and yet he couldn't shake the urge to make things right.

He'd call the BAU first. Maybe the right thing to do would come to him.

The call to his contact at the BAU went faster. They were no doubt working their own case and would go over the research when they could. By the time he hung up with the unit chief, he still didn't know what to say to Bliss.

“Sorry about Gavin. He's a stupid shit.”

There.

That was good, right?

He reversed out of the spot and drove them out through the front gates.

“Your phone is really loud, just so you know.” She glanced up. “Where are we going?”

Shit.

He was going to deck Gavin.

“Lunch? It'll take them a while to search for leads on the car. I can drop you back at your car if you like.”

“No, that's fine. I told my boss I was going to be out for a few days. I have a few things I'll need to do, but they can wait.”

Her at work...what did that mean? Did she test batteries in vibrators? Make them? Travis had never needed to use toys on a woman before. Everything he knew about them came from porn.

Shit. He wasn't any better than Gavin.

“You can ask me about it. My job, I mean.” Bliss sighed and stared out of the passenger window.

He wanted to ask, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

“So...what is it you do?”

“I'm the sales manager for the Blush Shoppe. We sell a wide range of adult toys.” She leaned her head against the seat and turned to watch him.

“You sell...what, exactly?”

“Have you ever seen a vibrator in person?” She chuckled.

“No.”

“Oh, that was a fast reply.”

He merged onto the highway but didn't miss the way Bliss rolled her eyes.

“What's that supposed to mean?” he asked.

“Guys and vibrators. You're all so intimidated by them.”

“I am not.”

“You're awfully defensive about it. What's wrong with a vibrator?” She turned to face him and perched her elbow on the armrest, leaning closer.

Did she have one? He was willing to bet she did by the way she spoke. Unbidden images unfolded in his mind. Bliss on her back, her hands between her legs...

“Nothing.” He pulled into the first fast food restaurant he saw. The better to get out of this conversation.

“But you don’t like them. Guys have porn. Why can’t girls have vibrators?”

“It’s not like that.” He turned the SUV off and opened the door. Her sigh played on repeat to the mental image of Bliss pleasuring herself. It was damn frustrating to not be able to touch.

“Then what’s the issue?” She made no move to get out of the truck.

He closed his door and faced her.

“Why need it at all?” he asked.

“Seriously?”

“A man should be able to take care of his woman’s needs.” Oh, if Bliss were his...she’d never have needs.

“What about everyone else? Not all of us have a man. And even the ones that do, what’s wrong with it? I mean, do you only like one position for sex? Or do you change it up?” She froze, as if she hadn’t intended to pose those questions to him.

This conversation should end. He needed to get out of the car, get some air, and pretend this never happened.

But he now knew one very important bit of information.

Bliss was single.

Her cheeks grew bright red.

Damn him.

“I like all the positions,” he said.

Her, he’d do from behind so he could get his hands on her ass, a handful of her hair, bend her neck a bit for a hard kiss.

Bliss cleared her throat. Her hands were wrapped so tight around her phone her knuckles were white.

“That’s not the point. I just meant...why limit the ways to enjoy sex?”

“That’s never been a problem.”

“Okay, then what if it can be different? Not better, just a little change.”

“If a guy is doing it right—”

“But why does it have to be about the guy? Why can’t it be about the girl?”

“It is.”

“No, you keep coming at this talking about the man taking care of the woman, the man doing it right. It’s about you. Not your partner. That right there is invalidating everything you say about wanting the other person to enjoy themselves, because it’s about you. Let’s just eat.” She opened the car door and slipped out while he stared at the space she’d just vacated.

He wasn’t selfish in bed. Was he?

5.

Bliss sat down in a corner booth with her tray.

“Oh my God,” she muttered to herself and buried her face in her hands.

Had she really just said that to Travis? A complete stranger? What had she been thinking?

She unzipped her hoodie and shed the outer layer. Her blush was still firmly in place, and to make it worse, she was hot all over now. The way Travis had looked at her and said...

Nope. She had to not think about that.

As if thinking of him summoned the man, he sank into the seat across from her. His legs immediately took up every available inch of below-table space she wasn't occupying. His knee brushed hers, their feet touched, tapped, and shuffled around as they situated themselves.

At least in a crowded restaurant, with children on either side of them, he'd let the conversation drop. Right?

He leaned toward her. There was a determined, focused look aimed directly at her. She squeezed her thighs together. This was not the time.

How was it she'd started working for Blush Shoppe not even being able to say the word *vibrator*, and now she was championing pleasure for all to a man she'd just met?

“I am not selfish,” he said, pitching his voice low.

“Can we drop it?” she whispered, glancing around as if everyone knew what they were talking about.

“I'm not selfish,” he said again.

“Okay. Fine. I'm sure you're very generous.”

“What am I supposed to think, though? I don't have the right tools for the job?” He ducked his head at the word tools.

“It's not that.” She unwrapped her burger. Her words needed to be chosen very carefully, not only because of where they were, but because Travis wasn't arguing against her. He was just a guy with normal guy hang-ups.

“Then what is it?”

“You're...focused on one type of tool. You don't use the same tools for every job. And I think you're only thinking about the...tab A in slot B scenario. What about everyone else? What about combinations of everyone else?” Their business served not just heterosexual couples, but every identification and sexual preference under the sun. Or close enough.

“Okay.” Travis' brows were a dark line across his forehead, and his lips were pressed tightly together.

Neither of them had touched their food.

She needed another approach.

Think. Think. Think.

“Why do we have tools? Hammers, wrenches, all that stuff.” She grabbed a fry and popped it in her mouth. Yeah, so Gavin what's-his-name had pegged her for being chubby. So what? She liked food.

“Because they're a more efficient way of getting a job done.”

“Or...they do a job we physically cannot do. Think of...slot B...having parts that the human body cannot touch. Using the right tool you can. And...it's fun. What's wrong with that?”

He continued to stare at her for several moments.

“Nothing,” he finally said.

“Are you seeing my point?”

“Maybe.”

“Travis, it’s not about tab A being the wrong size or length, it’s about finding a fun way to get the job done. Try it sometime.” She picked up her burger and took a bite.

Victory tasted like a quarter pound of beef with melty cheese. Her stomach growled, driving home the point she hadn’t had breakfast.

“Mm.” She licked a bit of cheese off her finger and glanced at Travis, who had yet to move.

He was staring at her, but not in the same way he had when she was speaking. Now he looked more like he had in the car.

All the positions.

All of them? In one go? Or would he spread them out over a week?

Shit.

Her sister might very well have been kidnapped, and she was sitting in a burger joint daydreaming about sex. She plucked a fry from the cup and crossed her legs, ignoring the sizzle of awareness that shot up her leg when she brushed against Travis under the table.

“What aren’t you telling me about the women that were found dead?” she asked again.

The heat in his gaze died, and a predator of another nature stared back at her. She had no doubt that Travis Ration was a dangerous man. He was her dangerous man for now.

“Believe me when I say you don’t want to know. We need to focus on finding your sister, fast.”

“How are we going to do that? This guy, he got into their house, changed their security system, and God only knows what else.” When she looked at it like that, there wasn’t a lot of hope left.

He sighed and rubbed the side of his head.

“Port Said.”

“What about it?” She didn’t really care anymore.

“When we went into that op, we had seven guys to rescue two girls that were being held by a trafficking group. They controlled the area, took two of our guys hostage, and injured three others. That left me and another guy to make the call. I’m shit at field medicine, so he had to take care of the other three while I went to get our guys back and find the girls, but they’d moved them out of the city. I spent a couple days on my own, tracking them down to a fishing village where they were waiting for pickup.”

“Shut up.” Her mind painted the images—a beautiful, Mediterranean vista, white buildings, blue mosaics, and men with guns. Lots of guns. In the middle of it all was Travis. She doubted he wore camo paint on his face, but her brain supplied that feature anyway.

“Found the girls first, which was shitty luck, because they screamed every time they saw their shadow, but we all got out of there alive.”

“Were you hurt?”

“Yeah.”

“How bad?”

“Took a couple bullets, broke my nose.” He shrugged as if it weren’t an issue.

“And you walked out of there?”

“Adrenaline works for you in an instance like that.”

She swallowed hard. Her brain wasn’t capable of comprehending what he’d done. It played in her head like an action flick, but it wasn’t entertainment. This was his life. He was the real

deal.

“What were you? I mean, before Aegis?”

“I was a SEAL.”

“Working for Aegis is better?”

“It’s a good gig.” He shrugged. “My point is, if she’s out there, I’ll find her.”

Bliss chewed her lip. He might find Wendy, but would she be alive?

“You done?” He gestured to her folded wrapper and empty fry cup.

“Yeah.” She glanced at her phone. Yet another message marked urgent hovered in her notification bar. “I need to run by my office.”

“No problem. Can I ask you questions on the way?”

“What kind of questions?”

“About your sister. I’m looking for where the other victim’s lives intersect.”

“Sure. If it’ll help, I’ll answer what I can.”

“Good.”

Travis picked up her tray and scooted out of the booth. She followed, lagging behind a bit. He’d taken how many bullets and just kept going? He didn’t limp. There was a smoothness to his stride, and his posture spoke of confidence. What good thing had she done to randomly run into him like she had?

* * * *

Bliss gave Travis directions to her Blush Shoppe office. Their storefront was within easy walking distance of the Vegas strip. They often got foot traffic from vacationers looking for something crazy to add to their experience. The Blush Shoppe was by far the biggest retail store in the city.

She did her best to black out the little fact that she was about to bring this man into her workspace. Her very sexual and graphic workspace. Bliss’ office might be on the third story, far away from the retail areas, but they still had to go through the store and one of their storage areas. Instead, she focused on the questions Travis fired at her. They covered everything from where Wendy had gone to grade school to where she got her nails done.

“Tell me about the security system again,” he said.

“They got it installed right before Wendy gave birth.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Gosh, Paul is six months old, so probably eight or so months ago?”

“Who responds to the security calls?”

“I don’t know. The police?”

“There’s two basic kinds of security systems. Monitored and un-monitored. A monitored system will have someone who contacts the home owner, maybe through the control panel or a phone call. An un-monitored system is just that. Some of them will text the owner.”

“Monitored. In the beginning there were a few times Wendy didn’t arm it right, and someone would start talking to her.”

“Okay.”

“Why? What are you thinking?”

Travis glanced at her.

“What?” Bliss had the sneaking suspicion he wasn’t telling her everything. Again.

“Just seems strange, your brother-in-law adding security before his kid is born.”

“They were worried...” About what? “Is this somehow connected to Grayson?”

“I don’t know the man, but he knows about us. There are two types of people who hire Aegis. The kind that are scared shitless, and the kind that scare people.”

“So, what?”

“I’m not sure. But even if it’s unrelated, you might want to know more about what it is your brother-in-law does. As far as right now is concerned, I need to check the other victim’s files, see what I can dig up.”

“You have a theory though.” And she had questions.

He turned into the newly paved and painted Blush Shoppe parking lot. The three story brick structure had been painted white, with pink trim and an awning over the store front. Inviting and cheerful, or at least that’s what the owner was going for. The lights and mannequins decked out like porno showgirls were all Vegas. What the heck was Travis going to say once he got inside? This was going to be fun.

He killed the engine and turned to dig something out of the back seat.

“I need to look at some things. Want me to wait out here, or would you mind if I came in?”

“If you think you can handle it, you can come inside.” But could she?

The store staff was a chatty, gossiping bunch. Travis was going to set them off, but on the other hand, she wouldn’t mind their assumptions. He was one beefcake she wouldn’t turn down.

She got out of the SUV and strode into the store, painfully aware of the man at her back. The bells chimed over the door, announcing their arrival. Two heads popped up from behind the glass display cases. Both sales associate’s brows shot up, neither looking at her.

“Hey Bliss, boss is looking for you,” the first girl said.

“I know. I know.” Bliss shouldered her purse and stopped abruptly.

“Need us to entertain your friend?” the other girl offered.

Christ. The mammoth butt plugs had arrived, and the boxes were arranged like a Christmas tree right in front of the door. She eyed the tacky string of lights casting ominous red light onto the black toy.

“Who did this?” She turned toward the two crawling out from behind the cases. The new hot and cold glass dildos were out, finally. Not like she’d asked for them to do that for a week or anything. “This is not a front of the store item. A casual shopper is not going to purchase a butt plug the size of a cantaloupe. Move this. Put the red and green vibes up here, some fuzzy handcuffs. And where did the naughty elf costumes go? Fix this. Now.”

Bliss didn’t wait for the two to respond. The shop wasn’t technically her responsibility, but damn it, they couldn’t scare people off the moment they walked through the door.

She took the shortcut through the masturbation section to the stairs. There was no way to avoid the bondage area, so she lifted her chin, pushed her shoulders back and strolled past some of their more intimidating gear to the Staff Only door. She breathed a little easier, at least until she caught a glimpse of partially inflated blow-up dolls. Christ. She didn’t want to know. The warehouse was not her area.

If she’d had her thinking cap on, measuring Travis’ reaction to the front display would have given her the perfect ammunition when the sales associates inevitably argued about switching out the merchandise. They wanted the shop to invite men just like Travis in to purchase items for themselves and their partners, but putting an extreme toy hardly anyone purchased front and center wasn’t the way to make it happen.

6.

Oh God, Travis had just seen the butt plugs. He couldn't handle the idea of a vibrator, what was he going to think of a butt plug? Or the floggers? Or the sheep-shaped blow up dolls?

Calm down.

Bliss kept her gaze straight ahead and walked past the industrial shelves full of boxes and carefully inventoried sex toys.

What did it matter what he thought?

Okay, he was an attractive man once she got past the scary factor, but he was responsible for finding her missing sister. That was it. Besides, she was chubby and her vibrator collection would undoubtedly scare him away.

One more flight of stairs, a hallway, and she unlocked her office, stepping into her sanctuary. She held her office door open for Travis and shut it behind him. Hopefully everyone else would take the hint and leave her alone.

"Sorry about that," she mumbled and retreated to her desk chair.

Her office was one of the more spacious ones, but that was because she was now in charge of order fulfillment to their bulk-buying clients. Namely, the adult film producers who sometimes liked an in-person meeting and demonstration of the products. Her desk was the size of Texas and she had two windows with a lovely view of the mountains. She turned on her desktop and waited for it to boot up.

"Do people...use those?" Travis sat across from her in one of the desk chairs. He had a few brown folders laid out in front of him and a frown on his face.

"Not enough to matter, and that's the point."

"But there are people who use them?"

"Yes." She tried to not bristle, but she knew the condemnation was next, and she couldn't help but take those comments personally. She might never want a cantaloupe sized thing shoved up her ass, but if she did, why judge?

"Christ...I don't think I want to know. Different strokes I guess."

Bliss glanced at him, waiting for Travis to tack on some other statement, but he was too busy looking at the walls. That was it?

"The BDSM practitioners who visit the store have a saying—*Your kink isn't my kink*. I feel like the sentiment applies to most of the stuff we sell." She relaxed marginally.

Not so bad.

She logged into her computer and brought up her email. Of course it had to be the holidays. Shipping was tricky and their sales volume was high, which was a good sign for the next year.

"Employee of the Year?" Travis' voice broke her concentration from composing a carefully worded email.

"Uh, yeah."

"How do you get that working here? Or do I not want to know?"

"What is it you think I do?" She turned to face him slightly. "You had your computer nerd run some sort of check on me. Why?"

She'd focused on the wrong part of that conversation. It wasn't just that Gavin what's-his-face knew she was chubby or that she worked in adult boutique. He had everything at his fingertips. He didn't even need to ask her questions about Wendy because he probably already

had it all in his email.

“Some of the messiest jobs I’ve been on involved a family member who came into a lot of money being kidnapped by their brother, cousin, uncle or whatever. It’s routine.”

“Don’t I have to sign something to let you do that?”

“No.”

“What else did you learn about me?”

“Nothing you haven’t told me. I haven’t had time to look.”

“But you have it.”

“Gavin would have sent it to me, yes.”

“If you want to know something, just ask. I’d do anything for my sister.” She didn’t have anything to hide, but it was an invasion of her privacy.

“That right there. It makes you a suspect.” He leaned forward, elbows on the arm rests. Somehow he made the chairs look child-size with his bulk and height. He couldn’t even stop taking up the space in her office.

“Because I love my sister?” She stared at him. That was the biggest load of bull she’d ever heard.

“Your sister sounds like a nice person, but she can’t take care of herself. She needs you, her husband, family and even staff to get her through a day. I’m assuming this was true before the baby and pregnancy. Dependence like that breeds discontent. Especially now that she has money and doesn’t have to work for anything. Someone like you could see it as a way to scheme some money out of them, since you’ve done so much for her and you’re still having to work here.”

Her jaw dropped. Was he serious? White-hot rage burned through her.

“That’s not true,” she blurted. “Any of it. I love my sister, and I’m glad she has Grayson in her life. And I like my job.”

But was she being completely honest? Weren’t there nights she lay in bed, alone and a tiny bit bitter that things worked out so easily for Wendy?

“Bliss, I’m not saying that’s the case here. We know it isn’t, but I’ve seen it happen. I want to clear that line of investigation so we can focus on finding her. You are not a suspect.”

She jabbed the keys on her computer, pounding out the messages that had to be handled. She wasn’t ready to stop being angry with him. He was still going to tromp through her life. He hadn’t said he wouldn’t.

“I’m not trying to say anything bad about your situation. Shit. This is why I don’t talk to clients.” He flipped through one of the folders in his lap. The silence drew out for several minutes, neither of them speaking. “You mind if I make a few calls?”

“Go ahead.”

Bliss kept her eyes on the screen. Why the heck were producers working this close to Christmas? And clearly it was too much to ask her boss to deal with them right now.

I love my job.

“Yeah, hi, my wife and I wanted some information on getting a new system installed.”

Travis had one of her pens and a sticky note in front of him. Had he noticed the phallic designs yet? She didn’t think so. “Do you monitor your system yourself? Or do you have a company that does that? ...Yeah... Oh...I understand, but we can’t in good faith make a decision without knowing who we’re talking to... That would be great, thank you. Compliance Systems? Got it. And what are your rates? ...Perfect. I’ll talk it over with the wife and get back to you.”

“What was that about?” she asked.

“2008. The only reason authorities knew Mindy was missing was because her alarm was set

off by her cat trying to get outside. He'd been locked in the house for a week without food."

"Is that a lead?"

"Maybe." He held his phone up to his hear. "We'll find out."

How was she supposed to concentrate on dildos right now?

* * * *

Daniel twisted the key in the padlock until the tumblers gave way. He'd debated disposing of his latest projects. Two of them were such good subjects. The third didn't have much promise. He wouldn't be surprised if that one expired on its own. In truth, it was fairer to terminate them now. His new wife would be taking up much of his time while they set about starting their new family.

He lifted the door and opened it by force. Time and age had worn the wood down. He was considering widening the path and installing a better door, but that would mean putting in more permanent electricity. Right now, he flipped a switch at the house, and power flowed out to his workshop. Three lights illuminated the honeymoon suite, his holding cells, and the workshop. There was only one outlet for his power tools—everything else was done by hand.

"Good afternoon, dear. Sleep well?" He closed the door behind him to keep the wind out and shed his jacket. The keys were a heavy weight against his hip.

Wendy had her back against the bars on the far side of the suite. He hoped she liked his house and would be a good mother to his other children. He'd made sure to dust them all off in preparation for the introductions.

The subject in cell one whispered something to her, and she jumped.

His Wendy was so delicate.

"I slept well," she said.

"Good. Good. One last bit of housekeeping and we can finally be together." He smiled at her and unlocked the door to her suite. It was a bit on the rustic side. Some of his previous wives hadn't liked it much, but Wendy had good breeding and manners. She could appreciate the aesthetic.

"What are you doing?" Wendy's dark eyes widened, and she pushed to her feet. She was so thin she swayed and had to grip the bars for support. That wouldn't do. He'd need her strong and healthy, so she could give him a son.

"Taking care of some loose ends."

He locked the door behind him and strode across to the workshop entrance. Wendy thoughtfully kept out of his way, which was good.

He could not wait for their honeymoon.

"Loose ends? What does that mean?" Her voice raise in pitch, reverberating off the stone.

"He means he's going to kill us," the subject in cell one said. He was an older man, roughly sixty years old, who Daniel had picked up off a street corner. The subject was hardy and had held on, despite being separated from every major limb. It was a shame to dispose of him, but Daniel had more important things to think about.

"You're what? You can't kill them." Wendy's voice wavered.

He hated the wavering. It lead to tears, and not the regal, quiet ones Wendy had shed last night. The ones that turned noses and eyes red and shook bodies.

"Be quiet," he snarled and banged the gate.

"It's okay, Wendy," the subject in cell two said. He was younger, an addict with a resilient

body.

“Do not speak to my wife.” Daniel thrust his finger at subject two, who merely stared at him.

Daniel peered in at the subject in cell four, but the body was an empty husk. A pity, since that took all the fun out of it, but not having to deal with a squirming subject would be easier in the long run, and he was still healing from the knife wound.

He opened the cell and dragged the body to his workshop in the back. The old wooden table had supported many such projects over the years. Deep gouges scored the wood from blades and nails alike.

It was time to put these subjects to rest with the others. Then, and only then, could he get on with the business of starting his new family.

7.

Travis had a lead. Something the BAU hadn't given him.

Of the eight victims, he'd been able to track down five with home security, and three of those were monitored by a contract company called Compliance Systems. The issue with having a killer who went a full year between kills was that it was difficult to impossible to tap into the earlier victims' lives. He needed a warrant for Compliance to obtain their data. But that would take time, especially since they would need to convince the cops they had an actual case on their hands.

He dialed one last number, but it went to the BAU unit chief's voicemail.

"Hey, Brooks, it's Travis again. Just checking on that lead. I think I've got something. Call me when you have time."

Damn it. He needed the information now, and Gavin's search hadn't turned up jack shit as of yet. If Zain were... No. He squashed that thought. Gavin had the same tools at his disposal Zain would in this instance.

"What'd you find?" Bliss breezed back into the office, carrying three small brown boxes stacked on top of one another. She set the haul on the far side of her desk and sat down.

"Our guy might work for this company that contracts out to answer home alarms."

"Really? That's good, right?"

"Yeah, except now how to tell which one he might be?" He tossed his phone onto the desk. "I need the car info to cross-reference employees, and we still need a warrant."

"Oh."

"What about you? Get everything done?" He almost wanted to know what was in the boxes. He'd never realized there was so much variety to sex toys.

"Almost. I need to pull a few other items and send a few emails still."

"How'd you get this job?"

"Craigslist. They advertised. I answered. And it's been three profitable years."

"I gotta ask, how does a girl like you work here?"

"Girl like me? What's that supposed to mean?" She turned to face him, hands in her lap and one brow quirked. He was learning to recognize her ticked-off face. He'd had one hell of a time pissing her off today no matter what he did. It was a skill he could do without.

"Just...normal." He shrugged. And not for the likes of him. He needed to remember that.

"Normal girls don't like jobs that pay them well?"

"That's not what I mean."

"You mean, why would I work for a sex toy company instead of...I don't know, a law firm or something?"

"Yes."

"At first, I just needed a job. Something to pay the bills. I'll admit, I was embarrassed in the beginning, but not anymore. Sure, it's not your typical career path, but sex sells. People like sex. And you know what? The people who work in and around this industry are incredibly nice and accepting. I've never been so comfortable just being me. There's some parts of my job I don't like, but there's so much more that I do."

"That question made me sound like an ass again, didn't it?"

"Yes."

“I didn’t mean to—”

“Forget about it.”

He rubbed the side of his face. He liked Bliss. She was smoking hot, smart, and she had...gumption. It was the only word he could think of for her. She was a fighter—quick on her feet and fierce when he pushed the wrong buttons. Once she’d pulled herself together, she’d actually been very useful looking over the footage at the guard shack.

There were plenty of guys who got involved with clients. In fact, the guys who did bodyguard work often called the gigs booty calls. It was a line he’d never crossed. But Bliss technically wasn’t the client. She was...a source? It was more personal than that, but she was firmly in the gray area. Travis didn’t like the area where lines blurred. It was an act firmly in the gray area that had screwed up his life forever, which was why he stuck to black and white. The letter of his orders. Doing exactly what he was paid to do. That way there was no confusion. But Bliss?

He was trying to come up with a reason to not act on the attraction pulling him ever closer to her. If he didn’t, he was pretty sure they’d fall into bed together at some point. Was that a bad thing?

“We’ve already established where you are with the idea of sex toys.” She chuckled and turned away from him when he didn’t continue the conversation. What was he supposed to say? He’d been an ass and admitted it. Again.

“Hold on, I’m not entirely against them.” He was plagued by the images of Bliss and a couple of the items he’d seen in the store. Some of them he wasn’t even sure what they did, but she would know. And he was willing to bet she’d enjoy it, too.

Fuck it. Why not put it out there and let her make the call?

“Had a change of heart, have you?” She chuckled.

“You’ve made me rethink things.”

“Well, then my job here is done.” She laughed, and all he could do was stare. Her bracelets jangled as she pushed her hair back. She’d taken her hoodie off. She wore a loose, sleeveless black top that hinted at and hid what was underneath. There was a hint of ink on the back of her shoulder. He couldn’t make it out, but he wanted to know what it was.

“If you were going to sell me one thing in the store, what would you recommend?” His groin tightened, and he could feel the throb of arousal in his balls.

“To use on yourself? Or a partner?”

“They make stuff for guys?”

“Oh yeah.” She turned and snagged something out of the top brown box. “This is a male masturbation toy. The end looks like lips and the inside is supposed to mimic the way a mouth feels if you use it with a little lube. It’s a popular item.”

His mouth dried up and he had to swallow to get his vocal chords working. He was not even remotely interested in buying something to jack off with.

“What about on a woman?” He cleared his throat.

“Depends on who you’re buying for. What’s your girlfriend, or wife, like?”

“I’m single.”

“Hm. Okay, then...” She squinted at the ceiling for a moment.

“What would you pick?”

“For myself?” She blinked at him, and if he wasn’t mistaken her cheeks were slightly pink yet again.

“Well, what would you want your partner to use on you?”

“That’s personal.” She grabbed a stack of papers and fanned herself. “It’s really hot in here, isn’t it?”

“I’m pretty sure we’ve been dancing around the fact we’re interested in each other most of the morning.” He eased back in the chair, but it didn’t allow any extra room in his jeans like he’d hoped.

Bliss’ blush reached from her neckline to her hairline now.

They were consenting adults, right? After he found Wendy there wouldn’t be any gray area. No uncertainty.

“Uh...well...I, um...”

“I’m not good at talking, and I’m worse when it comes to women. I figure the best thing for me is to be direct. If that’s a problem, tell me now. You can also tell me to fuck off, if you like.”

Her chest rose and fell at a slightly accelerated rate. He would know. He’d done a little study of her breasts earlier. Double Ds if he wasn’t mistaken, but he’d need a hands-on inspection to be certain.

“A bullet,” she said and turned to the monitor.

“A bullet?”

“Yes, and not the kind that come out of a gun, either.”

He opened the browser on his phone and went to the store’s site. It was better than wandering around the shop trying to figure out what the hell that was.

A bullet, huh?

She hadn’t told him off, so that was one good thing so far today.

* * * *

Bliss kept her gaze straight ahead. Wendy’s gated community was three turns away. Bliss’ car was in the drive. In a matter of minutes Travis would drop her off and go do whatever commando-type thing he did to rescue people. Or something. She wasn’t sure what he would do, but her imagination supplied plenty of scenarios, some she wished would get out of her head.

“Heard anything yet?” She couldn’t shake the feeling that the freaking FBI should have been able to get information sooner. After all, wasn’t that how it worked on TV?

“No.”

“Why?”

“Reasons.” He turned the SUV into the community. The guard from earlier waved them in. From the looks of it, the guy had sucked a lemon since they last saw him.

“And those would be? How is the FBI even involved? I don’t understand.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Explain it to me.”

Travis drove all the way to Wendy’s house and put the truck in park. She turned to face him. If she had to make him understand, she would.

“She’s my sister. I want to know what to expect. I know you think I’m some weak, crying woman, but I had my moment. It’s over. I need to know if I should prepare our family for the worst. You don’t get it, but things haven’t always been easy with Wendy. Wendy...she tried to kill herself a couple of times in high school.”

Travis turned his head and stared at her with those unreadable eyes of his. Was she getting through to him? Did he maybe understand? She’d lay it out there for him from beginning to end if she thought it would help.

“There weren’t programs, support groups, or social media movements back then. College...we were just glad she survived it, to be honest. When she married Grayson, it was like we had a new version of her. Like...I don’t know, she had this real second chance. This depression, it’s high school all over again. She hasn’t been suicidal, thank God, but that’s what we’re afraid of. Our parents are still in denial about her depression right now, so if there’s no chance she’s still alive, I need to know so I can prepare them. Losing her...it’ll break their hearts.”

“If the guy I’m hunting took her, she’s still alive.”

“And if it was someone else?”

“We still have time.”

“You won’t tell me what happens to the girls.”

“No. You don’t need to know that.”

“But what if it happens to Wendy?”

“It won’t.”

“How do you know that?”

“I just—”

His phone rang through the speakers, cutting off what he was about to tell her.

“Brooks, what did you—oh, Lali? Hi.” Travis produced a pad of paper from the center console and a pen. “Right... Okay... Compliance Systems, any chance that’s a current or past employer? ...God damn it, yes. I’m on my way now.”

“What? Did they find her?”

Travis ended the call and tossed the phone onto the dash with a clatter. He gestured at the passenger door.

“Get out,” he said.

“No.”

“Bliss, I’m not fucking around. You need to get out now.”

“I’m not getting out of this truck. You can haul me out, but I’ll follow you. She’s my sister. I’ve always been there for her, it’s always been me picking up her pieces. If you find her, do you know what to do for her? Do you know how to handle her?”

She was pretty sure she could hear Travis’ teeth grinding. They stared at each other for a moment.

“Fuck.” He sat back in his seat. “One, you stay in the god damned truck. Two, you do what I say or I’ll damn well handcuff you and put you in the back. Three, keep your head down.”

“That sounds kinky.”

“This isn’t a game, Bliss.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. Drive. I will do exactly what you tell me to, I promise.” She buckled her seatbelt. “Where are we going?”

“Out of town a ways. The plates we got were stolen. They belonged to a guy in New Mexico. They hit on something when they cross-referenced the make and model of the car to the employee records at Compliance Systems.”

“And? Should we call the police? Or what?”

“I’ll call my backup. When we have Wendy, we’ll call the cops in to make the arrest.” He pressed the accelerator so hard they shot forward and the tires squealed.

“Then what?”

“Then you and Wendy get your lives back.”

Travis snatched his phone before it scuttled across the dash to her side and made another

call. She could barely focus on his side of the conversation. How would they find Wendy? Would she be okay? Or would they be picking up pieces? Should Bliss even be part of this? There was no way she was about to back out now she'd convinced Travis to bring her, but she had to wonder if it was the smartest place for her. Regardless, her points about Wendy and needing her were true.

"Fuck." Travis tossed the phone into a cup holder and gripped the wheel with both hands.

"What?"

"They can't leave for an hour. God damn it."

"Why?"

"Because they're here on another job and can't leave their client."

"Oh. So, what are we doing?"

"I'm going in. You will stay in the truck."

"What if you need help?"

"I can handle myself."

"But, what if you get into trouble? Should I call the cops after a little while?"

"Cops will just get in my way."

"Okay, but—"

"If you're going to question the way I do things, get out now."

Bliss clamped her lips together and held onto the door. Travis pushed the SUV faster entering the ramp onto I-15 headed out of Vegas. They passed the Speedway and kept going. The barren landscape spread out all around them, broken up only by rocks, shrubs, and the odd assortment of trash. Every so often his phone issued navigation instructions, leading them further away from the interstate and anything resembling civilization. They passed the occasional dirt trail leading away from the old road, but were otherwise alone.

"Where are we?" she asked after they'd driven nearly half an hour in silence.

"Northeast of Vegas."

"How close are we?"

"This should be our turn, here." He nodded at yet another path leading away from the road. This one was gravel instead of dirt.

"Why aren't you turning?" She craned her neck to look behind them.

"You don't drive up to a kidnapper's house and ask for your loved one back. That's not how this works."

She'd grown somewhat accustomed to Travis' gruff nature of speaking, but now it was different. His voice was cold, nearly emotionless. He didn't glance away from the road—he was completely focused. She didn't know if she should be scared or impressed.

"What are you going to do?"

He slowed the SUV and checked the mirrors, peering behind them before pulling off the road onto a bit of clear ground.

"You'll stay here. I'm going to have a look around." He reached into the center console and removed not one, but two black handguns and an assortment of other things.

Bliss recoiled, pressing her back to the door. She'd never seen a gun in person, at least not out of a holster. It made sense that he'd have a firearm, and she didn't want him to go into a dangerous situation without some sort of protection. But this was her life. Her boring, typical, normal life. These things didn't happen to her.

"By yourself?"

"No, me and my army. Yes, by myself." Travis slid one gun into the top of his right boot.

He shrugged into a strange shoulder harness. The second gun went into a holster that rested just under his left arm.

By all accounts, Travis should be able to take care of himself. It wasn't the story he'd told her about Egypt, it was the way he carried himself, the cool confidence, the deadly focus. Yet she couldn't help worrying about him.

"Please be careful," she said.

He stopped and stared at her from behind the aviators. Okay, having that full focus on her was way more intimidating when she couldn't see his eyes. He had big and creepy down to an art, but she could remember what his gaze felt like with heat in it.

"I'll bring your sister back."

"Thank you. But be careful with yourself, too, okay?"

His brow wrinkled as if he didn't understand her.

"Hand me that water in the door." He pointed at the three bottles.

"Should I do anything? Call anyone?" She handed a bottle over.

"No. Keep the truck running"

"I'm not used to sitting around waiting on other people to fix things."

"Be glad you don't have to wait much longer." He pushed his door open.

"Travis?" She reached across and touched his hand gripping the steering wheel.

He paused, one foot already out of the door.

"Seriously, be careful? Please?"

"Your brother-in-law isn't paying me to be careful with myself. He's paying me to get Wendy back."

"Well I'm telling you to be careful."

Again his brow wrinkled.

Were they even speaking the same language?

He pulled his leg back into the truck. His features softened, and she realized there was a lot less room between them now.

"I'll be careful," he said slowly.

She wanted to kiss those lips. It was a desire she'd been ignoring, but now, with only his mouth to focus on, she couldn't deny the urge. He was dangerous and completely not her nice-guy type, but there was something about him that rubbed her the right way.

"Bliss?"

Wow, really nice lips.

"Yes?"

They weren't thin like most men's. Not that he had full, pouty lips either. They were...nice. Enough there to toy with, nibble on, but not draw all the attention to those two bits of flesh. They were the kind of lips a girl wanted to touch.

Travis' hand cupped the back of her head and all thought ceased. She was keenly aware of the way his fingers caught in her hair, the jolt of electric arousal shooting through her body. He pulled her closer. She gasped the second before their mouths met. Her toes curled, and she reached for him, gripping his bicep and leaning into the kiss. He suckled her lower lip. His stubble scraped against her chin and cheek.

"Stay here," he said.

She blinked, but he was already gone.

Holy crap.

Bliss wanted to kiss him again.

She pressed the lock button and wrapped her arms around herself. Travis was going to get Wendy back. Then she was going to kiss the daylights out of that man.

8.

What the hell?

Travis took a sip of water and peered at the house in the distance. He was getting closer, and he needed to stop thinking with his dick. Kissing Bliss had been...fantastic. And a terrible idea. She might not be paying him, but she was still a client. For now. Some guys might not be terribly bothered about bedding their temporary employer, but not Travis. The way he saw it, when he was brought into a situation it was always under great duress.

Bliss wasn't thinking clearly. She was emotional, and he was the man there to fix her problems. It made sense she'd flirt with him. It was a common case of hero syndrome, or whatever his boss called it. Any other month, she wouldn't look at him. A guy with his record didn't get girls like her. But for this moment in time, she did. And it was fucking with his head.

He needed to find Wendy and get her out of here so the cops could do their job and put this bastard away. Then he could go back to his normal routine of catching bullets.

The FBI's tech had a name for their serial killer.

Daniel Campbell. Fifty-four. He'd lived in and around Las Vegas for most of his life. He'd started out as an electrician before an accident ten years ago made an active lifestyle impossible. There was a string of minor charges against him for bar brawls, but otherwise nothing since his juvenile days, and those records were sealed.

The structure was a small stucco style house set in the foothills of Muddy Mountain. The terrain rolled and rose, painted a riot of color by the late-afternoon light, a bed of rocks and shrub that worked great for masking his approach. Getting away was another matter. He hoped Ethan and Mason showed up, or else he'd be hoofing it back to the truck, probably carrying Wendy. He'd done more under worse circumstances, but now he had Bliss to worry about. He should have made her stay put at the house, but when she argued her point so thoroughly, he couldn't deny her.

Travis adjusted his path, aiming for the back part of the house. There was a large rock formation that could hide his approach and allow him to get closer without tipping Daniel Campbell off. Nearly twenty minutes later he was starting to sweat, but he could finally make out details of the house and surrounding property.

The gravel drive extended all the way to the house, and sitting in plain sight was the same late model Buick he'd seen on the security cameras driving out of Wendy's gated community. The skin between Travis' shoulder blades prickled. He drew his weapon and pulled out his cell phone, but there was no signal. Not even the ghost of a bar. He was on his own. It wasn't the first time, but back-up in a hostage situation was always ideal.

He got as close as the rock cover would allow, and settled in to observe the residence. Daniel's land was a long, narrow rectangle, stretching from the road all the way back to the mountain. Most of the shrub appeared to have been burned back at some point. A few scraggly bushes sat sentinel under the windows, but otherwise the property was quiet. Nothing stirred the curtains and there were no other signs of life.

Or were there?

Travis took off his sunglasses and peered at a narrow, worn path weaving between the cacti and scrub. He glanced at the house, searching for cameras or other surveillance equipment, but didn't spot anything. He pushed off the rocks and picked his way to the path, keeping low. In

places, the overgrown brush was tall enough to hide him. If he hadn't been up on the rocks, he wouldn't have spied it.

There was a good chance he was being watched right now by means of small cameras. He could be walking into a trap, but it was the nature of his job to be caught, shot at, and attacked, so long as he protected his client. In this case, that meant not only Wendy, but Bliss as well. Like it or not, he was walking out of here no matter what condition he was in.

The path led between boulders and back into a narrow crevice. Travis had to turn sideways to squeeze through. At some point the sides had been carved back and smoothed out for someone with a smaller build than his.

He peered around a bend in the path and stared at an old, wooden door with a padlock drilled into the rock face.

* * * *

Bliss checked her phone. Again.

Time was moving too fast. It needed to slow the hell down. There hadn't been as much as a smoke signal from Travis, and the sun was starting to set. What was going on over there? Was Wendy okay? What if they were both dead?

They hadn't agreed on a time limit, and she had no way to contact Travis' friends.

Something horrible had to have happened.

She rubbed her eyes with her hands. Wendy's face, frozen in fear, filled the darkness behind her lids. A hundred nightmares of losing her sister filtered through her brain. It wasn't Wendy's fault nature had made them different. Bliss loved everything that made her sister unique.

No one could see beauty in the unexpected like Wendy.

Despite Wendy's delicate appearance, she was strong. Even when she'd been stuck full of needles by doctors, she'd never once complained.

There wasn't a person in Bliss' life who loved like Wendy.

Bliss couldn't lose her little sister.

She crawled across to the driver's seat. Her feet were a long way from the pedals, highlighting just how much taller Travis was than her. She adjusted the seat and gripped the wheel.

What was she going to do?

Travis was tough, but he was still human.

She opened the center console and peered in, holding her breath. It wasn't like he could hide a rocket launcher in there, but he had quietly stashed two guns right under her nose.

A few receipts, some business cards, and two cardboard boxes littered the bottom of the console. Tucked up against the side was a large pocketknife. It was better than nothing.

Bliss shifted into drive and whipped the SUV around, driving back toward the gravel drive. She wasn't strong like Travis, but she wasn't about to let someone hurt her sister. In high school, Bliss had faced down the mean girls, in college she'd run off the losers. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do for Wendy. But it wasn't just her sister that Bliss was fretting over.

Travis was the kind of man she avoided on principal. The bad boys made great poster boyfriends when she was younger, but as an adult she'd always been attracted to the nice guy type. Nice guys didn't break hearts. That was her job. Travis, though, being around him made her second-guess everything she thought she knew about her love life. He was a different kind of man. She could feel it in her bones. The way he thought, his stubbornness, and how he'd kissed

her. He didn't fit into a neat box, and she couldn't help being concerned about him. She didn't want him getting hurt either.

She turned the truck down the drive and pressed the accelerator. The vehicle bounced down the road, kicking up plumes of dust in her wake.

The house grew closer, solidifying into a flat roof and stucco walls. It was old and dated, but not in a good way. Wooden posts supported a sagging porch, and the windows were so dirty she couldn't tell if there were curtains or just a layer of filth.

There was no sign of Travis or Wendy.

Where were they?

The back of her neck prickled. Apprehension and adrenaline made it hard to breathe. She glanced around, searching for some movement, some sign they were there. Had she missed a turn off? Was there another house?

Her cell phone had zero bars.

No wonder Travis hadn't phoned for help.

He had to be in trouble.

She pulled the knife out of her pocket. It was too big for her hands, but the longer blade gave her a modicum of confidence.

Travis and Wendy had to be in that house. There weren't any other buildings or places to hide. The only reason Travis wouldn't be back already was if they were in trouble. It was up to her now.

Bliss killed the engine and opened the door. The thump of drums and the twang of a guitar could be heard through the house's walls. Well, if a killer was trying to drown out the noise of...she didn't want to think about it, but it made sense.

She slipped out of the SUV. Her boots crunched on the gravel, and the bitter wind sliced through her hoodie. She'd dressed for shopping, not hunting her sister's kidnapper.

Instead of heading straight for the front door, Bliss swung to her left, aiming for the right side of the house. She kept her gaze on the windows, watching for movement. Nothing stirred or maybe the windows were too dirty to tell. She put her back to the side of the house and breathed a deep breath.

In her peripheral vision she caught sight of something familiar. She peered around the house, but all she could see was the back half of a Buick. She didn't know a lot about cars, but it looked like the same one she'd seen on the security footage.

"Oh, God."

She put her hands on her knees and sucked down a deep breath.

This was real.

Her sister was here.

And so was the man who'd taken her.

Bliss gathered her scattered thoughts and collected herself. This was crazy and stupid. She wasn't the person for this job, but she was all there was. Unless she wanted to call the cops and wait for them to get there. Travis and Wendy might die before then.

She crept around the front of the house and craned her neck to try to get a look inside the house, but it was dark. And shiny.

Trash bags.

There were trash bags on the inside of the windows.

How very Dexter.

She ducked and hustled to the front door. She crouched next to it and listened to the music.

After this, she'd never be able to hear country and western music without cringing.

Bliss grasped the doorknob and pushed the unlocked door inward. It swung open on squeaky hinges, casting light into an otherwise dark interior. She waited for a second or two, but no one rushed out at her with an axe and there was no screaming.

She straightened and leaned inside.

To the right, the wood paneling dated the house at forty years old. Built-in wooden shelving cut off her view of the living room. Straight ahead she could make out what looked to be the kitchen. She brushed the wall, feeling for a light switch.

A single bulb flickered on in the entry, doing little more than the fading sunlight.

Something wasn't right.

If this guy had Travis, wouldn't Travis have put up a fight? Wouldn't there be yelling, or at least someone talking?

She stepped over the threshold. Another set of light switches was farther to her right, almost inside the living room. She tiptoed toward them, cringing when a floor board squeaked. The ceiling fan spun on a wobbly base and only one light came on when she flipped the switch.

The TV on the far side of the room was the source of the music. Some singer she couldn't name belted out a tune while sparks went off behind him. Bliss crossed to the older TV and hit the power button.

Silence descended on the house. Or near-silence. Her ears rang, and she wasn't sure if she could hear herself think yet.

She held completely still, listening for any sign of life.

The hair on the back of her neck rose.

He was right behind her, wasn't he?

Bliss pivoted, lifting the knife at the same time, but she was alone.

Staring back at her from the built-ins were at least a dozen little faces.

She gasped and stumbled back, hitting the TV with her elbow.

They were babies. Some of them were so small they would have fit in her palm, while others were maybe a couple of months old. The size of Paul. They each floated in their own glass jar, surrounded by murky liquid. Their little features were bloated and distorted until they didn't look human.

"Oh my God." She covered her mouth. Her throat constricted, and her stomach began to revolt.

Travis had said there were others. Was this what he hadn't told her? That the women were broodmares for...whatever this was?

An engine rumbled up to the back of the house. Bliss ducked out of the living room and stared through the little window on the rear door. A man sat on an ATV next to the Buick.

Where had he taken them?

Bliss wasn't about to let him get away with this.

9.

“Wendy... Wendy, Bliss needs you to calm down.” Travis gripped the frail woman’s wrists to keep her from scratching his eyes out. The coppery scent of blood was thick in the air. Enough to make even him gag.

Someone had died here not long ago, and it wasn’t the vic reported yesterday. That meant Daniel Campbell had other victims. Ones Travis and the FBI didn’t know about.

“Wendy, damn it.”

He’d been party to some tricky rescues before and, while it wasn’t common, occasionally the victims didn’t want to be saved. Which was too bad, because Travis had a job to do, and he wasn’t about to leave a new mother to die in a filthy cave.

“No!” she wailed.

Wendy twisted one of her arms free. He groped, catching her shoulder.

“Stop it. I’m not going to hurt you,” he said.

She swung her arm and hit him in the temple. His body jolted, and for an instant he was stunned. Had she really just done that? Damn woman was a lot like her sister. Wendy jerked free and scrambled to her feet. He reached out to grab her, but she evaded him, ducking through an open gate. She pulled it shut with a clang.

Travis sat back on his heels and rubbed his head. It wouldn’t do to move quickly or grab her. At this rate, she’d only hurt herself.

“Wendy, I’m here to take you back to your family. Grayson is worried about you. Bliss is out in my truck waiting for me to bring you back.”

“No, no, I won’t let you.” She leaned back, as if her slight weight mattered. Her chest heaved. By his guess, she was so panicked he’d be surprised if she didn’t make herself black out.

“Won’t let me what, Wendy?” Travis could grab her and haul her out, but what damage would it do to her? He wasn’t the gentlest of rescuers, and Bliss had made it clear Wendy’s mental state wasn’t quite on an even keel. But the longer he waited for her to come around, the more time he gave Daniel Campbell to catch him in the act.

“You can’t take me. You can’t. You can’t. You can’t.” She sagged against the bars, sobbing.

Chances were, Wendy was too scared and traumatized to be able to recognize the good guys. The trick was going to be minimizing the damage she did to herself. The best way to do that was with a mild sedative.

He slid his wallet out of his pocket, keeping one eye on Wendy as he slid the two-inch long injector out of the wallet. It was a standard Aegis tool. All the guys carried one. They never knew when they’d end up tossed onto a job like this one.

“Your sister is worried about you, Wendy.” He let the wallet drop to the ground and took a step closer to the gate.

“He can’t hurt her. I won’t let him.” Her voice was muffled. Her head was buried against her arm.

He reached through the bars and stuck the business end into her bicep. It was spring loaded, so once the seal on the end was broken, it pushed the sedative into the target, requiring no further contact from him.

“Wha-what did you do?” Wendy’s head snapped up, and she stumbled backward, holding her arm. The injector fell to the ground, lost in the deep shadows.

“Nothing.” He held his hands up.

Five...

She swiped her arm and looked down.

Four...

Her knees buckled, and she sat down hard.

Three...

Christ. She was going to cry.

Two...

He opened the gate, and she held out her arm as if to fend him off.

One.

She was out.

Travis scooped Wendy up. She weighed less than his go-bag. He used his shoulder to push through the cell door and the wooden exterior one. Squeezing past the stones was trickier. He had to turn sideways and flatten Wendy's body to his. There wasn't a way around it. The rocks scraped at him, catching on his clothes and scratching Wendy's skin.

The path between the rocks widened and Travis was able to stretch his legs. Sounds were misleading between the rocks. He'd heard something earlier, but couldn't make it out now. He took care to watch his footing, but couldn't shake the sense of urgency. He'd been gone longer than he intended to. Any minute, Mason and Ethan were going to show up, and what he really needed was a clean get-away.

He emerged from the rocks, and the path sloped down into the shrub and foothills. It was too quiet. Whatever had buzzed in the distance, it had to have gone somewhere. He peered out over the shrub and brush before descending into the thick of the ground cover.

In the distance he could see the house.

And a man getting off an ATV.

From Travis' vantage point, he was high enough to catch a glimpse of a dark-colored SUV in front of the house.

His rental.

What the hell was Bliss doing?

Was she in the house?

“God damn it,” Travis muttered.

He slid down the incline a bit before hitting the more level path. He should have known better than to leave Bliss on her own. She wasn't the kind of girl to take inaction well. At the very least, he should have left her with something to protect herself with. Granted, that would have been asking for trouble.

Travis jogged, trying his best to not jostle Wendy much. His boots crunched on the gravel and dirt. Branches snagged their clothing and hair.

Any minute, Daniel Campbell would go check on the SUV or find Bliss. What then?

Travis' job was Wendy, but Bliss was equally important. He wasn't about to let either woman get hurt, regardless of what the job was.

If his boss could hear that thought, Travis would get the boot. Aegis rules were law, and they did what they were paid to do.

He reached the edge of the property in a matter of minutes, but it was already too late. Daniel wasn't anywhere to be seen.

Travis skirted the house, going around the right side and then cutting across the front to his truck. The keys were in the ignition, and the doors were unlocked. He circled to the other side

and placed Wendy in the back seat, sparing a moment to bind her wrists with flexible restraints and handcuff her to the bench seat. As against being rescued as she'd been, he wasn't about to have her run away.

Bang!

His body went rigid at the report of a gun. Some sort of shotgun. From inside the house.

Bliss.

Travis pushed backward out of the truck and stared at the house through the windshield.

Not Bliss.

Something inside him broke, and he barely contained the urge to scream. She couldn't be dead. He was right here.

A small figure lurched out of the front door, dark hair obscuring her face, but he knew that figure.

Bliss.

He sprinted toward her and met her almost halfway to the house.

"Are you hurt?" His gun was in his hand. He didn't even remember drawing it.

"Run." She pushed him.

A man filled the doorway, a twelve-gauge shotgun in his hand.

Travis fired first, aiming wildly as he pushed Bliss ahead of her, shielding her with his body.

"In the truck," Travis yelled.

He fired again, but the man he assumed was Daniel Campbell was out of sight.

Bliss skidded around the front of the SUV while he climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Are you hurt?" he yelled.

Job or no, if Bliss was shot, he'd go in there, rip that shotgun out of Daniel's hands and shoot him full of buckshot.

"No, no. Where's Wendy? Oh my God, Wendy!"

Travis shifted into gear and whipped the SUV around, spraying gravel in his wake. The job wasn't over until the girls were out of danger.

* * * *

Bliss crawled into the backseat of the truck. It bounced down the gravel road, knocking her off-balance. Wendy was always petite, but her hollowed out cheeks were gaunt and her skin was ashen.

"What—why is she handcuffed?" Bliss crouched in the floorboard and pushed Wendy's hair off her brow.

"She was traumatized," Travis said over his shoulder. "Didn't know I wouldn't hurt her."

"You—what? Knocked her out and handcuffed her?" Was that seriously how he handled hostages?

"Yes."

She glanced at the back of Travis' head. He was serious. For a moment, she was torn between outrage and relief. She couldn't find it in her to be angry with him either way. He'd found Wendy, when the cops wouldn't even pretend to look. Her baby sister was coming home. Alive.

Bliss knelt and pressed a kiss to Wendy's forehead. She held her sister's hands, rubbing some warmth back into them despite being jostled and tossed around. Travis seemed determined

to push the vehicle to unholy speeds. Granted, she wanted as far away from that creep and his army of babies as possible. She still didn't even know what to think about that.

She peered out through the rear windows, but couldn't see a vehicle following them. In the movies, the kidnapper gave chase, and there was a big, dramatic end. This almost felt anticlimactic. They had Wendy, everyone was safe. That was a good thing, right?

Then why did Bliss still have a gnawing sense of dread, as if this wasn't the end of it all?

Images of the house, those jar babies, and Daniel Campbell zipped through her mind. She was going to need to shower after this, but nothing would clean those memories out of her head.

"Why didn't you stay where I told you to?" It was the first thing Travis had said since they got on the road.

She glanced out the window and saw the highway ahead. One step closer to civilization, the cops, and a hospital.

"I got worried," she said.

"You broke our agreement."

"Yeah, well, sorry." If she'd stayed put she wouldn't have the visions of dead babies in her head. Then again, she wouldn't have been there with the truck when Travis needed a place to stash Wendy.

Travis had saved her from the same fate as the women before her. Again, Bliss couldn't be angry with him.

"What happened in there? Who shot what?" he asked.

"The women, he forced them to have babies, didn't he? That's what you wouldn't tell me." Bliss sat back and stared at his profile. She could see bumps in his nose, no doubt from multiple breaks. The hard lines of his face were just like him; he either got the job done, or he didn't.

"How do you know that?" he asked finally, his voice quieter.

"Because I saw the babies."

"The children? They're back there?" The SUV slowed, and he glanced at her.

"They're dead. He has them lined up in jars. He watches TV with them or something."

"What?"

"There were over a dozen babies in jars. Most of them were probably newborns."

"They were in jars?"

"Yes!"

"What did you do?"

"What do you mean, what did I do?"

"What happened inside the house?"

"I went in, saw the babies, freaked out, and then that guy, Daniel, came inside. I tried to get out, but he grabbed me. I kicked him in the nuts, and he tried to shoot me. I ran outside and there you were."

"Don't ever do that again."

"I don't want to."

Wendy groaned and her hand curled around Bliss'.

"Wendy? Wendy, hey, it's Bliss." She bent her head.

Wendy's eyes' popped open, and she stared up at Bliss, her features twisted in horror.

"No, no, no," Wendy screamed. She tried to sit up, but her hands were bound to the bottom of the bench. Instead, she rolled off the seat and onto Bliss, trapping her against the console and the back of Travis' seat.

"What the hell?" he snapped.

The phone rang, adding to the general din.

“Wendy, it’s me. Bliss. Your sister.” Bliss wrapped her arms around Wendy and bear hugged her. Bliss did her best to use her weight to keep Wendy immobile.

Travis pulled into a Love’s truck stop and parked the SUV. He twisted around with his phone pressed to his ear. Bliss couldn’t hear what he said.

“He’ll kill you,” Wendy wailed. The fight left her body, and she lay limp on the seat.

“What? Me? Who will kill me?” Bliss eased her hold on Wendy and leaned back.

“Daniel.” Wendy sniffled. “He said if I left, he’d kill Paul. And you. And Grayson. I don’t want my baby to die. I don’t want you to die.”

Bliss glanced at Travis. The asshole back there had convinced her sister to stay a prisoner in exchange for her life? For the rest of Wendy’s family? What did she say to that?

“Wendy, no one is going to die,” Travis said. He spoke with the utmost certainty, as if Daniel Campbell would have to go through Travis to get to them.

“He killed Robert. And Stumpy. And that other guy. He killed them. In front of me. And he made me marry him.” Wendy’s body shook as she cried. “He—he’s crazy! He’s following some sort of medieval serial killer plan. He’s crazy. You have to take me back or he’ll kill you.”

Travis reached back between them and cut the bonds around Wendy’s wrists. Two police cars pulled up on either side of them. Bliss pulled Wendy into her arms and squeezed her. She wanted to rip Daniel limb from limb for what he’d put her sister through. The man was evil.

“Wendy?” The command in Travis’ voice made even Bliss look at him.

Wendy sniffled and peered up at Travis. Her body shook so much Bliss worried her sister might fall apart, or forget where she was again.

Travis rest his elbow on the console and stared at Wendy.

“Listen to me, these cops? They aren’t going to let anything bad happen to you, Bliss, or your baby, understand?”

Wendy nodded.

“Good.”

Bliss held her sister and watched Travis exit the SUV, hands up. She was too stunned to do anything else. The whole drama outside played out in a matter of moments. More cop cars streamed past, headed for Daniel Campbell’s torture chamber of horrors, hopefully, but she only had eyes for Travis. He’d promised her he’d get Wendy back, and he had.

* * * *

Daniel loaded the last of his children into the motorhome. The barn where he’d stored his get-away ride was already engulfed with flames, along with the trophies he couldn’t take with him. He’d had a lot of good memories here, but it was time to sever all ties with his old life.

Because of her.

Wendy’s sister.

Bliss.

She’d pay.

He’d make sure of that.

10.

Bliss peeled her boots off and groaned. They were cute and comfortable for a mall stroll, but damn they ached after a full day of on-her-feet action, not to mention sprinting across gravel. She eased back onto the sofa and flexed her toes.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

A wave of heat traversed her body. For a split second she’d forgotten Travis’ presence inside her home. She remained very still, wishing the buzz of arousal would die already. It was a completely unreasonable reaction after the day’s events.

“Bliss?” His fingers brushed her shoulder. Her breath caught deep in her chest and her skin tingled.

No such luck on killing her lady boner for the man.

“No, no, I’m fine. My feet just hurt.”

“Epsom salt?”

“What?” She pried one eye open. He was a lot closer than he’d been. His stubble was more pronounced, accentuating that dangerous look that fit him so well. She was beyond figuring out what it was about him that turned her on. There was always one anomaly to every proven fact, right? And the fact was she liked nice guys, and Travis was anything but nice. He still revved her engine.

“Epsom salt. Do you have any?” Travis said slowly.

“Maybe in the bathroom? I don’t think so.” She pushed herself up off the couch, but he caught her shoulder and pushed her back down.

“I’ll look. Through here?” He didn’t wait for her confirmation before striding into her jack-and-jill bath.

“You don’t have to do that,” she said for what felt like the hundredth time.

Not only had Travis rescued her sister, he’d stuck with them until Wendy was behind guard at the hospital, Grayson had landed, and baby Paul was back in their arms. Bliss had never seen her sister so in tune with her baby. Bliss had been shooed out by the hospital staff and back into Travis’ care shortly after Paul’s arrival. They’d grabbed a pizza and a couple beers at a place down the street. She’d thought he’d drop her off and leave, but he’d followed her inside.

“Seriously, you don’t have to do whatever you’re doing. I’ll get a cab to grab my car in a few.” Or maybe she’d just sit on the couch and watch bad reruns. Yeah, that sounded like a good idea.

“Can’t.” Travis emerged from the bathroom sans salt, but he had something else in his hand. “They have your sister’s house under surveillance. They aren’t releasing your car until after they go over the scene. You might not even get it back tomorrow considering they’re probably short-staffed for the holidays.”

She groaned and threw her arm over her face.

“Why me?” she said.

The sturdy coffee table shifted. She knew Travis was across from her. She sensed the heat of his body, and if she put her amazing horny powers to use, she could probably even measure the distance between them.

What she needed was for him to leave, so she could spend a little time with her vibrator collection and the bad-boy fantasy she’d been collecting material all day for.

His hand closed around her ankle and lifted.

“Wow—what—?”

“Relax.” His growly, gravelly tone didn’t invoke relaxation.

He peeled her sweaty sock off and dropped it on the floor.

“What are you doing?” And why did he have to touch her? Every time he did that, it turned up the heat burning her from the inside out.

Travis squirted a bit of her mint cream into his palm and slicked it over the ball of her foot.

“Seriously, don’t.” She tried to pull out of his grip, but he didn’t release her.

Wasn’t it enough he’d saved her sister, pulled her ass out of the stupid fire, fed her, and gotten her home? Couldn’t he leave her to her private, erotic fantasies?

He proceeded to ignore her and cupped her heel, driving his thumbs into the muscles and tissue. She sucked in a deep breath, and her body went completely lax. Her eyes rolled up in her head. She couldn’t decide if he was hurting her or giving her a footgasm. He continued up, into her arch, working over every bit of her. The sensation straddled that line of pleasure and pain. She clamped her lips shut, determined to keep the sounds of utter OMG, yes! inside lest she embarrass herself further.

Travis’ thumbs dug into her arch and she moaned. Her mind went blank, and she was pretty sure she was one with the sofa now.

He chuckled and she couldn’t scrounge up the energy to care.

“Oh, God, what are you doing?”

“Pressure points, it’ll take the stress out, help you sleep after today.”

“Oh, right there. Oh. My. God.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. Yeah, she was embarrassing herself, but damn that felt good.

Travis left her foot perched on his thigh and grasped her other ankle. She didn’t protest this time. Why should she? This was the most man-stimulated activity she’d seen in a while. By the time he finished with her other foot, Bliss was slouched down on the sofa, ready to dribble down to the floor and stay there until Christmas Eve.

“You’re going to fall,” Travis said.

“Don’t care. Dead now.” She had her eyes closed tight, the better to not see him with.

The coffee table groaned again. Her whole body seemed to vibrate, she was so completely aware of his every move. He pushed her hair off her face with a touch so gentle she might have thought she’d imagined it had she not also felt the slight puff of breath.

An image of his lips, those damn, kissable lips, filled her mind’s eye. He’d kissed her once, and she wanted him to do it again.

“Bliss?” He spoke her name in that same, gravelly tone.

“Hm?” She turned her head slightly, finding him by sound and scent.

“Tell me to leave,” he said.

Her eyes popped open. He filled her vision. One hand was on the couch behind her. He had a knee next to her hip. A quiver of apprehension shot through her. He was big and scary, but he’d never hurt her. At least not her body.

“Why?” she asked after a moment. Couldn’t he walk out of there on his own two feet? Wasn’t that what she’d wanted a few minutes ago?

He cupped her cheek, sliding his hand up into her hair. The feel of him was different from any man she’d been with before. Even his skin was rough around the edges, just like him.

“Because otherwise I’m going to kiss you, and we both know where that’s going to go.”

She gulped. He’d called her out on the attraction before. Did she dare?

“Kiss me,” she said, before she could overthink her answer.

Travis lowered his head, wrapping an arm around her and hauling her farther up on the couch without breaking contact. His tongue delved past her lips, thrusting into her mouth. She held onto him, her head reeling as he laid her out on the sofa right where he wanted her. His weight pressed her down into the cushions, and one thick thigh shoved between hers. She wrapped her leg around his hip. She gripped his shoulders, hanging on with everything she had as he swept her up into a sensual tornado.

She’d wanted men before, but not like this. Not with an all-consuming desire she felt to her toenails. It wasn’t neat or nice or even polite. His stubble scraped across her cheek and he bent her head backward with one hand dug into her hair.

“Travis,” she mumbled as he kissed his way down her neck.

Bliss ran her hands over his shoulders, arms, and through his short hair. There was no illusion that she had any control here. Travis was driving this show and damn, if she wasn’t glad she had a front row seat. Or something.

He shoved her shirt and bra up roughly, exposing her breasts and stomach. She sucked in a deep breath, and her eyes popped open.

Chubby.

His friend had called her chubby.

Travis caught her wrists before she registered her own attempt to shield herself.

“Don’t,” he ground out between his teeth.

“But...”

The smolder in his gaze was enough of a command to keep her in place.

But what if she was too fat? What if there was more of her to go around than he realized?

Travis levered up on one arm, his gaze on her chest. He grasped one nipple between his fingers and rubbed it, the calluses better than any suction toy she’d ever tried.

“Oooh!”

Her vision unfocused and she stared at the ceiling.

“Perfect,” Travis muttered.

Her?

Really?

She could point out a few less than perfect areas, but she’d take the compliment.

His mouth closed around her other nipple, laving it with his tongue. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she arched her back, pushing more of her chest into his mouth and hand.

Yes, she wanted him. She wanted him bad.

Travis tugged at the front of her jeans until the button slipped loose and her zipper lowered. He reared up and grasped the denim around her hips and jerked it down her legs, leaving her in her panties, with her shirt and bra up under her armpits. He stared down at her and again she had to fight the urge to cover herself.

He’d pursued her. He’d called her perfect.

She fisted the cushion under her to keep her hands in place.

“W-what are you doing?” she asked.

“Trying to think of something to say.”

Bliss gulped, and a tendril of doubt crept in.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because, I should say something, but I suck at talking. I don’t normally do this.”

“Do what?” He screamed heterosexual, so he couldn’t mean he did guys.

He leaned over her, running a hand up her stomach to cup a breast.

"I don't get involved with clients. I don't do it."

"Oh..."

"You're different. I should be different." The hard line of his mouth and the dark furrows on his brow suddenly made a tiny bit of sense.

She wasn't the only one dealing with self-doubt. This larger-than-life man, this hero, had insecurities too. She smoothed her hand up his arm to his face where she traced the lines.

"I like you. Be you," she said.

He bent his head and kissed her again, and this time his mouth was soft, yielding. She greedily stroked her hands down his back to the firm globes of his ass. Man, he had a nice ass—all firm and hard.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him down on top of her, relishing the way he pressed her into the cushions. His hands blazed a path across her body, her skin tingling everywhere they touched. She grabbed handfuls of his shirt, hauling it up and over his head.

Bare skin.

She could have cheered, but she saw the scars first.

Dots, lines, and jagged scars created a topographical map of Travis' life on his skin. He hadn't been kidding when he said he was a human shield. Her heart ached for him. She pressed a kiss to his shoulder, tasting him.

He shoved his arms under her and hauled her up into his arms, cradling her close.

Bliss yelped and clung to his shoulders, cringing. He was a strong guy, but she wasn't exactly tiny. Still, he didn't miss a step or even grunt carrying her into her bedroom and the big bed she slept in alone. He laid her down and stripped her shirt and bra off her, leaving her in just her panties.

His hands traced the lace at her hip and down her thigh. Her breath caught the closer he got to her mound.

"Fuck," he muttered.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I think my hands are too rough for this stuff. I snagged them." He smoothed out the snarl in her lace panties.

"It's okay. I have more than one pair." They were clothes. She could replace those. This moment? It was a once in a lifetime thing.

He cocked his head to the side.

"Really?" he asked.

She could hear him thinking. What was he up to?

Travis dug in his pocket and produced the same knife she'd taken earlier to defend herself. He flicked it open and she held her breath.

He wouldn't...

11.

Bliss watched in fascination and a touch of fashion horror. With a gentle flick of his wrist, Travis parted the delicate lace at her hip with the blade of his knife, never once coming close to her skin. She gasped and watched him do it again on the other side, until her panties were in bits and she wasn't wearing a stitch of clothing.

"There we go," he muttered.

The knife went onto her nightstand while he pushed her thighs apart, crawling up onto the bed.

"You just..."

"I did." He kissed her inner thigh.

She fought the urge to cover herself, but it was a bit too late for that. Besides, her subconscious knew exactly what she wanted. Her lungs burned, needing oxygen, but she couldn't move a muscle.

Travis traced a winding path from her knee to the other leg and back and forth on either thigh. She'd never been so grateful to Wendy for those nightmare waxing trips they went on every so often. Stray hairs were the least of her worries.

He kissed her mound, and her breath rushed out of her lungs. She dropped her head back against the pillows and shifted her feet restlessly on either side of him. If she'd thought she'd been hot for him before, it was nothing compared to the arousal burning her up from the inside. And all he'd done was strip her down and kiss her a bit.

"Travis..." She couldn't bear to look at him. Was he having second thoughts?

"Yeah?"

She pried one eye open and peered down at him. He had one hand splayed over her left hip and his gaze on her face. Her poor lungs froze again. Desire sharpened Travis' features, his cheeks sunk in, and his deadly focus was all on her.

What did she say? What could she say?

"Where's the bullet?" he asked.

"Uh, what?"

"Earlier you said you liked a bullet. Where is it?"

"Forget it." She couldn't help glancing at her nightstand. The drawer was closed, right?

"In here?" Travis reached where her traitorous eyes led him and opened the drawer.

Two cloth bins separated out her favorite toys into daily and occasional use, each in a color-coded bag. He snagged a pink cloth bag from the back of the drawer.

"No!" She snatched the toy bag from his fingers and shoved it under the pillow.

"What is that?" Travis crawled up her body, his hand delving under the pillow to close around hers.

"Not a bullet."

Shit. That was the last thing he needed to see.

"Show me." He tugged on her hand, but didn't force her to comply.

"No." She shook her head.

Travis studied her for a moment. If he looked in that bag, she was pretty sure he'd leave right now.

"Okay, then which one is the bullet?"

“Blue bag.”

“Which one?” He glanced at the drawer.

“All of them, just pick one.”

“You like your bullets, huh?” He released her hand, and she breathed a sigh of relief. But it didn’t last long. He picked a blue bag out of the mix and upended it on the mattress next to her.

Oh no...not that one...

Travis pinched the finger loops and lifted the pink-and-chrome toy off the sheets. The silver, egg-shaped bullet was halfway encased in a silver silicone sleeve, with two finger loops on either side of the mid-section. A clear, pink tongue curved up and over the bullet part, the surface ribbed and covered in bumps. He would pick the more outlandish looking toy to open.

“I don’t get it,” he said after a moment.

She covered her face with one hand and took it from him. Practice and plenty of time with this particular toy meant she didn’t need to see it to slip her fingers into the silicone bands until the bullet rested against her middle finger and the tongue curved over her nails.

“You turn it on and...stroke.”

“Oh yeah?” Travis’ brows lifted and a slow grin spread over his face. “Show me.”

No was on the tip of her tongue. Just this morning, the mere mention of a vibrator had repulsed him, was he really going to change his mind that fast?

If he wasn’t open to it, did she really want to share her bed with him?

She twisted the bullet in her palm and it began to vibrate. At the low setting, it was a good warmup to bigger and better things.

Travis shifted to lay next to her. She reached down between them, staring at his shoulder, and gently stroked the silicone tongue over her mound. Her heated skin tingled at the touch, and she felt the vibrations down to her bones.

“Does it feel good?” he asked.

He was so close she felt the puff of his breath against her cheek. She opened her eyes, staring at the ceiling.

“Yes.”

“Why do you like this one?”

“It’s waterproof, and the ridges give it a nice feel.” She curled her toes, fighting down the tide of embarrassment.

“Let me.”

Travis drew her hand away from her mound and slid the loops off her fingers. He didn’t even turn it off as he transferred it to his hand. The bands stretched around his digits and she had to wonder if that was just a prelude of what was to come. Did the big man, big cock myth hold true?

She couldn’t tear her gaze from his face and the way he stared down her body. Unlike her first touch with the bullet, his was not tentative. He cupped her mound in a bold, possessive grip, resting the length of the toy along her slit. Her clit throbbed. She groaned and arched her back.

He let his hand rest there a moment before pressing his middle finger, and by extension the toy, against her. Gently, he rubbed it up and down, pressing into her. She gasped and grabbed the sheets with one hand and his forearm with the other. He shifted to lean over her, and his hot breath fanned over her nipple.

Oh, yes, her mind screamed.

He kissed her nipple and pressed his finger farther into her, massaging her vagina and teasing her clit. His knee kept her thighs open—it gave her something to grip with her knees.

His tongue swirled around her breast, teasing the stiff peak until sensation zinged from her pussy to her breasts. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and shifted her hips, grinding against his hand.

“Oh, fuck.” He laid his head against her shoulder and worked his finger back and forth through her folds. “I want inside of you right now.”

“Yes!” She dug her nails into him, pulling him closer. If she didn’t come soon, she would go out of her mind.

“You’re damn tight.”

“I want to come with you inside of me. Please, Travis?” She didn’t even close her eyes when she said it.

Travis shook off her grip and vaulted off the bed. He shed both jeans and boxers at once, tossing them away to land haphazardly over her furniture. She didn’t even flinch when he plucked a condom from her nightstand and ripped it open. She followed the path of his hands and gulped.

Big man, big package.

“You sure?” He put one knee on the mattress.

Bliss sat up and snatched the condom out of the package before he could stop her. She knelt facing him and reached for his erection. There was so much power in him, he could push her aside and do as he liked. She’d probably even thank him for it. Instead, he held perfectly still while she rolled the latex down his hard length.

The tendons on either side of his neck stood out, a testament to how much control he was exerting over what he wanted. Which was her. It was a powerful, heady thing to know he wanted her that badly.

She rose up on her knees and cupped his cheek, leaning in for a kiss.

As if that contact broke whatever leash he’d put on his baser instincts, he crashed down on top of her. Their legs dangled off the side of the mattress, but she didn’t care. His mouth devoured hers, thrusting his tongue into her as his now empty hand palmed her breasts and coasted down her stomach.

She felt his cock nudge her thigh, and she shifted until she could wrap her legs around his waist. His now bare fingers pressed against her opening.

He tore his mouth from hers and panted against her cheek.

“God damn,” he muttered.

“Travis.” She lifted her hips as his finger slid deep inside of her.

“Tell me if it hurts?”

“Fuck me already,” she snapped.

“All right.” He chuckled and kissed the corner of her mouth.

His fingers left her, only to be replaced by the blunt head of his cock. She perched her heels on the edge of the mattress and pressed closer. He held back, depriving her of that first inch.

He shifted over her until he rose up, her leg brushing his thigh their only physical contact. She wanted to spend hours touching and kissing him. He wasn’t magazine beautiful—even naked, he was a little scary looking—but right now he was her scary. Her man. And she wanted him inside of her.

Travis carefully guided his cock to her entrance and glanced at her. Their gazes locked, and he pressed into her. She gasped and wrapped her fingers around the forearm supporting his upper body.

“You okay?” he gritted out and held still.

“Yes, yes, yes.” She hooked one arm around his neck and pulled him lower.

His girth stretched her, rubbing every nerve ending as he penetrated her, joining their bodies. He withdrew and thrust once more, sinking deeper. She appreciated his thoughtfulness, but she wasn’t a virgin. As he thrust once more, she lifted her hips, and their bodies met in a hard slap of flesh.

She groaned, and her eyes nearly rolled back in her head. Fully inside of her, he stretched and fit her better than any toy. There were some things that couldn’t be replaced. A real, live penis was one of those.

“Shit, you okay?” His body went rigid, probably with the strain of remaining completely still.

She lifted her lower body, leveraging her feet on the mattress and wiggled her ass. The things she wanted to do to this man might still be illegal in a few states. She lowered her hips, holding her breath as he slid from her body.

“Oh, fuck,” he muttered.

“That’s the point.” She grinned.

Travis hooked one arm under her knee, robbing her of her mobility and thrust, sinking deep. The breath rushed out of her lungs as he descended on top of her. The mattress squeaked and shifted under them. She didn’t care if they ended up on the floor, so long as he didn’t stop.

His hips pumped, long, deep strokes in and out, while his gaze held hers. There was something about the way he stared that made her feel like he saw deep into her soul, as if he could see how she felt and raised the bet. Her insides quivered and she held onto him tighter.

“Bliss,” he hissed out.

Her name on his lips sparked something deep within her. A sense of rightness, as if she’d been made to fill his arms and be filled by him. It was a soul-deep sensation that took her by surprise.

“Oh, Travis!”

A tide of pleasure swept over her, threatening to rob her of all thought and control. Her body clamped down on his cock, and he groaned, his motions becoming jerky and uneven. His mouth claimed hers as he shoved the mattress almost a foot off the box spring. She felt his muscles constrict and twitch across his back and squeezed him close, holding tight to this man who filled a hole in her life she hadn’t known was there.

12.

Travis stared up at the ceiling and ran his fingers through Bliss' hair. It was even softer than he'd imagined. She snuggled closer, her breath fanning across his chest. The sheet clung to his damp skin.

He didn't know what to think. Sex was an itch to be scratched when it was convenient, and he never crossed the line with a client. Bliss might not be paying his check, but she was involved, and she had no idea what he was. Who he was.

"Think they'll catch him?" she asked.

"Daniel?"

"Yeah."

"Eventually, yeah." The question was, how many people would Daniel kill before they caught him? Killers on the run often splintered, going on sprees or worse. It was out of Travis' hands now—the cops had made that clear.

"I hope so." Bliss lifted her head and looked up at him. "What's your plan for the holidays?"

"Nothing, really." Tracking Daniel had been it. Now he was at loose ends until the FBI threw him another file to look over. No doubt they were knee-deep in paperwork over Daniel's case, since the transient murders crossed state boundaries, putting it squarely in their hands.

"Usually we all get together at Wendy's, but I'm not sure what we'll do this year, you know? Do you at least get time off?" She kissed his chest, and her hair slid over his skin.

Shit. He was a terrible person. If she knew the truth about him, she would have shoved him out of her life.

"Yeah, I'm off now, until the first of the year or so, maybe later. Depends on when a job comes up." He shrugged and glanced at the clock. Half past midnight. Great.

"You think you'd be interested in going out later this week? After everything dies down?"

"Bliss...I don't live in Vegas."

"What?" She blinked at him.

"I live in Illinois. I...we talked about that."

"Oh. Oh right. That...sucks. I guess I should have. Now I feel stupid." She laid her cheek against his chest.

"No, don't. I suck at talking, remember?" God, he was the worst kind of man. She had no idea who she'd gotten into bed with. He'd practically taken advantage of her.

"Don't worry about it."

"Damn it. I'm not good at this either," he muttered and scrubbed a hand over his face.

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. I shouldn't have stayed." He sat up and glanced around her bedroom, searching for his clothes.

The best thing for her was to be away from him. A guy with his record didn't deserve a nice girl. Between his time with the SEALs and in prison, he was fucked up. Throw in his serial killer roots and his baggage was more than any woman deserved. Especially one like Bliss. She was too smart and too normal for a guy like him. He'd do her a favor by leaving.

He snagged his jeans and underwear from the top of her laundry hamper and stepped into them. The silence had the hair on the back of his neck lifting.

The sound of a feminine snuffle sliced him to the bone. He turned and froze. Bliss sat with

her back to the white headboard, the sheets clutched to her chest and her face turned away from him.

Was she crying?

That wasn't what he wanted.

For a second he stood there and watched her hand disappear behind the curtain of hair. She sniffled again, the sound muted this time, but he still heard it.

"Bliss?" He set one knee on the bed. When she didn't respond, he crawled across the bed to her. "Please don't cry. I don't know how to fix that."

"Go away." She grabbed the pillow that still bore the indentation from his head and clutched it to her chest.

"Bliss...I don't know how to make you understand."

"It was a big mistake. I get it." She stared at the far side of the room, resolutely not looking at him, but he could see each tear trickling down her cheeks. They hurt worse than any bullet he'd ever taken.

"No, that's what I...God damn it, Bliss. I'm a felon. Did you know that?" He bit the inside of his cheek and waited for her to slap him.

Her brow wrinkled and she glanced at him, a frown curling her lips downward.

"I'm a felon. A serial killer murdered my dad's family. I was kicked out of the SEALs, and now the only thing I'm good for is as a human shield or the FBI's blood hound. I'm fucked up, and you want no part of this." He jabbed a finger at his chest.

It was the rough, unvarnished truth of his life. Since the moment he'd been conceived, the bastard son of the Ration Survivor, his life was shrouded in darkness. His own mother couldn't stand to look at him. Why should Bliss have to accept what the woman who birthed him could not?

"I don't even know where to start with that." Bliss stared at him, which was better than avoiding him, except now he could see how red her eyes were.

"I've done hard time."

"For what?" One brow arched, as if she didn't believe him.

"Kidnapping a kid." Each word was a nail in his coffin. People got crazy when it came to kids, his prison time was proof of that.

"You kidnapped a kid? Why?"

It was Travis' turn to stare at her. Why wasn't she calling the cops on him? Wouldn't a normal girl do that? What rational woman let a felon into her home, much less her bed?

"Because his mother threatened to kill him and herself."

"And you went to prison for that?"

"Yeah."

"You shouldn't be jailed for that, you should be...I don't know, given a medal. You seriously went to prison for that?"

"A year and some change in FTC." He leaned against the headboard next to her.

"A year?"

"My sentence was longer, but it was reduced."

"I can't believe that. What happened?"

"You should kick me out, you know that?"

"Let me get this straight." She wiped her eyes. "A lot of bad stuff has happened to you, and you think—what? It means people should stay away from you?"

"I'm not a normal guy, Bliss." He couldn't translate the darkness that haunted him into

words.

“I think you’ve had some shitty luck, and if you’re afraid of more bad stuff happening, go on.” She gestured to the bedroom door.

“I’m not afraid.”

“Poor word choice. The big, bad SEAL would never be afraid.” She didn’t flinch away from meeting his gaze.

He could almost taste the sarcasm dripping from her words. Why was she so calm about this? Didn’t she know he could kill her in a dozen ways without breaking a sweat? Not that he would, she was too precious to be harmed. She should have someone in her life to be there for her, protect her if it came to that. If Travis ever met the guy, he’d be hard-pressed to not punch his lights out, even if it was what Bliss deserved.

“You’re still here,” she said after several moments.

“I’ll leave.”

“If that’s what you want to do.” She broke their eye contact and stared at the wall again.

“Damn it, Bliss, that’s not what I want to do. It’s what I should do. I can’t promise you anything. I won’t even be here by the end of next week.”

“But you’ll be here for a week at least?” She reached for his hand and threaded their fingers together.

“That’s the plan.” He stared at their joined hands. The simple act of acceptance floored him.

“I’m okay with that. I like you. I’d like to see you again if possible.”

“You should kick me out.”

“Why? Because you’ve been dealt a shitty hand? I don’t think that stuff is contagious. Besides, it’s made you a strong person. I can’t imagine what it’s been like for you.”

“You deserve someone better.”

“Better than the guy who saved my sister and Christmas all in one day?” She elbowed him and a smile spread across her face. “You’re pretty awesome.”

He knew he needed to say something, but his mind was at a stand-still.

Once, he’d gone rock climbing while in Utah, and he crossed a precarious bit of rock. For a few seconds, if his weight had shifted even the slightest bit, he’d have fallen to his death. From the way he held his breath to how his stomach was tied up in knots, this moment was every bit as uncertain. It wouldn’t be his death if he fell, but he didn’t know what awaited him.

“Travis?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m not like Wendy. I’m not looking for a man to take care of me, if that’s what’s bothering you. I’m happy where I’m at.”

He leaned toward her and fell off the mental cliff into the unknown. Bliss met his kiss, her hand cupping the back of his neck and sliding up into his hair. He meant to be gentle, but she nipped his lower lip. Arousal thrummed through his veins. He shoved the pillow aside and dragged a giggling, squirming Bliss across his lap until she straddled him.

She flattened her hands against his chest and smiled at him. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes sparkled.

It hit him in that instant.

Travis wanted to make her happy.

He didn’t know the first thing about pleasing a woman out of bed. He’d kept his relationships short due to deployment, the nature of his jobs, and his history, but for her, he could be different. It was possible, wasn’t it?

“I—” The sound of Bliss’ phone on the charging station silenced her protest. “It’s Wendy.”

She climbed off the bed and snatched up her phone. He wanted to drag her back into bed but knew she needed to be assured her sister was safe. Bliss yanked on a pair of yoga pants, a sports bra and sweatshirt, as if she were leaving.

“Where are you going?” He picked up one of the cloth bags at random.

Bliss’ cheeks were redder now. She shook her head as the ringtone died.

“I have no reception in here. I have to go out onto the patio to talk to anyone. She knows that. I’ll be right back. Do not open the blue bag.” She pointed at the other bin. “The blue ones.”

“Your sex toys are color coded?”

“Yes.” She laughed and fled the room, taking a pair of house boots with her.

He watched her go, listening for the snick of the latch on the sliding glass doors.

She made him feel things he wasn’t used to feeling. Emotions that had no name. It was unsettling and exciting, but he needed to remember this was only for now. At best, he could give her a weekend or a week here and there between gigs, nothing like what she deserved, but if she wanted him, he wasn’t about to leave.

Travis pried open the blue bag and peered at its contents.

“Fuck...”

* * * *

Bliss stepped out into the frigid evening air. She should have grabbed a coat, but her skin was so hot she’d mistakenly thought the December weather might make her feel better.

Nope.

She hit redial on her phone and pressed it to her ear, willing Wendy to answer fast. As much as Bliss wanted to know how her sister was doing, she also wanted to get back into bed instead of standing on her concrete slab of a patio.

Travis was nothing she’d expected. He was a wounded hero, and while she wasn’t foolish enough to think she could fix him, she could love the man he was now. If only for a little while.

Even as the thought solidified in her mind, she knew it was silly. She couldn’t love him. Maybe the idea of him, but it was too soon. They didn’t know each other. And yet, she couldn’t deny that her heart hadn’t beat this hard for anyone in her life. Not even the man she’d thought she might marry.

“Come on, Wendy, pick up,” she muttered.

A hand wrapped around her, covering her mouth. Something pricked her neck before she could strike out.

Bliss tried to draw breath, to cry out for Travis, but her muscles refused to work— even her lungs were hard to manage. Her legs gave out, and she hit the concrete. Overhead, the stars twinkled down at her, broken only by the large silhouette of a man.

“You took what belonged to me,” he said.

Oh God...

Bliss tried to lift her arm, to cry out, but her vision hazed. The last thing she saw was Daniel Campbell’s face before everything went black.

Dangerous Attraction: Part Two

1.

Travis' boots crunched with each step. The Nevada desert was rough terrain at the best of times. Today was not one of those.

The trail had deep ruts on either side just wide enough for an ATV to fit through. Acrid smoke hung low in the air from the house fire not even a mile away. The smoke mixed with the repugnant scent of death, decay, and animal feces, setting the tone for his foul mood.

He held his breath as he topped the hill and the crime scene unfolded in the small valley along the Muddy Mountain. A dozen or more forensics personnel from the Las Vegas police department clustered here and there around yellow markers.

Was this Bliss' fate?

Would the serial killer treat her like he had these bodies? Or would he do worse?

Daniel Campbell might be the most dangerous serial killer on the loose in decades. And Travis had put Bliss squarely in the man's crosshairs. This was his fault. The knowledge made him sick.

He should have told Bliss no when she insisted on going with him to rescue her sister, Wendy. If he'd known then that Daniel had Wendy's entire family under surveillance, he'd have made a different call.

It should have been Travis Daniel went after, not Bliss.

"Travis, thanks for joining us." Supervisory Special Agent Ryan Brooks strode toward him, arm extended. He breathed federal officer, from the close-cropped hair to the no-nonsense suit. He seemed a little out of place in the middle of the desert, but Travis wasn't about to underestimate the man. He led the FBI's Behavior Analysis Unit that specialized in serial killers.

Travis shook the agent's hand and nodded at the man and woman at his back.

"I'm sorry to meet like this." Somehow Ryan was able to cram sympathy and briskness into those few words. "This is SSR Connor Mullins and Jade Perez. The rest of our team is at the police station and Bliss' apartment."

"They find where the cameras are transmitting to?" Travis asked.

"Not yet, but our tech is working on that remotely," Ryan replied.

After calling in Bliss' abduction, it had only taken the cops thirty minutes to locate half a dozen cameras in Bliss' home and five times that many at her sister's residence.

The bastard had watched them make love, and then he'd taken her.

"Think you could walk us through what happened yesterday?" Connor's voice rolled and lilted. Wherever the man was from, it wasn't America, that was for sure. Travis's money was on Ireland.

"Sure. Where do you want to start?"

"The beginning. Right now you are our only inside view into Daniel Campbell's life," Jade said. The chilly December breeze blew her long, red ponytail over her shoulder.

"What about family? Co-workers?" Travis glanced between them. Someone had to know Daniel better than him.

"Family is deceased, and he worked remotely from home the last two years. To our knowledge, you're the only person that's seen him," Jade replied.

Shit.

Travis might not be an FBI agent with all the training, but he could read between the lines.

This was not good news for Bliss. He glanced over Ryan's shoulder to watch a forensics guy dusting sand off a small mound.

"How many do you think are out there?" Travis nodded at the dump site.

"No telling. They've found remains starting at that stone," Connor gestured at a large rock and then flung his arm wide, "to about fifty yards that way."

"It will take a while to match all the bodies," Jade said.

"Wendy said there were three men with her. Even if he kept three men between his kidnapping and dumping of the women that's...twenty-four possible victims." Travis' stomach knotted further.

"They've already identified thirty-two skulls," Jade volunteered.

"Christ." Travis shook his head. At the least, Daniel Campbell was responsible for forty lives lost once they factored in the women, and probably more.

"I hate to push, man, but we need to know what you know." Connor took a step closer, standing between him and the scene.

"Yeah, yeah." Travis nodded and dredged up that first memory of Bliss. "I went to records yesterday morning to pull the case files on the other women, look for similarities. Bliss walked in to report that her sister was missing. I figured, it's the right time frame, the sister fits the profile, why not follow up on it? So we got some coffee, she told me what happened, that she saw her sister the night before, but yesterday she was gone. We went to Wendy's house, and that's when I found the security system had been tampered with. Digging back into the other cases, I was able to find out a few of them had security systems that were monitored by the same company. Between that, and the make and model of the car Wendy left in, we were able to track down Daniel Campbell."

"How did you know Wendy left in that car?" Jade asked.

"Wendy and her husband live in a gated community. We had a look at the security tape from the night before." He was pretty sure those moments crammed into the security booth with her were the bedrock of this thing between them. Or maybe he'd been a goner from the moment she walked into the police station.

"But not Bliss?" Jade's gaze narrowed.

"No. Wendy's husband, Grayson, is rich. Her family isn't. Bliss lives in an apartment complex about ten minutes away."

"Why didn't you call us or tell the cops when you located Daniel Campbell?" Ryan asked.

"Because by then, Grayson had retained Aegis Group to get his wife back. I had to obey orders first."

"Like a good soldier," Connor muttered.

Travis ignored the comment. He was a SEAL. It was who he was. If the agent didn't like it, he could fuck off.

"Why'd you bring her here? Why not leave her at her sister's house?" Connor asked louder. The man was belligerent and starting to rub Travis the wrong way.

"Her sister's mental state. She argued that I might do more harm to her than good if I had to manhandle her out of the situation. Since it appeared to be low risk, I agreed." How did he explain to them the passionate way Bliss spoke? He was still positive that if he hadn't taken her with him, she'd have done her best to follow him.

"Walk us through the rescue," Ryan prompted. He glanced at Connor, who ignored the pointed look.

"I approached the house from the northwest on foot. I didn't know at the time no one was

home. I saw the path, followed it, and found Wendy. I had to tranq her to get her out of the cell. On my way back I saw that Bliss had driven up to the house. I made a beeline for the truck, secured Wendy in the back seat, and that was when I heard a shotgun blast. Bliss exited the house, followed by Daniel. I returned fire, covering her until she could get in the SUV, and we got out of there as fast as we could.”

“Did Wendy mention the other victims?” Jade asked.

“Yeah.” Travis nodded. “Called them Stumpy and something else. They told her about the other victims, how they wound up there.”

“And that was?”

“According to Wendy, Daniel kills the men, who he calls his test subjects, around the time he takes a new wife, as he calls the women. He forced Wendy to marry him at a drive-through wedding chapel under the name of Daniel White.”

“Lali was able to track down a half dozen wedding licenses we think were Daniel’s aliases.” Jade shook her head.

“We think he’s doing that to Bliss?” Connor asked.

“She doesn’t fit his profile. She’s not blonde or born in Vegas,” Ryan said, not looking at Travis.

“What you’re saying is he’s probably using her as a test subject. He wants to get back at her for taking away Wendy.” Travis didn’t flinch from the truth. In the SEALs, they hadn’t had the luxury of ignoring the truth, and it wouldn’t change now. The only difference was him. The agony of knowing these terrible things were happening to Bliss. He’d change places with her in a heartbeat if he could.

“We don’t know that,” Ryan said quickly. “What else do we know about the victims?”

“Did Wendy say anything about the Psycho Club?” Connor asked.

“Killer Club,” Jade corrected.

“No, nothing.”

“We need to talk to Wendy. Find out what she knows,” Ryan said.

“Good luck with that.” Travis chuckled bitterly. “Her husband has her on lockdown.” He curled his hands into fists. If he had the time to worry about Grayson Horton, he’d have already decked the guy.

“Where do we think he’s gone? He torched his house, abandoned his holding cells. The Buick was burned with the house. He has to have a plan,” Jade mused out loud.

“Who knows?” Connor shrugged.

“He’s detail-oriented. He would have had a getaway plan. We aren’t dealing with a killer on the run yet,” Ryan said.

Travis had tracked criminals and terrorists across deserts, seas, and continents. He was going to find Bliss, and when he did, he would kill Daniel Campbell.

* * * *

Everything hurt.

It was the first thought that swam up through the fog. Whatever party Bliss had gone to last night must have been something wild.

Who convinced her to go?

Her mouth was dry, and someone had let a herd of elephants loose in her head. It must be the landscapers. They always seemed to mow the tiny patch of grass outside her bedroom

window for half an hour. They had the worst timing.

The bed lurched, and Bliss reached out to catch herself. Her hand smacked into a metal bar. Light stabbed her bleary eyes.

This wasn't her bedroom.

She gasped for breath and blinked away the crud matting her eyelashes.

This could not be happening.

No, no, no.

Bits of last night teased her memory, but she hurt so bad.

What was going on? Was she going to die?

Across from her, shelves lined the wall. Strapped in like precious cargo were glass jars.

Glass...jars...

She squinted. Where had she seen those before? It was recent.

Light slashed in through the window above her, illuminating the jars.

Oh my God.

Daniel Campbell. She'd seen them in his house.

The diesel engine chugged loud enough to block out her thoughts.

She pressed her hand to her mouth and tried to pull her legs up, but the space was too narrow for her to do anything but lie on her back or maybe her side.

What happened? Where was she? Was Wendy okay? Had he hurt Travis?

Snatches of memory swirled in her head. They'd rescued Wendy, Grayson had arrived from London, and Travis had taken her home. After that it got a little fuzzy. They'd kissed and she knew there was more she couldn't recall.

Had Daniel killed Travis? Was he dead?

Hot tears pricked her eyes.

Why her? Why this?

The overwhelming sense of dread settled on her, and the weight of it was suffocating.

Bliss didn't want to die. Not like this. Who would take care of Wendy? What about her bucket list? There were so many things she wanted to see and do before she died.

She drew in a shaky breath and covered her mouth.

Panicking never solved problems. That's what she told Wendy. When something bad happened, she needed to take stock of her situation and make a plan. That approach had weathered the storms before, why not now?

Bliss inhaled and wrapped mental arms around all her fear, anguish, and sorrow. She shoved it into a mental closet and locked the door. There was time to fall apart when she was dead. But for now she was still alive, and Daniel Campbell had no clue who he was messing with. She might not be a badass SEAL, but she'd never rolled over and given up for anyone. Someone would come for her, and when they did, she intended to be alive.

Oh, God.

She gulped down a deep breath.

Freaking out wasn't going to do her any good.

Bliss peered through the bars, taking in her surroundings. This had to be some sort of converted motorhome. The insides had been gutted. The floor was covered in metal sheeting. A table, or something, was bolted to the center of the narrow space, maybe an arm's length from her prison. She craned her neck to look toward the back of the motorhome, but it was shrouded in shadow.

The motorhome turned a wide right. She could see out through a few feet of the windshield.

An awning blocked out the light. The vehicle lost speed and lurched to a stop.

A gas station.

She shoved her hands down to her sides and closed her eyes, forcing her body to relax.

Playing possum was her only defense right now.

The engine died, allowing the ambient sounds of country and western music to infiltrate the motorhome.

It wasn't soundproof.

Good to know.

The driver groaned and shifted. He must have stood. One heavy footstep after another on the metal flooring made it easy to track Daniel's movements to the door. It went against her instincts to remain quiet when it squeaked open, and the motorhome shook with each step down the stairs. The door slammed shut and for a few blessed seconds she relaxed.

She was alone.

Her body hurt, but a quick wiggle of fingers and toes suggested she seemed to be okay.

Nothing hurt in a bad way, and nothing was chopped off.

She shifted so she lay fully on her back and began exploring her prison by touch. The bottom was plywood with a thin egg crate laid over it. An act of kindness? Or was that to muffle her sounds? She stomped on the walls at her feet and knocked on the ones over her head. They appeared solid, but not metal like the bars holding her prisoner.

The top of her prison was heavy, but appeared to have some give in it. The hinges were up against the wall, but what was holding it closed was a mystery.

She pulled her knees up as far as she could and wedged them against the top, pushing with everything she had.

The motorhome door opened. She squinted in the sudden light and pain stabbed her behind the eyeballs. She wrinkled her nose and forced herself to see past the pain.

Daniel Campbell.

The man chuckled and climbed into the motorhome.

That sound, it was the stuff of nightmares.

Bliss sucked down air and screamed, praying someone was outside, that they would hear her.

Daniel swore and closed the door behind him.

She grabbed the bars, shook them, and screamed again.

He went to a knee, fumbling with something on the outside and moments later the lid lifted. He swung his arm and punched her, right in the face. Stars lit up her vision, and for a second she couldn't believe what had just happened. White hot pain seared her nerves. She cradled her face in her hands and rolled away from him, hunching her shoulders. It was instinct more than anything else, a weak attempt to protect everything vital.

"You shut up, or I'll slice your throat now. They'd like that—my children. You're only alive right now because you're useful." He dug a hand into her hair and pulled her backward, until she had no choice but to look up at him.

He held a syringe in his hand.

Her neck twinged, and a memory broke loose from the fog.

Wendy had called. Bliss had left her bed, no, she'd left someone.

Travis.

Travis had been in her bed.

She'd left him to go call Wendy back and something bit her.

No, it was Daniel.

She held up her arms, weakly trying to fend him off, but he jabbed the needle into her forearm. He shoved whatever was inside into her veins, watching her.

“W-why are you doing this?” she asked. There wasn’t a reason she could accept in existence, but she still wanted to know.

“Because I can,” he replied.

Her vision hazed, fading to black and all the fight leached out of her.

She wasn’t dying, but she might as well be. She wasn’t a SEAL, she had no training. It was only a matter of time until Daniel killed her. Just like the other women.

2.

Travis peered through the binoculars. By all appearances, the mansion on the hill was just that, a luxurious getaway outside of Las Vegas. That was, until one of the security guards came into sight. Even the most A-list celebrity didn't have security packing semi-automatic weaponry, unless they were looking for attention. From his vantage point above the outpost, Travis could document the comings and goings of all the personnel assigned to Grayson Horton's security detail.

Wendy had just become the most protected asset in America, and Bliss was paying the price.

What chapped Travis' ass the most was that these weren't just any hired toughs. These were federal agents. Badge carrying CIA officers. Which might explain some of Grayson's hesitance about speaking to the FBI. The two agencies didn't always play nicely together.

The phone in Travis' pocket vibrated. For a moment he considered ignoring the call. Chances were it was Ryan Brooks calling him again to relay some bit of knowledge that wouldn't help him find Bliss.

It wasn't Ryan.

"Tell me something good, Gavin," Travis said.

Next to the FBI's technical analyst, Gavin might be his best shot at getting a lead on Daniel's current whereabouts.

"Bliss' cell phone last pinged off a tower off I-95 north of Vegas at four this morning." Gavin was all business, unlike yesterday. No one at Aegis liked that someone had been kidnapped from under their noses. By now, everyone at the home base would know.

"Shit. There's everything north of Vegas." Still, it cut out the lower half of the country.

"I'm still working on Campbell's history. The FBI doesn't want to share, so you might get the same thing twice." Keys clicked and things beeped in the background.

"I'm fine with that. Maybe the second time around it'll jog something loose."

"You about to go pay our CIA friend a visit?"

"Friend is a bit much."

"Cool."

"Hey, in my email I have a folder called KC. Look through it. See if it doesn't help in the search for Campbell."

"You want me to hack into your email?" Gavin asked. The sound of keys clicking in the background stopped.

"Don't you already do that?" Travis chuckled.

"Well...yeah."

"Then get to it."

"What's KC stand for?"

"Killer Club."

"Okay..."

"It's the project I've been looking into for the FBI. A club of serial killers."

"The thing with your sister?"

"Yeah."

"I'm on it."

The line went dead, and Travis pocketed his cell phone.

He rose into a crouch and waited for the guard to circle around to Travis' side of the building.

Three...

Two...

One...

Like clockwork, the CIA agent came into sight.

Travis slid off the outcrop of rock and down a sand and stone embankment. The scrub and brush kept him out of sight from the building below. He hit upon the footpath up to the radio tower at the top of the rise and got his feet under him. For the span of a few seconds he listened, testing the wind and allowing his senses to think for him.

Satisfied he was still undetected, Travis proceeded along the path. Judging from the lack of tracks, no one had bothered to scout up this far from the house.

The property butted up to the rocks with a fence on the other three sides. In theory, this house functioned as a layover and hideout for CIA operatives in the field. It also could double as a command center in case of an attack on the region.

For as high-tech as the structure was, it still had blind spots. Like the cameras that couldn't be used due to the cluster of nests built around the poles. Because the southwestern willow flycatcher was endangered, the nests couldn't be touched, and that left the whole back half of the property vulnerable.

Which just went to show that Mother Nature had the last laugh in the end.

He crouched behind the line of decorative boulders that fenced off the pool area. Grayson and Wendy Horton were twenty yards away, safe and snug inside the multi-million dollar mansion.

Travis checked his watch and counted down to the minute mark. The interior sweep at the top of the hour would be concluding, and if he was lucky, the CIA agents were bored and sloppy. If he wasn't lucky, he might end up with a few more scars to add to his collection.

The time for hiding was over.

He slithered past the rocks, landing on his feet and strode around the pool.

Despite the tinting on the wall of glass, he could still see movement inside.

Travis reached the French doors. He held his breath, bracing for the gunshot and opened the door.

It swung open.

"Oh my God, Grayson!"

Travis ducked into the house as a man threw a weak punch at the air he'd just occupied. He shoved the man against the glass and held him there with his forearm.

"Grayson Horton, I'm Travis Ration," he said.

"W-what?"

"Grayson, he's not our enemy." Wendy stood ten feet away, clutching a baby to her chest. There were dark circles under her eyes, but she'd showered and cleaned up since he last saw her.

"Ma'am? Sir?" Right on cue, a man in a suit strode into the living room, hand at his hip. From the befuddled expression, he hadn't parsed out yet how or why Travis was there. Some security detail.

"He's not hurting us," Wendy said, reaching out to stop the CIA officer with one arm and hefting the baby up with the other.

"What the hell?" Grayson snapped. Travis let Grayson shove him away. "How did you get here?"

"I walked up to the door and let myself in," Travis replied.

Pampered idiot.

"Who are you?" The CIA officer frowned. He hadn't even pulled his weapon.

"Have you found Bliss?" Wendy stepped closer, her big brown eyes so much like Bliss' it hurt to look at her. The sisters were almost complete opposites, except for the eyes.

"Not yet. Got a ping off her cell phone from early this morning. Looks like he was headed north."

"Back to where...?" Wendy's voice stuttered and died on her. Chances were she wouldn't be able to speak about what had happened to her for a long time. The baby in her arms gurgled, content despite his mother's anxiety.

"No, farther north it seems. He's gone."

Wendy sat down on a cream L-shaped sofa. Her tears could have been his, if he knew how to cry. She hugged the baby closer and rest her cheek on his head.

"He's gone? Are you sure?" Grayson asked. He moved to stand next to his wife and lay a hand on her shoulder. The child waved a hand at his father. "Here. Give him to me"

Travis gritted his teeth and watched the tender exchange. Grayson took the baby and passed her a tissue, sticking close to her side while she fought a losing battle with the tears.

"Sir?" The CIA suit glanced between them.

"Get on already." Travis waved the agent away.

Grayson nodded, and the suit went without argument.

So much for security.

"Where is he taking her? What are they doing about finding her?" Wendy sniffled and dashed the tears off her cheeks, but they kept coming.

"We don't know. At this point, he's disappeared completely. We have no leads." But there were always leads. This time, Travis and the FBI didn't have them, but the CIA was another entity altogether. He'd learned that every time someone said there weren't any. The problem was asking the right people the right questions, and when necessary, applying pressure.

"He won't get you, Wendy. You're safe." Grayson took a knee and gently wiped his wife's tears away.

"But what about Bliss?" she asked.

Grayson glanced at him.

The man would do anything for Wendy—it might as well be stamped across his forehead—but he didn't give a damn about Bliss. If he did, the CIA would already be leveraging their considerable weight.

"Your husband could help," Travis said.

"He could?" Wendy glanced from Travis to Grayson, who suddenly found something interesting on the carpet.

"The people your husband work for could be very helpful." Travis watched the hunch of Grayson's shoulders, the furrows on his brow.

Wendy didn't know.

"They could? How could they help?" She blinked her dark brown eyes at her husband, and Travis knew the man was a goner.

"Honey, let me talk to Mr. Ration for a moment alone, okay?" Grayson helped Wendy to her feet and guided her to a hallway.

He watched her leave before turning to look at Travis.

"She doesn't know?" he asked.

"No. How the hell did you get in here? There are cameras and two CIA agents." Grayson strolled to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water.

"I'm the best." Travis accepted the water Grayson offered, but didn't take a drink. He never trusted a man backed into a corner, especially when a woman was concerned. "You going to help find Bliss? Or hope Daniel Campbell stays content hacking your sister-in-law to bits?"

"I don't want Bliss hurt," Grayson said in a rush, hand up defensively.

"But you aren't exactly calling in any favors to help her."

"I...I'm not in good standing with the CIA right now."

"That's your problem."

"I'm not paying you to rescue Bliss. Why do you care?"

Because...the reason was just there, out of view. Bliss was special. She was important.

"Because she's an innocent in all of this. She wouldn't have become a target if she hadn't have been trying to protect Wendy." Travis set the bottle on the counter and stared at Grayson.

"Are you going to let her die, or are you going to do something to help?"

"What do you think I can do?" Grayson spread his hands.

The man might look like a weak patsy, but he was no fool.

"You design buildings. You figure out ways for the American government to hide their spy tech in those buildings. Which means you must know the people at the NSA. The ones who can run facial recognition software on all the security cameras they supposedly aren't watching."

Travis pulled out a photograph of Daniel Campbell and pushed it across the marble surface. Grayson frowned at the picture.

"The FBI is on the case. Why can't they do it?"

"We all know there's the NSA they tell us about, and then there's the other one. Ask them, or when Daniel Campbell is done tearing Bliss into bits, he'll come back for Wendy. A man with a plan this detailed isn't going to let a loose end go." His body was cold, numb. He'd never felt this way before. Rescuing people had mattered, but this time, it mattered to him.

Travis pushed off the counter. Time was ticking, and they didn't have a second to lose.

* * * *

Daniel stood ankle deep in the fresh powder and inhaled. The weather blowing in would cover his tracks off the main road, and then he could settle in for the winter. By the time spring rolled around, no one would be looking for him. Or the girl.

Speaking of, he needed to check on her. The drugs should wear off before too much longer and he'd need to do something with her. The bench cage was fine for travel, but he didn't want her underfoot.

He pulled out his keys and examined the compass attached to the ring. With his bearings set, he trudged due west through the trees, counting off his steps. After the first few years, and one close call with the law, Daniel had implemented this back-up plan. A crash spot. The clearing along the hunting path was just big enough to fit his RV, and most importantly, his secret stash.

There.

The A-frame structure was small, not even big enough for a person of any considerable height to stand upright. He pulled the thatch door open. Snow and layers of leaves fell to the ground, but the shelter was otherwise intact. The only things inside were gas cans, and judging by the layer of dirt, they hadn't been disturbed since his last trek up to check on the site.

He grabbed two cans and made the return trek back to the RV. While he could use the ATV

to run out for supplies, the fewer people he saw the better. The gas in the shelter should keep him for two weeks.

A whole winter without the demands of work or society. Months to just be. And experiment. It was enough to make him almost forget the loss of his last wife.

Wendy.

He'd reclaim her someday, but not today.

A metallic clang interrupted his giddy daydreaming.

He frowned and picked up the pace, kicking up snow as he closed in on the Winnebago.

The girl.

She was bound to be a problem. Nothing like her sweet sister.

He tossed the cans down and jerked the door open. The bench top to the cage rattled. Bliss. No, he had to stop thinking of her like that. She was an object. A thing.

His newest test subject had her feet pulled up, as if to kick the lid. No doubt that's what he'd heard.

Daniel stomped into the RV, leaving clumps of snow on the floor in his wake. It was beyond time to get her settled and out of his way. It would be interesting to see how she survived in this weather, what she could stand.

He unlocked the lid and grabbed a handful of her hair.

"No! No, wait!" She grunted and clutched his wrist as he hauled her to her feet.

The nice thing about being out this far was that there was no one around to hear her scream.

She scratched at his gloves and kicked his ankle, but otherwise she was too weak and clumsy from multiple doses of tranquilizers.

He scooped a length of chain out from under the passenger seat before dragging the female subject outside.

"The air smells fresher here," he said, pausing for a second to appreciate it.

"Kill me already," the subject said.

He glanced at her but didn't respond. Her name was already fading from memory. She was no longer a person, or even a thing with feelings. She was part of his experiment. Part of his great test to figure out just how much a human body could withstand.

Daniel led the subject all the way back to the A-frame and secured his latest pet to the tree and then to the subject by way of a pair of handcuffs. He pointed at the shelter.

"Do your best to not die."

Yet.

3.

“Travis, man, you gotta eat something.” Ethan plopped a bag of fast food down on the hotel room desk.

Travis glanced at it.

He’d had burgers with Bliss yesterday. They’d talked about sex and vibrators. He hadn’t cared they were in a crowded, family establishment. One day with her and now it felt as if he were missing a crucial part of himself.

“Not hungry,” he said.

Travis tossed his clothes into his suitcase and carefully gathered his files while his Aegis Group co-workers, Ethan and Mason, ate. They had their own adjoining rooms, but hadn’t let him be since returning to the hotel.

“Where you going?” the kid, Mason, asked. He was the newest Aegis recruit, barely out of the SEALs.

“Don’t know yet.” Travis zipped the duffel bag and pulled his phone out.

“Where do you think he’s gone?” Ethan asked.

“Not sure yet, but he’d have somewhere outside of Vegas to run to if he needed. Some of the bodies they identified were from as far away as Flagstaff, so we know he travels. I just don’t know what the Vegas connection is.”

“What Vegas connection?” Ethan had forgotten his food and now leaned forward.

“The women. Every one of the women he picks are blonde, born and raised in Vegas, and until Wendy, they’d never had a child. We know he impregnated them, kept them alive until they had the kids, and then killed them. From what Bliss saw, we know he kills and keeps the babies. I’m thinking since he dumped the last two before they carried the babies to term, he just wanted to make sure the women could carry a child.”

“I think I’m going to be sick.” Mason’s lips curled, but he didn’t go anywhere.

“Why not set up here? Wait for him to come back, if Vegas is that important to him?” Ethan suggested.

“No.” Travis shook his head. “He’d keep those women for a year or more if they survived childbirth. If he escapes with Bliss, I don’t think we’d find her.”

“Okay,” Ethan brushed crumbs off his jeans and gestured to the files on the bed, “So saying he—”

Travis’ phone lit up, vibrating and ringing on the bed. He snatched it up and jabbed at the screen.

“What did you find out?” Travis asked.

“We got a hit. I’m not supposed to be able to ask for this kind of favor, but someone turned a blind eye.” Grayson’s voice was hushed and strained. Probably trying to keep Wendy fleeced.

Good luck, buddy.

“Where?” Travis didn’t give a fuck who he owed, not when Bliss’ life was in danger.

“Truck stop. I-95 up around Lake Tahoe.”

“That’s not much of a lead. He could be anywhere up there.” Travis grabbed his bags.

Both Ethan and Mason jumped to their feet, rushing into the adjoining room. Their half-eaten burgers and fries remained on the desk.

“I’ll see what else I can find out, but they got the make, model, and license on that

motorhome, and the trailer he's hauling."

"Wait. Trailer? What kind? How big?"

"I'll send the picture to you. It's small. There's a tarp over it, so I don't know what is there. What do your fed friends have?"

"Nothing."

"Damn. Will this be useful to them?"

"Don't know. I'm not telling them."

"What?"

"Later, Grayson."

Travis hung up and paused at his hotel room door, mentally flipping through the scene at Daniel's house that morning.

The Buick was there, but not the ATV. They'd rightly assumed he used that to get away, now they knew where to. Somewhere out there, he'd stashed an RV and the means to escape detection.

"We're ready," Ethan announced. He strode into Travis' room, bag slung over his shoulder, followed by Mason.

"What are you doing? Go home," Travis said.

"No way." Mason shook his head. The kid was stubborn.

"We can stand here and argue about it, or you can accept that we're going to fucking help you. What's it going to be?"

Travis ground his teeth together. It was almost Christmas, and they should be with their families. Except Ethan had no one, not anymore. Travis didn't know Mason well enough, but if the kid was anything like the rest of them, he probably didn't have someone keeping the light on.

"Fine. We got to book a plane to Tahoe. Tonight."

Hang in there, baby, we're coming for you.

* * * *

Bliss huddled under the old, moth-eaten blankets. She'd unearthed them from the pile of discarded things in the crevices of the shelter Daniel had left her in. The wind had picked up since the sun set, and icy fingers found their way through every crack and joint in the structure.

Her teeth chattered so loud she feared she might not be able to hear anything approaching. Frozen teardrops still clung to her lashes, but she didn't bother wiping them away. Instead, she gently examined the business end of a stick she'd salvaged. It wasn't old or rotten. For the last indeterminable span of time she'd worn one end down into something like a spear.

She wasn't kidding herself. Even with a collection of stones and her spear wouldn't deter anything set on eating or killing her. All she had to do was hold on. If she could just hold herself together, Travis would save her. She had to believe he was out there under the same night sky looking for her, otherwise, what hope did she have?

* * * *

Daniel placed the last child in the half-circle. He smiled at the beautiful, shining faces. He was asking a lot of them to be up this early, but it was worth it. They needed to learn what they were. It was time they knew they weren't just men and women.

They were gods.

And today they would receive a master lesson in where they stood with the rest of humanity.

He held up his finger to his lips, willing the children to be quiet. Of course they were excited, why wouldn't they be? Most had only seen his wives. Until now, they weren't old enough to understand what they were.

The little voices hushed.

They knew what would happen next. Last night he'd let them all watch as he studied his test subject in the dark. She'd never noticed the night vision camera bolted to the top of the structure. In his long years, he saw plenty of subjects attempt to thwart their fate, so her efforts were nothing new. Just one more habit to be broken. Until it accepted its fate.

He grabbed the side of the A-frame and pulled.

The structure splintered and cracked apart.

The subject yelped and screamed. The chain clanged as she scrambled to the side, breaking free from the debris.

She never made it to her feet.

Daniel grabbed her hair and *thunked* her head against the tree.

She lost her grip on the makeshift weapon and curled in on herself, huddling in the snow like the animal she was.

He crouched next to her. Unlike this subject, he didn't need a weapon. He was the weapon. He was the creator of her fate.

"Oh my God." She gulped and stared at his children.

"Look at me," he snapped.

Her gaze returned to his face. Her pupils were slightly dilated, her focus off. Probably from the knocks to the head she'd taken yesterday and today. Well, that was her fault.

"Children, look at it." He reached out and pinched her chin between his fingers, directing her to look up so they could see her throat. "This is what we rule over. We make them listen. We make them what we want them to be. This one will be the mother of our subjects. What?"

Daniel tilted his head to catch the faintest of voices.

"No, she will not give you a brother. She's not worthy of that." He spat at her feet and stood. "She'll give us more subjects. More playthings."

* * * *

Travis peered into the darkened ranger station. Just his luck people got Christmas Eve off. Tahoe City was blanketed in new snow, and the police were spread too thin this holiday season to be of much help.

They were on their own.

Snow crunched as Ethan approached, phone in hand and a frown on his face.

"Can't get anyone on the horn about a chopper," he said.

"What about a small plane? There's got to be someone who'd want to earn a buck," Mason suggested. The kid was showing a surprising amount of ingenuity. Too bad the holidays rendered every solution a moot point.

"Nah." Ethan shook his head. "They're all short-staffed and grounded thanks to last night's ice storm. Maybe we could get someone from the south side of the lake though. Sounds like they just got a dusting of powder."

"Where are the ATV rentals?" Travis asked.

"I don't know. Let's find out." Mason pulled out his phone.

Damn. Google. Why hadn't he thought of that?

Travis' brain was seriously scrambled. He should be focused, but every other second his mind went back to last night when he held Bliss. When she pulled him back to bed instead of kicking him out.

This was all his fault.

"Why ATVs?" Ethan asked.

"Daniel used an ATV to dispose of the bodies in a ravine. It was missing from the property when the cops swarmed the place. Grayson said the RV was pulling a trailer with a tarp on it. I'm guessing that was either supplies or the ATV."

"Why the hell are you just mentioning this?" Ethan scowled.

"Sorry, it was in here." Travis pointed to his head.

"You've got to get your head out of your ass," Ethan said.

"There's a bunch of ATV trails around the south side of the lake," Mason announced. He turned his phone around and showed them a cluster of red dots.

"Let's hit the road," Travis said.

"What else haven't you told us?" Ethan asked, falling into line next to Travis on their way back to the SUV rental. "Start at the beginning."

"Which beginning?" Travis asked.

"The very beginning. We've got a drive ahead of us."

The very beginning was almost a decade ago. Maybe longer. There was no telling how many bodies littered Daniel Campbell's past. If they didn't find her, Bliss could be next.

4.

Bliss hauled the bundle of straw and thatch over the burrow she'd made for herself out of rocks and packed snow. It was slow going. She couldn't feel her hands, and most of her clothing was either caked in ice or soaked. The handcuffs were the worst. Solid bands of freezing cold metal she couldn't escape from.

One more step.

One more handful of snow.

One more rock.

Since Daniel had scared her awake that morning, that had been her mantra. *One more.*

Bliss had never been one for the outdoors. She liked her comfortable apartment and her cushy bed. Beyond trying to stay warm, she didn't know what else she could do. The stick spear had been her great, innovative idea, but even that was gone now, buried in the pile of rubble that had been the A-frame hut.

All during the trip in the RV she'd imagined a bloody, horrible death, full of screaming and pain. Freezing hadn't been on her radar until last night. Now, even with the sun reaching its zenith, she couldn't feel her toes.

Hell of a way to spend Christmas Eve.

At least Wendy was safe. The silver lining, if there was one, was that Bliss stood a better chance of surviving the elements than her sister. If there was ever a time to love her fuller figure, it was now. In her place, Wendy might already be dead.

"On your knees."

Bliss cringed and turned toward the voice. She hadn't heard Daniel's approach, not with all the noise the chain made.

"I said, on your knees!" Daniel took two ground-eating strides toward her and lifted his hand.

"Okay, okay!" She dropped to her knees, hands lifted to ward off the blow.

He pulled back at the last second, slapping one hand into the other. She cringed anyway and curled her hands into fists. Fighting back hadn't gotten her anywhere, so she needed to play along and hope she lived. At least she knew he didn't intend to kill her yet. Just have her raped for his sadistic pleasure. It would take time to put his plan into motion, so all she needed to do was hang on. Just a little while longer.

Daniel muttered something under his breath and turned to face the tree. He produced a single key—not the one to her cuffs—and unlocked her tether.

"Come on. Keep up." He jerked the chain, pulling her off balance.

Bliss threw out her hands to brace herself but still got a face full of snow. The chain rattled over the ground. She scrambled to her feet, partly crawling until she got them under her. Her frozen, numb limbs screamed at her, but she couldn't take it easy now. Just a few more minutes on her feet, and then she could collapse. Granted, she didn't know what was at the end of this walk.

It couldn't be that bad, could it? Her kidnapper hadn't had time to gather new atrocities to throw at her.

He led her back to the RV. She almost wept when he opened the door and attached the end of her chain to the chair leg of the passenger seat.

“Inside,” Daniel snapped.

Inside meant the jar babies and Daniel, but it also meant warmth, maybe a potty break and water, if she were lucky. She climbed into the RV, squeezing past Daniel, and stopped on the top stair, her jaw hanging open.

It was worse.

A body—a man—lay on the rolling metal table bolted to the floor. Blood dripped off the side. Her stomach churned, and she tasted bile.

Another man was on the floor, wearing a pair of handcuffs. He groaned, curled up on his side. Blood stained his clothes, and there was a gash on his forehead.

The man on the table gasped, and blood bubbled up between his lips.

“Oh my God,” Bliss whispered. She gripped the side of the built-in shelves.

“Yes, I am your god.” Daniel grinned at her. “Now we can get started.”

He walked to the other end of the RV. Metal cabinets stood open, each displaying their gruesome wears. Knives, kitchen utensils, tools—she didn’t want to know what he used them for.

“Patch his head up.” Daniel gestured to the man lying on the floor.

Bliss glanced around until she saw a small, black case with gauze sticking out of it. She could let the man die and postpone her torture. The idea repulsed her. She grabbed the case and hobbled around the table, keeping her distance from the body.

Where was Travis?

She’d thought for sure he’d find her in a day, maybe two. But...what if he wasn’t looking? The only reason he’d gone looking for Wendy was because the FBI asked him to, and Grayson paid him. No one would shell out that kind of money for her. What if this was it—stitching up Daniel’s victims, being tortured, and worse?

What would be the price of survival?

Could she pay it?

* * * *

Travis glanced at his phone.

Ryan Brooks’ name flashed across the screen, and the device buzzed.

Again.

Travis rejected the call and pocketed the phone.

“The feds?” Ethan asked.

“Yeah. You’d guess they’d be off for the holidays or something,” Travis muttered.

They’d hit each ATV rental on the off chance one would be open on Christmas Eve, but no dice. Their leads were running out and Grayson wasn’t accepting his calls. The forecast tonight was for more snow. Any trail they might find would be covered up, and Daniel Campbell would get away.

Travis pulled into a scenic turn-off overlooking the bay and slammed his fist into the dash.

“Dude, it’s a rental,” Ethan said.

Mason was passed out in the back seat. They were chasing ghosts across the mountains. They weren’t going to find Bliss. Not at this rate.

“We’re too far behind him,” Travis said. He bit his thumbnail and stared out at the water.

“What do you want us to do?” Ethan turned toward him.

“In his position, what would we do?” Travis asked.

“Get out of the country.” Ethan snorted.

“At this point the only way Daniel could get out of the country would be to cross into Canada or Mexico. He’s on the do not fly list. So do we head for Canada and hope to find him?”

Ethan blew out a breath and laced his finger together behind his head.

“If I took Nate I’d never make it over any border. Amber Alerts would be everywhere, so I wouldn’t make it five counties over. The best thing to do would be to lay low, go off grid.”

“Should I know something?” Travis asked. He knew his buddy was taking the separation hard, but kidnapping his son was a whole other thing.

“No, just saying that if I wanted to take Nate and get away with it, that’s what I’d do.” Ethan shrugged.

“Talked to him?”

“Yeah, while we were waiting for the truck at the airport Molly let me talk to him a bit.”

“Good.” Travis nodded. “So, if we were Daniel, a wanted man with his mug all over the news, chances are he’d need to do the same thing.”

“Didn’t you say you think he’s been up here before?”

“Yeah, it would make sense. He got out of Dodge fast on a direct route to his hiding grounds.”

“Okay, so he’s probably thinking he’ll winter up here. He’s in an RV, so he either needs to plug up someplace or have a generator. He’ll need to be in proximity to supplies.”

“He’s not the hunting type. He might string people up and kill them, but he’s not a hunter. He’ll need to be near a store, but not anything too big. He’s got the ATV so he doesn’t have to move the RV so long as the weather is good.”

Travis glanced in his rearview mirror. A cop car pulled off the two-lane highway behind them, easing closer.

“Company,” he said.

Ethan leaned back and frogged Mason in the thigh. The kid shouted and grabbed his leg, growling at Ethan.

“Fuck. What?” Mason snapped.

“Cops,” Travis said.

“What did you do now, Ration?” Mason turned in his seat, rubbing his thigh. “Where are we again?”

“Emerald Bay, off Lake Tahoe,” Travis replied. He watched the cop stroll up the passenger’s side in the mirrors.

“What’s he doing?” Mason asked.

“Don’t know.” Travis pushed the button and lowered Ethan’s window.

The officer stopped and pulled his sunglasses off, squinting in the afternoon light.

“Afternoon, officer,” Ethan said.

Travis nodded.

“You boys okay?” The officer had to be around his mid-to-late thirties, not all that much older than Travis or Ethan.

“Yeah, just taking in the sights.” Ethan gestured at the impressive view beyond them.

“You guys here on holiday, or on your way somewhere?” The officer was looking for something. What, Travis didn’t know.

“We’re looking for someone.” Travis slipped the photograph of Bliss out of his pocket and a photocopied image of Daniel Campbell’s license. “This is Bliss and Daniel Campbell. You might have seen something about him on the news in the last twelve hours or so.”

The officer took Daniel's picture and whistled.

"I'm Travis, this is Ethan and Mason. We work for a private security company and have been working with the FBI on this case."

"Wish it was nice to meet you boys like this. I'm Sergeant Matt Farrow. Heard about this guy. You think he's here?" He handed the pictures back to Ethan, who passed them to Travis. "Got some ID on you?"

"Yes, sir." Ethan collected Mason's driver's license and passed them to Travis. "We tracked Daniel close to the state line. Made a guess he might be in the area."

"Anyone fitting his description roll into town in a late model Winnebago?" Travis asked. Chances were the officer didn't know anything, but he had to hope.

"Sorry, haven't seen many RVs lately." Matt leaned against the door of the SUV.

It was the answer he expected, but it was still disappointing to hear.

"Two local guys did go missing this morning, though. That's why I stopped to see what you were up to," Matt said.

"Two guys?" Travis perked up. "How do you know they went missing?"

"Friends of friends. Couple of cousins. Their truck was found on the side of the road, and no one knows where they are."

"Where'd that happen?" Travis pulled out his phone. "Can you show me on here?"

"You think this is related?" Matt took the phone and tapped around on the screen.

"This guy's killed at least forty people that we know of. Probably more. He doesn't have much of a cooling-off period." Travis wasn't willing to lump the disappearances up in Bliss' kidnapping yet, but it was worth looking into.

"Their truck was found here." Matt turned the screen back to them.

"That's not that far," Ethan muttered.

"What's this?" Travis pointed to an odd dot on the screen.

"That's the Bayview Trailhead," Matt replied.

"Are there ATV trails?" Travis' stomach knotted.

"Yeah, some go all the way out to Cascade Lake."

Holy shit.

Of course.

Lake Tahoe was a major pull. But the smaller lake off to the south end? Miles of forest and seclusion?

It was perfect.

Somewhere out there, Bliss was waiting for him.

"Officer, I need you to call this number. Tell the FBI agent who answers everything you've told me." Travis scribbled Ryan Brooks' cell phone down on a bit of paper. He didn't have time to call it all in.

"I can't let you boys go out there if this guy is that dangerous." Matt took the paper and frowned.

The hell he could. Travis wasn't asking for permission.

"Travis?" Ethan held up his hand and looked at Matt. "I get it, you're the local law enforcement, and we're a truck full of guys you don't know from Adam. It's Christmas Eve. I'm guessing you've got a family. We're about to go track this guy down. Do you really want to go with us? Or would you rather spend a bit calling around, checking us out, and give us a head start on this trouble?"

Matt frowned, clearly waging a war of rules and regulations in his head. Travis shifted in his

seat, ready to just gas it and be gone.

“Fine.” Matt snapped cell phone pictures of their licenses and handed them back, with the addition of a business card. “Here’s my info. You run into anything or if you find those boys, let me know.”

Travis nodded and shifted into drive before the state trooper could change his mind. Poor guy did not want to get mired in a manhunt on Christmas Eve.

The signs for the Bayview Trailhead weren’t even a mile later.

Hold on, Bliss. We’re coming for you.

5.

Bliss squeezed her eyes shut.

Daniel grunted, and a wet, sloppy pop resounded through the RV.

"Oh, God," the man chained up on the floor next to her muttered.

Don't look. Don't look.

"There," Daniel said in triumph.

He grunted again, and something hit the floor next to her. Warm liquid splashed her hands.

Bile coated the back of her throat and her head pounded.

"You monster, freak," the hillbilly spat. He rattled the short chain that bound him to the bench. At some point the duct tape around his boots had come undone.

"Monster?" Daniel parroted back.

"Be quiet," Bliss whispered. As long as Daniel was preoccupied with the dead guy, he wouldn't bother them. It was too late for him, but she and the other man could still survive this. Couldn't they? She had to wonder if it was worth surviving. If this was going to be her life, did she want to live it?

"Freak?" Daniel's footsteps rounded the end of the table.

He was just a few feet away.

"That's my cousin," her fellow captive said. Anguish twisted his voice, and she could see his horror-stricken face in her mind's eye.

Bliss pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, making herself as small as possible.

This couldn't be happening.

There was no way this could be real.

"You know what the definition of a monster is? A monster is an imaginary creature."

Daniel's steps came closer. "I assure you, I'm very much real."

The man grunted and Daniel yelled.

Bliss' eyes snapped open. The new captive had a knife buried in Daniel's thigh, hilt deep. Where had that come from? She stared at his leg and the blood darkening his jeans. Daniel had one hand buried in the captive's hair and the other grasped at the knife.

Bad could always get worse.

She scrambled back, crab-walking on her hands and feet. Her hand slipped in a puddle and she went down hard, knocking her head against the metal floor. She rolled to her side and face-planted in flannel.

The other man's arm.

His dismembered arm.

The scream stuck in her throat, but she shoved up into a sitting position. The captive shot to his feet, grappling with Daniel. The knife was in Daniel's hand and he held it up, poised to stab.

She froze, torn between self-preservation and the desire to fight back. Could they overpower him? She'd never before waffled on a decision. This was a whole new state of mind, and she didn't like it.

Daniel cracked the other man in the head with the butt of the knife, sending the smaller man to his knees, but not down for the count. The captive lunged forward, taking Daniel's legs out from under him. The knife clattered to the floor as the two men grappled with each other.

This was her chance.
It was time to be brave.
The choice was easy.
She shoved forward onto her hand and knees, reaching for the hilt of the blade.
Daniel took a step and kicked it out of her reach, sending it skidding across the width of the RV.

She stared up into his face, twisted in rage.
The other man had maybe two or three feet of chain. Bliss' was closer to a dozen or more.
She grabbed her leash and pushed to her feet, gripping the bloody table for balance.

"No you don't," Daniel yelled.

He yanked her back by her shirt. Seams ripped, but held. She sat down hard once more. The hillbilly held onto Daniel, but the fight was gone from him. Determination was the only thing keeping him going.

"I'll teach you a lesson," Daniel growled, sounding less human by the second.

Daniel unlocked the man's chain and hauled both of them out of the RV. Bliss' feet slipped and she stumbled over her own tether. Before long, the only thing keeping her upright was Daniel's hold on her shirt.

He shoved both her and the man face down in the snow. The icy top layer broke, cutting into her hands and face. The blood from her clothes stained it pink.

"You want to attack me?" Daniel roared.

The other man was already on his feet. Free of his chains, the only thing keeping him bound were the handcuffs. She struggled to get up, but she had nothing left. Between the drugs, the elements, and nothing to eat or drink, she was done for.

"Kill me then, go on," the man yelled.

Daniel hauled back with the knife and swung, slashing the other man's arm and chest. He yelled and Bliss screamed, bringing her arms up to protect herself.

* * * *

A scream rent the air.
Travis stilled. He didn't even have to hold up his hand, everyone froze.
The sound reverberated on the rocks, through the trees. It was almost impossible to tell where it came from, but he knew.

That was Bliss.

She was alive.

For now.

"That way," Mason said.

"Wait, we don't know—"

"I do." Mason jabbed his finger to the south and east. Toward Cascade Lake. "I grew up tracking in the mountains. That way."

Another scream, this time shorter, spurred them on.

Mason took point, loping easily over the snow, kicking up a spray of white powder in his wake. Travis and Ethan flanked the kid to either side, keeping six to ten feet apart. The terrain was tricky, and the snow disguised roots and rocks that tried to trip them up.

Adrenaline pushed Travis onward. His hands were near frozen, so he gripped his gun and the handle of his knife tighter.

"Oh my God," Bliss yelled.

A man shouted incoherent words.

Mason veered to their left, slowing his pace.

Urgency demanded Travis surge forward, but he kept one eye on the kid and the other on the trees ahead of them. If he acted on his feelings, he would get Bliss killed.

They broke through a stand of evergreens into a scene out of a horror movie.

"Daniel Campbell, freeze," Travis roared.

His vision hazed red.

Bliss crouched on her knees, hands up. There was no way to tell if the blood on her clothes was hers or the other man's. Daniel had one of the missing men by the scruff and held a knife to his throat. More liquid shined off the butcher apron wrapped around his girth. The poor guy in his grip was soaked and gasping for air.

"Oh my God, Travis? Is that really you?" She blinked several times, as if she wasn't sure she believed he was there.

"Bliss? Stay calm." Travis couldn't look at her. If he did, he would rip Daniel Campbell limb from limb for what he'd done to her. There were other victims, other innocents, but this was Bliss. The one bright spot he could remember, and now the same darkness that poisoned him had touched her. It was a crime punishable by death alone.

"Put the knife down, buddy," Ethan side-stepped toward the front of the RV while Mason went toward the rear.

Daniel's gaze narrowed. He pivoted, putting his back to the RV and used the hunter as a shield.

"He said put the knife down," Mason repeated Ethan's words.

"I don't think so." Daniel kept the knife at the man's throat and reached behind him, drawing a six shooter he aimed at Bliss. "If you don't want me to shoot you now, stand up."

"Don't do it," Travis blurted.

Bliss glanced from him to Daniel and back.

"Do it," Daniel adjusted his aim to Travis, "or I shoot him."

"Okay," she stood on shaky legs.

"Bliss, no," Travis said.

"Easy," Ethan whispered.

"Don't hurt anyone." Bliss clutched a length of chain that attached to her wrists.

Daniel reached out and snatched the chain, yanking her close so fast Travis didn't dare squeeze off a shot.

"There we go, this is better." Daniel hugged Bliss to him, the gun pressed up under her jaw. There was no way this was going to end well.

Variants, statistics, and past experience rattled around in Travis' brain. He'd been here a number of times with different jobs. Hostage situations at gunpoint were bad. Unless they could turn the tables somehow. But how?

What had Bliss told him about the house?

What was the one thing missing in the fire?

"You aren't getting out of here, Daniel. Think about your kids," Travis said. The jars Bliss had reported were missing in the devastation. What were the chances Daniel had taken them?

"They are my flesh and bone. I can create more," Daniel said without skipping a beat. "You want to know how this will end?"

"You dead?" Travis knew he should shut up, but that man had Bliss. He couldn't line up his

shot without seeing her pale face. Her lips were almost blue and there were leaves stuck in her hair.

“I’m going to kill this man and your two friends. Then I think I will skin you alive and make her watch. She and I will leave here. No one will find your bodies, and when I’m ready to put down roots again, she will bear me new subjects to experiment on. I’ll take something from her first so she doesn’t get any ideas about running away, but I’ll leave the important organs untouched.” Daniel stroked Bliss’ hair.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

She didn’t think they were going to rescue her.

He tightened his grip.

He’d show her.

One way or another, Daniel was going down. He only had six bullets, and it took a lot more than that to knock Travis off his feet. He had the scars to prove it.

“There’s a problem with your plan,” Ethan said.

“Yeah, we already told the FBI where we were. Local cops are on their way,” Mason said.

The two really did work well as a team, while all Travis could think about was how much he wanted to kiss Bliss again. Hold her.

He willed her to keep looking at him, to focus everything his way. When things went down, he hoped she didn’t see any of it.

Daniel glanced around, his gaze straying to the trees.

He hadn’t counted on backup.

“Nervous?” Ethan asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Daniel said. “I have a plan.”

Daniel squeezed the trigger and fired.

Everything happened at once.

Bliss screamed and dropped to the ground, hands over her head.

Ethan grunted and went to his knees.

Daniel’s eyes bulged the second he realized he was exposed. He drew the knife blade across the other man’s throat and ducked around the front of the RV Ethan was supposed to be covering.

Travis dove for the other hostage. The hunter lay crumpled on the snow, hands clutching his throat. Travis hit his knees, shoving the man’s hands aside to replace them with his own. Blood leaked out from between his fingers, but it was sluggish. The man’s wide eyes darted around and his mouth opened, gasping for air.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Ethan yelled. “Go after him.”

Mason sprinted around the RV, but they all heard the ATV engine in the distance. There was no way they’d catch him on foot.

Daniel Campbell was gone.

6.

Bliss perched on the hospital bed, her hands gripping the thin blanket they'd given her. Her feet and fingers were still cold. No matter what anyone did, she couldn't seem to get warm.

The nurse said she was still in shock, or something like that.

At least the nurse had stopped talking to her and was going straight to Travis now.

Travis.

He'd rescued her.

They hadn't said more than a dozen words to each other, but he hadn't left her side. Not for a single instant.

"Bliss?" Travis' hand rested on her shoulder, shaking her out of her deep well of thoughts.

"Hm?" She blinked at him. She'd missed something important, but for the life of her she couldn't recall what had been said.

"The doctor wants to keep you here to monitor you. I'd rather keep you close."

"Yes," she said, cutting him off.

"Yes—what?"

"I want to stay with you."

Travis meant safety. With him, there was no fear, no sense of dread. So long as he was there, everything would be okay.

He's saved her.

"I'd really rather you stay for observation," the nurse said.

"A man kidnapped me, took me across state lines, and made me watch while he chopped another man up into bits. I'm not staying here." Where he could find her.

"Okay." The nurse sighed and fixed Travis with her stare. "You have her instructions?"

"Right here." He held up a folder.

"I...don't have any clothes." Bliss held the blanket around her a little tighter.

"I have you a bag in the truck. Is it okay if she stays here while I grab it?"

"Certainly. You're the only thing happening here tonight, thank goodness." The nurse smiled and breezed out of the ER bay.

Travis turned to follow in the nurses' wake.

Invisible claws raked at Bliss' back.

"Travis!"

He turned, his lips pressed into a tight line and his eyes unreadable. She couldn't deny that he was what made her feel safe and secure.

"I'm going to step out in the hall and give Mason the keys. I'll be right there. You can see me, okay?"

She nodded, hating the tremor that shook her body, hating the way she needed him, hating Daniel for picking her family out of everyone in Vegas to target.

Travis pushed the curtain aside. Men in suits, uniforms, and nurses milled around. The FBI had shown up at some point, but it was all a blur. He handed the keys off to a guy in jeans and a leather jacket. Mason. He'd mentioned the name before, but the details escaped her.

She was so tired.

But what if she went to sleep and Daniel was there?

"Hey."

Her eyes snapped open, and she stared at Travis' chest. She looped her arms around his waist and slid off the table. He eased her to the floor and kept his hold gentle.

Tears pricked her eyes. The damn things wouldn't stop no matter what she did.

"Hey, you're safe," he whispered.

She nodded.

He had to be regretting his choice to stick around right about now, but she couldn't be more grateful. Not only was Wendy safe because of him, so was she. This nightmare wasn't over, not until Daniel was caught, but at least she was with the good guys.

"Travis?"

He turned, keeping her behind him. He was so big she couldn't see around him, but a moment later he tossed a duffle bag she recognized from her apartment on the bed.

"I don't know what I got, I just grabbed things and tossed them in." He gestured at the blue bag. "I wasn't thinking straight."

"Thanks."

"Want a moment to get dressed?"

"Sure." Her knee-jerk reaction was to keep him close, but she couldn't lean on him forever.

"I'll be right here, okay?" He stepped past the curtain and pulled it almost closed. Through the narrow gap she could see his back as he stood guard.

Even that separation triggered a twinge of anxiety. She tamped down on the urge to rush to his side and instead opened the bag to see what Travis had brought for her.

She'd need a shower and food, but clothes first.

The bag was stuffed almost to bursting with jeans, workout clothes, her birth control pills, her boots, some flip flops, and random bits of clothes. She pieced together enough of an outfit to be presentable and dressed in jeans, boots, and a thin, long-sleeved shirt she was pretty sure he'd grabbed from her dirty laundry. Mixed into the clothing were other odds and ends. Some of them didn't make any sense at all, but she appreciated that he'd thought about her needs.

He'd always intended to find her. In Travis' world, there wasn't room for failure. Even when she lost faith and thought he wouldn't come for her—he hadn't allowed it.

"Bliss?"

The sound of his voice tugged the corners of her lips into a smile.

"I'm ready." She shoved the clothes and odds and ends into the bag, making sure some things went on bottom.

He pulled the curtain back and crossed to the bedside. He took her bag and slung it over his shoulder, as if that was what he was there for.

"We've got a rental ready for us." His hand settled on the small of her back, and he propelled her out of the ER and into the waiting room. "I'm right here."

Travis guided her to a waiting SUV and got into the back seat with her. The same man who'd taken the keys earlier sat behind the wheel.

"Mason?" she asked.

"That's me." He nodded at her in the rearview mirror.

He couldn't be much older than her. He lacked the hardness that radiated from Travis, but there were shadows in his eyes. Whatever he'd been through was different, but no less life changing. It was a facet of a person's character she wasn't sure she'd ever noticed before, but now she did. Was that because she was different, too? Because Daniel had left his mark on her?

"Hungry?" Travis asked.

"Yeah, that soup they gave me at the hospital is pretty much gone." Her stomach was

making a meal of her spleen.

"I want to drop you two off, and then I'll go out for food, if that's okay with you," Mason interjected.

"Nothing's open." Travis sighed.

"There'll be a grocery store or something open if the restaurants are all closed," Mason replied.

"It's Christmas Eve," Bliss said. She'd known it was just a few days away, but the last few blurred together...and here it was. "Do my parents know I'm okay? What about Wendy?"

"The FBI called them and let them know you were safe. They've all been moved to secure locations until the FBI can be sure Daniel isn't monitoring them."

"He was watching them?" She stared at Travis' profile. She wasn't hungry anymore.

Travis turned his head toward her. For a moment she didn't think he would answer. "He had your whole family under surveillance. Once Wendy was no longer available to him, he latched onto you. I'm sorry, Bliss."

She sat in silence, staring at the seat back ahead of her.

Daniel Campbell had cameras in her home. He watched her most private moments. All to what end? To stalk her sister?

Travis' arm around her tightened, pulling her closer.

"We're here," Mason announced.

He pulled the SUV up to a large, two-story log cabin that was probably half the size of Wendy's home. As such, it qualified as a mini-mansion in her eyes. Several other black vehicles and cop cars sat in the circle drive, and a group of uniformed men hung around the front door.

"Any requests?" Mason turned around and smiled.

"Hot chocolate and more chocolate," she said.

"Can do."

She scooted out of the truck with Travis at her back. A couple people turned toward them, and she felt the weight of their gaze.

"Inside," Travis said for her ears alone.

He didn't take his hand off her until they crossed through the doors of the cabin. There was more activity here. A lot more. Several groups were going over maps and paper taped to the wall while another group leafed through boxes of...she didn't want to know.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"The FBI must have gotten back from the scene. I'm guessing they're coordinating the search for Daniel from here. Come on, let's find you a room upstairs away from all this. Brooks might want to ask you some questions later." He propelled her to the wide staircase leading to the second floor.

Travis poked his head in several rooms before whisking a door open and gesturing for her to enter.

She peered into the rustic room. The wooden walls were rough, while the floors and furniture were modern and smooth. There was a flat screen TV and even a small bathroom with a shower stall.

"This good?" he asked.

"Yeah. Thank you."

"There will be five agents, Mason, and me staying here. You're surrounded and completely safe." He set her bag down on the bed. "Need anything? Clothes?"

"How's your friend?"

“Ethan?”

“Yeah.”

“He’ll be fine. Bullet nicked a ligament. They want to do surgery to patch it up. He’ll be back up in no time.”

“Oh. Good.” It didn’t sound that minor, but what did she know? “What about...the other guy?”

“Don England.” Travis blew out a breath. “They took him into surgery. Last I heard they’re still going. Sounded like he was stable, and they thought he’d pull through.”

She sat down on the edge of the bed. At least Don would survive.

“What next?” she asked.

“We’ll eat whatever the kid brings back and get some sleep.”

“What about Daniel?”

“The FBI are tracking him.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“If it weren’t for me you’d have caught him already. You’d be looking for him.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I’d have already been on a plane home. Without you, he’d have gone on killing people.” He opened his mouth and closed it. “I’m sorry this happened, Bliss. I should have stopped him. I should have known—”

“You couldn’t have known.” She wrapped her arms around herself.

“I should have. I’d never want this for you, Bliss.” His phone rang, breaking the moment. “I need to take this,” he said after glancing at the screen.

“Go on.” She waved him out of the room.

He looked at her for another moment. Her new skill to see the shadows on a person’s soul didn’t help her to decipher what he wasn’t telling her. He strode out of her room, pulling the door closed behind her.

Bliss sucked in a breath and hugged herself. She was safe, wasn’t she?

7.

Travis stared at the map without seeing it. Every fiber of his body was acutely tuned in to the woman on the sofa.

It was almost midnight. The local law enforcement were either out manning roadblocks or at home with their families, leaving the FBI, Travis, and Mason to keep watch over Bliss and formulate a plan for what came next.

Some of them were keeping a little too close to her.

Connor Mullins barked out a laugh at something Bliss said. Travis couldn't hear them. Not that he hadn't tried.

She should be in bed, getting rest, instead of down here with the rest of them. Evidence and case details were everywhere. Why the hell were they subjecting her to this?

Because she was now their best lead.

Knowing the answer didn't placate him in the least.

He wanted to bundle her up, lock her away, and keep her safe. But wasn't his involvement what got her here in the first place? If he'd made her stay put and gone in for Wendy on his own, Daniel would have fixated on him. Or split completely.

It was his fault. All of it. Bliss would live the rest of her life with memories she couldn't scrub away and a darkness no light would ever defeat.

"What is it with these white dudes doing all the really fucked up shit?" Benjamin tossed his notepad onto a table.

"Sure debunks the racial stereotypes, huh? We don't see a lot of Hispanic or black killers. What do you think the ratio is?" Dmitri asked.

Travis tilted his head, curious about the line of reasoning. He'd never thought of it that way, but the two agents would have a different perspective.

"Ask Jade, she could crunch the numbers in her head. I'm too tired."

"Okay everyone, get some sleep," Ryan Brooks announced. "We've got a lot of ground to cover in the morning."

"Don't have to tell me twice." Benjamin slapped the folder he'd been poring over down onto the kitchen table and strode after Ryan. The unit chief and communications liaison chatted on their way up the stairs.

"Come on, lass, time to get some shut eye." Connor pulled Bliss to her feet and pushed her toward the stairs.

Travis wanted to deck the guy.

Didn't Connor realize the trauma she'd just lived through?

Bliss chuckled and smiled, something he didn't think she'd have mastery of yet. It just went to show how strong she was.

One by one the agents and Mason trickled up the stairs until it was just Travis and the red-headed woman. Jade. Such a strange name for a woman with red hair.

"You can go up, I'll turn everything off," he said over his shoulder.

He wouldn't sleep much tonight. Not under the same roof with Bliss. He'd intentionally picked the room across from hers. If he couldn't touch her, hold her, he'd at least be the closest one if something happened.

Jade glanced up from her tablet, one brow arched. Her eyes were those who had seen too

much. Things beyond their years. It was a little unsettling, but only because it stirred up old memories.

“Trying to get rid of me?” she asked.

“Just offering.” He shrugged.

“You’ve been staring at the same spot for fifteen minutes. Why don’t you go to bed?”

His neck burned. With all the activity, he’d hoped to fade into the background.

“How’s your sister?” Jade asked.

“Emma?” He turned, taken aback by the question. Why would the agent care about that?

“Good, last I talked to her.”

“Is she still seeing that detective?” There was a nonchalant way about her that was too careful, too casual.

“What do you want to know?” He narrowed his gaze, studying her. She was younger than the rest, late twenties if he had to guess, yet she dressed in clothes that could have been taken out of Connor’s suitcase instead of her own.

Jade sighed and set the tablet on the arm rest.

“Curiosity. They were under surveillance for a while because there was a remote, very tiny chance they were the copycat. Or one of them was. Before Lali pulled the plug monitoring them, Jacob made a conspicuous purchase.”

“What did he buy?” He curled his hands into fists. Emma was still his sister; if that cop did anything wrong, he’d have to answer to Travis first.

“He bought an engagement ring. Or at least that’s our guess.”

Travis stared at her. Emma, getting engaged?

“I’ll be damned.” He crossed to the sofa where Bliss and Connor had recently been seated and sank down onto the cushions.

“It’s none of my business, I know. I just...I can empathize with what it’s like to grow up with a certain heritage. Seeing Emma and Jacob together it was...I mean...” She shrugged.

“It doesn’t happen to all of us, you mean?”

Jade nodded.

Travis stared at her. Jade was bookish, shy, introverted, and extremely intelligent. He could tell that much just from looking at her. It was in the way she held herself apart from the others, how her focus went past people to the problem at hand. And yet, she was cute. Pretty. But she didn’t interest him like Bliss.

“What’s your story?” Travis asked.

“My parents were a serial killer team. They used me as bait to lure people away from groups, grabbed them, and killed them after inflicting sexual and physical torture.”

“Jesus Christ. Please tell me they’re dead?”

“They’re in prison.” She said it all so matter-of-factly, as if it didn’t touch her. As if it were just a list of details to be recited. “Travis?”

“Yeah?” His head was still reeling from the list of wrongs in a few short sentences.

“Bliss.”

His spine straightened and everything else ceased to matter.

“What about her?” he asked.

“She’s like us now. You seem to have built a connection with her. She’s going to need someone who understands her.”

“Connor seemed to be handling her pretty well.”

“Connor has a gift for making people like him. Talk to him. But she never answered any of

his questions. She avoided them.”

“Wait, he was trying to make her talk?”

“Yes. I thought it was obvious. He was doing the talking, I was supposed to take notes on anything she said. We got nothing. She’s completely closed off.”

“Her brother-in-law’ll get her a doctor or something.” Travis would make sure of that. Wendy wasn’t the only one who needed care. The man had enough money to help Bliss out, that was for sure. He pushed to his feet. “I’m headed for bed.”

“Don’t discount yourself, Travis. Not all of us are beyond redemption.”

“Lady, you don’t know the things I’ve done.”

“I probably have a list somewhere.”

Jade didn’t know him. He wasn’t Emma. There wasn’t hope for more than what he had now. And Bliss was better off without him. The sooner the better.

He turned and stalked toward the stairs. Jade didn’t say anything else, just let him go. His feet thumped on the wooden boards. He wasn’t tired yet, but neither should he be allowed to mingle with the others. A couple hours cooling his heels and clearing his head could be the trick.

The light under Bliss’ door was off, and the hall was dark. He considered checking on her, but if she was already asleep the last thing he wanted to do was disturb her. Besides, Connor had probably tucked her in.

He pushed the door open to his room and stepped inside.

“What are you doing here?” he said before he could reconsider his words.

Bliss sat on his bed, her knees drawn up to her chest and the bedside lamp on. He closed the door behind him, more to keep the others from waking up.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she said.

“Did you try?”

“Yes.”

“You know you’re safe here? There’s two patrol cars outside, and you’ve got a whole team of people that will protect you.” Not to mention Travis would die before he let anything bad happen to her again.

“That’s...nice.” And yet everything about her posture, the way she wouldn’t look directly at him, and the cant of her shoulders telegraphed unease.

“What’s keeping you up?”

She shrugged.

“Nightmares?” he asked.

She nodded.

Damn, but he had a few of those.

He toed off his boots and circled the bed to sit next to her, his back against the headboard.

“I still have nightmares,” he said.

“About what?”

“My dad’s stories. My dad. Being over in the sandbox. Jobs going sideways.” *Her.*

“Do they ever go away?”

“Some of them do. Mostly you just start realizing it’s a dream, and it’s not as bad anymore.”

“How long does that take?”

“I’ll tell you when it happens.”

She chuckled, and an invisible fist squeezed his heart.

“I was hoping for a better answer,” she said.

“I’ve never been good for good news.”

“Good news, talking, sex, what else are you self-proclaimed to be bad at?”

“Hey, I never said I was bad at sex.” As he recalled, it had been quite good. Hadn’t it? “You seemed to like it.”

“I did.” She stared straight ahead.

He reached over and took her hand in his. Touching her calmed the anxious voice in his head that said this was all a dream. That she was still out there somewhere, waiting on him to save her.

She should be in her own room, not here with him. And yet, he couldn’t make himself say those words. It was selfish, but he wanted to be near her, to assure himself that she was safe. He didn’t have any right to her. In fact, she should hate him. But he still wanted her.

“You’ve got to get some rest.” He drew little circles on the back of her hand.

“I can’t be alone,” she said, so quietly he didn’t think he’d heard her right.

He hadn’t protected her the first time, but here she was, trusting him again.

“Do you want me to stay with you? Or would you rather I go get Jade?” The two women could bunk together with little to no issue. Besides, Jade might get through to Bliss where Connor had failed.

“Would you mind?” she asked.

Travis swallowed. It was temptation straight from hell, but for her he’d do just about anything.

“No.” He stood and held out his hand. “Come on. Let’s go back to your room.”

“Why?” She let him pull her to her feet.

“No windows. One point of entry. It’s the safest place for you.” He grabbed his bag from the dresser, his boots, and turned the light off.

“Oh.”

He guided her out of his room and across the hall to hers. All the lights from downstairs were off. He wished Jade a peaceful sleep.

“Get in bed.” He gently pushed Bliss toward the big king bed. The pillows and blankets were rumpled, as if she had attempted sleep to no success. “I’m going to use your bathroom.”

That, and give her a moment of privacy.

He took his time in the bathroom while keeping one ear tuned to Bliss’ movements. He brushed his teeth, flossed, and stared at his reflection for several minutes. When he ran out of things to do, he opened the door.

Bliss wore the same thermal shirt from earlier, but her jeans and boots were discarded at the foot of the bed. She stared at the ceiling, her brow lined with worry.

There was no real way for this to go well. It wasn’t like he slept in much besides his boxers. Plus, he had the memory of what it was like to hold her, be inside of her, stuck on repeat. She didn’t need a trip to horny town, she needed a safety blanket.

“Can we leave the bathroom light on?” she asked.

“Course.” He flipped the light back on and closed the door until just a crack of light slashed through the darkness.

Travis shed his jeans and shirt before sliding into the bed.

This was about her needs, not his. He rolled to his side and stretched an arm out over her, trapping her against the mattress. Every muscle in her body was tense, ready for something to happen, and none of it good.

He wished he could take this burden from her. Clear her mind. Let her be free to not be like him.

Eventually she blew out a breath and her hands slid up to grasp his forearm. She turned, drawing him closer until he spooned her from behind. He did his best to stay relaxed, even when she wiggled her ass against his groin in a move to get comfortable. Minute by minute the tension eased, until her breathing relaxed and he knew she'd passed out. Only then did Travis allow himself to drift off to a dreamland where a beautiful, curvy woman waited for him with mischief in her eye.

8.

Bliss' nose itched, but she didn't dare move. It had to be early morning sometime. Already she could hear sounds below and the occasional door open or close on their floor. Any moment Travis would wake up, and they would have to face whatever today held in store for her.

She hadn't slept as much as dozed off and on until her body just decided it was time to be awake. Though her dreams were uneasy, they hadn't terrorized her like before. A difference she attributed to Travis' presence.

It was Christmas Day.

Usually she would pack up her car and head to her parents' house for a busy morning of presents and baking. It didn't feel like the holidays anymore, though Travis had given her a present. Her freedom.

Guilt gnawed at her. Out there, she hadn't believed he would save her, and he had. Then last night, she'd doubted him again when she allowed fear to cloud her judgment. It wasn't his fault Daniel was crazier than they thought. She'd allowed herself to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

There was no anticipating psycho.

Travis' eyes opened and he looked straight at her. There was no groggy, half-asleep period, just full alert aimed at her.

"Morning." His sleep-roughened voice was a comforting sound.

She smiled and scratched her nose.

"Merry Christmas," she said.

"Hm, it is, isn't it?" He tightened the arm around her, pulling her across the mattress until he had her pressed up against him.

Her heart beat faster for a new reason, one that had nothing to do with fear.

"Sleep okay?" he mumbled into her hair.

"Yeah. You?"

"The best."

She was only wearing a thermal top and panties. It wasn't a lot of material between them. Was it wrong to think about sex at a time like this?

A knock at the door interrupted her mental tango.

"Travis?"

"Yeah?" he called over his shoulder.

The door creaked open just a hair. She could spy Mason's profile, conspicuously looking away from them.

"Got breakfast. Doctors are taking Ethan into surgery now, thought you'd want to know," he said.

"Be out in a minute." Travis sat up, blocking her view.

The door closed, leaving them alone again. The sheets rustled and the bed bounced as he got to his feet. He clicked the lamp on and checked his phone. The dim light was more than enough to illuminate her fantasy material. Travis reached for the ceiling and stretched.

God, he was a work of art. Rough art, but still a thing of wonder.

A conspicuous bulge tented the front of his boxers. They'd had sex a few days ago, but she could still remember the feel of him inside of her.

Travis planted his knee on the bed and loomed over her, trapping her with one arm on either side of her shoulders.

“Looking at me like that gives me ideas.” His voice dropped and her nipples perked up.

Ideas? The naked kind?

He buzzed her mouth with a kiss, and she stopped breathing. It was just a scant few seconds of skin-to-skin contact, but she felt it to her core.

“Up.” He slapped her thigh.

She gathered the sheets and watched him step into the bathroom. Unlike last night, he didn’t close the door.

What were they?

Lovers?

Fuck buddies?

Friends with benefits?

He wasn’t sticking around, not for her, so it wasn’t a relationship. None of those labels felt right. She cared about him. They’d been through enough together in a week that even when he left she would never forget him.

She got dressed in her same jeans and boots, but changed out the thermal top for a sweatshirt. It wasn’t the height of fashion, but it was comfortable, and she was covered.

“What are we doing today?” she asked.

“Food. Check on Ethan. See what the cops dragged in.” Travis was half-dressed, which wasn’t a bad trade-off. She still got to see those abs. They were unreal. The kind of thing people painted on advertisements. He could sell just about anything with that bit of skin if he wanted to. Women would line up for miles to... She did not want to think about another woman touching Travis. This holiday season, he was hers.

“Any chance I can call my family?”

“I’m sure the feds can get you a line to their safehouse.”

“Safehouse?” She blinked at him.

“Yeah, given how he had you all under surveillance, they thought it would be safest if your immediate family was under protection.”

“Oh my God.” She blew out a breath and her eyes watered. “What did I do wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong. Nothing, understand?” Travis wrapped his arms around her tight.

“Yeah, but—”

“No, buts. Daniel Campbell is a fucked up man. He picked your sister and your family based on some parameters only he knows. You did nothing wrong. Nothing.”

She clung to him and buried her face against his shoulder until the tide of overwhelming fear abated.

Bliss lifted her chin and stared at him. A few days ago, she’d thought he was the sketchiest human being she’d ever seen. Now, he was her personal hero.

Travis lowered his head. Slow and tentative wasn’t his style, but he understood where she was at. She lifted herself up on tiptoe and kissed him, hooking her arm around his neck. A deep-seated ache throbbed low in her belly. He went on kissing her until her toes curled in her boots, and her nipples chafed the cups of her bra.

He lifted his face from hers, and she gasped for breath.

“Please don’t leave me.” As soon as the words left her mouth she cringed. Her whole life, she’d been the capable, independent one. Not this.

“I’m here. Nothing bad will happen to you.”

Travis squeezed her and rested his chin on top of her head.
She prayed he was right, that the nightmares were over.

* * * *

Travis thanked the nurse and entered the ICU bay, Mason on his heels. Ethan's body was relaxed, his head lolling to one side at an angle that was bound to leave a crick.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Ethan's words were slurred and quiet. The anesthesia hadn't worn off yet.

"Making sure they took the right leg." Travis reached over and prodded Ethan's left knee.

"You rat bastard. Stop." Ethan pushed Travis' hand away.

"Looks like they knew what they were doing." He stepped back and hooked his thumbs in his pockets.

They'd been here a few times over the years. Sometimes they'd been in beds next to each other. Every time they'd pulled through.

"What'd the doc say?" Mason asked.

"Like I fucking know." Ethan was perhaps the grumpiest when he was hurt. His soon-to-be ex-wife had often commented on his inability to handle pain or a little direction. Over the years she'd lost the fondness for his grouchy behavior. Maybe Travis should have seen their split coming, but he didn't know the first thing about relationships.

"Go find the nurse or the doc, let us know what needs doing," Travis said to Mason.

"Sure thing." Mason pushed to his feet and strode out to the nurse's station, a big smile on his face.

Nurses.

Of course.

"Where's Bliss?" Ethan asked.

"Safe from you."

Ethan flipped him the bird.

"Nah, I left her back at the cabin with the feds. They can keep an eye on her."

"Found him yet?"

"Not a whisper or a word. Snow set in and covered his tracks. ATV trails run all through that area. He could be anywhere."

"You think he's gone?"

Travis sat in one of the two chairs and rubbed his chin. The profilers probably had a better idea of what Daniel would and wouldn't do, but Travis had a gut feeling.

"He's either right under our noses, or he's long gone," he said at last.

"Think he's still after Bliss?"

"Wendy is the one he wanted, but now, who knows? He got caught because he took Bliss. If he'd left, I'd never have knocked Grayson for a favor and found her. Only reason the feds came here is because we were here. They had nothing."

"This ain't over, man."

Travis shook his head.

"Wish I had both legs under me so I could have your back. This sucks, man." Ethan sighed and let his head drop back against the pillow.

"Any idea how long you're down for?"

"Couple weeks, then PT. I bet it's two or three months before I'm back on the job." Ethan's

face twisted up. They all knew the kind of work the guys on sick leave got. Menial crap that needed to get done, but the kind of stuff no one used to field work wanted to do.

“Home office is making arrangements to fly you home in a day or two, as soon as they release you. You’ll be in Mamma Dean’s infirmary before you’re released.” One of the perks about working for Aegis Group was the medical facility on the property. Mamma Dean was a retired Navy surgeon who didn’t know the meaning of taking it easy.

“Good. When you and the kid headed back?”

“I think Mason’s looking at getting out of here today or tomorrow. I don’t know when I’m leaving.”

“Want some advice?”

“No.”

“Too bad, fucktard.” Ethan jabbed at the buttons on the side of his bed until he figured out which one raised the head of the bed a bit.

“That’s it?”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re a real ray of sunshine.” Travis played it fun and easy, prodding Ethan for a reaction, when inside he went over every second at the campsite yesterday. Could he have done something different to keep them all safe and get Daniel?

“You should take some time. Spend it in Vegas or wherever with her.”

“Bliss?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?” He couldn’t deny that was what he wanted to do. Actually, he wanted to bundle her up and whisk her away to someplace where he knew she’d be safe. Somewhere Daniel wouldn’t look for her.

“Don’t be stupid. You like her.”

“I’ve liked a lot of women.” But none like Bliss.

“Bullshit.” Ethan’s words were clearer now, his face more animated. He was coming out of it, for sure.

“If it weren’t for me, she wouldn’t be here now.”

“If it weren’t for your sorry ass, I wouldn’t be alive now. Sometimes we have to take the good with the bad. I’m just saying, you like her. I’ve never seen you take to a woman like this before, so you shouldn’t let it go. Don’t be like me, man.” Ethan stared up at the ceiling.

Mason knocked on the door, followed by a woman in a white coat with a tablet and a folder of papers.

“Doc’s here to see ya, gimp.”

“Fuck you, too, Mason,” Ethan said. His jaw went a bit slack when Mason moved. “Sorry about that, Doc.”

“It’s okay.” She laughed and pulled up a seat.

Travis tuned out for most of their discussion. Bliss was still heavily on his mind. She didn’t need him in her life. He was too much trouble, his schedule haphazard, and the likelihood that one day he’d come home in a body bag was high. It was a price too high to ask any woman to pay. Most of all someone with their history. But he couldn’t deny that if anyone asked him what Santa could bring him today, it would be Bliss, in a smile and nothing else.

9.

Daniel dropped the tool belt onto the bed. The right uniform, and no one cared what he was up to. Just went to show how stupid people were. The lot of them were only good for one thing: dying.

He checked the camera feed he set up that morning. The camera didn't tell him more than who came and went at the FBI cabin headquarters, but at least he knew when certain members were there.

Bliss hadn't set foot out of the building since she went in. He'd seen her through a few windows, enough to know the FBI hadn't spirited her away somewhere else. They were making this easy for him.

By the end of the year he'd have Wendy and Bliss all to himself. And then he could get started. No one would find them, because they were all going to die.

* * * *

Bliss clutched a pillow to her chest and tried to focus on the Christmas Day parade on the television. The FBI apparently didn't know how to take a day off and were already discussing routes of escape Daniel could have taken. Try as she might, their voices were the only thing she could focus on.

"Everyone take a half-hour," Ryan Brooks announced. Frustration vibrated through his voice. She couldn't blame him—she was frustrated they hadn't caught Daniel, too.

"Hey, Bliss?"

She looked up at the red-headed woman. There was something just a little off about her, but Bliss liked people who were different.

"I'm going to run out to pick up a few things. I didn't pack enough clothes for this trip. Need anything?"

"Sure, whatever you can grab, I'd appreciate it."

"Want to make a list? I know Travis said he had a bag for you, but..."

"Yeah, I think he got most of my dirty clothes in there." Plus a few things...she couldn't fathom how he'd grabbed those.

"Here. Write down your sizes. I can't promise I'll get anything fashionable, but at least you'll have something else to wear."

"You don't have to do that." Bliss chewed her lip. Her money and credit cards were still at home. It was the one thing she wished Travis would have grabbed.

Jade sat on the sofa next to her, holding her phone with both hands.

"I don't have to, but I want to. Just write up a list. Plus, we can't promise when you'll be able to go home. You could be living out of that bag for a while."

"Thank you." Bliss jotted down a few things and hastily added a last item with an asterisk by it.

"No problem. If you're up to it, I'd like to ask you a few questions later."

Bliss nodded. Inwardly she cringed. She was the only living person who could divulge first-person information. Last she'd heard, Don was still out cold, in a medically induced coma to allow some of his injuries to heal and improve his chances.

Jade left without another comment. The other people were all over the house, making calls, putting together a sandwich, or talking in pairs. Since Travis and Mason had left to see about Ethan's surgery more people had arrived. A few spoke to her, but most ignored her.

"Hey, Bliss?" Connor called to her from the kitchen.

She groaned to herself and got up. The guy was nice, but she was about done with him. The only person she wanted to talk to was Travis. Or her family. But they were out of the question.

"What's kicking?" she asked, glancing at the three agents.

Connor, Benjamin, and Dmitri, if her memory was to be trusted. Granted, it wasn't hard to pick them out of the crowd. Connor had the accent, Benjamin was often the only black man in the room, and she hadn't quite figured out Dmitri's ethnicity, but she was pretty sure it included both Russian and Latin heritage. The trio was pretty funny after-hours. She'd enjoyed their banter after dinner last night, though the nightmares had returned later. At least then she'd had Travis.

"Thought you'd like to put in a call to your family." Dmitri handed her the cordless house phone, his kind smile putting her at ease.

She glanced at the pre-dialed screen and back at him.

"Seriously?" She'd accepted that wasn't going to happen.

"Go for it. Keep it short, okay?" Connor patted her shoulder, and the three men moved out of the kitchen, giving her a bit of privacy.

She hit dial and pressed the phone to her face.

It rang once, twice—

"Hello?"

Bliss clapped her hand over her mouth. Her mother's voice was the best thing ever.

"Bliss? Is that you?"

"Yes, Mom, it's me," she managed to get out.

"Oh honey, it's so good to hear your voice."

"Hello? She there?" Her father's voice was distant, which probably meant he'd picked up another phone, and now she'd have to strain to hear them both. She didn't care. She got to hear their voices.

"Hi, Dad. Merry Christmas."

"Oh, Bliss, baby, we wish you were here."

"Me, too, Dad." She put her back to the fridge and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Are you okay? They wouldn't say a lot about what happened." That was her mother. Always the worrier.

"I'm fine. Just some bruises, a few scratches. I'm okay." It wasn't the outward injuries she was concerned about. "Are Wendy and the baby okay? Grayson with them?"

Her dad blew out a breath. She could imagine him sitting down and squinting at the ceiling. He always did that whenever someone asked him a question. "Last we heard from them, yes. The officers won't let us talk to them much, but we had a check-in last night. They were good. Worried about you."

"When can you come home?" her mother asked.

"I don't know. No one's told me much of anything."

The front door opened, and she glanced at the entry. Travis stepped through the door. She held her breath as he scanned the room and spotted her. Her heart did a little flip and she waved.

"They're telling us we need to get off the phone." Her mother harrumphed.

"I'm being taken care of, Mom. Love you guys."

"We love you," her parents said in unison.

Their words were an auditory hug, something she needed so very badly. Bliss hung up the phone and wiped her hands across her cheeks. Being away from her family on Christmas sucked. Given the circumstances, it was even worse.

"Hey." Travis filled her vision, blocking off the rest of the room.

"Christ, make some noise, would you?" She chuckled. It was good to have him near again. He wouldn't always be there, but for now she needed him.

"Sorry. Eaten yet?"

"No."

"I grabbed some stuff. There wasn't a lot open."

"Thanks. How's Ethan?"

"Grouchy, so that means he's good."

"Good. They want me to talk about Daniel."

"Are you ready for that?"

She shrugged.

"If you aren't, they'll understand."

"But if I don't, we might not find him."

"They might not find him even with your input."

"I know they want you to go out and help with the search, but do you think you could stick around for a little while and...I don't know, just be here for that?" She wrapped her arms around herself.

Travis wrapped her in a hug and kissed her brow.

"I'm not going anywhere."

She could face the nightmares with him by her side. She knew she could. But what would happen when he was gone?

* * * *

Travis grabbed a soda at random and a chocolate bar one of the officers had offered up. Bliss' tears were stuck on repeat in his mind, and he could still hear her trembling voice as she recounted every agonizing moment they'd been apart. He wanted to make all kinds of promises like she'd never be afraid again, that he'd never leave her, but those were irrational.

What she needed now was time to pull herself together. Sweets were one good tool to help combat the drop in blood sugar.

Jade entered the kitchen, her gaze on him. "She's upstairs. Give her a few."

He nodded. Words were out of his power now. All he wanted to do was punch something. Preferably Daniel Campbell, but he'd settle for the punching bag downstairs.

"You aren't any use to her if you can't be calm." Jade pitched her voice low, for their ears alone.

"I am calm."

"I tried talking to her, but she wasn't interested."

"I imagine she's pretty talked out." He couldn't deny the satisfaction that it was him she turned to. "What's next for her?"

"We're looking into protective custody."

"Permanently?" If she went into something like Witness Protection, he'd never see her again.

“Hopefully not. Daniel can’t have that many backup plans, and having been thwarted twice, he’s going to start splintering soon. We’ve notified the entire region to be on the lookout for his signatures.” She shook her head. “I don’t remember the last time we had a killer with two clear signatures like this. It’s highly uncommon.”

“What do you think about the Killer Club connection?”

“What we’ve been able to dig up on his Internet activity is nothing like what we ran into in Oklahoma. I’m not convinced he’s connected.”

“Have you found others?” This was a can of worms. Travis couldn’t afford to think about it. Not when Bliss needed him.

“Some.” She nodded. “That clown that kept popping up for a while is a good suspect. Crimes like his are clear copycats, which seem to be that group’s MO. Daniel is...different. If there’s ever been someone like him, it’s a hell of a long time ago.”

“Back to Bliss, where will you move her?”

“Can’t tell you that. Unless you plan on going with her.” Jade’s left brow arched ever so slightly.

The idea was tempting, but he had a duty to Aegis he couldn’t turn his back on. They’d given him a life and opportunities when no one else would. He couldn’t leave them.

When he didn’t answer, Jade continued, “She’ll go back to Vegas under protection, probably put her up somewhere for a few days until long-term arrangements are made if we don’t find Daniel. Maybe you could stick around.”

“Maybe.”

Jade checked her phone. “You should go up now.”

He nodded and headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time. The need to be near Bliss was eating him up. He paused outside her door to knock, and then opened the door.

Bliss sat in the middle of the bed. Plastic bags were strewn around, and instead of jeans, she wore pajama pants and a knit hoodie. A single red and green bag sat in front of her, out of place and festive.

“Here.” He handed the soda to her and ripped open the candy bar.

She took the drink and chocolate he offered without comment.

“The sugar sometimes helps the chemical fallout.”

“Thank you.” She patted the bed next to her.

He sat and offered her another piece of the candy bar. She took that as well and pushed the bag toward him.

“Merry Christmas.”

He stared at the gift, a knot of panic lodged in his throat.

“I didn’t get you anything,” he said. When was the last time anyone had given him something for Christmas? Sure, he and Emma traded cards, usually with a gift certificate, but that was about it.

“It’s a gift. You don’t have to reciprocate. I just...wanted to do something for you. It’s a lame thank you, so you don’t have to keep it.”

He handed her the rest of the candy and carefully pulled out each individual piece of tissue paper. The scent of leather clung to the wrappings. What the hell? And where had she found the time? He peered at the black lump at the bottom of the bag.

“I have a receipt around here if you want to take them back,” Bliss said.

Travis reached in and pulled out a pair of black leather gloves. Not the cheap kind that would flake and peel with a little use, but the real deal.

"You said your hands were cold yesterday, and I just thought it might be something you could use." She kept rambling on, tearing the candy wrapper into little pieces. "I'm sure you have gloves, but whatever."

"Thank you." He slipped his left hand into a glove. They were snug, just the way they were supposed to be. "I don't think anyone has ever given me something this thoughtful."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm serious. I usually spend Christmas on the job or by myself. This is nice. You didn't have to do this, Bliss."

"I wanted to." She wrapped her arms around her legs.

"Thank you." He gestured to the bags. "What's all this?"

"Jade got me a few things."

"I got it all wrong, didn't I?" He sighed and took the glove off, setting them carefully on the night stand.

"No, but you got a bunch of my dirty clothes." She chuckled. "There's a washer and dryer, but no detergent downstairs."

"Figures." He sighed and stretched out next to her, his back to the headboard.

"I kind of want to know how you decided what to pack." She chuckled.

"There wasn't a lot of thought to it. I grabbed things, threw them on the bed. I know I knocked some stuff over and just tossed it in, too."

"Ah, that makes sense then."

"What?"

"The bags."

The way her smile made her eyes light up, he wanted to capture that memory for all time. He reached out and cupped her cheek, relishing her warmth, the kindness she showed him. Except now he was staring, and she'd said something.

"Sorry, what?"

"Nothing. Doesn't matter."

"It does. What did you say?"

"I was just saying that it made sense why you shoved some of my, ah, bags into the duffle."

"Bags?" He had to think that one over for a moment. "The bags."

Those bags.

"Yeah, that was kind of funny to find last night."

"I just thought you might need them? I'm not that thoughtful. It was really an accident."

"Why would I need a vibrator with you around?" She smirked, and he was reminded all over again why he'd first found her so intriguing. It wasn't often people argued with him, and she hadn't backed down one bit.

"I thought you liked the variety?"

"I do." She rested her head on her steepled knees. A bit of hair swept across her cheek, pointing at her mouth he wanted to kiss. "What's next?"

He rested his head against the wall and blew out a breath.

Way to kill the mood.

"Depends if they find Daniel."

"If they don't?"

"Protective custody of some kind."

"Just me or my family?"

"Not sure, but you and Wendy are the main concerns."

“How long will you be around?”

“I’ve got a job that starts end of next week.” It was a short gig. Any other guy could take his place if it came down to that, but he’d volunteered, knowing many would still be packing in the quality family time. Screw it. “I’ll stick around as long as I can, if that’s what you want.”

“I’d like that, but I don’t want you to get in trouble because of me. I know this is just a job and whatever.” She shrugged.

He stared at her. The words he needed abandoned him. How did he make her understand how special she was to him?

“Or not. You don’t have to.”

“Bliss, I want to. It’s just hard to use the right words.”

“Oh. Can you use some of the wrong ones and see if I can figure it out?”

“I can’t help but think this is my fault, and you’d be a lot better off without me.”

“I’m going to disagree with you. Without you I’d never have found Wendy.”

“I know enough about killers to know that my actions have little to no bearing on what Daniel is going to do. But I can’t shake the feeling that if I hadn’t spoken to you, you’d be alright.”

“I’d be worse. I’d be grieving my sister.”

“And this is better?” He reached out and ran his fingers across the bruises circling her wrist.

“Better than losing her? Yes.”

He shook his head. No one had ever cared that much about him.

“You saved Wendy, and you saved me. Without you, I’d be a lot worse off.” She grasped his hand and laced their fingers together.

He’d promised himself to give her space, to step back and let her go, but he wasn’t that strong. She was this bright, beautiful thing that had become snared in his life, and he couldn’t resist her pull. Everything about her was good, so different from him. No one had ever called him good at anything, except killing and keeping clients alive.

If he were really a man, he’d get up right now and walk out the door. Bliss was stronger than she realized, and given a little time, she’d be okay.

“I’m...” Words stuck in his throat.

Bliss’ face was the only thing he could see. When had she gotten so close?

“Travis?” She licked her lips, and he stared in fascination at the glistening skin.

“Yeah?”

“Make love to me?”

10.

Travis' ears rang with her request.

"Make love to me. I want to feel something besides fear and helplessness. Please." Her voice broke and she blinked a single tear.

"Shh." He cupped her cheek and wiped the tear away. "You never have to ask twice, darlin'. Stay right there."

She could have asked him for anything, and he'd have broken a dozen laws just to make her happy. Pleasing her, stroking her body to orgasm was no trouble at all. He wasn't a man used to soft lovemaking, but for her he could be whatever she needed.

He got up out of the bed and flipped the lock on the door with shaking hands. It wasn't much to keep anyone out, but if Jade or another agent came knocking it might give them pause before entering.

Travis turned toward the bed and paused. The other night he'd been pushed by a sense of need so sharp and deep that it might have been a dream. This time, he wanted each moment filed away in his memory so that Bliss would always be part of him.

She sat where he'd left her, legs still pulled up. If he didn't know better, this could be a moment taken from any normal day. What would it be like to come home to Bliss every day?

He should say something, but again, the words he needed were gone.

Bliss grabbed the comforter and flipped the bags off onto the floor. She glanced up at him, an uncharacteristically shy smile pulling on her lips.

He grabbed the hem of his shirt and tugged it up. The bed creaked as he tossed the garment off. Bliss stared at his chest, her brow slightly wrinkled. He wasn't perfect. Scars and incisions marked his body from head to toe, writing the story of his life on his skin.

"Do they hurt?" She flattened her palm over a long line just below his ribs.

"Nah."

"I hate knowing you've been hurt." She took a small step closer and covered an old bullet wound with her other hand.

"Part of the job."

She kissed the jagged scar along his sternum where a man had tried to knife him. His knees went a little weak. Her tongue licked across his skin and his balls throbbed. Damn, but she was something else.

This was supposed to be about her, and he was the one getting all the attention. It just wasn't right.

Travis cupped her face using both hands and nibbled her lower lip, drawing it in between his, sucking the taste of her into his mouth. She groaned and her hands slipped around his waist. He tilted her head to the side and deepened the kiss, stroking her with his tongue, inviting her to come out to play.

He slid his hands down to her ass, squeezing the round globes. She fit his hands so well. He rocked his hips against her, and she groaned into his mouth. The only hardship about taking her to bed was his impatient cock.

She wiggled her hands between them and rubbed the length of his erection. The denim was a cruel barrier, but this was not about him. He stepped back, breaking the kiss as she got the button through the tab.

Her cheeks were flushed and her lips swollen. It was a primitive satisfaction to see her turned on because of him.

He grabbed the hem of her shirt and tugged it up, breaking her fight with his zipper. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth as her breasts were revealed, sans any sort of bra. Her nipples were tight, dusky brown peaks he couldn't wait to taste again. The sounds she made when he licked them were the stuff of fantasies.

Bliss reached for him, but he crowded her back against the mattress and laid her down. He knelt over her, running his thumbs over her nipples, watching her squirm. She didn't shy away from his gaze, and more often than not she stared right back at him, owning this beautiful body of hers and the desire she felt for him. He loved the rounded softness of her hips, stomach, and breasts, so different from himself.

"Travis, I want you inside of me," she said without hesitation.

"Not yet." He had to put her over the edge first.

She made a frustrated sound, something between a sigh and a growl. He chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose as he shoved his hand past the stretchy waistband of her pants. He cupped her mound, pressing two fingers against her folds. Her mouth opened and her eyes fluttered shut. He parted her folds, rubbing against her. Her hips shifted under him, but he was saving being inside of her for a few moments longer.

He sat back on his heels, tugging her pants and panties down her long legs.

This was what sex was supposed to be like. He'd deprived himself of human connection on a meaningful level besides his friendships. Caring for Bliss, and knowing she felt something for him, too, changed everything. He didn't just want to please her, he wanted—more. It wasn't just his dick, it was his heart.

He slid his hands between her knees and pushed them open, going to his elbows. She shifted and gripped the sheets with both hands. There was something erotic about the sight of a woman's breasts from this angle, especially hers. Later, he'd have to spend more time between them, but her pleasure came first.

Bliss' mouth opened, and her gaze bore a hole into his skull. She didn't shy away from what turned her on, which was just that much better.

He licked the length of her slit, tasting the slightly salty tang of her skin.

"Travis," she drew his name out for several seconds.

He spread her folds, licking her. He thrust his tongue into her pussy. Her hips came up off the mattress, and her knees squeezed his shoulders. The noises she made were even better than last time. Her hand found his hair, and her nails raked across his scalp.

"There, right there." She gasped.

He slid his fingers into her, curling them against the sensitive g-spot while sucking on her clit. Her mouth dropped open, and her back arched. He felt the spasms of her vaginal wall before her first high-pitched moan. She grabbed a pillow, muffling the sounds of her orgasm while he stroked her, keeping the steady, even pace, milking her for everything he could until she lay slack and boneless against the sheets.

God damn, she was fantastic.

He eased out of her and carefully crawled up to lie next to her. The jeans were on the extreme side of uncomfortable now, but he could manage.

"Oh my God. Oh my God." Bliss lowered the pillow to her chest and panted.

Travis allowed himself a chuckle.

"Good?" he asked.

She stared at him with wide eyes.

“Good? Great would be an understatement.” She grinned without some of the tension she’d carried earlier.

Bliss rolled toward him and threw a leg over his. He stared at the ceiling and mentally ran through what ammunition he had with him. The state of his razors. Anything but the feel of her breasts against his chest, the still-hard nipples prodding him, or her thigh rubbing up against his balls.

He knew every one of her injuries, had listened as the nurses uncovered them and then again when Bliss recounted the horrors. She wanted release, and he’d give her that, but until she had more time to heal, he wouldn’t presume that sex was on the table, no matter what she said.

She kissed his jaw and cupped his cheek, turning his face toward her. He hesitated—some people weren’t fond of their taste on another’s mouth—but she didn’t show any reservation. She kissed him and slid her leg over his hips.

“Careful.” He winced and adjusted his dick with one hand, the other busy copping a feel.

“Sorry.”

Bliss sat up, straddling his thighs. Her smile was the stuff better men wrote songs about. She grasped his zipper and tugged it down. He hurriedly cupped his dick before it got caught in the zipper.

“Hold on.” He grabbed her hands, staying away from her bruised wrists.

“What?” She frowned.

“Just, don’t think you have to.”

She tilted her head to the side.

“I mean, if you aren’t ready,” he said.

“Travis, Daniel didn’t rape me.”

“I know, but it doesn’t mean you’re ready. If you aren’t.”

“I don’t know if I should thank you for being considerate, or slap you for being stupid.” One side of her mouth screwed up.

“No slapping.” He cringed and covered his erection.

Bliss chuckled and ducked her head, kissing his mouth. He couldn’t keep his hands to himself. He palmed her breasts, capturing the hard nipples between his fingers. She groaned against his lips and her eyes parted.

“Are you really turning me down right now?” She stuck out her lower lip.

“No, but—”

She put her fingers over his mouth.

“Nothing good comes after *but*.”

Bliss replaced her fingers with her mouth while her other hand wrapped around his cock.

“You really want to turn me down right now?” she asked.

“No. I just want what’s best for you.”

“Can you stop being so considerate for a little bit? Are you really going to argue with me about having sex?”

He should.

She’d been through so much.

“No,” he finally said.

She smiled and planted a kiss on his mouth while her hands slid down to cup his balls.

“Any chance you have a condom?” she asked.

He sat up, pushing her back onto her heels, and slapped his wallet onto the nightstand.

Tucked inside was a little precautionary protection. He grabbed it and ripped the packet open. If she was determined to have sex—with him—he was done fighting what they both wanted. He'd tried the selfless martyr route, and that clearly wasn't for them.

Travis rolled the condom on by feel alone while Bliss' mouth kept him busy. She pushed his shoulders and he lay back, cramming a pillow under his neck. This was a sight he didn't want to miss.

She grasped his cock, her eyes a little wider.

"I thought I imagined it being this big," she said.

"It's only going to get bigger the longer you look at it."

"Oh, really now?" She grinned.

She lifted up on her knees, and he grasped her hips, steadying her. Her grip tightened, holding him in place as she sank down. He held himself back, allowing her to go at her own speed. She planted her hands on his chest, her nails driving into his skin as she rose and sank, working more of his cock into her tight little pussy. Finally she sank down, taking the last bit of him into her.

Bliss sucked down deep breaths, her gaze a little unfocused.

He sat up, wrapping an arm around her waist, and kissed her. She groaned, sucking on his tongue, and clung to his shoulders. Her body relaxed further and the vice-like grip on his cock eased.

She pushed on his shoulders, and he released her, breaking the kiss and letting his hands drift down to her ass. There was no telling how long he'd last. Not long enough, that was for sure. Her body fit him better than the gloves she'd gifted him. There was a rightness to the world when he was in her.

Bliss rose on shaky knees.

"Christ." He groaned.

"Bliss." She kissed his cheek. "My name is Bliss."

"I'll remember that."

Little sparks of light were going off behind his eyelids. She rose and fell, her breasts rubbing against his chest. He dropped back to the bed, giving her free rein to move as she liked. Her hands found his chest again, and her nails dug in.

Travis lifted his hips, moving in time with her.

"Oh—oh!" Bliss tossed her head back, her hips rolling. He could feel the flutter of muscles right before her vagina tightened in orgasm.

"Fuck—Bliss." He grasped her hips, lifting her, and thrust, losing himself in the tight, hot feel of her body around his.

He squeezed his eyes shut as his orgasm spurted out of him. Bliss fell forward, collapsing against his chest, her breath fanning over his skin. He wrapped his arms around her.

If only every day could be spent with her.

11.

Daniel lifted the cigarette to his lips, his gaze on the black SUV. He didn't smoke, but it gave him a reason to loiter outside the hospital. Tapping the phone lines hadn't told him anything he couldn't have guessed on his own. What he needed was another way to keep tabs on them, especially once they returned to Vegas later in the day.

Three figures climbed out of the truck. The two men automatically put the smaller woman between them, not that Bliss was worth saving. But she was for later.

He waited until they'd entered the hospital, and then waited longer, letting the cigarette burn down almost to the filter. Disposing of the butt, he kept his head down and strode out to the parking lot, peering at the other cars. No one had pulled in after the two bodyguards, but that didn't mean someone wasn't waiting for him to expose himself. So far, the cops were looking in all the wrong places, the places some other idiot would go on the run. But not him. He had a brain.

Daniel pulled the spare rental key out of his pocket and clicked the fob. The black SUV beeped.

One more glance around.

No one was watching.

He circled the truck and opened the passenger door. A few belongings littered the console and floor board. Nothing useful. He dug into the back seat and came up with several bags. One of which had Bliss' nametag already attached to it.

Perfect.

He dug into his pocket and pulled out the tiny tracking device. Disguised as a bit of garbage, it would blend into her belongings. With any luck, it would lead him right to her once they went to ground in Vegas.

A pair of black gloves stuck out of the seat pocket. He grabbed them, turning them over.

Nice.

He shoved them in his pocket and got out of the SUV, locking it with the rental key. Satisfied, it was time to get out of the city and hit the road. His new ride should be ready soon, and he needed to return the key before it was missed.

Daniel's plans were falling into place.

* * * *

Bliss peered out between the blinds. The upper-middle class house was one of many nearly identical models in the Las Vegas housing development. Except it wasn't. This one was owned by the government. Not just the police, but *the government*. An unmarked police car had delivered them here and then left. Someone was supposed to bring Travis' rental around eventually. From the talk that had gone on around her, she picked up that their arrangement was unusual.

The difference was Travis. His continued presence in her life made everything different.

"Where the fuck are they?"

She turned and watched Travis upend his bag onto the big bed that sat in the middle of the master suite. He'd marched in here and deposited both their bags on the dresser as if it were the

most natural thing. She liked that. Liked knowing he would be next to her tonight when the nightmares came again. That when she needed him, he'd be an arm's length away.

But only for another week, at best.

During the flight she overheard his hushed phone call. He was passing up work to be with her, and while she appreciated that, she couldn't let his life stall for the sake of her comfort.

"What's wrong?" She crossed to the bed.

"The gloves. I had them earlier, but they aren't in any of my stuff." A few days ago, his ferocious frown might have sent her into hiding. Now she just wanted to kiss him.

"They're somewhere." She shrugged. They'd packed in such a rush to make the flight before another front blew in. She doubted he really thought about what went where.

"But they should be here."

"You'll find them." She climbed onto the bed and lay down on her side, watching him.

"Heard from Ethan?"

"Yeah. He texted. Sounds like he's still being a grump."

"When will he get home?"

"Tomorrow, as long as flights aren't grounded."

"You guys seem really close."

"Should be. We've known each other since Basic."

"Yeah?" She curled her arm under her, eager to hear anything about his past.

Instead, Travis grunted and started folding his clothes.

Well, nuts.

"What was that like?" she asked.

"Basic? Bullshit."

"That's all you have to say about it?" She laughed and threw a pillow at him.

Travis caught it, folded it in half and sat on the mattress, the pillow under his forearm.

"I don't have a lot of good memories from Basic."

"Why?"

"I had a friend that enlisted with me. He couldn't hack it, got kicked out and...it's just bad memories."

"Why? What happened?"

"Carlos went on to have a kid. It was his baby momma who went crazy, threatened to kill the kid, and I grabbed the boy while Carlos talked her down."

"Oh, no."

"Yeah."

"But...what happened? You told me a little, but I'm guessing not the whole story."

Travis sighed and stretched out, cramming the pillow under his head. He stared at the ceiling, hands crossed over his stomach.

"Carlos had a bad picker. He only liked the crazy women. He knocked up Priss right before Basic, and he always said getting kicked out was good, because he got to be there for her during the pregnancy. She was never right in the head. Every time I was home, they'd broken up and been back together a couple of times."

She held her breath, dreading the end of his story.

"That last time, they were split up. She called, pissed about something that didn't even make sense, and threatened to kill their son, Manuel. Carlos, he was scared. Real scared. So we went over there, and she's hitting on this kid." He swung his hand in the air, not looking at her. "He was seven, I think. She's just wailing on him. Carlos grabs her, and I figure, this kid needs help. I

grab him, get in the truck and go down the street until the cops come.”

Her heart hurt. On the surface he was just rattling off the details, but she knew how much it had to bother him. Travis was a protector. He’d acted with the best interests of the kid in mind.

“We must have sat there for an hour. I thought no one was coming. I didn’t have a cell phone, and all I’ve got is a screaming kid. Well the cops get there, yank me out, start yelling, and they haul me to prison and give the kid back to Priss and Carlos, who in that hour had patched things up and were back together. They stayed together all during my trial. Carlos, he lied through his teeth on the stand. It was awful, but he never was very strong when it came to women. Worst of it? I was in the pen maybe six weeks when I heard Priss killed Carlos on one of her crazy benders.”

“No!”

“Yeah. I got paroled a couple months later.”

“What happened to Manuel?”

“He lives with Carlos’ mother now. I go by and see him whenever I’m home.”

“Does he like you?”

“Yeah. He got all the brains his parents never had. Smart kid. Scary smart.”

“What did you do after that?”

“I got out and went straight to a bar. My sister, Emma, showed up, and we drank until we were seriously fucked.”

“Really?” Bliss laughed and tried to picture what Travis’ sister must look like. She had to be an interesting woman.

“Yeah, you don’t want to have a drinking contest with her. Our old man had her on the bottle young. She can’t drink me under the table, but she can hold her own.”

“Your dad got you guys drinking when you were kids?”

“My sister. My mom would have smacked him silly. Didn’t stop me sneaking a few beers.”

“Okay, wait...” She shook her head, rearranging the pieces.

“My dad stepped out on his wife a lot. He only had two kids though. Emma, whose mom is his wife, and me. We’re about a year apart.”

“And it’s your dad who had the run-in with the serial killer?”

“Yeah. BTK. He murdered my grandparents and made him watch.”

“That had to be rough.”

“It wasn’t a cake walk.”

“And you said a copycat tried to kill your sister?”

“Yeah, earlier this year, guy called himself BTKiller. He was...I don’t know, trying to recreate the original BTK murders because he thought he was the reincarnation of the guy. You’d have to ask Emma. He had this idea that if he killed all these people, her and this cop, he’d set his soul free or some bullshit.”

“And that’s how you got hooked up with the FBI?”

“Kind of. Their guys called me, asked me some questions. It went from there.”

She shook her head, mind reeling. They hadn’t even touched on his time in the Navy, doing whatever it was he did, or his job now. Danger was woven into the fabric of who he was. There was no use wishing him safe because, even doing something safe, he was dangerous.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing, I’m wrapping my head around all of it.”

“I’m not a good person, Bliss.”

“Right.” She rolled her eyes.

“You’re seeing me as the man you want me to be.”

“Or maybe you’ve decided to be a martyr because a few idiots said you were a bad apple? I can’t believe that. You’re a lot better than you give yourself credit for.”

“I’m not.”

“Fine. If that’s what you want to believe.” She rolled off the bed, stood and stretched.

If Travis wanted to be a martyr and believe he was some sort of awful human being because a bunch of bad stuff had happened to him, she wasn’t going to change his mind. But now she understood him a tiny bit better, and she liked what she’d seen.

“Where you going?” he called out as she left the bedroom.

“Kitchen.” She hadn’t stopped being hungry since they’d picked her up out of the snow. Sure, another meal would go straight to her hips, but they were hers, and she wasn’t about to feel guilty for being alive to eat.

* * * *

Travis watched Bliss leave the bedroom.

She didn’t get it. And he didn’t know how to make her understand. His life was cursed. There was a darkness he couldn’t shake. He’d been born into it, and it would die with him. There was no future if she couldn’t accept that.

A future?

What the heck was he thinking?

He shook his head and sat up, busying himself with putting his clothes into a drawer.

There was no denying he liked Bliss. She was special, and he would be crazy to not want her in his life. But that was a something he couldn’t ask of her. He couldn’t offer her a stable home like Grayson. He wouldn’t be around to take her calls, have dinner or anything. She deserved better than him, and that was the end of it.

He put the last of his things away and headed downstairs, following his nose.

Bliss stood at the stove, stirring something in a pot. She was barefoot and bounced her hip in time to music only she could hear. Just the sight of her was a punch to the gut. This time two days ago he hadn’t been certain he’d ever see her again. And here she was.

It was enough to make a man wonder about the future. To want something different. But even trying to live part time in Vegas to be nearer to her wouldn’t be fair to her. He’d watched the stress that kind of separation put on Ethan and Molly. Sure, other guys made it work, but someone always suffered. He wouldn’t ask her to do that.

Travis crossed to the entry and the brown box the officer had left for him.

“What ‘ya got there?” Bliss asked.

He set the box on the kitchen counter and opened it. A couple of things for him, and two for her.

“Belated Christmas presents.” He held up the two items.

“Oh, you’re so thoughtful. I’ve always wanted my very own Taser. And Mace?”

“Will you be serious?”

“Fine. What’s up?”

“I want you to keep these with you. Have you used mace before?”

“I had some in college. I know the basics. Point it away from you. Aim for the eyes. If I get it on me, don’t try to wash it off with soap, use milk.”

“Good. And the Taser?”

“You sure that’s necessary?”

“It could be. I’d like you to have a gun, but first you need to know what to do with it.”

“A gun? Seriously? Me?”

“What? You operate a vibrator. It can’t be that much different.”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that.”

“Look, I just want you safe. These are easy tools to keep around in case you need them.”

She sighed and tapped the spoon on the pot.

“Fine. How do I work it?”

They left the soup on to simmer while he showed her the basics of the hand-held device. It had enough juice to stop a man in his tracks long enough for her to get away. That was the most important thing he had to drill into her.

“If you’ll consider it, I’d at least like to show you how to shoot.” He placed the items back on the counter. Later he’d make sure they got into her purse.

“But they said we couldn’t go out.”

“Not now. Some other time.” He got at least a week off between gigs, sometimes more. Plenty of time to make a trip to Nevada.

“Like—what? You’re just going to come back to Vegas to teach me how to shoot a gun?”

“Sure. Why not? You don’t want me here?” Hadn’t he just decided that was a bad idea? He had no self-control where she was concerned.

She blinked at him for a second, then stared at the soup, stirring it slowly.

“It’s not that. I like you. But it’s hard to lean on you and know you’re going to leave any minute. I was starting to think I’d never see you once you left.”

“I never said that.”

“No…”

“I wouldn’t mind coming back if you wanted to see me.”

Bliss nodded. It wasn’t the reaction he’d hoped for, not that he knew what he wanted from her. It was all so tangled and twisted inside of him. He wanted her even when he knew the best thing for her was not him.

“I don’t have to,” he said.

“It’s just hard right now. I really like you, and I’m so very grateful you saved not just me, but Wendy… I don’t know where my head is. I’d like to see you though.”

“Cool.”

“But what if I’m not even here? What if they move me?”

“Then we’ll figure it out. Daniel can’t keep hiding forever. They’re going to catch him.” That, or Travis would. The most important thing right now was keeping Bliss safe. Once he was assured of her well-being, he would go on the hunt.

* * * *

It was good to be back in his home city. Getting out of California hadn’t been as difficult as he’d thought. Granted, there were a few close calls, but his disguise had passed the test.

Daniel unlocked his secret bunker and quick-stepped down the stairs. It was time to find out where his girls were and plan for their get-away.

He fired up the computer and waited for it to boot.

Wendy was easy to locate. All he had to do was follow the courier from her husband’s place of work, and he’d know where she was. Bliss, on the other hand, was better concealed. Thanks to

that piece of work bodyguard. Daniel hadn't figured out how that one played into everything, but he was ready to find out.

A few clicks of the keys, and he brought up the GPS tracker tuned into the device he'd planted in her bag. The red pin plopped on the map, and he zoomed in to the very street she was sitting on.

"Gotcha."

He grinned and clicked through his other feeds. The majority of his cameras were disabled, but a small number were still up and running. They all showed what he expected, abandoned homes.

Now, what about the man?

Travis.

That was his name.

"Who are you, Travis? And how will you die?"

12.

Bliss peered into yet another drawer. The master bath was stocked with all kinds of things. Toothbrushes. Adult diapers. Children's diapers. First aid kit. The list went on. If she didn't have something, she now knew where it was stocked.

The digital clock on the counter ticked off another five minutes. She'd successfully hidden in the bathroom for over an hour. Travis had moved around the house, talking on his phone, chatting with her, and mostly brooding. Their conversation over dinner had consisted of a dozen or so words.

She liked him. A lot. And she did want him to come back to Vegas. At least that was her knee-jerk reaction. On one hand, she wanted more. For Travis to realize he was more than a string of other people's mistakes. That he was a caring, thoughtful guy who just needed to let go a little. That there was more than just chemistry there. On the other hand...She didn't know if she'd be living in Vegas. If he would be allowed to know where she was. And why the hell did she have such crazy strong feelings for a guy she met a couple days ago?

From the moment Travis had walked into her life, she felt like someone had her back. He believed her when she said her sister was missing. At the house she'd freaked out, and he was right there with her. When she pressed the issue of going with him, he didn't try to keep her away. At every turn he'd had her back. What would it be like to have a partner like that? She'd always been the one pulling the weight of two people.

Then there was the chemistry. It was off the charts. She didn't think it was simply switching out her nice guy type for a bad boy. It was a result as unique as Travis himself.

She was falling in love with him, and they were doomed to fail.

"Bliss?" He knocked on the bathroom door.

She flinched and turned toward the white pocket door. If she ignored him, would he go away? She couldn't be so lucky.

"Yeah?"

"You done in there?"

"Almost."

She held her breath and listened, but of course he couldn't do her the favor of making a tiny bit of sound.

Freaking man.

Bliss turned back to the mirror. She'd showered. Dried her hair. Brushed and flossed her teeth. Scrubbed and moisturized her face. Was she missing something? Could she squeeze out a few more moments alone with her merry-go-round of thoughts?

The lock on the door *snicked*.

Her spine straightened and she stood at the tiny silver lock, pointing the wrong way.

Daniel?

The door opened. Travis stood on the other side, a knife in hand.

Bliss blew out a breath and turned to face him.

"Christ, don't do that. You scared me."

"You've been in here for a long time." He closed the knife and slid it into his pocket without looking away from her.

"Yeah, so? There's not a lot to do here." She scooped up her dirty clothes.

He stepped back, out of her way. She crossed to her bag, opting to leave the worn clothing tucked behind the duffle for now.

“What’s bothering you?” Travis leaned against the dresser, watching her.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing is always something when a woman says it.”

She glared at him.

“Ethan’s ex-wife always said that.”

Smart woman.

“You going to bed?” he asked.

“Might as well.”

Travis had insisted they keep the TV off. If she had to guess, the news was still clogged with updates on Daniel’s whereabouts and his history of crime. The FBI had mentioned something about confirming over fifty bodies attributed to Daniel.

She climbed into bed and turned away from Travis.

He still wanted to see her.

The idea of never seeing him again left an empty ache in her chest. Could she ever have him? Would he ever truly be hers? She wasn’t even sure what he meant when he suggested still seeing her.

She listened to him brush his teeth and move about the room, getting ready for bed. Everyday actions that squeezed her heart in a vice. Why couldn’t this be their normal?

Travis turned all the lights off, save for the bathroom. He left the door open just a crack. For her. Because she needed the security of the light.

The bed dipped under Travis’ weight, and she squeezed her eyes shut. She wanted him, but she didn’t want to lose him. And right now, things were too uncertain to make any sort of call about the future.

He rolled toward her and she shifted as gravity tilted her toward him. She was intently aware of his presence, the sound of his breathing, the feel of his gaze on her.

“You need to get out of your head, darlin’. You’ll drive yourself crazy if you keep doing this to yourself. You’re safe. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” He turned and the sheets rustled as he stretched out on his side, closest to the door.

Travis thought she was obsessing about Daniel? That mental refrain had broken some point that morning, and she’d slept without the hint of a dream. His return to her life was a very real possibility, one she didn’t like, but she couldn’t control.

She held very still, listening to his breathing grow shallow and even. He could probably fool her into thinking he was asleep, so she chose to believe it for now.

Bliss rolled over, letting her gaze travel the line of Travis’ body. The sheet and blanket were down around his waist and the bathroom light cast just enough light she could see the tattoo on his upper arm.

She wiggled her toes and turned back toward the windows. There was no reason for her to have so much pent up energy. She’d barely slept, hadn’t eaten well, and it hurt when she moved certain ways. And yet, she wasn’t about to sleep anytime soon.

The digital clock ticked off the minutes, taunting her. She turned away, only to roll to her stomach and glare at the numbers.

Longest night of her life.

Or, second longest. There was no denying that night spent in the A-frame had seemed to go on forever.

She rolled to her side, tossing back the comforter tangling around her legs.

Travis sighed in his sleep. She froze, not even breathing as she counted to twenty.

The bedside lamp clicked on, casting a warm glow on the room.

“What’s bothering you?” he asked.

She rolled to her back and cringed.

“Sorry. Keeping you up?”

He rolled to his side, all that muscle on display.

“What’s bothering you?” he asked again.

“Nothing.”

“Bliss.” He tipped his chin down and gave her The Look. The one that said they both knew very well something was bothering her and she was hiding it. “I told you Daniel can’t get you here. There’s two sets of plainclothes cops stationed at either end of the street, plus one lives behind us. Daniel shows up, we got him.”

“Wait, we’re next door to a cop?”

“Yeah.”

“What about his family?”

“He’s single, and this is part of his job. I think he’s got a cop buddy roommate.”

“Oh. I’m not worried about Daniel.” She rolled to her side, chewing her lip. If she told him, she would become that girl. The clingy one who always wanted more. She’d never been that girl, but with Travis...It was all different.

“Then what’s got you tossing and turning?”

“You aren’t so bad at talking.”

“Bliss.”

She blew out a breath and spent a moment fluffing her pillow. He waited her out, watching her every movement. She was only prolonging the inevitable.

“What’s going to happen to us?” She couldn’t even look at him when she asked.

“That’s up to you.”

“That’s not a fair answer.”

“What do you want to hear?”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” She flopped onto her back. “Why do you have to put this on me? It’s like you’re just saying that to make me feel better or safe or something.”

“Put this on you? What the hell?”

“I mean...” She glanced at him and almost wanted to hide under the bed. His scowl was dark and unhappy.

“Let me get this straight, you think I’m in bed with you, fucked you, and stayed here to make sure you feel good? Darlin’ there are some things you can’t pay me to do and whore myself out is one of them.”

“That’s not what I meant!” She sat up, her restless nerves pushing her to do something.

“I’m not that kind of man.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just thought...yeah, we like each other, and you’re letting me focus on us instead of Daniel when you aren’t really interested.”

Travis scrubbed a hand over his face before answering.

“This ain’t that complicated.”

“Well, what am I supposed to think when you’re pushing all this on me to make the decisions? You haven’t told me what you think or feel.”

“I told you exactly what I thought, that it was up to you what you wanted.”

She grabbed the pillow and swung it at him. He deflected it easily with his forearm before lunging at her and pinning her to the mattress. She squirmed a bit, but getting away from him was a useless expenditure of energy.

“What’s not clear enough about that?” he asked.

“Because what if I want something you don’t? What if you like me more than I like you?”

The scowl didn’t go away and he didn’t move off her, but he did let go of her arm.

“Don’t you get what I’m saying when it’s up to you? I want it all, but I’m not about to ask a woman to put up with my lifestyle or what I do. It’s not fair to you.” His voice retained the same rough quality, but there were deeper, vulnerable notes.

“Oh.” She let her hands rest on his biceps. Her voice trembled despite her efforts to speak clearly. “So if I said this was it, you’d be okay leaving and never seeing me again?”

“Yes.” His gaze narrowed. He didn’t like that answer, but she didn’t doubt that he’d at least pretend he would leave her alone, per her wishes.

She got the feeling Travis was the kind of man who got what he wanted and damn the consequences, and right now he wanted her. That desire was a palpable zing of electricity in the air, arcing between them, and she was surprised they couldn’t see the sparks.

“And if I said let’s be crazy and get married now?” She held her breath, dying to hear how he’d send that question back at her.

“I’d say wait until the morning.”

“Seriously?” She stared at him in more than a bit of shock.

Travis’ shoulders lifted.

He was serious. Holy cow, the idea didn’t terrify her. That rational part of her brain wasn’t screaming at her to stop now.

If he said yes, she’d marry him tomorrow.

Was she brave enough to ask? To put it out there?

Hell no.

Bliss licked her lips. “I’m not serious about the wedding chapel thing, but...I don’t like the idea of not seeing you again. And I don’t like the idea of not knowing where I stand with you. I’m not the kind of girl that just jumps into bed with a guy.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Use more words, damn it. What does okay mean?”

“I’m good with that. And you should plan on not jumping into bed with anyone else.”

She gulped and nodded.

“As far as where we stand, like I said, I’m leaving that up to you, because I can’t ask you for more than what you’re ready for.”

Everything. She wanted it all, but who fell for a guy they just met? That kind of stuff was for girls like Wendy. Not her.

“Then...dating?”

“I’m good with that. But Bliss, I can’t even tell you when I’ll be back or how long you might go without hearing from me. Some of the work we do...it’s important. It’s not all watching rich guys like Grayson tinker around. Sometimes it’s very dangerous.”

“Can you at least warn me about the dangerous stuff?”

“No.”

“Travis, if something bad happens I want to be prepared. Otherwise I’ll worry all the time.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I said I’ll think about it. I need to talk with Ethan. Figure out how they handled it. Molly always was chill about stuff like that. But what if I’m sent on a sensitive assignment? I can’t promise that I will always be able to tell you everything, or anything. See what I mean?”

How did women and men deal with this? This wasn’t just a problem unique to Travis, there were all those men and women working in dangerous fields who had to routinely leave loved ones behind. It sucked.

“Okay, so long as we can still figure that out.” She could. Right? That wasn’t impossible?

He stared at her for several moments, the frown lines still wrinkling his face. She could only imagine what was in his head. He’d tried scaring her away once. He was painting the worst picture possible of a relationship with him. Did he think so little of himself?

She slid her hands up to his face, applying the barest pressure with her fingers. He lowered his head, gaze locked on her lips. The first touch of his mouth was gentle. It felt as though she’d kissed him a thousand times before, and as though this were the first time. Warmth pooled in her stomach and her restless feet rubbed against the sheets. She wanted to wind her body around his, to touch him, love him, show him things could be different.

“Bliss?” His lips caressed her with each syllable.

“Hm?”

“Where’d you put the bags?”

Her sex toys.

She sucked in a breath, both thrilled and apprehensive about his participation with her collection of sexual wonders.

“They’re in my duffle.”

Travis climbed off the bed, heading straight for her bag.

She sat up and pulled the baggy shirt she’d worn to bed off and shimmied out of her panties. Was that too forward? She didn’t think so, it was just being pragmatic. They were going to be naked so why not speed the process along?

Bliss clutched the pillow to her chest and watched him examine the contents of several pink drawstring bags. Pink was a safe color. Most of the time.

He selected three and left the rest on the dresser.

A promise for later?

Her body hummed with anticipation.

Travis crossed to her side of the bed and tossed the three bags onto the nightstand. He grabbed her pillow-shield, tugged it from her grasp, and deposited it behind her. In the blink of an eye she was flat on the mattress, his weight pressing her down once more, his mouth on hers. This time it wasn’t gentle or kind, it was hungry.

She rolled her hips and hooked a leg over his waist, undulating against him. His erection strained the front of his cotton boxers at just the right angle.

Travis growled something incoherent and sat up, grabbing one of the pouches on his way. She was left breathless, spread eagle on the bed with him kneeling between her thighs. This was usually the moment where she would have a bit of fluttering in her stomach, some worry about her body or scaring him away, but not this time. It was just—perfect. They were exactly who they were supposed to be together, and nothing about this moment was wrong.

He reached into the long pouch and drew out a curved, magenta dildo with V-styled ridges circling its girth.

That one.

Of course it would be that one.

She ran her toes up his calf.

“Should I know anything?” he asked.

She shook her head. Usually she’d need a bit of lube, but not right now. She’d gone from dry to wet in an instant.

“What do you like about it?” He turned the dildo this way and that.

“It’s good for g-spot orgasms. And I like the girth.” The last bit she managed to get out without stammering. It was awfully pretty and just different enough that it stood out in her collection. But in the girth and length department she was pretty sure Travis won out.

He stared at the toy a few more moments, his brow wrinkled, as if he didn’t know which end went in her.

She wrapped her hand around the base and tugged it from his grip. Some guys liked to watch, right?

Bliss closed her eyes, conscious of the blush creeping up her neck. She reached down, but Travis’ hands were there already. He spread her open while she guided the head of the dildo to her entrance. Her nerves were wound up just enough that she felt her body resist the tapered dildo.

Deep breath.

She slid the end in and out, keeping the strokes steady and slow. The ridges teased her vaginal walls. Travis’ hand covered hers and the angle changed, rubbing the front of her channel. She gasped at the shift in sensations and curled her toes, giving control of the toy up to him.

This.

This was what it could be like.

13.

Travis stared, entranced by the sight of Bliss' body taking the dildo. The silicone glistened with her arousal, and already she was making all those little sounds that drove him crazy. Her feet rubbed on the sheets, her hands fisting them. He didn't mind her eyes being closed. At least if he made a mistake she wasn't watching him do it.

The toy was harder than he'd expected, which made gripping it easy. He slid the full length of it inside of her, right up to the flared base. Her hips came up off the mattress and she gasped.

Had he found the spot?

He pumped the toy, slow and easy, fascinated by the way her body stretched around the oddly shaped dildo. It was fucking hot.

"Travis." She hissed and peered up at him through narrow slits.

The goal wasn't to make her come. At least not yet. He wanted to...play with her. This wasn't just about scratching a sexual itch. Of course he wanted to spend a day inside of her, but there was also something far more intimate in this act. Plus, the idea of making her come over and over again had plenty of appeal.

He'd show her just how generous he could be in bed.

He continued lazily stroking her with the dildo with one hand and upended another, smaller pouch onto the bed. The small bullet was nothing like what she'd shown him their first night, but it was perfect for what he wanted to do. He'd had nothing but time to consider.

Bliss's hips undulated, her motions faster, far more intent than his. He let the dildo slide from her pussy and tossed it a few feet over.

"No," she wailed.

He braced an arm across her hips, keeping her right where he wanted her, and twisted the bullet on. The second he touched her mound with it she shrieked and her knees clamped down on his shoulders. He watched in fascination as her spine bowed and her body shuddered.

Damn.

He hadn't even touched her clit or anything.

Her body went slack and he removed the tiny vibrator. He hadn't realized how much stimulation the dildo had provided. Clearly he had a lot to learn about sex toys and Bliss' body.

He was about to become the most dedicated student.

Travis turned the vibe off and crawled up her body. She looped her arms around his neck and hauled him down, wrapping her legs over his hips and kissing him deeply. He rolled them to their sides and kissed her back.

He'd made her that crazy. He'd pushed her to orgasm.

It was a surprisingly satisfying accomplishment.

Bliss reared back, wiggling out of his hold. He let her go, but instead of taking off for the bathroom, regrouping, or anything he'd expected, she slithered down his body, yanking his underwear down in the process.

"Wow, Bliss...."

He rolled to his back and stopped talking. There was something about a naked woman with intent in her eye. He couldn't pass up the opportunity to watch.

She stripped his underwear off him and straddled his thighs. God, she was amazing. He hated the dark bruises dotting her flesh, but she'd overcome them. There would be time to

address the rest of it. She grabbed the bullet he'd discarded and twisted it on.

"What are you going to do with that?" He eyed the vibrator with apprehension.

"You'll see." She grinned at him and bent until her ass was in the air and her elbows pressed into the mattress.

He wasn't sure he wanted to see anything except her ass. Damn but he liked her butt. It was round and just right for his hands.

Bliss fisted his cock in a firm grasp. Nothing tentative or unsure about that. She slid her palm up and down his erection before licking up the underside, right along the vein that throbbed.

"Oh, fuck," he muttered and thrust up into her grasp.

She placed the bullet just under the mushroom cap. He gasped, his hips shooting up off the mattress. The vibrator rubbed the length of his cock. It was weird. The sensations were arousing but also fairly...ticklish. He jerked his hips back and forth, the muscles in his shoulders and neck tightening.

"Breathe," Bliss whispered.

He had a vague impression of her grinning at him, and her breasts resting on his thighs.

She leaned forward and wrapped her lips around his cock, her tongue swirling around the head. The wet heat of her mouth against his sensitized dick was amazing. Her hand wrapped around the base of his cock and she went to town twisting, licking, and sucking him.

Her hand cupped his balls and the bullet pressed right between his testicles.

He shouted and thrust far harder than he'd ever intend into her mouth. One hand wound up in her hair, the other in the sheets. His vision hazed, and he had the sensation of everything whizzing by, like they were on a bullet train.

Bliss sat up, breathing deep, and turned the vibrator off. Her chin was damp and a bit of his seed coated her lips.

He sat up and glanced at his still-erect dick.

"Did I come?"

"Uh, yeah." She chuckled and swiped her hand across her mouth.

"God damn."

* * * *

Bliss smothered her chuckle behind her hand.

Oh man, he looked so confused. It was rather adorable.

"How am I still hard if I just came?"

She tracked his gaze to his erect penis. It hadn't softened much, if at all.

"Some guys can come more than once."

"Is that natural?"

"Yeah," she chuckled.

"Oh. Okay. Cool." He reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her up the bed and into his arms.

She giggled, relishing the feeling of being manhandled. This was a first. She'd never thought the idea of being tossed around in bed was that great, but with Travis? She could become a fan.

Travis kissed her briefly while he hauled them both up to their knees. He pushed her forward and she grasped the headboard with both hands.

Things went flying from the bottom of the bed until she heard a very familiar crinkling

sound.

Oh, yes! She gave a mental cheer and peered over her shoulder in time to watch him roll the condom on. He caught her gaze and her grin widened.

He palmed her bottom with both hands, leaning over her. She could feel the press of his cock against her ass.

“Do you know how long I’ve been thinking about this ass?”

Her breath caught in her throat. He’d been thinking about her? For as long as she’d wanted him?

“The second you walked out of that police station, fuck, I knew I wanted you.”

He pulled back and the next thing she felt was the thick, blunt head of his cock. Unlike the dildo, he was warm, but just as unyielding. The teasing he’d given her earlier just wasn’t enough. She wanted him to pound into her, make every fiber of her body feel.

She pushed back, impaling herself on him. A groan escaped her lips. He thrust and she dug her nails into the headboard. His arm circled her waist, holding her up or captive, she didn’t know yet. He worked himself in and out, slowly, but she could feel his control eroding.

“Travis.” She tossed her head back. “Fuck me.”

“Like this?” He put real force behind it, enough to rock her forward and make the bed shudder.

Electric tendrils of lust snaked through her body.

“Yes,” she shouted.

He wrapped one hand around her throat, but didn’t squeeze. It was almost tender, the way he braced part of his hand against her chest.

Again he thrust, each pass of his cock branding her body as his. She moved with him, but it was mostly his contained power pumping into her, touching her in a way no toy would. There was no replacement for the feel of him inside of her or how he stirred her heart.

“Oh, Travis.” She leaned her head back against his shoulder as her body gave itself over to the orgasm. Her muscles went lax, and he held her, supporting her weight as he fucked the daylights out of her.

She held onto the headboard until he shouted and stilled, clutching her to his chest.

“That was fucking amazing.” She panted and kissed his hand.

Her heart was doing weird things in her chest. Things she didn’t have a name for, yet.

14.

Travis focused on keeping his breathing even in an attempt to lower his heart rate.

He'd basically told Bliss he'd marry her.

What was he thinking?

He wasn't. That was the problem. He'd been half awake and horny, so he'd said whatever it took to get in her panties.

A small voice deep down inside whispered, *Liar*.

It was almost seven. He could probably slip out, book a flight home, and be gone by noon. With a little distance between them, he was sure they'd both come to their senses. It was the right thing to do. Falling for a client never went well, and Bliss didn't know what she was getting herself into. She could spout the nice line about accepting him for who he was all she wanted. Until the ugly reality set in. Life with him would never be easy.

He plugged his proverbial ears to keep from the chant of *Liar* out of his conscious thoughts.

The phone on the nightstand vibrated.

This was his opportunity.

He gently rolled her to her side, off his arm, and snagged the phone.

"Mm, Travis? What's wrong?" She blinked up at him, not even fully awake.

"Office. Go back to sleep." He hit the Answer button, grabbed his shorts and headed for the hall. "What's up?"

"Damn, I thought you'd be up," Gavin said.

"It's been a long couple of days. What's up? Find Daniel?" Travis pulled the shorts up and took the stairs down to the ground floor.

"No, man. Boss wanted me to see if you had Ethan's hospital records. They didn't come back with him."

"Mason has those." He peered out the window, looking first for the cops stationed at the end of the street. Not a soul was up yet.

"Oh, right, right. I guess he will come by today sometime then. Cool. Enjoy Vegas."

"Hey, Gavin, wait." Travis glanced over his shoulder, up the stairs. "Can you get me a flight back to base this morning?"

"Dude, seriously? I thought the boss was clearing you—"

"Yes or no?"

"Yeah, I can handle it, or I can pass it over to Ops. Actually, it'll be faster if I do it. You want the aisle, right?"

"Yeah. Thanks, man."

"See ya soon."

Travis hung up and blew out a breath.

Part of him wanted to crawl back in bed with Bliss, keep the lie of a future going a little while longer, but he couldn't do that.

Liar.

He turned the coffee pot on and tossed a breakfast burrito in the microwave.

There were cops and the FBI here to take care of her. Chances were, they'd reunite her with her sister, parents or both, and his presence would be completely pointless. It wasn't as if he'd done anything useful since finding her, and in truth, all he'd done was get Ethan hurt and waste a

lot of Mason's time.

"What's going on?" Bliss descended the stairs, her steps lagging and her eyes still heavy with sleep.

"Work. They need me to get back today." The lie slid out, cold and hollow, but until they were back to being rational he would tell her whatever he needed to.

"Oh. Today? Like, right now?"

"Yeah, afraid so."

"Hey, will you stop for a second and look at me?" She grabbed his hand and tugged him to face her.

He needed to set her straight, for both their sakes.

Liar.

Travis looked down at her tousled hair, her lips still swollen from last night. She'd put his shirt on, which he didn't want to think too much about.

"I'm not sure this is going to work, Bliss. I've been going over it in my head and...I don't think it's going to work out."

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

"Wait, what do you mean?" She snatched her hand back.

"I mean us." He leaned against the counter, gripping the edge to keep from grabbing her and taking it all back. What the hell was wrong with him. "What are we going to do? Spend a weekend a month together? I can't be tied down with too many responsibilities away from the job."

"You can't be serious."

"I am."

Liar!

"Your job means that much to you?"

"I don't have to explain it to you." He grit his teeth.

A job didn't keep him warm at night or kiss him or make him feel like she did.

Bliss took a step back, her mouth working soundlessly.

LIAR!

He winced, both because that voice was right and—he didn't want to hurt her. But one way or another, he would. There wasn't a good thing about him, and the faster she learned that, the better. It would hurt her a lot less now than a year or five down the road, after they'd made all the mistakes and left all the scars that would never heal.

His phone beeped. Gavin was good. His flight information was all there in a nice, neat text. At least with work he knew where he stood, how to operate. He'd die if he stayed on with Aegis for the rest of his life. It was just a matter of time until he caught the right bullet in the wrong place. If he left Aegis, there wasn't anything for him in the civilian world. He couldn't support her, much less himself.

She was better off without him.

The voice didn't call him a liar this time, because it was the undeniable truth. He might have feelings for her, hell, he very well might love her, but that was a curse.

"I'll be out of here in less than an hour."

The microwave dinged. He grabbed the still-hot breakfast burrito and headed for the stairs. More like he fled.

This was the right thing to do.

Wasn't it?

* * * *

Bliss stood in the smaller bedroom over the garage, listening for sounds of the car.

Travis was leaving.

He was serious.

She still couldn't wrap her head around it all. Last night they'd almost said they loved each other. You didn't offer to marry someone you didn't love, right? And today they were over. Done with.

The hole in her chest was so new and raw she didn't really feel it yet. She was just...numb.

Travis' rental backed out of the garage. She stepped to the side, out of his line of sight. It was one thing to wait around, mooning and depressed, it was another for him to know how much this hurt.

What had she done wrong? What was wrong with her?

She wiped her hand across her cheek. The tears she'd promised herself she wouldn't cry streamed down her cheeks. She pressed her back to the wall and slid to the carpet.

Seven days. Was it really possible to fall in love with someone that fast?

Her broken heart said yes.

She hadn't harbored any kind of illusions. Yes, she knew that things wouldn't be easy with Travis, she'd have to be okay with less in exchange for being loved by him, but they could make it work.

God, she needed to pull it together. Jade and Connor would be here soon to—she didn't really know. Move her? Question her?

They weren't Travis.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and buried her face in her hands.

Life just wasn't fair.

* * * *

Daniel started the dead cop's car and eased out a full thirty seconds after Travis turned out of the residential area. He hadn't been able to tell how many people were inside the house, but there was only one in the truck.

He'd take his chances.

Travis had to die before he executed the rest of his plan anyway.

* * * *

"Keys, sir?"

Travis stared at the rental keys.

What was he doing? Was this really the right choice?

He was going to spend the next five days drinking himself stupid. At home. Alone.

His pocket vibrated.

Bliss.

"Excuse me?" He yanked the phone out of his pocket.

"Sure thing." The attendant turned away, busying himself with paperwork behind the counter.

Not Bliss. Ethan.

"Hey, man," Travis said.

"What the fuck are you doing up this early?" Ethan's voice was raspy, low and slightly slurred. Drugs or alcohol? Maybe both?

"On my way to see you."

"Why the hell would you do that?"

"I don't know. You're my friend?"

"Unless you're bringing Bliss, I don't want to see your sorry ass."

Travis blew out a breath.

"What do you want, Ethan?"

"I want to know why you're making a huge, fucking mistake."

"Ethan, Bliss isn't Molly."

"Good. Because I'd beat your ass if you thought she was a good idea. The shit I've put up with. Wait—have you slept with my wife? Ex-wife?"

"What? No. Did someone say she did?"

"Oh fuck, don't tell me you don't know."

"No, man, I don't."

"Yeah, she's cheated on me. Yeah, I've caught her three fucking times. Believe me, stick with Bliss."

Travis stared at the wall.

Molly? Cheating on Ethan? But they'd seemed so perfect.

"Listen, you like her. Don't leave. Don't come back. Stay there and get a ring on it. Girls like that don't come along every day. Hear me?"

"Yeah."

If Ethan and Molly couldn't make it, what chance did they have?

"And I can hear you thinking. You aren't me, and Bliss ain't Molly. She told me she was unhappy years ago, but I asked her to stay. I ruined us and I know it."

"Are you drinking, Ethan?"

"Fuck yeah I am."

Shit. There was no telling what alcohol and the pills would do. Travis was going to have to make a few calls.

"You'll never stop wondering *what if* if you come home now," Ethan said.

Travis balled his hand into a fist. Damn Ethan for speaking his thoughts.

Travis knew the odds were against them, but what if he was wrong? Wasn't it time for something to go right in his life?

"I'll talk to you later, man. Put the bottle down." Travis hung up and fired off a quick text to Gavin. Someone needed to keep an eye on Ethan. He jangled the keys at the attendant. "I'm going to need to keep these a bit longer."

"Okay."

Travis jogged out of the rental car shop and climbed back into his SUV.

The feds weren't supposed to get to the house until noon. He had an hour and a half to beat them there and make things right.

It was crazy and he was probably stupid, but what else was there for him these days? Didn't he deserve to at least try to be happy?

And Bliss made him happy. He'd been serious about getting hitched. Yeah, they didn't know each other all that well, but when something was right it was right.

He loved Bliss.
And he was going to tell her.

* * * *

Daniel pulled into the small parking lot outside a florist's shop.
Flowers.
How typical.
His wives never needed such things. They were damn well happy with what he gave them.
The location was pretty perfect. Stores bordered the lot on three sides and a dumpster sat between him and the road. He had a straight line of sight to the SUV, now all he needed was for Travis to emerge.
He pulled out the cop's gun and checked the chamber.
Good to go.
Daniel kept his gaze on the rearview mirror. He'd need to get out fast and pick up a new ride. Things would have to happen fast once Travis was dead, or the feds would move his wife.
Oh, how he couldn't wait for Wendy to be back in his arms.
Travis strode around the corner of the building, a bouquet of roses in his hands.
Now.
Daniel pushed the door open, lifted the gun and fired—straight at Travis.
So long, asshole.

Dangerous Attraction: Part Three

1.

Travis hit the ground, rolling and grabbing for the firearm in his boot holster. Every fiber of his body was hyper aware of his surroundings. His left arm burned, and he couldn't feel his fingers. There wasn't time to worry about the injury now, not with someone firing a gun at him. Adrenaline fueled his need to survive. Bliss. He had to get back to her. Had to protect her. She wasn't safe.

He rose to his knees, gun raised and pointed toward the front of the SUV where he'd glimpsed the shooter.

Daniel.

It had to be him. Travis had caught a glimpse of a familiar car. The nagging sense that something was wrong had just started low in his gut, and then he saw the blast of muzzle fire. From there he operated on instinct, dropping to the ground, narrowly avoiding the shot.

How had Daniel found him so fast? Why was he after Travis? What had changed to make him deviate from the plan? Daniel went after the girls and transient junkies.

Pinpricks of pain started in the fingers on his left hand. The good news was he could flex and move the limb, though the ache radiating down from his shoulder meant he was going to be in a world of pain after the adrenaline dump wore off.

An inhuman roar bounced and echoed off the brick walls boxing them in. There was nowhere for Travis to go but through Daniel. This was it. The end. He could finish this right now. Make it so that Bliss never had to worry about the killer ever again.

He crawled to the front of the truck. On a whim, he'd backed into the spot, which meant a faster exit, and a measure of protection for a shoot-out.

The footsteps came closer. Heavy boots thudding on the new asphalt.

Travis crouched behind the rental SUV, the front wheels to his back.

One...

Two...

Three.

He straightened, sighted his shot, and fired off two rounds. Daniel ducked, and the back window of a car shattered. He was maybe six feet away, out in the open lot. It should be like shooting fish in a barrel, but tremors shook Travis' arm.

Daniel returned fire, hitting the front of the SUV and the van behind him. Travis ducked behind his truck, his right leg almost buckling. A big piece of glass stuck out from his calf. He didn't remember getting cut, but adrenaline did funny things in the heat of battle.

Two more shots pinged off the truck.

Travis circled his truck until he had the brick wall behind him, and the SUV between him and Daniel. He took a breath and then stepped out in the open, aiming at where he expected Daniel to be.

He was gone.

Travis was alone.

Travis limped around the SUV, gun up, sweeping the lot in case Daniel was hiding. People across the street were yelling, a car alarm was going off, but no Daniel. He'd disappeared.

The florist shop window sported several new cracks. The owner peeked out from around the corner. Travis dug his laminated badge out from his back pocket and flashed it. The badge didn't

have any legal weight besides identifying who he worked for, but sometimes it got civilians moving.

“Call the cops. Tell them Daniel Campbell was here. Do it. Now. Get inside.”

Daniel had meant to kill him. For some reason, he was going after Travis, not Bliss or Wendy. It was a complete and total break from pattern. Daniel was going to be even more desperate now. People needed off the streets, out of his path, or the bodies were going to start piling up even more.

How close was the safe house?

He’d chosen a shop not too far away, but not too close either. The house was maybe a five minute drive.

Daniel could already be there if he had a backup vehicle in the area.

Travis turned and limped back to the truck, pushing the pain out of his mind and focusing on what mattered: Bliss’ safety. Had he just put her at risk?

He should have never left her side that morning.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

He’d vowed to protect Bliss, and now he might have just killed her.

Travis turned the key in the ignition, saying a silent prayer. Who knew what was torn up in there after the bullets hit it? The engine roared to life. He blew out a breath and threw the truck into reverse, glad he didn’t have to track down a new set of wheels. With a piece of glass jutting out of his leg and a questionable arm wound, he wasn’t in any shape to hoof it back to Bliss on foot, either.

“Call Ryan Brooks,” he yelled at the Bluetooth.

“Calling Ryan Brooks.”

He pulled out onto the street, cutting two cars off and tailgating a third until they turned out of his way. Steam trickled out from around the hood and the temperature gauge crept higher. Getting pulled over by a cop might actually be a good thing if he could catch a ride to the safe house.

“Pick up. Pick up. Pick up.”

“Hello, this is SSA Ryan Brooks, if you will please leave a detailed message—”

“Fuck.”

He jabbed the End Call button on the steering wheel and slammed on the gas. The engine’s muddy roar wasn’t a good sign. The truck was limping along when he needed a sprint.

It could already be too late. He’d walked into Daniel’s hands, and now he could be after Bliss.

* * * *

Bliss sat on the sofa, mindlessly staring at the TV. She was numb to it all. Her life was done with, at least as she’d known it. And Travis was gone. The cops had already told her that the paperwork for Witness Protection was being pushed through despite the holidays, and that meant that in twenty-four hours Bliss Giles would cease to exist. She’d become someone else. A stranger. None of it mattered anymore.

Was this how it felt like for Wendy? Was this depression? She’d always fought her way through the tough times, determined to make things better but now... It wasn’t worth it. Travis had made that clear.

A man had never meant so much to her before. She’d never allowed them to, if she were

honest with herself. Nice guys fit into a box in her life, one where she still had time and attention to pick up the slack for Wendy. But a guy like Travis? He would demand everything she had. He readjusted her priorities, shown her what she could have with a man who deserved to be the love of her life. But clearly she wasn't important enough to him.

This sucked.

She flipped the channel again and couldn't muster the energy to care when the news popped on with a special update in the Daniel Campbell case.

He was her personal nightmare. Her kidnapper and tormenter. The man who wanted her to have babies he could torture to death. She couldn't even wrap her mind around it, and quite frankly didn't want to try. Soon, there wouldn't be a Bliss for Daniel to kidnap. She'd have a new identity, hopefully one he couldn't track.

The back door creaked.

An electric-like current of adrenaline raced down her spine. She sucked in a deep breath.

She could barely hear the light steps of the intruder on the linoleum. Her whole body was frozen to the sofa, tracking a single person's steps into the kitchen. In her head, she could hear the echo of Daniel's steps on the metal floor inside the RV. They'd been so loud and heavy, and she'd been sure she was about to die.

Fuck this gloomy shit, she wanted to live.

She wrapped her hand around the Taser tucked between the cushions at her side. It wasn't much in the way of protection, but she would go down fighting this time.

"Bliss?" A young man wearing sweatpants and a hoodie stepped out of the kitchen, a police badge in hand.

She sagged against the cushions in relief.

Not Daniel.

A cop.

All the tension left her body and she slumped against the cushions. Would it kill him to knock?

"Who are you?" she asked. There was no way she could keep them all straight, but she tried. These were the men and women she owed her life to, now.

"I'm Marcus. I live on the other side of the fence."

"Oh. Right." She blew out a breath. Travis had told her about the officer stationed behind the safe house tasked with keeping an eye on them. He and two officers positioned in cars at either end of the street were the entirety of her protective detail now that Travis was gone. Without him there, it didn't feel like enough.

"I'm going to have to ask you to get your things together."

"Why? What's wrong?" His expression was too tight, his smile fake. Her stomach clenched. "What happened to Travis?"

"Ma'am, I don't know. Last I heard he was getting on a plane. Will you please get your things together? We need to move you. Now."

She could demand answers, or she could grab her bag and get the same answers on the way to wherever they were taking her.

Bliss opted for taking the stairs two at a time up to the room she'd shared with Travis. She could still smell him in the sheets and her clothes. Even a shower hadn't washed him off her. He branded her body and soul as his, then left.

Now wasn't the time for sad, mopey thoughts. She'd been captured by Daniel once and that was an experience she didn't want to repeat. She grabbed her blue duffle bag off the dresser,

tossed on a jacket, and was back downstairs in less than five minutes.

“Ready,” she said. “Will you tell me what’s going on now?”

“In the car.”

Marcus took her arm and guided her out through the back door, moving at a brisk pace. She almost had to jog to keep up with him. The gate that joined their backyards stood open, and a uniformed officer waited for them on the other side. She didn’t miss the way his hand sat on his service gun. Something was wrong.

“Is my sister okay? What about my parents?”

The officer took her bag and the two men led her to a patrol car parked in front of Marcus’ house. Neither one spoke until she was locked in the backseat.

“Package has been picked up,” Marcus radioed while the driver gassed it out of the driveway.

“What the hell is going on?”

She was used to Travis, who gave her answers. Travis, who didn’t hide the truth from her. These officers were seriously scaring her.

“Ma’am, did anyone come to the door? Anyone at all?” Marcus twisted to look at her through the wire barrier.

“No, no one. Will someone please tell me what’s happened?”

“One of the plainclothes officers is missing. His car is gone.” Marcus’ tone was grim.

“You think—you think Daniel did something?” Cold dread swept her. Bad things weren’t accidents.

“We don’t know anything yet.”

“Your friend, he couldn’t have gone out for coffee or anything?”

“No, he wouldn’t have.”

“Oh, God.” She covered her mouth and closed her eyes. What kind of hell was this? What had she done to deserve this?

“Shit, look out!” Marcus threw his arm up, and the driver slammed on his brakes.

A big black SUV barreled down the road at them, smoke trailing out from under the hood, screeching to a stop so hard it rocked from side to side. The body was dented, and it looked like someone had taken a huge pencil and jabbed holes in the metal.

Bullet holes.

A familiar figure leapt out of the driver’s side, heading straight for them.

Travis.

Her heart pounded twice as hard. He was supposed to be on an airplane. He left her. And yet, he was looking right at her. She slapped her hand against the window and pulled at the door—but there was no handle, not in the back of the cop car.

“What the hell?” Marcus got out and stalked toward Travis.

Their voices were too low for her to hear anything.

Travis.

He told her they weren’t going to work out. By all rights, she should be furious with him. They were broken up. But she couldn’t be happier to see him.

The two men had a short conversation, including a lot of pointing on Marcus’ part. They must have reached an agreement, because the young officer turned and led the way back to the car. He grabbed the door handle and opened it, waving Travis in. She scooted over just in time for Travis to fold himself into the tight space.

God, she’d never seen anything so good in all her life.

A metallic odor tickled her nose and memory.

Bliss gasped.

"You're bleeding," she said.

"Don't worry about it." Travis wrapped his hand around hers and braced his other against the wire barrier. "Drive. Have you heard from the FBI?"

"No, not since earlier," Marcus replied. "What happened to you?"

"Daniel jumped me."

Bliss gasped. Daniel had attacked Travis? The rest of the conversation went on without her, but all she could focus on was that Travis was hurt because of her.

"You saw him?"

"Yeah."

"Was he in a blue car?"

"There was a blue car there." He rattled off the plates.

"That's the undercover car."

"Something happen?"

"An undercover went missing with his car."

"Damn it." Travis punched the wire. "I should have checked the damn car."

Marcus grabbed his cell phone while Travis hit dial on his. The name Ryan Brooks filled the screen. She watched it all happen, but just kept holding onto Travis' hand.

He was real, and he was right next to her.

What had happened in the hour or so since she last saw him? How had things gone so terribly wrong?

2.

Travis kept one hand on Bliss the whole walk from the car to the entrance of the police station, his gaze scanning the vehicles in the parking lot. Marcus strode ahead of them and the driver behind in a tight formation around her. Travis didn't breathe until they passed through the secured entrance. His leg twinged and his shoulder burned, but they were minor injuries as far as he could tell.

Marcus led them through the warren of departments, moving at a brisk pace. Bliss nearly jogged at his side, puffing and out of breath by the time they made it to the inner sanctum. The homicide department, if Travis had to guess.

Ryan and Jade had their heads together, staring at a file.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Connor drawled.

Travis steered Bliss to a cushy office chair.

"Shit, you're bleeding."

"Leave it," Travis snapped at Connor. He'd already pulled the glass out of his leg, and the wound on his arm was just a graze. It was the lack of sleep and focus that had been his undoing. "Did you find Wendy?"

Connor glanced at Ryan, who nodded, before answering. "Nothing yet. Husband has her locked down tight."

"If Daniel is making a move on me, and this close to Bliss, he has to know where they're at. They're not safe."

"Maybe you should sit down, let someone take a look at—"

"Shut it, Mullins." The last thing Travis needed was someone hovering over him because of a couple scratches.

"Morning, Bliss." Jade breezed past Travis and handed Bliss a cup of coffee. "Connor needs to ask Travis a few questions. Think you can come with me?"

Bliss nodded, never once looking at him.

Travis had screwed up. Not only did he allow his doubt to get the better of him, his rash actions put Bliss and others in danger. That was on him. All of it. The shootout. The potentially dead officer. His fault.

"Right. This morning, what happened?" Connor planted his hands on his hips and stared Travis down despite the difference in height.

"Home office booked my travel back, I went to the rental agency, and when I got there I changed my mind. Decided to stay. Figured it wasn't a good idea to show up empty-handed, so I stopped for some flowers." Flowers which had at least made it into the backseat of his SUV before he'd forgotten about them.

"That's when Daniel jumped you?"

"He must have tailed me. Marcus said something about one of the undercover cars missing?"

"Yeah, car and the dead cop were in the florist's parking lot."

"Shit."

"Like you said, Daniel knew where she was. Time of death was way before you bailed on her."

Fucking Irishman. Had to rub salt in that wound, didn't he?

“So, what happened? You had an OK Corral showdown?”

“I came out of the shop, Daniel stepped out of his car and fired at me. I dodged, it grazed my shoulder. Landed behind the SUV, got some glass in my calf.”

“Bullet looks like it grazed you and then broke the van’s window next to you. I’d say it’s safe to assume that’s what you got cut on.”

“Okay, so I pulled my back-up weapon, returned fire, he shot at me, I returned fire, and he left on foot. Any stolen cars reported recently?”

“Nothing yet, but they’re getting security footage from the area, looking for him or how he got away. This is a load of shit.” Connor shook his head. “Are you even technically employed on this case?”

“Not anymore.”

“Cops are going to have a field day with you if they don’t catch Daniel.”

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Shoot him.”

Travis curled his hands into fists. The damn agent was on his last nerve.

“I’ll call Dmitri and Ben, see what the scene is like. Maybe we can head this off. You’ve been a real pain in the ass, but you do good work.”

Travis glanced in the direction Jade had taken Bliss. An hour apart and he’d lost her. God, he was a screw-up.

“What about her parents?” he asked.

“On their way in. Figure we can keep everyone under one roof until we smoke Daniel out.”

“Except Wendy.”

“Yeah, pain in the ass that husband is. Hey, what if you get your guy working on finding them with Lali?” Connor pressed his cell to his ear.

“Right.” Travis tapped out a quick text to Gavin. The kid was going to hate this request, but they were running low on options.

Connor turned his back on Travis, exchanged a few words, and hung up.

“Right. So why you?” Connor asked.

“Me?”

“No, the asshole standing next to you. Yes, you. What happened out there when you snagged Bliss?”

“Nothing. Ethan and Mason talked to him. He shot Ethan, cut the other vic, and ran.”

“But now he has you tied up in all of this. He knows you and Bliss are involved and that you’ll come for her and her sister. Maybe you’ve become his—what? Arch-nemesis?”

“That’s stupid.”

“Yeah, well, you’re the one with a big target on your back. He must have a plan, but he thinks you’ll ruin it, so he has to take you out first.” Connor’s gaze slid off Travis. He stared at the wall and tapped his phone into his palm. “He hasn’t really splintered or gone on a spree yet. It’s more like he’s adapting, which these fuckers don’t always do well. What’s holding him together?”

“Bliss said he has a god complex.”

“Maybe this poor bastard thinks he’s really in control of it all. Perhaps we need to shake his control a bit. Hold onto that thought.”

Travis watched the agent retreat to the case boards set up in an adjoining conference room. The glass walls hid nothing. Table upon table of evidence and documentation. In the middle of it all were glass jars. The ones Bliss had told him about. What plan was the agent cooking up? And

would it work?

* * * *

“Mind giving me a hand?”

Bliss steeled her nerves and turned toward Travis. She’d avoided him since they arrived at the station, hiding out in the break room after answering Jade’s questions. Her emotions were too mixed up for her to make sense of them, and she wasn’t fond of making a spectacle of herself. The FBI agents were politely ignoring whatever it was she’d had with him up at the lake, but her parents wouldn’t.

Travis held a first aid kit in his hand, and his jacket was folded over his other arm. Blood soaked his shirt, and there were several small scratches on his face he hadn’t had when he left her that morning.

“Sure.” What else was she supposed to say?

Bliss pulled out a chair and gestured for him to sit.

He plunked the kit onto the table and peeled his long-sleeved thermal shirt off. Her mouth dried up, and her fingers itched to trace his ladder-like abdominal muscles. Forget about what was really going on for just a few minutes. Pretend they were still in that happy place.

Blood smeared down his left arm and shoulder. A pencil-wide gash tore across the top of his bicep, partially scabbed over with bits of cloth stuck in it.

She must have made a face.

“It doesn’t hurt that bad. Bandaging it will go faster with help.”

“Shouldn’t you see a doctor?”

“For this? No point.” He handed her a bottle of peroxide and pulled out some bandages.

“Let’s do this over there.”

He crossed to the sink, leaving her no choice but to follow him.

This was exactly the kind of thing he’d tried to explain to her. The dangers of his job. It was a hard thing to wrap her mind around, even with a front row seat. He considered a bullet wound no big deal. It was a perspective she didn’t think she could understand.

“Do it,” Travis said prompting her to action.

She poured peroxide along the length of the wound, wincing as it bubbled and fizzed. He simply stood there, staring past her to the wall beyond as if it didn’t hurt at all.

“There.”

He glanced at the wound and picked out a few bits of lint and stray fabric that stuck to the scab.

“Grab the bandages?”

She snagged the pre-packaged gauze and tape, plus an anti-bacterial ointment packet. He leaned down and she applied the topical medicine, not once looking at his face. She couldn’t without the overwhelming tide of emotions doing funny things to her. There was something soothing to the action of patching him up, but she was still...unhappy.

He left her. He came back, but why? Out of some obligation? Because Daniel had surfaced? Or had he wanted to? Nothing made sense, and quite frankly, she was hurt.

“You have every right to be mad at me,” he said.

“What? I didn’t say anything.”

“You don’t have to. I screwed up. I woke up this morning, realized what I’d said, and freaked the fuck out. I’m sorry.”

An apology was all well and good, but it didn't sooth the ache inside or bridge the chasm between them now. He'd broken the understood promise. What would stop him from running again?

The mental snapshot of Travis' face when he jumped out of the SUV on his way back to her tugged at her guilt strings. He saved her when he didn't have to. Without him, she could already be dead. They were on a rollercoaster, being jerked around. She should cut him some slack, though a part of her also wanted him to grovel for her forgiveness.

She did understand his explanation. Hadn't she freaked out? The only difference was she hadn't left. Of course it was natural to panic, considering the depth of what they'd said to each other. But he could have talked to her. He could have suggested they slow down, take some time to think about it. Instead he made a decision for both of them and left. An apology was nice, but it didn't change what had happened.

"It's fine. I'm glad you're okay."

"Are you sure it's fine?"

"What am I supposed to say?"

"I don't know. I'm not—"

"You're not good at this stuff?" She cut the last bit of tape and stepped back.

"No, I'm not. I screwed up. I realize that. What can I do to fix it?"

"I don't know. You didn't even talk to me. You wouldn't give me a chance to understand or suggest something else—it was *this is how it's going to be*. I don't know if I want to be with someone who doesn't consider how I feel or what I'm thinking before deciding things with no input from me."

"You're right."

"And what's to say you wouldn't do the same thing again? What if this is just how you are? Here one minute and gone the next. That's not okay." She sucked in a breath and blinked her eyes.

No, no, no, no tears!

"I'm not used to anyone relying on me. My longest relationships have all been shorter than this. I fuck up, but I do learn from my mistakes."

She wiped under her eyes, hating how stoic Travis could be about this situation.

He left her.

Yeah, he came back, but he left her when she'd trusted him to be there.

She didn't know if she had it in her to trust like that again. This whole ordeal, the nightmares, she blindly allowed herself to pin all her trust, with no reservations, on this man. And he failed her.

Yes, it was crazy to expect anyone to be perfect, but when she needed him there with her, he was gone.

She had to get away from him.

"Where are you going?"

"Bathroom." She wrapped her arms around herself and strode out of the break room.

It was hard to make anything out with tears making her vision hazy, but she stumbled into the women's restroom and splashed water on her face. The cold chill of it woke her brain up a bit. By some miracle she was alone. There wasn't anyone around to hear her crying or pester her about what was wrong.

Travis was an amazing man, but he wasn't perfect. She'd needed more from him than he could offer, and it had broken their trust. Whose fault was that?

The bathroom door opened on a long, slow squeak.

Great. Just what she needed. A witness to her breakdown.

She glanced at the newcomer. Was it too much to hope it was Jade?

“What are you doing in here?” she blurted out.

Travis had his shirt back on and his frown in place. He flipped the bathroom lock and stalked toward her.

“You can’t be in here. This is a women’s restroom.” She jabbed her finger at his chest.

“You can’t run from me.”

“Yes, I can. You did.”

The air left her lungs.

She did not just say that.

Travis’ lips compressed into a tight line. She’d drawn blood with those words.

“I didn’t—I shouldn’t have said that.” She wrapped her arms around herself and stared at his chest.

“I deserved that. Tell me you want me gone and I’m gone.” He crossed his arms over his chest. Was it her imagination, or did she hear the tape pulling?

She opened her mouth and closed it.

The anguish of losing him all over again was an ache deep in her bones. She didn’t want it to be over with him, but they’d lost something special. They’d lost the trust. Her blind belief in him was gone.

How did she put her feelings into words? How did she begin to tell him?

“I don’t know that you’re not going to leave again. I can’t trust you when you say that. You left. You left me alone.” Sure, he had a life and a career that didn’t involve her, but for a few minutes they’d flirted with the idea. They’d wanted to make it work. Didn’t that mean something? Weren’t they something to each other?

Travis wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in his chest. She was angry with him, and she still loved him. He had more power over her than Daniel, more pull on her fears and hopes than the worst nightmare to ever walk Vegas.

“That was the worst decision of my life, darlin’. If I could go back and kick my own ass, I would. I don’t deserve another chance, you’re right.” He kissed the top of her head, and she clung to him, melting from the inside out.

The unspoken statement hung in the air so clear she thought she heard him say, *But I want a second chance.*

“Do you want me to leave?” he asked instead.

She’d never heard Travis sound hesitant or uncertain before, and she didn’t like it. If she stopped thinking about herself, she knew they were both going through something here. It wasn’t just about her.

Bliss leaned back and stared up at him. She wasn’t the only one scared of what was happening between them, she just chose to react in a different way.

“No.”

He squeezed her a bit tighter.

“I’m used to handbooks and officers barking orders. I’m going to screw up, but I promise no repeat issues.”

“I think I saw a *Relationships for Dummies* once.”

“I’ll get a copy. Do they have one for boyfriends?”

Oh... Her body flashed hot and cold.

“Too soon?” he asked.

“No, I’m just—processing.”

“I’m not used to people relying on me outside of the SEALs, but if you’ll give me another shot, I’ll do better.”

“It’s a two-way street. People in relationships,” the word and all its implications made her shiver, “rely on each other. I think it’s too soon for us to stick a label on this. Don’t argue with me, okay? You freaked out. I think it’s reasonable to say maybe we jumped in too fast.”

“I don’t know any other way.”

“I’m not going to change my mind.” He spoke with the determination of someone with conviction. A man with his mind set on one goal. Her.

“I hope you don’t.”

She slid her hands up his arms and over his shoulder, mindful of his wound. They were a messed up couple, but they had each other.

Travis tightened his grip around her waist and dropped his head.

“I could take you away from here,” he said.

“Where would we go?” She chuckled.

“Anywhere. Jamaica. The UK. Thailand. Somewhere far away.”

She pulled back a little and looked up at him. Oh, the fantasy of it. But it wouldn’t work.

“I’m not leaving, and I’m not giving up my life. It’s mine. And besides, if that happened you’d have longer to fly to get back to work, and I’d spend longer alone. That’s not going to work for me.”

“Fine. Then we’ll figure something else out. I just want to keep you safe.”

He wasn’t perfect, but he was hers. If he forgot that again, well, she’d have to put the Taser he gave her to another use.

3.

Daniel hunched down in the front seat of the sedan. Four cars in less than two hours. He was pretty sure he'd covered his tracks, but he couldn't shake the sense that he was being watched.

Damn feds.

He was getting too old for this.

No, he couldn't be old. Gods didn't get old. Right?

He gripped the steering wheel, but his hand slid off the smooth leather. A smear of blood stained the high-end material.

Shit. Was he bleeding again?

He should have never used the officer's gun. It was different than his six shooter. He'd missed because he'd gotten cocky, and now that son of a bitch was still alive.

His plan was screwed to hell. First he botched killing the fed attached to Bliss, then he took too long to get back to the safe house and snatch Bliss from under the cops' noses. The only thing left was to pick up his wife, but even that wasn't enough for him any longer.

He needed to get revenge.

* * * *

Found them.

Travis glanced at the message and instinctively squeezed Bliss' hand.

"What?" she mumbled.

"Come on." He pushed off the desk and strode toward the conference room. Since he wasn't technically on this case, he'd stayed out of the way. If Daniel were in the wilderness or hiding out in a hot zone, Travis knew what to do. Getting inside the head of a deranged serial killer and figuring out what fucked up kind of reasoning made the man tick was a place Travis didn't want to go.

Ryan glanced up from his phone as they entered. Travis pushed Bliss behind him in a vain attempt to shield her from the jar babies.

"Lali and Gavin found them," Ryan announced.

"Them, who?" Bliss glanced from Ryan to Travis.

"Your sister."

"Wendy? Are they okay?"

"They're fine. Still in CIA custody." Ryan pocketed his phone. "We can't make them do anything."

"No," Travis agreed.

"I bet she could." Connor thumbed at Bliss.

She squeezed Travis' hand, and he released the tight grip he had on her, swiping his thumb over her knuckles as an apology.

Five minutes. That's all Travis wanted with the guy. Somewhere he could punch his lights out.

"Let me talk to her," Bliss said.

Ryan held up his hand. "How sure are we that Daniel knows where Wendy is?"

"He's too detail-oriented. Wendy is his target. Bliss and Travis are bystanders in this. It's

the women he focuses on. Look.” Connor turned and gestured at one of the boards. Photographs of several dead blonde women lined the top of it, with coordinating information below. “The women were first. It’s always been about them. He had his accident, got well, and then the first woman went missing. The best we can tell, the transient murders were a year later, after his accident. The women represent who he really is, the men are his way of expressing his rage. It’s in how he disposes of the bodies. The women are left. He wants them found because they’re special. The men? They’re trash. He tosses them out. He’s going to zero in on Wendy, and there isn’t an army out there that will stop him.”

“What about what Wendy said? That he’s copying someone?” Bliss glanced between them, her nose scrunched up.

“If he’s copying someone, it’s obscure enough we can’t place them.” Jade sighed and glared at the floor.

“Where is Wendy?” Bliss turned to Travis. “You know I’m right. She’ll listen to me. Remember how scared she was?”

Connor glanced from Bliss to Travis.

“I’ll take you,” Connor said.

“I’m riding with you.” Travis wasn’t about to let her out of his sight.

“If we do that, we’re putting everything he wants in one location.” Ryan scrubbed his hand across his face.

“He hasn’t yet taken on more than two people.” Jade gestured to another list scrawled on a dry-erase board. “Ones and twos, he’ll attack one and use them to control the other. We saw that with Don, and preliminary reports on several identified remains support that theory. Don’t go off on your own and he won’t attack.”

“Let’s go then.” Connor grabbed his jacket.

Travis didn’t like it, but he was completely biased. Still, he grabbed Bliss’ jacket, borrowed another that wasn’t soaked with blood, and joined the small team heading to waylay Grayson’s hideout.

“Do I want to know how you guys found her?” Bliss asked. She sat between him and Dimitri, about as safe and protected as he could make her.

“The baby.” Travis stared out of the passenger window.

“Paul?”

“Yeah. He gets some kind of frou-frou fancy baby formula. Lali and Gavin looked for recent purchases. Then they followed the money.”

“Someone’s getting in trouble,” Connor said from the driver’s seat.

“Why?” Bliss’ brow wrinkled.

“Because a CIA agent in the field should be harder to identify. His guy nailed the fella doing the buying.” Connor thumbed at Travis.

“Oh. Then...if it was that easy for them to find Wendy, it’ll be just as easy for Daniel?”

Bliss wrapped her hand around his and squeezed. She was holding it together so well, it was hard to remember this was all new for her.

“Not as easy, but yeah, that’s what we’re afraid of. We know he’s got mad technical ability, but Lali was never able to track down where his stuff was kept or where the cameras transmitted to. He had another location, somewhere not at his house.” Connor merged onto the highway and headed south.

Twenty minutes later they pulled into another gated, upscale community. Connor flashed his badge to gain entry and navigated them around to a sprawling, three-story abode that was just

slightly less opulent than the home Grayson already owned.

A man trimming perfect hedges turned around and stared at the minivan. Security. They weren't that discreet. But they had protected Wendy from another kidnapping. Maybe that's what Bliss needed. Round-the-clock watchdogs, but that wasn't any way to live. They had to stop this, soon, before someone that wasn't Daniel got killed.

* * * *

Bliss pushed past the man stationed at the door and glanced around the sparkling marble entry.

"Bliss?" Wendy's voice echoed, intermingled with the sounds of a TV and other people speaking.

"Where are you?" Bliss peered into the two rooms on either side, but they were empty.

Wendy strode through a grandiose arch leading to the rest of the home, baby Paul perched on her hip. Bliss stared, blinked, and couldn't believe her eyes. It was a subtle transformation, something a casual observer or a stranger wouldn't notice, but Bliss did. It was Wendy's smile, the color of her cheeks, a slight bounce in her step.

"Oh, Bliss!" Wendy wrapped her free arm around Bliss' shoulders.

She hugged both mother and son, burying her face in Wendy's hair. Paul immediately took the opportunity to pull on Bliss' ponytail, but she couldn't care less.

"What are you doing here? Is everything okay?" Wendy pulled back and glanced from Bliss to Travis.

"What the hell is going on this time?" Grayson came down the stairs, followed by another man in a suit.

"Mr. Horton, I'm Supervisory Special Agent Connor Mullins." He extended his hand.

"Bliss?" Wendy pitched her voice low, watching the men grumble and growl at each other.

"Come in here." Bliss dragged Wendy into what she guessed would be someone's office someday.

"Have you seen Mom and Dad?"

"Yes, they're at the station."

"Oh, good. How are you?" Wendy cupped Bliss' cheek.

"I'm okay. You look—good."

"I feel good." She absently stroked Paul's face and let him grasp hold of her finger.

"Yeah?"

"It's like...I woke up." Wendy tilted her head to the side and stared at the floor. "It's almost like I've been asleep, and what happened—it made me realize I want to live. I don't want to be who I was letting myself be. It was awful and terrible and...I can barely sleep, but I feel like I've got my life back."

"That's good. That's really good." Bliss could hardly believe her ears. She'd never wish this experience on anyone, but if something good could come out of it, well, she'd focus on that.

"How about you? Travis is still around?"

"Yeah. I pretty much owe him my life." She followed Wendy's gaze to where Travis stood scowling at Connor and Grayson.

"You want to tell me what's going on between you two?"

How long had it been since Bliss talked guys with her sister? Ages.

"It's...complicated," she said.

“He’s not your usual type.” Wendy tilted her head to the side and smiled.

“No.” Bliss fidgeted and glanced away. Things with Travis were too uncertain to talk about yet. Not until she knew where they stood with each other.

“So what’s up? I’m guessing you didn’t stop by with a federal escort just to chat.”

“I wish I did.” She turned back to Wendy. “It’s Daniel. He tried to kill Travis earlier, and they know he killed a cop outside the safe house where I was. They think he already knows where this house is, and they want us to all go to the station. More people. More protection.”

“That’s why Mom and Dad are there?” Wendy’s eyes widened until they seemed to overtake her face.

“Yeah. They think he’s obsessed with you, but he won’t go up against a lot of people to get you.”

“There’s a lot of people here, though.” Wendy nodded out the window where they could see the superfluous lawn guy strolling around.

“Yeah, but they thought I was safe too, and someone died protecting me. Do you want that to happen here, too?”

“No.”

“Then come with us. Please?”

Wendy chewed her lip for a moment, clearly torn. And why wouldn’t she be? There was a small army stationed around her, keeping her safe. The rest of them didn’t have that.

“Okay. Here, hold Paul for me while I go talk Grayson into it, okay?” She handed the baby over and tweaked his nose a little.

Gestures like that were new. Before, Wendy hadn’t been able to look at, much less hold, her child. The change was remarkable. A single brush with death and she was ready to live again.

Bliss followed, staying on the edges of the group while Wendy spoke with her husband in low tones.

“No. No, we aren’t going to hide out with a baby at the police station. We can’t stay there forever. They need to do their job and catch this man.” Grayson slashed his hand in the air.

“If it was that easy, don’t you think they’d have done it by now?” Wendy held onto his other hand, her composure a thing of beauty. Just last week she’d have crumbled in on herself if someone raised their voice.

“I’m not putting you at risk.”

“Is it worth risking other people’s lives?”

“Going to the station isn’t going to fix anything. It’s not like he’ll walk in and hand himself over to the cops just because you’re there.”

“Then we bait him,” Bliss said.

All eyes turned on her. She latched onto Travis’s gaze.

“They can’t find him. We know he’s hurt. Why not bait him? We could go back to your house, set a...a...trap, right?”

From the tight set of Travis’ lips she had a pretty good idea she was onto something. If he didn’t like it, well, too bad. She didn’t want to go into Witness Protection, and she didn’t want to have to spend the rest of her life being afraid of Daniel Campbell.

“I’d do it,” Wendy said.

“No,” Grayson snapped.

“I don’t like it either,” Travis said.

“It could work,” Connor pitched his voice over Wendy and Grayson’s argument. “Set you up at their house. Stage the security and keep officers inside and out of sight. It could work. Nice

thinking.”

She didn’t believe for a second Connor hadn’t already considered this option. He winked at her and turned toward Travis and Grayson. Dimitri was already on the phone, probably calling Ryan to set it up.

“No, we’re not doing it, and that’s final,” Grayson said.

“I am.” Wendy drew herself up and stared at her husband as if she were ready to do battle. “You asked what you could do to help me. Do this. Help me make sure this man is behind bars and isn’t a threat to us any longer. Hiding will only make it worse.”

Grayson’s face twisted in anguish. “I just want to keep you safe.”

“I know.” Wendy leaned in and kissed her husband.

Bliss glanced at Travis, who was already staring at her. She could hear a similar argument coming from his, but with a lot fewer words.

It’s my choice. My future. My life.

4.

Wendy followed the police officer and Grayson into the house.

Their home.

She saw it with new eyes. When they moved in, she was so happy. Each piece of furniture, all the colors, she chose them with care. Looking at it now, she remembered all the reasons she loved it. Her husband had designed this especially for them. A home they could raise a family in, grow old together in.

Paul gurgled and waved at her from the car seat.

“Thank you, Priscilla. Set him there on the counter.” Wendy waved at the marble surface and waited for the housekeeper to put her things down.

“Glad you’re home.” Priscilla smiled.

“Me too. Give me a hug?” Wendy squeezed the young woman tightly. Oh, the things Priscilla had put up with over the last year. Wendy would have to bug Grayson about doing something nice for her.

“This is the last of it.” Bliss set the last of Paul’s things on the counter while the men tended to the luggage.

“You didn’t have to get that,” Wendy said. Bliss never listened. She was her big sister, always looking out for Wendy, even when she didn’t ask for it.

“I need something to do.” Bliss dug into the bag containing Paul’s formula and bottles, separating the clean from the dirty.

“You could take a break from managing my life and, I don’t know, go do something for yourself?” Wendy nodded at the big brute of a man stalking through the living room heading for the office where Grayson sequestered the federal agents.

“What? No.” Bliss’ frown was more telling than the way she wouldn’t look at him.

“What is going on with you two?” Wendy rocked Paul and leaned against the counter. This felt like old times. When they used to talk about each other, and not just how Wendy had managed to drag herself out of bed.

“Nothing.”

“Yeah right.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fine.” Wendy shrugged. “Oh, Priscilla, where’s the phone you picked up for Bliss?”

“You—what?” Bliss rolled her eyes.

“Hush. Mom and Dad will freak out if they can’t stalker-call you from across the house. It’s your same number, too. Don’t give me that whole *I want to pay for my own stuff* crap, either.”

“Fine. I love you, and you rock.” Bliss wrapped Wendy in a tight hug.

This was what she was living for. To love her sister, to see her family grow old together. Depression had almost stolen this from her, but now she was ready to fight for it again.

Wendy would also have to get Travis alone at some point and bully him into being nice to Bliss. She deserved someone who made her happy, and a life that didn’t involve looking after Wendy.

* * * *

“These are your tracking devices.” Connor handed the girls what looked to be small pins. “Fasten them inside your clothes, somewhere we won’t see them. Keep them on your person at all times, just in case.”

Just in case my ass.

Travis would make sure Bliss didn’t need it. He wouldn’t let her out of his sight, much less out of the house. This plan set his teeth on edge for a reason he couldn’t quite put his finger on. Something bad was going to happen, and he didn’t know how to stop it.

“Just in case—what?” Bliss turned the tracking device over in her hand.

“We want to be prepared for everything.” Connor folded his hands together. Ever since they’d stepped foot in the Hortons’ house, the agent had just about bent over backward to keep everyone happy.

“Nothing better happen,” Grayson muttered, staring daggers at Connor, then Travis, as if he had something to do with this.

If Travis had his way, Bliss would be across the globe already.

“Anything else?” Wendy glanced over her shoulder, toward the sounds of Paul crying. Since they were back at their home, most normal routines were being picked up and the house staff was back on the job, which meant half a dozen more people to keep an eye on.

“That should be it. Go give the little guy a bottle, eh?” Connor smiled.

The house had received a bit of a makeover in the last two hours. All of the windows had blinds and curtains drawn, whereas before they’d been left open to let in all the natural light. Clusters of officers and agents were set up to do their jobs, and the family moved in and around them all.

If they were lucky, one of the guards on the perimeter would take Daniel down before he ever set foot on the property. But that was a big if. Chances were, he’d run off, tail between his legs, and wait for a better time to strike. At least, that was what Travis would do.

Bliss followed Wendy into the main living space. She’d avoided him since proposing this plan of hers, and for good reason. He wanted to have a chat with her. This wasn’t an incredibly dangerous operation, but it was far more risk than he was comfortable with.

She needed time to trust him again, but he wasn’t good with giving her space to do that. Everything in him said to stay right by her side.

“Hey, sunshine.” Connor stopped in front of Travis, forcing him to look at the man. “Do a security walk-through with me.”

“Why?”

“Because your job involves a lot more protecting people than mine. I just find the killers after the act. Come with me.”

Travis glanced at Bliss one last time before following the agent into the foyer.

“We were able to disable the cameras, thanks to Lali. He should be blind as far as inside goes.”

“Is that still on?” He nodded at the security system panel.

“Yeah.”

“Good.” Travis pulled out his cell phone and texted the agent.

Could be hacked.

Connor glanced at his phone and flashed him a thumbs up.

I'll put Lali on it. Meet me in the office.

"I think it's time I headed out," Connor said. "See you in the morning."

"Later."

Travis watched Connor open and close the door, then flip the locks. There was no way to be sure if they were being observed, but at least they'd laid the foundation for making Daniel think otherwise.

"Need to tell everyone to stay away from the panels," Travis said once they were in the safety of the office, behind closed doors.

"Texting Ryan now. He'll talk to the officers and let the girls know. All right, so we've got a lot of people out there." He turned to the office wall they'd procured to organize the sting.

"There are five guys in the gates, roving around the community. We've got two guys in the pool house with eyes on us, and cops stationed near every point of entry, most of them within sight of another cop. What do you see?"

"Too many cops."

"If we went with less, Grayson would be out."

"Daniel's going to catch sight of them and we'll be stuck here twiddling our thumbs while he gets on the road. If he's smart."

"He is smart, but his obsession rules him."

"That's what I don't get about these guys. They can't kill if they're dead or caught."

"A lot of them don't think they'll get caught or they don't care. They can't control it."

"Which do you think Daniel is?"

"Neither. He thinks he's a god. He thinks he's above all this. His obsession will make him slip up. He can't leave Wendy behind, not after he abandoned his kids."

Travis shook his head. It made no sense to him, but it didn't have to. So long as he kept Bliss safe, everything else would work itself out.

"Hey guys." Grayson opened the office door and leaned in. "We're turning in."

"Good night," Connor said. "You should hit the hay. I'm going to find a couch somewhere and cat nap."

Travis nodded. He wasn't planning on sleeping anytime soon, but no one else needed to know that. The first floor was quiet, everyone out of sight and the lights turned down low. He did a circuit of the second floor and wound up outside the double doors leading into a guest room.

The light was still on inside, and he could hear the TV.

He still didn't know where he stood with Bliss, if she wanted him here or not. If she kicked him out, he'd stand watch in the hall outside her room all night long. Until Daniel was caught, or better yet, dead, he wasn't going anywhere. That thought gave him pause. Was it true? His gut said yes. That kind of conviction was hard to ignore.

Bliss meant something to him. And her safety was more important than anything else.

Travis knocked on the door and waited.

No one answered, but he heard the soft padding of feet across carpet.

"It's Travis," he said.

A few seconds later the lock on the door released and it opened. Bliss stepped back, leaning her head on the wood.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

"Please." She waved him in and closed the door behind him again.

At some point she'd showered and changed again into pajama pants and a long-sleeved shirt.

“How’s everything looking?” She gestured at the house and sat down on the bed, curling her legs under her.

“Good. If he shows up, we’ll catch him.” He did a slow walk around the room. If he had his way, she’d be away from all the windows, but that wasn’t how Grayson’s house was built.

“Will you sit down and stop prowling around?”

“Just checking things out.”

Did he sit on the bed, or give her space?

Bliss hugged a pillow to her chest and stared at the muted TV. Some holiday re-run was on, so at least she wasn’t watching the news.

Screw it.

Travis crossed to the bed, toed off his boots, and stretched his legs out. She’d let him in, so it was something.

“You still mad at me?” he asked. Might as well get right to the point.

“What?” She scrunched up her eyebrows and glanced at him. “No.”

“Then what’s up?” She’d practically avoided him since they’d crashed the Hortons’ CIA house.

“Did you see Wendy?”

“Yeah.”

“Not like—see her, see her, with your eyes. I mean—did you look at her?”

“She seems different.”

“Yeah. You know, I’ve been scared what all this would do to her, if she’d just give up and wither away, or live petrified of what would happen next, but...it’s like she’s woken up. She’s awake and fighting back. Grayson said she’s her old self again. But not, because she was never this...determined. It’s crazy that something so bad has done her so much good.”

“You’re—what? Scared that’s going to change?”

“A little. I think...mostly I’m at a loss for what to do with myself. I’ve always been Wendy’s keeper. She doesn’t need me right now. It’s kind of sad. But I guess family always needs each other, just the way she’ll need me is different now.”

Travis had no clue what he could offer to the conversation. His sister was more like a guy in a lot of ways. There wasn’t a problem a blow torch or a tire iron couldn’t fix. The rest of his family had communicated through fists and thrown objects. How a healthy family interacted was a mystery to him.

“I’m just...unsure of myself. I’ve always been needed, and now no one needs me.”

“What about me?”

“You don’t need me.”

She pushed his shoulder. He grabbed her hand before she could pull it away and tugged her closer. Need was a funny thing. He needed air to breathe, food to eat, and he needed her to fill the emptiness inside he’d always attributed to his inner demons.

He tucked her against his side and kissed the top of her head. She lifted her chin until she looked up at him, her dark brown gaze pulling him in, looking into those hidden parts of himself he didn’t like to think about.

“I think I do need you. I didn’t realize how much until I walked away. I thought I was doing you a favor, that it was the right thing to do, but it wasn’t. I was stupid.”

“I’m not going to argue with you there.” She poked his chest and smiled.

Warmth unfurled in his chest. It was strange, and not quite uncomfortable, just different.

“You think we can try this again? And I mean more than wait and see how things turn out.”

He'd never wanted something so bad before. If she said no, he didn't know if he could let her go.

5.

Travis held his breath, waiting for Bliss' answer. Sweat dampened his palms, along his hairline and down his spine.

"This?" she asked.

"Us."

She spread her hand out against his chest, over his heart, but didn't speak.

"You said I'd broken your trust." He ran a finger through her silky hair. He'd never touched anything so soft or sleek before.

"You did, but you came back. I shouldn't have put you on the spot like that. That was unfair. I mean, everything you've told me about yourself..."

"That I'm a fuck up?"

"No." This time she slapped his thigh. "You're being difficult."

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. She made him smile. He liked himself when he was around her.

"I know what I am. I know what my strengths and weaknesses are. I'm not a good man, Bliss. A good man would let you make up your own mind, but I can't. I need you. It's not something I'm used to. If you need time I'll try to be patient, but I'm not good at it."

"How exactly do you plan on making up my mind for me?"

"I have a couple ideas." He smiled through the nerves. Bliss could tell him to fuck off, and he'd go. Not far, but enough to give her space.

"What is it we're trying to decide?"

There it was, that inner spark, the bit of mischief twinkling in her eyes again.

"That I'm your boyfriend." It was silly and maybe juvenile, but part of him needed more from her.

"Then you'd better get to work because I just don't know yet..."

She was playing with him. Whatever breach of trust he'd made wasn't so big that she wasn't willing to give him another chance. He had to make the most of it. Show her he could be different, that they were right for each other.

Travis scooted off the bed.

He didn't have a plan. Hell, he didn't really know what he was doing. He'd never wanted to have a girl stay part of his life before, but she was different. This whole situation with her was new.

The bags were an option. She had quite the collection, and he was warming up to her brand of fun in bed. There were a couple more items he'd glimpsed they hadn't used yet, but he didn't want a gimmick or anything between them. She had to want him. Just him. When it came down to it, that was all he had to offer her.

He circled the bed and held out his hand. She glanced from it to his face and back before placing her hand in his. He pulled her to her feet next to the bed.

No one had ever looked at him the way she did. There was lust there, but also more. Things he didn't have names for and had never allowed himself to feel for another human being.

He cupped the back of her head, relishing the way her hair felt between his fingers. So soft and smooth. She lifted her hands and grasped his forearms, her gaze never leaving his. It was all out there in the open. He didn't need to hear the words to know the depth of her feelings for him.

Or that he'd hurt her. He could see it in her eyes. How much she trusted him, how he'd hurt her, the desire, and love. It wasn't a secret.

He pressed his lips to hers and her body softened against him. She tasted like Christmas morning. Everything good and happy he'd only seen on TV. He pulled her closer, their knees bumping and bodies brushing. She smiled against his mouth and slid her hands up to his shoulders.

Travis leaned back and tugged her thermal top up and off, tossing it onto the floor. Bliss lowered her arms and tried to cover herself in a playful, coy act he wasn't buying. He pushed her hands aside and cupped her full breasts, squeezing them just a bit. She arched her back, thrusting her chest forward. Her nipples were stiff points prodding his palms. Bliss tipped her chin back, offering her mouth for a kiss he couldn't give her.

Not yet, at least.

He hooked his thumbs into her pajama pants and drew them over her hips. This time her panties were a string and scrap of fabric over her mound. He eased those down her legs, leaving her in nothing at all.

His hands shook with a need so intense, so foreign, he thought he might burn up before they'd begun. Was this how it was for her, too? Was this what love did to people, drove them fuck-all crazy?

The need for her was all-consuming, to the point he had to wonder if he was safe to be around.

"Travis?" She slid her hands up his chest, worry etched into her features.

"I'm fine." He blew out a breath.

He'd never hurt her, but neither did he have to be careful about his desire. She wasn't a fragile doll.

Travis pushed her shoulders and she slowly fell back onto the mattress, her legs hanging off the side. He enjoyed the way her breasts jiggled, how she chuckled and acted without abandon. She might not know it, but she didn't need him. Not for anything. He, on the other hand, couldn't survive without her. Not after he'd seen what life could be like. What it was supposed to be like.

He knelt over her, letting his hands rove across her body, her curves. She twined her arms around his neck and kissed him, pulling him down on top of her until she got a handful of his shirt and pulled it up. He let her rob him of his shirt. His shoulder didn't even ache anymore. That, or he was too distracted to care.

Travis slid off the bed and onto his knees, a plan for seduction forming in his head. He pushed her legs apart and slid his hands under her ass, dragging her to the very edge of the bed. She yelped and kicked her leg out. He pushed her knee over his shoulder, which had the added bonus of opening her wider for him. Moisture glinted off her damp skin.

She was wet for him.

He spread her open and licked the length of her slit. The taste of her hit the back of his mouth, and his dick throbbed. Bliss' back arched, and she groaned. He slid a finger deep inside her and felt her grow even wetter. Just for him.

"Travis." She moaned. "Travis, I need you inside me now."

"In a minute."

"No, now." She pulled on his hand, her other hand in his hair.

He considered shaking her off, but why deny her what they both wanted?

Travis let Bliss guide him up her body until they were both on the bed. She shoved her hands inside his jeans. His hips bucked and his vision blurred when her hot little hands wrapped

around his cock.

“God damn,” he muttered.

She pumped him, root to tip, her thumb swiping over the head, slicking the moisture over his flesh. He flexed into her hold, driving deeper into her grasp, loving the feel of her on him. His jeans slid down his hips, getting caught at the top of his thighs.

Bliss hooked her leg over his hip and the head of his cock met her wet folds.

Christ, yes, this was what he wanted, to pump into her slick, wet heat until she screamed. She lifted her hips, pressing against him. Her body yielded to his, as nature intended. He pulled back, though every fiber of his body said to thrust into her.

“Condom,” he got out from between clenched teeth.

She groaned and released her hold on him, falling back on the bed.

Travis stood and shed the rest of his clothing. He flipped open his wallet...and froze.

Fuck.

“I...don’t have any.”

“My bag.” She scampered off the bed before he could get there.

God love a prepared woman. He followed her across the room to the dresser, watching her in the mirror.

Bliss fished a foil packet out of the side compartment and ripped it open. He made a grab for it, but she retreated, clutching it to her chest.

“Let me,” she said.

“Do it.” He leaned against the dresser, gripping the edges with both hands.

She grinned at him and wrapped her hands around his cock. Her fingers fumbled with the latex at first, but she rolled it on him with ease.

The small, shy smile was all for him.

He’d meant to be gentle, to focus on what she wanted, but other ideas were taking root, and he needed her now. Right now.

He grasped a handful of her ass with one hand and kissed her. She fell forward against his chest, clutching at his arms. He turned, breaking the kiss and pushing her up against the dresser. The artful mirror hanging on the wall gave him an excellent view of her swaying breasts, her swollen lips, and what lust did to her face.

Bliss’ reflection watched him, her face flushed and eyes dilated with lust. She braced her hands against the heavy piece of furniture, as if daring him to do every wicked thing to her. He gripped her hips and pushed a knee between her legs, making room for himself.

He’d intended to be gentler, but she seemed determined to drive him crazy.

She thrust her hips back, grinding against him. Her face was flushed now, her cheeks pink, and her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

So damn sexy.

Travis grasped his cock and passed it through her folds, coating himself with her arousal. Her heat soaked into him until he felt it in his toes. Something knocked around in his chest, big and important, but now wasn’t the time for that.

He thrust, burying himself inside of her. Bliss dropped to her elbows, pushing back on him, and moaned. He sucked in a breath as he sank a few inches deeper. Her body quivered around him, stretching, adjusting to his girth and this moment. It was an intense sensation, not just because it was sex and he wanted her, but because he loved her.

The knowledge didn’t bring on the same kind of panic it had that morning. He loved her, and that changed everything. No matter what, he would always love her.

Travis smoothed his hands up her thighs to her hips. Her muscles tensed under his palms and she rocked back against him.

She wanted him to move?

He grinned and thrust again, driving into her so hard she went up on her tiptoes. Her mouth opened on a silent shout, and her pussy constricted around him.

She liked it.

He pulled her hips, grinding their bodies together. Her breathing hitched and her eyes closed.

“Oh, yes,” she whispered.

He rocked into her. The drawers rattled and something fell onto the carpet, but it didn’t matter. Bliss opened her eyes and their gazes locked. She rolled her hips, and this time, when he pulled most of the way out, she moved with him. Their bodies met in a wet slap of flesh.

“Yes,” she said louder.

He pushed her pelvis up against the dresser to keep her right where he wanted her and thrust, again and again. Bliss moaned and dropped her head forward. He was vaguely aware of other things falling off the dresser, the way it bumped against the wall, but the only thing that mattered was the feel of Bliss around him. The joining of their bodies.

This was the woman he loved.

He wasn’t good enough for her, but damn it, she was in every fiber of his being.

A tingling sensation started at the base of his spine. He was going to come so hard, but she had to orgasm first.

Travis covered her left hand with his, leaning over her. He flexed his hips, driving into her with short, powerful strokes. Her fingers twined with his, squeezing tight.

He reached around her and cupped her breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers. She thrust her chest into his hand and her head back onto his shoulder.

“Travis.” His name became a hiss as he plucked the stiff bud.

“Come on, darlin’,” he said into her ear.

“Travis.” Her voice hitched at the end and she squeezed his hand even tighter.

Bliss made some sort of sound and her body tensed, rippling with pleasure. Her mouth worked silently, her head tossing back and forth on his shoulder.

He let go of the tenuous hold of control and surged into her. Bliss leaned over the dresser, up on her tiptoes while he pumped in and out of her body, losing himself in her sighs, her scent, everything about her. She made him whole in a way he’d never experienced before.

His balls drew up, and the wave of release swept up through his body. He thrust once, twice more, and then leaned over her, burying his face in Bliss’ hair and squeezing her to his chest while the tremors ceased.

Now, all he had to do was convince her to let him stay. To give him a second chance, and to love him. Another screw up, and he’d lose her. He wasn’t willing to make that mistake again.

Travis kissed her shoulder and straightened. He missed the feel of being inside of her immediately, but if they worked things out, maybe they could be together. And not in the temporary sense.

Bliss remained slouched over the dresser, eyes closed and her body glistening with a light sheen of perspiration.

She was perfect.

He bent and picked her up. This time she didn’t squawk in protest, though she did tense up for a second.

“Your shoulder,” she mumbled.

“Flesh wound.”

He carried her to the bed and lay down with her, too spent to do more than hold her for the moment. What they shared was more than an orgasm and a couple hot, sweaty moments. It ran deeper than that. At least it still did on his side. He had to hope her feelings for him hadn’t changed, though maybe he was reading into it. He didn’t have a lot of experience when it came to loving someone.

“Hm, I still don’t know.” She traced shapes against his chest.

He liked the sleepy, content smile. He was pretty sure before he’d freaked out that she’d been close to telling him she loved him. Looking at her now, he didn’t think much had changed.

“Yes you do. You don’t want to admit it yet.” He traced her bottom lip.

“Oh, really?” She propped her head in her hand and stared down at him, that mischievous light shining out from inside. Nothing could snuff that out, not even a serial killer. She’d never been more beautiful to him. “What decision have I come to, then?”

Either he put it all out on the line, or he waited and bided his time.

Screw it.

He was all in this time.

“You love me.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. Shit. Could he be wrong?

He took a deep breath and pressed on. Might as well lay it all out there for her. “Or, you think you might love me. Either way, I’ve decided I’m in love with you, so you should get on board with the idea.”

“Bossy.” She slapped his stomach, but not hard enough to acknowledge. “That’s not nice.”

“It’s the truth.” He grabbed her hand and kissed it.

“Wait—you’re serious?” She sat up and blinked down at him, her mouth hanging open.

“I’m not good at joking around.” He clenched the hand curled under his head into a fist. Was this a mistake? Should he have kept that to himself?

“Travis—you’re serious?”

“Yes. I’m serious. I know I screwed up, but I panicked. I think I had to so I would realize what I you meant to me.”

“I thought we just said we should take things slower.”

“That was your suggestion. I never agreed to it.”

“You love me?”

“That’s what I said.”

“I...don’t know what to say.”

She covered her mouth with one hand and her eyes got that glossy, I’m-about-to-cry look. Shit. He’d screwed up.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said and glanced at the bathroom. How long could he spend cleaning up?

Bliss leaned down and cupped his face, forcing him to look at her. Her dark hair brushed his jaw and she stared deep into his eyes.

“I think I love you, too,” she said.

* * * *

The hours dragged on, one by one, but he was patient. Nothing good ever came from spur of

the moment decision-making. His patience and planning were why he was the best.

The cops made another round through the gated community. In the east, the sun started its trek across the sky. Soon, it would begin.

No one glanced twice at the housekeeper's car parked in the neighbor's shed. He timed their arrival to coincide with a gap in the security sweep. This plan was perfect. Daniel was rather proud of this one. He'd never come so close to law enforcement before. It was a little disappointing they were so bad, but then he wasn't a common criminal. He was more than human.

A hollow thud broke the stillness.

"Please, he's scared," Priscilla whispered.

"He's alive. Would you rather him dead?"

"No."

"Then wait a while longer. Remember, you do your part, your son lives." He jabbed the gun into Priscilla's ribs.

"Please don't hurt my baby." She hunched over in the driver's seat.

"Shut up. Stop crying."

Damn woman was going to blow this whole thing by bawling. It was fucking frustrating that his entire plan hinged on one worthless creature playing her part. Hopefully the cops chalked her odd behavior up to nerves. Out on the street, the same late model truck rolled by. Again.

"Go on, before anyone else wakes up."

Priscilla started the car and eased it around into the alley behind the expensive homes. They went about fifty feet before turning into the utility entrance of the house everyone was watching.

Just a few more minutes, and Wendy would be his.

6.

Wendy rinsed out the bottle and stuck her tongue out at Paul, who was already drifting off to sleep.

The house was quiet, caught in the drowsy hours between when most people were asleep and when they headed out for their day. It was the perfect time to get a few things done before everyone woke up.

She opened the fridge and frowned. They had practically nothing to feed the masses currently residing in her home. Priscilla was picking up the groceries, but Wendy hadn't made a list of everything she wanted between all the activity last night.

"Utility room door open," the security system announced.

Wendy turned and listened to the light footsteps and crinkling plastic.

"Priscilla! You're early. Here, let me help." She rushed to the housekeeper's side and took one of the heavy bags.

It felt good to be the woman of the house again, with things to do and people to feed. When was the last time she'd cooked a meal that didn't need to be microwaved?

"Is there more, or is this it?" She took a few cold items out of the bag and placed them in the fridge.

"There's a lot more still out in the car. I can get it."

"Don't be silly. I'm going stir-crazy stuck in here."

Plus, poor Priscilla was looking a little worn.

"You don't have to," she said again.

"Come on. Let's go." Wendy grabbed her coat from where she'd tossed it over the back of one of the stools last night. She glanced at the officer sitting silent sentinel on the sofa, his phone pressed to his ear. The officer had spent most of the morning trying to get a hold of his ex-wife and children. Wendy's heart went out to him. "Mind watching him for a minute? He's falling asleep, so he shouldn't bother you."

"Not at all, ma'am."

"Thanks. We'll just be a moment."

"Really, you should stay in here." Priscilla was showing her overprotective streak, which was one of the reasons she was so valuable to their family.

"Don't be silly. Come on."

Wendy exited through the utility room and zipped up her coat.

"How's Carlos?" she asked.

"He's under the weather. Are you still wearing those tracking things?"

Ah, a sick child. Wendy had seen Priscilla come to work exhausted and worn out after dealing with her stubborn child. The boy was going to be a hard-headed man someday.

"Grayson made me sleep with that silly thing on." She wrinkled her nose. The device might be small, but she was going to have a bruise of it imprinted on her skin. "Maybe you should take the day off, take care of him?"

They walked around to the second driveway designated for staff and utility vehicles. Priscilla's sedan was parked on the far side of the slab that could accommodate up to three vehicles.

That was odd, but then again, who knew where the cop cars were and when?

Wendy circled around to the back of the car and waited for Priscilla to open the trunk.

"I'm sorry, miss."

"What?"

Priscilla stood a few feet away, hands down at her side and fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

The trunk rose on well-oiled hinges.

"What's wrong?" Wendy glanced at the trunk at the same moment she heard a car door open.

Carlos stared up at her, tape wrapped around his mouth, his eyes open wide.

"Wendy, so nice to see you again." Daniel pointed a gun at her and smiled.

"Oh, my God." Wendy gulped, her whole body freezing.

This wasn't supposed to happen. She was at home. Safe. There were dozens of cops all around.

It had to be a dream. She was asleep in her bed. Any moment now Grayson would shake her awake.

"Get in the car, Wendy."

She took a step back and ran into Priscilla, who mumbled the same words over and over again, "I'm sorry."

Wendy wasn't getting in that car. She wasn't going back to that cave. She couldn't.

She sucked in a deep breath.

Daniel moved first. He grabbed Wendy with his left hand, jerking her against him.

"Please, you said you wouldn't hurt anyone," Priscilla said. She was full-on crying now, her hands outstretched toward Daniel.

Run! Run, Wendy wanted to tell her, but her voice was frozen.

"Priscilla—"

Daniel shifted and pushed her up against the car. She caught a glimpse of him lunging at Priscilla before Wendy squeezed her eyes shut. That gurgling sound, it brought back blood-soaked memories of what he'd done to the two men right in front of her.

Oh God, that was Priscilla...

* * * *

Bliss jogged down the stairs. She couldn't stop smiling. Her sister was going to have a lot of questions. She was pretty sure the whole house had heard them last night. But first, she needed food. She'd always known sex burned calories, but after last night and this morning she might waste away if she didn't get something in her soon.

An officer stationed in the den had the TV on, watching the morning news. It was otherwise quiet and peaceful. Two bags of groceries, and Paul, sat on the kitchen counter.

That was...odd.

She paused and listened for sounds from the pantry or maybe the bathroom. It was totally out of character for Priscilla to leave Paul unattended. When the sitting service wasn't there, the baby's care usually fell to the housekeeper, and she took her job very seriously.

"Wendy? Priscilla?"

"They're carrying in the groceries," the officer said without glancing her way.

"What's wrong?" Travis said right behind her.

Bliss shook her head and looked up at Travis. Something was wrong. Really wrong.

"Priscilla wouldn't let Wendy set foot out of the house, not after that talk with Ryan yesterday."

And she wouldn't leave Paul sitting on a kitchen counter."

"How long ago did they leave?" Travis asked. He was already reaching for his gun, which she hadn't even noticed.

The officer sat forward and frowned at his wrist watch.

"Five minutes ago?" he said.

"Shit."

Bliss sprinted for the utility room door, but Travis caught her, jerking her back against his chest.

"Stop. Stay here." He pushed her into the kitchen as the officer slid past. Both men were armed and on edge by the time they exited through the utility room door.

Logically, she understood why she should be inside the house. If she went out there, she was at risk. But what if Wendy was gone?

Screw this, they were not going out there without her. It was her sister who was in trouble.

She followed maybe a dozen feet behind the men. Every fiber of her body was on alert. The breeze whipped her hair around her head, making it hard to see.

"God damn it," Travis said, then rushed ahead of them.

"We have a body at the utility entrance," the officer radioed.

A body?

Bliss stumbled to a stop at the corner of the storage shed. She reached out and braced a hand on the building, gasping for air, unable to look away from the scene.

Travis knelt next to Priscilla's prone body. Her limbs were twisted at an unnatural angle, as if she had fallen and not tried to get up or protect herself. A puddle of dark liquid spread out around her on the concrete.

"Hang in there. Priscilla? Look at me," Travis said.

She was alive?

Bliss sprinted the last couple of steps and went to her knees next to Travis. Her stomach revolted at the sight of the ugly, thick slash across her throat and up the side of her face.

"Oh, my God, Priscilla." Bliss sobbed, horrified and sickened by the sight. Priscilla might be their housekeeper, but she was also a friend. Someone who loved and cared for their family.

Travis grabbed Bliss' hand and put it in Priscilla's.

"Hang in there, we're here with you," Travis said. He smoothed her hair out of her face and never once shied away from looking at her.

Priscilla opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"No, no, don't try to talk," Bliss said. She leaned down, just as close as Travis. "We're getting help, okay? Hang on."

She glanced at Travis, but his face was grim.

Where was the help? Why weren't they there yet?

"Look at her," he mumbled.

Bliss stared down at Priscilla. Her eyes were dilated, the pupils huge. The grip on Bliss' hand went loose and a breath hissed from between Priscilla's lips.

Was that...?

Bliss sat in shocked silence for several seconds.

Oh God, she was dead.

Priscilla was dead.

And Wendy was gone.

Bliss sat down hard and stared at her hand. Priscilla's blood stained her fingers.

“Why did you do that?” she said. “She needed help.”

“That’s a couple pints of blood. He didn’t miss her throat this time like he did with Don. He made sure to kill her. At least she didn’t die alone, Bliss. That’s something.”

“What the fucking hell?” Connor stood over them wearing track pants and a hoodie. “Who was watching those cameras?”

Three other officers circled them, guns out.

A radio crackled.

“They’ve got a visual,” one announced.

Officers and agents ran this way and that, but Bliss continued to sit there, staring at another casualty of Daniel Campbell’s obsession.

“Bliss, you need to get inside.” Travis grasped her by the shoulders.

“But what about Priscilla?” She blinked up at him.

“Think about Paul right now, okay?”

How could she, when Wendy was gone again?

“What’s going to happen to Priscilla? She has a son.” She let Travis pull her to her feet. She glanced over her shoulder, unable to stop looking at Priscilla, willing the woman to get up. But she didn’t.

“They’ll call the coroner to come pick her up. We need to move so the cops can do their job.”

He guided her inside and stood guard while she washed her hands in the kitchen sink. The house was abuzz with activity now. Officers strode back and forth, agents on the phone.

“Bliss—we just heard.” Her mother and father rushed into the kitchen, elbowing Travis out of the way and surrounding her. They meant to be comforting, but their nearness suffocated her.

“They’re following him now,” Travis said.

“You should leave,” Bliss’ father said, scowling at Travis.

“What good are you?” Bliss’ mother wheeled on him. “You were supposed to keep my daughter safe. Now she’s gone again, because you couldn’t protect her.”

“Mom, Mom.” Bliss held onto her mother, wrapping her arms around her. “It’s not Travis’ fault.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll go.” Travis backed away.

The man Bliss loved. This was a shit way of introducing them.

Paul chose that moment to let out a big wail.

“Oh, I know, honey, I know.” Mom scooped Paul out of his carrier and cradled him to her chest.

Wendy was gone. Right out from under their noses.

7.

Wendy huddled in the back seat of yet another car. She'd lost count around the second or third. Time blurred together. She had no idea where they were, except she could still see the casinos in the distance. All she knew was that Carlos was in the trunk, safe and unhurt.

What had Priscilla done? What had he done to her?

"We're here," Daniel announced.

He pulled the car under a metal carport that stretched several yards to her left. The buildings around them were warehouses, big metal structures. The street was empty of traffic or pedestrians, just them. No one to cry out to for help or report them to the cops.

She clutched her bound hands to her chest. The tracker was still there, attached to her bra strap. Priscilla had known. She'd even asked, ensuring the device was on her.

Wendy couldn't fault Priscilla for what she'd done. If Daniel threatened her family, Wendy knew the lengths to which she was willing to go to keep them safe.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Here."

"What about Carlos?"

"Don't fucking worry about him." Rage laced his voice.

She flinched away, pressing her back against the door.

"Don't do that, don't be afraid." His tone gentled, and he reached for her, his hands careful as he patted her arm and then her shoulder. "Come here. Come here. I had to do it, so we could be together. You were made for me. This is how it's supposed to be."

"What are you going to do to me?" She couldn't stop the tears. Hadn't she survived this once? She didn't want to go back there. Not to that cave painted with death.

"First, I've got to get your sister, and then we can leave. Go anywhere. I've got it all figured out. You'll see."

"No," Wendy blurted. Not her sister. Not Bliss. She'd given up so much of her life for Wendy. If he called her, Bliss would come. It was who she was. Who she'd always been.

This time though, this time Wendy would save her. They had the same blood, the same genetics. She could do this. She could save her sister. The cops would find her first, right? That's what the tracker was for. She just needed to hang on a little longer and keep him from making contact with Bliss.

Daniel's face twisted into something ugly, almost inhuman.

Wendy's body went cold, and tremors shook her hands. Some inborn sense kicked in. She had to keep him happy. Convince him all he needed was her. It's what Bliss would do.

"I mean, why do we need her? Can't," she swallowed down the bile, "can't it just be us?"

His mouth spread into something like a smile. He reached for her, cupping her cheek in his rough hand. She clenched her fists tighter to keep from cringing away from him.

This time she would be strong.

"She doesn't matter, but I can't let her live. Just a little while longer, and then we can be happy, together."

"Why does she matter? Can't we go now?"

"She dies," he snapped and dropped the compassionate act. "Out of the car. Now."

"Okay. Okay."

A thump from the trunk reminded her that she wasn't his only victim.

"What about Carlos?" she asked. They couldn't leave him behind, could they? Should she keep her mouth shut and hope the authorities found the car?

"Get him out." Daniel popped the lock on the trunk and pushed up out of his seat, leaving her to scramble after him.

Wendy circled the car, but froze once she reached the tail light. Daniel had the gun out, pointed at the trunk. Her body shook uncontrollably, either from the cold or the fear, she didn't know which.

Be brave.

Be more like Bliss.

"What's that for?" she asked. Wasn't she cooperating?

"The kid's trouble. Get him out."

Wendy lifted the trunk and forced herself to smile at Carlos. Did he know his mother was dead? He had every right to hate her because of this. It was her fault. If Daniel weren't obsessed with her, Priscilla would still be alive.

Carlos stared up at her, his eyes big and red. There was an ugly bump on the side of his head. The duct tape around his hands and face was twisted and mangled, but hadn't torn. Yet. He was doing his best to get free. The kid was a fighter. Priscilla would be proud.

"Hey, Carlos, it's okay." She reached for his hands and held them for a second, willing him to believe her. "It's all going to be okay. Just come with me."

Please let it be okay. Please?

Wendy helped the kid out of the trunk. Like his mom, Carlos was a strong-willed personality with lots of smarts. Grayson didn't know that Wendy had pushed Priscilla to use their address so Carlos could go to a better school district. The only thing that mattered to Priscilla was giving her son the opportunities in life she never had. Now she was gone, and who would look out for Carlos?

"Walk," Daniel barked.

"Where are we going?" Wendy wrapped an arm around Carlos and hustled him away from Daniel.

"Keep walking."

"Is it really necessary to point a gun at us?"

"Wendy, Wendy, you're so sweet and kind. You'll make a good mother, but you forget you aren't my first wife. I've had others like you. I'm not stupid. You don't love me yet, but you will. You will." He picked up his pace and pushed the barrel of his gun against the back of Carlos' head. "You do as I say, or I'll kill him, understand?"

"Oh, God. Oh my God." She swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes. Yes, I understand."

She shook from head to toe, so much that it was hard to walk. Carlos stared straight ahead, supporting her as they huddled together and stumbled forward.

Wendy wasn't strong enough for this. She wasn't Bliss. She couldn't do this.

* * * *

Travis stalked down the driveway. Ryan, Connor, and Jade stood in a circle with a few uniformed officers. The frigid breeze sliced through his clothes, but it was nothing compared to the damning looks from Bliss' parents.

It wasn't his fault eyes hadn't been on the perimeter, or that the house staff wasn't being

watched, but he still should have known. If he were dealing with a client under threat, it's the kind of thing he'd expect to happen. But this was a deranged serial killer with a fucked up god complex, and most of Travis' rules were out the window.

"Hey Travis. How's the family?" Connor asked.

"Pissed as hell. What the fuck happened?"

"Check those locations and report back to us," Ryan said to the uniformed officers.

The cops got in their cars and zoomed off, no doubt under pressure to wrap this up. No one wanted this kind of trouble in a major tourist destination on New Year's. Shit. The days had zoomed by for him. He hadn't realized what day it was.

"Jade and I are going to the station to coordinate with the officers there. The rest of you, keep your phones on. When he makes a move, be ready to get there."

"Yes, sir," Connor said.

Travis didn't reply. He wasn't under the orders of the FBI, but for now he was going to play by their rules. Even if their rules had gotten Wendy kidnapped. Again.

Jade and Ryan climbed into one of several black SUVs and headed out after the police, leaving Travis and Connor alone on the drive, save for the cops stationed at either end of the street.

"Have they figured out what happened and how they lost him with Wendy wearing a tracker?"

"One thing at a time, mate." Connor held up his hand and sighed. "Appears Daniel got to Priscilla through her son, Carlos. Neighbors said they saw a man with him yesterday. The build fits Daniel, though none of them saw his face. Best guess is he got her when she went home last night and set this up."

"Where's the kid?" Travis asked.

"No clue. Daniel has no problem with violence toward men and women, but what he did to his children wasn't about torture or killing, it was about preserving them. I don't think he means to kill Carlos. He's just a tool, but I wouldn't bet on that. Daniel's under a lot of pressure right now, and he could do a lot of things we wouldn't expect him to do."

"Yeah. Yeah." Travis nodded. At this point all they were doing was pointless talking. "What about the tracker?"

"It's active, but it's on a delay. We're about half an hour behind him."

"Are you fucking serious?"

"Man, we don't have your resources. We're borrowing Vegas PD tech here. This is a government budget we're playing with, and we have the best tools available to us."

"You should have said something."

"And what? Your guys cost money Uncle Sam isn't going to foot the bill for, and we both know your boss don't do charity work. How the hell you're still here is beyond me."

Travis had ignored the two calls from his boss. If it weren't the holidays, his ass would have been called home already. The shit was going to hit the fan once everyone was back from the break, and then he'd pay for this. For now though, he was on his own time and dime. That still didn't mean they couldn't have found a way to get real-time tracking devices on the girls. At least Bliss was still here.

"My balls are about to freeze off. You mind?" Connor gestured at the other SUV. "I want to start driving his trail. It'll get us closer to him the next time we get a read on our girl."

Travis stalked to the truck and climbed in. He hated this whole situation. Usually, he was the guy brought in to finish a job like this, and he had no idea how to end it. They weren't dealing

with anyone remotely like what he was used to. But Daniel Campbell needed to be put down. The question was when.

* * * *

Bliss sat on her bed, Paul cradled against her chest. Everyone was downstairs, yelling and blaming each other. She couldn't handle it anymore. Even Travis was gone, vanished to some far corner of the house where her mother couldn't heap the blame on him. She didn't fault him for getting out of the way, but she wished she knew where he was. Even if he was out looking for Wendy. But she didn't have his number programmed into her new phone yet. Next time she saw him, it was the first thing she was going to do.

Everything in the last twenty-four hours was just more weird and surreal than the last week. Except for last night.

Last night had been perfect.

Travis loved her.

She blew out a breath.

He loved her, and he meant it.

It was crazy and totally out of character for her to jump into a relationship like this, but maybe she'd been waiting for him all along. There was no rhyme or reason to why she loved him over other guys she dated—she just did. She could totally list out the reasons why she loved him, but it was more than how he listened to her when she made a point, counted her opinion about things, or what they had in common. It was how she felt about him. How he made her feel. The way he understood her.

When all this ended, if—when—they brought Wendy home and Daniel went to jail, they had some serious stuff to sort out. She wasn't willing to be apart from Travis for longer than necessary. Maybe she needed to think about moving. Blush Shoppe had a handful of remote employees. She might take a pay cut, since she couldn't manage the in-person client meetings, but there was no reason she had to be in Vegas.

Was she serious?

Moving meant being away from Wendy and Paul and her parents. If Wendy was out of the depression then maybe...but who would be there for her in the future? Could Bliss live the rest of her life revolving around her little sister?

Travis had called her on it, and he was right. As much as she loved Wendy, Bliss couldn't live her life for Wendy. If moving was what was right for Bliss, she'd do it. And Wendy would understand. Bliss hoped she would understand.

She hugged little Paul closer and kissed his sleepy face. Wouldn't it be nice to be a baby right about now? He had no idea there was anything wrong. Not a care in the world. Whereas, once again, Bliss was at a loss for what to do next.

Her phone rang, clattering like an old telephone. She jumped, unaccustomed to the default ring tone.

Unknown Number.

There were a lot of people involved in the search for her sister. Maybe someone needed to get a hold of her?

"Hello?"

"Bliss—"

"Wendy?" Disbelief. Hope. Dread. A dozen different emotions pounded at her from all

sides.

8.

“Wendy, where are you? I’ll come get you.”

“Don’t say anything. Don’t tell anyone about this call.” Wendy sounded frantic as she breathed into the phone.

“What? Why? Are you still with Daniel? Did you get away?”

“No—”

“Give me the phone,” a man said in the background.

Daniel.

Wendy hadn’t gotten away. She was still a prisoner.

Bliss clutched Paul to her chest and stared at the bedspread.

Something bad was going to happen, and she couldn’t stop it.

“Hello?” Daniel said.

“I’m here.” She sat up straighter, refusing to cower at the sound of his voice.

“Don’t get any smart ideas and tell the cops about this call. Are they listening?”

“No. I’m up in a bedroom by myself.”

“Good. Good.” He practically purred with approval.

Her stomach rolled and Paul grunted in his sleep. She eased her hold on him and willed him back to sleep.

“What do you want? You know the cops are looking for you.”

“I’m making a one-time offer. Meet me in half an hour, and I’ll trade your sister for you. Come alone. I see the cops, I shoot the kid, and then Wendy. If you’re late, I shoot the kid and leave with your sister.”

Seriously?

This was his offer?

It was such a steaming pile of shit. Bliss kind of wanted to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t sleeping. She knew he wanted them both. Did he really think she wouldn’t figure out it was a trap?

No, because according to the feds he had a narcissistic god complex. He thought he was smarter and better than everyone.

“Bliss, time is running out.”

“Yes. Fine. I’ll be there.”

If the cops showed up though, if they caught up to Daniel, Carlos and maybe her sister would die.

The tracking device.

The cops were already closing in on them.

They’d find Daniel before she did, and then everyone died.

“I’ll text you the address. Hurry. Don’t be late.”

“Wait!” she blurted.

She had to do this. She had to save her sister.

“What?”

“My sister has a tracking device on her. It’s probably attached to the hem of her shirt or something. I put it there. If you don’t take that off and move, I’m not responsible for the cops showing up.”

She practically heard his teeth grinding before the line went dead.

“Daniel? Daniel? Damn it.”

Bliss tossed the phone onto the bed.

Shit. What was she going to do?

No cops, or everyone died.

Think. Think.

A text message landed in her inbox from the same Unknown Number. One line of text, and yet it was all the hope she had.

She needed Travis...but what if there was no way to hide him? Plus, she hadn't seen him since earlier, and there wasn't time to track him down. Besides, he'd try to talk her out of this. He loved her. He'd want to keep her safe, and she couldn't really fault him for being biased, but he didn't care for Wendy like she did.

Hadn't she been a tiny bit glad it wasn't Travis who'd been shot up in the mountains?

God, that felt like an age ago.

Bliss carefully removed the tracking device from her bra strap and pinned it to Paul's onesie. First things first, she needed to hand the baby off.

She padded downstairs, quickstepping to stay out of the officers' way as they hustled back and forth.

Travis, Connor, Jade—none of the faces she recognized were there.

The living room was a sea of uniforms and more unfamiliar faces. She tiptoed down the hall to a smaller den area that Wendy had converted into a play room. The more comfortable space was where her parents and a few friends and neighbors were clustered.

“There you are. Come sit.” Her mother patted the couch next to her.

“My head really hurts. I think I want to take a shower and lay down. Would you mind?” She lifted Paul a bit and smiled.

“Of course. Hand him here.”

Bliss kissed Paul's forehead. If she fucked up, she might never see her nephew again. But if she didn't do something, Daniel might disappear with her sister before the cops ever found them. The feds hadn't been able to find him. Maybe it was time to try something else. Something stupid, but at least it was—something.

“Come back down and join us,” her mother said.

“Will do.” Her smile was forced, but it merely supported her claim of a headache.

She took the smaller staircase up to the second floor. It was quieter up here, but also rather eerie. She glanced over her shoulder. If Travis were there, he'd know something was up. So it was a good thing he was MIA.

Back in her room, she flipped the flimsy lock into place and changed into jeans, her boots, a long-sleeved shirt and a bulky sweatshirt. The Taser and mace Travis had gifted her were easy enough to stick in her pockets. But would those be enough to stop Daniel?

She needed something with stopping power.

She needed a gun.

Wasn't it serendipitous she knew someone who over-packed their firearms?

This is how accidents happen.

She opened Travis' bag and poked around.

Buried on the bottom, under a plastic traveling case with built-in locks, was another gun. She'd seen him squirrel away the three he had a few times, enough that she'd dared to hope it would be there. They were going to have to have a serious conversation about gun safety, but for

now his lapse in judgment was playing in her favor.

She knew what the safety was, but other than that, she was working on blind faith. A row of shiny bullets laid waiting in the bottom of the bag. She pocketed those as well and put the rest in the hoodie pouch.

Twenty minutes and counting to make it to the meet on time.

She was being reckless, crazy, and stupid, but it was her sister. She had to do this, because so far nothing else had worked.

Bliss adjusted her clothing and headed for the hall.

Now she just had to find a car and get her ass out of here.

Her car.

Her car was still here!

She hustled down the hall and into her sister's room, pulling up short at the last minute.

Grayson and his assistant sat on the bed, papers spread out between them.

"Need something, Bliss?" he asked.

"Are you working?" She tried to not...gape...but how could he concentrate at work when Wendy was missing?

"I'm trying to stay busy, but it's not working." He got up and paced the bedroom. His assistant glared at her.

"They're going to find her, it's going to be okay," the assistant said. Bliss could never keep them straight, so she'd just stopped trying.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure you're right," Grayson muttered.

"Hey, you know where Wendy kept my spare key? I wanted to see if I left a change of clothes in my trunk." Bliss smiled and hoped he believed her.

"I have it. It's in here."

Grayson strode to the closet, which was as big as her bedroom back at her apartment. He opened a small safe and rooted around inside for a moment before turning to present her with the spare key.

"Thanks."

She grabbed the key, focusing on acting natural. How exactly was she supposed to act though? It wasn't every day a serial killer proclaimed his obsessive hatred for a girl. She glanced at her phone again and cringed at the time. It was running out.

Bliss took the small staircase to the ground floor and checked the map once again. She wasn't great with directions, but the phone could also be used to track her in a pinch. At least that's what happened in the movies. So she left it on the bottom stair, waited until no one was looking, and slid out the front door. With her hood up, she hoped she looked like any one of the neighbors coming and going.

If one of the cops made her, it was all over, and Wendy was as good as dead.

She crossed the lawn and slid into her little car, shivering. Boy, it was unusually cold this year. She started the car, glancing at the cop cars every few moments. Easing it into drive, she rolled down the street, holding her breath.

Neither car moved to follow her.

No one ran out of the house after her.

She had some serious road to burn if she was going to make it.

* * * *

“Do you think he had a car waiting here? Or did he boost something parked on the street?” Travis studied the blocked-off street. He wanted to get out of the SUV and walk the scene, look for a clue, but then he’d be in the way of the professionals.

Officers and what had to be the forensics team clustered around the first car, Priscilla’s. The one Daniel had driven into the gated community and right up to the house to kidnap Wendy in.

“Nah. Two hostages? He had to have something waiting.” Connor twisted to look behind them.

“If they’re both tied up, what’s he got to worry about? Wendy’s not strong enough to break loose, and the kid’s probably scared shitless.”

“Time. He knew we would chase him, so he needed to get away clean and change vehicles before we got too close. He had to have something waiting at this location. He knew he was coming here. Look at the street. There’s no camera in sight. He knew he’d change vehicles without us knowing what to look for.”

“What about there?” Travis pointed to a dome camera mounted on the cross street.

“Nah, that’s blind this way. It only goes north and south. You can’t see the lights, that’s how he knew.”

“Fuck.” Travis rubbed his forehead. He’d gone up against some thorough bastards before, but they’d had teams to do the work. This was one man. “Do we have another ping on Wendy’s location?”

“Yup. Patrol is in the area now looking for a car or some sign of them.”

“Do we know which way they went?”

“Lali tagged every car that crossed the intersection behind us, the one up the street, the other to the left, and the three closest traffic cameras. It’s a lot of cars to follow and sort through. She’s requested some support, but still, that’s a lot of cameras and a lot of cars.”

“Needle in a fucking haystack.”

“Pretty much.” Connor eased the truck past the ongoing investigation. “If I wanted time alone with my sweetheart, and I knew the law was after me, where would I go?”

“What is that? Some kind of profiler trick?”

“It’s easy to get into some of their heads, but Daniel is more complex. Usually we’re dealing with a sociopath, mum issues, a sadist, someone who has a single driving trait. Daniel...he’s a mix. He’s a narcissist, yet he hasn’t made contact with us. It’s like he doesn’t even care about us, so who is it he wants to pay attention to him?”

“Bliss said he talked a lot about his subjects.”

“Maybe. We know he picked up homeless people and chopped them up, but still, he’d want someone to know about what he was doing. To show it off.”

“Wendy?”

“Yeah, that’s a good point. If he considers her his wife, maybe she’s his equal and her affirmation of witnessing his “work” is all he needs because we are so below his notice. But...” Connor shook his head. “It’s damn frustrating, man.”

Travis’ phone vibrated, breaking his concentration. He glanced at the screen and frowned.

“Hey, hold on. Let me answer this.” He clicked the Answer button. His phone connected to the Bluetooth. “Grayson, we’re—”

“Bliss is gone.”

“Wait—what?” Travis sat forward. The vision of her pale, blood-splattered face leapt to mind. Gone? Bliss? She couldn’t be. No, she was safe. Last he’d seen her, she was in the kitchen with her family.

“She came up to my room, asked for the key to her car to get some stuff out of the trunk. Then someone found her phone at the foot of the stairs.”

“Bloody hell,” Connor muttered. He pulled over to the curb and got his phone out, too.

“What about the tracker?” Travis asked. “It just pinged, right?”

“The cops are looking for the signal, but...”

“But what?”

“She deleted all the history on the phone. No calls, no texts, nothing. She’s doing something.”

Bliss would do anything to protect her sister. Anything. Damn it, he should have seen this coming. Cold dread settled in the pit of his stomach. She should have called him at least. He could have helped her. Together they might have been able to accomplish something. But alone? He wasn’t sure she stood a fighting chance against Daniel.

“Fuck all,” Connor said.

“What?” Travis glanced at the other man.

“The tracker still shows her at the house, as of five minutes ago. Ask him to look around, really check. Is she in a bathroom? Sleeping somewhere? Anything?”

“Is there anywhere else she could be?” Travis asked.

“No, we’ve checked every closet, room, and vehicle on the premises. Besides, they have video of her driving out the front gate ten minutes ago.” Grayson’s calm tone was breaking. He’d lost not only his wife, but maybe his sister-in-law as well.

“Then the tracker should have just pinged her...”

“Shit. It must be here somewhere. Damn it, Bliss.”

“We have another vehicle,” Connor announced. He gassed the truck and sent it barreling around the turn.

“Grayson, I’ll call you when I know more.” Travis hung up and gripped the side of the door. Connor could drive like a bat out of hell all he wanted, so long as it got them a little closer to Bliss.

“When did she get a bloody damn phone?” Connor said as he took a turn at a high speed.

“Last night. Grayson had Priscilla go buy her a new one.”

“And no one mentioned it? God damn it.” Connor slammed his hand against the steering wheel. His phone began ringing, vibrating in the cup holder. He grabbed it and shoved it at Travis. “Put her on speaker.”

Travis jabbed the screen.

“Connor, are you there?” A woman’s calm voice filled the cab.

“Yeah, me and Travis are here, Lali.”

“I tracked the last phone call made to Bliss’ phone. It’s from a pre-paid cell phone—”

“Shit,” Connor mumbled.

“—and that phone is still on.”

“What?” Connor and Travis said at once.

“Assuming this is our guy, I’m triangulating his location now. I have Gavin cross-referencing the area with our parameters for Daniel’s secondary location.”

“He could have dropped the phone to get us off his tail,” Connor said.

“What if he wanted to make sure Bliss had a way of contacting him?” Travis had to hope. This couldn’t be how things ended.

“He could have told her to dump the phone.”

Lali’s voice broke through their battle of what-ifs. “Address, I just sent it to your phone and

I'm updating the rest of the team."

"Thanks, Lali."

"Go save those girls."

The line went dead.

"Where am I going?" Connor asked.

Travis brought up the map.

They had a long way to go, and Bliss had one hell of a start on them. When he got his hands on her... The only thing he could think of was never being separated from her again.

He was going to marry her.

9.

Bliss clutched the wheel and stared up at the large, metal building.

She was late.

Almost ten minutes late.

She'd run red lights and broken every speed limit posted, but she was still late.

Was Carlos still alive? What about her sister? Were they gone?

She pulled the gun and bullets out of her hoodie pouch. One went in the other, right? She slid the row of bullets into the gun until it clicked. Now, she just had to hope it was as simple as removing the safety and firing. Otherwise she was shit out of luck. She really should have taken Travis up on that gun lesson he talked about. If she survived this, she was learning how to shoot.

Bliss pushed her door open and stood. The bitter breeze bit into her limbs, leeching the warmth away.

It was the mountains and snow all over again.

She slid the gun into the waistband of her jeans like she'd seen Travis do. It felt weird and unnatural pressed against her spine, but at least this way her hoodie wasn't hanging down to her knees from the weight of it. She slid the Taser out of her pocket and gripped it in the safety of her pouch.

The street was empty, probably due to the holidays. She almost wished someone would happen along to stop her. This plan was crazy. There was no way it would work, but she had to do something.

Daniel hadn't given her instructions for how or where to enter the warehouse, just—the blue and white one. She reached a door with a faded red Exit sign stenciled on it and tried the handle.

It didn't budge.

"Shit," she mumbled.

Glancing up and down the street, all she saw were the big, rolling doors she couldn't possibly get through. She took a chance and jogged to her left, around the corner.

Double doors. One, jostled by the breeze, swung a few inches.

Scratch the crime show setting. This was a horror movie, and she was the stupid chick in high heels going out the front door.

At least she had a Taser, some mace, and a gun.

Bliss took a deep breath and reached for the door.

Wendy could already be gone. Carlos could be dead. But she had to see for herself.

She stood at the door, peering into darkness so thick even the daylight only penetrated a foot or two. Listening did her no good. The ambient sounds blocked out anything helpful, like cries for help from her sister.

Did she call out hello? That seemed like asking to be murdered.

She stepped into the darkness and ducked to her right, squinting and praying her eyesight adjusted.

There. That sound. Was that a foot step? It was hard to tell with the way things echoed inside the building. She was starting to make out shapes and lighter bits of darkness, but no Wendy. No Carlos. And no Daniel.

She clutched the Taser and edged forward.

A flashlight would have been super useful. But why should she have expected to need that in

the middle of the day?

Tall shelves lined her path from the door into the cavernous space. It was cold, and the occasional breeze still caught her off-guard.

Shit. The place was big. If she had any hope of meeting up with Daniel after being late, she was going to have to do it.

“Hello?” she called out. “Wendy? Carlos? Are you there?”

Bliss turned in a circle, gripping the Taser so tight it hurt her knuckles.

That.

That scraping sound was not because of the wind.

“Bliss, run!”

Wendy.

Bliss whirled toward the voice, somewhere to her right. There was just enough light filtering in through opaque panels to make out the form of a man. A very large man.

He shook a body—Wendy—like a ragdoll and then dropped her. Wendy scuttled backward on her bottom until she ran up against the metal shelves.

There was no sign of the boy. Was Carlos dead? Was she too late?

Her body reacted without her consent. Palms went sweaty and cold, her stomach tied in knots, and her limbs ached with the memory of snow and ice. For a moment, she almost swore she felt the drip of warm liquid on her face. She couldn’t breathe, and her heart pounded in her throat.

Daniel took two steps toward her.

Panic set in. She could run. Flee now. It’s what her instincts said to do. This was her in way over her head.

She’d made a huge mistake.

“Stop!” Bliss yelled. She forced herself to let go of the Taser and hold her hands out.

“You’re late.”

“You know how far this is. You knew I’d never make it in time.”

“Not my problem.”

“Where is Carlos?”

“I killed him.”

“Then we have no deal.” She took a step back. What were the chances she could run faster than him? Daniel still had that leg wound, he wasn’t a spring chicken, but it wasn’t like Bliss was used to doing a fifty yard dash.

“Brat’s alive.” He took another step toward her.

“Stop right there. You agreed if I came, you would let Carlos go.” She kicked her right leg back. Hopefully the Taser bulge wasn’t obvious.

“I’ll let him go after we cross the state line.”

When they were all under his control.

“That’s not what we agreed on.” It was hard to hear over the pounding of her heart and the clang of metal.

“That’s what’s going to happen.” Daniel pulled out a gun and pointed it at Wendy. “Now, get over here or I shoot her and kill the kid.”

Oh, God, she’d made a mistake. A really big mistake...

* * * *

Travis unclipped his seat belt and leaned forward, gun in hand.

The cell phone signal was close. They had it narrowed to a four block radius. Now, to find Bliss before something else bad happened to her. If Daniel hurt her, if she died, Travis would never be able to forgive himself. Her blood would be on his hands, because he hadn't protected her.

Connor's phone rang and once more he shoved it at Travis.

"It's Lali. Answer it."

He flipped the phone to speaker and held it between them.

"What'cha got?" Connor eased them around a turn. The shopping strip was busy with post-holiday traffic. Anyone could blend in here.

"An address. Gavin—I don't want to know what he did—but he got the texts off Bliss' phone." There was furious typing in the background, a lot like what it sounded when Travis had Gavin on the line.

"What is it?" Travis glanced at the street signs.

Lali rattled off the address.

Travis brought it up on his phone and his vision hazed red.

"That's ten miles from here," he said.

"I know. I'm alerting the rest of the team, Gavin is communicating to local law enforcement. There's more."

"Hit me." Connor whipped the SUV around and gassed it, on the fastest path to the blinking red dot.

"Daniel sent a message to her that said if she wasn't there in thirty minutes the kid would die. That was forty-five minutes ago."

"They could already be gone," Travis said.

"Bliss would be hard pressed to get there in under thirty minutes." Even Lali's soothing voice broke with tension.

"And it takes time to sneak out of a house full of people there to protect you. She's late to that meet." Connor grinned and swerved around slower moving traffic, lights on.

"How long until the closest patrol gets there?" Travis had to hope there was someone closer, someone nearer than they were.

"Uh, hold on, chatting Gavin..." The keys clacked and clicked. "Best guess? Eight minutes. That address is in the middle of a bunch of warehouses. Since the recession a lot of them have become vacant, transients have moved in, and the rest appear to be on hiatus until after the holidays."

"Suppose that's where he picked up his victims?" Connor asked.

"You're the profiler," Lali replied.

"What about finding his evil guy lair?"

Lali sighed into the receiver.

"Talk to me, Lali."

"Gavin has dozens of pings off the cell number registered to Daniel in that area. I'm cross-referencing utility costs, wireless capability, but it's not a fast process. This isn't TV. It's going to take a while."

"It's safe to say his secondary base of operations is in the area though?" Travis asked.

"Yes. Connor, Ryan is beeping me. Hold on."

"Tell Ryan to fuck off." Connor spoke too late. Lali was gone.

It was strange being the outsider on this operation. He was so accustomed to working with

his SEAL brothers that riding along with the feds was a unique experience of being on the outside again.

He never much cared for being on the outside. Too bad his federal record meant jobs like this were out of the question for a guy like him. He'd stick to what he was good at, tracking down the bad guys and protecting people, and leave the serial killers to the professionals.

"How close are we?" Connor asked.

"Take a left up here. Five minutes."

"The cops should be there any minute. She's going to be fine, Travis."

Travis didn't respond. Connor didn't know if Bliss was alive or not, he was simply trying to give him hope. It's what Travis would do if their situations were exchanged. He'd say whatever it took to keep the client calm. The less hysterical or upset they were, the easier they were to manage. No one wanted a screaming customer, unless it was in bed, and then the only screaming that should happen was in pleasure. Not that he ever intended to bed a customer again.

"Shit!" Travis braced his hand on the dash and grabbed the door to keep from being hurled across the SUV.

"Sorry, man, didn't see him."

"Slow the fuck down."

"Buckle up."

"Are you trying to kill us?"

"You Americans drive too slow."

"Another left, there."

They made two more turns and it was as if they entered an urban desert. No cars. No pedestrians. It was barren and desolate. Trash and refuse lay piled up in the gutters. The buildings were worn. Most had seen better days. A few company logos were painted or bolted to the structures, but few were recognizable.

A police cruiser turned, heading toward them, flashing their red and whites at the SUV. Connor waved at the cops and kept going.

"Right," Travis said.

Connor turned, and they rolled slowly down the street to the next intersection.

"There. That's Bliss' car." Travis pointed to their right.

Another cruiser eased to a stop behind the car, followed by another SUV. In moments the place would be swarming with uniforms and guns.

"You'll have to stay here," Connor said.

"The fuck I am."

"Listen, I know she's your girl and everything, but facts are you are not a law enforcement officer. You don't have a vest. Right now, you are a liability to her. Stay here. Let us do our job and bring her back safe. Cool?"

Travis ground his teeth together.

"Fine," he said.

"Good man."

Connor left the SUV running and got out, dragging his heavy Kevlar vest with him.

Travis waited for the feds to cluster before slipping out of the truck.

If Connor was stupid enough to think he was staying put, Connor clearly had something coming to him.

The police officers on scene paid him no mind. At this point, they might suspect him of being with the feds. All he needed was the badge and vest. He pulled out his phone and paused

close enough to the cruiser he could listen to the radio. Ryan was on the horn, directing officers to spread out around a particularly beat-up warehouse. If Daniel was still around, he had to have a getaway car somewhere.

Travis prayed the feds were right. That Bliss might still be here.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and waited. Watching. They didn't have long.

The buildings all had slanted roofs. Bad for snipers or making a getaway. They knew Daniel had at least one leg wound, and his lingering handicaps from the accident years prior meant he probably didn't move fast. Which was why he had to be smart. Daniel might have the physical strength to snap someone's neck, but the rest of him wasn't as mobile.

Travis strode the width of the building, putting the cops and feds to his back.

If Daniel was as smart as the feds thought he was, he'd probably know Bliss' directions would lead her to that spot and that entrance. But where would Daniel park, and where would he enter the building?

What would he do in Daniel's place? Wasn't that how Connor puzzled out the killer's actions?

Travis would go for something up high. A vantage point to watch for the arrival and entrance, and then he'd sneak up behind his target and take them out. But Daniel likely couldn't do stairs.

The cameras.

That would make sense.

Travis craned his neck and looked up.

If Daniel's hideout was here, then the chances of the area being covered with cameras was high. He could be watching them now on a mobile device. A camera would also eliminate the need for a vantage point because he could watch her from a blind.

He jogged down the side of the building. A passing cruiser hailed him with a wave, and drove on past.

Sixty feet down he found a door. An unlocked door.

10.

Get over here now,” Daniel said again.

Bliss’ body shook. She had to take that step, but it was the snow and the motorhome all over again. Pure terror. She’d never known such fear. The kind that paralyzed her body and set her mind on a mental loop of those horrible hours she’d spent terrified for her life.

Daniel took a step toward Wendy. She cried out and covered her head with her hands, but he reached past her into the shadows. Daniel dragged a small, kicking form out into the open and backhanded the boy.

“No!” Bliss took a step.

“Carlos!” Wendy reached for the child, but Daniel lifted the kid by his shirt until his toes barely touched the ground.

Think.

She had to be smart.

Fear could not win. Not now.

“I’ll go with you, just leave him alone,” she said.

Whatever he wanted to hear, she had to say it. She needed him to lower the gun enough so she could stun him. Then she had to hope her sister and Carlos could run.

“It’s your fault I had to do that anyway.” Daniel shoved a whimpering Carlos away from Wendy. Her sobs were muffled, her figure shuddering.

“I’m sorry, okay?” Bliss took another step toward them.

Her eyes were adjusted better now. Bits of light filtered in here and there, making it easier to see her surroundings, gauge where the rows were.

“Get over here.” Daniel pulled a long, flexible zip-tie from his pocket.

He’d used one to bind her wrists until he could get the handcuffs on her. It was a vague, almost-memory stuck in the back of her head. She’d been drugged, passing in and out of consciousness for a bit. A passenger in her own body while he kidnapped her.

Not this time.

She took two more slow steps.

Metal on metal screeched, echoing inside the warehouse.

She glanced to her right, toward the noise.

Were those voices?

Was someone else in the warehouse?

“Bliss, look out!” Wendy yelled.

Bliss brought her arms up, one hand clenching the Taser. Daniel lunged at her, his hands grasping her body. She shoved at his shoulder and stumbled backward. Her thumb slid off the button and she nearly dropped the Taser, but she squeezed it for dear life. If she lost her hold on it, she didn’t think she’d be able to get out the mace or figure out the gun.

Sparks of light lit up, crackling. For a second she could see Daniel’s face, slack in shock.

She jammed the Taser at the only exposed flesh she could see.

His neck.

Bliss stepped toward him and gritted her teeth as the electrical charge leapt from his body to hers. Her muscles tensed, and she could feel the current deep in her bones. Daniel’s mouth moved, but she couldn’t hear his words.

Finally he released his hold on her and stumbled back, bent over.

“Bliss.” Wendy gripped her by her shoulders, dragging her away from Daniel.

“Fuck,” he roared.

“Over there,” someone yelled from across the warehouse.

“I’m going to kill you.” Daniel’s voice and breathing was horse, heavy, and hard to place as human.

“Run,” Bliss said. She shoved at Wendy and they each hooked an arm under Carlos’ shoulders, jogging and limping away from Daniel.

“Are those the cops?” Wendy asked, her voice low.

“Wifey, get back here.” Daniel’s voice was damaged, rasping and breathy in a way Bliss didn’t think could be fixed.

“This way.” Bliss dragged them down an aisle then ducked under the lowest shelf, crawling over boxes.

Daniel’s steps were heavy, thudding sounds right behind them. He tracked their movements through the shelves, while the other voices sounded as if they were getting farther away.

Bliss pushed Wendy and Carlos back the way they’d come, up a dozen or so paces then into the six foot wide shelf space. If they had any luck, Daniel would keep going for a row or two before doubling back to find them.

“Here, hide, hide, hide.” Wendy pulled Bliss down between stacks of—whatever they were hiding in.

“We should keep going,” Carlos’ voice rose.

“Shh.” Bliss slapped her hand over both their mouths and held completely still.

Doors banged and every so often she could see a slash of light.

Help was there—but Daniel was closer. And he had a gun.

Gun.

Bliss felt at her back. The gun. This was what she brought it for, right?

A scuff and scrape a few feet away froze her in place.

She hunched lower, but caught a glimpse of two legs.

What were the chances Daniel would leave without them? If they could hold on, hide just long enough to be found, they’d be safe. Right?

Daniel plodded past them then paused.

Was he listening for them? Or for the cops?

Bliss held her breath. Travis was out there, looking for her. And she was going to live, damn it.

Daniel turned and limped back the way he’d come, down the row and out of her direct line of sight. The boxes were piled too high for her to tell if he was gone.

“Go.” Wendy pushed her, glancing pointedly toward the sounds of people.

“No.” Bliss shook her head. They didn’t know that Daniel wasn’t waiting for them. He’d gone to all of this effort to get them, now was he going to let them go this easily?

“I’m going.” Wendy wiggled past.

Bliss grabbed her elbow and jerked back.

If anyone was going to stick their neck out first, it was her.

She slithered past the boxes, scraping her back against the shelves. She squeezed through the space between two pallets, caught her foot on the wood and rolled into the aisle, sprawling on her back.

A footstep near her head froze her in place.

She stared up at the barrel of a gun, and behind it—Daniel.
Bliss didn't think. She couldn't. She lifted the gun she'd stolen from Travis and squeezed the trigger.
Click.
Nothing.
Daniel grinned.
“No,” Wendy wailed.
“Fuck—”
Bam.
Bam.
Bliss cringed and waited for the pain.
Wheezing.
Her eyes snapped open.
Daniel stared down at his chest. It was too dark to see more than a glistening, spreading spot.
He pitched forward, landing heavily on his knees. His gun clattered to the floor.
She heaved, and focused on the figure behind Daniel.
The one in a black leather jacket and jeans.
Travis.
He didn't look at her. Instead, he closed the distance in a smooth, silent stride and kicked the gun farther away.
Voices yelling and the drum of footsteps were all around them.
“Here,” Travis called out.
He went to a knee, gun still aimed at Daniel, and felt his neck.
“Travis? God damn it.” She knew that voice. That was Connor.
Bliss pushed up, squinting at the lights. A dozen or more people clustered around them.
“Is he dead?” someone asked.
“He's gone.” Travis slid his gun into his waistband and then looked at her.
She'd have known the weight of his gaze if she were blind.
“Where's Wendy? Bliss?” Connor knelt next to her.
“Here.” Wendy climbed over and through the shelved stuff, bumping into Bliss.
Hands wrapped around Bliss shoulders and hauled to her feet. Her legs were rubber, and she wasn't quite sure which way was up or down.
“Is he really dead?” She kept staring over her shoulder, down at the body.
Travis' hands clutched her closer.
“He'd better be dead,” he said for her ears alone.
She rested her cheek against his shoulder.
Daniel was dead. Did that mean the nightmare was over? Were they free?

* * * *

“I think the poor bastards just want to sweep this under the rug.”
Travis nodded at Connor, but he never looked away from the ambulance. The EMTs were going over Carlos while Wendy and Bliss hovered around the kid.
“You listening to me?” Connor waved his hand in front of Travis' face.
“I'm lucky they aren't arresting me.”

“Damn straight.”

“I was doing what I had to do to protect my client.”

“We both know you don’t have a contract on Bliss.”

“No, but I will have one post-dated by the end of the day.” Travis tore his gaze away from Bliss to stare at Connor. “Considering the circumstances, there wasn’t time to draft a contract, sign it, and have it notarized.”

“I’m not arguing with you. If you hadn’t been there they might all be dead. Good work, mate. Go see your girl.” Connor slapped Travis on his shoulder and thumbed toward Bliss.

He didn’t need an invitation.

Nearly an hour going over the details with the cops while they sorted it all out, and he was ready to knock a few heads together. Christ, this was why he worked for Aegis, so they could handle the tedious bits.

Bliss glanced up, the haunted look back in her eyes. He’d made sure to never be out of sight, but it wasn’t good enough. He needed to feel her. Hold her. Shake some goddamned sense into her.

She took a couple steps toward him and stopped. He closed the distance until he was so close her hair swept across his jacket.

“You good to go home?” he asked.

“Yeah, they said someone’s going to take us back to Wendy’s.”

“Connor, probably. Come on.” He turned and placed his hand at the small of her back, propelling her forward. She had that brittle, about-to-cry look. Chances were, she wouldn’t let it out until her sister wasn’t there. “Wendy all right?”

“I guess. She’s either crying about Priscilla or...just crying.”

He opened the backseat of the SUV, held the door open for her, and then climbed in after her.

“What’s going—”

He wrapped his arms around her and dragged Bliss into his lap. Besides the few minutes just after shooting Daniel, he hadn’t touched or spoken to her. He squeezed her to his chest and buried his face in her hair.

Bliss was alive.

The icy grip on his heart relaxed.

And Daniel was really dead. It wouldn’t chase the nightmares away, but at least she wasn’t in danger.

“What the hell were you thinking, taking that gun?”

“I thought—I don’t know what I thought. It wasn’t good, anyway.”

He blew out a breath and closed his eyes.

“Next week I’m taking you to the gun range and you’re learning how to load a damn gun. Fuck. Bliss, you could have died.”

“I know.”

She unzipped his jacket and wiggled her hands in under the leather. For several long moments they sat like that, no words, just the communion of their souls. He knew her darkness, the things that haunted her thoughts and dreams. He also knew she could overcome them in time. And he intended to be right there with her through all of it.

“Cops said you fried his brains.” He chuckled, recalling the baffled expression on the officer’s faces.

“Did they find the Taser?”

“Yeah, but it’s in evidence. I’d just as soon get you a new one.”

“I’d like that.”

“Promise not to use it on me?”

“Don’t piss me off.”

She peeked up at him and smiled.

God, she did things to him. Scary, big things that fucked with his head and screwed his emotions up into a tight, hot ball of need.

“Why didn’t you call me?” he asked.

“I didn’t have your number in my new phone.”

“If you ever do something like that again...” He shook his head. The simmering anger made it hard to form words. He wasn’t pissed at her, though hell yes, she should have called him. He was pissed at Daniel. At the cops for not watching her. At himself for going out, thinking he could help, when his duty was to protect Bliss.

“I won’t. I’m going to memorize your phone number. I swear.”

“The others are coming.” He patted her thigh.

Bliss groaned and slid to the middle of the seat.

“I don’t want to go back to Wendy’s. Mom, Dad, and everyone else are just going to make a big deal out of this, and I just want to...not.”

“I know.” He reached for her hand and wrapped his fingers around it. “We aren’t done, yet.”

“No, we aren’t.”

They squeezed together as everyone piled into the SUV. Wendy immediately buried her face on Bliss’ shoulder, crying and leaning heavily on her older sister.

He’d never had that with Emma. He didn’t know what it was like to have family lean on him. His had been glad to see him go.

There was no question he wanted Bliss, from now until forever, but what did that life look like? Any other man would have options. In order to provide for Bliss, he had to stay his course. Keep putting himself in danger. And hope she understood. They’d have weekends here and there, a couple of weeks sometimes. Was it enough? Once the dust settled, would she want to be with him?

11.

Bliss was ready to hurl her fancy wine glass full of punch in Wendy's neighbor's face.

The entire neighborhood was crammed into the house. At some point between being rescued and their convoy arriving home, Mom had begun cooking all the Christmas food they hadn't consumed during her abduction. There was easily enough to feed everyone and then some.

And where the hell was Travis?

She made another noncommittal sound to whatever the neighbor was saying and glanced around for the shadow-shaped man sticking to the edge of the room. It hadn't taken more than a minute to realize how uncomfortable the large gathering made him. Travis had an amazing ability to belong in any high-stakes situation, but stick him in a social group, and he was immediately lost.

There he was. Chatting with Jade in the corner with the curtains about to swallow them up. They both looked ready to bolt. She chuckled and sipped her drink.

Travis caught her eye. She lifted her eyebrows and canted her head toward the crazy, racist neighbor. Some people just made her sick.

A little help here?

"Bliss, there you are." Wendy grabbed her arm.

Oh, fun, more family drama!

Bliss groaned and let her sister haul her out of the living room, past the kitchen, and into the pantry. The red liquid sloshed over the rim and onto her hand.

"What the hell, Wendy?" She set the glass she didn't want onto a shelf and daubed the back of her hand on her jeans. At this point, there was no telling what was on them. When this day was over, they were going in the garbage. She was weary of all the people, the activity.

"Sorry, I just—CPS wants to take Carlos. They're backed up because of the holidays and asked if he could stay here a few days until they get it sorted." Wendy paced up and down the short room. Every few steps, she reached out and straightened a can or turned a box.

"Okay. He has family, doesn't he?"

"In Mexico. Priscilla's parents were illegal immigrants who got deported a couple years ago. That's why she's been on her own. She was born here, and so was Carlos."

"Wow, that's rough." Bliss blew out a breath. Daniel's actions impacted so many people. So much death and loss and sadness.

"I want to adopt him." Wendy whirled to face her, spine straight, head held high.

"Really? Wow, I mean, are you sure?"

"Yes. I've known him most of his life. He doesn't even remember his grandparents. If we do, he could get the kind of life Priscilla always wanted for him. And of course I'd want him to know his real family. We could go visit them, or something, but he'd have a better chance if he stayed with us. Wouldn't he? Or is that arrogant? I want to do what's best for him, but I also feel responsible for what happened to his mother. I mean, can I fix this? Is it a good idea?"

"Well, have you talked to him about it?"

"No. He's upset."

"Where is he?"

"Upstairs, sleeping."

"Have you talked to Grayson about it?"

“Not yet.” Wendy wrung her hands. “I was kind of hoping to pitch the idea to you, first.”

“I think it’s a good idea, but his family has to be included on a decision like this, I think. They are his family. But, you’re right. He has known you more and longer than his own family. So yeah, I think you should consider it.”

“Yeah?” Wendy smiled, and it was both happy and sad.

“Do you want me to hold your hand while you talk to Grayson?” She offered up her right hand.

“Stop it.” Wendy slapped her. “No, I just—is it a good idea?”

“Maybe? If it’s what Carlos wants and if Grayson is okay with it, yeah. But he’s not a puppy. You can’t adopt just because it makes you feel good.”

“I know. I love that little boy.”

Bliss took a deep breath. They were going to be okay. The nightmares weren’t going to go away, Wendy’s depression wasn’t cured, but they could take the awful things that had happened and make a new future.

“I just keep thinking...I wanted babies. Lots of them. But after Paul, I just don’t think I can go through that again. Just getting pregnant was hard enough. What if this is how we do it? We adopt?”

“That’s great, Wendy. You have a lot of love to give to kids. But...can I suggest waiting a bit before jumping on the adoption train? You’ve been through a lot this week, and I know you’re feeling better, but what if tomorrow is a bad one?”

“No, no, you’re right. I want to focus on Carlos first, then in a year or more, we can see about adding to it.”

“Good.”

“Paperwork will probably take ages.”

“Right. But, you need to take things slowly. For Carlos. For you.”

“I know I’m not magically better, but I do feel more alive than I have in...months. You are right. I’ll probably still have some bad days, but I want to get better.”

“Have you considered therapy again?” Bliss had bullied her sister into going a handful of times, but the therapist couldn’t work with a mute patient.

“Yeah, and I think this time it’ll be good. I just couldn’t figure out how to put things into words before. Now I have a lot to talk about.” Wendy sighed and faced Bliss. “I don’t know if I’ve ever said this, but thank you. Thank you for being there for me, and propping me up and everything. I can’t imagine what it’s been like for you.”

“That’s what sisters are for.” Bliss grasped Wendy’s hand and pulled her in for a hug.

“I’m just trying to say,” Wendy’s voice trembled, “thank you, and whatever you have it in your head to do, do it. Please? For you. I’m going to be okay.”

Bliss leaned back and screwed up her face.

“What do you think I’m going to do?” she asked.

“Something. You always had the more interesting life.”

“You mean Travis?” Just saying his name set the butterflies going in her stomach.

“Yeah. You like him.”

“I do.”

“Grayson doesn’t like him.”

“Do I want to know why?” Just the little Travis had said about Grayson’s career left big questions in her head.

“Some other time.” Wendy waved her hand. “So, what is it you’re going to do?”

"I...don't know yet. I like him." Love, was more accurate, but she knew that would sound crazy to anyone else. They loved each other, and she wasn't going to let that go.

"He likes you, too."

"How do you know?"

"He rescued you."

"He rescued us."

"Carlos and I were a bonus. He went in there for you. That's how I knew Grayson was the one. I was at that party you told me not to go to, got drunk, and there he was." Wendy shook her head.

"What? You mean you didn't meet Grayson in the library like you told Mom and Dad?" Bliss mock gasped. Oh man, did she remember the stories from that night.

"The last thing they want to hear is how I puked my guts up and he held my hair."

They laughed, a myriad of memories brightening up the otherwise bittersweet day.

"You were so in love with him. I mean, from day one, it was there." Bliss shook her head.

"Which is why I can say, with confidence, don't let this one go. If you don't love him already, you're going to." Wendy crossed her arms, eyes twinkling. "Do you want to slip out? Head home?"

"God, yes. I'm exhausted, and all these people..." She shuddered.

"I don't blame you, but this is my house so I can't run away. I'll go get Travis. Someone drove your car back here, didn't they?"

"Yeah, Jade did. I have the keys." She patted her pocket.

"I'll send Travis out with your coat."

Wendy opened the pantry door and left. Bliss wrapped her arms around herself and stared at the floor.

They were going to be okay. Wendy, Carlos, and her. They were going to make it. Now, she just had to convince a brooding, sexy man to spend extra time with her.

* * * *

"Jade. Travis."

Travis glanced up from his phone. Ryan jerked his head. The tense set of his lips, the one clenched fist...they didn't bode well. What other bad news could they get? Did Daniel Campbell have a sick, twisted twin brother? Or a partner they didn't know about?

Both Jade and Travis followed Ryan through the throng of people into the office. It was still decked out with all their information from trying to catch Daniel. Now, would they be after another ghost?

Dmitri closed the door behind them and leaned against the wall.

"What is it?" Jade asked.

"Lali has made her initial pass through Daniel's files," Ryan said.

"And?"

"We know he was in contact with the person called Black Widow. The same one we think TBKiller was taking orders from."

Travis' stomach dropped. It was the connection he'd been asked to look into. To see if these murders matched up with other copy cats, if the feds had a case to add to the potential list of Killer Club members.

"There appears to have been some correspondence. Lali sent it over." Ryan turned his tablet

around to display a page of text.

“What’s it say?” Travis asked. If there was another danger to Bliss or his sister Emma, he needed to know. The reach of a couple of psychopaths wouldn’t be that great. He could get them out of the country, set them up somewhere safe. Thailand had always been his first option for laying low. Take them deep enough, and no one would find them. No one but him.

“Essentially Daniel petitioned for membership over six years ago, but the emails go back further. Around the time the first blonde woman disappeared. He claims to have been inspired by a sixteenth-century German serial killer who would kill people traveling deep in the forests and hide their bodies in caves.”

“Christman Genipperteinga?” Jade reached for the tablet. “That doesn’t quite fit.”

“Who?” Travis glanced between the two.

“He murdered almost a thousand people. Got away with it because he lived so far out. In caves. He killed mostly robbers and highwaymen, which is why it took so long for people to stop him. Who cares about the person killing the bad guys? He wasn’t caught until he let his sex slave-wife visit her family, and she had a nervous breakdown and outed him to the mayor.”

“Sex slave?” Connor parroted back, his face screwed up on one side.

“It’s the connection.” Ryan gestured to the board. “Daniel Campbell was trying to be a better Christman. He killed the women so they wouldn’t betray him. His god complex morphed that into creating a better race through their children.”

“Not to be rude, but what does this have to do with Bliss or Emma? Are they in any danger?”

“No.” Ryan crossed his arms. “In the last email with Black Widow, she told him she doesn’t allow sex crimes into the club. Any raping or genital mutilation is expressly forbidden. She goes on to say that they also do not allow child crimes, either.”

“That eliminates roughly half our potential pool of cases.” Jade handed the tablet back. “It’s smart though. Sex crimes and children get the most media attention. If she wants to keep this club secret, best to stay away from the kinds of crimes that get the most press.”

“That can’t work.” Travis couldn’t wrap his head around the idea.

“It has.” Connor pointed at the tablet. “If that email is to be believed, they’ve been operating for seven or more years. And we’re just now finding out about them.”

“And you’re sure we aren’t in danger?” Travis asked again. He didn’t give a flying fuck about what kind of crazy puffs Daniel ate, only that the two people who mattered in his life were safe. It was a callous mindset, but they could never stop all the sickos out there from killing innocents.

Ryan shook his head. “He operated alone. Plus, retaliation murders would draw attention, and everything in Black Widow’s messages conveys the need for secrecy.”

“Anything else?” Travis asked.

“Unfortunately, no.”

“But it’s more than we had. Before we didn’t know the identities of the club members. Now, we know who they answer to.”

“It’s interesting she chose the moniker Black Widow.” Jade tapped her chin.

“That is a problem for another day. I’m ready for some of that turkey and some sleep.” Connor pushed up out of one of the office chairs and stretched.

“When we get back and get this sorted, I’d like to discuss a more permanent arrangement. Your help has been invaluable.” Ryan extended his hand to Travis.

Yeah right, like the FBI was going to make an exception for a felon. More likely it would be

under the table work. The kind that kept him on the fringes. Still, it would be better than nothing.

“You know where to find me.” Travis shook Ryan’s hand. “Flying out tonight?”

“The morning. We could all use some sleep.”

He was running on fumes himself.

“Travis?” Wendy leaned into the office. If possible, she looked better and more alive than she had since he’d met her. Crazy to think that kidnapping had worked some good in her life.

“Excuse me.” Travis stepped out of the office, closing the door behind him. “What’s wrong? Where’s Bliss?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just helping my sister get out of here.” Wendy handed him Bliss’ jacket. “She’ll head out in a few minutes, then you guys can go do whatever.”

“What about you?”

“I’m fine. This,” she gestured to the people milling around in the living room, “is what I’ve been missing. Bliss? She’s exhausted and over-peopled. Do me a favor and get her out of here, please?”

She didn’t have to ask him twice.

He took the jacket, said a few goodbyes to the feds, and jogged out to Bliss’ little car. Their stuff was already in the back, so it wasn’t like he was leaving anything here.

A few moments later Bliss slipped out the front door, quick-stepped to the passenger side of the hatchback, and dropped in. She leaned her head against the seat and closed her eyes, blowing out a deep breath.

“Drive. Don’t talk. Just drive,” she said.

He chuckled. He could understand the desire for silence, especially after being in the house that felt too full.

The path to her apartment was still burned into his skull. He would never forget these turns. It was as if he’d always been here.

“Wendy wants to adopt Carlos,” she said after a while.

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Thanks for skipping out with me.”

He reached over and covered her hand with his, squeezing it tight. How did he convey to her what she meant to him? How important she was?

Travis had never loved before. Bliss deserved for him to not fuck this up, but that was a lot to ask of a man with a history of screwing up.

12.

Bliss smiled and squeezed Travis' hand.

Man of few words.

He made her heart beat too fast, her head want things she hadn't realized she wanted, and her body, well, she'd never had a man set her insides on fire like Travis did. She loved him. And he'd told her he loved her. It was a curious place to be, confident and nervous all at once. Things between them were still new, and yet the more time she was around him, the more it felt as though he'd always been there. A silent, ever-present shadow watching over her.

They spent the rest of the drive to her apartment in silence. It was nice to be free of the expectation to smile and say thank you to all the well wishes for living through the holiday nightmare. She could just—be. Travis didn't need her to put on an act. He'd see through that anyway.

"We're here." Travis killed the engine.

She stretched and pushed her door open.

"Is it safe?" She stood and blinked at her apartment.

"Yeah. Cops went over it twice."

Bliss followed Travis up the walk and leaned against his back, soaking up his warmth, while he unlocked her door. Reality would hit soon, and then she'd need to sort out work, bills, and what they were going to do to make this relationship work, but for tonight she wanted to simply be with him. Like normal people. Granted, after what Daniel had done, she'd never be normal again.

He held the door for her, their bags slung over his shoulders.

She entered her apartment and paused. Things were out of place. Only a little. But she could tell people had been here. That her home had been invaded by strangers with both good and bad intent. She wrapped her arms around her and peered around.

"The cameras are all gone."

"You said that. It's just...I didn't really think about it until now."

"You want to go somewhere else? A hotel?"

"No, that's silly. I pay rent here. I live here. I'm going to have to get over it." She pushed her shoulders back and strode into the living room. This was her space. She'd have to work it out for as long as she lived here.

Travis took their bags into the bedroom. She liked his easy assumption that was where his stuff went. As if he'd accepted this thing between them wasn't optional.

She stood behind her sofa and turned in a circle, taking in the living room on one side and the kitchen-dining room on the other.

Daniel had been here. But now he was dead. She wouldn't ever be able to erase what he'd done to her from her mind, but it didn't have to rule her.

"Come here."

She turned, and there was Travis. He wrapped his arms around her, tugging her jacket off, until he had her squeezed tight. She sighed, letting go of the tension and stress. Everything would be okay, somehow, some way.

"I missed you," she mumbled into his shirt. From the moment they arrived back at Wendy's house, he'd been a wall-hugging shadow.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Good." She tipped her head back and looked up at him.

Travis was a rough-and-tumble man. She'd never seen herself falling for anything but the nice guy, but here they were, and she wouldn't change it for the world. He wasn't what she expected, he totally screwed up her five-year plan, but maybe that's what she needed. The kind of shove out the door to do something new — and totally for herself.

He pushed his hand into her hair, cupping the back of her head. She stared at his mouth, hungry for something besides her mother's cooking.

"You never do something like what you did today ever again." His voice was hard and probably scary, but his mouth was downright fascinating to watch.

"Okay." She slid her hands up his chest.

"I'm serious, Bliss."

"Me too."

"You could have been hurt."

"I know. It was stupid. I realized that pretty early on."

"Then why didn't you get help?"

"It was too late. I didn't have a phone. And if I wasn't there on time, he'd kill Carlos. I'd already watched his mother die. I couldn't let him die if I could save him."

Travis made a frustrated growling noise deep in his throat. It rumbled in his chest and tickled her breasts where they were mashed up against him.

"I know you're angry with me, but you know you'd do the same thing."

"That's different."

"How is it different? Is it because you think you're disposable while I'm not?" Stupid, infuriating man. She jabbed her finger at his chest. "That's not how this works. I can't just replace you. You said you loved me, and that means you are just as important as me."

"It is not the same thing. I'm trained to handle these situations. You can't even load a gun properly."

"Because you haven't taught me."

"Yet."

"I'm serious, Bliss."

"And so am I. You'd have done the same thing I did. Don't act like you wouldn't."

"It's still different. You could have been killed."

"I wasn't. You were there."

And he had been. Even in those dark, awful moments in the snow, he came through for her. He was there at every turn and bump in the road. She knew he didn't see himself as worthy, that he had plenty of baggage, but she also saw the heart of him. Despite the mistreatment from his parents, the bad decisions, and everything else, his heart was good. It took a strong person to experience those things and come out the other side putting others first.

He lowered his forehead to hers. His eyelashes tickled her brow, and their noses bumped.

"What if I hadn't been there? What then? What if I'd lost you?"

"You didn't. I'm right here."

She pushed up on tiptoes and pressed her mouth to his. At first he didn't move. She slid her hands over his shoulders and pulled him down more. He tilted his head the barest fraction, and his lips went soft.

Yes!

Travis' hands grasped her ass and lifted. She yelped, but he swallowed the sound, deepening

the kiss, and carried her to the wall, pinning her there with his hips. Her head swam, and she wrapped her legs around him. She'd never had a guy even think about doing that to her. Hell, she might as well be Wendy's size for all the strain it appeared to cause him.

His tongue licked into her mouth, gliding back and forth. He held onto her with a need she felt. There weren't words to describe it, but she knew what was in him, because now she felt it, too.

They were alive.

It was time to feel like it. Time to embrace what they had and run with it.

She loved him. All of him. Even the parts she didn't like.

Travis shoved his hands up under her shirt. His rough skin gliding over her stomach to her breasts sent fissures of anticipation through her body. He pushed her bra up and cupped her breasts. She leaned back, her head against the wall and his mouth on her neck.

Back and forth, he swiped his thumb over her breast, driving her crazy. Her panties grew damp and her clit throbbed. She tried shifting against him, but her lower body was prisoner to his strength. He grasped her nipple, tugging on it just enough to make her gasp.

"Travis."

She bunched his shirt up but never got it over his chest. Her brain short-circuited as he switched breasts, tweaking the already erect nipple.

He jerked at the tab on her jeans until he yanked it open. Somehow he wedged his big hand down the front of her pants until he cupped her mound, fingers pressed into her slit.

"I'm still pissed you risked your life," he said against her cheek.

"Mm." She rocked her hips, as much as she could. If only he'd do something with that hand.

"You're mine."

Those words...she shivered.

She was his. All of her. Heart. Mind. Soul. Body. He'd taken over her at some point, become her life line, her support, her warm comfort, and now her personal jungle gym.

She loved him.

"You understand?" He curled a single finger, sliding into her.

"Yes," she hissed.

"You pull something like that again, and I'm going to be more than pissed. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"God, you feel good."

"Your cock would feel better."

He stepped back enough for her to unhook her legs and stand, though leaned was more like it. Her back to the wall, he pushed her jeans and panties to the floor and went to his knees. She kicked out of them and her shoes as fast as she could.

Travis caught her knee, pushed it over his shoulder, and leaned closer. She held her breath and flattened her hands against the wall, looking for something to hold onto. He licked the length of her slit before she was ready. She rocked up on her toes and groaned, pushing her hips forward. He rubbed his tongue over her clit, fingers pressing into her.

She panted for breath, giving herself over to the feel of him. How he made her heart sing. The way they were together.

Bliss twisted her fingers in his short hair. She could come like this. Another few licks and her bones would liquify from the pleasure, but she wanted to come with him.

"Travis!"

He did a thing with his fingers inside and outside of her. A new wave of warmth blossomed

low in her belly, spreading from head to toe.

She tugged on his hair again, harder this time.

He kissed her mound, her hip, everywhere in between as he rose to his feet. She captured his face between her hands and claimed his mouth while he picked her up again. She grasped the front of his pants and jerked them open. He shifted, giving her more room to work his jeans and underwear down his hips. His cock slid free and lay against her thigh, trapped between their bodies. She wrapped her hand around it, pumping the velvety soft skin.

This was right.

This was supposed to happen.

They were meant for each other.

She shifted her hips and placed the head of his cock against her.

“Bliss—wait.”

“No.”

She rolled her hips and felt him slide into her.

“Christ,” he groaned. The tendons on either side of his neck stood out and his face twisted up.

“I want to feel you.” She grasped his shoulders and pulled him closer, squeezing with her internal muscles. Her arousal eased his entry, letting him slide deeper.

“You don’t—”

“I know what I’m doing.” She kissed one side of his mouth then the other. “Don’t hold back, okay?”

He took a step and shifted her body with one hand on her bottom. Gravity did the rest of the work and his cock slid the rest of the way into her. She gasped and dug her nails into his skin. It was different without a condom. More intimate.

Travis moved slowly, his hips flexing, hands holding her. She closed her eyes and savored the slow glide of skin on skin. He thrust hard enough that the pots hanging on the wall rattled.

“Yes,” she said again.

His hand settled at the base of her throat, not tight, but possessive. He held her against the wall while his hips moved, in and out, harder and harder. She said things, incoherent words.

“Look at me.”

She opened her eyes, staring into Travis’.

Love.

She knew he loved her, but she saw it, too.

Pleasure spiraled through her body. She gripped him tighter and groaned as the orgasm shuddered through her. He surged once, twice, and stilled, head buried against her neck. She squeezed her legs around him, pulling him a little closer, deeper into her heart and body. Where he belonged.

“I love you,” she whispered.

He blew out a breath.

“Are you sure?” he asked. Those three words almost broke her heart. She kissed his cheek and squeezed her eyes shut, hurting for the boy who’d never been truly accepted.

“Yes. I love you.”

“I thought I dreamed that.”

For several moments they stood twined around each other. It was as if she could sense the locks coming undone inside of him. These weren’t just words they were exchanging, it was a promise. An acceptance of who they each were.

At long last he blew out a breath and glanced up at her. She smiled and cupped his cheek, running her thumb over his stubble. This was right.

He carried her to the bedroom and lay her down. The sheets still smelled of him, of that night—what? A week ago now? It felt like an eternity.

Travis carefully removed the rest of her clothes then escorted her into the bathroom, and left, giving her a few moments of privacy. She cleaned up, still floating on cloud nine. There was little to no chance of her getting pregnant. She'd practically lived on birth control since she was a teenager for medical reasons. In fact, she looked forward to children, someday. Travis was the kind of man who would make a better father than he ever had. Because he didn't do anything in halves. He did it with everything he was.

By the time she was done, Travis was naked in her bed. It was a pity she was too exhausted to take advantage of him, but there would be time for that later.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Yeah, a little. We can order pizza or something in a bit. I just want to lay here for a while."

"Okay." He pulled her against his chest and kissed her brow.

Everything with him felt right. A week ago, this would have been daring and new. Now, she couldn't see her life without him in it. They'd figure out how to make this work. They had to.

"Where do you live?"

"Illinois."

"No, I mean, do you live in an apartment, own a house?"

"Oh. I rent a place. Two bedrooms. Nicer than anything I've ever lived in before. I barely use most the space. There's plenty of room if you want to come visit."

The crux of their issue. The distance. The different lives. They were going to have to find solutions.

"I was thinking about that. What if I could work remote? It would take a while to train a replacement, but I could move up there. I realize that's like, way future plans and all, but I like knowing where I'm headed. And I just thought, I like you, I want to make this work, so why not plan for moving up there?" She leaned back and looked at him to gauge his reaction.

He could say he loved her, but not want her in his space.

Travis' expression was neutral. Too controlled and closed off. They were going to have some serious battles over the Wall o' Ration if he didn't open up on his own.

"What about your family?"

"Mom and Dad have each other. Wendy has Grayson. They don't need me."

You do.

"I...don't want you to think you have to do that." He frowned, as if he didn't like the taste of the words in his mouth.

"What if that's what I feel like doing?"

He glanced away, and his hand coasted up and down her back.

"Or, I could stay here if you'd rather come visit when you can." Everything in her screamed, *No!* She wanted to be as close to him as she could be, every minute she was allowed.

"I don't like that, either."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"Move in with me. Marry me if you want."

She opened and closed her mouth.

That was a lot faster than she was letting herself think. She'd already convinced herself after Travis' bolting act that future plans needed to be broached carefully so he didn't spook, but he'd

barreled through that barrier and into the deep end. Of course, her head was already there...she just hadn't thought he was, too.

"Or not." Travis shrugged. "I don't see the point of moving all the way up there to just rent another place. It's a waste when I'm not home all the time. But, your family is here, my job is there. It's...whatever."

"No."

She crawled on top of him, needing to see his face. Every so often she could see through that badass SEAL mask. His heart was too big, too bruised to be shown to many people, but he'd let her in, shown her what he was capable of.

He curled his left arm under his head. The bandage over his wound was barely hanging on. She pressed the tape down absently while she studied his face. The tight lips. The unwavering gaze. It was the hand clenched on her knee that was the real tell. Her heart thumped painfully against her ribs.

Never, in a million years, would she have thought this was where they'd end up when she met him back at the police station.

This was it.

If she jumped, he'd catch her, but she still needed the words.

"I'm just...are you serious?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Last time we kicked this around you ran away."

"I said it was a fucking mistake. What else do you want me to say?"

"That you won't do that again. That if you need space or whatever, tell me, don't just leave."

Travis nodded.

"You have to say it. None of this nodding, grunting, shrugging stuff." She poked his ribs.

"And don't say that whole line about not being good at crap. That's a bullshit line."

"I'm not perfect, but yeah, I'll communicate better next time something comes up." His thumb swiped over her skin and his lips curled up. He was still broken, there were old hurts that would never heal, but together, they could be more.

She bent down and kissed him, pouring all her love into that one act. Yeah, they were still strangers, he had no clue how much she loved musicals or the rain or so many other things. But they would make it. They'd figure it out, because Bliss wasn't about to give up on him. Now, or ever.

"Let's do it, now. Tonight," she said.

He frowned.

"Look, I'm all on board this whole live life now train or whatever. I could have died. It's changed the way I look at things." She spread her hand over his heart, just below yet another scar that could have ended him. He understood her. "You love me. I love you. Why wait? I don't see the point in waiting."

"Your family might kill me."

"What? No. Mom wasn't serious. She was just stressed earlier. She'll love you."

"No I mean about getting married tonight. Wouldn't they want to be there?"

"Probably, but this is about us, not them." Silly man making valid points and crap. But, he was probably right. Her parents, and especially Wendy, would never let her live it down if she got hitched without telling them. Considering the circus that had been Wendy's wedding, Bliss was still going to be in the doghouse over a small, fast affair.

"Bliss, I'm not going to marry you and piss off your family."

“Fine.” She rolled her eyes and flopped on the bed next to Travis.

His hand coasted over her thigh toward her inner leg. Her body hummed with awareness of his every movement. She held her breath...

“At least wait until the morning,” he said.

“What?” She dragged her thoughts up, out of the gutter and looked at him.

“There are places that do appointments, right? We could just do something convenient for them, like after breakfast.”

“Seriously?”

“I am if you are.” He squeezed her leg.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’m not a good person. I’m not going to keep telling you no when I want you with me.”

“Okay. Let’s do it.”

She kissed him, dragging him on top of her.

There were things to figure out, people to text—and crap, where were they going to get rings and clothes and stuff? But first, the engagement sex. Because they were engaged, weren’t they?

* * * *

Travis swiped the fancy handkerchief over his brow. Shit, this was almost as bad as being in the sandbox. The tux was a little tight across the shoulders and every time he took a breath he was sure the thing was trying to suffocate him, but Bliss had assured him he didn’t look like an ass before disappearing with her sister to go do...bridal things. Whatever the hell that meant.

His phone vibrated against his thigh. He dug it out of the impossibly deep pockets.

Ethan.

“Hey, man.” Travis glanced over his shoulder into the foyer. People were starting to arrive, most of them with a slightly befuddled expression on their faces.

He didn’t blame them. It was pretty damn surreal to him, too.

“You’re doing this?”

“Yeah.” Unless Ethan had a good reason why he shouldn’t. Nah. Even then, Bliss was worth it. But maybe he should have taken her up on her midnight wedding idea instead of waiting until ten the next morning.

“Well shit. They’re about to roll me into the common room. I guess Zain got the feed hooked up to the projector in there.”

“Fuck. Why the hell would he do that?”

“Because we all want to see you sweat.” Ethan laughed. “I guess it’ll be too late to throw you a bachelor party when you get back.”

“Yeah, too late for that.”

Five people in black filed into the small wedding chapel.

“Got to go,” Travis said.

“Remember, the ring goes on the left hand.”

“Fuck you.”

He hung up, cutting off Ethan’s laughter. Bliss’ family, and friends he didn’t know, but the feds? He hadn’t expected to see them. He strode across the chapel and shook Ryan’s hand, glancing down the line at the rest of his team.

“Congratulations are in order.” Ryan grinned, the first unrestrained expression Travis had

seen on the man. Then again, Ryan was clearly a family man.

“Thanks. I think. I thought you would be on your way out already.” Travis shoved his hands in his pockets. He hadn’t bothered to tell the FBI team because he figured they would be in the air, and why would they care?

“I’m pretty sure Wendy’s screaming woke us up at—what was it?” Connor glanced at Jade.

“It was a little after one.”

“Nearly gave me a heart attack.” Benjamin grumbled.

“Anyway, we couldn’t leave before Elvis sang the vows.” Connor grinned. Despite how they’d butted heads, the Irishman was an okay guy.

In small doses.

“Everyone.” A woman in a pale purple dress, and her hair up in a beehive stood at the chapel’s entrance. “Please find your seats. For those watching at home, the service will begin in five minutes.”

Shit.

Travis swallowed around the lump in his throat.

It was too late to leave, and he’d promised to talk things out with her before he did anything. Like run away from their wedding.

Their fucking wedding.

He was going to be sick.

She had no idea what she was getting herself into.

“Travis, you okay?” Jade tilted her head sideways.

“The nerves are normal. Take deep breaths, don’t lock your knees, and just look at her.”

Ryan twisted his wedding band, a far off look in his eye.

“Thanks. Excuse me?”

He didn’t wait for another word, just pushed past the small crowd and into the foyer. The air was warmer out here and sunlight streamed in through the double glass doors. A couple random people milled through the shop at the front of the chapel, but no one paid him any attention.

Travis could save Bliss the disappointment now and leave. She’d hate him for skipping out, but it might be the best thing for her. He had more baggage than anyone, she just didn’t know it yet. He didn’t know how to be in a healthy relationship. Even what he had with his sister or the guys he worked with wasn’t what he’d call good.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and jabbed at Bliss’ contact.

It didn’t get through a full ring before she answered.

“Are you planning to leave me at the alter?” Her tone was teasing, light-hearted.

He blew out a breath.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” he asked.

“You’re having second thoughts.”

“It’s not—no, but, you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“I know we’re both going to have a big reality check. When we wake up from this, yeah, there’s going to be some rough times ahead. I’m not stupid enough to think that love fixes everything, but I’m willing to work at this. If you don’t want to, or if you want to put it off, tell me now before they put this veil thing on because it’s going to hurt. Pretty sure they used a whole can of that Aqua Net stuff on my hair.”

He chuckled, and his world shifted back into focus.

“I’ve never...I’m going to need a lot of patience. I’m going to screw up a lot.”

“And that’s fine. We’ll talk about it. We’ll do better. You’re already doing better. You’re

still in the chapel, right?”

“Foyer. Chapel is too loud. Everyone was staring.”

A man in a glittering white jumpsuit exited a back office and paused in front of a mirror. Elvis weddings were a much bigger thing than he’d realized. When in Vegas...

“See, already doing better. So, are we getting married or what?”

“Yeah. And forget the veil.”

He hung up the phone and the sick sensation vanished. One more swipe with the handkerchief and he was himself again. This was where he was supposed to be.

“Mr. Ration, ready to make a bride a wife?” The Elvis impersonator gripped his hand and pumped it.

“I am.” And he was, damn the nerves and doubts.

“Good, good. Full room today. We’ll wait for the signal, then go up like we practiced earlier.”

Travis nodded and checked his phone one last time.

A text from his sister Emma filled the screen.

Break a leg, bro! We r watching.

Everyone was here. Or close enough.

His blood family, his chosen family, and the people who mattered.

“That’s us. Come on, let’s get this show on the road.” Elvis slapped his shoulder before leading the way into the chapel.

Travis kept his gaze straight ahead, all the way to the platform at the front of the room and stood on his mark. Elvis said a few words, people snapped pictures, but none of it really mattered. He bounced his knee, just enough to feel the ring in his pocket and stared at the double doors that now stood closed at the end of the chapel.

Finally, the music started and Elvis began to sing.

Travis stopped breathing. The attendees stood as one, turning toward the doors. Elvis hit a higher note, the song lost on Travis, and the doors opened.

Bliss and her father stood at the end of the red carpet, and he’d never seen anything so beautiful in his life. His future wife. His love. His heart.

Epilogue.

Six months later.

Travis jogged up the porch stairs, keeping on the balls of his feet and avoiding the squeaky board. Bliss wasn't expecting him home until tomorrow morning. These moments, coming back to the little two-bedroom house they shared, were the best. Second only to the hours of lovemaking that followed. Things weren't perfect, but they were making the best out of what they had. And it was a hell of a lot more than he'd ever expected.

He disabled the security through his phone app and let himself in the front door. For a second, he stood on the little rug and listened. Music played softly from the spare-room-turned-office, and over that he could hear her humming.

There wasn't an aspect of his life Bliss hadn't touched. From redecorating the boring house to his taste in food and music, she'd changed him. For the better. His life wasn't just work anymore. And though the long hours, days, and sometimes weeks apart sucked, he always got to come home to this.

His home. With his wife.

Travis tiptoed down the short hall and peered into their office. Or more accurately, Bliss' office. Yeah, he had a desk in the room, but she was the one who worked there five days a week.

She sat bent over his desk, her back to the door, pen in hand, signing—something.

He tapped on the door with his knuckle.

Surprising her only went so far.

There were still nightmares and panic attacks on occasion, but those were fewer and farther between.

Bliss whirled around, mouth open, eyes wide. Her hair was pulled back in a clip, and she wore one of his sweatshirts with leggings and bare feet.

"Travis!"

He grinned and crossed the room in two strides, picking her up for a thorough kiss.

Five days away, forgotten in an instant between her lips.

"What—? You weren't supposed to be back until—"

"Tomorrow, I know. I decided to hop a commercial flight instead of waiting." The cost of a one-way flight was nothing in comparison to twelve more hours together. Especially when he was facing a lengthy assignment down in the Keys.

Bliss grinned and he put her down. She kept her gaze on him and pushed the papers behind her.

"What are you up to?" He reached around her and plucked the top sheet off the stack.

"No, just—Travis!" She made a wild grab and only got his forearm.

He wrapped the arm around her and skimmed the letter.

To the governor of Oklahoma.

"What is this?" A chill swept over him.

Was Bliss unhappy? Had he upset her?

She sighed and snagged the letter from between his fingers.

"I didn't want to show you. I didn't want to get your hopes up," she said.

"Why are you asking the governor for a pardon?"

She leaned against his desk and stared up at him.

"It's the job, isn't it? You still don't like it."

"Its—no. You like what you do. I just—you really want to be a PI."

He didn't bother to nod. They'd had this conversation. That career path was closed to him thanks to his felony record, as were so many other options in life.

"I talked to a lawyer. He thinks that there's plenty of evidence and proof that your conviction could be pardoned. So yeah, I was going to send these today, see what might happen. I've got letters to both the governor of Oklahoma and the President. Worst case, they said no, you wouldn't know, and we keep on making the best of what we have." She reached for his hand, clasping it between hers. "I just want for you to be happy."

"Are you happy?"

Above anything else that mattered was Bliss. No, he didn't want to work for Aegis forever. He'd die doing this job if he stuck it out until he was too old to dodge bullets, and she didn't deserve that. Truth be told, he'd never considered a way around his conviction. It hadn't occurred to him, because good things never happened to him.

And then there was Bliss.

She was all the good he'd never had, rolled into one, sexy package.

"Are you mad at me?" She pulled his hand, urging him closer.

He let her pull him between her legs while he paused before answering, rolling her actions around in his head.

"No," he replied. "Are you happy?"

"Yeah." Her smile spread slowly across her face. "More now that you're home."

He blew out a breath and leaned down to kiss her. She tasted of oranges and tea, which meant they were probably out of food. Oh well, they could order pizza and spend more time in bed anyway.

"Note to self, next time I get a bright idea I don't want my super sneaky husband to know about, do it right after he leaves. And before I forget, Emma sent over some wedding stuff. They picked a date."

"Later."

Travis picked Bliss up, and she wrapped herself around him. There was time to figure out the logistics of a couple trips back to Oklahoma. For now, he needed to show his wife just how good they had it.

* * * *

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About Sidney Bristol

It can never be said that NYT & USA Today Bestselling author Sidney Bristol has had a 'normal' life. She is a recovering roller derby queen, former missionary, and tattoo addict. She grew up in a motor-home on the US highways (with an occasional jaunt into Canada and Mexico), traveling the rodeo circuit with her parents. Sidney has lived abroad in both Russia and Thailand, working with children and teenagers. She now lives in Texas where she splits her time between a job she loves, writing, reading and fostering cats.

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So Good

By Darcy Burke



Dedication

For my parents-in-law, Linda and Roger, as they celebrate 50 years of marriage.

Your happy ever after is inspiring and amazing—
and still going strong.

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Last but never ever least thank you to my family. Every little thing you do is just magic.

Chapter One

July, Near Ribbon Ridge, Oregon

Cameron Westcott frowned at the serpentine line stretching before them. To their left, a forty-foot-long bed of hot coals roasted salmon that was speared on long, arched pikes. The heat wafted over the crowd of people waiting to go in to the dinner, making the already hot summer night even warmer.

But Cam didn't care about the temperature. He wanted a good seat. The annual salmon bake at the International Pinot Noir Celebration was a fun, casual event where the wine flowed freely, and the attendees came from all walks—wine connoisseurs, winemakers, wine critics, and, most importantly, wine lovers and buyers. It was the perfect place for Cam and his partners: his best friend and two of his brothers, to offer a sneak peek of their pinot noir.

Cam craned his neck to try to gauge how far back they were from the entrance. "We should've gotten here earlier."

Cam's younger-by-two-years brother Luke, nearly always the coolest head in the room, clapped his shoulder and gave it a quick, hard massage. "Relax. Hayden will save us a spot."

Hayden Archer had been Cam's best friend since first grade. He was also the winemaker at their winery, West Arch Estate. Cam was the business and sales manager, Luke managed the vineyard, and their youngest brother, Jamie—who stood just behind them looking at his phone—was the chief financial officer.

"Yeah, you're right." Cam forced himself to do exactly what Luke said—relax. He'd been working crazy hours the past few weeks as they geared up for their first fall season as an official winery. They'd purchased the vineyard two years ago, but this was the first year they would have everything in place: a facility with a tasting room and their inaugural vintage, albeit small, of pinot noir.

The line suddenly started to move more quickly. The closer they got to the entry, the more they could see the dozens of round tables with their battery-operated candles and two bottles of wine each and the long rectangular tables that held the amazing buffet and carving stations. It was always a beautiful setting, a fairylike dinner in an oak grove at the local college.

Their wine wouldn't be poured by the roving servers nor would it be set out on the tables, but Hayden had a cooler with their whites and a rolling tote with their fledgling pinot. Like many other winemakers, he'd whip the bottles out and share them with everyone at their table and anyone else who wandered by.

Cam's phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it from his khaki shorts and looked at the screen.

Hayden: *Running late, sorry.*

Cam glanced at the tables that were rapidly filling. By the time they got inside, they'd be scrambling for a good spot. He typed a response into his phone.

Cam: *We're screwed for a decent table.*

Hayden: *Liam just nabbed two seats for me and Bex, but the rest of the table's full. Sorry, bro.*

Liam was Hayden's older brother and a master at networking.

Irritation curled along Cam's spine, but he inhaled deeply, getting a nose full of campfire scent for his efforts. This was no big deal. So they weren't sitting together. It would still be an amazing evening. Besides, once people started milling about, they'd all end up in the same place.

He turned to his brothers. "Hayden's running late, but he's got two seats saved thanks to Liam. We're on our own."

"Damn lucky Archers." Luke said this without heat, his dark eyes crinkling at the edges.

The Archers were the first family of Ribbon Ridge—literally, since their ancestor had settled the town—and most things they touched turned to gold. Cam wasn't jealous, though, and neither were his brothers. Especially when they were in business with one of them, and their older half-brother was married to another.

Jamie sidled closer. He looked between Cam and Luke. "So what's our plan? Split up and find something?"

"Just go for whatever's closest to the center," Cam said. "Ideally we'll find a table close to Hayden, but that may not be possible."

Luke nodded. "I'll find Hayden and check the surrounding area."

"And I'll just look for anything center-ish," Jamie said.

Cam edged closer toward the gate. "Sounds good."

At last, they reached the entry and rushed inside. Luke took off in one direction, while Jamie went in another. Cam scanned for empty seats and saw a few at a table near the edge but still relatively close to the center of things.

Just as Cam reached the table, a trio of women did the same. He set his hand on the back of a chair at the same moment one of them did.

The woman was probably a few years shy of thirty—a bit younger than him—and drop-dead gorgeous with shoulder-length, golden blonde hair and sharp blue-green eyes. If Cam wasn't so eager to claim the seats, he'd hit on her.

Hell, he'd probably hit on her anyway. *After* he took possession of the chairs.

She smiled at him, and she was even prettier. *Yes, definitely hitting on her.*

"We're taking these three," she said, glancing at the other two women—a petite brunette and a lean, athletic beauty with long, dark hair.

"I think I was here first," Cam said, flashing his most disarming smile.

Her eyes darkened a shade, but then she batted her lashes. Her gaze raked him from head to toe, firing his blood. "I don't think so, but anyway, a real gentleman would surrender."

Surrender.

For some reason, that word evoked an incredibly erotic response in him. He pictured himself surrendering to her in every way and decided that would be just fine with him. Okay, not *every* way. He wanted this damn table. A quick look around showed that the only seats left were in the corners.

He leaned toward her. She smelled of vanilla and bergamot—he'd gotten pretty good at detecting fragrance over the past eight years shilling wine. "A lady wouldn't resort to flirtation to steal seats."

"It's not stealing if I was here first." She arched a slender, sculpted blonde brow. "Which I was."

He met her brow arch with one of his own. "In your opinion."

Luke walked toward them. "You find something?"

Cam kept his hand on the chair. "I did."

The blonde glanced at Luke. "That is up for dispute."

Luke dipped his gaze toward his phone. "Jamie found us seats. Come on."

Cam didn't want to give in so easily. And not just because he wanted this table. He wished there were enough seats for all of them. That way he could get to know this stunning woman.

She looked past him at Luke, and her smile became more radiant, if that were possible. "Thank you."

Luke's mouth curved up. "My pleasure." He turned. "Let's go, Cam."

Cam reluctantly let go of the chairback. He took a small step toward her and lowered his voice. "You win this round."

She brushed the lush waves of her hair over her shoulder. "Oh, you think there'll be another?"

He dipped his gaze over her. She wore a coral-colored sleeveless top with a pair of long gold necklaces and white, cropped pants with strappy wedges. She had great style—precisely the type of woman that caught his eye. "Definitely," he said.

She set her small clutch purse on the table and flashed him a saucy look. "Hold my chair for me?"

Damn, she was a flirt. He couldn't stop a grin from stealing across his lips. He might be sitting in the nether regions of the grove, but he had the sense it was going to be a great night.

He held her chair out while she sat, then scooted her in. He dropped down and whispered close to her ear, "I'll be back later."

She looked at him over her shoulder. "I don't see a need for that."

What? Hadn't she just given him all sorts of signs that she was interested? He opened his mouth to ask why, but his phone vibrated. He quickly read the screen. Both his brothers were asking where the hell he was. They were having trouble defending his seat.

Resigned that he had to go, Cam settled for a parting shot. "I see plenty of need," he said. "And I'll show you later."

As he pivoted to walk away, he nearly tripped. Had she just rolled her eyes? He looked back at her, but she'd turned toward the table so he couldn't see her face anymore. His phone buzzed again.

Luke: *STOP FLIRTING AND GET YOUR ASS OVER HERE.*

Cam walked out to what felt like Siberia, to a table in the darkest corner of the grove. He surveyed the sad gathering—all guys. "Wow, great seats."

Jamie reached for one of the open bottles of wine on the table and poured pinot blanc into their smaller white-wine glasses. "At least we're together. It's not like we'll be here all night. We'll move around after dinner."

Luke set his phone next to his place setting. "You'll have ample opportunity to get back to the hot blonde."

Cam sat down between his brothers. "Maybe."

Luke threw him an incredulous look. "Maybe? Where's my brother the player? She was totally flirting with you."

"Yeah, I thought so too, but then she gave me the brush-off."

Jamie shrugged. "Maybe she was just flirting to get the seats. You were arguing over them, right?"

"She said as much," Luke said. He gave Cam a pitying look. "Can't win 'em all, bro."

Now it was Cam's turn to roll his eyes. He was used to his younger brothers giving him crap about his love life, which wasn't really an accurate description since love never came anywhere near the vicinity of it. "Whatever. Plenty of dateable women here tonight." Just not at their table.

Luke laughed. "Dateable? You're going to actually date someone for the first time in, what, seven, eight years?"

"Yeah, since what's-her-name." Jamie snapped his fingers.

Even though Jamie hadn't said her name, which Cam didn't allow since she was his own personal Voldemort, the mere mention of her set Cam's teeth on edge. "I date."

Jamie looked unconvinced. "I guess, but is it really dating when you have no intention of seeing someone more than a handful of times?"

That wasn't fair. Cam had seen plenty of women more than a handful of times. During the six years he'd worked for Blackthorn Cellars traveling around the country, he'd seen a couple of women regularly. Granted, neither of them had lived in Ribbon Ridge and the long-distance, casual nature of those relationships had suited all parties. "I've dated plenty of women." Just not exclusively, and he'd always been up-front about it.

"Hear that, Luke? *Plenty* of women." Jamie wagged his brows before dissolving into laughter.

Cam drummed his fingers on the table. "You can tease me all you want, but how many women have I been with since we started the winery?" He'd thrown himself into this endeavor, and yeah, since he wasn't traveling anymore, his options had narrowed. But he also didn't miss that lifestyle.

Luke stroked his hand along his perpetually stubbled chin. "Good point. Guess we should stop calling you a player and a manwhore and the like. How about we start calling you assbat instead?"

Cam grinned. "That's the best you can do?"

Jamie angled himself toward Cam and Luke and set his elbow on the table. "Speaking of the winery, I hope this pinot we're launching is ready."

Hayden had acknowledged it was going to be close. This was a small batch from the grapes they'd harvested almost two years ago—their first yield from the vineyard. Most of the fruit had gone to contractual obligations held by the former vineyard owner, but they'd had enough left over to produce just under ninety cases. It was meant to be a teaser for what would come next year—their haul from the entire vineyard, which was currently sitting in oak barrels in their new winemaking facility.

"It's ready," Luke said firmly. Before coming back to Ribbon Ridge two years ago, he'd worked for a few vineyards in Sonoma. Between him and Hayden, West Arch had the best winemaker/vineyard manager duo in the entire Willamette Valley. At least in Cam's opinion, and he was pretty sure he knew enough about wine in this region to make that call.

"I'm stoked to see what people think. That's why I'm bummed we aren't at his table." Or even close to it. On his way to the back of beyond, he'd seen Hayden and Bex setting up a few tables away from the seats he'd given to the ungrateful blonde.

Actually, she *had* been grateful. To Luke, he recalled. To Cam she'd been cool—after obtaining her victory.

The buffet tables opened up, and they stood to get their dinner. As they waited in line, they chatted with people they knew and made new acquaintances, all the while talking up West Arch. The three of them lived and breathed their start-up, and Cam was thrilled to be doing this with his brothers and his best friend.

Well, most of his brothers. They had an older half-brother who was married to Hayden's sister. Dylan was a contractor with a very successful business of his own. In fact, he'd built their winery, the bones of which had been completed just before last fall's harvest. Dylan would've

been here tonight to support them, but he and Sara were doing what they did most Saturday nights—doting on their new daughter.

Just as they headed back to their table with their loaded-up plates, Hayden intercepted them, grimacing. “Hey, sorry about the table situation.”

“No worries, man,” Luke said, smiling. “We like our secluded, all-male table. Later on when we’re shitfaced, we can act like complete assholes, and no one will care.”

This provoked laughter from everyone. “Cool,” Hayden said. “Liam schmoozed his way into our four seats.”

Cam snorted. “Of course he did.” Liam Archer worked a room better than anyone Cam had ever met. As a kid out of college, Cam had studied him and employed many of his same techniques when he’d started out selling wine.

Hayden glanced at their plates. “Hurry up and eat so you can come join us. That is, if you can tear yourself away from your new man club.” His mouth tugged into a half-smile.

“Very funny.” Cam inclined his head toward his best friend. “Let’s call *him* asshat instead.”

Hayden blinked. “Who are you calling asshat?”

Luke jabbed a thumb toward Cam. “Him, actually. He’s trying to deflect. It seems we can’t rightfully call him manwhore anymore.”

Hayden laughed. “Why, because he’s calmed down a little since we started up West Arch? Nah, I think we can still call him a manwhore. Just because he’s been refocused on the winery doesn’t mean he’s ready to change his ways. Right, Cam?” He gave Cam’s arm a slap before taking himself back to his rock-star table.

“Asshat,” Cam muttered.

Luke and Jamie started back toward the outer limits, and Cam made to follow them. Instead, he collided with someone and had to clutch his plate with both hands, lest he lose his dinner to the ground.

“Hey, watch it!” He looked over at the person who’d run into him, and couldn’t keep his jaw from briefly dropping. “You.”

“*You*.” The blonde dipped her fiery gaze to the dirt and grass beneath their feet. “You made me drop my focaccia bread. I’ve been looking forward to those carbs all day.”

“*I* made *you* drop it? Are you hell-bent on casting me as a villain tonight?”

She cocked her head to the side. “If the label fits...”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re a piece of work. First, you flirt with me to steal my seats, and instead of being gracious in victory, you give me the cold shoulder. And now you’re trying to steal—or at least ruin—my dinner too.”

Her eyes widened, and she sucked in a breath. “Like I ran into you on purpose!”

Satisfaction burned through him. “Ha! You admit you ran into me.”

She let out a groan, and damn, it should *not* have been sexy. But it was.

She glared at him. “You’re a menace.”

Something about the way she said it made him slightly uncomfortable. It was as if she actually meant it, and how could she? They didn’t even know each other. He wanted to change that. Because, holy hell, he was attracted to her.

“I’m not really. If you’ll let me—” He’d been about to say buy you a drink, but you didn’t have to buy any of the wine at this dinner. “I’d be happy to pour a great wine for you later.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I need to get back to my friends.” She pulled her plate in close. “You go first.”

He didn’t want to take no for an answer, but he had a rule—three strikes, and he was out.

That gave him one more chance with her. He'd save it for later. "By all means, ladies first. My feet are rooted to the ground until you move." He gave her a bow, something a *gentleman* would do.

Her gaze turned skeptical, but she moved. As she passed by, she gave him a bemused look. He watched her until she sat down at her table. A moment later, she turned her head, registered that he hadn't budged, then quickly turned back. But not before he'd caught a blush in her cheeks. Or maybe that was just his wishful thinking at this distance. Either way, he looked forward to trying that third time and just hoped he didn't strike out.

Chapter Two

“He’s still watching you.”

Brooke Ellis didn’t mean to look, but she did. And there he was staring at her in all his handsome, self-assured glory.

She snapped her head back around and forked a bite of salmon into her mouth.

Her friend Naomi, seated on Brooke’s right, sighed. “And now he’s gone. You should’ve invited him to sit with us.”

As it happened, there was an empty chair on the other side of the table. Both Naomi and their other friend Jana had remarked—several times—that the people at the table would surely shift so that Brooke could sit with him.

“I am *not* inviting Cameron Westcott to sit with us.”

Jana paused in eating. “Wait, you know him?”

Brooke had successfully changed the subject when her friends had tried to bring up the attractive guy who’d clearly been hitting on her. She’d known as soon as she saw him exactly who he was. “Remember that wine sales guy I’ve mentioned a few times, the total player? The one with the reputation for having a girl in every city in his territory?”

Jana’s blue eyes widened. “That’s him?”

Naomi sipped her wine. “Who cares? He’s hot. And interested in you. When was the last time you had sex?”

Nearly three years ago. But who was counting?

“She has a point,” Jana said. “In fact, he’s the perfect guy to end your dry spell since he won’t expect anything. I think you should hit that.”

Naomi lifted her glass in a toast. “Ditto. And if you don’t, maybe I will. Or maybe I’ll go for the taller one. They looked like they might be related.” She glanced between Brooke and Jana. “Brothers, maybe?”

Brooke speared several leaves of romaine on her fork. “I have no idea. Nor do I care.”

Jana grinned. “You’re so full of it. I saw you checking him out, and whether you want to admit it or not, you were flirting with him.”

“Until she shut him down cold.” Naomi’s teasing gaze turned serious. “Seriously, you deserve a good time. Why not give him a shot?”

Because he was a player, just like her ex-husband. And look how their marriage had turned out. She inwardly cringed because that wasn’t a fair assessment. Yes, Darren had looked elsewhere, but their marriage had hit the skids long before that had happened.

“I am not giving a guy like Westcott a shot at anything.” Although, Naomi raised a good argument *if* Brooke was looking for a one-night stand or a casual fling. Which she wasn’t. “I’m focused on my job right now. They took a chance on me, and I don’t want to blow it.”

About fifteen months ago, she’d moved to the area from southern Oregon. Following her divorce, she’d needed a fresh start—new surroundings, new job, new outlook on life. She was still waiting for the new outlook. Yeah, maybe she did just need to get laid.

Jana tipped her head to the side and looked at Brooke as if she were bonkers. “Spending an evening with a super cute guy, having a great time... How is that going to mess up your job exactly?”

“Westcott has a reputation that I don’t want to be associated with. The wine industry isn’t

that big.”

“Okay, I guess.” Jana didn’t sound convinced. “Since you’re both in sales, you probably want to keep your distance.”

Brooke poked at the roasted potatoes on her plate. “Actually, he’s not in sales anymore. He and his brothers started up a winery.” Ugh, why had she mentioned that? Now they’d continue to harass her about him. But maybe she could divert their attention. “That had to be one of his brothers with him.”

Naomi’s head came up, her eyes widening slightly. “Brothers? How many?”

“There are three of them, I believe,” Brooke said, relieved they were taking her bait and abandoning their objective to hook her up with Cameron Westcott.

“Excellent, one for each of us,” Naomi said, lifting her glass.

Jana grabbed her wine to toast Naomi. Their glasses met over Brooke’s plate, and they laughed. Then they turned to look at Brooke, their gazes demanding she join in their toast.

Brooke just chuckled and shook her head. “I’m out, but you two have fun.”

It wasn’t that she didn’t want to date anyone. Okay, yes, it *was* that she didn’t want to date anyone.

The pain of her failed marriage *had* started to dull, however. The harder she worked, the more she was able to block out her sadness and even look toward the future. Maybe it was time she got back in the game. At least for a short stint.

But not with Cameron Westcott. He *was* hot. *Too* hot. And confident. And charming.

She *had* been flirting with him, and without even realizing it. He’d sparked something within her, something that had lain dormant for the past few years. Something she’d missed, if she were honest with herself. And when did she bother to do that? Burying her feelings had become her favorite pastime. One she’d gotten *really* good at.

Jana sat back in her chair and sipped her wine. “If Naomi’s got her eye on the tall drink of water and Brooke is going to pretend she doesn’t want to get to know Cameron Westcott, I clearly need a target of my own.” She turned her head to Brooke. “Did you say Westcott had brothers, plural?”

“Yes, although I’m not exactly sure how many.” She tried to think of what she knew of their winery. “Actually, I just remembered that Hayden Archer is the winemaker. You know the Archers, right?” She looked at Naomi.

Naomi rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Yeah, duh. Now I feel stupid. I see Tori at races sometimes. I forgot her brother’s a winemaker. With that hottie, huh?”

“And his brothers,” Jana said. “If there are more Westcott brothers running around tonight, I call dibs.”

Brooke waved her fork at them. “You can have all the Westcott brothers.”

Naomi looked at her intently, all humor gone from her expression. “Brooke, you have to get back out there. This isolation isn’t healthy.”

Brooke couldn’t help but feel defensive, especially since Naomi wasn’t wrong. “I’m not isolated. I’m out here with you guys, aren’t I?”

Jana exhaled. “Okay. We’ll stop bothering you—for now.” She leaned close and lowered her voice to ensure the last bit was just between the three of them. “But I still say Cameron’s fuckability factor is off the charts. You’re crazy not to want a piece of that.”

“Agreed,” Naomi said. “In fact, I think it’s past time I went in search of hottie number two. She picked up her nearly empty wineglass and downed the contents before standing up.

Jana jumped to her feet. “I’m going with you to find hottie number three. Come on.” She

grabbed Naomi's hand, and they headed back toward the wine tent.

Brooke frowned after them, wondering why they hadn't invited her to tag along. Then she saw the reason coming toward her table. Her "friends" had seen Cameron Westcott headed her way and had decided to meddle by vacating the area. *Bitches*.

Brooke finished off her wine for fortification as Cameron neared the table. He carried his glass, which was also empty, and a bottle of wine. "May I take this empty seat, or are we going to have another knock-down-drag-out over it?"

She blinked up at him. "Nothing got violent. At least not until you tried to plow into me near the buffet."

He sat in Jana's chair and set his glass on the table, scooting her plate with the stem just before a worker plucked it off the table. "I thought we'd established you did the plowing."

"I misspoke." She looked at the bottle of wine in his hand. "Is that your wine?"

He set it on the table between them so she could read the label. "It is. I thought you might want to try it. I assume, since you're here, that you like wine."

She liked the look of their label. The font was stylish and sophisticated, and the graphic was simple but elegant—an archway with the sun setting behind it. She ran her fingertips over the embossing of West Arch Estate. "Classy branding."

"Thanks. I'll take credit for that."

She half smiled at his arrogance. "Why does that not surprise me?"

He grinned. "Fine, I'll share credit with my pal Evan Archer. He's the creative director at Archer Brewing and so far, I guess, at West Arch. He designed the font and created the graphic, but it really was my idea."

"It's very nice. Makes sense you would have a handle on wine branding, considering what you used to do."

He froze for a moment, studying her. "Wait a sec. You know who I am. I didn't put it together when you asked if this was my wine, but you know me."

"Yes, you're Cameron Westcott."

"Well, damn. I'm afraid you've got me at a disadvantage, because I don't know you."

She liked having him at a disadvantage and suspected he wasn't terribly familiar with the sensation. "Pour me a glass of that pinot, and maybe I'll tell you."

The wine was already open and just had a cork stuck in the top, which he pulled out. He laughed as he splashed the garnet liquid into her glass. "Maybe, huh? Why only maybe?"

"If your wine sucks, I'm ditching you immediately."

He laughed again. "Fair enough."

She vaguely realized she was flirting with him again, but decided it was harmless. People flirted all the time. Hell, flirting was a huge part of her job. Wine didn't sell itself.

She picked up the glass and swirled the wine around the bowl.

"Hold on," he said. "Are you really qualified to say if our wine sucks?"

She stared at him, the glass on its way to her lips. "I'm a wholesale wine distributor, smart-ass."

His eyes widened briefly, and then he sat back in his chair, a grin playing across his sexy mouth. "Then by all means, judge away."

She sniffed the aroma first and picked up a strong cherry along with licorice and cola. She sipped and let the wine linger on her tongue. It was young, but it had great promise. She took another whiff before glancing at him. "My name is Brooke Ellis."

His lips spread into a full, satisfied grin. "I guess that means our wine doesn't suck, Brooke

Ellis.”

“No, it doesn’t.” In fact, it was quite good. Or it would be, anyway. “How much of this do you have?”

“Less than a hundred cases.”

“*That* sucks.”

He sat forward in his chair, his face animated. “Does it? I have to admit I’ve been excited about this wine, but nervous too. You really like it?”

“I do.” His enthusiasm and uncertainty were both alluring and endearing, two things she hadn’t expected this player to be. And he *was* a player—she shouldn’t forget that.

She took another sip of the wine, liking it even more on the second drink. “How many cases do you have from the last harvest?”

“Don’t know yet. The pinot is all still in barrel. Hayden’s mulling what to bottle. We’ll do some single vineyard, but he’s planning an estate blend too.” His excitement was palpable. It had to be incredibly exhilarating to start your own winery.

“Did you bring anything else tonight?”

“A couple of whites—a pinot gris and a chardonnay. You want to taste them? They’re over at Hayden’s table.” He inclined his head to where a group of people stood milling about.

She hesitated but decided there was no harm in drinking wine with him. Plus, she wanted to meet the winemaker. “Sure. Looks like there’s a bit of a buzz going on over there.”

He stood up, smiling. “Just what we want.” He held her chair, pulling it back as she stood.

She slipped the strap of her small clutch over her wrist and picked up her glass. Her friends’ purses were still on the table, but they weren’t her responsibility since they’d ditched her.

Brooke sipped her wine as they made their way to the other table. The man Cameron had been with earlier was there—evidently, Naomi hadn’t been able to track him down. Or, perhaps more accurately, she’d found someone else.

Cameron stopped next to him. “Brooke, this is my brother Luke. He’s the vineyard manager.”

Brooke shook his hand. “Hi, I’m Brooke Ellis. I work for Willamette Distributors.”

Luke nodded. “Good company. Nice to meet you.”

She saw the resemblance between them in the dark shade of their hair, their wide foreheads, and the supple curve of their lips. Luke’s eyes were a dark brown, while Cameron’s were green. And where Luke had a faint beard, which a lot of women found sexy, Cameron was clean-shaven, which Brooke found even sexier. Overall, Luke exuded a casual, outdoorsy vibe, while Cameron looked more formal, from his expensive sandals to the crisp, pressed lines of his button-down shirt grazing his lean hips. He also smelled amazing, like clove and pine. She’d tag him at least slightly metrosexual, but in an exceedingly masculine way. Cameron Westcott was, unfortunately, precisely the kind of guy who did it for her.

Damn.

Cameron tapped another guy on the shoulder. He turned, and Brooke knew immediately he was another Westcott. He and Cameron were exactly the same height, possessed indistinguishable noses, and the set of their eyes was identical, though this one’s were hazel.

“Brooke, this is our youngest brother, Jamie.”

Jamie smiled, and she realized that together, all three brothers could probably power every string of lights hanging from the trees with the wattage from their smiles. Wow, what a cheesy thought.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” he said with a slight bow.

Brooke smiled at him, her shoulders arching. "Very gallant."

Cameron rolled his eyes. "He lived in England for a couple of years and came back with these obnoxious manners."

Brooke gave him a prim stare. "I think they're nice."

Jamie laughed. "Score one for the little brother." He nodded toward the glass in her hand. "Did you try the pinot?"

She nodded. "It's excellent." She finished what was left in her glass. "I was hoping to sample the pinot gris or the chardonnay."

"Get the pinot gris first. It's running low." Jamie turned and reached past a woman to tap a man's arm. "Hayden, hand me the pinot gris."

The man, who Brooke surmised was Hayden Archer, gave Jamie the bottle. "Last one. Be judicious."

"Pouring for a wine distributor," Luke said, gesturing toward Brooke.

Hayden pivoted and stepped toward them with a smile. "Hi, I'm Hayden Archer."

Brooke took his hand. "Brooke Ellis, Willamette Distributors. Your pinot is amazing."

"Thanks. I'm glad you like it." He took her glass and went to grab a bottle of water from the table. "Can't let you drink the whites without a clean glass." He swirled water in the bowl and tossed it on the ground. "Much better." He handed it back to her, then took the bottle from Jamie to pour it himself.

As with the red, she swirled the liquid in her glass. She sniffed and picked up pear, lemongrass, and spearmint. When she tasted it, the flavors of starfruit and apricot danced across her tongue. She savored the swallow and took another. It was an incredibly refreshing wine for a hot summer night. "This is outstanding."

Hayden grinned. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

A voice interrupted them from the other side of the table. "Hey, Hayden, I hear you're pouring the best pinot gris in the place."

"Excuse me." Hayden gave her a warm smile before taking off around the table.

"This is a great night for him," Cameron said, proud of his friend and proud of West Arch.

Jamie raised his glass in a toast. "It's a great night for all of us."

Luke lifted his too. "That it is."

The three brothers tapped their glasses together, and Cameron looked at Brooke. He nodded toward her glass, and, mesmerized by his stare, she joined in.

"To West Arch," Cameron said. "And making new friends."

Friends? Yeah, okay, she could do that. But nothing more.

"On to the chardonnay?" he asked her.

"Definitely." He found a bottle on the table, and she finished her pinot gris to make room for the chardonnay.

He gave her a healthy pour. "We have plenty of this. It's still a bit young, but I think it'll be pretty damn special in about six months."

She tasted it and agreed with him. "Don't hate me, but I like the pinot gris more. That's a personal preference, though. Chardonnay has never been a favorite of mine."

"Me neither, actually." He lowered his voice. "I have a secret love for off-dry Riesling. I convinced Luke and Hayden to plant some last summer."

She liked Riesling too and proceeded to take him down a rathole of her favorite producers. She blushed as she realized she'd been talking for a few minutes without a break. "Sorry, I'm kind of passionate about wine."

“I like that—wine and passion are two of my favorite things.”

She stared into his green eyes, fringed with ridiculously long, dark lashes, and thought she could dive right into their depths and never come up for air. Damn, that was even cheesier than her thought about their smiling. Then again, she’d already had a few glasses of wine since they’d arrived.

Wine. That was why she was here. Not to flirt with a guy with a horrible reputation. “Well, thanks for the wine. I appreciate you introducing me to it.”

“It was my pleasure. Is there anything else you want to taste? I know a bunch of folks.”

She tried not to laugh. “Um, I do too. Anyway, I should let you get to your adoring fans. You guys are attracting quite a buzz and rightly so.”

She started to turn, but he touched her arm and moved closer. His scent was all around her, and he was near enough that she could feel his warmth. Her body instinctively gravitated toward him, but she willed herself not to bend. Not with Cameron Westcott. Hell, not with anyone. Ugh, her friends were right—she needed to get back out there. Except she wasn’t sure she knew how.

“Stay with me. It’ll be fun.” His voice was low. Seductive. Dangerous. “Later we can cozy up by the bonfire.”

Oh, he was *good*. And Jana was right about his fuckability factor—off the freaking charts. Her heart had sped up, and the sound of it beating seemed to flood her ears. This wasn’t good. She wasn’t ready. Not for this. Definitely not for him. “No, I think it’s best if we say good night. Thanks for the wine.”

His brow furrowed, but he let his fingers slip away from her arm. She felt a tinge of loss but vowed she wouldn’t regret this.

“Can I call you?”

Damn, he was persistent. But she hadn’t built a wall around herself since her divorce just to see it torn down in a single evening. “No.” The lines in his forehead deepened. “Look, I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong idea. I didn’t mean to be...flirty. But I’m not interested. *At all.*”

He exhaled and took a step back from her. “Cool. I get it. See you around.” The words were clipped, but not rude. He was trying to be a gentleman, because, well, maybe he *was* a gentleman, and since she’d given him the brush-off, he was doing his best to hide his disappointment.

Ugh. Now she felt bad. She turned from him before she could change her mind. Before regret took hold of her.

As she made her way back to her table, she realized it was too late.

Chapter Three

By the time noon rolled around on Friday, Cam and his cohorts—Luke, Jamie, and Hayden—were sweaty, disgusting messes. They'd spent the morning in the uppermost region of the vineyard, checking fruit, removing leaves, and pretty much getting as hot as possible. Not that Cam minded. He loved this job more than he thought possible. This morning, he was sweating it out in the vineyard, but later he'd be working in his office on a variety of things, from marketing to event planning and coordination to updating their website.

The four of them walked into the shade and air-conditioned comfort of the winery. Hayden turned as he took off his hat. "Too bad there's no salmon bake to look forward to tomorrow night." His exhalation held a wistful quality.

"Dude, you read my mind," Cam said, grinning. "I was just thinking about that. What a great night. We've had a lot of interest this week—the wine dinner next month is filling up fast."

"Excellent." Hayden shook his head and looked around at the other three. "I still can't believe this is actually happening."

Luke swept his hat off and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Believe it."

Two years ago, Jamie had pitched the idea as a joke as they'd sat drinking beer in Hayden's family's flagship brewpub, The Arch and Vine, in the center of Ribbon Ridge. It hadn't been a serious discussion, but every one of them had walked away thinking about the possibilities. For Cameron, he'd been tired of traveling, of feeling disconnected. His parents, particularly his mother, had constantly hounded him about being gone so much, but in the early years, he'd needed that lifestyle. He'd thrived on the unexpected, the sense of adventure, and excelling at his job.

But the opportunity to start something with his brothers and his best friend had grabbed him hard and fast. He'd immersed himself in it ever since.

"How are things coming for the wine dinner?" Jamie asked.

Cam and Hayden were working on it with Hayden's brother Kyle and his sister Sara. The Archers owned and operated a luxury hotel, The Alex, in the hills over Ribbon Ridge, and Kyle, a world-class celebrity chef, managed the restaurant, The Arch and Fox, while Sara was the event manager for the entire property. It was a no-brainer for them to unveil the wines of West Arch there. The dinner would take place the weekend after Labor Day, just six weeks from now.

"Kyle and Sara are on top of the logistics," Cam said. "I'd like to get some high level wine critics in so I'll be working that angle."

Jamie threw him a humor-filled, teasing little brother look. "Is Brooke Ellis coming to the dinner?"

Cam knew Jamie was flipping him shit. "I didn't invite her." Not after she'd turned his overtures down flat.

Luke set his hat back on his head. "I was surprised she left before you. Or did you hook up later?"

"Nope."

Hayden looked at him in mock pity. "Damn, I think you're losing your touch."

Cam snorted, but there was a bit of truth in Hayden's words. Since Cam had noted that his love life had tamed over the past two years, he'd started to think about why. It had to be because he was too busy. Anyway, he wasn't a monk.

Jamie set his hands on his hips. “What happened there? She seemed kind of flirty when we were tasting the wine.”

Yeah, Cam had thought so too, but she’d set him straight. He’d certainly tried—three times, and that was his rule: three strikes, and he was out. Total bummer because he’d really liked her. She was funny and smart. He could’ve talked wine with her into the wee hours. Now he was disappointed that he never would.

Cam lifted a shoulder as he answered his brother. “It’s no big deal. Just no connection there.”

Luke blew out a breath. “Too bad. Man, her friend was pretty eager, though. She stalked me all night.”

The tall one with the long, dark hair and the sultry eyes. Very attractive, and yeah, she’d hung around, even after Brooke had gone. “I saw that,” Cam said. “What happened?”

Luke shrugged. “Nothing.”

“You give me shit about being a player, but you’re a regular hermit when it comes to female companionship.”

Luke arched a brow. “And how would you know?”

Cam nodded toward Jamie. “Because you live with him, and you apparently hardly ever date.”

Luke elbowed Jamie in the arm. “What the hell, bro?”

Jamie elbowed him back. “What the hell is right. You *don’t* date. No big deal. I guess it’s because of your ex back in California, but who knows, since you never want to talk about her.”

Luke made a noise that was half snort and half scoff. “Whatever. I’m grabbing some lunch, then heading back out.” He’d spend the rest of the day with his vines.

“I’ll join you later,” Hayden called after him.

Luke waved his hand as he started up the stairs to the uppermost floor, where they all had offices with bathrooms—and what Cam was most after: a shower.

“I’m running home for lunch,” Hayden said. He and his wife, Bex, had built a house last year on a couple of acres just up the road. “See you guys in a bit.”

Jamie turned toward the stairs that Luke had gone up. “I need a shower, and then I’ve got numbers to crunch.”

“Ditto,” Cam said. “On the shower anyway. Keep your numbers away from me.”

Jamie was terrifyingly intelligent, with multiple master’s degrees from the London School of Economics. He took care of everything and anything to do with money, and Cam had no doubt he’d see this winery turning a profit in no time.

Jamie chuckled as they went upstairs together. They parted at the top. Jamie’s and Luke’s offices were on the south side of the building, while Cam’s and Hayden’s were on the north. The center portion was claimed by a large space, some of which would go to employees they would hire down the road, plus a conference room overlooking the vineyard.

Cam went to his office and beelined for the bathroom he shared with Hayden. While toweling off after his shower, he heard his phone ring. Wrapping the towel around his waist, he dashed out and picked up the receiver, but it was too late.

He set the phone down and started back toward the bathroom, then froze at the sound of a feminine voice.

“Hello?”

The query came from outside his office. He went to his door, which was ajar, and peered through the space. At the same moment, Brooke Ellis’s blue-green gaze connected with his.

And here he was in nothing but a towel. He stifled a smile at his luck.

"Uh, I can come back later," she said, clearly trying not to look south of his face and failing miserably.

"No, it's fine. Come in." He opened the door wider.

She hesitated.

"You can sit while I get dressed," he said.

Her eyes widened briefly. "Really, I can come back later. Or wait out here."

He laughed. "I wasn't going to get dressed in front of you. Unless you want me to."

Pink bloomed in her cheeks. "Clearly, I don't."

"I have chairs in here. And a couch." Her eyes widened again, and again he tried not to laugh. "That you can *sit* on while I go into the bathroom, *close the door*, and make myself presentable. Sound good?"

Still, she hesitated, but finally said, "Sure." She walked toward him slowly, and he couldn't help but appreciate the view. She wore a sleeveless red-and-white-floral sundress with red sandals. Her toenails were painted red too, and they'd been coral the other night. Yeah, he noticed things like that. Just like he noticed the sexy gold chain hugging her ankle.

She stepped into the office, and he gestured to the mini fridge tucked beneath a granite counter in the corner. "Help yourself to whatever," he said. "There's water, iced tea, and a Riesling." He winked at her before going into the bathroom to get dressed.

He hurried, half afraid she would leave before he could finish and curious as hell as to why she'd come.

When he went back out, she was standing at the floor-to-ceiling windows, which afforded a stunning view of the vineyard and Ribbon Ridge beyond.

"This is gorgeous. How do you work? I'd just stare at this all day."

He moved to stand beside her. "Sometimes it's tough, I'll admit. But I do love my job, so that helps."

"I bet," she murmured, and he loved the dark, seductive sound of her voice.

He looked at her empty hands. "You didn't get anything to drink?"

She turned her head to look at him. "I didn't want to open the Riesling."

"Not one of your favorites?"

"Just the opposite. It would be a shame to open it now and have just one glass."

Cam grinned. "So, we'll have more than one."

Her lips curved into a half-smile. "I'm working."

He went to the fridge and grabbed a sparkling water. "Is that why you're here?" He downed half the bottle before sitting in the comfy leather chair that was angled near the couch.

She came to join him, perching on the dark brown leather sofa, where she'd dropped her shoulder bag. "Yes, actually."

"Bummer. I was hoping you'd changed your mind about going out with me."

She smoothed her hand over her skirt, which fell across her knee. "I don't remember you asking me out. You asked if you could call me."

"You are *such* a stickler for details."

"I'm a stickler for accuracy." She straightened, assuming a businesslike posture. "Anyway, let's stay on topic, shall we?"

Damn, he loved talking to her, even if they were sparring. Especially if they were sparring. She was sharp and engaging—flirty, even if she didn't mean to be. "By all means."

"I came to talk to you about your wine. Have you selected a distributor yet?"

He should've seen this coming, but he'd been too distracted by his attraction to her. "No. You think it should be you?"

"I do. I love your wines, and I think I have a good handle on how to sell them."

He didn't disagree. Her comments about them reflected a keen knowledge and a true love of wine. Still, he wanted to make her work for this. A woman he used to see had once called him sadistic because he'd taunted her too much in bed. Maybe she was right.

"Tell me how." He sat back in the chair and took another drink of water, all while scrutinizing her and thinking about his damn three-strikes rule. He wanted to ignore it and try again. Hell, he wanted to torch it to the ground and put everything he had into pursuing her, but he wasn't a stalker. Still, if they hired her as their distributor, they'd see each other often enough, and maybe that would be all he needed to wear her down. She couldn't be disinterested. Not with the way she flirted. And definitely not with the way she'd checked him out in his towel.

"My territory is western Oregon and Washington. I have great contacts. Before I moved here, I worked for the Southern Oregon Wine Collective."

Cam had worked with them a little when he'd been at Blackthorn Cellars. "That's a great outfit. Why'd you leave there to come here?"

She hesitated just long enough to make him curious. "It was a promotion." Her gaze darted toward the windows, and that slight telltale sign of nervousness made him even more curious.

"Is that where you're from—southern Oregon?"

"Yes, Medford."

He wished she would open up more. He wondered if she was just trying to keep things focused on business with him or if she was this closed off with everyone. "You go to Southern Oregon University?"

"I did."

"I went to Oregon State." He cocked his head and studied her a moment. She looked confident in the way she held herself and assured in the manner in which she spoke. Even so, he sensed an underlying uncertainty. "You don't like to talk about yourself, do you?"

"Not in this sort of environment, though I understand you wanting to understand my professional experience and expertise." She then launched into an overview of her accounts in her territory and how she went about selling wine. She also impressed the hell out of him.

"You really know your stuff," he said when she was finished. "But this isn't just up to me. I have to talk about it with my partners."

"Sure, I understand. Let me know what you decide. I'd love the opportunity." She grabbed her bag and stood up.

He jumped to his feet, sorry that their interlude was over. That meant they needed another one. "I'll talk to them as soon as possible," he said. "We're formally unveiling the pinot at a wine dinner in early September. It would be great to have a distributor in place to spark some buzz. How about we have dinner to discuss it?"

She'd started walking toward his office door, but paused and turned, her brow arched. "Tonight? I'm headed down to Medford for the weekend. It's my younger sister's birthday."

"Next week then. How about Tuesday? We could go up to The Arch and Fox. Or Georgia's." Those were the two best restaurants in Ribbon Ridge.

"Sure, I'd love to talk to the others in person." She flashed him a bright smile that made his stomach flip with its intensity and beauty. "That way they can see what a great salesperson I am."

Oh, he could see it, and he was completely smitten. He'd buy whatever the hell she wanted

to sell him. She'd neatly turned what could've become a date into a business meeting with other people so that she didn't have to be alone with him. He couldn't help but respect her prowess. "You're formidable," he said as he held the office door open and gestured for her to precede him. "I'll walk you out."

She started down the stairs. "This is an amazing facility. When will you be open for tasting?"

He trailed her to the main floor. "Not until November. The tasting room's not done yet. Hey, do you want a tour?"

"I do, but I can't today. I have another appointment I need to get to."

He understood. The workday of a wine distributor was busy at best and positively frenetic at worst.

He moved through the unfinished tasting room and passed her to open the door to the parking area in front. "After you."

She walked by him, and he inhaled her sweet, intoxicating scent. It certainly looked as though he was going to blow right through his three-strikes rule. He couldn't seem to help himself.

She dug into her bag and pulled out a pair of sunglasses, then slid them on, shielding her magnificent blue-green eyes. What a shame. But he couldn't deny she was just as sexy with the Burberry shades.

He didn't have his sunglasses on him, so he used his hand to shield his eyes. "I'll see you Tuesday night—you didn't pick where."

"Georgia's. It's close to where I live. I'll meet you there at seven."

"Perfect." It was close to where he lived too, and he wondered if they were maybe neighbors. He surely would've run into her, but maybe she was new to the neighborhood. He wanted to ask—hell, he wanted to know everything about her—but decided to save it for Tuesday night. For their date. Because, sadly, his partners weren't going to be able to make it.

"See you then." She turned and went to her car, a fairly new, dark gray Acura MDX, and climbed inside.

He waited until she drove away before going back into the winery. That was when the reality of what he was doing hit him. He was pursuing her. But for what? He hadn't lied about not being a player anymore, but he also didn't usually feel this way about a woman.

And what way was that? Like he wanted to know everything about her. Like he wanted to talk with her long into the night. Like he wanted to share himself.

Cold dread curled up his spine. He liked women. Loved them, in fact. And he did his best to be honest and give them a great time for however long they were together. He never, ever wanted to hurt anyone, and he'd been careful not to do so. Eight years on, and his own pain still lingered, still made him want to keep things casual and...safe.

He'd be damned sure to continue that.

Chapter Four

Brooke walked into Georgia's just before seven on Tuesday. It seemed especially dim inside after the brightness of outside. The hostess greeted her, and Brooke said she was meeting the Westcotts.

Smiling, the hostess said, "Right this way." She led Brooke to a small table in the corner in front of a window. It was empty but only had two seats.

"You beat me here." Cameron came up behind her, and Brooke turned.

She narrowed her eyes at him, uncertain of his motives before looking at the hostess. "We'll need a table for five, actually."

"Uh, no, we don't," Cameron said. He went to the table and held out a chair for her. "I'm afraid it's just us. My brothers and Hayden couldn't make it."

She didn't believe that for a second but didn't say so. Not yet anyway. She threw him a skeptical glare but took the proffered seat and set her purse on the floor beside her.

Cameron sat across from her as the hostess handed them their menus and told them about the specials. He looked up at her and asked, "Can we have a bottle of the 2012 Bergstrom Pinot?"

"Sure thing." She turned and left.

Brooke peered at him over her menu. "I don't get to choose the wine? Or at least consult?"

He looked mildly offended. "That's a fantastic bottle of wine I ordered. You disagree?"

No, she couldn't disagree. "It might have been nice if you'd asked. I was in the mood for Beaux Frères."

"Then I'll order that too." He set his menu down and looked at her. "I'm sorry. Really. I should've asked what you wanted to drink." His lips twisted into a half-smile. "That's what I get for trying to impress you."

Now she felt shrewish. But could she blame herself when she was clearly being manipulated? "Where are your brothers and Hayden, really?"

He picked the menu back up and studied it. "Busy."

"Did you even invite them?" She should've contacted them herself.

He didn't look up from the menu. "I, ah, mentioned it."

She shook her head and repeated what she'd told him at the salmon bake. "You *are* a menace."

Now he lifted his gaze, and his eyes sparked with mirth. "I thought we'd resolved that you ran into me at the salmon bake. Or is this something you're going to hold over me forever?"

Forever. That intimated a shared future. Did that mean she'd won the contract with the winery, or did he have other...plans, of a more personal nature? She narrowed her eyes again. "You're not scoring a lot of points here."

He laughed. "Tell you what. You order my dinner. I'll eat whatever you choose."

It was a silly offer, but she planned to take it. She looked over the appetizers and entrées. "Any dietary issues I need to be aware of?"

"What, like am I vegan or gluten-free? No and no. I'm full glutton."

She glanced at him, and though he was seated now, she'd noted his slim khakis and the way they hugged his hips. "I don't buy that for a second. You're in too good a shape."

He grinned at her. "Glad you noticed. It's all that work in the vineyard. Keeps us hopping."

Great, now he thought she'd been checking him out. Which she had. She couldn't help it. He was very attractive with his perfectly styled brown hair, seductive green eyes, and sexy-casual sense of style. Plus, she knew that underneath his shirt he possessed a spectacular set of abs. Add in his killer smile, and she could very easily be in trouble.

Which was why she had to be on her guard.

Their server arrived then and poured the wine. Cameron indicated that she should taste the sample, which she did. He'd chosen exceptionally well, damn him. She nodded at the server, who filled their glasses and said he'd be back shortly to take their order.

Brooke perused the possibilities and considered ordering him the vegan risotto just to be a pain in the ass but decided not to.

"So what am I eating?" he asked, interrupting her selection process.

"I'm having the filet, and you're having the duck."

"Excellent, though I might've chosen the filet too."

"Too bad. You gave me full control."

He picked up his wine and gave her a sly, sultry smile. "You can have all the control you want." He held his glass toward her. "To relinquishing control."

She rolled her eyes but clinked her glass against his. "Your attempts at flirtation are lame and pointless. This is a business dinner. If we aren't going to talk about business, I'll go. I have plenty to do at home."

Though she'd moved into her loft four weeks ago, she still had a few boxes to unpack and pictures to hang.

He sipped his wine. "Okay, let's talk business. You've got the job."

Triumph surged in her chest. This would be a great account. "Thanks. You *did* talk to your brothers and Hayden, right?"

"Of course I did. We're full partners."

"And they didn't want to meet with me?"

He arched a brow at her. "They met you at the salmon bake and, given my background in sales and marketing, they trust my judgment."

That made sense. She still wished she'd had the chance to talk with them. "I was kind of looking forward to discussing the winemaking."

"You still can. Why don't you come by this weekend for that tour? We're there every day. Luke will take you around the vineyard, and Hayden will tell you more than you want to know about his process."

"I'd love that. How about Saturday around one?"

"Done."

She reached down to grab her purse. "Well, I guess we don't really need to have dinner, do we?"

"Wait." He gestured toward the wine bottle on the table. "We have all this fantastic wine to drink, and now I have my mouth set on that duck. Plus, it's not like we don't have things to discuss. I could give you a complete overview of our wine catalog—small though it is at present." He glanced toward the approaching server. "He's coming back to take our order. I'll leave my fate in your hands." He sat back in his chair and watched her.

He seemed dead set on letting her be in control, which meant she could conclude this evening right now. Except as soon as the server arrived, she placed their order.

When they were alone once more, Cameron sat forward. "I'm surprised. But pleased." His gaze brimmed with anticipation. "Thank you."

She was pretty sure he was looking at this as some kind of date, or at least half business, half date, so she cast him an arch look. “This isn’t a date.” Was she informing him or herself? She had to admit she liked Cameron, and she found his persistence... Well, she wasn’t sure what she found it. But she didn’t *dislike* it. “Tell me about your wines.”

He smiled broadly. “Happy to.”

He spent the next ten minutes telling her how they’d started the winery two years ago, and that they’d only claimed a small percentage of grapes from that vintage. They’d made some limited cases of chardonnay and pinot gris, and slightly more of a pinot noir—the one she’d tasted the other night. Last year, the entire yield was theirs, which had given them a good supply of the whites and would generate a handful of varieties of pinot noir.

His enthusiasm was infectious. Brooke smiled as she wrapped her fingertips around the stem of her glass. “I can’t wait to come see the operation and taste everything you’ve got.”

He started to smile and maybe open his mouth, but he took a drink of wine instead.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Were you going to make some sort of innuendo?”

He set his glass down and sighed. “Guilty as charged. Sorry, I really am trying to keep to business. At the same time, I have to tell you that I’m incredibly attracted to you.” He said this with a matter-of-fact tone, without intensity, without any layered nuance. It made her shiver nonetheless. “Sorry, I probably shouldn’t have said that since we *do* have a business relationship, but you’ll find that I’m a straight shooter. I figured I had two choices—ignore that attraction or come clean. The former seems kind of impossible, so I went with the latter.” He grinned at her.

She was having a hard time thinking of him as a smarmy player when he was so forthright and charming. She was inconveniently attracted to him too. But she didn’t say so. “I appreciate you focusing on business—and I would appreciate you *trying* to ignore your, uh, attraction. Because that’s so not happening. That said, I, ah, I have to admit you aren’t quite what I expected.”

“Uh-oh. I’m not sure if that’s good or bad.”

“Good, I think. I expected you to be, I don’t know...*cheesy*.” She shrugged. “And I guess you are.”

“I am?” He sounded incredulous but laughed.

“A little.” She grinned. “But it’s kind of cute.”

His eyes sparkled as he smiled at her. “I’ll take it.”

Their dinners arrived, and the conversation turned to wine once more. She was shocked to learn he hadn’t been to France.

He shook his head. “I know, right? And my best friend was making wine over there for a year.”

She scooped a bite of garlic mashed potatoes. “Hayden?”

He nodded. “He interned in Burgundy before we started up West Arch. I’d meant to go but just couldn’t get away that year. I take it you’ve been?”

“Yeah, a few times.”

“A *few* times. I’m green with envy.”

“Well, the first time was a college trip to Paris. But since then, I’ve been a couple of times. We hit Burgundy on the first trip and Bordeaux on the second.”

He swallowed a bite of duck and washed it back with sip of wine. “Who’s ‘we’?”

Crap, she’d walked right into that one. But her marriage wasn’t a secret. “Uh, my ex.”

“Boyfriend?”

She cut a piece of steak. “Husband.”

“Ah. A little more complicated. Why is he your ex?”

That wasn’t a secret *per se* either, but it was firmly in the do-not-discuss-with-almost-everybody category. “Complicated is the perfect word. Also boring. You don’t really want to hear about my ex-husband, do you?”

His lips split into a smile. “Actually, no, I do not. What I would like is a bite of that steak, since that’s what I would’ve ordered.”

She looked at the piece of meat on her fork. “I don’t know. This is really good. I’m not sure I want to share.”

“Pretty please? I’ll give you a piece of duck.” He batted his eyelashes for added persuasion, but it only made him look ridiculous.

Brooke giggled. “I don’t actually like duck.”

His forehead wrinkled. “You ordered me something you don’t even like?” He chuckled. “Well played.”

“Sorry. It honestly didn’t occur to me that *you* wouldn’t like it. You said you were full glutton after all.”

“That’s true. I love food, including duck, and I’ll try pretty much anything. Just don’t ask me to cook it.”

“Is that right? I love to cook.” She was ecstatic to have her own kitchen after sharing a house with Jana the past year. She’d moved in with her former college roommate when she’d first moved up here.

“Then you should cook for me some time, especially if we’re neighbors. You said you lived nearby, right?”

“Yes. Do you want this steak or not?” She waved the fork at him.

“Oh, I want it.”

She rolled her eyes as she leaned forward and held it to him to take the bite. “You can’t keep yourself from flirting, can you?”

He chewed and swallowed, his lips curving into a satisfied smile. “That is amazing. You definitely have the better dinner. And clearly I *can* help myself. I did earlier, remember?”

She remembered. She acknowledged that she liked his flirtatious behavior. It wasn’t over the top—yet. Still, she steered the conversation to something safer, if such a thing existed with Cameron Westcott. “Have you lived in Ribbon Ridge a long time?”

“My whole life. My dad’s the middle school principal, and my mom’s the head secretary at the elementary school.”

“And you have just the two brothers?”

He forked a green bean. “Three, actually. I have a half-brother.”

“He’s not in on your winery?”

“He built it, actually. He’s a contractor. Super busy now too—thanks to The Alex Hotel and the winery, he has more commercial projects than he can handle.”

“Wow.” Brooke remembered reading about The Alex when it had opened. It was a former monastery and current luxury hotel in the hills over Ribbon Ridge. It was owned and operated by the Archers, who also owned her building. “This really is a small town, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Totally. I assumed you were new here since I hadn’t met you before.”

“I only moved in about a month ago. I was living in Newberg before that.”

He slid the rest of his duck onto his fork. “What drew you to Ribbon Ridge?”

“I just wanted a place of my own—I had a roommate before—and this was the first place I found.”

“Seems like you’re going out of your way to avoid telling me where you live.” He chuckled again as he sat back. “Just so you know, I have every intention of asking to walk you home.”

She actually hadn’t been trying *not* to tell him. “It isn’t a secret—I live in the lofts over on Second.”

His mouth spread into a wide smile. “And I live directly across the street in one of the row houses.”

Of course he did. She shook her head and tipped it down toward her plate, an answering smile tugging at her lips. She finally gave in and looked at him. “How convenient.”

His eyes glinted with humor and something else that made her stomach flip. “Very.”

She finished the last of her dinner, and he poured the remainder of the wine into their glasses.

He swirled the wine in his glass as he studied her. “I wondered if you moved here to get away from the ex. Was he the roommate in Newberg?”

“I thought we agreed that was a boring topic.”

“We did, my bad. I find you infinitely interesting—even the boring topics.” He took a drink of wine, and his gaze was intense, provocative.

“Maybe we should go back to talking about business. We should schedule a meeting—maybe next week—to discuss the quantity of product you want me to sell. I’d like to get started.”

“Sounds good. We’re doing a formal debut at a dinner at The Arch and Fox in September. If you have some people you think would be good to invite, let me know.”

A few people came immediately to mind, but she’d put together a list for him. “Well, me, for one.”

“Consider yourself seated at my table.”

She laughed softly, expecting him to say something like that. “I’ll get you a list tomorrow.”

Their server returned to take their plates and asked if they wanted dessert. Neither had room, so Cameron asked for the check. After the server had left, he finished his wine. “I should’ve asked if you wanted a late harvest Riesling or a port.”

“I’m fine. Don’t get me wrong, I rarely turn down a good wine, but I should get home. I have an early start tomorrow.”

The server brought the check, and Cameron paid it. “It’s business,” he said, glancing up at her with mirth in his eyes. “Not a date.”

No, it wasn’t a date, but it had contained date-like moments. She’d forgotten how nice those could be.

He put his credit card away and looked over at her. “Ready?”

“Yep.” She grabbed her purse and stood.

He gestured for her to precede him from the restaurant. The sun was starting to set, casting the sidewalk in golden shadow. “It seems silly to ask if I can walk you home since we’re going in the same direction.”

“It does.” She thought back to his arrival just after her. “Did you follow me earlier?”

“No, I made a stop on the way so I came from the opposite direction.”

They crossed the street and made their way toward Second. She glanced over at his profile. She’d had a good time tonight. She liked him. A real date might be nice... But this was Cameron Westcott. Did he even do real dates?

She readjusted the strap of her purse on her shoulder. “So, tell me how you came to be a player.”

He barked out a laugh. “You nearly made me trip. Not going to beat around the bush with

that one, huh?” He looked over at her, smiling.

“Nope. I’m taking a page from your playbook and shooting straight. You don’t deny your reputation?”

“Nope,” he echoed. “I will say that I’ve mellowed a bit recently. I’m too busy with the winery.”

“So if not for the winery, you’d be up to your usual shenanigans.”

“Shenanigans... Yes, I suppose so.” He lifted a shoulder. “Maybe not. I don’t know. What do you mean by ‘shenanigans’?”

She kept her gaze forward. “I hear you had a different girl in every city when you were on the road.”

They turned the corner, and she stopped as they reached the door to her building.

He stopped too and turned toward her. “Not *every* city. And anyway, I don’t travel anymore.”

“Right. You’re busy. Does that mean you don’t date?”

He moved closer. “Are you asking me out?”

The scent of his cologne stole over her. The green of his eyes at this range was so deep, so captivating, she could easily sway toward him and... She straightened her shoulders. “No.”

“Well, that’s a damn shame.” His words carried a dark, seductive tone of regret. “Guess I’ll have to ask you out—since I wasn’t clear about it before.”

“No. Thank you,” she rushed to add. “I had a nice time tonight, but I’d prefer to keep our relationship strictly professional.”

“Too bad,” he said softly. “I was sort of hoping I could kiss you.”

Standing here with him in the early twilight, feeling the intoxicating burn of his stare, she was sort of hoping that too. But she hadn’t done that in so long... And she wasn’t ready. Okay, her body was totally ready, but her mind was still trying to figure out what the hell to do with Cameron Westcott.

“Cameron—”

“Cam. Everyone calls me Cam.” He inched closer so that she could *feel* his proximity, and heat raced through her. “At least everyone who likes me.”

“Cam, I—”

“Oh good, you like me.”

She couldn’t help smiling. He was good at that—making her smile. No one had been good at that in a very long time. Not even herself. Especially not herself. “I do. And... Well, ask me again sometime.”

Had she just said that out loud?

“If I can kiss you?” He leaned forward, putting his lips against her ear. “Count on it.” He stepped back. “Good night.”

“Good night.” She watched him cross the street to the row house on the end, directly across from her. She expected him to turn and look at her, wave or something. But he didn’t. He walked inside and closed the door, leaving her to wonder if she should’ve listened to her body instead.

Chapter Five

After finishing the last bite of his dad's mouthwatering ribs, Cam wondered for the thousandth time why he couldn't cook. It just wasn't fair, not when his dad was so good at it. Maybe he should try again. "Dad, will you send me the recipe one more time?"

Cam's mom's head snapped toward him. Her green eyes, which Cam had inherited, widened in shock. "You're going to cook something?"

Everyone chuckled around the table, which prompted Emma to squeal in her high chair between her parents. Sara and Dylan both turned to their five-month-old daughter and made silly faces and nonsensical comments. Cam smiled as he answered his mom, "I'm going to *try* to cook something. Don't hold your breath."

Mom got up and started gathering plates. Sara joined her, saying, "Let me help you clear the table."

Dad jumped to his feet. "Come on boys. Sara, sit and enjoy your daughter." When Dylan stood, Dad waved him back down. "Not you. The other ones."

Dylan leaned back in his chair and grinned tauntingly at his half-brothers.

Cam picked up his plate and one of the serving dishes and bussed them to the kitchen, passing Dad on his way back out. Mom stood at the open dishwasher and shook her head at her three sons. "Look at all of you—*alone*. Couldn't one of you have brought a date tonight?"

Cam and Luke and Jamie exchanged glances, but it was Cam who spoke. "Don't look at me. You know I'm a committed bachelor. Jamie's the one with a girlfriend. Where's Madison?"

He shrugged. "Busy."

Mom frowned. "You've only brought her over once. Didn't she like us?"

Jamie set the dishes he'd brought on the counter. "We've only been dating a couple of months, and we're not that serious. But really, she's just busy tonight."

"I see." Mom pursed her lips as she started loading dishes in the dishwasher. "What about you, Luke? Why aren't you dating someone?"

"Because he's still hung up on Paige," Jamie said.

Luke scowled at him. "You're full of crap. I don't have time to date anyone. It's summertime, and I've got crops to tend."

Jamie smiled at him. "You're such a good target."

Luke punched him in the arm.

"Ow!" Jamie massaged his bicep.

Luke grinned. "You're a good target too."

Mom straightened. "Boys, knock it off." She added another dish and then lifted her gaze to Cam's. "Maybe if you're willing to try cooking, you'll be willing to try dating someone. It won't kill you, you know."

No, it wouldn't, but his heart had barely recovered from his last girlfriend, and he had no desire to put it to another test. At least not yet and maybe not ever. "Maybe someday, Mom, but like Luke, I'm busy with the winery right now. Sorry, but you're going to have to get your grandma fix with Emma."

That was what this was really about. She adored her step-granddaughter, but she was still just a "step." Mom had never fully embraced Dylan as her son, not when his own mother was still a big part of his life. On one hand, Cam understood her not wanting to intrude on Dylan's

relationship with his mother, but on the other, Cam thought Dylan might have liked that, especially when he was growing up living in two households for a week at a time. It had been a chaotic upbringing, and Cam hated that Dylan had suffered because of it.

Cam supposed it probably played into his reluctance to settle down. Divorce was a common occurrence, and the breakup he'd gone through eight years ago had been just as devastating. He couldn't imagine going through that after marrying someone, especially if they had children.

"And why not?" Luke asked, addressing Cam's comment about getting her grandma fix. "Emma's adorable. In fact, why don't you go do the grandma thing, and we'll finish up in here?"

Mom stopped and looked at them. "Really? That's very nice of you." She smiled, and the warmth in her gaze was full of love and pride. "I have the nicest boys. Thank you." She hugged each of them and started for the dining room but turned back. "Wait, I bet Emma would like a cookie." She grabbed a box of some sort of baby biscuits from the pantry and left.

Luke wiped his hand over his brow. "Whew, dodged that bullet."

Jamie started filling the dishwasher, and Cam went to rinse dishes.

"I knew you weren't just being nice," Jamie said, laughing.

"Hey, whatever it takes to end the inquisition." Luke sent their little brother an arch look. "Unless you'd like me to call her back so she can ask you more questions about why Madison isn't here."

Jamie shuddered. "No, thanks. We've got a low-key thing going. I realized as soon as I brought her to brunch here last month that it was a dumb move. Mom hasn't stopped asking about her since."

Cam handed him a bowl for the dishwasher. "Madison didn't dump you after that, huh?"

"Nah, she actually thought it was cute. She felt flattered that Mom was so interested in her."

Cam wasn't surprised. Their mother could be intense, but she was also fun, and she had no trouble chatting people up. She had a great knack for finding a common topic and making people feel engaged and included. He'd employed some of her techniques in sales situations, and they'd worked well for him.

Jamie pronounced the dishwasher full, so Cam dropped a soap packet into it and programmed it to run later. "You know," Jamie said, "you're both using the winery as an excuse to live a monk-like existence. Cam, I get why you're doing it. I mean, it's been eight freaking years, but whatever. But Luke, from what I can tell, your breakup with Paige wasn't tough. Or is there something you're not telling us?"

Luke and Paige had been together for about three and a half years—most of them in California. They'd tried a long-distance relationship when he'd moved back here two years ago, but it had barely lasted a year. Luke didn't disclose much, so they all assumed the long-distance thing just hadn't worked out. Cam also assumed things hadn't been that serious since she hadn't moved with him. She worked for a winery. It wasn't as if there weren't any winery jobs around Ribbon Ridge.

Luke shook his head. "Don't do Mom's dirty work for her."

Jamie laughed. "Not guilty. Just trying to figure you guys out."

"Why, so you can write a dissertation on romantic relationships?" Cam asked. He was only half kidding. Jamie had told them just yesterday that he was considering pursuing a PhD.

"Ha. Very funny." Jamie leaned back against the counter and folded his arms. "I'm all about the money, man. No psychology or human development for me." Yes, he was a numbers guy through and through. In fact, he was probably the least likely of them to succeed in a romantic relationship given his overly analytical mind. He wasn't so great at demonstrating emotion.

"I'm thinking it's ironic that you're the one in a relationship," Cam said.

Luke grabbed a beer from the fridge and nodded. "Good call." He held up the bottle. "Anyone else?"

"Hit me." Cam held out his hand, and Jamie did the same.

"Let's not get all crazy and call my thing with Madison a relationship," Jamie said. "We hook up once or twice a week maybe. It's extremely casual."

Luke pulled the bottle opener from a drawer and popped his top, then handed it off to Jamie. "Is it exclusive?"

Jamie opened his bottle and rolled his eyes, grinning as he gave the opener to Cam. "Yes. I'm not Cam."

Cam was used to their teasing, but of late it had grown stale. Why did he care? They weren't wrong. He didn't do exclusivity. Not since She-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named.

"True. My bad." Luke lifted his bottle. "To doing whatever the hell we damn well please."

Jamie stepped forward and tapped his bottle to Luke's. "Indeed."

Cam did the same but felt a strange knot in his gut. He'd spent eight years guarding himself from pain and heartbreak, but was that how he planned to spend his entire life? For the first time, he didn't really know.

* * * *

Brooke crossed the finish line of the 10k two seconds before Jana. Naomi, who ran much faster than either of them and had likely finished at least five minutes ago, waved at them from just past the finish area.

After collecting their medals and grabbing waters, Brooke and Jana joined Naomi, who appeared rested and beautiful.

"You barely look like you ran a race," Jana said, her face still red. "I hate you right now."

Naomi laughed. "I run at least five miles every day. This is like a walk in the park for me."

Jana glared at her. "You're not helping defuse my hatred."

Naomi laughed harder. "Sorry."

Jana looked down at herself and made a face. "It's not fair. You have the legs of a gazelle, while mine are like a rhino."

Brooke laughed. Naomi was blessed with long, athletic legs. Her form was built for running, whereas Jana was curvier, and yeah, her legs were kind of short. "Not a rhino. How about a miniature horse?" Brooke suggested.

Jana transferred her glare to Brooke. "You're not helping either." She suddenly laughed. "Screw it. I need a beer. This after-party has beer, right?"

"Yep, and rum." Naomi rubbed her hands together. "And hot guys. I chatted with a trio who finished right behind me. They're waiting for us in the beer garden."

Jana nearly choked on her water. "Ack! I look like hell!"

"You look awesome!" Naomi said. "That shirt does amazing things for your boobs. Which are already amazing. You can envy my legs all you want, but your tits are, well, *tits*."

Brooke snorted. Saying things were "tits," meaning "fantastic," had become Naomi's latest catchphrase.

Jana tossed a bit of water at Naomi, and she jumped back, laughing. "Yeah, well you can *buy* tits if you want them so badly. I'll never have your legs."

Naomi continued to laugh. "True."

With nothing more to contribute to this odd conversation, Brooke finished the last of her water. “I think I’m going to take off.”

Both Naomi and Jana turned toward her. “No!” Jana said, her brows slanting over her eyes. “You always bail when we try to hook you up.”

“Yes, because I don’t want to be hooked up.” Their incessant prodding was one of the reasons—maybe the primary reason—she’d moved out of Jana’s townhouse and stopped hanging out with them as much. She’d invited them to the salmon bake thinking they’d maybe just want to have a girls’ night. But no, they’d both been on the prowl as usual.

“You’d be a lot happier if you just got laid,” Naomi said. “And these guys are *hot*.”

She probably wasn’t wrong—Brooke hadn’t had sex in ages. But she also wasn’t interested in just having sex with some rando. “Thanks, but I’ll pass. See you guys.”

She smiled and waved before she turned, hoping to take the sting out of her departure. She didn’t want them to think she was mad. At the same time, she couldn’t think of when she might call them to hang out again, which bummed her out. She’d latched on to Jana when she’d moved up here from Medford because she was the only person Brooke had known in the area. Then Jana had introduced her to Naomi, and it had seemed like she’d anchored herself with a couple of good friends. But now she realized that wasn’t really the case. Maybe she’d have better luck in Ribbon Ridge.

She thought of Cam. Was he her friend? Maybe, but he was also a coworker. Neither was the same as having girlfriends. Hopefully she’d find some, or she was going to get very homesick. And she didn’t want to go back home. There were too many memories. Too many things she wanted to block from her mind, including her ex-husband.

She drove back to Ribbon Ridge and decided to stop for a coffee. Her favorite brew was at a little place called Stella’s. It was a few blocks from her loft, so she drove straight there and was lucky enough to park right outside.

As she walked to the entrance, the door opened and out walked Cam sipping on a tall iced beverage. “Well, if it isn’t Brooke Ellis,” he said, smiling as he slipped his sunglasses on. His gaze dipped over her. “You already ran a race this morning?”

She looked down and realized she hadn’t removed her bib with the race number. “Yeah, a 10k over in Newberg. And now I need a coffee if I’m going to make it through the day.”

“Definitely—I know you have an important appointment this afternoon.”

She chuckled. “With you. Yes, very important.”

“Hey, I’ve been looking forward to it since we set it up.”

Had he? She had too, if she was honest, which she wouldn’t say out loud. He was already too flirty, and she shouldn’t encourage him. But hadn’t she done that the other night when she’d invited him to try to kiss her some other time?

She’d thought about that over and over and cursed her stupidity. She *didn’t* want to hook up with some random guy... Granted, he wasn’t random.

Yikes, what was she *doing*?

Time to change the subject to something safer. She nodded toward the cup in his hand.

“What’s your poison?”

“Iced caramel macchiato.” He leaned close and lowered his voice. “Don’t tell them inside, but I never order the same thing twice in a row—I like to keep them on their toes.”

“Really?”

He laughed. “No, I just like variety.”

In coffee as well as women. Ugh, where had that icky thought come from? The vulnerable

part of her that dictated she keep herself free and clear of nasty romantic entanglements. Only, it kept her free and clear of *any* romantic entanglements. Her divorce had been final for well over a year. Wasn't it past time she moved on?

She pushed her attention back to their conversation. "Since you clearly come here often, what's your favorite drink?"

He blew out a breath. "Whew, that's tough. I love anything with caramel, but really espresso is my go-to. Here, try this." He handed her his drink.

Stupidly, she realized she was about to put her lips where his had been. She looked at him as she took the straw in her mouth but couldn't see his eyes behind the sunglasses.

"Are you trying to drink that in the most seductive way possible?" His voice had lowered but still held that sexy, flirty vibe.

Her belly pitched in response, and she couldn't suppress a smile. Nor could she avoid batting her eyelashes as she sucked on the straw. She handed it back and licked her lips, fully aware of how "seductive" she probably looked. Flirting with him was probably a bad idea, but she couldn't seem to help herself. "Delicious. I'm totally ordering that."

"I'd love to stay and keep you company—really I would." He sounded a bit pained. "But I have to get up to the winery. I'll console myself with the fact that I get to see you in a few hours."

Her stomach was still full of butterflies. His voice was so sexy, particularly when he flirted with her. "That you do. After I shower and make myself more presentable."

He moved closer and leaned toward her ear. "Newsflash, sweetheart, you look absolutely stunning as is, and I'd bet you always do. See you later."

His words sparked a delightful shiver along her neck that worked its way down her spine. She pivoted and watched him walk away down the street. Eventually, she turned and went inside, confident she'd never look at a caramel macchiato the same way again.

Chapter Six

The bright August sun hit Cameron full force as he stepped outside the front door of the winery a few minutes before one o'clock on Saturday. He slipped on his sunglasses and inhaled the scents of cut grass and blackberries. A bramble of bushes grew along the opposite side of the road, and this time of year, the air was full of the fragrance of ripening fruit.

At that moment, Brooke pulled into the gravel lot. He waved and walked to where she parked.

She stepped out of the car, and Cameron couldn't help but look his fill. Her blonde waves grazed her shoulders, and she wore fitted khaki shorts with a cornflower-blue tank. She was also sporting her Burberry sunglasses so he couldn't see her eyes.

She closed the car door. "Waiting for me?"

Absolutely. He'd meant what he'd said earlier—he'd been looking forward to this since they'd set the appointment. "You're right on time. And dressed for a hike." He dipped his gaze toward her boots. They looked worn. "You hike a lot?"

She shrugged. "I don't know if 'a lot' is accurate, but some." She kicked a pebble. "These are kind of old and beat up."

"We should hike sometime. Hayden's wife is really into it. We've taken some cool weekend trips."

Brooke turned toward the winery. "Where are we starting?"

He noted that she ignored his invitation. She probably wanted to keep to business, as she'd told him the other night. But then he'd walked her home, and they'd had that near kiss. Plus, she'd openly flirted with him this morning with that sexy straw situation. It seemed like a social relationship might not be out of the realm of possibility. He sensed she preferred to take things—if there was ever going to be a *thing*—slow. He could do that.

A tiny voice somewhere in the recesses of his mind asked how he could keep things casual and nurture a slow-burn relationship at the same time. He pretended that voice was talking to someone else.

"We'll start inside, if that's okay," he said. "Hayden will be here in a few minutes."

"Sounds good."

Cam held the door open as she stepped inside. Cool air greeted them, and he pulled his sunglasses off. "Hot one today."

"Definitely." She pushed her glasses to the top of her head. She wore very little makeup, and he stood by his earlier assessment that she was stunning anytime.

He turned his brain to the winery. "This is a gravity flow facility, which I'm sure you figured out. Top floor is business offices, and this main floor will be the tasting room—"

"This space exactly, right?" She walked over to the wall of glass doors that opened to the patio and pushed one open.

"Yes. The build-out is starting in a couple of weeks." He followed her outside onto the covered deck. "This will be a pretty sweet place to sit and have a glass of Riesling."

She flashed him a smile before returning her gaze to the panorama before them. "Gorgeous view—same as upstairs." It overlooked the vineyard and the town of Ribbon Ridge below. "Did you lose much vineyard when you built this?"

"A bit, but we were able to acquire about ten acres up the hill. We planted that last year. All

pinot noir.”

She turned and walked back inside. “Plenty of space here for tables and events.”

He closed the door as he came in. “That’s the idea.” He went to the wall on the left. “The bar will be here—there’s a kitchen on the other side.” He went through a door, and she followed him.

She chuckled. “It needs a little work. A backsplash would be good.”

He smiled. “It’s in progress. For now, we only need the fridge, the sink, the dishwasher, and the microwave. This will be finished before they start on the tasting room.”

“Who’s they?”

“My brother Dylan’s contracting company. We get roped into doing a lot too—keeps costs down, and frankly, we like doing it.”

“Hello?” Hayden’s voice filtered into the kitchen.

Cam turned toward the door. “That’s Hayden.”

They moved back into the tasting room. Hayden held out his hand. “Good to see you again, Brooke. Thanks for coming today.”

“Thanks for having me. I really appreciate the tour.”

He grinned at her. “Just sell a ton of our wine, please.”

She peered at him and shot a glance toward Cam. “Do you have a ton to sell?”

“Not yet, but we will,” Cam said. “I’ll let Hayden tell you all about what he has planned. Let’s start on the mezzanine.”

The opposite side of the tasting room opened up to the fermentation level below, and a walkway with railings on either side stretched toward the receiving area and where they stored the sorting equipment.

Brooke strolled to the railing and looked down at the fermentation tanks, currently empty.

Hayden joined her and slapped his hands on the metal. “The railings are removable so we can move the grapes down into the fermenters.” She took her hands off the steel, and he chuckled. “Perfectly safe, I promise. Come on, let’s go down.”

Cam rolled his eyes. “Don’t scare her off, Hay.”

Hayden tossed him a teasing look over his shoulder as he started down the stairs. “That’s your job—but please don’t do it.”

Brooke descended between them. “You guys have been friends a long time, I take it.”

“Since first grade,” Cam said. “I’ve tried to get rid of him, even got him to go to France for a year, but he’s like a bad penny.”

Hayden snorted. “As if. You cried like a baby when I left and practically begged me to come back.” At the base of the stairs, Hayden waited for Brooke to step down, then moved closer to her. He lowered his voice, but not enough so that Cam couldn’t hear him, which was the point. “Don’t let Cam fool you. His brothers both left Ribbon Ridge for long periods—years—but Cam could only bring himself to leave for days, maybe a week, at a time and only because his work demanded it. He’s a diehard Ribbon Ridger. Since he left Blackthorn and his hectic travel schedule, some might even call him a homebody. I don’t think he’s ventured out of the state in the past two years.”

Cam came off the stairs and joined them. “Hey, I was tired of traveling. And I have too left the state. We’ve taken several research trips to Washington and California.”

Brooke seemed to be enjoying Hayden’s teasing, if the smile hovering on her lips and the glint in her eye were any indication. “I hear he hasn’t even been to France.”

Hayden nodded, his gaze full of false pity. “True story.” He chuckled. “Come on, let’s talk

wine!”

Hayden guided her through the fermentation level. Her questions came fast and furious, and Hayden answered every single one of them. Cam didn’t say much—the winemaking was Hayden’s thing—but he appreciated her intellect and her passion for wine.

As they proceeded down to the settling level, Cam asked, “You sound like maybe you should have been a winemaker.”

She turned her head toward him, her eyebrow arching. “Really? I never thought about it. I worked at a tasting room part-time in college, and that turned into a full-time job when I graduated. From there, I went into sales and distribution.”

This sparked a conversation about southern Oregon wine and where she’d worked. By the time they finished up with the cellar, which included the barrel rooms and the bottling area, it was past time to meet Luke for the vineyard tour. Cam’s phone vibrated—a text from Luke asking where they were.

Cam looked across the bottling line to where Brooke and Hayden were chatting. “Luke’s waiting for us.”

Hayden gave her a sheepish look. “Sorry, I get a little carried away.”

Brooke shook her head. “Not at all. I asked too many questions.”

Cam went to the exterior door. “No such thing.” He texted Luke to meet them out back on the lower level. “We can go out this way.” He slid his sunglasses back on as he held the door.

Brooke preceded them into the sunlight and dropped her glasses back over her magnificent eyes. Bummer. He liked watching them animate and sparkle as they discussed winemaking.

Hayden gave Cam a slight elbow as he walked by. He turned his head for a brief glance that included arched eyebrows and wide eyes that clearly said, *Dude, she’s cool*, or something to that effect.

Cam knew she was cool. And smart. And attractive in so many ways that went far beyond her looks.

“Oh, I love this!” Brooke exclaimed as she moved toward the massive fire pit they’d just installed last month. She looked around. “Is this for guests? I don’t see an easy access point.”

Hayden put his sunglasses on. “For now, it’s just for us, but we’ll eventually add stairs from the upper deck and another deck, then more stairs leading down here. We may have evening dinners out here—but that’s down the road.”

Cam walked to the pit where she stood. “We reclaimed the brick from the house before we demolished it.”

“House?” Brooke asked.

“There was a mid-century ranch, which Hayden and Bex lived in for a while. We’d planned to use it for something, but it had...problems.”

“The extensive dry rot and the leaking pipes were problems. The rodent infestation was catastrophic.” Hayden shuddered.

Brooke made a face that clearly transmitted what she thought of that—*disgusting*. “Oh dear.”

“Unsalvageable as a whole, unfortunately, but we saved what we could.”

Hayden nodded. “Some of the wood will be used for the bar in the tasting room.”

“That’s so cool that you reused stuff.”

“Especially this brick,” Cam said. “It predates that ranch house, even. When we went to pull the brick out, we found one buried near the foundation with the year 1879 and the initials BNR.”

“That’s cool. What does it mean?”

Hayden grinned. “No idea. But my sister-in-law Alaina is on it. She and her BFF are history nerds, and they’ve been working on establishing a Ribbon Ridge museum.”

“That’s so neat. I’d totally go to that.” She froze for a moment. “Wait a second. Is that Alaina Pierce? I just remembered she’s married to one of the Archers.”

Alaina was one of the world’s most famous actresses, despite doing only a supporting role in a single film during the past two years. She’d been too busy being a newlywed and a mom.

Hayden laughed. “Yeah, that’s her. She’s completely down-to-earth. She’s just another Ribbon Ridger now.”

Brooke glanced between them. “Huh. How long does the indoctrination take? I mean, I’ve only been here a month or so.”

Hayden looked at Cam and shrugged. “Dunno.”

“Being a Ribbon Ridger is a state of mind. Time’s got nothing to do with it,” Cam said. “There’s a distinct pride that comes in living and working here.”

“What makes it so special?” she asked.

Cam tried to think of something specific—maybe the annual Ribbon Ridge Festival, which had taken place a couple of weeks ago—but there were too many intangibles. For him, it was the only home he’d ever known, and it was the only home he ever wanted. “Did you go to the Ribbon Ridge Festival?”

“I did. It was great.”

Cam wondered why he hadn’t seen her, but it was a widely attended event, drawing more and more people from the Portland metropolitan area every year. It was silly to think he’d pick her out of a crowd. Except now he knew he absolutely could.

“It’s gotten kind of commercial in the past decade or so,” Cam said, “but the festival started way back in the nineteenth century. They had horse racing, dancing, and even a quilting bee.”

“Sounds like something that museum you mentioned should highlight. Maybe you can bring some of that back next year.”

Cam suddenly wondered why no one ever had. “That’s a great idea. Hayden and I’ll get right on that.”

Hayden chuckled. “Yeah, sure. Right after we launch our wines, not to mention everything else on our plates.”

“Good point. Sounds like a job for Alaina and Crystal, though.” Cam looked toward Brooke. “Crystal’s her friend.”

“I figured. Maybe I’ll offer to give them a hand. Sounds fun. And maybe it’ll help me earn my Ribbon Ridge Club Card.”

Cam let out a bark of laughter. “We totally need those. We’ll get Alaina and Crystal on that too.”

Hayden pulled his phone from his pocket and glanced at the screen. “Bex is bringing some food in a bit if you guys are hungry. I haven’t had lunch.”

“I ate before I came,” Brooke said.

Cam didn’t want her to go when the tour was over. He envisioned them sitting on the patio upstairs. “Then wine—I still have that Riesling in my fridge.”

She smiled at him, showing straight, brilliant white teeth. “I’m not sure I can decline that a second time.”

Luke came down the hill then, his hat pulled low over his eyes. “It’s a good thing I love the sun.”

“You’re in the wrong line of work if you don’t,” Cam said. “Luke, you remember Brooke

Ellis.”

“Yep. Good to see you again.” He slipped off his sunglasses and shook her hand. “Ready for a sweltering walk?”

“Absolutely. I tried to choose the right footwear.” She held her foot out to show her hiking boot.

“Perfect. Though a hat would’ve been good.”

She nodded toward his head. “I see that now.” She looked over at Cam and Hayden. “Where are yours? You guys should know better. In fact, you should have a stock of them here—haven’t you heard of swag?”

Cam chuckled. “We’re looking at some—hats, shirts, all that. Maybe you can help me decide what to buy. Tell me what people will want when you go selling.”

“Sure,” she said.

Hayden pivoted toward the building. “I’ve got stuff to do inside. In the air-conditioning. Actually, Cam, I could use a hand.”

Cam preferred to go on the vineyard tour, even without a hat. “I was going to tag along with them.”

“Like you haven’t walked every inch of this vineyard a hundred times. Come on.” Hayden jerked his head toward the winery. “See you in a bit, Brooke.”

Cam had no choice but to reluctantly follow Hayden. Brooke and Luke were already on their way toward the vines before Cam could say anything. He trudged back inside into the cool dark of the bottling room.

He tossed Hayden a glare. “What could possibly be so urgent on a Saturday afternoon?”

Hayden laughed. “Absolutely nothing, dick-for-brains—and I mean that literally. Someone had to save you from yourself.”

Cam pulled the door closed behind him. “What the hell does that mean?”

“You were practically tripping over yourself. Where’s the cool ladies’ man we all know and love?”

Cam scoffed. “You’d give me shit no matter what, wouldn’t you?”

Hayden slapped his shoulder. “It’s what we do.” He walked out of the bottling room and started up the stairs. “But seriously, do you like her?” He glanced back at Cam as they ascended.

“Sure. She’s great.”

“I mean like-like her. Don’t you think it’s time you had a girlfriend again? I know we always give you crap about being a player, but you *have* sort of abandoned that way of life of late. I guess I thought that might signal that you’re ready to let down your guard.”

Cam scowled at his friend’s back. He hadn’t mentioned the reason for Cam having a guard in the first place, but it wasn’t necessary. They both knew why.

“I’m never doing that, and if you think I should, keep your opinion to yourself.”

They climbed in silence until they reached the fermentation level. Hayden stopped and turned. “Is it wrong for me to want to see you happy?”

“Isn’t this the same crap your family pulled when you came home from France to find Bex ensconced in your house and working for your brewpub? They were all happily paired off and wanted you to get right back with Bex.”

Hayden looked down at the floor, but Cam caught the smile pulling at his mouth. “Yeah, they did. And it pissed me off. But they were also right about me and Bex.” He looked at Cam again, and his gaze was sincere, caring even. “Maybe Brooke isn’t the right woman—believe me, I really don’t want you screwing up a good working relationship if she turns out to be a fantastic

salesperson. But the right woman *is* out there. Jennifer was the aberration, not the norm.”

“Damn it. You had to go and say her name.”

“Dude, everyone eventually said Voldemort too.”

Cam knew Hayden meant well, but his love life was off-limits. “I think you should drop the conversation.”

Hayden held up his hands in surrender. “Sorry. Just... I don’t want you to have regrets.”

“It’s far too late for that,” Cam muttered. “Listen, I’m heading up to my office for a few.” He started toward the stairs.

Hayden called after him. “I’ll let you know when Bex gets here with lunch.”

Cam nodded but didn’t turn. He climbed up to his office, feeling agitated. He hated that word—regret. Because he had plenty of experience with it. He strove to live his life so that emotion never knocked him down again.

Yeah, he liked Brooke, but he still didn’t want a girlfriend. Luckily for him, she didn’t seem interested—even if he was. He was content to flirt with her and keep things light. That was what he did best.

And that was what kept him out of trouble.

* * * *

By the time they finished the vineyard tour, Brooke was hot and more than eager for that glass of Riesling Cam had promised her. Like Hayden, Luke had been an engaging and incredibly knowledgeable tour guide.

“I have the sense you pretty much live and breathe this vineyard,” she said as they walked back toward the building.

“Guilty. But then we all do.”

She could see that. The four of them seemed to have poured all of their passion—their very souls—into this endeavor. It was inspiring and honestly a little envy inducing.

“You guys are incredibly lucky to be pursuing your dream.”

Luke blew out a whistle. “Don’t we know it. He led her toward a doorway on the uphill side of the building. “You sound wistful. Selling wine isn’t your dream?”

“I love it, really.” She did. But it wasn’t really her *dream*. Her dream—to have a family—had been shattered when she and Darren had divorced. She realized she didn’t have a new dream, and that felt like a bit of an epiphany.

“But maybe it’s not where you see yourself in five or ten years,” he said.

She hadn’t thought about that. She’d been too focused on taking one day and then one week at a time. She’d stopped seeing a shrink when she’d moved north, but she still had tough questions she ought to explore.

Oh, get over yourself! Thinking about the future should not send you into a tailspin. Not anymore.

Luke opened the door to the winery as she silently chided herself. They walked into a vestibule with a staircase—the one that led up to the offices, she was fairly certain.

“Oh man, does that feel good.” Luke swept his hat off and closed his eyes briefly.

Brooke welcomed the cool rush of air-conditioning, despite the instant goose bumps rising on her heated flesh. It felt delicious. “Yes, it does.”

“This way,” Luke said, gesturing past the stairs to the main room.

A table had been set up, and a cute brunette was arranging food on it. She turned as Brooke

and Luke approached. “Hi!” She brushed her hands on her jean shorts and came toward Brooke. “I’m Bex Archer.” She offered her hand, which Brooke shook.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Brooke Ellis.”

“So I heard. I’m so thrilled you’ll be working with the guys. They need a woman’s influence.”

Luke chuckled. “As if you don’t insert yours. And we have no issue with that.” He leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

Bex tossed him a look of affront. “Hey, I’m too busy with my beer.”

“I meant no offense. Don’t listen to me. I’m overheated.”

“Then I’m just in time!” Cam called from the base of the stairs. He carried two bottles of white wine—the Riesling, which she could discern by the shape of the bottle, and another white.

Hayden came from the kitchen carrying a knife and some napkins. He handed the knife to Bex. “This is for the cheese.”

She gave him a quick kiss followed by a smile. “Thanks, babe.”

He smiled back at her, and it was obvious they were still in newlywed mode or just that sickeningly happy. Brooke had thought that she and Darren had been that happy once, and she supposed they had. But it hadn’t lasted.

Bex put the knife down on a cutting board with the cheese. “Help yourselves!”

There was a fruit salad, a chicken salad, little rolls and crackers, a charcuterie plate, two cheeses, and a spread that looked like fig.

Brooke’s stomach rumbled. Yes, she’d had “lunch” but decided a protein shake didn’t really count. Hadn’t she earned a second lunch after running a 10k and taking a brutal hike through the ninety-degree vineyard? “This is all for you guys?”

Hayden picked up a plate as he tossed Bex a wink. “My wife knows how to put out a spread.”

“Did I hear lunch was ready?” The youngest Westcott, Jamie, jumped down the last few stairs and burst into the room.

“Damn straight,” Luke said as he grabbed his plate.

Jamie came forward and shook Brooke’s hand. “Good to see you again, Brooke.” He was a couple of inches shorter than Luke, but the same height as Cam. His eyes were a mix of his brothers’, with Cam’s green and Luke’s brown converging into a warm hazel. His hair was the lightest of the three, but still brown and thick.

“Nice to see you too.”

Cam looked at Bex. “What, no wineglasses?”

“Oh, I forgot. I admit I wasn’t thinking about wine.” Bex threw Cam a smile.

“Your beer bias is showing,” Cam said.

“I am not biased! You guys are the worst.” Bex laughed, which took any sting from her words.

“I’ll get wineglasses,” Cam said, shaking his head good-naturedly.

“I’ll help,” Brooke offered, feeling a bit like a fifth wheel since they all knew each other so well.

He led her to the kitchen. Inside, he turned to her. “I know you said you ate, but how can you say no to that spread?” He opened a cupboard, which held three shelves of wineglasses stamped with their winery logo.

“I can’t, so I won’t.” She joined him and took down two glasses. “How many do we need?” She started counting people in her head.

“Just five. Bex won’t be drinking wine.” Right, because she preferred beer.

Cam curled the fingers of his left hand around the stems of two glasses and picked up the last with his right before closing the cabinet. “Oops, almost forgot to get an opener.”

Brooke transferred one glass to her other hand. “I’ll get it. Where?”

“That drawer next to the fridge.” He gestured with his head.

Brooke opened it and saw at least twenty openers. She laughed. “Um, you’ve quite a selection.” Like the wineglasses, they were all emblazoned with their logo. “You misled me—you have *some* swag.”

“Wineglasses, openers, and four- and six-compartment bags to carry bottles. That’s pretty much it. I do have designs for several apparel items as well as a soft-sided cooler.”

“Great idea with the cooler.”

He pushed open the door and stood against it while she walked out of the kitchen. “Thank you. I have my marketing moments.”

“I’m sure they’re more than moments. Your sales numbers from Blackthorn are legend.”

He gave her a side eye. “Is that right?” He laughed. “Along with my reputation.”

She appreciated that he had no problem with the way others saw him. He not only owned it—he seemed to wave it like a flag. “Yep.”

They deposited the glasses on the table, and Cam poured Riesling for the two of them, while the other three guys drank a white blend from a local winery.

Brooke helped herself to a plate of food. “No Riesling for you guys?”

Jamie looked horrified. “Cam guards that stuff with his life. He only pours it for special people.”

“I thought you’d want the pinot blanc. Was I wrong?” Cam asked.

“Nope, I’m good.”

For a brief moment, it had seemed to Brooke that Jamie’s comment was bait for Cam to say that Brooke *was* special. But Cam didn’t take it. He’d missed a prime opportunity to flirt. Was it because they weren’t alone?

They all dished up from the mini-buffet and sat around the table. Bex and Brooke traded the usual get-to-know-you questions. Brooke was surprised to hear how long Bex and Hayden had known each other—nearly a decade, though they’d broken up for a five-year period in the middle of that. True love, however, had won out, or so it seemed given the way they grazed each other’s hands or exchanged little glances when they thought other people weren’t looking. Or maybe they didn’t care. Maybe they waved their love for each other as proudly as Cam flew his flirtatious flag.

Cam scooted his chair back and stood. “I’m going to sit on the deck for a few.”

Luke stood and picked up his plate. “I’m heading back out to the vineyard. If anyone wants to *work*, I’ll be in the chardonnay block. Thanks for lunch, Bex.” He smiled at her before taking his dishes to the kitchen and then disappeared the way he and Brooke had come in.

Brooke finished her glass of Riesling and wanted to pour another, but she wasn’t sure she should. Jamie and Hayden were deep in discussion about some piece of equipment Hayden wanted to buy, and Bex stood up and started clearing away the food. Brooke’s gaze drifted to the deck where Cam leaned against the rail, his wineglass dangling from his fingertips.

Bex came around the table near Brooke’s chair. “You should go out and join him.” She spoke quietly so that only Brooke could hear.

Brooke glanced over at her in mild surprise. Was she trying to push them together? Brooke didn’t really know what to say, so she stood up and helped instead. “Where do you want the

food?” she asked.

Bex grabbed as many containers as she could. “We’ll put it in the kitchen so the guys can snack on the leftovers tomorrow.”

Brooke picked up some odds and ends and followed her.

Turning from the counter where she’d deposited her items, Bex winced. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be obnoxious. I just thought...well, Hayden said that Cam liked you.”

Brooke opened the fridge and put away the food she’d brought. “Doesn’t Cam like a lot of women?”

“Yes, but Hayden thought you might be different. And then when you went to help with the wineglasses, I’m afraid I jumped to the wrong conclusion that you maybe liked him too. Probably.” She closed her eyes and briefly massaged her forehead. When she looked at Brooke again, her gaze was clear and honest. “I really am sorry. It’s none of my business. I’ve known Cam a long time—just about as long as I’ve known Hayden—and I’d love to see him find a genuine girlfriend. Here, I’ve barely met you, and I’m being all pushy. Ugh!” She shook her head and smiled. “Terrible first impression. Forget I said anything. *Please.*”

Brooke could’ve been annoyed by Bex’s desire to meddle, but she was actually charmed. “It’s nice to know Cam has such good friends—he’s lucky. And I get it. My friends keep urging me to get a boyfriend too.” Okay, maybe not a *boyfriend*. She wondered how much she and Cam might have in common with regard to their unwillingness to seek commitment. Did he have an ex like she did?

Bex laughed and seemed to relax as she tucked the rest of the nonperishable food away in a cupboard. “I’m not sure *he* thinks he’s lucky, but we can be a tough crowd, especially when you throw in the rest of the Archers. It’s one big crazy—but happy—family.”

That sounded nice. Brooke had two sisters, one older and one younger, both of whom were married with children. Between them and her parents, there was no shortage of people extolling the virtues of committed relationships. Never mind that Brooke had tried that already and crashed and burned.

She thought about joining Cam outside. Why not? She was suddenly quite curious about why he was a player. Plus, there was still some Riesling to drink. “I think I’ll head out and help him finish the wine. Wouldn’t want it to go to waste.” She smiled at Bex. “I’d offer you a glass, but I have the impression wine isn’t your thing.”

Bex looked momentarily confused, her brow puckering. “Oh! The guys just give me crap because I’m a brewer, but I actually love wine. I’d absolutely be drinking some along with you if I wasn’t three and a half months pregnant.”

Brooke’s gaze dipped to Bex’s still-flat belly. A surge of envy followed quickly by a wave of sadness slammed into her. She’d never know what it would feel like to care for a burgeoning life inside of her. She’d never smile and nod knowingly at another woman who’d been there and done that.

Damn. Just when she thought she’d finally compartmentalized her infertility, the old feelings and the despair threatened to steal her breath, her equilibrium, her ability to simply finish a stupid conversation. *Come on, Brooke, you can do this.* “Congratulations.”

She knew she ought to make some chitchat about impending motherhood, but she just couldn’t do it. She could barely keep her face from crumbling.

“Thanks. We’re pretty excited.” Her hand fluttered against her belly. “We’ve been trying for a little while.”

And they’d been successful. It was strange how one could feel happiness, jealousy, and grief

in the span of a single second. “That’s terrific.”

Brooke’s heart, already broken when she’d learned she couldn’t carry or even have a child of her own three years ago, shuddered anew. Someday—God, she hoped someday—she wouldn’t feel that awful pang of loss. It was dumb really. She shouldn’t be able to miss something she never had, right? Just something she’d desperately wanted with all of her heart.

“You okay?” Bex asked.

Brooke focused on the other woman. Her gaze was intent, concerned. She tucked a lock of dark hair behind her ear as she took a step forward. Shit. Brooke wasn’t doing a very good job of compartmentalizing at all.

“I’m great. I was just realizing that I promised a friend of mine I’d meet her in a little bit. I guess I got swept away by your amazing lunch spread.” She summoned a smile and hoped it looked a hell of a lot better than it felt.

Bex nodded. “I hate when I forget stuff. Seems to happen more and more lately.” She laughed softly.

Brooke had to leave. *Now*. “Thanks again for lunch. It was great to meet you.” She turned toward the door.

“You too.”

Brooke left the kitchen. Jamie and Hayden were no longer at the table, but Cam was still outside on the deck. She ought to go say good-bye, but she couldn’t. She wanted—needed—to be alone. So she grabbed her sunglasses from the table and made her way to the front door.

“Aren’t you going to tell Cam you’re leaving?” Bex asked. She’d apparently followed Brooke out of the kitchen, which Brooke would’ve noticed if she weren’t acting like a total idiot.

“Uh, he looks deep in thought, and I really need to run. You can tell him I’ll talk to him next week. Thanks!” She rushed out before Bex could encourage her to stay or before that look of worry crept back into her gaze. Brooke had enough people—her friends, her family—who’d regarded her with pity over the last few years.

She didn’t need any more.

Chapter Seven

Cam pushed open the door of Taste, a wine bar that was closed tonight for a private party for a newish winery—Allen Drake. Keen to sample the competition, Cam went to as many of these kinds of events as he could. Not that they were really *competition*. Sure, they all wanted to be the next big producer, but the community was mostly supportive, and a win for one was a win for all.

The event was already bustling, and Cam recognized most of the faces in the room. There were small, round tables in the center plus a bar that ran along the windows facing Main and First Streets. The primary bar, where Allen was currently holding court, was at the back of the room.

Cam made his way to Allen, whom he'd known for several years. He was a former salesman like Cam, who'd decided to try his hand at crafting wine. He smiled when he saw Cam. "Hey, you made it."

Cam shook his hand and grinned. "Of course. Is anyone else here going to tell you if it tastes like swill?"

The guy to Allen's right, whose name currently escaped Cam, laughed. "Of course we will. In fact, I think your brother already did."

Cam darted a few looks this way and that. He knew Luke had planned on stopping by, but didn't see him. "Did Luke drink and dash?"

"Nah, he's around here somewhere, I think," Allen said. "He was looking for my vineyard manager. They might've gone in the back to get more wine."

Probably. Luke always pitched in to help.

Allen motioned for one of the employees behind the bar to pour a glass for Cam. She filled the bowl with a dark pinot, enough for a healthy taste. Allen put his fingertips on the base of the glass and slid it to the edge of the granite. "I might regret this, but give it to me straight. Even if you think it *is* swill."

Cam shook his head. "It won't be." He picked up the glass and swirled the liquid before inhaling its cherry and cassis scent. The nose was great, but would the taste hold up? He sipped and let the wine rest on his tongue a moment. He was immediately assaulted with cherry and then hints of coffee and truffle. The texture was silky, and the flavor lingered after he swallowed. It was, in a word, incredible. Jealousy snaked through him but was quickly overcome with happiness for Allen. "This is still young," he said cautiously. "But it's going to be a fruit bomb."

Allen watched him expectantly. "Yeah, I think so too. Anything else?"

Cam considered drawing this out, but he knew what it felt like to be anxious about your brand-new wine. He shook his head at Allen. "Dude, it's fucking awesome. You suck."

Allen's face split into a wide grin. He pushed his glasses up his nose and exhaled. "You almost had me going there."

"Almost?"

"Hey, your opinion matters. You really like it?"

"It goes beyond that. I'm considering a long-term relationship with it."

This made everyone howl with laughter. The guy next to Allen slapped him on the back. "Damn, Allen, now you know it's good if Westcott's going to give up his bachelor lifestyle."

Cam laughed along with everyone, but bristled at always being labeled the consummate

bachelor. Which made no sense. He had no problem with his lifestyle or his reputation. However, since he'd met Brooke, he'd started to wonder... He shook the thought right out of his head.

Cam steered the conversation to Allen's wine—the quantity, when he was going to start selling it, what else he had to taste and so on. At one point, Luke emerged from the back and nodded toward Cam, but he didn't join the group. Instead, he and Allen's vineyard manager took a couple of stools by the window.

"Hello." The single word, barely more than a breath really, came from the guy on Cam's left. He was young—an intern at one of the larger wineries near Ribbon Ridge—and his head was turned toward the door.

Cam followed his line of sight and immediately saw what had drawn his reaction. Brooke was standing just inside. She looked around the room, taking stock. Cam did the same—but only of her. Her blond hair was loose, hanging in silky curls to her shoulders. She wore a cobalt-and-turquoise-striped maxi dress with silver sandals peeking out beneath the hem. He was utterly captivated. Like the guy next to him, apparently.

"Excuse me," the intern said, taking off toward Brooke.

The jealousy Cam had felt for the wine earlier came back tenfold, and this time it didn't immediately dissipate. He watched as the guy approached Brooke and greeted her. She smiled at him, her eyes crinkling at the sides and her dimples creasing. Cam reacted deep in his gut, wanting nothing more than to walk over to her and stake his claim.

Only he didn't have one.

Over the past week, since she'd toured the winery and vineyard, they'd kept their communication strictly business—all e-mail. She'd left without saying good-bye last Saturday, and when Cam had pressed Bex for why she'd left, Bex had only said that Brooke had gone to meet a friend. He'd half expected her to join him on the deck so they could finish that Riesling together, but then he hadn't actually invited her. Because he was trying to keep things business-oriented instead of flirty, something he found hard to do when he was with her. Away from her, he could ignore that he was insanely attracted to her.

He turned to the bar and asked for a full glass of the pinot. Then he asked for another. Before he could think better of it, he swooped up both glasses and beelined for Brooke and her admirer.

As he neared, she saw him, her eyes widening briefly in recognition, then slanting at the edges as she smiled. She seemed happy to see him.

"Cameron! Just the guy I was looking for." She turned to the intern and flashed him an apologetic look. "You'll have to excuse me. I need to talk shop with one of my clients."

Always eager to help someone out, he glanced somewhat apologetically at the intern as he offered Brooke one of the glasses. "I come bearing wine."

"Excellent." She tossed the intern a look and said, "Ciao," as she looped her arm through Cam's. The connection was instant and magnetic and made him wonder if strictly business was going to be possible tonight.

He let her lead him across the room, threading through tables and skirting people. They passed Luke and his pal. Luke raised an eyebrow, not much, but enough for Cam to catch it. Cam didn't respond verbally or otherwise.

She stopped at the end of the bar along the window, at the two seats closest to the back corner. "He didn't follow us, did he?" she asked in a low tone.

Cam had only just recovered from her touch to find she was removing her arm. That was too

bad. He looked back toward where they'd started. The intern was still standing there, wearing a bemused expression. "No, he didn't."

She exhaled as she perched on the stool. "Great."

Cam took the other seat with his back to the corner. "I take it you were dying to get away from him?"

She set her wineglass and clutch purse on the smooth wood top of the bar. "Yes. Thank you."

So she hadn't *really* been looking for him. Bummer. "Glad I could be of convenient service."

She smoothed her hair back and flipped the curls over her shoulder. "He was laying it on a bit thick. I mean, he's a kid. Just out of college."

"You refuse to date younger guys?"

She gave him a pointed look. "I refuse to date players. And he's most definitely a player."

Cam couldn't help laughing. "So you attached yourself to the closest available...*player*. Who's maybe in a better age range?" He laughed a little harder, feeling more amused than he probably ought.

She giggled, then let go into a full laugh. "Okay, now that you put it that way, that was a really bad move on my part. But, in my defense, you haven't seemed like all that much of a player. Your lines aren't *too* cheesy, and I think we've settled into a good working relationship." She let her laughter subside. "Or am I wrong about that?"

"Nope, I'd say you got it right. Besides, as you can probably tell from my two a.m. e-mails, I'm a little too work obsessed right now to play at anything."

Her eyes sparkled in the orange glow coming from the evening sun glinting off the windows across the street. "You are! You work more than I do, which is saying something." She nodded toward the glass on the bar. "What's the wine?"

"Allen's pinot."

She picked it up and swirled the garnet liquid. "A full glass, huh? Not a taste?"

"I already tasted. Trust me when I say it's envy inducing."

Her eyes widened. "That good? Oh my. I might have to pitch my services."

She absolutely should. But again, he felt a pang of jealousy. Which was stupid. She wasn't an employee of West Arch. Her job was to sell wine from a variety of sources, and from what he'd seen so far, she was good at it. He liked her. And he liked Allen. Why not help them both out?

"Do you know Allen?"

She shook her head as she inhaled the aroma of the wine.

"I'll introduce you so you can talk him up."

"That would be great, thanks. I'm surprised you're willing to share." She flashed him a sexy little smile. Or maybe he just found everything about her sexy. Either way, he got a definite flirty vibe. Business-only was looking harder by the minute.

A server came by and offered them a small bite. "Goat cheese tarts."

Brooke set her glass back down and picked a tart from the tray. "Thanks."

Cam took one for himself along with a napkin and set them on the bar.

As the server left, Brooke sampled the tart. A look of starry-eyed bliss glazed her expression. "I love cheese, don't you?"

He laughed again. "You look like you're maybe *in* love with cheese."

"You'd be right. And I guess those are two distinct emotions, aren't they?"

He pondered that for the briefest of seconds before agreeing. “Definitely.” He knew the difference between loving someone and being in love. He’d done both, and the latter was far more painful.

She gave him a sly look as she picked up her glass and swirled the wine around the bowl. “Are you speaking from experience?”

He was good at dodging these kinds of questions. Talking about Jennifer was something he never did. Period. He didn’t like to give her lip service or brain space. She didn’t deserve it.

“Don’t we all? By our age anyway.”

She froze in lifting the glass to her mouth. “Crap, are we *old*?”

He chuckled. “I turned thirty a couple months ago. Is that old?”

She winced. “Was it hard? I don’t have to face that until late next year.”

He grinned, enjoying their conversation. “No, it wasn’t hard. I’m digging thirty so far.” He was exactly where he wanted to be in life, and that was a pretty good feeling. He glanced toward her glass. “Are you going to taste that or not?”

“If you’ll stop distracting me.” She gave him one of those saucy looks that made his gut tighten. She took a sip, and he watched her scrutinize the texture and the flavor. Her eyes narrowed, and her lips pressed together. Then she swallowed. “You weren’t kidding.” She took a longer drink. “I need to meet this Allen guy like *right now*.”

Cam looked toward the bar to gesture for Allen to come over, but he wasn’t there. He glanced around and made eye contact with Luke, who gave him another look that clearly asked, *What’s up with you and Brooke?* Cam ignored that one too.

Why was everyone suddenly trying to pair him off? He understood Hayden—he was married with a kid on the way—and Jamie was seeing Madison. But Luke was single. It was clearly time to turn the tables and set Luke up with someone so he could mind his own damned business.

Cam finally located Allen standing at the other end of the bar. “I see Allen. Let me go get him.” He started to rise, but she put her hand on his arm.

“Don’t. I don’t want to seem pushy. If he wanders by or you catch his eye, you can flag him down.”

He arched his brow at her. “You aren’t very cutthroat.”

The edge of her mouth ticked up, and a ruthless glint flashed in her gaze. “I am, actually. I’m just kind of tired. It’s been a long week.”

He could relate to that. They’d had a couple of colossal headaches at the winery with the wrong bottles being delivered—and the supplier being a jackass about it—followed by significant irrigation problems that had sent Luke into a tailspin.

The server came by with another round of appetizers, and they helped themselves.

Brooke sipped her wine and looked at him over the rim of her glass. “That was some pretty crafty avoidance earlier.”

He set his glass on the bar and rested his arm on the edge of the wood. “What?”

“When I asked if you spoke from experience of being in love—the cheese?”

He knew what she was referring to. That she’d called him on it was strangely alluring. Shouldn’t it be annoying? He refused to cave. “Who isn’t in love with cheese?”

Her eyes narrowed, and he recognized the shrewd assessment in her gaze. “You’re doing it again—avoiding. Do you even realize? Either you’ve never been in love, or you have and you’d rather not talk about it.”

He leaned back and studied her, a smile hovering about his mouth. “You’ve got me all

figured out, don't you?"

"Ha! Not even close. You're a pretty closed book, Cameron Westcott."

"It's the latter," he said, surprising himself. And her, given the subtle rounding of her eyes.

"I see," she murmured. She inclined her head slightly. The movement coupled with her tone seemed to convey some sort of respect...as if she understood he'd revealed something important and meant to keep it safe.

Damn, he liked her.

"And you? Wait, I know the answer—I think. You have an ex-husband, so I have to assume you were in love. I can't see you marrying someone without that."

"Aren't most people who get married? I'm curious why you think some people marry for something other than love."

His past experience with Jennifer crashed into his mind—she'd married that other prick because he was wealthy and could give her the material things she desired. "Because they do. Some people are cold and selfish, and love never enters into it." He picked up his glass and looked at her over the rim. "But that's not you."

She cocked her head to the side. "You think you know me that well?"

He sipped his wine and set the glass back on the wood. "Based on your response a moment ago, I think you were in love with your husband. But I also think you're guarded and skeptical, and since you're divorced, you likely had your heart broken."

She pursed her lips briefly, again studying him intently. "You know what I think? I think you just told me about you. *You* would only marry for love. The question is whether you were with someone who was cold and selfish, and"—her voice dipped—"you had *your* heart broken."

His insides seized up, and the blood in his veins turned to ice. How the hell had she come up with that? "Now, who's deflecting?"

She laughed. "Damn, you caught me. Yes, I was in love with my ex." She polished off her wine and glanced around for the server. "Think I can get another?"

"Absolutely." In that moment, he happened to catch Allen's eye. He came toward them, and Cam introduced him to Brooke. Cam slid from his stool and picked up their glasses. "I'll get more wine while you two chat."

He made his way to the bar and set the glasses down for a refill. Luke sidled up next to him. "Hey, brother. You and Brooke look cozy."

"Knock it off." He turned his head to look at Luke, who was grinning like an idiot. "I've decided *you* need a girlfriend."

Luke glanced over his shoulder. "Who, Brooke, maybe?"

Cam scowled. "No, not Brooke. Someone else."

"What's wrong with Brooke? She's great. Funny, smart. She's also insanely beautiful."

"I know what you're trying to do, so don't bother."

Luke turned, resting his elbow on the countertop. "What's that?"

"You think I need a relationship. I don't. I'm busy. I'm happy. I'm *good*."

"No one's disputing that. But we all see what you apparently don't—you like Brooke. Believe me, I'd be the first one to say you shouldn't encourage anything given the work stuff, but for me, I'd rather see you happy in a relationship. And if Brooke's that person, I'm all for it."

What were they "all" seeing? "Do you guys have meetings about this when I'm not around?"

"Ha-ha. No. Don't be a jerk."

"I'm not the one playing matchmaker like we're in seventh grade."

“Fine. I’ll shut up.” Luke shook his head but smiled. “I just hope you don’t pass something up because you’re too stubborn to realize they aren’t all bad apples.”

One of the bartenders finally poured his wine—they were busier at the bar than when he’d arrived—and Cam picked up the glasses. “I do realize. I just don’t want an apple, okay?”

Luke rolled his eyes, and they went their separate ways.

His brother’s words rankled. Maybe because they held more than a little bit of truth. He didn’t trust women. Hell, he didn’t trust himself. How could he have been such poor judge of character with Jennifer? He had to be a complete moron not to see her for what she was after being together for almost two years.

Was he still a moron, though? No, because he’d done a damned good job of keeping himself from making another stupid mistake.

When he arrived back at his seat, Brooke and Allen seemed like old friends. Allen was just tucking her card into his pocket as he turned to Cam. “Thanks for introducing me to my new wine broker.”

That shaft of jealousy poked him again, but he summoned a smile. “Great. I don’t think you’ll be disappointed.” He handed Brooke her wineglass. “How many sales did you close for me this week?”

“Eight. And we’re just getting started.”

Allen grinned. “Damn. I look forward to seeing you Monday, Brooke. Thanks!” He nodded at her and gripped Cam’s bicep before taking off.

Cam sat down. “You sealed that up pretty quick.”

“Told you I was ruthless.” She arched her brows at him, and again he caught a flirty vibe.

He suddenly wanted to ask her to come home with him. He wanted to wrap her in his arms and kiss her, and see if the attraction he felt—that others seemed to see—was as hot and thrilling as he imagined. But he didn’t think she’d go for that. What *would* she go for?

“You said earlier that you refused to date players. Who *do* you date?”

She twirled her glass for a moment and watched the pinot cascade around the sides. She looked up at him. “Like you, I don’t really date.”

“I date, just not seriously.”

“Right. I don’t date at all. Haven’t since I divorced my ex.” She took a drink of wine, and her gaze seemed to dare him to chastise her for that. He had the sense most people did, and of course, he wouldn’t. Not when he was dealing with his own peanut gallery.

“How long ago was that?”

“Almost a year and a half.”

A paltry amount compared to his eight-year streak. “Eh, that’s not so bad. Give yourself a break.”

She set her glass on the bar and kept her hand curled around the base of the stem. “Thanks. My friends and family keep telling me I should get back out there, but it’s just...different after you’re divorced.”

He knew exactly what she meant. Even though he hadn’t been married, he’d been close. If he’d proposed a little sooner, he might’ve married Jennifer.

No, you wouldn’t have. You didn’t have the money or the stuff to keep her.

He shook thoughts of his ex away. She so wasn’t worth it. “So you don’t date, and you’re good with that.”

She moved her glass around slightly, again swirling the wine. “For the most part. Lately, I’ve begun to think that I should maybe at least *try*.”

Lately. Because of him? He tried not to feel encouraged, but it was tough. Especially if he'd been reading her body language correctly tonight. "Hey, I'm not a role model, unless you're interested in casual dating."

"I...might be." She picked up her glass and took another drink, then set it back down with a clack. "Never mind. This is a terrible conversation for us to have. Like I said earlier, we have a great working relationship. I should not be asking you for dating advice."

He chuckled. "Is that what you were doing? Well, I would say you should do what makes you feel good. Just be clear about what you want going in."

"That's what you do?"

"Absolutely. I like to have fun, but there's nothing permanent with me."

She blinked at him. "Nothing? Ever?"

Not in eight years, and he didn't see an end to his current mindset. "Nope."

"Wow, that's actually a little disturbing."

"Is it? I know what I want, and if it doesn't float someone's boat, there's no harm done."

"I meant disturbing in that you don't seem to miss having a significant other. But yeah, that shouldn't be—it's good to know you can be alone." She gave him an intent but coy look. "Not that you've been *alone*. You've dated plenty of women whose boats were, I'm sure, *well* floated."

He grinned. "You're getting it now—alone, but not *alone*."

A couple of guys who worked in sales at different wineries joined them. They all knew each other and visited for a few minutes before Brooke excused herself to use the restroom.

When she was gone, one asked, "How long have you and Brooke been dating?"

"We're not." Cam sipped his wine. "She's distributing our wine."

"Nice," the other one said, nodding. "So you're definitely not dating?"

Cam's senses pricked at their interest. "Definitely not. But what do you care?"

The second one, Joe, lifted a shoulder. "Just wondered about her availability. I asked her out a while back, but she said she wasn't dating. When I saw her with you, I assumed her status had changed."

Status...as in whether she would date or not. It certainly seemed as though she was considering it. He could encourage Joe, but he didn't want to. Man, he was a selfish bastard.

"I don't know," Cam said. "You could try asking her out again."

"I might, thanks."

Cam finished off his wine, suddenly ready to leave. But he wouldn't go until Brooke came back. When she returned, she glanced toward his empty glass. "You having another?"

"Nah, I'm heading out."

The other guys looked at her expectantly, and when Cam vacated his seat, Joe took it. A tiny crease formed between Brooke's eyes for just a moment. She looked at Cam. "I think I'm going to take off too." She smiled at Joe and Sam. "See you guys."

They nodded at her. "See you, Brooke," Joe said.

Cam swung by the bar, where Allen was now sitting, and thanked him for sharing his wine. Allen shook his hand and Brooke's and restated how he was looking forward to seeing her Monday. On their way out, Cam caught Luke's interested eye and shook his head.

"Did you want to go say hi to Luke?" Brooke asked as Cam opened the door for her.

"I talked to him earlier."

"Ah." She waved at Luke and smiled before she preceded Cam outside.

"Thanks for letting me leave with you," she said. "You've proven an effective shield

tonight.”

He laughed. “I’m happy to be your shield. Although don’t expect it to have a lasting effect. Joe asked if we were an item, and when I said no, he made it clear he was interested in asking you out. Again, apparently.”

She exhaled. “I see.”

“It’s your own fault for being so attractive.”

She cast him a side eye as they strolled down Main Street. “Is that right? What should I do, forgo makeup? Stop washing my hair?”

He doubted any of that would help. She was more than a pretty face—she was funny and fun. He had a great time with her. “You could try. Let me know how that works.”

“Or, I could just say that we’re an item. Why not? You’re not dating anyone. I’m not dating anyone. It would keep the vultures at bay.”

A laugh erupted from his chest. “They’re vultures now?”

She giggled. “Not that bad.”

“Do you really have a problem fending off interested guys?”

“Sometimes. Tonight was one of those times, I guess.”

“Because you look incredible.”

She walked in front of him and turned, taking a few backward steps. She smiled at him—that sexy, seductive little grin that made his motor purr. “Why, thank you.”

“Now you’re just being mean. You have to stop flirting with me, Brooke. I’m not a vulture, but I’m still a *guy*.” Who hadn’t had sex in a few months. He mentally counted and couldn’t quite come up with the last date. Three? Four?

She fell into step beside him as they turned onto Second. “Sorry. You’re just so fun to tease.”

“Well, you’re tempting the hell out of me. I like our working relationship, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t think about taking things a step further—keeping in mind my policy. Nothing long-term.”

They’d arrived at the door to the lofts. She turned toward him. “Okay, I get it. Don’t flirt with you unless I want it to go somewhere.”

He hadn’t said that, but maybe that was what he meant. He let his gaze dip over her. She did look incredible. And if she were any other woman, he’d invite her over.

She held her clutch purse in front of her and brought her gaze to his. “So...remember when I said you should ask me again?”

Oh damn, did she mean what he thought she meant? Now she was seriously fucking with him. “About kissing?” The question came out raspy. He cleared his throat.

“Yes. You should ask me again.”

He looked up and down the street, for the first time giving a shit if someone was watching. Why? Because he was suddenly agitated. Anxious. But in a good way. Anticipation curled through him.

“Don’t say that unless you mean it.”

Her blue-green eyes shone with intent. “Oh, I mean it.” She reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him back under the cover of the doorway.

The force of her action propelled him forward until he was nearly pressing against her. He linked his fingers through hers. “You sure?”

“Anyone ever tell you that you talk too much?” She wrapped her free hand around his neck and tugged his head down.

“Never in a moment like this.” He brushed his lips against hers and slanted his head.

Her fingers curled into his neck, and she arched up into him. Her mouth opened beneath his, and the kiss took off like a rocket.

Their tongues met, eager, almost desperate. Or maybe that was their hands and bodies. She pulled him so that he was snug against her. He let go of her hand and gripped her hip. Her hand splayed against his side, the heat of her palm blistering through his shirt.

Her fingers stabbed into his hair, holding his head as she did ridiculous things to his mouth and tongue. Lights danced behind his closed eyes. He felt every inch of her—the press of her breasts against his chest, the pulse of her wrist against his neck, the push of her pelvis along his. He wanted to bring her even closer so that he could nestle his cock between her thighs.

She ended the kiss to nibble on his lips and drag her mouth and tongue along his jaw, then kissed him again. Holy hell, he was burning for her.

The next time she pulled away, she leaned back against the wall beside the door, her breath coming in heavy pants. His did the same. “Brooke.” The word came out dark and hard. Needful. “I should go.”

She looked up at him, her gorgeous aqua eyes dilated and so damn seductive. He exerted every bit of willpower he had and stepped back, heedless of his raging erection. There was absolutely no help for it. “Unless you want me to stay.” He hadn’t meant to say it. He was trying so damned hard to be a gentleman.

“I do. But...you’re right that you should go.” She blinked, and it dampened a bit of the electricity zinging between them. “I’m probably going to regret this,” she muttered.

He knew he would. “Good night.”

He turned and dashed across the street before what little common sense he had left completely abandoned him.

Chapter Eight

Brooke watched Cam cross the street, her legs shaking and her heart thundering in her chest. Her brain forced her body to turn and go into the building. But even parts of her brain were rebelling, telling her to go after him.

When was the last time she'd been kissed like that?

She tried to think, but her mind was mush. Okay, not that mushy. She wasn't sure that Darren had ever made her feel that good. Overwhelmed in the best possible way. Absolutely quivering with need. She almost turned and went back outside.

Pushing herself to the elevator, she jabbed her finger onto the Up button. Waiting, she pulled her phone from her clutch and texted her older sister, Rhonda.

I just walked away from a totally hot guy. Give me a reason I should go spend the night with him.

The response came almost immediately.

Rhonda: *Because you SHOULD. GO NOW.*

Brooke: *That's not a good reason.*

Rhonda: *You haven't had sex in years.*

Brooke: *He's a player.*

Rhonda: *So? You aren't marrying him. Go have great sex.*

Brooke: *It's been a long time...*

Rhonda: *OMG!*

Brooke smiled, hearing her sister's voice yelling at her.

Rhonda: *You're looking for excuses. If you're asking me for permission, you already want to. So go do it. Will you regret it?*

The elevator chimed, but Brooke didn't walk inside. Instead, she crossed to the other side of the lobby and stared at her phone. *Would* she regret it? Maybe. They did work together, after all. Things could very well be awkward.

Or they could be amazing, and she'd feel better than she had in years. Just kissing him had made her positively woozy with want. She'd been fine with her solitary, celibate life, but right now she thought she might wilt if she didn't find satisfaction.

With Cam.

Nothing else would do.

She tapped into her phone again. *What about my...problem?*

Rhonda: *What problem?*

Brooke frowned at the phone. *Duh, my infertility.*

Rhonda: *Srsly?! You want to have sex with this guy, not start a family! You said he was a player!*

Brooke watched the dots on her phone, which indicated Rhonda was typing. And it was a long text.

You deserve a night of fun. You actually deserve way more than that, but whatever. Please let yourself out of grief jail or whatever the hell you've been doing the past few years and LIVE. I can't even imagine why you're hesitating. But then I don't understand a lot of your choices.

Like divorcing Darren because they couldn't have children. Only it had been more than that. The fertility problems had sent Brooke into a tailspin, and she'd pushed everyone away,

especially Darren, who hadn't been that devastated by her inability to carry a child. She'd been so immersed in her sadness that he'd started screwing one of the legal assistants at the law firm where he was in charge of IT. She'd never told anyone about that. It had seemed like her fault, but suddenly, in this moment, she realized it wasn't.

Brooke: *If you're talking about Darren, I had a perfectly good reason for leaving him. He was screwing that woman he's still with.*

Rhonda: *WTF?! Why didn't you ever say anything?*

Brooke: *I just didn't.*

Because she'd been too locked up in "grief jail," as Rhonda put it. Everything had felt like her fault, like her inadequacy. So she'd taken it as such.

Rhonda: *If you don't go get laid right now, I'm driving up there and kicking your ass tomorrow.*

Brooke: *How will you know? Apparently I'm a pretty good liar.*

Rhonda: *I want proof. Send me a pic of his boxers or something.*

Brooke giggled. She had a tiny bit of a wine buzz, so this idea was probably funnier—and more stupid—than it ought to be.

Brooke: *Okay.*

Rhonda: *Okay, you're doing it? YESSSSSS! Go get him!!!!*

Brooke rolled her eyes with a grin and stuffed the phone back in her clutch. Then she turned and left the building, barely looking both ways across the sleepy street before she hurried over to his townhouse. The sun had gone down behind the buildings, but it wasn't fully set so that there was a warm, golden glow over everything.

She raised her hand to knock, but didn't. What if he didn't want her to come in?

Oh come on, he was totally into you!

But he'd been the one to break the kiss and suggest they should go their separate ways.

He'd also suggested he could stay!

That was true. And he'd certainly acted as though he was enjoying it. He'd clutched at her body and wrought sensations she hadn't felt in years, if ever. Plus there'd been the evidence of his insistent erection pressing at her core. Her knees felt weak as she recalled the pulse of lust she'd felt every time he leaned into her.

Without further thought, she knocked.

Nothing.

Her gut clenched. She knocked again.

Still nothing.

Doubt crept in and iced the surge of desire she'd just felt. Clearly she'd made a mistake. She turned, and her purse vibrated. She pulled out her phone.

Rhonda: *I hope you aren't reading this, but if you are, stop vacillating and do it!*

She hadn't been vacillating! She'd been arguing with herself. Surely the difference between those two things was somehow important.

Okay, one more try. She took a deep breath and knocked again. Hard. And long.

At last she heard footfalls. It almost sounded like running followed by a thud. She winced. After a moment, the door clicked and came open.

Cam stood there, a towel draped about his waist, his hair soaked, and his cheeks flushed.

"Uh." She couldn't seem to form words. She'd seen his chest before—that day at the winery. And it was just as spectacular now as it had been then. Nearly smooth, but with just the right amount of sexy hair curled in the center. And the muscle definition—that was eye-popping.

“I seem to have a knack for catching you when you’re just out of the shower.” She took in the towel wrapped about his lean hips.

“Yes, you do. It’s like you have radar. And a damn useful one at that.”

Damn useful indeed. She couldn’t seem to look up. Her fingers itched to touch him, and her mouth was dry with the need to taste him. Water droplets clung to his flesh, making him look even sexier. Finally, she lifted her gaze. He was staring at her, his green eyes dark and sultry.

“Did I interrupt your shower, or were you done?” she asked, rather stupidly.

He shook his head. “You’re not interrupting anything. I just, uh, I needed to cool off.”

He’d needed a cold shower? Made sense, she supposed. She might’ve had to do the same if she hadn’t come back over. Or found her vibrator.

For some bizarre, perhaps prurient reason, she dropped her gaze to his crotch. No tent. Shit, was she too late?

He opened the door wider. “I’m such an ass. You should come in. Please.”

She blinked at him, wondering if that was a good idea.

He pulled her inside and closed the door. “I don’t really want to stand in my doorway in nothing but a towel.”

She blushed then, feeling like an idiot. “Sorry, my bad.”

“Why’d you come over?”

“I, uh...” Her sister’s voice sounded in her head: stop vacillating! “I came to have sex. If you want to.” Life didn’t get any more honest than that, did it?

His eyes widened, and she nearly laughed at his shocked expression. “I’m surprised.”

“Clearly.” She dipped a look at his towel again and saw the start of something...tentlike. “I was afraid I was too late.”

“What? Why?”

She looked up at his face. “You were in the shower. A cold shower, I guess. And you weren’t—” Her gaze fell once more. “You looked as though you’d taken care of business.”

He paused the briefest of moments before laughing. “You thought I was masturbating?” He sobered. “Okay, you caught me. You did interrupt—thank God—and then I slipped on the hardwood coming off the bottom of the stairs. That tends to kill an erection.”

Now it was her turn to laugh at the image of him falling. “Did you fall completely? I heard a crash.”

“Oh yeah. Towel went flying, and I hit the wall. Totally unsexy. Hurt like hell too.”

She giggled. “Where?”

He gestured to the wall across from the stairs and the floor beside it. “Here.”

She giggled harder, her stomach muscles contracting. “No. Where did you hurt yourself?”

He joined her in laughing. He pivoted and stroked his hip. “My ass, if you really want to know.”

“I do.” She tossed her purse on a small table, which he’d apparently just missed in his catastrophic spill. “Let me see.”

He arched his brow at her but said nothing. He let that side of the towel go, and it fell across his butt, revealing a perfectly sculpted cheek. With a red mark on the side.

She lightly touched him, caressing his warm flesh. Desire flared through her, along with a burst of anxiety. It had been far too long since she’d seen a naked man, let alone touched one.

“That’s going to leave a bruise.”

He looked at her over his shoulder. “I suppose it would be horribly cliché to ask you to kiss it for me?”

She continued to stroke him. "Horribly." Nonetheless, she was considering it.

"Did you mean what you said? About wanting to have sex?"

She stared at the hard plane of his lower back, the mouthwatering muscles tapering from his ass to his hamstring. "Yes." Now more than ever. She wanted to grip his flesh as he drove into her. "Were you really masturbating?"

He wrapped the towel back around his hips, surprising her. What had she expected? That he'd pick her up caveman-style and thrust her against the wall for a good, hard screw? God, that sounded divine. Her thighs quivered in response.

He turned, and the tent was in full effect now. "Guilty. What can I say? I'm not seeing anyone right now, and spending the evening with you is enough to get me pretty worked up, particularly because you're unapologetically flirtatious. And sexy as hell."

She licked her lower lip. "That towel is going to have trouble staying in place."

"Especially if you keep doing provocative things with your tongue," he growled, catapulting her into an even greater state of sexual agitation.

"I'd like to, but you seem hesitant." She was still waiting for her caveman moment.

"I just want to be clear. You remember what I told you earlier. This is casual. If we have sex tonight, you can't expect me to call you tomorrow." He tipped his head back, and when he brought it back down, his mouth dipped into an almost frown. "Actually you can, because we'll still be working together. That's the other thing to consider. Is this going to be awkward?"

Yes, that *was* something to consider. Maybe the biggest something. "I don't know. We're adults, and I'd like to think we can keep this separate. But maybe not. Or maybe it won't be great, and we won't have any trouble pretending it never happened."

He took a step toward her, his eyes intensely green. "I'd bet my life that won't be the case."

She would too. This was already one of the most exciting, enthralling, utterly arousing evenings she'd ever had. At the wine tasting earlier, there'd been this sexy undercurrent that went beyond flirtation. She'd wondered if it had just been her, but perhaps not.

He suddenly broke their eye contact. He looked over toward his kitchen. She followed his line of sight but had no idea what he was looking at. When his gaze found hers again, the kinetic sparks were gone.

She tensed, wondering what had happened.

"As much as I'd love to continue this evening toward its certainly thrilling conclusion, I think we should stop." The planes of his face were taut, his muscles rigid. He appeared physically pained.

Disappointment curdled in her gut. "I see." Her gaze dipped to his towel tent. He was clearly still aroused. But he was pushing her away. Had she done something wrong? She *was* out of practice. She wanted to find a hole, crawl inside, and maybe come out next week. *Maybe*.

She picked up her purse from the table. "Sure. I get it." Only she wasn't sure she did. A guy who was notorious for his conquests had just turned her down.

She wasn't sure it got any more pathetic than that.

You are not pathetic!

No, she wasn't. She was, however, pissed.

"Good decision," she said, turning. "I'll talk to you next week."

* * * *

Cam watched her walk toward the door, his mind churning for something to say that didn't

sound lame or patronizing. He moved quickly—too quickly as his towel tried to slide off his hips. He was vaguely aware that his erection was still raging. And *that* wasn't awkward as hell.

He caught up to her as she turned the handle and put his hand over hers. "Wait. I don't want you to be upset."

She turned her head, and her eyes were blazing. *Too late.* "You just turned me down. How am I supposed to feel?"

He tried to think of what to say that would soothe the situation. He didn't want her to be mad. Or whatever else she might be feeling. "Like you dodged a bullet?"

She arched a brow at him in question, and the fire in her eyes didn't diminish.

"I'm bad news, right?"

She just stared at him. He was not handling this well at all. "Look, it's the work thing," he said. "You're a tremendous asset, and I don't want to mess that up. Your job is important to you—as it should be—and I don't want to cause problems for you."

Her eyes narrowed. "Or for you. At least take some ownership here."

He inwardly winced. "Okay. I like and respect you too much to muck up our working relationship."

Her upper lip curled. "Since I'm pretty sure you've screwed other people you had to work with, I'm not sure how to take that. I guess I should just be happy I rate higher than those other women. Poor them."

Damn it, she was right. He'd slept with plenty of women he'd worked with, but they didn't live here in Ribbon Ridge. Across the street. They weren't in his everyday world. Well, fuck if he didn't feel like the manwhore everyone had always joked that he was.

Before he could come up with a reasonable response, she dipped her gaze and let out a harsh laugh. "I guess your hand is getting lucky tonight after all. Have fun." She opened the door and left, closing it sharply behind her.

He stared at the wood, tempted to go after her. But what would be the point? The way his night was going, he'd probably lose his towel in the street and accidentally lock himself out. Absurdly, he laughed, but only for a moment.

Damn it.

That had been a lose-lose situation. If she'd stayed, their work relationship probably would've suffered. But wouldn't it suffer anyway? She was pissed and rightfully so.

She wouldn't stay pissed, though. At least he hoped not. She'd come to realize this was the right decision, even if he'd probably doubt it for the rest of his life.

That nasty word—regret—reared in his mind again. This was one he'd have to learn to live with. In the meantime, he was getting right back in the damned shower.

He took the stairs two at a time.

Chapter Nine

Brooke slept later than usual on Sunday, then puttered around her loft, emptying the last of her moving boxes and hanging a few pictures. She kept herself from looking out the window toward Cam's townhouse, lest she happen to catch him coming or going. She'd have to face him sooner or later, but she'd do her best to make sure it was later.

She made herself a salad for lunch and was just finishing up when her phone rang. Her immediate thought was that it could be Cam, and she perversely hoped it was so that she could ignore him. But no, it was her sister on FaceTime.

Knowing full well that Rhonda wanted an accounting of what had happened last night, Brooke answered the phone anyway. She wanted to unload, and Rhonda would be a sympathetic ear.

She propped the phone against her water bottle on the table. "Hey, Rhonda."

Her sister's smile greeted her. She wore no makeup, but she'd never needed it, and her light brown hair was pulled back in a high ponytail—her "mom do" as she called it. "Hey! I waited as long as I could. I'm not catching you at a bad time, am I?"

Translation: Are you still shackled up with the hottie?

"Would I have answered the phone if you were?" Brooke asked.

Rhonda laughed. "I guess not, but you *are* out of practice."

So out of practice. "Yeah, I'm so rusty, I completely crashed and burned."

Rhonda's jaw dropped. "WHAT?!"

Brooke smiled, glad she didn't have the phone next to her ear.

"What happened?" Rhonda asked, clearly agitated. She sat down, and Brooke could tell she was on one of the stools at her kitchen counter.

"He wanted to, but he decided to grow a conscience. He was afraid we'd damage our working relationship if we went down that path."

Rhonda held up her hand and set the phone down against something so that she was hands-free. "Wait a sec. You didn't tell me you worked together."

Brooke hadn't meant to leave that part out. She just hadn't been thinking clearly. Damn him and his stupid sexy smile and his annoyingly seductive charm. "I picked up his winery as a client a couple of weeks ago."

Rhonda mashed her lips together. "Hmm. That's no bueno, sis. I hate to say it, but that was probably a good move on his part."

Brooke scowled. "Wow, you are not making me feel better."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I'm sure he's an asshole. Does that help?"

"A little." Brooke couldn't argue with her sister's logic, much as she wanted to. It had been a good move. And one *she* ought to have made, not him. "It just sucks. I finally put myself out there, and it was a total fail."

Rhonda cocked her head and nodded sympathetically. "It wasn't a *total* fail. You said he wanted to sleep with you, right?"

Yes, he'd said as much, even if his towering hard-on and admitted masturbation hadn't been evidence enough. "It doesn't really matter, though, does it? In the end, he passed."

"Ugh, don't take it like that. I think it's cool that he respected you enough to keep things professional."

God, did she have to regurgitate what he'd told her? Brooke tried to keep her expression impassive while silently cursing the jerk who'd invented FaceTime.

But Rhonda knew her too well. She winced. "He said that, didn't he?"

Brooke sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. "Yep."

Rhonda blew her a kiss. "Sorry."

"I guess it bothers me that he's slept with other women he's worked with before. But somehow I fell short."

Rhonda's forehead creased for a moment. "Or...he likes you more than he liked the others, and he really doesn't want to mess up a good thing workwise."

"He did spout some nonsense about not wanting to screw up my job since he knows it's important to me."

"Doesn't sound like nonsense. It sounds like he made a tough call." She set her elbow on her kitchen counter and leaned her chin on her palm. "One you probably would have made if your uninformed sister hadn't pushed you toward him."

Brooke appreciated Rhonda trying to shoulder some of the blame, but Rhonda was right—Brooke should have been the one to call a halt. Instead, she'd ended up feeling as though she'd been dumped. Which was stupid. But the hurt of Darren's betrayal had replayed at the back of her mind, like a bad song that pops into your head and stays there for a day. Or more. The old feelings had meshed with the new until she'd just felt like she ought to swear off men forever.

"So...since you're not going to be getting lucky with the hot coworker, Mom wants to set you up with someone."

Oh no. Brooke uncrossed her arms, instantly alert and tense. "I do not want Mom to set me up."

She'd tried a couple of times to put Brooke "back on the horse again," as she put it. Only Brooke hadn't been ready, and she still wasn't completely sure that she was. She'd told Cam last night that she might be interested in casual dating. But she'd been flirting with him. Anyway, she'd said "might." After last night's debacle, she was ready to revise that to "no way in hell."

Rhonda dropped her hand from her chin. "I know you're skeptical, but this doesn't sound like a bad deal, especially since you're ready to move on. *Finally*."

Brooke bristled at that but said nothing.

"You know Mom's pal Joyce?" At Brooke's nod she continued. "She has a nephew who's been living in McMinnville the past couple of years. He works in admissions at the college. I saw a picture, and he's cute."

Brooke remained skeptical. Her opinion of cute differed from Rhonda's. Her sister liked tall, lean guys with glasses, whose wardrobes contained funny T-shirts and a lot of button-downs—including flannel—to throw over them. In her own words, she dug nerds. Brooke preferred men who were well put together and more traditionally handsome. She supposed you could call them movie-star variety like Ryan Gosling or Chris Pine. Or Ribbon Ridge-winery-owner variety. Like Cameron Westcott.

"I don't know. I'll think about it." That would buy her time to come up with an excuse.

Rhonda blinked. "You will?"

"I said I'd think about it, not that I'd go out with him."

"I heard you. It's just more than you've committed to in...well, ever."

"I committed to nothing. Do not get Mom's hopes up." Brooke suddenly felt claustrophobic. It was a beautiful day, and she needed some exercise. "I'm going for a jog. Thanks for the pep talk."

“Sorry, I kind of sucked at that. I’m proud of you for taking the next step, even if it wasn’t successful.” She leaned forward, her brows arching. “And no, that’s not the same as calling it a failure.”

Brooke rolled her eyes. “Yeah, okay. You sound like such a middle school counselor.”

Rhonda laughed as she picked up her phone. “Because I *am* a middle school counselor.”

She was also a younger-sister counselor. How many times had Brooke and their little sister Tracy commiserated over Rhonda’s bossiness, aka “help”? Too many to count.

“I’m going now,” Brooke said. “Really, thanks. I appreciate your support.”

Rhonda smiled at her and blew another kiss. “I love you, sis.”

“Love you too.” Brooke sent a kiss back and disconnected.

Brooke took her dishes to the sink and went to put on her running shoes. After strapping her phone to her bicep and tucking in earbuds, she took the elevator down to the garage so she could exit the building away from Cam’s townhouse.

She hoped he wasn’t out and about on foot today. Ugh, why’d she have to move to such a small town? No, the real question was why did she have to have a crush on a player she would most certainly run into on a regular basis?

Yuck. She didn’t want to have a crush on him. So she wouldn’t. She turned up the music and clenched her teeth as she ran near the park. It was a beautiful afternoon, and there were several families enjoying picnics. An impromptu soccer game was going on and the playground was clogged with children. She turned her attention away and kept her gaze focused straight ahead.

Crossing the street, she breathed easier as she left the scene of familial bliss behind. She jogged by City Hall and the police station, nodding at an officer as she passed. A sandwich board sign at the edge of the sidewalk read, “Library Now Open!”

Brooke turned her head to where a small piece of the City Hall building had been carved out to form the new community library. She’d heard that it was going to open soon, but didn’t know it already had. The door was open, and she couldn’t resist the scent of books.

She pulled her headphones from her ears and draped the cord around her neck as she walked inside. A rush of cool air-conditioning turned the sweat dappling her forehead and neck to ice, causing her to shiver.

To her right was a small checkout counter, and next to that, a couple of self-checkout machines. To her left was a reading area, clearly designed for children, with small chairs and short tables with stubby legs. A mother sat in one of the chairs, her knees hitting her chest as she read to her daughter, who sat beside her. She was around three years old, and she was utterly focused on the pages of the picture book lying open on the table. The mother stroked the girl’s dark hair—a small, instinctive gesture, one that she was probably unaware of but that cut straight to Brooke’s heart.

She turned abruptly and nearly crashed into a young woman. “Oh! Sorry, I didn’t see you. My bad.”

The woman smiled, her pale blue eyes crinkling at the edges. “It’s no problem. Can I help you find anything?”

Brooke surveyed the books the woman clutched to her chest—she clearly worked here. “No, thank you. I was just running by and wanted to stop in for a quick look. It’s so great to have a library.”

The woman nodded. “Isn’t it? It’s been a long time coming. Ribbon Ridge has needed one for years. Well, I guess they had one once around the turn of the century. It was more of a traveling situation with a small collection of books that circulated around the area.”

“You know your history,” Brooke said. The brick at West Arch and what Hayden had told her about it popped into her head. “Do you know anything about a proposed Ribbon Ridge museum?”

The librarian tucked a dark curl behind her ear. “You’ve heard about that?”

“Only that it’s in development. I work with Hayden Archer, and he mentioned it. I know you’re not Alaina Pierce—he said she was working on it with her best friend. Is that you?”

She shook her head, chuckling. “Goodness, no. I only know Alaina a little, mostly from when she comes in to The Arch and Vine. I work there part-time as a server. Used to be full-time until I was hired here as the librarian, which is what I’ve always wanted to do.”

Brooke knew The Arch and Vine was owned by the Archers, so it made sense that this woman was familiar with them, at least as an employee. “I’m Brooke Ellis, by the way.” She offered her hand.

The librarian shook her hand. “Kelsey McDade. Nice to meet you.”

“You too. I’m pretty new to town, so I don’t really know many people.”

Kelsey flashed a smile. “Well, you know the Archers, and if you have their stamp of approval, you’re good to go in Ribbon Ridge.”

Brooke chuckled. “I know one Archer—Hayden. And his wife. And I don’t know them well. I’m distributing his wine, so our relationship is both new and strictly professional.” She couldn’t help but think of Cameron and how their relationship was exactly the same. Then she couldn’t help but think about how that sucked.

“I know several of them since I’ve worked at the pub for a couple of years. They’re good people. I like Hayden and Bex a lot. She makes great beer.”

“So I hear,” Brooke said. “I’ll have to try it sometime. Maybe you can join me.”

Kelsey nodded, smiling. “That would be fun.”

Brooke tugged her phone from her armband. “What’s your cell, and I’ll send you my number.”

Kelsey rattled off the number. “Have you been up to The Alex? That’s where Bex is the brewer—at The Arch and Fox, to be exact.”

“Just once. I went to a wine dinner several months ago.” She thought back and tried to recall if Cam had been there. He had to have been, but she didn’t remember him. It was odd, but she had a hard time believing she could be in the same room with him and not be aware of his presence. Which was really stupid.

Time to get back to that run that was supposed to be clearing her head.

“Hey, about that museum,” Kelsey started, sounding a bit hesitant. “What else did Hayden say? I’ve been thinking it would be great to open a Ribbon Ridge history exhibit upstairs.”

Brooke grinned. “What a terrific idea—goes right along with the library. I think people would love it. Hayden didn’t say much, just that Alaina and her best friend were working on it or something. You should ask him.”

“I will, thanks.” Kelsey moved the books to her other arm. “I should’ve thought to talk to the Archers. They’re the reason this library even happened. They gave a grant to the county to expand the library system here.”

“Wow.” Brooke didn’t even want to consider how much money that might have been. But even she, who was new to town, knew that the Archers were one of the wealthiest families in the state. “I bet they’d be thrilled to work with you on it.” Brooke’s mind turned to the brick again. “I was up at the winery—Hayden’s winery—last week, and they showed me this cool brick that looks like it had to have been from around the founding of the town. Actually, I have no idea

when Ribbon Ridge was founded. The brick was from 1879.”

“That’s pretty close,” Kelsey said. “Benjamin Archer settled here in 1856 after a friend of his—a fur trader—wrote to him about the beauty of the area.”

“The brick had the initials BNR on it.”

“Where’d they find this brick?” Kelsey asked.

“Near the foundation of a house they tore down on the winery property. They think it had to have come from an earlier structure.” Brooke frowned. “They’re planning to install it in the fire pit outside, but I think it needs to be somewhere protected.”

Kelsey smiled, her brow arching. “Like a museum?”

“Bingo.” Brooke smiled in return. “You should definitely talk to them. Soon.”

“I will. And hey, if you’re at the winery, try to put that brick somewhere safe!”

And just like that, Brooke’s mood took a turn down Disappointment Street. Yes, she’d be at the winery, but probably not soon, if she could help it. “Sure, I’ll do that. But you’ll probably beat me to it.”

“Well, with both of us after it, we’ll get it handled.”

Someone came from the back of the library and approached the front desk. Kelsey nodded at them. “Guess I should help this person check out a book. I’ll text you about getting together. It was really nice to meet you.”

Brooke pulled her headphones from around her neck. “You too. See you later.” She waved as she turned and left the library.

As she started up her run, she pushed herself hard so that her mind couldn’t stray to Cam. By the time she got back to the loft, she was hot and tired. But her plan had worked because she hadn’t thought to alter her path to avoid passing in front of his townhouse. And that made her smile.

* * * *

For what seemed the hundredth time that morning, Cam caught himself staring off into space, rehashing what had happened on Saturday night. He’d spent most of yesterday on a friend’s boat, which had served to distract his mind from thoughts of Brooke and what he’d missed out on.

Had he really turned her away?

Yep, and his conscience kept reiterating that it had been the right thing to do. But that didn’t mean other parts of him agreed. He liked her. A lot. He wanted her. *A lot.*

But he also respected her, and he knew how much she loved her job. Still, she’d been the one to offer...

Thankfully his brothers took that moment to interrupt his pointless musings.

“What’s up?” Jamie asked as he sprawled in one of the chairs in front of Cam’s desk.

“Just working,” Cam said. He eyed both of them as Luke took the other chair. “What do you guys need?”

Jamie clasped the arms of the chair. “We wanted to touch base about the wine dinner. We’re about a month out, so things are going to start amping up.”

Cam leaned back in his chair and twirled his pen between his fingers. “I talked to Sara this morning, and she’s got logistics pretty well covered.”

“How’s the food coming?” Luke asked. “Shouldn’t we have a menu to advertise yet?” He shook his head. “What do I know? I leave the marketing and whatnot up to you.”

Cam snorted. “Thanks. We’re close. Kyle’s just finalizing the dessert.” As the executive chef at The Arch and Fox, Kyle was working on just the right recipes to pair with their wine.

“He better hurry. Isn’t Maggie going to pop any day?” Jamie asked.

They were expecting their first child in a couple of weeks. “Not quite yet, but yeah, the timing’s not ideal.” Cam chuckled. “He’s well aware. I’ll follow up with him this afternoon.”

Jamie slapped his hands on the arm of the chair as he sat forward. “Remind him of our budget. Kyle likes to splurge.”

“You know I won’t be able to stop him, and he’ll just insist on paying the difference.”

Jamie grinned. “He can afford it. Before I go, what’s the scoop on the guest list? I met a woman the other night that I’d like to invite.”

Cam exchanged an interested look with Luke before they both turned their attention to their little brother. “Not Madison?”

Jamie laughed. “No, not Madison. Leah’s the new CFO at Seven Wonders. She’s a business contact.” That was one of the largest wineries in the area.

Cam tossed his pen onto the desk. “We aren’t inviting a lot of winemakers. We’re focused on people who are going to buy or promote our wine.”

“I know, but her brother writes for *Wine Spectator* so...”

Cam leaned forward. “Say no more. She’s in. And great get. Any chance he’ll come?”

“I said we’d love to have him. We’ll see what happens.”

Cam rubbed his hands together. He’d invited someone from the magazine to come, but they hadn’t committed yet and at this point, he feared they wouldn’t. This connection might help.

“Excellent. Brooke’s also working an angle at *Wine Enthusiast*.” She knew someone there and was pretty close to getting her to commit.

Jamie stood. “Brooke’s been awesome. She’s picked up some great accounts. Good find, bro.” He nodded at Cam before turning and heading out of the office. “Back to the grind.”

Luke didn’t leave with him. Cam looked at his middle brother and arched a brow. “No grind for you?”

“Always, but since Jamie brought up Brooke...” He let the question hang out there, and Cam had no doubt what he was getting at.

Still, he’d make him work for it. “What about her?”

Luke let out a quick chuckle. He leaned his elbow on the armrest. “You left with her the other night. What happened?”

“Nothing. She lives across the street from me. I walked her home.”

Luke scrutinized him for a moment, as if he could discern what had actually happened. Cam stared at him in stoic silence, daring him to try.

“I just wanted to know if I need to worry that you might drive her away.”

Cam flashed a purely sarcastic smile. “Oh, that’s nice of you. No, I won’t be driving her away. Our relationship is strictly professional.”

“Yeah, right. I see the way you look at each other.”

Cam stood, irritated by the conversation because their relationship *was* strictly professional and it *sucked*. “Can you drop it?”

Luke got to his feet. “Hey, I’m not trying to be a dick.”

Maybe not, but he was doing an excellent job.

“My bad. You guys seemed like you might make a good couple, that’s all.”

They might’ve, but if they tried and it didn’t work out, things would be awkward. No, worse than that. Things would be ugly, and he and Brooke wouldn’t be able to maintain this working

relationship. And the winery was far more important to Cam than any sort of romantic entanglement. Which he didn't need or want anyway.

Cam rubbed his hand over his eyes and looked at his brother. "Look, I appreciate you trying to be supportive or whatever it is you're doing, but leave it alone. Yes, we were attracted to each other and we discussed going out. We decided the working relationship was too important to jeopardize, okay?"

"How mature of you both." Luke laughed. "I'm not sure I'd have that kind of resolve."

Cam chuckled, letting his irritation fall away. "Clearly. Wasn't your girlfriend in Cali a coworker?"

"At first, yeah, but then she moved to another winery."

"Was that a mutual decision?"

"Sort of. The boss found out, and told us to figure it out." Luke glanced toward the windows. "He made it, uh, clear that he didn't want to lose me."

"Ouch. I bet she was pissed."

Luke laughed again. "Yes, but not enough to break up."

Cam knew that because Luke moving up here hadn't even been enough to break them up. They'd kept up a long-distance relationship for a year or so before he'd finally called it quits. And he hadn't dated anyone since. "You know, if you spent half as much energy on your own love life as you do speculating about me and Brooke, you might actually start dating."

"Hey, I date. I'm just busy. Like you."

"Exactly. Keep your nose out of my business and I'll do the same."

Luke threw up his hands. "So much for brotherly camaraderie or whatever." He turned and walked to the door but paused before leaving. "You usually take this sort of poking better. It seems like Brooke means more to you than anyone you've...*whatevered* with."

Cam stifled a scowl because he feared Luke was right. "Would you go, please?"

"I'm going." He pivoted and went out the door, closing it behind him.

Cam went to his mini fridge and popped open a sparkling water. He stood at the window and looked out over the sloping vineyard. It was green and verdant amidst the yellows and browns of mid-August. A sort of oasis, and it represented their hard work.

That was what he needed to focus on right now, not Brooke. This introductory dinner next month was crucial.

And what the hell was he thinking, anyway? He wasn't long-term relationship material, which meant an inevitable breakup. He liked her too much for things to end like that—and maybe that was the *real* reason he'd called a halt. Either way, it had been the right decision.

Chapter Ten

After meeting Kelsey for a beer at Books 'N Brew, Ribbon Ridge's kitschy bookstore that served coffee in the morning and Archer beer in the evening, Brooke and her new friend made their way down Main Street to the edge of town to Ruckus, Ribbon Ridge's answer to a dive bar.

"Thanks for agreeing to come here instead of The Arch and Vine," Kelsey said as they cut into the parking lot.

"No problem." Brooke flashed her a smile. "I totally understand why you don't want to hang out at your job on your night off. Plus, I'm the one that suggested something more casual than The Arch and Fox." They'd agreed to go up and drink Bex's beer another time.

The night was warm and dry, typical of August in the Willamette Valley. Brooke was glad she'd put her hair up, but she was still heated after the walk.

"Have you been here before?" Kelsey asked as they approached the door.

"Not yet. Do I need to be prepped?"

Kelsey laughed. "No. It's just a different clientele from most of the other places in town."

Brooke could see that, judging from the motorcycles and four-wheel-drive trucks in the lot as well as the neon signs offering Keno and video poker. It reminded her of the family friendly restaurant by day and bar by night back home, where her family had enjoyed many an excellent burger. "Do they serve burgers?"

"No, just basic bar food. Pretzels, hot dogs, fries, and nachos. Although, don't expect their nachos to compare to The Arch and Vine."

"I haven't had them." Brooke had only eaten at the Archers' pub a couple of times. "They do have pretty good burgers though."

Kelsey opened the door, and music blared at them. "That they do."

Brooke walked in behind her. "Bar or table?"

"Definitely table."

They scanned the busy room. The tables looked pretty full. But Kelsey pointed toward an empty booth in the middle of the far wall. It was still cluttered with glasses, indicating it had been recently vacated. Brooke nodded, and they wove through tables and patrons to reach their destination. Between the music and the conversation, a deep hum filled the place.

They each slid into opposite sides of the booth and set about scooting the former occupants' detritus to the edge of the table.

"Why do I feel like I should bus this?" Kelsey laughed.

Brooke joined her, chuckling. "Resist the urge! It's your night off."

A server came by and stacked the glasses. "Sorry. We're busy tonight." She pulled a towel from a pocket in the small apron around her waist and wiped down the table. "Do you know what you want?"

They ordered a couple of beers, and the server took off.

"So what's going on with the history exhibit?" Brooke asked.

"I talked to Hayden, and he hooked me up with Alaina and her friend Crystal. They were pretty excited to hear about the brick you mentioned. Which reminds me, I totally forgot to ask Hayden for it." Kelsey shook her head. "Any chance you'll be up at the winery any time soon? Maybe you can grab it."

Brooke would probably have to stop by there sometime next week to pick up more wine

samples. She was running low, but she knew she'd wait until the last possible moment to get more. As it was, communication between her and Cam had trickled to a bare minimum. They'd exchanged just a couple of quick e-mails this week about the wine dinner next month.

"Sure, I can do that," Brooke said. She went back to their topic to push Cam out of her head. "So what's your plan with the exhibit?"

"I guess there was some discussion about turning the Archer homestead into a museum, but Alaina and her husband are renovating it instead, and they plan to live there."

Brooke immediately wondered if that was where the brick had come from. "What's the Archer homestead?"

"It's a house on the current Archer estate that dates back to about 1890." Kelsey's mouth curved up. "Yes, too late for the brick—I can see you went to the same place I did immediately." She chuckled.

Brooke smiled. "I did. The initials on it—BNR—did anyone have a clue about them?"

Kelsey shook her head. "No, but they were going to hit the books and see what they could find. I've been doing a bit of searching too, but they have the bulk of the materials."

"What sort of materials?" Brooke looked up at the server as she arrived with their beer. "Thanks."

Kelsey curled her hand around the base of her pint glass. "Letters, copies of birth and death certificates, and property deeds. A random collection, I guess. I haven't seen it yet. We're getting together soon so I can take a look and put together some ideas for the exhibit."

"That sounds so fun. You're going to house it upstairs at the library?"

Kelsey took a quick sip of her beer. "Yes. You know, I'm sure we could use a hand if you want to help. I'm always looking for library volunteers."

Brooke instantly warmed to the idea. It would give her something to do that wasn't work-related. Between that and trying to restart her nonexistent love life, she'd be busy enough to forget all about Cameron Westcott.

"I'd love to help, thanks for asking." Brooke took a long drink of beer. "Maybe we should've ordered shots."

Kelsey laughed. "Is that right? Is there something you're trying to forget?"

Wow, she'd nailed that. "It's just been a long week."

Kelsey grimaced. "And it's not over yet. I'm working at the library tomorrow from ten to four, then at The Arch and Vine from five to close."

"Yikes! I'd say you need a shot—or several—but then you might not be able to function tomorrow."

"True. So rain check on shots?"

"Definitely. I'd say on your next day off, but I'm worried you don't have any." Even though Kelsey hadn't worked at the pub today, she told Brooke that she'd done a full day at the library.

Kelsey lifted a shoulder. "The library's closed on Mondays and Wednesdays, and I try not to work at the pub on one of those days."

"So one day a week." At Kelsey's sheepish nod, Brooke shook her head. "That's not enough! Why do I think this is the first social outing you've had in ages?"

"Because it is?" Kelsey waved her hand. "It's fine. I like to be busy."

"Clearly you don't have a boyfriend, and I'm guessing you don't even date." Wow, this sounded so familiar. No wonder they'd hit it off.

"No, and correct."

Brooke lifted her pint in toast. "Well then, we have that in common. Men suck."

Kelsey was quick to tap her glass to Brooke's. "Amen."

They drank deeply, and Kelsey was the first to jump in. "Anything you want to share?"

Brooke shrugged. "I don't want to be Debbie Downer. Suffice it to say I'm divorced."

Kelsey nodded, and her eyes were warm and empathetic. "I get you. I won't depress you with my story either. Not divorced, but a long-term relationship that ended badly." She shuddered.

"Sorry to hear that. You might think I'm crazy, but I've actually been thinking it's time to get back in the game. I have two sisters and an overinvolved mother who keep trying to set me up."

Kelsey laughed. "I thought you told me earlier that your family still lives in southern Oregon?"

"They do, but you think that would stop them?"

"One can hope. My family lives up in Washington, and it could be Siberia for all I see of them."

Brooke couldn't tell if that was a good thing or not. "And is that okay?"

Kelsey cupped her hands around her pint glass. "It's fine. It's just my mom and stepdad and my younger half-brother. He's still in high school, so they're focused on that." She took another drink of beer. "Are you eyeing someone in particular? To date, I mean."

An image of Cam in his towel at his townhouse rose in her mind. No, not him. "My mom wants to set me up with a guy in Mac. I think I'm going to say yes."

Kelsey inhaled and briefly cocked her head to the side. "You're brave. Not only putting your toes back in the water, but with a blind date?"

Brooke winced. "You're giving me second thoughts."

Kelsey's eyes widened. "Oh no! I'm sorry. You should totally do it. If your mom vetted him, he's probably great."

Probably. "I think he might be more my sister's type than mine."

Kelsey chuckled. "So she should date him."

"Except she's married. Both my sisters are. I'm the failure." Brooke took a long pull on her beer to cover up her discomfort. She hadn't meant to say that.

Across the table, Kelsey's gaze darkened with concern. Brooke averted her eyes and caught the door opening. *Oh hell.* In walked Cam and Luke Westcott. Of all the damned, rotten luck.

She drank more of her beer, nearly draining it. If she finished it quickly, she could suggest they leave.

"Well, when you decide to go out with this guy, let me know if you need a wingman," Kelsey said. "I'm happy to sit at a nearby table and rescue you if necessary."

Brooke bit her tongue before she said that rescue was necessary right now. She glanced toward the door, and damn it, the brothers made eye contact with her. And started walking over. Steeling herself, Brooke polished off her beer.

Kelsey noted that Brooke's glass was empty and picked hers up. "I need to catch you."

She did. Then they could leave.

"Hey there!" Luke greeted Brooke as they approached the table. He looked over at Kelsey.

There was no avoiding introductions at least. "Hi," Brooke said, somewhat unenthusiastically and not caring one bit. "Luke, this is my friend Kelsey. Kelsey, this is Luke Westcott and his brother Cameron." She didn't make eye contact with Cam.

"You look familiar," Luke said to Kelsey. "Have we met before?"

"Probably. I work at The Arch and Vine."

He shook his head, smiling. "Duh. Now I feel like a tool for not remembering that."

She smiled at him. "Don't. We haven't ever introduced ourselves or anything."

"Well, no time like the present." He sat on the bench next to Kelsey, and she scooted over to make room. "You don't mind, do you?" He looked from Kelsey to Brooke and back to Kelsey again. "There aren't any other tables."

"We'll be leaving shortly," Brooke said. She finally shot a glance at Cam, who was still standing next to the table. Their gazes connected, and fire sparked through her. Damn it. Absence apparently made more than the heart grow fonder—it made unsatisfied aches burn.

Luke looked up at his brother. "Aren't you going to sit?"

Brooke moved as close to the wall as she could without looking ridiculous. Cam slid in beside her, and though they weren't touching, she felt his presence as though they were.

"What're you drinking?" Luke asked.

"Hefeweizen," Kelsey answered.

"And it looks like you're due for another round." Luke looked around for the server.

Shit. Wait, this was stupid. She could sit next to Cam and be fine. They were going to be doing this in the future for various work-related stuff, so she'd better get used to it. Besides, Ribbon Ridge was a small town. Things like this were bound to happen.

The server stopped by, and Luke ordered a pitcher. After she left, he looked at Brooke and Kelsey. "Are we interrupting girls' night?"

"Sort of," Brooke said.

Luke flinched. "Sorry. We'll leave you alone as soon as a table opens up."

Kelsey shook her head. "It's fine." She exchanged a look with Brooke that seemed to ask if that was okay. Brooke gave a slight nod. What could she do?

Luke darted a look at Cam, and Brooke could see the unspoken question in his gaze—*why aren't you talking?* She wondered if Cam was as uncomfortable as she was.

"So, Kelsey," Luke said, "you work at The Arch and Vine?"

"She's also the new librarian," Brooke said.

Luke looked confused.

Kelsey turned her head to look at him. "The library just opened up a couple of weeks ago, and I'm running it."

"Very cool. I didn't realize. Too wrapped up in work, I guess. I'll have to stop by."

The server brought the pitcher with glasses, and when Cam went to pour the beer, his elbow brushed Brooke's arm. She sidled closer to the wall.

Luke took a drink, then angled his body toward Kelsey. "Tell me about the library."

As they chatted, Brooke sipped her beer. She kept her voice low as she looked over at Cam. "Something wrong with you tonight?"

He glanced at her. "No, why?"

"I've never seen you this quiet. It's... weird."

He exhaled. "Sorry." He took a long drink. "I didn't realize... That is, I didn't know how... seeing you... Hell, never mind." He went back to drinking.

Brooke smiled, enjoying his agitation. "Is this a problem?" She blinked at him and made sure her tone was sugary innocent.

He scowled at her briefly, then took a deep breath. When he turned toward her, he smiled, and the effect was devastating. Brooke's gut clenched, and heat pooled between her legs.

"Nope, not a problem," he said, appearing to completely regroup and change his attitude. "I guess I was still feeling bad about the other night, but you seem fine."

"Yep, fine." She knew she answered too quickly and wished she'd said something far more sophisticated. Like what? Maybe something like, *What are you feeling bad about?* as if she'd forgotten all about their near-sexy times. Damn, why did the good comebacks never come to mind at the right time?

Kelsey looked at her beer. "You know, I usually drink this with lemon."

Luke jumped up. "I'll get you some."

"You don't have to," Kelsey said.

"No, but I want to." He flashed her a smile, and Brooke wondered how long Kelsey might stick to her no-dating resolve. Assuming Luke was interested. Maybe Brooke just saw a Westcott smile and immediately assumed they were on the hunt. Ugh, that wasn't fair. Especially with regard to Cam. He'd been a gentleman last weekend, and she should thank him for that.

Brooke shook away the last vestiges of her irritation as Luke took off to get the lemon.

"Actually, I'm going to run to the ladies' room," Kelsey said. "Be right back." She left, and suddenly Brooke and Cam were alone. Well, alone in a boisterous bar.

Cam sipped his beer and cast her a sidelong glance. "You look great."

"Thanks. You too." He wore a crisp green T-shirt and dark gray shorts that had clearly been pressed. He always looked so put together. So bizarre for a guy, and such a turn-on for her.

He turned his head to look at her. "Thanks for your help with the wine dinner. The critic from *Wine Enthusiast* is a huge get. We really appreciate it."

"My pleasure." That word set off warning bells in her brain. She looked at his chest and recalled how sexy he looked when it was bare. She jerked her gaze back to his face but ended up staring at his mouth, remembering what it felt like on hers. Fighting a blush that would tell him more than she wanted him to know, she picked up her beer and drank.

Luke came back with the lemons. "Where's Kelsey?"

"Ladies' room," Brooke said.

Luke nodded. He looked between her and his brother, his gaze assessing. *He knows.* But what exactly? He'd watched them leave the wine tasting last weekend. Had he drawn his own conclusions, or had Cam filled him in? She leaned back against the wall and watched Cam drink his beer.

"Hey, I need to drop by sometime this week to pick up some more samples," she said.

"You're on fire," Luke said. "We hit the jackpot when Cam hired you."

Cam slid her an appreciative look. "We sure did."

Uh-oh. He was flirting again. They weren't supposed to do that.

She glared at him and muttered, "Knock it off," so that only he could hear.

He looked away and exhaled, appearing defeated. *Good.*

She sipped her beer, and the alcohol infused her with a welcome sense of relaxation. She edged away from the wall and settled back against the booth.

Kelsey returned then, and she and Luke picked up their conversation again.

"That's better," Cam murmured too close to her ear. He'd leaned toward her. "You looked like you might crawl through the wall to get away from me."

She turned her head and gave him an ultrasweet smile. "Careful, or I might do it again. Stop flirting with me."

He blinked one eye closed and scrunched his face briefly. "I tried, but I can't help it. Sorry."

"Try *harder*."

"Yes. I will. I mean it." He gave her a determined look, and she almost laughed.

"This really is hard for you, isn't it?"

“Only with you.”

That was *not* what she needed to hear.

Time to save them both from temptation. “I think I should go.” She made a show of yawning, even though it was all of, what, nine thirty?

Kelsey, bless her—she was clearly a great wingman—bought the clue. She looked at Brooke in question, read her nonverbal response, which Brooke delivered in the form of a pleading stare, and gave a slight nod. She drank more of her beer, taking it down to the halfway mark. “Yeah, time for me to head home too. Working two jobs takes a toll.” She stood up. “Enjoy the table.”

Luke smiled at her. “Thanks. It was nice chatting with you.”

Cam slid out to make way for Brooke. She followed him, and as she stood, caught her foot on the base of the booth. She stumbled, but Cam clasped her waist and kept her from falling.

“You okay?” He didn’t let go, and his green gaze blazed into hers.

She pivoted—reluctantly, if she was honest—and his hands finally dropped to his sides. “Yes. Good night.”

She turned and followed Kelsey from the bar. Outside, the temperature had dropped a couple of degrees, and there was a lovely breeze that felt divine against her flushed cheeks.

“What’s the story there?” Kelsey asked as they walked back toward the main part of town.

Brooke looked over at her, not terribly surprised that she’d detected something. “With Cam, you mean?”

She hunched her shoulders briefly. “Sorry. If you’d rather not talk about it, I totally understand. I just... You guys have crazy sparks.”

“I know.” What else could she say? “But we work together, so it’s a nonstarter.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Not really. He’s a player. Even if we didn’t work together, it would be a flash-in-the-pan kind of thing.” That sounded terrific. Just what she needed, probably. “Which wouldn’t be so bad at this point in my life, actually.”

“Well then, that sucks. Maybe you should stop working with him. It’s not like you’d have to quit your actual job, right?”

Brooke had told Kelsey about her job earlier, so she knew that Cam wasn’t her employer. “True, but so far, West Arch has proven to be a good income stream. Not sure I want to give that up for a few nights of fun.”

“Yeah, that makes sense.” Kelsey shook her head. “Tough situation. Whatever you decide, I’m here if you need to talk.”

Brooke smiled, glad that she’d met Kelsey and that it seemed their friendship was off to a great, solid start. “Thanks. I appreciate that.”

They reached Second, where they would part ways, and Kelsey said, “So, I’ll let you know when we’re going to meet about the exhibit.”

“Sounds great. See you then.”

They exchanged waves, and Kelsey crossed the street while Brooke took off toward her building.

A few minutes later as she stepped into the elevator, she pulled out her phone and texted her sister. *Okay, tell Mom I’ll meet the guy from Mac.*

Rhonda’s response came as Brooke stepped into her loft. *Excellent! This is going to be great. I can just feel it.*

The only thing Brooke could feel right now was a pull to Cam’s townhouse across the street. But that wasn’t an option. Yes, it was time to make some changes. Starting with putting herself

back on the market.

* * * *

Cam hefted the case of wine onto his shoulder as he stepped off the elevator onto Brooke's floor. He ought to have called or texted first, but he didn't want her to tell him not to come. He could've just left it for her at the winery to pick up, but he wanted to talk to her. The other night at Ruckus had been unnecessarily awkward. Things didn't have to be like that. At least he hoped they didn't.

But damn, he had to admit it was difficult being around her and not pursuing a romantic relationship. Difficult, but not impossible. He could do this.

He knocked on her door. A moment later, her voice came through the wood. "Who is it?"
"It's Cam. I brought your wine."

She unlocked the door and opened it to reveal her skeptical expression. "You didn't buzz up."

"Someone else was coming in the building."

She frowned at him. "You aren't supposed to do that."

He narrowed his eyes at her, fairly certain she wasn't teasing. "Do you want to call the police? Just let me set the wine down, if you don't mind."

She opened the door wider and gestured him inside.

Somehow they'd gone from uncomfortable to adversarial. He *really* didn't like that. He set the wine on the floor in her entry. He noted she didn't close the door. "Can we talk for a few minutes?"

She hesitated but ultimately shut the door and walked farther into her loft. He watched the sway of her hips, cloaked in denim shorts. They cupped her ass perfectly and had a sexy, tattered hem, like they'd been torn. He got an instant visual of ripping them off her and started to sport wood.

Down boy, he cautioned. He hadn't come here to do anything but apologize and hopefully smooth things over.

She turned to the right and walked into her kitchen, standing next to a long, rectangular island. "What do you want to talk about?"

He joined her at the counter, but left a few feet between them. He leaned against the granite edge and crossed his arms. "I wanted to apologize for the other night. Things seemed uncomfortable, and I really don't want them to be."

She blew out a breath and crossed her arms too. "I don't either. Any ideas on how we do that?"

He'd spent a lot of time thinking about that. Too much, probably. And his thoughts generally veered in the wrong direction, where he ended up undressing her in his mind and having spectacular sex with her.

Yeah, that wasn't helping.

"I'm hoping we can be friends. Maybe if we focused on doing friend things, the...uh, the attraction between us might fade." He nearly laughed at how stupid that sounded.

She arched a brow at him, and her expression seemed to echo his thoughts. "You really think that will work?"

"Hey, it's worth trying." He cocked his head to the side. "What do *you* suggest?"

She hesitated a moment before saying, "Finding someone else at Willamette to take your

account.”

So they could pursue a romantic relationship? The rampant desire he was trying so hard to rein in pulsed through him.

She dropped her arms, and her brow furrowed. “But I hate to do that. This is a good account.”

He didn’t really want her to do that either. She was great, and the business part of his brain didn’t want to lose her. “So back to my friend idea, then.” Which sounded even more unappealing than it had two minutes ago.

She laid her palm flat on the counter and seemed to study the granite. “It’s not a no. I just don’t know how it will work.” She darted him a glance. “I do like you. As a friend.”

He edged closer and uncrossed his arms. He mimicked her, putting his hand on the counter so that their fingers were maybe a foot apart. “I like you too. A little more than as a friend, but I’ll take what I can get.”

She straightened and looked at him, her blue-green eyes sharp and beautiful. “Maybe we should just get this out of our systems. I know you’re worried about us working together, but it’s sort of not going all that great right now anyway, is it?”

Their communication had become stilted, and even though she was still doing a great job, things were awkward. All in all, she had a fair point. But was she serious about the getting-it-out-of-their-systems part? He couldn’t tell.

He offered a self-deprecating smile. “I was trying to be a gentleman. And look where that got me.”

She laughed softly, and her eyes lit. He ached to touch her.

“I appreciate you trying to do that—really. Even if I was pissed at first. But it’s good. You’ve actually encouraged me to get back out there. My mom and sister are setting me up on a blind date.”

She could’ve kicked him square in the balls, and it might’ve had less of an impact. His chest tightened, and his insides swirled with turmoil. Apparently, she hadn’t been serious about getting their mutual attraction out of their systems. “Well, that’s progress, I guess,” he said tightly. He stalled the incremental movement of his hand—which he’d only been partially aware of—on the counter.

Her eyes narrowed slightly and only for a second, as if she’d caught the nuance of his reaction. Shit, maybe it wasn’t that nuanced. Maybe his face screamed his envy. Time to get the hell out of there. “So let’s try the friend thing, then. I’m confident we can do it. You can even tell me all about your date when I see you next.” He forced a smile before turning and starting from the kitchen toward the door.

“Hey, you seem mad.” She caught his hand. “Don’t leave mad. Friends don’t do that.”

He turned, his fingers twining through hers. “Friends don’t do a lot of things. Like think about how they want to toss the other one on the counter and screw them senseless.”

Her eyes widened and immediately darkened with desire. “See, I told you we should just get it out of our systems. I bet that’s all it would take.”

She *was* serious. “That’s a line I would use. You’re killing me with it.”

She lifted a shoulder and ran her thumb along his palm. “Maybe it’s fun to play the player.”

The sexy lilt of her voice and the seductive glint in her gaze completely destroyed whatever willpower he’d been clinging to. He clasped her waist and spun her around so that her back was up against the fridge. She gasped softly, but her eyes slitted as he pushed his body into hers.

He massaged her waist and brought her hand up, pinning it against the stainless steel. He

leaned in close and inhaled her spicy, floral scent. She stared at him, her eyes daring him to take the next step. He shouldn't...he couldn't...he *had* to.

Angling his head, he kissed her hard and fast. He let go of her hand and cupped the side of her neck. Her hands came up around his back and clutched at him. He felt his shirt bunch up as she tugged at the fabric.

Their hips pressed against each other, their bodies pulsing and seeking. The kiss was deep and lush, delicious strokes of tongues and fevered moans. He cocked his head the other way, searching for new ground, claiming every part of her he could find.

She thrust into him, grinding her pelvis and opening her thighs. Hot lust poured through him. Mindless, he found the hem of her tank and pulled it up, yanking it over her head as he broke the kiss for the briefest of moments.

Her breasts were flush against his chest, full and enticing. He cupped the underside of one, his thumb and fingertips skimming over the lace decoration of her bra. She arched her back, pushing her breast into his hand. He pulled his mouth from hers and bent to her chest. Slipping his fingers into her bra, he tugged it down to pop her breast free. God, she was beautiful. Perfect. He ran his thumb over her nipple and watched it peak. It beckoned him to taste, and he didn't need much urging. He licked at her flesh, lightly, teasingly. She thrust her hands into his hair and pressed him against her. He held her breast, capturing it for his mouth. Then he taunted her with slow, gentle licks before he closed his lips over her.

She moaned, her fingers digging into his scalp. He squeezed her flesh and used his teeth lightly, making her gasp. "Yes." The word floated from her mouth—a plea, a demand. Over and over, she prodded him with that word and with her body. Her hips continued to rotate into his, and her hands moved over him, seeking and claiming. She clasped his ass and pulled him tight against her. His cock nestled between her legs, finding her heat despite the clothing between them. He needed her now.

"Cam."

It sounded as if she needed him too.

He reluctantly left her breast, and she clasped the hem of his shirt. He whipped it off and threw it aside, then pulled her away from the fridge long enough to unhook her bra. Then he brought her against him and kissed her again, reveling in being flesh to flesh with her at last.

He pinned her against the fridge, and she tilted her hips. The movement caressed his cock just right. He groaned and grabbed her ass, lifting her. She wrapped her legs around him, bringing him even closer to that sweet spot. He mentally cursed the clothes they were still wearing.

She twined her arms around his neck and kissed him as she squeezed him with her legs. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this worked up. Not even last week when she'd interrupted him in the shower. This was utter bliss. This was heaven. This was Brooke.

He considered where to go next—he needed to get the rest of their clothes off. He interrupted the kiss long enough to form a single-word question. "Bedroom?"

She kissed him, her tongue sweeping against his. "Mmm, yes."

He mentally undressed her and then him and then—

Shit.

He pulled back slightly. She opened her eyes and gave him a dusky stare.

"I, uh..." He hadn't come prepared for this. "I don't suppose you have a condom?"

Chapter Eleven

Brooke flattened her back against the refrigerator. The irony of Cam not having a condom nearly made her laugh...until she thought about the fact that they didn't actually need a condom, assuming they were both clean.

As if he read her mind, he said, "I'm clean. I get tested every six months, and I haven't, uh, had a partner since my last test. If you're on birth control, we could forgo the condom—but only if you're comfortable with that."

She would've been. But she wasn't on birth control. *Because I don't need it.*

She unhooked her legs and pushed at his shoulders.

Lines creased his brow, and he stepped back. "What's wrong?"

She pushed her hair back from her face. "Nothing. I'm not on birth control, and I don't have any condoms, so..." *You should go.*

He wiped a hand over his forehead and blew out a breath. Then his eyes found hers, and they sharpened with hope. "I have condoms at home. I can be right back."

She bent down and picked up her bra and tank top, then walked away from him to put them on with her back to him. "I think this is probably the Universe telling us to put on the brakes, don't you?"

"Uh..." He sounded confused. Or frustrated. Or both.

She hooked her bra on and wiggled into it, pulling up the straps. After she shimmied into her tank top, she turned. He was still standing there bare-chested, and damn if she wasn't sorely tempted to pick up right where they'd left off.

She took a deep breath to calm her speeding pulse. "The points you made last week—about not ruining our working relationship—are as valid today as they were then. Maybe even more so since things have been kind of awkward. You came here for a reset and that's a great idea. We got carried away, but thankfully had a good reason to stop."

He still looked a bit dazed, and it reminded her of how she'd felt when he'd called a halt last time. She didn't feel any sort of vengeance, though. It wasn't about that.

Then what was it about?

Her mind was crammed with thoughts and sensations—wanting him, feeling alone, fighting the sudden urge to cry because she didn't need any damned birth control. "I'm sorry about sending mixed messages. This is complicated, and we've been trying to uncomplicate it, right? Stopping...*this* is the right thing to do."

He nodded finally, then stooped to pick up his shirt. He tugged it on, and it seemed to be happening in slow motion, as if time wanted to give Brooke one more chance to ask him to stay.

She stiffened her spine and walked past him, turning down the entry hall to the doorway. "Thanks for bringing the wine. I really appreciate it."

He walked toward her, and she opened the door before he could do or say anything that would threaten her resolve. *If* he could. She was so conflicted right now, so agitated, that she didn't know if he could persuade her to go back to where they'd been five minutes ago.

"You're welcome." He walked over the threshold then turned around to face her. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm not upset."

He frowned briefly, but the creases on his brow stayed. "I'm not sure I believe you. But it

doesn't matter. It was your turn to be the cool head of reason."

Relieved that he wasn't angry, she relaxed her muscles.

"I wonder, though," he continued. "Who's going to do that next time? I'm not sure I've got it in me." He gave her a half-smile. "See you later."

As she watched him go, she wasn't sure she had it in herself either. Which meant they'd have to stop meeting alone like this. No more visits to each other's homes. She'd tell him that when she talked to him next.

She closed the door and locked it, then leaned back against it with a deep breath. Her body still thrummed with desire, and her mouth was still imprinted with his kiss.

She didn't doubt that she'd missed out on what would've been a great night. But it had been the right thing to do. She'd just keep telling herself that until she completely believed it.

In an attempt to clear her head, she went to the case of wine he'd brought in and looked through the variety. No chardonnay. Damn. She would run out this week, which meant she'd have to pick up more. She'd arrange for him to put some aside at the winery, and then she'd drop by when she was pretty sure he wouldn't be there.

This plan made her feel better. It gave her hope that they could continue this work thing without falling into each other's arms.

But would that be so bad? What's the worst that could happen? They'd have sex and things would become awkward? They were already there.

Hell, put like that, she was tempted to call him and invite him back over. But the shadow of that pesky question, "Are you on birth control?" hovered at the back of her mind. It was stupid. She didn't have to tell him about her infertility. Like Rhonda had said, it wasn't as if they were in this for the long-term.

She closed her eyes and groaned.

The other thing Rhonda kept telling her was also true—she so needed to get laid. Their mom had sent over the blind date's phone number yesterday. His name was Justin Weber, and she could text him right now.

Before she lost her nerve, she picked her phone up off the table and brought up his contact. She typed out a message introducing herself—he knew she had his number—and asked if he wanted to get together for a drink this week.

She tossed her phone back down, not expecting to hear back. She was surprised when it immediately pinged. Picking it back up, she quickly read his response: *Sounds great. How about tomorrow night?*

Wow, so soon. She wasn't sure she wanted to do that...but why? The sooner she made this leap, the better. She typed in her answer.

Sure, seven? How about Grape Central?

That was a wine bar in downtown McMinnville, where he lived. She didn't want to meet here. Ribbon Ridge was too small. Was she afraid they'd run into Cam? Again, she was being so stupid.

His response came fast. *Perfect. See you then.*

Mom had texted a picture of him with her friend—his aunt—so Brooke would be able to find him. She didn't know if he'd received a picture of her and didn't ask. She was suddenly exhausted.

She decided to take a long hot bath. And maybe find her waterproof vibrator.

* * * *

Cam walked into Hazel, one of Newberg's best restaurants a few nights later, anticipating a fun evening of good food, lively conversation, and excellent wine from some of the area's top producers. He was also anticipating possibly running into Brooke, and he just wasn't sure how that would go.

There'd been radio silence since their aborted lovemaking session on Sunday, but he wasn't surprised. What could they say that hadn't been said?

How about, *screw the work thing and let's just have sex?*

Because, really, could things get any worse than they were? They tiptoed around the elephant in the room and despite their best intentions couldn't seem to help themselves. If he saw her tonight, he'd do his level best to say hi and move on. Hayden would be here soon, and he'd be an excellent distraction.

Cam made his way to the bar and picked up a glass of pinot from one of his favorite winemakers. When he turned, he nearly bumped into Kyle Archer.

He grinned. "Hey, Cam, good to see you. What're you drinking?"

"Hey, Kyle." Cam held up his glass, swirling the dark ruby pinot. "A. F. Nichols."

"Oh, he's great." Kyle nodded toward the bartender. "Same for me, please."

The bartender nodded back. "You got it."

"I didn't know you were going to be here," Cam said. "Shouldn't you be home massaging your wife's feet or something since she's about to give birth?"

Kyle picked up his wine. "Yep. Phone's in my back pocket with the sound jacked up way too high, but I keep checking it anyway. I'm so excited, but nerve-racked as hell at the same time."

Cam sipped his wine. He couldn't identify, of course, but he recalled his half-brother Dylan feeling the same way before his daughter, Emma, was born. "Let me know if you need help busting out of here in a flash. She's got a bag packed, right?"

Kyle laughed. "In the car. We're more than ready. Maggie's so done being pregnant in the middle of summer."

"Yeah, it's been really hot this week." It had been in the nineties every day, which made Cam's current getup of slacks and a long-sleeve shirt rather stupid. But Cam didn't sacrifice looking good for comfort. At least not often. And he'd at least rolled up the sleeves to his mid-forearm. "I can't imagine how Maggie must be feeling."

"She was going to come with me tonight but decided it just wasn't worth putting on shoes." Kyle leaned toward him. "I should probably go home and give her a foot massage."

Cam chuckled and raised his glass. "To being the sperm donor instead."

Kyle lifted his wine. "Hear, hear. But don't let them hear us say that." He took a drink. "Actually, you don't have to watch yourself, free-agent man. Think you'll ever settle down?"

Cam shrugged. "Don't have any plans to."

"Right." Kyle nodded, likely recalling whatever story he'd heard regarding Cam and Jennifer. Since Hayden was Cam's best friend as well as Kyle's brother, Cam imagined Kyle had to know something. "You know, no one ever saw me settling down," Kyle said.

"No one ever saw you coming back to Ribbon Ridge," Cam said wryly. Kyle had taken off for several years, during which he'd mostly cut ties with everyone here. After one of the Archer septuplets killed himself, Kyle had come home. Then he'd shocked everyone by falling in love with his deceased brother's therapist. And now they were expecting their first kid. "You're a testament to the unpredictability of life."

Kyle laughed. “Isn’t that the truth?” His eye landed on someone at the end of the bar. “That’s my pal who owns this joint. I need to go say hello.” He clapped Cam on the shoulder. “Catch you later.”

“Later.” Cam turned and walked into the main dining room. It wasn’t terribly large—the building was a renovated house—and encompassed a space akin to a living and dining room combination. Most of the tables had been moved out for tonight’s mingling and were likely stashed upstairs in the private dining rooms.

What they had plenty of was wine. Much of the wall space was taken up with cabinets stuffed full of the best the Willamette Valley had to offer. Cam loved to peruse the labels. He always found a hidden treasure when he came here.

He sauntered toward a cabinet in the corner and stopped short when he heard a familiar laugh. When he turned, his gaze wandered to the back of the room and landed on the source of the lovely sound. Brooke.

She stood with another young woman, who was also laughing. He knew he ought to stay put, but his feet didn’t get the memo. As he neared, Brooke saw him, her eyes widening briefly in recognition before she looked down at her wine.

“Good evening,” he said to the other woman. She was younger than Brooke, with straight brown hair and gold-brown eyes. Cam turned his attention to the reason he’d come over. “Hi, Brooke.”

She lifted her gaze to his. “Hi, Cameron. This is my coworker, Elise. Elise, this is Cameron Westcott. He’s one of the owners of West Arch Estate.”

Elise smiled at him. “I know who he is.” She offered her hand. “Nice to meet you. I’ve heard all about you.”

“Uh-oh.” Cam shot a glance at Brooke, wondering what she’d said.

Brooke shook her head. “Not from me. Elise is new. She started at Willamette, what, three weeks ago?” She looked at Elise who nodded.

“Not quite.” Elise edged closer to Cam. “And I was teasing. I haven’t heard *all* about you. Someone mentioned you in a list of eligible bachelors in the area.”

Cam laughed. “I see.”

“He’s definitely eligible,” Brooke said before taking a sip of wine. “And he’s definitely a bachelor through and through.” She finished what was left in her glass. “I’m empty. Excuse me while I get a refill.” She smiled at him as she passed by. He noticed she was careful not to touch him. He also watched her backside as she walked away and recalled the feel of it in his hands. Damn.

“So what are you drinking?” Elise asked. “I’m new to this area—not the wine necessarily—but I’ve been working at a winery up in Prosser. Do you know where that is?”

“Sure, south central Washington. I’ve been there many times. Where’d you work?” He sipped his wine. “Oh, and this is A.F. Nichols. He’s a small indie producer, but really great. Give him a try if you haven’t.”

“I will, thanks.” She spent the next few minutes talking about her prior job, her dog, and the manicure she’d gotten that afternoon. With each topic, she moved closer until her arm was grazing his.

Meanwhile, Cam kept watching the doorway, waiting for Brooke to return from the bar. When it looked as though she wasn’t coming back, Cam searched for an out. He didn’t want to abandon Elise, so he eyeballed someone else in the room that he knew and drew her over to meet him. “Elise, come meet Henri Morin. He’s the winemaker up at Synchronicity.”

“Hello, it’s my pleasure to meet you,” Henri said in his thick French accent.

Elise shook his hand. “I love your wine!”

Satisfied that he’d made a good handoff, Cam excused himself and went in search of Brooke, despite his better judgment.

He found her in the bar area near the window, chatting with someone he didn’t know. Cam went to the bar and refilled his glass while he waited for an opening. A few minutes passed before her conversation partner departed, and Cam beelined toward her.

“You abandoned me,” he said.

She arched a brow at him. “Not on purpose. I’m networking. That’s why I come to these events.” Her gaze dipped over him. “You look hot.”

He grinned at her compliment. “Thanks.”

She laughed softly. “No, you look hot in that outfit. Why are you wearing long sleeves? It’s like ninety-six.”

He held out his arm and glanced at the French blue fabric. “I like this shirt.”

“I like it too, but you have to have a million others. I’ve seen what you wear—you have no shortage of stylish clothes.”

He took delight in the fact that she noticed. “Anyway, it’s not ninety-six now. The sun’s gone down.”

“True, but I’d say it’s still upwards of eighty-five.”

Probably. Why were they talking about the weather? Because it was safe, and so far it had prevented any weirdness like they’d had that evening at Ruckus. “You look cool and comfortable,” he said, taking in her black spaghetti-strap dress that was longer in back than in the front. “Actually, *you* look hot—and not the temperature kind.” She couldn’t be wearing a bra in that dress, but he couldn’t see her nipples, so it had to have some sort of built-in coverage. But all he could think was that there was just one layer between him and paradise.

She didn’t respond. Instead, she sipped her wine and looked out the window for a moment before asking, “What happened to Elise?”

“I left her with someone. She’s fine.”

“She was excited to meet you. In fact, she told me before you came over that she was hoping to meet you tonight. Your reputation precedes you.”

He groaned. “Great. Why me?”

Brooke lifted a tan, sculpted, sexy shoulder. “Because you’re attractive, very single, and like I said, your reputation is kind of unparalleled.”

He wanted to know what she was getting at. Specifically. “In what way?”

“Just that you’re known for giving a girl a good time—with or without sex, if you must know.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a relief. I don’t really want to be known as just a manwhore.” *Any more.*

“But you kind of are, aren’t you?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re being rather saucy this evening. You know I’ve calmed down my...*behavior* for some time now. In fact, I’m living like a damned monk at present.”

“You could change that with Elise, I’m sure. Why don’t you ask her out?”

A chuckle rose in his chest. “I fell right into that one.”

Brooke gave him a half-smile, but he saw the victory lurking in her eyes as she took another drink of wine. “In all seriousness, you should ask her out. Why not?”

Because he didn’t want to go out with Elise. He didn’t want to go out with anyone who

wasn't Brooke. "She's not my type." And she really wasn't, even if he *had* been looking. Which he wasn't. "Plus, I'm not sure I'm in the right head space to be dating anyone."

She looked at him in surprise, her eyelids fluttering. "I went on that blind date last night." She quickly averted her gaze, focusing on her wineglass, and he wondered if she regretted saying it.

Jealousy cut into him, leaving a hot trail of irritation. "How was it?" He knew his tone sounded clipped, but he couldn't help it any more than he could help asking. Which was stupid because he really didn't want to know.

"Fine. Forget I mentioned it. We should keep our personal lives personal."

"Like we did the other night?" He leaned closer and reveled in her scent. "That was extremely personal to me," he murmured.

"I need to use the ladies' room, excuse me."

It was a chicken-shit move—he could see the hunger and the hesitation in her eyes. He watched her go and ask the bartender where the bathroom was, but she didn't go straight to the back where it was located. Instead, she turned and went up the stairs.

Don't follow her. Don't follow her. Don't follow her.

He downed the rest of his wine, deposited the glass on the bar, and followed her.

He climbed the stairs and wove to the back, where another bathroom was located. He slowed as he approached, his mind warring with itself on whether he should stay or go back downstairs. He should really go.

As he was about to pivot, the bathroom door opened. She stood on the threshold and her gaze connected with his. "You followed me."

"Guilty."

"We're not supposed to do this. Unless you came up here to talk to me about work."

"I didn't." He didn't bother trying to mask the longing he felt. "I came here because I'm jealous that you went out with some other guy."

Her chest hitched, as if she'd lost her breath for a second. "You should go. We know what happens when we're alone."

And they were quite alone up here. No one would hear them...

"Yes, I should go." But his feet propelled him forward.

She didn't move, and her gaze was unflinching. "Don't go."

Then she reached out and grabbed him by the shirtfront and dragged him—not that it took much effort—into the bathroom and closed the door.

Chapter Twelve

As soon as she closed the door, Brooke pushed him up against the wood and locked the knob. She immediately started unbuttoning his shirt. “You shouldn’t have followed me.”

He stared at her, his green eyes blistering with heat. “You’re giving me such mixed messages.”

“Just because I said you *shouldn’t* have doesn’t mean I’m disappointed.” She finished with his buttons and spread his shirt open, pressing her palms against his smooth, warm flesh. His chest felt even better than it looked. “Do I look disappointed to you?”

He clasped her waist. “God, Brooke.” He pulled her into him and kissed her.

She curled her fingers into his chest and met his tongue. Lust—raw, pure, and devastating—raged through her. She pushed her hands up and cupped his neck as she pressed against him.

He broke the kiss and took a gasp of air. “I need to understand this. We can’t keep starting up and...stopping. My body can’t take it.”

He sounded so adorably high-strung. She smiled and traced her finger over his lips. They were so soft and delicious. “Mine can’t either. Clearly, we need to do this, and hopefully that will be the end of it.”

His brow arched up as skepticism joined the desire in his gaze. “So we aren’t stopping?”

She shook her head. “No.” Then she kissed him again with wild abandon. There were no voices in the back of her head telling her to stop, no conscience saying she might regret this. Because she knew, without a doubt, that she wouldn’t. Except...

She pulled back with a groan. “Tell me you have a condom.”

His lips spread in a lazy, sexy grin. “Put a couple in my wallet after the other night. No way was I going to let that happen again.”

“Smart man.” She tugged at his neck and brought his mouth to hers.

They kissed ravenously, like starved animals led to a feast. His hands cupped her ass as he pulled her tight against him. She could feel the length of his cock and couldn’t help but rotate her hips to create friction.

He moaned into her mouth and pushed away from the door. He interrupted the kiss and looked around. She licked along his jaw and spread kisses down his neck.

“God, I’ve waited for this. *Dreamed* about this. And we’re in a damned bathroom.”

She giggled. “There’s a fairly sturdy-looking cabinet against the other wall.”

He steered her in that direction. “Thankfully this bathroom isn’t tiny.” He reclaimed her mouth just before her backside hit the cabinet. He lifted her, effortlessly, and set her on the top. Something behind her jostled.

She reached back, and her fingers closed around a vase of dried flowers. “Do something with this before we break it.” She thrust it into his hand, and he left briefly to set it on the counter next to the sink.

When he came back, he looked at her a moment, his gaze dark and fierce and full of promise. With both hands, he brushed her hair back from her face before lowering his head to kiss her again. This time was softer, less frantic, but every bit as passionate. His tongue made long, searching strokes as his fingers tangled into her hair. This was a kiss that made you swoon. A kiss you’d never forget.

She opened her legs, and he moved between them. She clutched his back, holding on to him

tightly because if she didn't, she might just slide off the cabinet and form a puddle on the floor.

He pulled away, sighing. "I could do this all night. But we don't have a lot of time."

"I know. The bartender sent me up here because the other bathroom was in use. He'll send others..."

This galvanized him. He hiked up her skirt, baring her legs.

She undid his belt and his pants and said, "Condom," into his mouth.

He pulled his wallet from his back pocket. She watched as he withdrew a condom, then tossed his wallet to the floor. She pulled at the waistband of his boxer briefs until his cock was exposed. She couldn't resist running her hand along his length and smiled when he moaned again.

She helped him don the condom, and then his hands were on her. He pushed her thighs farther apart and went straight for her clit, teasing and rubbing the sensitive spot until she moaned. She tried to be quiet, but it was nearly impossible. "Someone's going to hear me."

"Baby, I'd like nothing more than to hear you scream my name." He slipped his finger inside her. "But don't."

She clutched at his hips. "*Cameron.*" Her whispered plea made him smile.

"That works. Just keep saying that." He stroked his finger into her and kept his thumb on her clit.

Damn, he was skilled. And she did precisely as he asked, murmuring his name over and over as pressure built inside her.

Then he was at her entrance, and his mouth was on hers once more. He pushed into her, and she slumped against him as sensation overwhelmed her. It had been so long since she'd done this, and probably forever since she'd wanted anyone this badly.

He began to move, his hips thrusting, his cock filling her. She pressed into him, her breasts flush against his chest. She clutched at his hips, urging him faster and deeper.

He braced his hand on the wall behind her and clasped her waist as he drove into her, increasing the pace. Pleasure assaulted her, and she knew if he wasn't kissing her, she'd be making a vociferous fool of herself. As it was, the cabinet began to rock and hit the wall.

"Hurry," she urged between kisses.

He gripped her harder and thrust even faster, increasing the knocking of the cabinet. Her muscles contracted as her orgasm started. Her eyes were closed, but she saw brilliant white light as he pulsed into her. A dozen more strokes maybe, and she felt him stiffen. She kissed him deeply, swallowing his moans and taking them into herself as spoils for a battle well fought—and won.

She hadn't meant for this to happen, but she was sure as hell glad that it had.

She held on to him tightly as they slowed their movements. He softened the kiss, tugging on her lip as he eased away from her. He caressed her cheek before turning toward the toilet to take care of the condom. She focused on adjusting her clothing and slid off the cabinet.

The toilet flushed, and when he turned back, his pants were done up. He bent and retrieved his wallet, then stashed it in his back pocket.

Brooke smoothed her hand down her dress and went to him. She started buttoning his shirt. "Thank you. That was nice."

"Nice?" His eyes still held a bit of their wild intensity. "That was fucking incredible. Please don't tell me it was just nice."

"It was amazing. And I have to admit, I feel much, much better." She didn't remember the last time she'd felt so...satisfied.

He laughed, dark and sexy. "I hope so. And I hope this means your date was a total bust."

It hadn't been great, but it also hadn't been a *total* bust. And she blamed its lack of greatness on Cam. She'd kept comparing Justin to Cam in her head, and poor Justin had consistently come in second place. He'd asked to see her again, and she'd said yes, if only because she thought she owed it to him to give him another shot. Maybe now that she'd exorcised her crazy lust for Cam, she could give Justin the attention he deserved.

She finished the last button and stepped back. "It was an okay date. It didn't end like this." Damn, he looked sexy. His hair was mussed, and now his eyes had this dazed, satiated quality. He looked like he'd just been screwed, and he'd liked it. Wondering how she looked, she turned to survey herself in the mirror. Her hair was also a bit ragged, and her cheeks were flushed.

"Great to hear." He leaned close to her ear. "You're gorgeous." He pressed a quick kiss to her temple, then looked at his reflection.

The sound of footfalls made them both freeze as they were tending to their hair. Brooke held her breath. The knob tried to turn, and this was followed by a knock.

"Just give me a minute," Cam answered.

"No problem." More footfalls. Was he walking away?

Cam took a deep breath and finished finger-combing his hair back into its style. He winked at her, then went to the door. After unlocking it, he opened it just enough to peer through the gap. "Coast looks clear," he said.

Brooke exhaled fully, and her shoulders dropped. He held the door open. "After you."

"Thank you." She preceded him and walked down the hallway toward the stairs.

He caught up to her and snagged her hand, drawing her past the stairs to a small dining room. "Hey. What now?"

Shit. That was the one question she'd been hoping he wouldn't ask.

* * * *

He really hadn't meant to ask that. Wasn't that the reason they'd tried to keep from having sex, because it would open up a can of worms? "Forget I said that. I had a great time."

She visibly relaxed, and his ego took a minor hit. Had he hoped she'd fall at his feet? No, but he hoped they could do this again. He hadn't realized he'd feel that way, but now it seemed rather obvious. He liked her a lot, and it wasn't just about the sex or being physically attracted to her. She was fun to be with, and he respected her drive and work ethic. She also had a vulnerability that he longed to explore. Something about her brought out a desire to care for her, protect her even. He hadn't felt that way about someone in a long time. In fact, he didn't know if he'd ever felt that about Jennifer. But then it had turned out that she hadn't ever really opened herself up to him. Maybe Brooke would be different.

Cam pushed those thoughts away. They were dangerous and probably pointless.

Brooke untwisted the strap of her dress and smoothed it over her shoulder. "I had a great time too. But, uh, let's hope this is one and done. Out of our system. Probably for the best, right?"

"Definitely." Maybe not. He actually wanted to take her home right now and go for round two. No, he wanted to hold her hand and go for a walk. Something. Anything that would prolong this feeling of...happiness.

His blood turned to ice. Happiness scared the hell out of him. *That* he'd felt before. And he didn't like it when it was evoked by other people. That meant it could be decimated by other

people too.

“Shall we go back downstairs?” she asked. “I stashed my purse in a corner. Hopefully it’s still there.”

“I’m sure it is. Let’s go find out.” He stepped aside, and she walked out in front of him, then turned and went down the stairs.

He watched her, remembering the feel of her against him, thinking that he’d never be able to look at her and not recall what it felt like to hold her in his arms.

He had a feeling that one and done was a pipe dream.

They didn’t pass whoever had come up to use the bathroom, but as soon as they walked back into the bar area, Hayden approached them.

“There you are,” he said. “Hi Brooke, how’s it going?” He looked between them, and Cam couldn’t decide if Hayden was trying to figure anything out. Since he and Cam’s brothers seemed hell-bent on pairing him with Brooke, he had to assume Hayden’s mind was churning ideas about why they’d come downstairs together.

“Good, thanks. Excuse me, I need to find my purse before someone walks off with it.” She flashed Hayden a smile and quickly departed for the main dining room.

Cam watched her go because, really, there was absolutely no reason for him to accompany her. Except he wanted to.

Hayden pulled him toward the windows, away from the more crowded area near the bar. “I’ve been here a good ten minutes, and you’ve been...upstairs? With Brooke? Spill.”

Cam knew there was no point in telling him to fuck off. Cam had butted in the same way when Hayden had tried to avoid falling back in love with Bex. As if they’d ever fallen out of love. Cam had sometimes wondered if he was still in love with Jennifer, if that was the real reason he hadn’t moved on. But then his insides pitched with disgust, and he felt nauseated. Nope, he was pretty sure that ship had sailed right into the Bermuda Triangle. And good riddance to it.

“It’s complicated,” Cam said.

“I’m sure it is. Are you guys together or not?”

That depended on what he meant by “together,” but Cam wasn’t going to split hairs. “Not.”

Hayden exhaled. “You usually tell me about your conquests. This is disappointing.”

Cam narrowed his eyes. “Brooke isn’t a conquest.”

Hayden’s eyes widened. “Aha.”

Cam had fallen for that one. “You’re a dick.”

Hayden smiled. “Takes one to know one, but you know that.”

Brooke came back toward them, waving her clutch. “Found it.”

Cam hadn’t expected her to come back. He was pleasantly surprised. “I said you would.”

She nodded. “I’m going to take off. Oh, I keep forgetting to ask you something.” She transferred her attention to Hayden. “That brick you showed me, I told Kelsey about it—she’s the new librarian, and she’s putting together a Ribbon Ridge exhibit. She’d like to include it. She’s going to try to find out more about it with Alaina and Crystal.”

“Right, I talked to her about the museum. It sounds great,” Hayden said. “Of course the brick should go in the exhibit.”

“I’m meeting with them tomorrow night, so I’ll tell them, thanks.”

“Yeah, anything we can do to help,” Hayden offered. “Just let us know.”

“Will do.” She darted a glance at Cam. “See you guys.”

Hayden lifted his hand. “Bye.”

“See you,” Cam murmured.

Hayden turned back to Cam. “You’re sleeping with her.”

“Not really.” That was true, right? There had been absolutely no sleeping, and that phrase made it sound like what they *had* done was an ongoing thing. “No, I’m not. We, uh, we have some chemistry, but I think we resolved it.” He highly doubted that, but maybe if he repeated it to himself over and over, it would come true.

Hayden didn’t look convinced either. “If you say so. Whatever you do, don’t drive her away. She’s really good at her job.”

Cam gave him an exasperated stare. “I know. But thanks for the reminder. Are you going to stand here and harass me about Brooke, or are we going to do what we came here to do and talk up our wine?”

Hayden held up his hands. “Hey, I didn’t mean to piss you off. You really like her. That’s great. I hope it works out.”

“There’s nothing to work out.” Though as he said it, Cam couldn’t help but hope he was wrong. “I’m getting more wine.” He turned toward the bar.

Hayden clapped him on the back. “Right behind you, bro.”

* * * *

The next evening, Brooke walked into The Arch and Vine. Kelsey had invited her to meet Alaina and Crystal to discuss the Ribbon Ridge exhibit.

She glanced around the interior, looking for the others. The man behind the bar, which was situated in the middle of the space, nodded toward her. “You can seat yourself. Or can I help you with something?”

“I’m meeting some people.”

The man, probably in his early sixties, adjusted his glasses on his nose. “You’re welcome to look around. What are their names?”

He would know them, of course, especially since Kelsey worked here. “Kelsey McDade is one of them.”

“She’s back in the corner over there.” He pointed behind him and to the left. “Go on over. I’m George, by the way. I don’t know that I’ve seen you in here.”

Brooke walked to the bar and offered her hand, which he shook. “I’m Brooke Ellis. I’m pretty new to town.”

He grinned at her. “Well, welcome to Ribbon Ridge. There’s plenty of room for charming young ladies like yourself.”

She laughed softly, immediately liking his easy, warm demeanor. “That’s good to hear.”

“If you ever need to take a load off—your feet or your mind—just belly up to my bar here, and I’ll get you on the path to feeling better. Or the beer will.” He winked at her.

“Sounds like a deal I can’t refuse. Thank you.” She started to turn toward the back corner.

“Wait, you need a beverage,” he said. “What can I get you?” He rattled off their beers on tap, and Brooke chose a blonde ale called Legolas.

George nodded. “Good choice.” He grabbed a pint glass and went to the tap. “This is actually made up at The Arch and Fox.”

Brooke supposed that meant that Bex had made it. “Bex Archer makes the beer up there, right?”

He brought the glass and set it on the bar for her. “You aren’t that new to town.”

Brooke chuckled. “I guess I’ve been here a couple of months now, and I’ve met Bex. I’m distributing wine for West Arch.”

“Aha, that makes sense. Well, this one’s on the house—don’t be a stranger, now.”

Brooke thanked him and made her way toward the sound of feminine laughter in the corner. As she approached the table, Kelsey caught her eye. “Brooke! Come sit.” She patted the empty space beside her.

Brooke slid onto the bench and set her beer on the table. “Hi. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Brooke, this is Crystal and Alaina.”

“Nice to meet you,” Brooke said.

Crystal had pale blonde hair and deep blue eyes. “Hi, Brooke, good to meet you too.”

Brooke moved her gaze to Alaina Pierce. It was weird sitting here across the table from someone she’d seen on film. She seemed familiar, but of course Brooke had never met her before.

Alaina smiled warmly. “Kelsey told us all about you. Okay, not ‘all’ about you, but you know.” She laughed softly and offered Brooke her hand to shake.

Tentatively, Brooke took it and shook. “I love your movies.” She withdrew her hand in horror. “Sorry. I told myself I wasn’t going to do that.”

Alaina laughed. “It’s quite all right. Kelsey says you’re a wine distributor. Since you make sure good wine gets into my hands—that’s pretty much how it works, right?—I appreciate your work as well.”

Crystal laughed and looked at Brooke. “See what a dork she really is?”

Brooke relaxed as the starstruck sensation began to fade. “No, but I’ll take your word for it.”

“Oh, do,” Alaina said. “I’m the biggest dork. Take this exhibition, for example. I’m completely nerding out. I’m even thinking I should go to college and get a degree in history. Or science. I love science.”

Crystal shook her head. “See what I mean? She is so not going to college. She’s too busy with a toddler running around and the odd film project.”

Alaina exhaled. “It’s true. But maybe someday. I can’t make movies forever. I’m already over the Hollywood hill.”

Brooke could hardly believe that. Alaina was as beautiful as she’d been in her debut film and had only gotten better with each role. “That’s so lame. Male stars your age are in their prime, right?”

Alaina nodded. “For at least another twenty years. Jerks.” She flashed a grin.

Kelsey looked over at Brooke. “We were just talking about that brick. Did you ask if we could have it for the exhibit?”

“I did,” Brooke said. “I saw Hayden last night, and he was more than happy to give it to you. He offered to help in any way possible.”

Kelsey grinned. “That’s great. Should I arrange to pick it up?”

Brooke almost offered to get it for them—and she could because she needed to stop by the winery sometime this week to restock her chardonnay supply before she headed to the coast this weekend for a sales trip. Why was she hesitating since she had to go there anyway? She could arrange the pickup with Hayden, not Cam. Was she avoiding Cam? In person, yes. She might’ve said last night was one and done, but the way she’d thought of him almost constantly today told a completely different story.

Brooke sipped her beer. It had a smooth wheaty flavor. “I can pick it up later this week, if that works. When are you planning to open the exhibit?”

The three women looked at each other, and it was instantly apparent that they didn't know. "We're still figuring out what should go in it," Kelsey said. "It's kind of turned into a massive undertaking."

"Yes, and we're trying to not have it be the Archer show." Crystal chuckled. "But it just so happens that they have the best cache of historical documents and items."

"Well, they're the first family or something, aren't they?" Brooke asked.

Alaina nodded. "Yes, Benjamin Archer settled here in 1856, but others followed. He made frequent trips into Portland, where he met his wife. Her brother and cousins came to the area and were involved in establishing the town."

Brooke was intrigued by all this. "Is there a written history of Ribbon Ridge?"

"Nothing formal," Alaina said. "It's something the Archer family had planned to do, but it just hasn't happened yet. Crystal has actually offered to document it for them. She's not as busy working as my assistant since my career has taken a backseat to being a wife and mother. Plus, she's a terrific writer. I keep telling her to finish the screenplay she started, but she keeps finding other things to do." Alaina gave her friend a look that said they'd had this conversation many times.

Crystal returned the look with a mild, probably playful glare before taking a drink of her beer. She set the glass back on the table. "Maybe I *have* finished it. I certainly wouldn't tell you." Crystal looked pointedly at Kelsey and Brooke. "She's a real nag once you get to know her."

Alaina smiled broadly. "That's me. And hey, what's wrong with encouraging your friends toward things that you know will make them happy?"

They sounded like Brooke and her sisters. "You've been friends for a long time, haven't you?" Brooke asked.

"Since we were kids," Alaina said. She briefly rested her head on Crystal's shoulder. "She's held my hand through so much. Is it bad that I want her to be happy?"

"Of course it isn't. You know I love you." Crystal turned and kissed her cheek, provoking a grin from Alaina.

Brooke couldn't help but smile in the presence of such a warm and deep friendship. She suddenly missed her sisters and planned to call them both later.

"So in the process of gathering information to write this town history, we've been trying to figure out what those letters on the brick stand for," Crystal said. "So far, we've got nothing."

"I assumed they were someone's initials." Brooke took another drink of beer.

"I think we all did, but we've pored over the birth and death records—well, those we have from those early years—and there isn't anyone with a first name that starts with B and a last name that starts with R."

"We've also scoured marriage records and still nothing," Alaina said. "There's a pretty good cache of letters too, and we're not all the way through them. But so far, no mention of anyone that would match the initials BNR."

"That's a little frustrating," Brooke said.

Kelsey pressed her lips together. "Tell us about it. Don't suppose you have any brilliant ideas?" She stared at Brooke hopefully.

Brooke took a moment to sip her beer and think. She knew next to nothing about Ribbon Ridge. Maybe she should start by exploring every corner of the town, starting with the oldest buildings and places. A lightbulb went off in her head. "Hey, have you guys been to the cemetery? Maybe BNR's death wasn't properly documented or the documentation was lost."

Kelsey's face lit. "That's a great idea! Nice going, Brooke."

Brooke smiled. It felt good to be helpful. “Thanks. Should we plan a field trip?”

Alaina cocked her head to the side. “It would be faster if we all went together to canvass it. But Crystal and I are headed to LA tomorrow, and we won’t be back until Tuesday. Can you guys wait until then?”

Brooke looked over at Kelsey. “I can. I’m headed to the coast Saturday and won’t be back until Wednesday.”

“What time?” Kelsey said. “My next free day is actually Wednesday. Any chance we could make that work?” She glanced at Brooke.

“If we make it later in the day—say three or so—I can do that.”

“Sounds good to me,” Alaina said. “Crystal?”

Crystal nodded. “It’s a date.” She already had her phone out and was typing into it. “And now it’s in my calendar. I’ll send you all an invitation so it’ll be in your calendars too.”

Alaina grinned at Crystal. “I’m so glad you’re here to keep us all organized.”

Crystal chuckled. “Can’t help it, even when I’m not working.” She looked over at Brooke. “I just need your number, Brooke.”

Brooke provided it, happy to have found a group of friends here in Ribbon Ridge. She had barely talked to Naomi and Jana since the 10k, but that was probably for the best. They were single women on the prowl and too overbearing in trying to jump-start Brooke’s love life.

Alaina rubbed her hands together. “I’m so excited about this. Thanks, Brooke! And on that note, I need to get home and put my daughter to bed.”

The familiar pain ripped into Brooke. She wanted to ask about Alaina’s daughter but was afraid that it would only intensify her heartache. But she was also tired of letting that rule her life. “How old is she?” The question came out soft and tentative. Hopefully no one else noticed.

“Two and a half and such a spitfire.” Alaina pulled out her phone and scrolled to a picture, then handed it to Brooke. “She looks just like her dad.”

Brooke hadn’t met Evan Archer but could see the toddler didn’t have her mother’s dark blonde hair. Her hair was dark brown and a bit wild. She stood in a small inflatable pool wearing a bright yellow swimsuit with flowers and a huge grin. “She’s adorable.” Brooke’s gut twisted. She’d wanted that so badly—to be a mother, to share a picture of her own child, to feel that pride and that bond. She gave the phone back and didn’t ask any more questions.

Alaina tucked the phone into her purse. “Thank you. I’m grateful for every day with her—she’s such a gift.”

Her words made Brooke’s eyes sting with unshed tears. Her throat clogged, and she merely nodded.

“It was great meeting you, Brooke. I’m really looking forward to this project!” Alaina stood. “See you next week.”

Brooke summoned a wobbly smile and forced words past the emotion jamming her throat. “See you then.”

Crystal followed her out of the booth. “Alaina’s my ride. Great to meet you, Brooke.” She lowered her voice and looked at Kelsey and Brooke. “Us single ladies should plan a night out.” She winked at them and grinned before turning and joining Alaina.

Brooke watched them leave and drank more of her beer, hoping it would blunt the ache.

“Everything okay?” Kelsey asked.

Damn, she’d picked up on something. Maybe they all had.

“Yep,” Brooke answered. She liked Kelsey, but she didn’t share her infertility with most people, especially those she didn’t know well. A voice in the back of her head asked if Cam still

fell into that category. How could he after last night? It wasn't just that they'd had sex. It was that they'd both finally lowered their guard.

Kelsey finished her drink. "Well, if you ever need to talk, I'm apparently a good listener. Or so my college roommate always told me. But maybe that was because she talked all the time and I didn't have a choice." She laughed, and Brooke joined her. She felt instantly better, and whether Kelsey had provoked that on purpose or not, Brooke appreciated it.

"Crystal and Alaina are really nice," Brooke said, moving the topic in a new direction.

"Aren't they? Alaina is so down-to-earth, and Crystal's hilarious. You'll see that the more you spend time with her." Kelsey tipped her head to the side. "Maybe when we go out for our single ladies' night out. Hey, did you ever go on that blind date?"

"I did, actually."

Kelsey watched her expectantly. "And?"

Brooke chuckled. "It was fine. Nothing spectacular, but it didn't crash and burn either."

"Are you going to see him again?"

She'd thought so, but then she'd hooked up with Cam in a bathroom, and now a second date with Justin seemed disingenuous. Never mind that she wasn't *with* Cam and didn't expect a repeat performance. Probably because in the recesses of her body and mind, she *hoped* for a repeat.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"That doesn't sound promising. Any chance Cameron Westcott is holding you back?"

Wow, she was good. But then she'd noticed the crazy sparks—that was what she'd said, wasn't it?—between them. Brooke considered brushing her off, as she'd done a few minutes ago, but she suddenly wanted to talk to someone about what had happened.

"Yes, I think he is."

Kelsey looked surprised, her eyes widening. "I see. Did something happen?"

Brooke couldn't withhold the smile from her lips. "You could say that. We, uh, had a moment last night."

Kelsey turned on the bench and faced her. "What does that mean?"

Brooke winced, her eyes squinting. "We had sex in a restaurant bathroom?"

Kelsey clapped her hand over her mouth and giggled. "That's a bit more than a 'moment.' You are too funny. Are you guys together now?"

Brooke shook her head definitively. "No. In fact, we both agreed it was a one-time deal."

"Yet you're holding back with the blind-date guy."

"A little." Brooke set her elbow on the table and put her forehead on her hand. "Ugh. What am I doing? I would much rather things move forward with blind-date guy—uh, Justin—than with Cam."

"And why is that? The work thing?"

"Yes, and—" And what? Cam's history as a player? Certainly, but he seemed to have relaxed that behavior from what she could tell. Or maybe it was something far deeper. Something she didn't want to explore. Something to do with her and her inability to give him, or anyone else, a family. She slammed back the rest of her beer.

Kelsey was still studying her, likely waiting for the rest of whatever Brooke meant to say.

"That's pretty much it—the work thing." Brooke was done sharing for the day.

"I understand. That's a bummer, though. Maybe there's a way around it?"

Only if Brooke gave the account to someone else at Willamette, and she didn't want to do that. She felt personally invested in their wine, and she wanted to be a part of its success. But if

life had taught her anything it was that you couldn't have your cake and eat it too. "I don't see one, but really, it's okay. I'm pretty sure I got him out of my system. Talking to you has helped me see that. I think I'll give Justin a call."

Kelsey nodded. "Sounds good. I'm a little jealous, actually. I wish I was ready."

Brooke wanted to return Kelsey's kindness. "Anything I can do to help?"

"No, it's all me. I'll get there eventually. I hope." She smiled and glanced toward her empty glass. "Alaina must've paid the bill. Or maybe George comped it."

Brooke slid out of the booth. "He comped mine as a sort of welcome to town."

"George is the best. He's one of the reasons I'm still here in Ribbon Ridge. He made me feel welcome from day one—like family."

"That's so great." Brooke missed her family, but more and more she felt like Ribbon Ridge was home.

They parted and went their separate ways, and as Brooke walked to the store to grab something for dinner, she thought about what she'd told Kelsey, that she'd call Justin. Would she, really?

Or would she continue to obsess about Cam? She was fairly certain it would be the latter, unfortunately.

Chapter Thirteen

Cam stared at the prepackaged meals stacked in the deli refrigerator at Ribbon Ridge's sole grocery store. It was a perfectly fine store, albeit small, but didn't offer much in the way of variety for a single guy who didn't cook. If it couldn't be prepared in three steps or less, Cam didn't make it.

So what was it going to be tonight—pulled pork or pasta with meatballs? He glanced at the items already in his handheld basket: paper towels, cereal, a half gallon of milk, and a bottle of microbrew. Beer went better with the pork. "Winner, winner, pork dinner!" he said as he grabbed it from the reefer.

"Are you talking to that?"

He swung his head around at the familiar sound of Brooke's voice. Her hair was pulled up, and she wore cropped jeans and a fitted T-shirt. She looked casual and comfortable and heart-stoppingly sexy.

Cam took a minute to put his thoughts into coherent speech. "Uh, yeah. I always talk to my food. Don't you?"

"I try not to, actually." She held her hand up to the side of her head and twirled her finger. "People might think I'm *crazy*." She whispered the last word, and he laughed.

He glanced at her basket, which was full of veggies. "Look at you being all healthy."

"Sometimes a girl's just gotta have a big salad."

His stomach grumbled. Damn, that sounded good. "Boys too. But that's a lot of work."

She flicked a look toward her basket before tipping her head to the side. "What, chopping vegetables? That's not a lot of work."

"Yeah, it is."

Now she laughed. "Then you either have the wrong knife or you're lazy."

"Both, probably." He smiled, glad she'd approached him. It would've been easy for her to simply avoid him and any awkwardness. But this didn't feel awkward. It felt...good.

"Well, I can't help you with lazy, but the right knife is actually super important. You can cut much more efficiently if you have a good blade. I can't believe a bachelor like you doesn't have good knives. That's pretty much the only thing you can count on a guy to have, right? And maybe a grill or a smoker."

He shook his head. "I don't have any of those. Didn't I tell you that I don't cook?"

"Maybe? But you're serious, you don't cook, like, at all?"

"Nope, much to my mother's chagrin. My brothers are much better at it. Dylan is actually pretty good, or has gotten that way anyway. He designed himself a badass gourmet kitchen, and then he went and got married. All that domesticity breeds cookery, I guess." He shuddered but smiled playfully.

"Ah yes, domesticity. The arch nemesis of a confirmed bachelor like yourself. I'm tempted to invite you over to demonstrate how a good knife can change your life."

Tempted... He was tempted to do far more than that, but he reined himself in. They had a pact. Or an agreement. Or an assumption. Whatever. They weren't supposed to repeat what they'd done the other night, and if he went to her loft for salad making, he was pretty sure it would lead to lovemaking.

At least on his part. Maybe she really was over it.

“You could save me from prepackaged pulled pork.”

She peered into his basket. “I’ve had that, and it’s actually pretty good. Besides, you’ve already talked to it—it’ll be sad if you reject it now.”

He laughed again, loving her sense of humor. “I think it’ll survive. Or not—I’ll eat it tomorrow.”

“In that case, you can come for salad.” She looked down at her basket briefly, and he saw her lips press together. When she tilted her head back up, her gaze was determined. “Just salad.”

“Just salad.”

She watched him warily. “I’m quite skilled with that knife.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He couldn’t resist a grin. “You may not want to show me all your tricks.”

She squinted at him for a second. “I can’t tell if you’re flirting. If so, knock it off or I’ll rescind my invitation.”

He held up his hand. “You win. No flirting.”

She turned toward the checkout registers, and he followed. She seemed quite over their...whatever it had been. His chest felt suddenly hollow. Because he *wasn’t* over it. He’d tossed and turned at night, his thoughts consumed with her touch and her scent. He longed to feel her against him again but was afraid that would never happen. Now he was even more sure of that.

This was stupid. He was in lust with her, nothing more. Okay, there was plenty more, but screw it. They could be friends. He *wanted* to be friends.

She started unloading her veggies onto the conveyer belt.

“Hey, I can pay for everything,” he offered.

She tossed him a gimlet eye. “This is not a date, mister. I’ll pay for my own salad makings, thank you.”

She said it in a good-humored enough voice that he didn’t take offense. He still couldn’t help *wishing* it was a date. God, he wanted to date her.

Yes.

Maybe he could convince her to give it a try...

She cleared her throat loudly.

He looked down at the belt and saw that she’d put out a divider so he could unload his groceries. “Thanks.” He transferred everything from his basket and set it under the check stand.

“Hi, Cam!” Marcia, the checkout clerk smiled at him. “What’s for dinner tonight?” She looked at Cam’s groceries on the belt as she scanned Brooke’s items. “Pork again? You just had that a few nights ago.”

He shook his head and gave her a wry, friendly smile. “Good to know you’re cataloguing my meals.”

She pursed her lips. “Someone has to. Your mother likes to know what you’re eating.” Marcia played in his mom’s Bunco group, and Cam had known her for probably twenty years. “She’d also like to know that you’re eating with someone.” She looked at Brooke inquisitively.

Great, just what Cam needed: Marcia reporting to his mother that he was on a date or something. Wanting to date someone and wanting your family to know about it were two very different things. Mom would probably fall prostrate with shock if she thought he was dating—right before she harangued him for every detail. That her stepson was married and a father and none of her own sons were remotely close to that drove her nuts. Cam rushed to quell any misunderstanding. “Uh, we’re neighbors, and we work together. We’re not eating together.” He inwardly flinched and thought about how to cushion that lie as soon as he and Brooke left.

Marcia frowned and then sighed. “Well, that’s too bad. You’d make a cute couple.” She winked at Brooke. “That’s twenty-eight thirty-three. Brooke, right?”

Brooke nodded. “Thanks.” She swiped her debit card and completed her transaction. Then she turned to Cam with a cool stare and said, “Nice seeing you. Bye.”

Disappointment coursed through him as he watched her leave. He shouldn’t be disappointed—or surprised, since he’d said they weren’t eating together. She couldn’t know he’d only said that for Marcia’s benefit.

Marcia made more small talk as she scanned his items *slowly*. He tried not to be visibly antsy but had already swiped his card and entered his PIN long before she’d finished. At long last, she was done. He bid her a hasty good-night and left the store at a fast pace. He looked down the street and saw that Brooke was already across the street at the corner a block down.

He dashed out into the street without looking and stopped short at the sound of a horn blaring. The car hadn’t come close to hitting him, but the driver held up his hands and clearly mouthed, *What the hell?*

Cam waved at him and mouthed, “Sorry!” before continuing across. He looked toward the corner and saw Brooke was waiting for him, her head cocked to the side. When he reached her, he saw that her expression was one of concern but also mild annoyance.

“Nice move,” she said. “You have a death wish?”

“Definitely not. I was trying to catch up with you.”

She arched a brow before pivoting and walking around the corner. “At your own peril.”

He caught up to her. “Evidently. Hey, I didn’t mean what I said back there. We *are* eating together—if you still want to.”

Brooke didn’t slow her pace. “Why’d you lie to Marcia?”

“She plays Bunco with my mom. She’s already going to tell her that she saw me with you at the store, and my mom will get a zillion ideas.” He rolled his eyes, wondering when their next Bunco night was so that he could avoid his mom’s inevitable phone call.

“What sort of ideas?”

“That we’re dating or whatever.”

Brooke cast him a narrow-eyed look. “I’m pretty sure I don’t want to know what ‘whatever’ is.”

What did she mean? “I just meant that she’ll draw her own conclusions.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. Given your history, I can only imagine what those conclusions might be.”

Shit, this was not going well. And they’d had such a great conversation at the store. He snagged her elbow and drew her to a stop as they reached the corner across from the entrance to her building. “Wait. Let me explain. My mom is desperate for grandchildren. My stepbrother just had a kid a few months ago, but their relationship is a bit strained, and she’d like a grandchild of her own blood—her words, not mine.”

Brooke looked past him and started to cross the street. “That’s too bad.” She sounded terse and cool.

He realized he hadn’t painted the best picture of his mother, and she wasn’t a bad person. “My mom’s a bit high-strung, I guess. She loves Emma—Dylan’s daughter—really.”

“I would hope so. She should feel blessed to have a grandchild at all.”

“Yes.” Cam followed her onto the curb outside the entrance to her building. “So, dinner?”

Brooke turned to look at him. “I think it’s best if we skip it. I’ll e-mail you a link to a knife you should buy. Really, it will make a huge difference.”

He longed to touch her, to soothe the creases in her forehead. He wondered if there was more to this than his idiot behavior. “I will. And hey, I’m sorry if I upset you. My family can be meddlesome, and I didn’t want them to get the wrong idea.”

“Absolutely. I don’t want them—or you—to get the wrong idea either. We’re coworkers. Friends. That’s it. We’ll have dinner another time.” She gave him a warm smile, but he had the sense it wasn’t completely genuine. “Enjoy your pork.” She turned and went into her building, leaving him to stare after her.

Why did he feel like he’d just royally screwed up?

* * * *

By the time Brooke walked into her loft, her pulse was hammering a staccato rhythm. She’d kept herself together in front of Cam, but hearing about his mother had summoned those terrible feelings of inadequacy, of being...broken.

She set her purse and the bag of groceries on the kitchen island and walked into the living room. Any thoughts of dinner had fled during their conversation as she stared out the bank of windows toward his townhouse. She clenched her fists, angry with herself for her debilitating reaction. Why did this seem to be so prevalent lately?

Because she had a man in her life, something she’d strove to avoid since her divorce. Whether she wanted him there or not, Cameron Westcott was *in* her life. She liked him. She was attracted to him. She looked forward to being with him.

But there was no future for them. Not when he talked of a family who was champing at the bit for him to provide grandchildren.

Still...could there be a right now? Could she find a way to be with him in the present? A way that would allow them to enjoy what they had for a while and split ways amicably so they could continue their working relationship.

Sure, right after monkeys flew out of her butt.

She retraced her steps to the kitchen and fished her phone from her purse. She dialed Rhonda and waited anxiously for her sister to pick up.

“Yo, sissy!” Rhonda answered in a goofy voice she often used.

“I need help. Tell me how to make this work with Cameron.”

“Whoa, you sound stressed. Let’s just take a deep breath.” Rhonda breathed deeply on the other end of the phone, and Brooke inhaled with her. “How to make what work?”

Brooke had told her about hooking up with Cameron in the bathroom, but had insisted it was a one-time thing and that she was okay with that. “A...relationship. A casual one,” she quickly amended.

“Did you have sex again?”

“No.”

“Then what’s got you so wound up?”

“I ran into him at the grocery store, and we ended up talking about his family. Apparently, his mom is dying for grandkids.”

Rhonda sighed. “And that sent you over the edge. Sis, you might need to find a therapist up there.”

“I don’t need a therapist. This is only bothering me because of Cameron. He’s the first guy I’ve met since Darren that I...like.”

“That’s true.” Rhonda made a high-pitched sound like she was sucking on her lip. “Okay,

let's figure this out. You like him. He likes you. There's absolutely no reason to think this is a forever thing, hence any discussion about procreation isn't necessary. There. Done. Now go get him."

Brooke rolled her eyes but couldn't help smiling. She realized this was why she'd called Rhonda. Yes, she was oversimplifying things, but maybe that was what Brooke needed. She was the one making it into a Thing. "Say we get together—like date and stuff. We still work together. Remember when you thought my hooking up with him was a bad idea? What happens when one of us is ready to move on?" She didn't voice the fear she was desperately trying to tamp down—that he would dump her long before she wanted to dump him. He didn't do long-term, right?

"You break up like grown-ups. People actually do this. Look at my friend Kara. She and Doug broke up after four years together, and it was perfectly civilized. They even share custody of the dog."

Brooke knew Kara and Doug and Spreckles. They *had* made it work. Maybe she and Cam *could* do this. Assuming he even wanted to. "Cam might not be interested."

"You're making a lot of assumptions about him—about what he wants, about his dreams for the future, and whether he wants kids. Why don't you spend some time finding out the truth? Do that, and then you can bail if you see red flags."

Now Brooke felt a bit foolish. "It all seems so straightforward when you say it."

Rhonda laughed. "Because it is. You're caught up in it though, so of course it seems complicated to you. Just take a step back tonight and see where you are tomorrow. I bet you'll feel much more clearheaded."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Brooke exhaled, and this time she felt the stress start to dissipate. "Thanks, sis. I appreciate you talking me off the ledge. Again."

More laughter. "That's what I do. Okay, I need to tuck Isla in to bed. Text me tomorrow and let me know what happens!"

"Will do. Kiss Isla and Will for me."

"Of course." She blew a kiss into the phone. "Night!"

"Night." Brooke ended the call and set the phone on the counter, feeling much better. She still wasn't completely certain what to do, but she wasn't in a panic anymore. She could do this. She was ready for the next step.

She just hoped that step didn't send her tumbling off a cliff.

Chapter Fourteen

Cam scrubbed his hand over his face as he stared at his computer monitor. He'd reread this e-mail he was drafting to Sara at least twenty times and still kept thinking of things to add. He'd be better off just talking to her in person to make sure they captured everything that needed to be done for the winery dinner. She'd laugh and tell him he was obsessing. Which was probably true.

Just not about this.

He couldn't stop thinking of Brooke. He'd started texting her a dozen times today, but never sent anything. He didn't know what to say about last night. Things had taken a weird turn, and he was sure it was his fault. But that wasn't why he didn't text her. No, it was because he was pretty sure she'd given him a definite brush-off this time. She'd been friendly at the grocery store, but not necessarily flirty. Then when he'd become flirty, she'd started to distance herself. Then he'd stuck his foot in it with Marcia, and Brooke had completely left the building as far as he was concerned.

Time to figure out a way to move past her once and for all. He sat straight in his chair and inhaled sharply before refocusing on his screen.

A moment later, his resolve took a major hit when a light knock on his door was preceded by Brooke stepping into his office.

Her gaze met his. Searching. Tentative. Beautiful in its clarity—he could stare into her eyes all damn day. “Am I bothering you?” she asked.

“No.” He coughed past the cobwebs that had suddenly crisscrossed his throat.

“Oh good.” She smiled softly and came farther into his office. “I, ah, came to pick up that case of chardonnay I need for next week. I'm headed to the beach tomorrow morning.”

“You can't be working Labor Day weekend.”

“Actually, my sisters are meeting me for a girls' weekend.”

Cam sat back in his chair and rested his right elbow on the arm. “Sounds like trouble.”

Now she grinned. “Probably. But that's how we Ellis girls roll.”

“Damn, now I wish I could come along.”

“It's a *girls'* weekend.” She lifted a shoulder. “The condo's in Lincoln City.”

The one owned by her employer—he knew it well. “Willamette's? I've been there for an after-party or two. Nice place. There's a hot tub on the deck.” He sat up in the chair and dropped all pretense. “Am I nuts, or are we flirting? I am so confused. After last night—”

“I'm flirting. Are you flirting?”

“I'm trying not to. But you make it impossible, sorry.”

“So do you.” She laughed softly. “That's the other reason I'm here. I'm sorry about last night. I was trying really hard to keep things platonic, and then we made plans to have dinner at my loft, and, well, that just didn't seem like it would support the whole platonic thing.”

He couldn't disagree with her there. He stood up slowly and circled the desk. “I don't disagree. But I was really disappointed. I also felt like a major jackass for saying that at the store. I was just trying to be private, I guess.”

“I get it. This is a small town. I think I glommed on to that as a good reason to put the brakes on.”

Cam moved in front of his desk to face her and leaned against it. “Makes sense. So we're flirting. And it seems like platonic is tough for both of us.”

She dropped her purse into one of the chairs facing his desk. "It seems that way." Her gaze was hot and intense.

He swallowed, his body tightening with desire. He eyed her purse and tried to process why she'd dropped it. She planned to stay? She wanted her hands free? She was about to touch him? All of the above? His skin tingled with anticipation.

She took a step toward him. "I was thinking that one-and-done business didn't really pan out for me. How about you?"

"Not even a little bit," he rasped. Need catapulted through him. He put his hands on the desk on either side of his hips and squeezed the wood lest he launch himself forward and crush her against him.

"I was hoping you'd say that." She moved closer and laid her hand against his chest.

He was sure she had to feel the wild pounding of his heart. "So you're here to...?"

"Negotiate terms." She arched a brow at him and curved her lips into the sexiest smile he'd ever seen. "You told me that you make no promises, that you like to live in the present and take one day at a time. Is that right?"

He wanted to live in this moment forever. "Yes."

"Perfect. No expectations. No demands. And we have to agree that we can still work together."

"Yes, of course." He vaguely realized that he'd probably surrender his firstborn right now if that were part of her terms, but that was his Y chromosome talking. He meant what he said. "I respect and value you too much to let anything else happen."

"Then I guess we're settled." She started to remove his shirt, slowly, her fingers slipping the buttons through the holes.

"I guess so. And we're going to move on this now?"

Her hands stilled. She blinked at him, her head cocking to the side. "Unless you'd rather not?"

"I'd rather die than not." He swooped forward and clasped her against him as his mouth claimed hers.

She clutched at his shirtfront, her fingers digging into his flesh as they clenched the fabric. He held her against him, his head tipping opposite hers to kiss her deeply. Her tongue slid against his as she thrust into him.

She started in on his buttons again, her hands fumbling between them. She pulled back slightly so she could better complete her task, and as soon as the shirt was open, he shrugged it off his shoulders with her help. Her hands caressed his bare shoulders as she kissed him again.

He pushed at the little cardigan she was wearing. It was white and flimsy and slid from her shoulders with ease. He found the hem of her red-and-white sleeveless top, and he pushed his hands up under the fabric. His fingertips skimmed along her rib cage and didn't stop until he cupped her breasts.

She arched into him, moaning softly into his mouth. Her hips gyrated against his so that he could feel her heat against the raging length of his cock.

He tugged her shirt up and broke their kiss so he could whip the garment over her head. He tossed it away and realized his office door was still open.

"Just a second," he said, his voice dark and full of gravel. He crossed to the door and closed it firmly, then locked it for good measure. He was pretty sure that Jamie was in his office and that Luke was in the vineyard somewhere.

When he turned to come back to her, he froze. She'd kicked off her sandals and was now

shimmying out of her bra. She dropped it to the floor and gave him a torrid, come-hither look that momentarily turned his knees to water.

But then the savage beast within him that couldn't wait to be inside her stalked forward and drew her against him. "You are so beautiful." He bent her backward and shoved the items on his desktop to the side, some of them toppling to the floor. Thankfully, his primary workspace with his monitor was on the side that faced the window. Although in this moment, he wasn't sure he would've given a damn about any of it.

He laid her flat on the desk and turned her lengthwise so that the desk could support her comfortably. He stared down at her breasts, so full and perfect, their pink tips hard and beckoning. He cupped them firmly and lightly pinched her nipples. She came up off the desk, her eyes closing in ecstasy as she moaned again. Desperate to taste her, he leaned down and took one in his mouth, using his lips and tongue to drive her mad.

Her hands tangled in his hair, holding him to her. "*Cam*. Yes."

He stroked and kissed her for several minutes, moving from breast to breast—taunting one and then the other with his mouth and hands until she was writhing on the desk.

"You're torturing me." Her words came out on a gasp.

"Actually, I'm torturing myself." He wanted to prolong this time with her, but was also seething with impatience. "You're killing me."

She rolled to her side to face where he was standing and started to undo his belt. She quickly had his shorts unfastened and pushed them down, along with his boxer briefs. Her hands stroked his cock. He moaned as wave after wave of pleasure cascaded over him. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes, reveling in her touch. Then her mouth was on him and he had to grab the edge of the desk to keep his legs from buckling.

"Brooke. Good God. You are...amazing."

Her lips and tongue moved over him as her hand clasped the base of his shaft. She was fast and expert, utterly mind melting. He could barely think and soon his body was taking over, thrusting into her mouth in quick, relentless strokes. If she didn't stop he was going to pour himself down her throat, and that was not how he wanted this to go.

He moved back and kicked his shoes off before stepping out of his shorts. Brooke stared at him with slitted eyes and pushed herself up and off the desk. With slow, languorous, catlike grace, she slipped her skirt and underwear off until she was naked before him. Then she knelt, and he was sure she was going to finish what she'd started. He wanted to stop her, but the words wouldn't come.

But no, she was searching the pockets of his shorts. He watched her, confused. Then he realized. "Condom." Duh. It was a good thing one of them was thinking clearly. "My wallet's on the desk." He gestured toward where he'd tossed it earlier, near his monitor.

She moved stealthily behind the desk. He watched her movements, appreciating the slope of her hip and the curve of her back right above her ass. He was going to explore every inch of her. Maybe not today, but soon.

She pulled a condom from his wallet and came back around the desk. Was she moving more quickly now, or was that just his impatient hope?

Either way, when she reached him, she pushed him backward, making him take several steps until he felt the couch hit the back of his legs. Then she forced him down—not that he needed much coercion—and leaned forward with the condom.

He took it from her and ripped open the package. Surprisingly, he managed to get it on without assistance. At least his brain was partially working. And in the ways that counted.

She put one knee on the couch and swung her other leg up on his other side so that she straddled him. Her eyes found his and held them as she fondled his cock in long, agonizingly wonderful strokes. She held him to her entrance. She was all wet and hot and devastating as she lowered herself onto him.

He clasped her hips and pushed into her, his head falling back against the couch as he closed his eyes in rapture. When she'd taken him completely, she wriggled her hips and just rested for a moment. He felt every ragged breath she drew, every beat of her heart, every muscle stretch and contract around him and against him.

She cupped his neck, massaging his flesh before settling her hands on his shoulders. Then she began to move. Slowly at first, her hips rotating over his, pulling up just enough to tease him and not coming down quite enough to satisfy his need.

He let her play, his pleasure churning and mounting with each thrust. He tipped his head up and opened his eyes to feast on her. Her eyes were closed. She looked focused, her lips parted as soft little moans burst forth. He brought one hand up to her breast and held it captive for his mouth. She gasped as he sucked on her flesh, his fingers digging into her softness.

She clutched at his shoulders and began to move faster. She came down a bit harder, more fully, but it still wasn't enough.

He moved his hand up and cupped the back of her neck, drawing her head down so he could kiss her greedily. She tasted of heat and summer and bliss, and he couldn't get enough of her. He nipped at her lower lip. "Harder, Brooke. Ride me."

She ground down, taking him completely into her until there was nowhere left for him to go. But it wasn't enough. He kissed her again, his tongue spearing into her as his cock did the same.

He grasped her hair and tugged lightly, not hurting her. She opened her eyes and looked down at him. "Ride me, Brooke. *Hard*. I'm yours. Now. Own me."

He pushed up, straightening his hips. Then he clasped her ass and squeezed her as he thrust up into her. He drove hard and fast, pulling sharp groans from her kiss-swollen lips. She did as he asked, riding him with a harsh frenzy that sent blood spiraling to his cock. He brought his hand around and found her clit, pressing and stroking her until she cried out, her eyes closing once more and her head falling back as her orgasm rocked her body. Her muscles clenched around him, and he moved even faster, holding her tight while he pulsed into her again and again.

His balls tightened as his orgasm crested and crashed over him. He yelled her name as he gave himself over completely.

They moved together for another minute, their hips eventually slowing and their labored breathing filling the air around them. She collapsed against him, her breasts caressing his chest. He ran his hands over her back, soothing her, soothing himself.

"That was quite a ride," he finally said.

"Yes," she murmured against his neck. He loved the feel of her against him. So soft, so warm. *So good*.

"I, uh, should get cleaned up," he said with great reluctance.

"Right." She pushed up off him, and he regretted not kissing her first.

She retrieved her clothing, and he went to the bathroom to take care of business. When he came back to the office, she'd already donned her skirt and bra and was just pulling her top over her head.

"That was fantastic," he said. "I'm so glad you came by."

She laughed, and he detected a bit of nervousness. Or shyness. Or both. It was adorable. And

he was surprised to find he felt a little bit of it too. He liked her so much. He didn't want to fuck this up.

She found her cardigan and tugged it on. "I actually didn't mean for this to happen. I really did come to pick up wine and just say that I'd be open to seeing you casually."

If this was casual, he wasn't sure he wanted to see serious. No, he definitely didn't want to see serious. This was enough. This was great.

"Clearly, we were both excited by that development." He pulled on his briefs and shorts and didn't bother with his belt as he went to grab his shirt from where it barely dangled on the back of one of the chairs. "One of these days, though, I'd like to make love to you in a bed."

She slipped her feet into her wedges. "I'm sure we can manage that." She picked up her purse. "Where's my wine?"

He sat down and quickly put his shoes on. "I'll carry it to your car for you. Hayden left it out—you probably walked right by it."

She chuckled. "Probably."

They walked downstairs and found the wine. He was glad they didn't encounter his brothers. He wasn't going to hide their relationship, but he also wasn't going to put it out in front of them just yet. He cared for Brooke, and he wanted to take things slow. Okay, except for the crazy awesome sex they couldn't seem to keep themselves from having.

He smiled to himself as he hefted the case of wine onto his shoulder. He didn't care what speed they went, as long as they were going somewhere.

* * * *

Brooke snuck a look at Cam's back as he lifted the case of wine. His muscles rippled beneath his shirt, muscles she'd caressed and madly clutched just a short time earlier. She'd meant what she told him—she hadn't expected that to happen. But she was glad it did.

She was also glad that they seemed to be on the same page. For the first time in years, she felt hopeful. She felt happy. And damn it, she deserved that.

In the parking lot, she unlocked her car with the remote and opened the back end. He deposited the case inside and shut the hatch. He turned, and the breeze tousled his dark brown hair, mussing it over his forehead. She reached out and brushed it back. He captured her hand and pressed a kiss to her palm. A shiver raced up her spine—a good shiver, the kind that was filled with anticipation and sprinkled with longing.

He pulled her against him and kissed her, his lips lingering over hers as she let her body relax into his. "I had a great time," he said softly. "I'd ask to see you this weekend, but you're busy."

"Yes, sorry." She almost wished she could tell her sisters that the condo had fallen through, but no, sisters before misters was a rule she didn't intend to break. "I'll be back Wednesday night."

He looked at her, his brow arching in seductive query. "Is that an invitation?"

She brushed her hand over his chest, relishing his solid warmth against her palm. "It's out there. What you choose to do with the information is your choice."

"I see." He lowered his head and kissed her again. "There's tonight, right? You're not leaving until morning?"

That was true. But she hadn't packed, and she still had some work stuff to do. But it was early, barely four, she could make some time later...

The sound of a car pulling into the lot drew them apart, but he didn't move away from her. They hadn't discussed whether they planned to be public, but she supposed it wasn't a secret.

It wasn't a car actually, but a king cab work truck stocked with ladders and a toolbox. They parked near Brooke's SUV, and a petite blonde climbed out of the passenger seat. "Hey, Cam!" She didn't come toward them but opened the back door and busied herself with something that Brooke couldn't see. The driver, a tall, dark-haired drink of water, came around the truck. Brooke could see instantly that he and Cam were related.

He came toward them. "Hi. I'm Dylan Westcott."

Cam's older half-brother and the construction guy. Brooke held out her hand. "Hi, I'm Brooke Ellis. I, uh, work with Cam."

Dylan's eyes narrowed infinitesimally as he scrutinized her briefly. His gaze darted to Cam with an equally assessing look. "Uh-huh. Nice to meet you." His demeanor said he wasn't entirely certain they were coworkers, which meant he'd seen them embracing. Oh well, it *really* wasn't a secret.

"Brooke is distributing our wine," Cam said. "And she's damn good at it."

The blonde came toward them, and Brooke saw why she'd been busy in the backseat—she carried a baby. The infant's chubby little legs stuck out from a ruffled romper, and she smacked her hand against her mother's chest, clutching at her shirt between thumps. Brooke's maternal instinct kicked into high gear, and she willed herself to keep it together. She could be around babies, for crying out loud—she had two nieces and a nephew.

Cam went straight for the baby, swooping her from her mother's arms. He lifted her up, much to the baby's delight. Her eyes shone as she giggled. He turned to Brooke. "This is my niece Emma. Oh, and her mom, Sara."

Sara snorted. "This is what happens when you have a baby, you become a second-class citizen." She gazed lovingly at her daughter. "Not that I mind."

No, Brooke couldn't imagine she would. She'd gladly become a second-class citizen in exchange for a baby of her own. "She's beautiful. How old?"

"Five months," Sara answered, watching Cam while he made ridiculous faces and silly noises.

Brooke watched him too, and in that moment, any hope she might've nurtured for a future with him evaporated like water on a hot summer day. Despite the blazing heat of the sun, ice coated her veins and chilled her mood. Yet at the same time, she told herself this was stupid—she didn't want a future with him; she only wanted right now.

And *right now* he was snuggling his niece with adoring eyes.

Brooke urged a smile to her lips. "It was nice to meet you, but I should go."

"I hope we're not driving you off," Sara said.

"No, no, I was on my way out. I have work to finish." Brooke nodded toward Cam, feeling disjointed and irritated with herself. Maybe she'd drink one of those bottles of chardonnay when she got home. "See you later."

She made a point of looking at Cam and wished she hadn't. The picture of him with Emma in his arms would haunt her for a long time. He was an absolute natural as he held Emma's wrist and helped her wave. He even said, "Bye-bye, Brooke. See you later!"

Brooke smiled because she really couldn't help it—she loved children—and waved back. "Bye!"

She didn't end up drinking the chardonnay, of course, but she did throw herself into work and then packing. And when Cam's texts came and he asked if she was up for a visitor, she

pretended she was already asleep.

Chapter Fifteen

After spending the weekend with her sisters, Brooke felt absolutely rejuvenated. She realized she'd been vulnerable Friday after being with Cam, and seeing him with Emma had triggered all of her worst anxieties. Rhonda and Tracy had restored her confidence and successfully reminded her that right now in her life it was okay to put herself first and live for the present.

So that was precisely what she was going to do.

Once her sisters had left early Monday afternoon, Brooke finalized her schedule for the next two days and completed some other work. By late afternoon, she was ready to get out for a bit, so she went for a walk on the beach. The day was cloudy and a bit cool due to the wind. By the time she walked back up to the front of the condo building, she was eager to put on some sweats and kick her feet up with a glass of wine.

But when she rounded the corner to the door of the condo, she stopped short. There, propped against the wall with a lazy grin, was Cam.

He pushed off and walked toward her. "Hey, beautiful."

She shouldn't have been surprised to see him. In fact, during her walk, she'd thought it might be nice if he were here with her tonight. A light, giddy feeling bloomed in her stomach and spread. A warning fired off in the recesses of her brain—this could move beyond casual so fast if she wasn't careful. "You're lucky girls' weekend is over."

He winced. "I took a chance. I hope that's okay."

While her insides churned with anticipation, she tried to maintain an outward air of composure. She shrugged. "Surprises are nice sometimes." She moved past him, catching the scent of his cologne, and managed to insert the key into the lock. Once she was over the threshold, she held the door open. "Come on in."

He exhaled. "Oh, good." The relief in his tone was evident.

She laughed. "Were you worried I'd send you away? After the other day?"

"Guys always worry about that kind of stuff."

She closed the door behind him and locked the dead bolt out of habit. "I'm sorry, but I have a hard time thinking an über-confident guy like you worries about that sort of thing at all. Nice try, though." She walked down the short hallway and turned to the kitchen, where she dumped her keys and purse on the island.

He came up behind her, his hands clasping her waist. "Maybe not usually, but you're different. Special. You know that, right?"

She didn't, actually, and the newfound knowledge sent tingles dancing over her flesh. She stepped away from him and turned, suddenly feeling shy. Or nervous. Or both.

"I didn't know that. But thank you." Part of her wanted to ask how she was special, but that would send them down a path she didn't want to take. She wanted now, here, nothing "special."

She moved around the island, putting space and the large slab of granite between them. "So you came down here to...?"

"Take you to dinner and...whatever else." He took a step to the corner of the island but didn't pursue her. "I really just wanted to see you. I was sorry we couldn't see each other Friday night."

She'd texted him back the next morning saying she'd already been asleep, but that she'd

catch up with him when she was back in town. The whole time she repeated the word “casual” to herself over and over again. “Yeah, I’m sorry too.”

“So, can I take you to dinner?”

That sounded divine. And like a real date. Once again, the word “casual” became a mantra in her brain.

She hadn’t been on a real date in so long. The blind date with Justin didn’t count. They’d met for drinks and, given the blind-dateness of it all, the conversation had been a tad awkward and slow. This would be different. She and Cam knew each other. *Well.*

And yet there were so many things she wanted to know.

Careful, Brooke, casual.

“Where should we go?”

He glanced at the clock on the microwave. “As it happens, I have reservations at The Bay House in about twenty minutes.”

His thoughtfulness was awfully flattering.

“Oh, wow, I guess you really *were* worried that I wasn’t going to show up!” She laughed. “They’re on my schedule for tomorrow, but if Don’s around, we can pitch your wines together.”

He grinned, and his handsomeness rocked through her like a lightning bolt. “Sounds great. I like that—together.”

She did too, but cautioned herself not to like it too much. “Let me freshen up real quick.” She dashed back down the hallway to the master bedroom and checked herself in the mirror, fluffing her hair and spritzing on perfume.

When she went back to the living room, he was out on the deck, looking at the ocean. The sun was gliding toward the horizon, casting the water in a golden, shimmering glow.

She joined him at the railing, and a cool breeze made her shiver. She wrapped her arms around herself. “Fall’s in the air a bit.”

“It is. Just a few weeks away, really.”

“I know. Crazy. I’ve lived here—well, in Ribbon Ridge—for almost two months.”

He turned, leaning his hip against the railing. “And what do you think?”

She turned too, facing him, her arms still crossed. “I like it a lot. I’ve met some really nice people.”

“I hope that includes me.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed him lightly in the chest. “Don’t go digging for compliments. That’s obnoxious. Or so my mother says.”

He captured her hand in his. “Let’s go have dinner.”

They left the condo, and he drove them south through town to the restaurant, which had a lovely view over Siletz Bay. They’d be able to watch the sun set from their table by the window.

“Is Don here?” Cam asked the hostess who sat them.

“Not tonight. He’ll be here tomorrow, though.”

She smiled at the hostess. “That’s okay, thanks.”

The hostess gave them their menus and said their server would be right with them.

Cam went for the wine list first. He groaned, and it reminded her of the noises he’d made the other day in his office. “So many great pinots from Eyrie.”

Brooke forced herself to focus on the menu and not how insanely attracted she was to Cam. “I think I want to try the tasting menu, and there’s a wine pairing for it. What do you think?” It included a salad, three main courses to share, and a dessert trio.

“Looks great, and the wine pairings are spot-on. I’m game if you are—there’s a chardonnay,

you know.” He looked at her in question, reminding her of the night they’d met and first discussed wine, including their mutual ambivalence toward chardonnay.

“I saw that, but I actually enjoy that one a lot.”

“Me too.” He glanced longingly at the wine menu.

Brooke laughed. “It’s like going to church for you, isn’t it?”

He smiled sheepishly. “A little bit. I’m rather passionate about it.”

“I can see that. It’s cool because I feel the same way—okay, maybe not *quite* as much as you.”

When the server came, Cam ordered for them. A few minutes later, they had their chardonnay, and he proposed a toast. “To being on a real date. Thank you.” He tapped his glass to hers.

She chuckled. “You’re welcome. I notice this date is happening a long way from Ribbon Ridge. We didn’t talk about whether this was a secret thing.” She sipped her wine. “I recall you didn’t want your mom to know you might be seeing someone.”

He flinched. “That was stupid of me. I didn’t want to be a piece of Ribbon Ridge gossip, but no, this isn’t anything I want to hide.” His gaze was warm and earnest and heated her in all the best physical and emotional ways. “And anyway, my brother totally saw us canoodling in the parking lot the other day and asked what was up. I told him we were dating—*casually*. I don’t mean to diminish it by saying that. I just want you to know that I respect our plan.”

She appreciated that and didn’t take it any other way. They were on the same page, and that was great. “I’m fine with you telling him. Or anyone else for that matter. Because I told my sisters the same thing this weekend.” Okay, she’d told them a bit more than *that*, but that was what sisters did.

He set his wine down after taking a drink. “Do I want to know what they said?”

She recalled her sisters’ reaction and decided it would be funny to share. “Hallelujah?”

His eyes widened briefly before he dissolved into laughter. “That’s funny.”

“It had been a while since I...but you know that.”

“Yes, but I don’t know any specifics. Like about your ex. How long were you married?”

“Almost five years.” She weighed what to say and decided to keep it simple. “We met in college and got married right after.”

“Divorce sucks. My dad’s divorce from Dylan’s mom was pretty acrimonious. It was awful for Dylan—just be glad you didn’t have any kids. What happened?”

Her brain tried to freeze up after his kid comment, but she willed herself to relax. He was right. Splitting up would be terrible if you had children, but in her case, the lack of them had been the cause. Or had it? She’d begun to think that their marriage wouldn’t have worked out either way. If he couldn’t stick with her through infertility, what other issue would’ve caused him to stray? “We just weren’t meant to be.”

It was like a weight lifted from her as she realized that wasn’t a trite phrase but the truth.

He curled his hand around the bowl of his wineglass and swirled the chardonnay without lifting it from the table. He looked from the wine to her, his gaze probing. “That’s a pretty romantic thing to say.”

She wasn’t sure what to make of that comment. “Well, marriage is romantic, isn’t it?”

“I only meant that you sound like a romantic—like you have a nice heart.” He smiled softly.

She recalled the conversation they’d had a couple of weeks ago at Taste when they’d danced around the topic of their past love lives. “What about you? Are you ready to confirm that you were in love once?”

He took a long drink from his chardonnay. “Yep, I was in love. Like you, we started dating in college. Unlike you, we did not get married, thank God.” The sharp bitterness in his voice could’ve cut bone.

“And why was that such a good thing?”

One side of his mouth curved up. “We just weren’t meant to be.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I see what you did there.”

“Only what you did.” He took another sip of wine. “Look, that relationship is ancient history for me.”

“And yet you haven’t had any others since.” She saw a darkness creep into his gaze and hoped she hadn’t pushed too much. Especially when she wasn’t in any hurry to talk about Darren and her...issues. She reached across the table and touched his hand. “Hey, it’s fine. This is a casual thing, right? I’m with you because it feels good, and we’re having fun. Are we still having fun?”

He took her hand and leaned forward to kiss the back. “I am.”

Their salads arrived then, and they discussed food and wine pairings. The conversation turned to the wine dinner that was happening that weekend.

“Are you happy with how the final menu turned out?” she asked. “I know you were hoping for a salmon dish.”

“Yeah, but Kyle won me over with his halibut. I think it’ll be good. And we have amazing guests coming—thanks in part to you.”

“I’m happy to have helped.” She liked working with him. She liked talking wine with him. She could imagine going to France with him and showing him the places she’d been. “When are you taking that overdue trip to France?”

“No time soon. We’ve got the harvest coming up after this dinner.”

“Next spring maybe?”

“Maybe.” He looked at her as if he might say more, but didn’t.

She’d been about to offer to go with him, but planning things six or eight months in advance was pretty much the antithesis of “casual.”

The salad plates were cleared and the server brought dinner, which included beef, halibut, and duck dishes.

“Should I leave the duck for you?” she asked, recalling their first dinner together.

He laughed. “I guess, since you don’t really like it.”

“I’ll try a bite. I like to be adventurous.”

He raised a brow, and his gaze turned seductive. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

She shook her head, smiling. “I actually think that dinner was our first date. It was supposed to be a business meeting, but you rather manipulated the situation in your favor.”

“I did, didn’t I?” He showed absolutely no remorse.

She laughed. “Unapologetic, I see.”

He grinned as he cut a piece of steak. “Completely.”

“Oh, look!” She gestured toward the window and the magnificent sunset they’d been ogling throughout dinner. “The sun is just about to disappear. I love that moment when the orange sinks into the sea, like it’s dissolving so it can rest before re-forming again tomorrow. Like it’s home.”

“Beautiful.”

She turned her head to see that he was watching her. “The sunset, silly.”

“You.” His gaze was focused and intense, and she felt it all the way to her toes.

Their flirtation continued through dinner and dessert—what little of it they could eat. They

had the remainder boxed up for later.

He drove her back to the condo, and they walked up the stairs and toward the door. She dug the key out of her purse and turned. "Thanks for dinner."

"Uh-oh, this sounds like a good-night. It's a long drive back to Ribbon Ridge."

"Only an hour. But no, this isn't good night." She unlocked the door and pivoted with her hand on the knob. "I didn't mean to be nosy at dinner. It just seems like...it seems like we've both been hurt, and I'm wondering if this is really casual or if we're just going very, very slow."

He caressed the side of her jaw and cupped her neck, his fingertips massaging her. "I'm not sure there's a difference. Anyway, like you said, this feels good."

It did. Especially the way he was rubbing her neck and how deeply he stared into her eyes—as if he could see right into her soul and the pain she kept inside. She tried to see into him, to understand why he needed to go slow.

But maybe he was right. Maybe it only mattered that this felt good.

She turned the knob and backed into the condo, pulling him with her. He closed the door behind him and locked the bolt. Then his hands came around her waist, and he kissed her. She reached out and dropped her purse, hoping it landed on the console table in the hallway, but heard it hit the floor.

He pulled back and bent to pick it up, then deposited it on the table. He set the dessert box next to it before coming back to her.

His eyes found hers, and he just stood there a moment—promise and intent carved in every line of his face, burning in the depths of his stare. He clasped her sides gently and backed her to the wall, his mouth descending on hers. She expected an assault, but this was gentle, searching. And over too soon. But just so he could nip at her lips and kiss her jaw. He massaged her hip as he licked along the flesh beneath her ear. He held her there, pinned between him and the wall as he feasted on her neck. Brooke closed her eyes and let sensation take her away.

He scooted her along the wall until they hit the corner, then he guided her along the short hall to the bedrooms, turning right into the master. "Oh, look, a bed," he whispered before kissing her again. His mouth opened over hers, his tongue deftly sliding into her, eliciting soft moans from her throat.

She held him against her. He felt so good—his hands, his mouth. Everything he did sent need spiraling through her.

He pushed off the canvas jacket she'd thrown on earlier, letting it fall to the floor. His hands massaged her shoulders as he plundered her mouth. He was still gentle, his tongue caressing her in sweeping, delicious strokes.

He broke the kiss, surprising her. He held up a finger as if to say *hang on* and pulled his phone from his back pocket. He quickly typed into it, and soon music filled the room. It was something sexy. Justin Timberlake, she was pretty sure. He tossed the phone onto the nightstand, then kicked off his shoes.

She followed suit, losing her slip-ons. Her bare feet sank into the plush carpet, but only for a moment because he eased her back onto the king-sized bed. He shrugged out of his long-sleeved button-down and stretched out beside her, turning her so that they were on their sides, facing each other. "I've been looking forward to this. So much." Desire darkened his voice and filled his gaze with heat.

"Me too." She caressed the side of his face, from his temple to his jaw. He had the barest amount of scruff. It tickled her fingers as she traced along his flesh. She closed her eyes and leaned forward to kiss him.

He met her halfway, their lips connecting briefly before coming apart and finding each other again. They were playful kisses. Teasing and seductive. The kind that stoked your need into a steady burn.

He propped his head on his hand while the other hand traveled from her hip to her breast and back again. He pressed her back onto the bed, bringing his body over hers. He settled between her legs, his erection hitting the perfect spot and spurring her desire. His tongue dove into her mouth, and she felt absolutely devoured—but in the best way possible. She felt revered. Treasured even.

She clutched the hem of the T-shirt he'd had on beneath his button-down. He sat up and tore it away, then came back to her, his mouth finding hers as his hips ground down. She arched up into him, need pulsing through her. She ran her hands up and down his back, exploring every muscle, appreciating every plane.

He pushed her shirt up over her breasts and reached under her to unclasp her bra. Then he shoved that up too, impatient, apparently, to get to her. He knelt between her legs and used both hands to cup her. She loved how he touched her. He seemed to know exactly what would feel good.

He pulled on her nipples and caressed her flesh, using slow, deliberate strokes and light, gasp-inducing pinches to arouse her. Fire burned in her belly, and she ached to feel him naked against her.

She opened her eyes and saw the determination—the power—in his gaze and gave herself over to him completely. She opened her legs farther and arched up to clasp his hips, but he pushed her back.

“My turn,” he said. He stripped her shirt and bra away, then dropped over her, taking her breast into his mouth. The music, a new song now, but just as sexy, washed over her. Combined with the feel of his tongue on her and his familiar, delicious scent, she could barely keep herself together.

Moaning, she begged him not to stop.

He nipped at her flesh. “Never.” Then he moved lower, his fingers working at her jeans until he had them open. She arched up, making it easier for him to tug them off her.

When he'd pulled them away, he turned her over to her stomach, surprising her. He pushed her thighs apart and knelt between her legs. “I've been obsessed with exploring your back.”

He pushed her hair to the side, exposing her neck. His lips touched her flesh, then his tongue. He kissed her softly all along her nape and onto her shoulders, then traced his tongue down her spine to the middle of her back before using his fingers to continue all the way down, to just above her backside. “Here,” he rasped. “This little concave place entices me. I want to pour wine in it and drink it from your flesh, but I think it would trickle everywhere, and then I'd just have to lick you clean.”

His words enflamed her, and she couldn't keep from arching backward, seeking his touch between her legs. But no, he was torturing her. And she loved it.

“Another time,” he said, his hands caressing her lower back and drifting to her ass. He massaged her flesh, arousing her with each caress. Sensation coursed through her and gathered in her core. “Should you kneel up and we'll do it like this? I'd love to watch this gorgeous back as I make love to you.”

She gasped.

“Is that a yes?” He asked the question next to her ear before he tongued her there, sending shivers of delight down her spine.

“Yes. I don’t care how...I just...need...more.”

“Turn.”

She did as he said, turning, but also feeling a little disappointed that he wasn’t going to do what he’d suggested. And he was still wearing his damned jeans. She reached for the waistband, but he grasped her hand and held it up over her head. He kissed her again, his tongue probing deep. “You want more?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He tweaked her nipples and moved down, his lips and tongue skimming their way to her hips. She twisted and arched, her body crying out for release. “Cam, please.”

He pushed her legs up, planting her feet on the bed on either side of him. She sensed what was coming next but wasn’t completely prepared for the full brunt of his mouth on her. He sucked on her flesh, then buried his tongue inside her. She bucked up, her orgasm hammering for release. But not yet. He wasn’t done torturing her. He pulled back and thumbed her clit, making slow, agonizing circles over her flesh. Taunting her, tormenting her. She opened wider for him and clutched at the bedspread, her fingers digging into the fabric.

“You like this?” he asked.

“I’d like you to go faster.” She sounded harsh, her voice deep and needy. Foreign. But excitingly so.

“Really? I think this is good. But maybe a little more.” He slipped a finger into her, and lights flashed behind her eyelids. She arched up, her muscles stiffening. No, she actually didn’t want to come yet. She wanted this to go on and on.

“Yes, more. Please, Cam.”

He pumped into her but didn’t increase his speed. He spread her folds wide and licked her, his tongue sweeping long, devastating strokes along her heated flesh. Want became desperate need as she writhed beneath him. When he entered her again, she was sure it was two fingers. More, but still not enough.

“Faster. *Cam.*”

“Like this?” He speared into her, his fingers filling her. Then his mouth was on her again, sucking at her clit. She was mindless with need.

“Come for me, Brooke.” His voice was coarse and demanding. Thoroughly enticing.
“*Come.*”

She couldn’t keep it at bay any longer. Mind-numbing pleasure crashed over her. The lights behind her eyes dimmed to black as she tumbled headfirst into the abyss. Still, he didn’t stop. His hand and mouth continued, drawing her orgasm out until she whimpered.

Then he was gone. She heard him take his pants off, then the sound of a wrapper. A second later, he was back between her shuddering legs. He didn’t hesitate but drove into her, filling her at last. As he hit her G-spot, another wave of pleasure washed over her—a mini-orgasm she’d never had before.

He kissed her, and she tasted herself. This was a new experience, and, surprisingly, it didn’t turn her off. In fact, it somehow heightened her desire for him. He sucked her lower lip and came to a stop between her legs.

“Open your eyes and look at me, Brooke.”

She let her lids flutter open. The room was dark with just the light from the hall cascading through the doorway, but she could see him clearly. The tense, sexy set of his jaw, the dark intensity of his green eyes.

He brushed her hair back from her face. “I want to look at you when you come again, and I

want you to look at me too.”

He began to move once more, filling her, then withdrawing in easy, measured strokes. She rocked with him, meeting his thrusts and striving to keep this pace. Though it was slow, it was absolutely devastating in its power. She clutched at his back and his ass, feeling the muscles stretch and contract as he plunged into her.

She lifted her legs and wrapped them around his back. His eyes closed briefly as he slid in even deeper than before.

“Damn, Brooke.” He moved faster, his hips snapping against hers.

Their gazes connected as their bodies moved, binding them together in a way that went somehow beyond the physical. Wonder filled her, heightening her pleasure.

“Now, *you* come for me,” she said, watching him and loving the delicious agony in his expression.

“Together,” he growled, his body picking up speed. He kissed her again, long and deep, their bodies moving in time. She closed her eyes again. He pulled back. “Look at me, Brooke. *Now.*” He slammed into her, igniting her orgasm. She tried to keep her eyes open, but she was lost. Incoherent. Spent.

He thrust into her, prolonging the sensations shooting through her until he shouted her name. He held her tight against him, his hands digging through her hair and clasping her head as he let himself go.

He stopped moving but didn’t leave her. He kissed her, his lips soft and coaxing, gently moving over hers. She cupped his head and kissed him back, loving this moment more than she ever imagined possible.

He drew his mouth away from hers, and she opened her eyes to see that he was watching her. “Wow,” he breathed. “I...wow.” He caressed her cheek, then abruptly stood and went to the bathroom.

She lay there, her body replete, her mind at peace, and wondered what in the hell had just happened.

Duh, sex.

Yes, sex. But something more. Something she wasn’t sure she wanted to acknowledge.

Chapter Sixteen

Cam disposed of the condom and stood in front of the mirror, glad he'd closed the door. What the hell had just happened?

He turned the faucet on and splashed cold water over his face. Once. Twice. A third time. He shut the water off and stood there as droplets fell from his jaw to the sink.

He looked back into the mirror, a little afraid of what he might see. But it was just him. Familiar green eyes stared back at him. They didn't look different. But he felt different.

For the second time, he'd referred to sex with Brooke as making love. He hadn't done that since Jennifer.

Damn it. Jennifer didn't belong anywhere near him right now. Just a thought of her might poison one of the best nights of his life.

No, the *best*.

He'd never felt so aligned with someone, like he could sense her in his bones. He'd only been with her a few times, but he knew the rhythm of her body, and it called to him like none ever had. Even now, he wanted to hold her and kiss her and touch her, not roll over and go to sleep and plot how he would extricate himself from the bed.

He grabbed a towel and dried his face. He put his hand on the doorknob and hesitated. What if...what if that had been nothing special for her? Did he want to know?

God, he was acting like a noob.

He opened the door and saw that she'd crawled under the covers. She lay on her side, her blonde hair spread out on the pillow, her brilliant blue-green eyes fixed on him. "Hey," she said.

"Hey." He padded to the bed and climbed in beside her, drawing the covers over himself.

She snuggled closer, and he put his arm around her. "That was amazing." She sounded blissed-out. Utterly satisfied.

He smiled. "Totally." He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. Inhaling her scent, which now included his scent, he closed his eyes briefly and committed it to memory. He didn't ever want to forget how he felt in this moment. He smoothed her hair back against the pillow, loving its silky softness. Thick curls wound around his fingers, trapping him—only he was perfectly happy to be her captive.

"Can I ask you something?" This was stupid, and he was sure he knew the answer, but he couldn't keep himself from wondering. "That guy you went on a date with... Are you planning to see him again? Or maybe you already have."

She looked at him a moment, her lashes coming down just once before she touched his jaw. "I *was* planning to see him again, but not now."

A bit of tension—which he hadn't realized he'd been holding—seeped from his muscles. "What changed?"

Little pleats formed between her brows. "When I came to see you on Friday, I said I wanted to try this."

"You also said it was casual, and in my book, casual doesn't necessarily mean exclusive."

"I see," she murmured, dropping her hand from his face. "I guess I don't have your full rule book."

He captured her hand in his and squeezed. "I'm not sure my rule book applies here. Anyway, I'm not dating anyone else, and I don't plan to."

“Well, that’s...good. But you’ll need to keep me up to speed about these rules. Is there anything else I need to know?”

That he didn’t trust women? That he didn’t expect to find anyone he’d dare to commit to forever with? That he was as broken and damaged as they came with regard to healthy romantic relationships? Even before Jennifer had dumped him, their relationship had been toxic. He just hadn’t realized it until much later.

“I’m not good at this.” He shook his head and allowed a small smile. “No, I *suck* at this.”

She looked at him with encouragement, her lips parted. “I’m not sure that’s accurate.”

“I haven’t had a girlfriend in eight years. Not since the last one broke my heart.”

She scooted closer and put her hand on his chest, her fingertips tracing over his skin. “I figured that’s what happened. She was a moron.”

“She was a bitch. And unfortunately ensured that pretty much every woman I met after her ended up in the same category before I even gave them a fair shot.”

“That’s understandable. How serious were you?”

“I was going to ask her to marry me.” His gut clenched, and it felt like the world fell out from under him, like he was on a plane and suffered a sudden five-thousand-foot drop.

Her fingers stilled. Her hand skimmed up his chest and curled around his neck. “I’m so sorry. But...I guess it’s good that things didn’t work out. You could’ve ended up divorced like me.”

“Count on it.” If Jennifer hadn’t found a better option then, she would’ve later. He had no doubt she would’ve kept looking, even with a ring on her finger. She was a self-serving leech. He’d thought they were so happy—discussing their life together, planning for the future, hell they’d even named *children* they’d have someday. The depth of her betrayal still stung, and damn that made him mad.

He rolled to his back. “Can we talk about something else?”

She kept her hand on him, her palm a comforting warmth against his chest. “How about my ex? He was cheating on me.”

Cam immediately rolled back. “Asshole. Give me his address, and I’ll go punch his face in.”

She laughed, her eyes sparkling and her lips parted. “Thanks for the offer, but that’s not necessary. I’m over him.”

He believed her. God, when would he ever be over what Jennifer had done to him? When would he be able to entrust his love to someone else? Someone like Brooke. Yeah, he could love her. So easily. That hollow feeling in his stomach spread.

She stroked his neck. “You talked about exclusivity. I don’t know what your rule is, but I don’t date more than one person at a time. At least I never have, and I can’t see myself doing that now. *Especially* not now.”

Her words eased the ache inside him and shone a small, faint light into the darkness. He *had* dated multiple people, had slept with multiple people at the same time when he spent so much time on the road selling wine. Monogamy had felt like a fool’s dream after his experience with Jennifer. But now he realized he’d grown tired of that sexually transient existence. He’d given up that lifestyle before he’d met Brooke and now, with her, he wished he could forget he’d ever done it.

He cupped her face and kissed her gently. Her lips were still red from their kisses, but they were so soft, like ripe raspberries and just as sweet. “I have no plans to date anyone. I haven’t dated anyone. Not in a long time. I don’t want anyone else—only you.”

God, had he said that out loud? Had he really put that much of himself out there? Panic

nagged at his head, his stomach, and everything in between. He didn't want to regret this. Fuck, he hated that emotion more than any other.

She kissed him, stealing his insecurity and his doubt, at least for a moment.

He deepened the kiss, palming her nape as he swept into her mouth. She met him with lush precision, kindling his desire once more. His cock twitched, ready for her again. He gently rolled her to her back and nudged his thigh between her legs. She twisted her hips and threw her leg over his hip, bringing her wet heat against his thigh.

He moved his hand down her back and side until he reached her hip. He squeezed her flesh as she pressed into him. Her fingers curled into his neck.

Reluctantly, he pulled himself away and found a condom in his wallet. When he returned, she was waiting with open arms, her mouth claiming his in a delicious kiss.

They made love slowly, deliberately. He didn't think he'd taken the time and care to push someone—and himself—to the edge and beyond. By the time they came together, he was nearly brainless, his body simply moving in need and desperation. She felt like heaven against him, and he wasn't sure he deserved anything this good.

After disposing of the condom, he brought her some much-needed water and gathered her in his arms. He'd never done that. He'd never wanted to hold someone until he fell asleep.

He wanted to hold Brooke now. And maybe forever.

* * * *

The buzzing of his phone on the nightstand jarred him from a deep sleep. He blinked at the light filtering through the window. It was early, but he didn't remember setting an alarm. Turning, he picked up the phone and saw that it was barely seven. And he had a text from Hayden.

Kyle and Maggie are parents! Ripley was born about twenty minutes ago. I'm about to go in and meet him so I'll send pictures in a bit. Soon it will be my and Bex's turn!

Cam smiled broadly, hearing his friend's excitement in the typed words. He knew how thrilled Hayden was to be having a kid of his own. He and Bex had lost a baby when she'd miscarried several years ago. They'd broken up soon after, and then found their way back to each other. Happy ever afters were possible after heartbreak—at least for other people. Could it be possible for him?

He felt Brooke's hands curl around his waist. Her lips caressed his shoulder blade. "Did you set your alarm?"

He rolled over and kissed her quickly. "No. Hayden texted me. His brother Kyle and his wife had their baby this morning. A boy—Ripley."

She pulled back and rolled to the side of the bed. "That's so great."

He frowned slightly. "You okay?"

She flashed him a ready smile. "Yep. Just going to brush my teeth."

Ah. Yeah, he should do that too. Except his toothbrush was still in the car. He'd brought an overnight bag in the hope that she'd invite him to stay, then had forgotten all about it. He'd been too caught up in her.

He jumped out of bed and pulled his pants on. "I'm going to run out to my car for a sec," he called toward the closed bathroom door. After throwing on his shirt, he slipped on his shoes and shivered his way to his car. Mornings on the Oregon coast were always chilly.

By the time he got back, he heard the shower running, so he made himself at home in the

other bathroom.

He finished before she did and went to the kitchen, where he made coffee. His phone went off just as Brooke came in. Cam smiled at Hayden's text—a picture of him beaming while he held Ripley, all red-faced, wearing a tiny blue cap.

Cam held the phone out to Brooke. "Look at how goofy happy Hayden is. He can't wait to have his own kid."

Brooke smiled and turned toward the fridge. "I bet. I don't have much in the way of breakfast. I usually snarf down a protein bar or make a shake, but I didn't bring any shake stuff." She pulled out creamer and set it on the counter.

"That's okay. I'd be happy to take you to breakfast."

"The breakfast restaurant options in this town are awful. We'd be better off going to Starbucks."

He laughed, agreeing with her. "Then we can do that." Another text vibrated his phone. He looked down and this time it was a picture of the proud papa—Kyle—holding his swaddled son. The image of the former beach bum with a baby made Cam think that maybe the impossible wasn't impossible after all.

He stared at the picture and realized Brooke hadn't been all that excited. Didn't women typically fuss all over cute babies? He thought about her reaction to Emma the other night—also not quite what he might've expected. She hadn't even asked to hold her. Did she maybe not like children?

"So, uh, do you plan to have kids some day?"

She pulled two cups down from the cupboard and poured coffee into them. "I assume you want coffee since you made it." At his nod, she asked, "Cream or sugar?"

"Whatever you're having. My only preference is that it's strong. Okay, and bonus points for caramel."

She arched a brow. "I remember you like that. This is, in fact, caramel-flavored creamer."

He watched her pour a liberal amount into both cups. "Hmm, maybe you hoped I would surprise you here."

Taking a spoon from the door, she stirred both concoctions then handed one to him. "I actually didn't—at least not consciously."

"To caramel and the subconscious." He clacked his mug against hers. She hadn't answered his question. Was that on purpose, or had the coffee conversation simply derailed her? When she didn't answer, he decided to ask again. "So, kids, yea or nay?"

She winced. "Last night was great—and I like where we're headed. But that's a conversation for another time. A *way* other time."

She was right, of course, but something scratched at the back of his mind and gave him an unsettled feeling. He sipped his coffee and tried not to dwell on it. Things were great right now, and he wanted them to stay that way.

She sipped her coffee. "As much as I would love a Starbucks date with you, I need to drive south to Newport for the first part of my day. I'm going to finish getting ready, and then I should head out."

He exhaled. "If you weren't shilling my wine, I'd take umbrage and demand you stay, but I guess I'll let you go."

Her eyes widened, and she barked out an offended laugh. "Like you get to tell me what to do, mister. In bed, I'll allow it—as long as I get my turn. Out of bed? Not a chance."

The mention of a bed started his engines purring. He wished they hadn't gotten up so

quickly. He'd fallen asleep planning round three for this morning and was disappointed it didn't look as though that was going to happen.

He set his coffee down and circled the island to take her in his arms. She still held her cup and didn't move to put it down. He found that a bit odd but didn't want to make something of it.

"Should I come back tonight?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I'm going to be working late and I've got an early start tomorrow. I need to catch up on my sleep—you kept me up pretty late last night."

Instead of going to sleep after making love that second time, they'd sat up talking about movies and television shows and music and bands. It had been fun, and they'd later fallen asleep in each other's arms. "I still can't believe you've never watched *The Walking Dead*."

She made a face and stuck out her tongue. "And I can't believe you have. Okay, I can, but ewww."

He smiled, glad that things were still good. Of course discussion of children was too soon. If he wasn't so damned out of practice, he would've known that.

She leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss. "Okay, I need to get moving. Stop distracting me." She winked at him as she stepped around him.

"I guess I'll take that as my cue to leave. Unless you're sure I can't help you get ready?" He looked at her suggestively, letting his gaze rake her from the top of her damp head to the tips of her turquoise colored toenails.

"You're a bad influence, Cameron Westcott. Get out of here." She bestowed him one last smile before presenting her backside and marching from the room.

He watched her go with a wistful stare. Damn, he was smitten. And while it felt better than he'd ever dreamed possible, he couldn't shake the sense that something was about to go wrong. Maybe because in his experience, happy didn't have a shot at ever after.

Chapter Seventeen

Brooke stepped out of her car at the Ribbon Ridge Cemetery just as Kelsey drove up. They met in the gravel parking lot and exchanged greetings. A moment later, Crystal arrived.

She jumped out of her mini SUV and immediately apologized. “Alaina isn’t coming, unfortunately. Alexa has a fever.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Kelsey said. “I hope she’s all right.”

“It’s minor, but she’s cranky and sad, and only Mommy will do.”

Brooke knew about this from experience. While she was babysitting her nephew when he was about a year old, he’d come down with a fever. He’d screamed until Rhonda had come home. “That’s how it is.”

“Poor dads,” Crystal said.

Kelsey shrugged. “Or lucky, depending on how cranky the kid is.”

Brooke shuddered. “Or if they’re puking.”

Crystal nodded vigorously in agreement. “Don’t get me started on diarrhea. Alexa had a horrific episode when I was watching her one night. It was a terrible thing to do to one’s godmother.”

They all laughed, and Brooke felt a rush of relief. See, she could talk about children without suffering a pang of loss or a burst of anxiety.

Which hadn’t been the case yesterday morning. The pictures of Kyle’s new baby and the unadulterated joy on his father’s and uncle’s faces had pierced straight through her heart, leaving a hole the size of Jupiter. No, that wasn’t quite right. It had been the glee in Cam’s gaze that had nearly been her undoing. She had seen with her own eyes just how much the baby’s birth had affected him. Then he’d asked her about kids and she’d just...faltered.

She’d hidden behind the coffee conversation, hoping the topic would just fade away. Then he’d pursued it, so clearly the issue was important to him. Her mind had stumbled and then shut down. She’d grasped at anything to keep him and that discussion at bay. In the end, she’d been relieved at his reaction—that he’d dropped it and said it was too soon to talk about it. Little did he know that it would be too soon pretty much forever.

“So where should we start?” Crystal asked. “We’re looking for any tombstones with the initials BNR, right?”

“I think we should actually look for anything with a last name that starts with R. Take a picture of it with your phone.”

“And what time period?” Brooke asked. “The brick said 1879, so anything between that date and...?”

“That’s a good question,” Kelsey said, looking from Brooke to Crystal. “What do you guys think? If BNR was a person who made that brick in 1879, he or she could’ve died anytime.”

“Well, let’s say they weren’t over a hundred. So how about anything prior to 1970?”

Brooke nodded. “Okay, sounds good. Any ideas on how to tackle this?”

“Why don’t we start at one end and each take a row?” Kelsey suggested. “That way we’re still together in case we find something.”

“Perfect,” Crystal said, whipping her phone from her back pocket. “Let’s do this.”

They walked to the back corner and each took a row. The headstones were an amalgamation of sizes and shapes and conditions. This section was old, and some of the lettering was

impossible to read due to weathering.

“How was your trip to LA?” Brooke asked Crystal as they walked.

“Busy,” Crystal said from the row behind Brooke. “We crammed a lot of meetings in and a couple of interviews. Alaina doesn’t like to invite people here, so she usually does that stuff in LA.”

Kelsey, who was in the row in front of Brooke, turned and looked over at Crystal. “Any new movies coming out?”

“She’s voicing an animated feature in a month or so. That’ll be fun.”

“Oooh, is it the sequel to *Frozen*?” Kelsey laughed. “I’m kidding.”

Crystal laughed with her. “I wish! It’s still cool, though. I’d tell you about it, but then I’d have to kill you.”

“Of course. That’s top-secret intel right there,” Brooke said, smiling. She liked both of them and was glad they’d met. Forming connections made her think she could maybe stay in Ribbon Ridge long-term. Or maybe something else was making her think that...

She shrugged the thought away and focused on the headstones. “I’m not finding any Rs yet.”

“Me neither,” Kelsey said. “Irony given that the town is Ribbon Ridge.” She rolled the Rs for emphasis.

“Totally.” Crystal chuckled. “Wait, here’s one. Joseph Rollins died 1889. Not a B or an N, but I’ll take a picture.”

Brooke saw the same name on the headstone in front of Crystal’s. “This is a Rollins too. Ann Bedelia. There’s a B, at least.” She took a picture.

“And an N in Ann,” Kelsey said. They continued for another minute in silence. “How was your beach trip, Brooke? Sell a lot of wine?”

“I did, actually.” West Arch Estate had been quite popular. She’d shared her sales information with Cam earlier via text and was sure they’d talk about it later—assuming they’d get together.

“And how are things going with Justin?” Kelsey asked.

“Who’s Justin, your boyfriend?” Crystal chimed in.

Brooke suddenly wished she hadn’t overshared with Kelsey last week. But why? They were friends, right? “No, he’s not my boyfriend. He was a blind date, and I told Kelsey I was thinking of calling him again.”

Kelsey turned to look at her. “Uh-oh,” Kelsey said. “You didn’t?”

Brooke shook her head.

“What happened?” Crystal asked.

Brooke pivoted so that she could see Crystal too. “Uh, Cam happened.”

Crystal came into Brooke’s row. “Cam as in Cameron Westcott? Are you two a thing? Wait, I think I heard he was seeing someone. That’s like major news in the Archer circle.” She rolled her eyes, grinning. “Small towns. You gotta love ’em. I come from one in North Carolina.”

Kelsey moved closer so that she was just on the other side of a headstone. “Did you have sex again?”

“Yes. He came to the beach.” Where they’d had sex. But he’d called it making love. Did he always call it that, she wondered?

Crystal’s grin didn’t fade. “Sounds hot.”

“It was...romantic.” Aside from the baby disaster, she’d felt incredibly close to him. He’d been an amazing and thoughtful lover—as gentle as he’d been aggressive in their other encounters. She’d loved seeing that side of him.

“Uh-oh, sounds like you’re falling for him.” Crystal’s tone was teasing, while Kelsey was watching her skeptically. But then Kelsey knew a little about Brooke’s history and Crystal didn’t.

“Are you ready for that?” Kelsey asked, her gaze laced with concern.

“I don’t know.” Brooke turned her head toward Crystal. “I got divorced a couple of years ago, and it was kind of ugly. Cam’s the first guy I’ve dated—the first guy I’ve paid *any* attention to really—since then.”

Crystal nodded. “I get it. And that sucks. Sorry about your ex.”

“I hope you’re taking it slow,” Kelsey said.

“We are. Very. It feels...good. A little foreign, like a pair of shoes I forgot about in the back of my closet, and putting them back on is a little strange.”

Crystal chuckled. “Good analogy. That happens to me all the time.” When both Brooke and Kelsey stared at her, she added, “With shoes! I’m a total shoe whore. I, uh, actually don’t date that much. Too busy with work.”

“Even since Alaina’s career has slowed down?” Kelsey asked.

“Yep. Always tons to do. I do get a little more sleep now.” She winked at them. “Back to the grind.” She returned to scanning headstones, and Brooke and Kelsey did the same.

A few minutes later, Crystal called out to them. “Guys, here’s Benjamin Archer’s headstone.”

Brooke and Kelsey walked over to where Crystal stood. Ribbon Ridge’s founder had a large, rather new and fancy headstone, as did his wife next to him, though hers was a bit smaller.

“The family replaced his headstone a while back because the original was so decrepit.”

“How awesome to have founded a town,” Crystal said, her tone glazed with reverence. “I love history like this. My grandpa was a Civil War reenactor. I can’t tell you how many battles I attended when I was a kid.”

Kelsey smiled, her eyes lighting. “Now, *that’s* awesome. Were your ancestors rebels?”

“Ha, rebels! You’re such a northerner. Actually, my family was both Confederate and Union. All dirt poor and fighting for their state. That’s what it was about to them back then. My family comes from North Carolina and Pennsylvania.”

“It sounds like you know a lot about them,” Brooke said.

“I do. My grandmother was really into genealogy. I’m a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution too.”

Kelsey shook her head. “*So* cool. I can only trace to my great-great-grandparents. Someday I’d love to go back further. I guess that’s why I find this project so fascinating. It’s silly, but I can’t rest until I know who BNR is and why he had that brick.”

Crystal nodded. “I completely understand. The less we learn about those initials and that date, the more I want to find the truth!”

“You guys should start your own show—solving small-town historical mysteries.” Brooke chuckled. “Reality show, buddy comedy, with a bit of Indiana Jones thrown in.”

Crystal howled. “Yes. I’m so pitching that to Alaina and Sean for their production company.”

“I’m game,” Kelsey said, smiling. “But so far, we suck at solving this one.”

“True.” Crystal’s tone was wry. She looked back at Benjamin Archer’s headstone. “Hey, any chance the B is for Benjamin and the N and R are just other people? Like maybe they were a trio and the brick was something they made?” She shook her head. “I know that sounds like a longshot.”

“Any idea is a good one,” Kelsey said. “Let’s keep that in mind as we look. Maybe we’ll see an N or an R first name with dates that are similar to Benjamin’s.”

A few headstones down, Brooke got a little excited. “Guys, here’s an R—Reginald Carver.”

Kelsey and Crystal moved to stand beside her, and they all took in the fading letters of his name. There was no birth date, but the death was listed as April 2, 1879.

“This has the year and one of the letters,” Crystal said, her tone hopeful.

Kelsey took a picture. “Just in case.” She glanced around. “Let’s keep looking, particularly for an N.”

They fanned out and scoured the surrounding area for several minutes. Kelsey was a few rows away when she called out, “Anything?”

Brooke looked up and saw Crystal shake her head. “No,” Brooke answered.

They continued with their search and found a few more single B, N, and R names, but no N first names and nothing else that sparked an idea. They gathered back near their cars.

Crystal frowned. “So it looks like Reginald is our only lead.”

“At least it’s something,” Kelsey said. “We can go back to the records and zero in on him and look for N names.”

Crystal nodded. “Good plan. It’s not a lot to go on, but it’s something. Do you want to set up a time to look through the records together? Alaina and I should bring them to the library anyway in preparation for the exhibit.”

“Sounds great. Just this past weekend, I finally got the upstairs cleaned out enough,” Kelsey said. She turned to Brooke. “Do you still want to help, or has your interest in this waned—I wouldn’t blame you.”

On the contrary, Brooke was as intrigued as ever. The mystery of BNR had bitten her too. Or maybe it was their enthusiasm that was contagious. “Oh no, you’re not getting rid of me now.”

Crystal grinned. “Excellent! Okay, I’m off. See you guys soon.”

As Crystal jumped in her car and drove away, Kelsey turned to Brooke. “Hey, I didn’t mean to be negative earlier. I’m sorry if I came off that way.”

“About Cam?” Brooke shook her head. “Not at all. I appreciate your wariness, actually. I’m feeling cautious too, but optimistic. For now, it’s casual and slow, and we’re just enjoying each other’s company. There would be...issues if we wanted to make a go of it, but I’m nowhere near that yet.”

“I think you’re being very smart. And I’m glad it’s going well. Maybe even a tad jealous, but when I think of starting something...” She shuddered.

Brooke sensed genuine fear, not just anxiety from a bad breakup. “Kelsey, are you okay? I definitely don’t want to pry, but if you ever want a shoulder—a confidential one—I’m here.”

Kelsey smiled, but there was sadness in the lines around her mouth. “Thanks. I really appreciate that. It’s tough to open up about it. I was pretty stupid. He...wasn’t very nice.”

Brooke knew right then that he’d hurt her—emotionally and physically. She also knew Kelsey wasn’t ready to talk about it, and Brooke both understood and respected that. “I’m so sorry. And now I’m going to hug you. Not because I think you need it, but because I suddenly do.” Hearing even this much about Kelsey’s past reminded Brooke of the struggles she’d been through, of the pain of Darren’s betrayal and the agony of her dream life breaking into tiny impossible-to-put-back-together-again pieces.

Brooke squeezed Kelsey tight and was happy that Kelsey squeezed back.

“Now we’re BFFs,” Kelsey said, smiling and offering a wink.

“Definitely.”

Kelsey pulled her keys from her purse. “I’ll be in touch about our next research session.”

“I hope it’s soon. I’m anxious to find some answers!”

“Me too!” Kelsey waved before turning toward her car.

Brooke climbed into her SUV and pulled out of the parking lot. As she turned onto the main road back to town, her phone rang and she answered it via the Bluetooth in her car.

“Hello!”

“Hey,” Rhonda’s voice sounded from the speakers. “You have a minute?”

“I’m driving, what’s up?”

Rhonda exhaled and hesitated. Brooke instantly knew something was wrong. Her muscles tensed, and she gripped the steering wheel tightly, her knuckles whitening. “Rhonda? Is everything okay?”

“Yes. I just wanted to tell you something before you saw it on social media or something. Darren and his home-wrecker girlfriend are getting married.”

Brooke’s insides wavered for a moment—like they turned to jelly and then went back to normal again. It didn’t matter to her that he was getting married again. She took a deep breath. “Well, good for him. I hope she doesn’t expect him to be faithful.”

“There’s, uh, more.”

Brooke had loosened her hold on the wheel, and that fluttering feeling came back to her. What more? She suddenly knew...

“They’re having a baby,” Rhonda said, confirming Brooke’s fear.

Brooke’s vision blurred. She blinked madly to keep her focus on the road. She wrapped her fingers around the leather wheel as if it was the only thing keeping her from drowning in a sea of black emotion. “Of course they are,” she choked out.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t wanted kids—she knew he did. It was that he hadn’t seemed to care that she couldn’t have them. All during her infertility battle, he’d been supportive, but in a very hands-off way. As the medical bills had mounted and her anxiety increased, he’d started to change his tune. He’d said having kids didn’t matter, especially if it meant spending a fortune and her losing her mind. She’d realized much later that she hadn’t been “losing her mind.” She’d been understandably devastated. All the while, he’d been sleeping with his coworker and then blamed Brooke for driving him away.

“He’s such an asshole,” Rhonda said, as if she’d read Brooke’s train of thought. But then she probably had. They’d discussed his betrayal at length last weekend.

He was going to get his happy ever after—the life they’d planned together. The injustice of it curled Brooke’s stomach into a heavy knot.

She drove into town and willed herself into a sort of numbness. She wasn’t going to break down. She couldn’t—she had to get home.

“Brooke, you okay?” Rhonda asked tentatively. “I’m so sorry. But I wanted you to hear it from me.”

“I’m glad.” This was hard, but anything else would’ve been much worse.

“Hey, I think you should talk to Cam.”

What the hell? “Why? We’re in a fledgling relationship.”

“I know you say that, but I spent the weekend with you. I saw how your eyes lit up when you talked about him. And you said your beach date was spectacular.”

Brooke had texted her sisters yesterday during lunch and told them about him surprising her. She hadn’t, however, told them about the baby situation that had derailed her yesterday morning.

Gah, there were babies everywhere!

Brooke turned toward her loft and pulled into the parking garage. “I can’t talk to Cam about this. He totally wants kids someday. There’s no future with him.”

“Damn it, Brooke, you’re being so shortsighted! Just because *you* can’t carry a kid or even make a kid doesn’t mean you can’t be a mom or have a family someday. You guys could use a donor egg and a surrogate, you could adopt—you have options!”

“Not for someone whose mother can’t wait to have a grandchild with ‘her’ blood.” Bile churned in Brooke’s stomach as she thought of what Cam had said about his mother.

Rhonda made a sound that sounded like an angry gargle. “You are so stubborn. Sometimes I think you like to wallow in your circumstances. This doesn’t define you. You’re an amazing aunt, and you’ll be an amazing mom. Not *if* but *when*.”

Brooke pulled into her parking place and started to shake with her anger and frustration and sadness. “It must be nice to call the shots from the sidelines. You have no idea what this feels like or how painful this journey has already been. Yes, there are options. Expensive options with zero guarantees.”

“There are no guarantees in life, period.” Rhonda sounded cold and dispassionate. “Come on, Brooke, you know better than that.”

“Yeah, I do. Which is why I prefer to err on the side of no risk, no pain. I’ve been down that road, Rhonda, and right now, I can’t do it again. Cam is not The One.”

Except as soon as she said those words, something opened up inside her. The wobbliness, the uncertainty faded, and she felt a clarity. But just for a moment. It was gone almost as quickly as it had come.

“Fine. I just hope you aren’t screwing up a good thing.”

“I’m not screwing up anything. We’re having fun, and we’ll continue to have fun. Thanks for letting me know about Darren.” Brooke thought about all the passive-aggressive, snarky ways she could congratulate her ex. That gave her a small bit of satisfaction. Of course, she wouldn’t do any of them.

“Will you please call me if you want to talk?” Rhonda asked. “I’m sorry I upset you. I love you.”

Brooke closed her eyes briefly. “I love you too. I’ll talk to you later.” She disconnected the call before Rhonda replied.

Suddenly weary, Brooke leaned her head against the steering wheel. Her mind churned from Darren to Rhonda to Cam. Part of her wanted to tell him the truth. She wanted to believe he’d understand, that he’d stand by her when Darren hadn’t. But how could she know that? She’d been with Darren for several years and she’d only known Cam, what, five weeks?

It seemed clear to her that he wanted kids given the way he interacted with his niece and his reaction to the new baby yesterday, and then he’d asked her about kids. You didn’t ask about kids unless they were important to your future. And yes, she realized it could be that he didn’t want them, but that just didn’t seem to be the case based on her observations.

And if that were true...she’d be doing him a favor if she walked away now. Before things got complicated and messy. Before it hurt too much to walk away.

Oh, who was she kidding? It was going to hurt either way. She wasn’t completely sure, but she suspected she was in love with him. She loved his sense of humor. She loved the things they shared in common. She loved the way he looked at her, the way he touched her, the way he made her feel like the best woman in the world.

Which was no small feat given how he’d been hurt in the past. More than anything he

deserved to be happy, and she wanted that for him. She was just afraid she wasn't the woman to make it happen.

Chapter Eighteen

Cam finally relinquished the sleeping Ripley to his father. “Kyle, he is one cute kid. You sure he’s yours?”

Kyle smacked him in the arm. “Don’t be a douche bag.” But he was smiling. In fact, Cam hadn’t seen him not smile in the hour he’d been at the hospital visiting.

Cam waggled his eyebrows. “It’s part of my charm.” He leaned toward Kyle. “And yours too, unless you’re going to get all responsible and normal and shit.”

Maggie cleared her throat from the hospital bed. “He already has. It was called marrying me if you recall. You might consider it.”

Cam peered over at her, marveling at how together she looked despite giving birth the day before. “What, marrying you? Last time I checked, bigamy was against the law.”

Maggie looked at the others in the room—Bex and Hayden. “Will somebody please throw something at him now that he’s not holding my son anymore?”

“Hellooooo!” A singsong voice carried through the doorway as Maggie’s mother came in. Cam had met her only a couple of times, but she was incredibly distinctive with her henna-tattooed arms, long flowing skirt, and lack of bra. He hated that he noticed that, but it was hard *not* to.

She waved at everyone. “It’s a party! But then I expect nothing less with so many of you Archers.” She turned to Cam. “But you’re not one of them.”

“Nope, just a friend.”

“Hey, we’re related by marriage,” Kyle said. “You’re much more than a friend.” His eyes conveyed gratitude and camaraderie. Yes, Cam supposed they were more than friends.

Cam clapped Kyle’s shoulder. “Ditto, bro.” He turned and went to the bed to kiss Maggie’s cheek. “Good job, Mama, he’s gorgeous.”

She clasped his arm briefly. “I’m serious. You need to settle down. Or at least get a girlfriend.”

“He has one,” Hayden offered. “Kind of.”

Cam inwardly groaned. Just what he needed—everyone weighing in on his recently resurrected and still feeble love life. “And on that note, I’m out of here!” He waved to everyone in the room and took his leave.

Hayden caught up with him in the hallway. “Sorry, dude. I’m just really happy for you.”

Cam looked at him askance. “We only started dating like a week ago. Not even.”

Hayden shrugged. “I guess it seems longer since you guys have been dancing around it for weeks. You seem pretty smitten.”

Smitten. Hadn’t he used that same word? He didn’t respond.

They got to the elevator, and Cam glanced at Hayden. “Are you following me?”

“Just walking you out.”

Cam pressed the Down button and exhaled. “What do you want?”

“I want to know what’s going on. You went to the beach, you came back with a shit-eating grin. I haven’t seen you like this since...” He shook his head. “Nope. Haven’t ever seen you like this. Dopey almost. Did you get any work done yesterday? I think I saw you puttering around the tasting room about ten times.”

He *had* been distracted. And yeah, dopey wasn’t the worst word to describe him.

The elevator arrived, and he stepped inside. Hayden joined him. “So spill. You gave me such a hard time when Bex came back to town.”

Cam pushed the button for the lobby. “Yeah, because I didn’t want you to get your heart broken again. I’m a cynic, remember?”

Hayden studied him a moment, crossing his arms. “You *were* a cynic. I think that’s changed.”

It had...but how much? Cam thought about what Hayden had just said—that he didn’t remember seeing Cam like this. And he was right. Cam had never felt like this. Maybe it was his age and experience compared to what he’d felt for Jennifer, maybe it was that Brooke was just completely different. Jennifer had never been The One, no matter how much Cam had thought so at the time. Brooke, on the other hand... Could he let himself go down that path? Damn it, he just felt *good*, and he wanted it to continue.

“Okay, I’ll admit my cynicism has lessened.” He cracked a smile at Hayden.

Hayden dropped his arms with a laugh. “There you go. That’s a step in the right direction. Would you guys be up for a double date, maybe next week?”

“Sounds fun. I’ll check with Brooke, but I think she’ll be fine with that.” They’d been very up-front with each other, and they were definitely dating. Exclusively. His heart skipped a beat. “I think I have a girlfriend.”

The elevator doors opened, and he didn’t move.

Hayden clapped him on the back and steered him into the lobby. “Yes, I think you do.” The grin was evident in his voice.

“I gotta go.” Suddenly, Cam was desperate to see Brooke. To hold her. To call her his girlfriend and see if the light burning inside him was reflected in her eyes.

“Take her flowers,” Hayden called after him.

That was a good idea. Cam stopped at the florist before heading to her loft. Armed with a dozen red roses and one white one, he buzzed up to her.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Hey, it’s Cam. Can I come up?”

“Um, sure.” She sounded a bit hesitant, but maybe he’d caught her getting out of the shower or something. He *hoped* he’d caught her getting out of the shower.

The buzzer sounded, and he let himself in. A minute later, he was stepping off the elevator and striding to her loft at the end of the hall.

She opened the door just as he got there. She was dressed in khaki shorts and a dark red tank, and her feet were bare. He clutched the flowers and smiled at her. “You should consider taking a shower right before I get here. It’s worked well for me.” He looked at her suggestively, but she didn’t respond. Her gaze was fixed on the flowers.

“You brought roses.”

“Yes.” He held them out. “For you.”

“Red roses.” She took the bouquet, her brow creasing. “What’s the white one?”

“Friendship. I love that we’re friends, and I hope we always will be.”

She blew out a breath and looked at him, but only briefly. “I hope so too.” She turned and walked down the short hall to her kitchen.

He closed the door and followed her. Her demeanor was not what he was expecting. Every muscle in his body tensed. “Is everything okay?”

She set the flowers on the island and turned to the sink, where she bent down and opened the cupboard to pull out a vase. Setting it in the sink, she filled it with water. “I’m okay. Why’d you

bring me red roses?"

He heard the shakiness in her question, and his skin turned glacier cold. "Why do you think?" Because he was falling in love with her. And he'd allowed himself to let that stupid emotion rule his brain. He should've gotten all white roses.

"I can guess." She set the vase next to the flowers but didn't put them in the water.

He reached for the roses. "I'll take them back."

She didn't stop him. "You can, if you want. It's just... You're throwing me for a loop here. I thought we were going slow."

He picked up the bouquet and clenched it in his fist. "I get it. I fucked up. No red roses." Right now, he wasn't sure he wanted anything with her. Her mood, her detachment was all too reminiscent of the day Jennifer had shown up at his apartment and told him about Aaron. Her fiancé. The guy with the house in Eastmoreland, a BMW, and a rock the size of Gibraltar that he'd put on her finger.

Cam hadn't thought the horrible shock of that day could be repeated, but he now realized it could. If this went bad...

He coughed. "What's going on here?"

She met his eyes, but only briefly. "I've been thinking about...us, and while I really like you, it seems like it's moving too fast, whether we want it to or not. I mean, you brought me red roses." The bridge of her nose scrunched up. "Yesterday you asked if I wanted kids, and I kind of brushed you off. I don't want kids. Does that change how you feel about me? And please don't lie, because I can see that you love children."

God, he'd suspected this, but hadn't really considered how he might feel. It was as if he'd been punched in the gut. Hard. He managed to find his breath. "I do love kids. I haven't thought about it that much because I didn't expect to get married." He hastened to add, "Not that we're talking about marriage here."

No, right now, he wanted to pretend he'd never met her. It was going to be Jennifer all over again—precisely what he'd been afraid of and what he'd tried to avoid. It would serve him right. First time he let down his guard and *bam*.

"No, we're not." She sounded so distant, so unlike the fun and warm person he'd come to know.

"So tell me what you're saying here." He tensed and prepared himself for the worst.

Her gaze found his, but it didn't carry the warmth he'd grown accustomed to. "I don't want to keep doing this. I don't see a future, and the longer we continue, the more awkward things will get."

He could say that he'd prepared himself, but the truth was that there was nothing he could've done to deflect the agony that was now tearing through him. Not just at her, but at himself for being such a colossal fool. "You think things are going to get awkward?" His voice climbed. "They're going to be fucking impossible, Brooke. I can't work with you anymore. Hell, I don't even want to *see* you anymore, and you live right across the goddamned street."

She flinched. "I'll find someone else at Willamette to take over the account."

"I don't care about the damn account." He threw the flowers on the counter and turned away from her. He wiped a hand over his face. This couldn't be happening again.

He told himself he hadn't been about to propose, that this wasn't as bad as Jennifer. Except it was. He'd finally let someone in, and she was the wrong one. His desire to trust withered and completely died. He apparently didn't know how to pick someone who wanted him forever.

He spun around and glared at her. "Thanks for doing this now. No, really, I mean it. Yeah,

I'm mad and hurt, but it could've been a lot worse. So thanks. Just have the new rep e-mail me. I do care about the account—and it can't be you."

Her gaze was steady, but her throat was working, the muscles contracting. "I understand."

"See you around, I guess." He turned and left, silently vowing to never open himself up again.

* * * *

Brooke heard the door close and went to lock the bolt. She placed her hand on the wood. If she opened the door now and called his name, she could ask him to come back, tell him that she loved him. Because she did.

Straining, she listened for the elevator. When it was gone—when he was gone—she just stood there, numb, for what could've been an hour but was probably only a minute or two.

What had she done?

Legs shaking, she turned and went back to the kitchen. Her gaze fell on the roses. God, he'd brought her red roses.

Tears welled in her eyes, and she covered her mouth with her palm. Pain and regret tore through her. She could go after him, but to what end? It didn't change the facts. He wanted children. She couldn't give them to him.

And those unfixable truths didn't change the fact that she loved him, and given the color of the roses he'd brought her, maybe he loved her too. The red roses weren't even the worst part—that single white one...that had nearly broken her.

Now it did. She sank to the floor and cried. She didn't know how long she sat there with tears streaming down her cheeks, her shoulders shaking, her throat clogging.

Her phone vibrated on the counter, and she jumped up thinking, stupidly, that it was maybe him. But no, it was Rhonda. On FaceTime. Brooke didn't want to talk to her. And she sure as hell didn't want Rhonda to see her like this.

The vibrating stopped for a moment, then started again. When it stopped for the second time, Brooke picked up the phone and sent her a text.

I don't want to talk right now.

Rhonda: *You okay? I feel bad about earlier.*

Brooke stared at her phone. She wanted to say, "Yeah, I'm fine." But she'd never been good at lying to Rhonda.

Brooke: *No. I ended it with Cam.*

The phone showed that Rhonda was typing. And typing. And typing. Finally: *I'm sorry to hear that. Did you tell him why?*

Brooke: *If you're asking whether I told him about my infertility, no. I told him we were a dead end. And we are.*

Rhonda: *So you didn't trust him with the facts and give him a chance to decide for himself?*

Brooke's tears had stopped when she'd started typing. Now they dried completely as she glared at the phone. She set it down on the counter and walked into the living room. That was a mistake. All she could see out the window was Cam's townhouse.

She pivoted and went right back to the kitchen, where her phone was vibrating as Rhonda tried calling again. Picking it up, she hit Ignore. Then she texted Rhonda again.

Please leave me alone. I know you think you're helping, but you're not. This is my life and I'm not going to live it the way you would.

Rhonda: *From where I'm sitting, you're barely living it at all. What's the worst that could happen if you told him the truth? He'd leave you and you'd be no worse off than you are now. But what if he didn't? What if he's everything Darren wasn't and you find a way to be together—happy? I can't believe you don't even want to try.*

Brooke turned her phone over on the counter and walked to her room in a fog. She sat down on the edge of her bed and stared, unseeing, at the wall.

Rhonda was right. Logically, anyway. There was no way Cam could hurt her more than Darren had. But he could still hurt her. And she knew she couldn't give him what he wanted. Questions pinged in her brain:

What if you really don't know what he wants?

What if he stands by you and builds a future with you?

What if he is your happily ever after?

Those were a lot of what-ifs. She wasn't sure she could chance them. She told herself this was for Cam, that she was saving him from heartache when he learned the truth about her. The reality, however, was that she was protecting herself because she was too scared to risk him leaving her. Better to be the one to do the leaving.

If only she hadn't fallen for him so hard. She got up and went back to the kitchen. Ignoring her phone, she went to the flowers and unwrapped them. One by one, she took them out of the plastic and snipped the ends of the stems. She sprinkled the food packet into the vase and arranged them one rose at a time, adding in the baby's breath and greenery as she went. When she got to the last flower, the white one, she knew she'd made a terrible mistake.

He was her friend, and she hadn't treated him like one. Friends trusted each other, and friends were honest. She owed him at least that much.

And maybe, just maybe, Rhonda was right.

Now she had to try to make herself look presentable, which meant a bunch of cold water and some makeup.

Chapter Nineteen

The sun had long dropped from Cam's view as he sat on his back porch, but the brilliant streaks of orange and yellow and pink from its setting streaked the sky. They were beautiful and warm and happy—in complete opposition to the way he felt.

He lifted his beer bottle to drink, and when nothing hit his lips, he recalled that he'd finished it. He set the empty on the table. He should get up and get another. Or ten.

Only he was rooted to the chair. The breeze stirred, rustling through his hair, but he didn't feel the temperature. It could've been ice-cold, and he wouldn't have noticed.

He'd done a good job over the past however long he'd been sitting here keeping Brooke from his mind, but without the beer to occupy him, like it had really been the beer, thoughts of her assaulted him.

Her laugh. The sparkle in her eye. The lilt of her voice when she gave him great snark or cried his name as he made love to her.

Ha, *made love*. It had been that for him but clearly something completely different for her. The ease with which she'd terminated their short-lived relationship cut right through his heart and battered his soul. He'd kept himself closed off for nearly a decade. And it hadn't been long enough.

He stood up. Time for another beer or maybe something stronger. He grabbed the empty from the table and went into the house. After dropping it in the recycle, he went to his liquor cabinet and perused his choices. Tequila? No, too celebratory. Gin? Not hard enough. Thirty-year-old Highland malt whiskey? Hell, yes.

He pulled the bottle down and went to grab a glass. It was then that he heard his phone vibrating on the counter where he'd tossed it earlier. He didn't think it would be her. What more could she want to say to him? She didn't seem particularly vindictive, even if she was a heartless bitch.

He set the bottle down and picked up the phone as the call dropped. Four missed calls. From an unknown number. Southern Oregon area code. Like Brooke's area code.

But not her number.

The phone vibrated again, this time with FaceTime. The picture that appeared on the screen wasn't someone he knew, but she looked familiar. The shape of her face and the set of her eyes screamed Brooke. One of her sisters?

His first instinct was to ignore the call—he couldn't imagine why either of them would want to contact him. But something picked at the back of his mind, and he decided to answer. Maybe they were trying to reach Brooke and couldn't. Maybe something had happened to her.

Despite what had transpired earlier, he didn't want to contemplate that. He answered the call and didn't give a shit about his rudeness. "Who are you?"

She smiled, but it seemed strained. Her eyes held a nervous glint. "Hi, Cam. You are Cam, right? You look like your picture."

"Yeah, I'm Cam. Who are *you*, and why are you calling me?"

"I'm Rhonda Markwith—Brooke's older sister."

Score a point for him, not that it mattered. "Still waiting for the why you're calling." He knew he sounded obnoxious, but he didn't care. Especially with one of Brooke's relatives.

She set the phone down and straightened in her chair. Behind her, he saw a wall with photos.

He didn't look too closely but saw kids. They must be hers.

"My sister's an idiot."

That wasn't the word he would choose. "She's something, all right."

Rhonda winced. "Yes, about that. I'm going to break her confidence and tell you something I probably shouldn't because I think it's important. It might not matter in the great scheme of things, but if somebody doesn't fight for what they really want here, it would be a tragedy."

Cam stared at her for a moment, torn as to whether he wanted to hear whatever she had to say. He supposed it couldn't be worse than anything Brooke had already said to him. "I want to be intrigued, but I don't think I can muster that right now."

She nodded. "I get it. Just listen. Brooke can't have children."

Of all the things he might have been expecting, that hadn't been it. She didn't say anything more, probably to let this sink in. But he was having trouble processing. "She told me she didn't want children. If she doesn't want them, what difference does it make?"

"Because she lied to you. She *does* want children. Desperately. She tried—for years—with her ex, and it just wasn't possible—"

Cam cut her off. "She lied to me? Why would she lie to me?" He'd been lied to before, and it had hurt. This time was no different. His insides curled in on themselves, like someone was peeling him away layer by layer. He shouldn't feel this strongly given the amount of time they'd known each other. But damn it, he did. He loved her. And she'd lied to him.

Rhonda had started talking again, but he didn't hear a word of what she said. Well, he heard *sound*, but the meaning? Absolutely no idea. He couldn't process past the anger and hurt thundering in his head.

"Thanks for calling." He disconnected the call without noticing if she'd stopped talking and definitely without caring.

He turned and stalked out of his townhouse, slamming the door behind him. He barely looked before crossing the street. At the door to Brooke's loft, he hesitated. He had to buzz up, and she wouldn't let him in. Probably.

Clenching his fists, he swore violently. Maybe someone would come along. She'd asked him not to come in that way, but right now he didn't give a shit what she wanted. She owed him the truth.

He paced in front of the building and froze a moment later at the sound of her voice.

"Cam?"

He turned and saw her standing just outside the door. Had she seen him out here? His gaze flicked up to her window as if he could assess her view. It didn't matter. She was here. And he was livid.

"Your sister just called me. I think I deserve an explanation."

The light from the lamp on the outside of the building splashed over her face. She was pale and her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying. *Good*.

"What did she say?" Her voice was low, and it trembled like a leaf on a blustery day.

"That you can't have kids, but that you want them. Is that true?"

She squeezed her hands together. "Yes. I was just coming to tell you."

"Because you were hoping to beat your sister to it? How big of you."

"I didn't know she was going to call you. I'm sorry she did—not because I'm mad she told you. It's just... This is between us."

"There is no *us*."

She flinched. "Can I explain?"

“No. Maybe. But I’m talking first. You had a chance to tell me the truth, but you chose to lie instead.” He advanced on her. Her eyes darkened with trepidation, but she didn’t move. “Do you know what I hate more than anything? People who lie to me. My ex lied to me. All the time. All while I was so in love with her and planning to ask her to be my wife, she was fucking some other guy and getting engaged to *him*. So lying isn’t something I can tolerate. *Ever*.”

She paled even further, her eyes looking dark and huge in her face. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize—”

“And would that have changed anything?” He took another step toward her until he could reach out and touch her. He caught her familiar scent—that damn vanilla and bergamot—and hated it. “If you’d known I’d been utterly betrayed, you would’ve told me the truth? I don’t think so. Tell me why you lied.”

“I just...” Her lip quivered, and she looked away, turning her head. “It hurts too much. I saw you with your niece, and then when Kyle’s baby was born... You should have children.” She turned her head back to look at him. “I can’t give you any.”

For the first time, his brain slowed and relinquished a bit of his anger. “Why? What’s...what’s the problem?”

“I don’t have viable eggs, and my uterus isn’t hospitable. I had a surgery to try to fix it, but it didn’t work, so I can’t even carry a donor egg.” She smiled then, and it was the saddest expression he’d ever seen. Nearly all his ire fled. “So you see, I’m pretty worthless when it comes to procreation.” A tear snaked down her cheek, and he stared at it, trying to understand what this meant for her.

“I’m sorry.”

She wiped at her face with the back of her hand. “Yeah, it sucks.” She tried another smile, this one a little better but still wobbly. “You’d think I’d have come to terms with it over the past few years, but I really, really wanted to be a mom.”

The ache in her voice sliced into his heart. And he learned something vital about himself right then: “I really want to be a dad.”

She nodded and another tear escaped. “I know. I can see that about you. I love that about you. I wish...I wish things were different. I’m so sorry about earlier. If I wasn’t in love with you, I could’ve just kept going as we were.”

In love with him. She was in love with him.

“I love you too. But—” That single word fell out of his mouth before he could censor it. He loved her, but she was standing here telling him she couldn’t give him children, something he realized he wanted. The future he’d denied himself out of the hurt and anger he’d nurtured the past eight years unfolded before him—a dream he hadn’t known he’d harbored. Until now.

And it was more than the kid thing—that he’d have to process. He just didn’t know how he felt *at all*. None of that changed the fact that she’d lied to him. She’d made a decision to end their relationship without giving him a fair shot. Just like Jennifer had done.

“But what?” she prodded, sounding small and uncertain.

Part of him wanted to reassure her, to hold her, to tell her everything would be all right. He didn’t hate her. He didn’t want her to hurt. Not when she’d clearly been through hell. The other part of him, however, was in defense mode. He’d worked so long and so hard to protect his heart from further damage and right now, it was hanging on by the tiniest of threads.

“But I need to go. I have to think about...everything. I honestly don’t know where we go from here. I’m sorry.”

He turned and hurried across the street because he didn’t want to see her cry.

* * * *

Silent tears slithered down Brooke's cheeks as she watched him go. This was what she'd expected, what she'd known would happen, what she'd tried to shield herself against. But it had been no use—she was as hurt and broken as she'd ever expected to be.

She turned and trudged back into her building but didn't go upstairs. She sat on one of the chairs in the lobby and just stared through the glass doors toward his townhouse.

She could go over there and beg him to forgive her. But no, he'd said he needed to think. She owed him that much at least.

His hurt and anguish washed over her, and she realized she was going to completely lose her shit. She bolted up and pounded the Up button for the elevator. She just managed to keep herself together until she was back in her loft. As soon as the door was closed and the lock turned, the tears fell in earnest.

What had she been thinking? Certainly not of him. Shielding him from future heartache had been a lie she'd told herself. She'd wanted to protect herself, and it had royally backfired.

They'd both tried to keep their hearts safe, but in the end, it hadn't mattered. She remembered some stupid Internet meme she'd seen: the heart wants what it wants. And hers wanted Cam. His had wanted her too, but would that be enough?

She understood that he needed to process. It had been slightly different with Darren because he'd already been married to her. He couldn't just walk away. He had *eventually*, but that had come over time. As she'd undergone procedure after procedure and received bad news and more bad news. How much of that had been her fault, just like this? Yes, Darren had cheated, but she'd pushed him away. She'd burrowed herself deep under the weight of her depression and shut him out. Was it any surprise that he'd found someone else?

Not any more surprising than it was for Cam, a young, healthy man who wanted a family, to walk away from her. She didn't really deserve anything different.

She'd turned her phone off but imagined Rhonda was madly trying to reach her. She found it, turned it back on, saw a ton of missed calls and all-caps texts, but she didn't read any of them. She typed in a simple message and sent it to her sister.

I'll be fine. I'm going to bed. I'll talk to you tomorrow.

Yes, she'd be fine—the new definition of fine she'd created after starting the new no-kid chapter of her life. The kind of fine that left the edges of her soul feeling frayed and the weight of her heart too heavy to bear.

Chapter Twenty

Too much whiskey had made Cam's head feel like an anvil. He walked into the winery Thursday morning and didn't bother taking his sunglasses off. Maybe he'd just go up to his office and sleep on the couch.

"Yo, there you are." Jamie leapt down past the last stair as he came down into the main room. "I have like a billion questions about Saturday."

Cam held a finger to his lips. "Shhh. You don't need to yell."

Jamie cocked his head to the side and studied him. "Dude, I can't see your eyes, but I'm guessing you're hungover."

"Maybe." Abso-fucking-lutely.

"What are your billion questions? And can you please whisper them?" He walked past his little brother and started up the stairs to his office. Slowly. Climbing each one felt like scaling an entire rock wall. By the time he reached the top, his stomach was churning and his head was throbbing. Had he forgotten to take that Tylenol?

He made it into his office and collapsed onto the couch, instantly closing his eyes. Maybe coming to work had been a bad idea. But he *had* to be here. The biggest event of their fledgling winery was happening in just two days.

"Cam?"

"Mmm?" He'd forgotten about Jamie entirely.

"Are you all right? Well, aside from your ghastly pallor. Should I bring you a garbage can?"

"Probably not a terrible idea." Cam didn't think he was going to puke, but it was maybe better to be safe than sorry just now. "Lying down is an improvement, though."

"Anything you want to talk about? I mean, why the hell are you so hung?"

Cam lifted his hand to wave at him but didn't think he raised it very far. He kept his eyes closed. "It's no big deal."

The "no big deal" crept into his mind for the first time since he'd gone back to his townhouse and drunk half of that bottle of whiskey. He shoved her from his thoughts.

"Hey, what's up?" That was Hayden's voice. "Holy hell, you weren't kidding. He looks like hammered shit."

He and Jamie were apparently discussing him as if he couldn't hear them. "I can actually hear you, despite my, uh, deteriorated state."

"Did you actually drive here?" Hayden asked, his voice incredulous.

"Yep. I'm not drunk. But you know, that's not a bad idea either. Little hair of the dog, maybe." He opened his eyes and tried to sit up. The room tilted sideways, and he fell back against the couch with an "oof."

"Maybe we should let him sleep for a while," Jamie said.

"Yeah, probably." Hayden sounded concerned.

"Don't worry about me." Cam was already fading. "I'm goooo..."

Cam startled awake and knocked his sunglasses off his face. They fell to the floor as he rolled to his side. His office was dim and blessedly empty. His heart had sped up but now began to slow as he realized where he was.

He swallowed. Damn, his mouth was dry, and his teeth felt like they were wearing furry slippers. Gross.

He pushed himself up and was instantly rewarded with a sharp pain in his head. Awesome.

After a moment in which he gathered his equilibrium, he found his footing and stood. Right on his sunglasses, crushing them. Not awesome.

He stumbled to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. Opening it seemed harder than normal, but he blamed his fuzzy, still mildly hungover state. He downed half the bottle in one gulp and made his way to the bathroom, where he brushed his teeth practically out of his mouth.

The rest of the bottle of water went down nearly as fast, so he got another one. After taking a healthy swig of that, he sat behind his desk and started up his computer. Judging from the number of messages in his Inbox, Jamie wasn't the only one with a billion questions.

This was good, though. Busy was good today. No, busy was great.

A couple of hours flew by before his stomach started to grumble with hunger. Finding a decent place to take a break, he went downstairs to grab some food.

As soon as he rounded the corner on the landing of the stairs, he saw his partners sitting in the main room. Like they were waiting for him. He took the rest of his descent slowly.

Luke stared at Cam's feet. "I realize you're the most fashion forward of us, so I guess mismatched shoes are the latest thing?"

Cam looked down at his feet and saw that he was indeed wearing two different shoes. Well, that was pretty fitting for this shit show of a day. "Yeah. It's totally a thing. Saturday night, you better not wear a matched pair."

Cam went into the kitchen, hoping that was going to be the end of the interrogation. He was dead wrong, of course. All three filed in behind him.

Opening the fridge, he kept his back to them. "You guys don't have to babysit me."

"Oh, we're not babysitting. We're being nosy assholes," Hayden said. "Spill. I don't remember the last time you came in looking like death. Probably because you never have."

That was true. Cam loved wine, but he wasn't a big liquor drinker. At least, not of the half-bottle-of-whiskey variety. "I opened a really great bottle of Scotch last night. Sue me."

"Are you going to tell us your deal?" Luke asked. "Or are we going to have to call Brooke and ask what's going on?"

Cam closed the fridge and turned to scowl at them. "Why do family think they have the right to butt in?"

He was simultaneously glad that Rhonda had called him last night but also annoyed that she'd stuck her nose in. Brooke had come around—if he believed that she'd really been coming to see him. Since she'd come outside and looked so...anguished, he decided he did. Even if she had lied to him before that. And maybe that made him an even bigger fool than he already was.

"Because they do," Hayden said grimly, speaking from very specific experience. His family had meddled in a major way, enticing Bex into coming back to town with her dream job in the hope that she and Hayden would get back together. It had pissed Hayden off to the point that he'd left town, but in the end, it had worked.

Cam suddenly felt weary and defeated. "Brooke and I broke up. We just weren't going to work out. Satisfied?"

Jamie leaned back against the kitchen counter and crossed his arms. "Hell no. Why?"

"The particulars don't matter. Anyway, they're her business, not mine." He wasn't sure it was his place to tell them all that she couldn't have kids.

And just like that, what little wind he had completely left his sails. His heart ached for her, just as it ached for his own loss. He loved her. More than he thought he'd ever love anyone again. She was a gift, but not the one he'd expected. He could only imagine how she felt. He

could walk away from her, and he could have children of his own. She could not.

“Sounds like a cop-out,” Hayden said.

Cam bared his teeth at him. “Damn it, Hayden, it’s not. She’s infertile, okay? I finally fall in love with someone—someone I can think about spending my life with—and it’s not what I expected.”

All three of them wore identical expressions—pitched brows, wrinkled forehead, semi-frowns.

“What are you saying?” Luke asked.

“I know you all think I’m a committed bachelor, and I guess I was. No, I was a hurt bachelor. And it just took me a long time to find my footing. Contrary to all the shit you give me, I’ve practically been a monk since we started this winery.”

“We know,” Jamie said. “And I’m sorry we gave you shit.”

Luke nodded. “Me too. But dude, you’re in love with her. That’s gotta count for something, doesn’t it?”

With a sigh, Cam slouched back against the counter next to the fridge. “I don’t know. She lied to me about not being able to have kids. I had to hear it from her sister.”

Hayden crossed his arms over his chest too. “Ah, now your meddling-family rant makes sense.”

“That can’t have been easy for you,” Luke said softly. “After Jennifer.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“Can you forgive her?” Hayden asked. “I know a lot about forgiveness—it’s not for her, it’s for you.” He did know a lot. He’d had to forgive his parents for interfering.

He wasn’t sure, but... “I want to. I just don’t know about the other.” He hated saying this out loud. He felt like such an asshole. “The kid thing. I didn’t realize how much I wanted to be a dad until she said she couldn’t have children.”

“Oh, hell.” Hayden dropped his arms to his sides and crossed the kitchen and stood next to him. Both Luke and Jamie came closer too.

“It’s not like I had this Big Plan. Like I said, I didn’t expect this. Then I met Brooke, and I just fell for her. Hard. Somewhere in the recesses of my consciousness, I had this idea of a house and a wife and kids here in Ribbon Ridge.”

“So she can’t have kids at all?” Jamie asked.

“Nope. No eggs, dysfunctional uterus. Nothing happening.” His heart twisted. He wanted to punch her ex-husband more than ever now. How could he have walked away from Brooke?

The same way Cam had walked away from her last night and was thinking of doing permanently.

Except, a tiny voice in the back of his head argued, you aren’t married. Your commitment isn’t the same. You can walk away...

But could he? He loved her, and the thought of turning his back on what they’d stumbled upon made him feel like he’d been hit by a Mack truck. And backed up over and run over again.

“What about adoption?” Luke asked. “Or a surrogate? Can’t you use someone else’s egg for that? I admit I know dick about this.”

“Yes, that’s possible,” Hayden put in. “Bex and I researched different options when she had trouble getting pregnant.” He looked at Cam apologetically, as if he were sorry they *had* gotten pregnant.

Was that what happened to Brooke whenever she told people she couldn’t have children? She got pitying looks and sympathetic comments? That had to get real old real fast. Not that Cam

thought that Hayden pitied him. Still, it was a delicate subject and completely new to Cam. If he was going to be with Brooke, he needed a crash course.

“What are you going to do?” Jamie asked. “And can we do anything to help?”

“Besides getting completely up in my grill?” Cam smiled. “No, you can’t do anything. I’m still not sure, but I think I need to figure it out with the person who matters most.”

“You really do love her,” Hayden said. His lips curved into a broad grin. “I knew it. I’m so happy for you.” He gripped Cam’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

Cam’s achy head twitched. “Yikes, Hay, I’m still not feeling that great.”

Hayden pulled his hand back with a laugh. “Understandable. You sure you can function? Maybe you should take the rest of the day off?”

“With the dinner on Saturday?” He shook his head. “Way too much to do. I need to find something to eat and get back to it.” Even if he was ready to talk to Brooke right now, he really didn’t have time. There were far too many things that needed his immediate attention. He supposed he needed to make sure that she was still coming. She’d invited that critic from *Wine Enthusiast* and really ought to be here for networking purposes. She’d come. She was a consummate professional.

“Okay, but don’t overdo it.” Luke moved past him and opened the fridge. “Can I make you a sandwich at least?”

When they’d been younger, Cam, as the oldest, had often made them sandwiches for lunch. “Sure, thanks.”

Later, when Cam went back to his office, he was tempted to pick up his phone and call Brooke. But what would he say? His thoughts still weren’t organized, but he felt better than he had last night. There was a lingering pain from her lack of trust in him, but he wanted to believe they could get through it. No relationship was ever going to be easy. He just wanted to be damn sure he didn’t put all his heart into someone who would cut it out. Been there, done that.

He hoped Brooke was who he thought she was. He’d find out soon enough.

* * * *

The last two days had passed in a blur in which Brooke focused harder than ever on work. She’d stealthily avoided actually talking to her sisters, limiting her contact with them to text only. She thought they understood, but Rhonda still sent apology texts at least five times a day.

It had felt great to spend this afternoon with her new circle of friends. She’d met up with Crystal, Alaina, and Kelsey at the library—rather, upstairs from the library. They’d been poring over their stockpile of records for the elusive N name, assuming that was even the missing piece. So far they hadn’t found anything, but they had piles left to go. No way would they make it through everything today.

Brooke was grateful for this project. It kept her mind occupied, and that was the best thing possible.

“Whoa,” Crystal said from her table, where she sat next to Alaina, papers spread out before them. “I just found a guy named Nathaniel.”

Alaina leaned over and looked at the paper in Crystal’s hand. “Nathaniel Danforth, died 1903.”

“Death certificate?” Kelsey asked. She and Brooke were sharing a table pushed up against Crystal and Alaina’s.

Crystal nodded. “Place of birth is St. Louis in 1835. Parents are Warren Danforth and

Margaret Tobin.”

They sat there and looked at each other for a moment.

“Okay, so not super helpful, but it’s something.” Crystal set the paper in a blank space toward the middle of the tables. “I’ll just set this here.”

They continued on for a while, music streaming from the Internet playing in the background as they worked. “Ugh,” Alaina said, standing. “I need to stretch.” She arched her back and bent to touch her toes.

Brooke turned the page in the diary she’d started reading a little bit ago. So far it had only managed to distract her. She’d tried to skim it, but it was fascinating. It had been written by one of the Archers’ ancestors, someone named Maribel Walker. She wrote stories about her children, about their daily tasks, about things going on in town. She reminded herself to stop reading and just look for N names or BNR, but suddenly something jumped out at her:

Bird’s Nest Ranch.

There it was: BNR. The initial letters leapt off the page at her. She read the entry from the start.

August 8, 1881

The clouds finally moved in today for a bit of respite from the heat, though it didn’t rain. Working to irrigate the fields continues to be the focus of so many in Ribbon Ridge. Thomas went up to Bird’s Nest Ranch today to lend a hand. It doesn’t look too good for them, but hopefully Hiram will recover. I worry for Dorinda if he doesn’t.

The next paragraph talked about harvesting berries and making jam. Brooke looked up from the diary. “Hey, Crystal and Alaina, did you see this Bird’s Nest Ranch?”

All three heads popped up and pointed toward Brooke. “What’s that?” Crystal asked.

“Bird’s Nest Ranch—the initials. I was just thinking what if they aren’t a person’s name.”

Crystal blinked. “Well, damn.”

Kelsey leaned over and looked at the diary. “Who are Thomas and Hiram and Dorinda?”

“Thomas is Maribel’s husband. This is her diary,” Brooke said. She looked around at all three of them. “I’m guessing Hiram and Dorinda own the ranch. Maribel writes about how Thomas went to help them, but that things don’t look good—Hiram is sick or something.”

“When is that?” Alaina asked.

Brooke rechecked the date. “August 8, 1881.”

“Well, don’t leave us hanging,” Crystal said. “Keep reading!”

Brooke chuckled. “Okay.” She returned to the diary and looked for mention of the Bird’s Nest Ranch. Every few minutes, someone would ask if she found something until Kelsey said they should knock it off. They all laughed, but the room was quiet until Brooke closed the diary.

“Nothing else,” she said dejectedly.

“That’s too bad,” Alaina murmured. “But I think I might have something. This is a death certificate for Hiram Olsen.” She looked up at them, her expression grim. “Date of death is August 14, 1881.”

Kelsey briefly put her hand to her mouth. “Oh, that’s terrible. Does it have a cause of death?”

Alaina glanced down. “It just says fever. His wife is listed here—Dorinda Foster.”

Crystal put down the paper she was reading. “I don’t know if the Bird’s Nest Ranch is what we’re looking for, but I want to know what happened to it and Dorinda after Hiram died.”

“Me too,” Kelsey said. “I just keep thinking that it makes sense for the brick with the date on it to be associated with a place. I wonder if the brick was part of the ranch—the house or something.”

Alaina nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, me too.”

Brooke thought about the diary passage. “In the diary, Maribel said Thomas was going ‘up’ to the ranch. The brick came from a house built up on the hill at the winery. Maybe Bird’s Nest Ranch was on the hill?”

“It’s a good theory,” Crystal said. “Especially with a name like Bird’s Nest—like it’s up above the town maybe. It would be great if we could find something about the ranch with the 1879 date on it. Too bad they didn’t have building permits then.”

Kelsey smiled. “Very true.”

Crystal looked around at them. “Are there any town records? Like from the church or the town hall? Something that might list events or... I don’t know. I’m grasping at straws here.”

“No, you’re not.” Kelsey stood up and went to a bookshelf in the corner. “I borrowed this book from the McMinnville Library. It has some early photos. I thought it might be helpful.” She sat back down and thumbed through it. Brooke craned her neck to see over Kelsey’s shoulders. They were photographs of places in the county. She turned page after page, but there was nothing in Ribbon Ridge.

“There’s something!” Brooke declared as the words Ribbon Ridge jumped out at her.

“That’s Main Street. It looks so different.”

Alaina and Crystal got up and joined them on their side of the tables. Soon all four were huddled over the book, looking at the old pictures of the town. Kelsey turned another page, and the sound of their breaths catching filled the room.

There on the page was a photograph of a man and a woman in front of a clapboard farmhouse. The caption read: Bird’s Nest Ranch, 1879.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Crystal whispered.

Kelsey looked around at them, beaming. “I think we found the origin of our brick.”

They began to laugh and shout and high-five.

After a minute of exuberance, Alaina stood with her hands on her hips. “Great work, ladies.”

“Oh, but it’s not finished,” Crystal said, looking down at the photo. “I have to know what happened to the ranch and Dorinda.”

“Absolutely.” Kelsey flipped through the rest of the book, but there was nothing more about the ranch. She turned back to the picture and left the book open on that page. “I haven’t been up to the winery. Does this look like the house is in the same place?”

Brooke studied the photograph. It was hard to tell since images from that period weren’t terribly clear, but it did seem that there was a slope behind them. “It could be. I think we have more research in front of us.”

“Does that mean we’re all on board?” Crystal asked.

“I am, definitely,” Brooke said without hesitation. She was as intrigued by the mystery of Dorinda Olsen as the rest of them.

“Me too, obviously,” Kelsey said.

Alaina put her hand on Kelsey’s shoulder. “Count me in!”

“Excellent!” Crystal glanced at her fitness tracker on her wrist. “Geez, is it that late? No wonder my stomach is grumbling. I think it’s time to call it a day. At least for me.”

“Yeah, I need to get home to Alexa and Evan,” Alaina said. “I didn’t realize it was that late.” She went around the table and gathered up her purse and jacket.

Crystal did the same. “Is it okay to leave everything out like this?”

“Definitely,” Kelsey said. “I hope you guys don’t mind, but I’ll probably sneak up here as much as my schedule will allow. I’ll let you guys know if I find anything.”

Crystal pulled out her phone. “Sounds good. Should we set up our next group time?”

“Yes, let’s do that,” Alaina said.

Brooke pulled out her phone. It was terrible, but every time she looked at it since the other night, she kept hoping there was a text or call from Cam. And each time there was nothing, with now being no different.

“Brooke?” Kelsey asked. “Does Monday night work for you?”

Brooke mentally shook herself. “Probably. Let me look.”

She opened her calendar and saw the winery dinner tomorrow night. She hadn’t decided if she should go. But somebody for Willamette should. She’d told her boss yesterday that they needed to assign West Arch Estate to someone else, but they hadn’t done it yet.

Kelsey nudged her, and Brooke realized she’d lost track again. She looked at Monday and said, “Yep, I’m good.”

Crystal peeked around Kelsey and asked, “You okay? You’ve seemed a little off today, but I don’t know you too well, so maybe I have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“I’m fine... Just a little off my game.”

Kelsey’s gaze took on a knowing glint. “Is it what I think it is?”

Brooke laughed nervously, not at all sure she wanted to tell them what had happened. But she supposed she had to tell Kelsey since she thought Brooke and Cam were dating. Plus, Kelsey was her friend. And so were Crystal and Alaina.

“It might be,” Brooke said. “Cam and I aren’t seeing each other anymore.”

Kelsey touched her arm. “I’m sorry to hear that. But wow, that was quick.”

“We want different things.” She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Was she going to hide this forever? It was who she was, and it was time she learned to live with it. “No, that’s not quite right. We’d like the same things, I think, but it isn’t in the cards for us. I can’t have children, and I think that’s a deal breaker for him.”

All three women gasped and immediately hugged her. The people Brooke had told had reacted similarly, but this felt different. Maybe it was the fact that it was three of them. It was like empathy in surround sound.

Alaina went and got her chair and brought it around next to Brooke’s. “Sit and tell us all about it.”

Brooke wasn’t sure what to do with the attention on such a sensitive subject. She didn’t regret telling them, yet she wasn’t sure she was ready to open up completely. “You need to get home. It’s okay.”

Alaina shook her head firmly. “Not a chance. You need some shoulders, and here’s six of them.”

Kelsey turned her chair to face Brooke’s and moved Brooke’s so that it was facing out. Crystal fetched her chair, and soon the three of them were seated in a semicircle.

Crystal pointed at the empty chair. “Sit. We’re not going anywhere. Unless you really want us to.”

Surprisingly, Brooke found she didn’t. She dropped into the chair and summoned a smile. “Thanks.”

Alaina reached over and patted Brooke’s knee. “We had a child-related situation before we got married—Evan and I. I was actually trying to have a baby on my own—that damned

biological clock was killing me—and inadvertently got pregnant with him. Oops. Happy occurrence, right? Only if the baby daddy wants to be a baby daddy, which Evan didn't think he did. No, he was damned sure he was never going to be a father."

Brooke relaxed listening to Alaina talk. It soothed her own anxiety. "Why?"

"Maybe you don't know, but Evan has Asperger's syndrome. He didn't think he'd make a very good dad, and he didn't want to chance passing that on to his kid." She exchanged a smile with Crystal. "Lucky for me, he decided he loved me enough to give it a try, and you know what? He's the best damned dad Alexa could ever have. And no, she doesn't have Asperger's, but that doesn't mean our next kid won't. Yes, we're trying for another one, and I think we may have been successful. But shhh, don't tell anyone. We haven't spilled the news to his family yet."

Crystal smiled smugly. "I knew, of course."

Alaina laughed. "Of course. Anyway, I know this story doesn't really have much to do with yours, except that sometimes even in the face of certain adversity, things can work out."

"I'm so glad they did for you," Brooke said. "I just don't know if that will happen here. Cam and I just started dating. I'm not sure there's enough between us to make it worth fighting for." Saying that made her throat constrict because she loved him, and she'd come to realize over the past couple of days that she wanted to fight for a future with him, but she couldn't if he wasn't invested too.

Alaina crossed her legs. "So, when I was looking into my own baby-making options, I was amazed at how many ways there are to have a family without a man. Not that you don't want a man, but you get me." She winked at Brooke. "I'm sure you've researched everything, but if you ever need a sounding board or want help hunting down information, I'm your girl."

"We're all your girls," Crystal said. "Just look at what researching badasses we are."

Everyone laughed again, and Brooke felt better than she had in ages. She also felt like she belonged here, something she'd begun to doubt heavily over the past few days. She'd even looked at other jobs within Willamette that were far away from Ribbon Ridge.

"Can you use a surrogate?" Kelsey asked.

"Not with my eggs. I don't have very many, and the ones I do have are all nasty and useless." For once, she was able to say that without feeling like she might be overwhelmed with grief again.

"Stupid eggs," Crystal said. "I don't know that I'll ever use mine, and as far as I know, they're peachy. Wish I could give them to you."

Alaina's eyes widened, and she turned her head toward her best friend. "Are you offering to be her surrogate?"

Crystal laughed. "Uh, no. Part of my probably not having children comes from an aversion to all the disgusting side effects that came along with your pregnancy. No, thanks."

"Hey, there were lots of good things too."

Brooke expected Alaina to apologize for saying that, and when she didn't, Brooke realized she was glad she hadn't. Talking about this with them was the most normal conversation she'd ever had. She didn't feel pitied or condescended to. She just felt understood.

"You guys are the best," Brooke said. "I can't thank you enough for your support. Really."

Alaina turned her attention back to Brooke. "I meant what I said about being here for you. You have options—you don't need a kid of your own blood to be a mother. You don't even need a baby. There are so many older kids who need loving parents."

Brooke knew that, but it would take a special partner to agree to that kind of journey. Was

Cam capable of being that partner?

They all stood and hugged again. Kelsey stayed to tidy up a little, and Brooke walked out with Crystal and Alaina, who squeezed her hand before they walked toward their car down the block.

Brooke strolled back to her loft, feeling better than she had in days. Maybe she'd even work out tonight. Yeah, some yoga sounded great.

She went into the lobby of her building and nearly tripped.

Standing up from the chair with a manila envelope in his hand was Cam.

Chapter Twenty-one

Cam watched the surprise on her face fade to confusion and then wariness. “Hi, Brooke. Before you yell at me for having someone let me in, I didn’t. I was waiting for you outside, and your neighbor insisted I come in and sit down.”

“Okay. Why are you here?” Her tone was as guarded as her gaze.

He missed the glow that usually emanated from her, that light that had drawn him to her weeks ago at the salmon bake. When she’d given him the brush-off.

“Did you know that I have a three-strikes rule?” he asked. When she shook her head, he continued. “I give myself three shots with a woman. If she shuts me down every time, I’m out.”

“Like baseball.”

“Exactly. I figure with you, I’m on about strike ten or something.”

She cracked a smile, and some of the tension left his frame. She inclined her head toward the envelope in his hand. “What’s that?”

“Oh, I’ll get to it. Can we maybe go upstairs?”

She hesitated, but only briefly. “Sure.”

He went ahead of her to press the elevator button. Once they were inside, he said, “I meant to text you about tomorrow night. You’re still coming, right?”

“Yes. Unless you don’t want me to.”

“Of course I want you to. You’ve been a huge asset.”

“Thanks.” She glanced at him with a small smile as the doors opened.

He gestured for her to precede him and then followed her down the hall to her loft.

Once inside, she set her purse on the counter and turned to him. “Can I get you anything?”

He stood on the other side of the island from her and shook his head, suddenly nervous, his throat going dry. He didn’t want to screw this up. “I messed up the other night. I’m afraid I might do it again.”

She shook her head too, but with more intensity. “No, *I* fucked up. Not you. I should’ve told you the truth. I was scared you’d leave.”

He wanted to kick himself. “Which is exactly what I did.”

“Yes, but I don’t blame you. Especially given your experience.” She took a deep breath.

“Besides, you came back. With an envelope. I have to admit I’m very curious about that.”

He laughed and set it on the counter, sliding it across to her. “Open it.”

She picked it up, looking at him, and then tipped her head down to pull back the flap. She reached inside and pulled out infertility pamphlets and papers he’d printed from the Internet. Slowly, she sorted through them, setting them on the counter as she glanced over each one.

When she looked up at him, her eyes were wide and such a clear blue-green, he would’ve sworn he could see himself in their depths. “Where did you get all this?”

“Some of it I printed at home.” He’d stayed up until four this morning reading everything he could about infertility, surrogacy, adoption, everything he could find that might be pertinent to their situation. Yes, *their* situation. “The rest I picked up in Portland at a fertility clinic.”

Brooke stared at him. She opened her mouth but didn’t say anything. He waited another moment to give her a chance to find her words, but when she remained quiet, he continued.

“I’ve looked at a lot of options—probably not all of them—and I think there are avenues we can explore. If we get that far. I mean, you might tell me to get the hell out when I’m done

rambling.”

“I won’t,” she whispered. “Not ever.”

His chest expanded with emotion. “I’m so sorry about the other night.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. It was my fault. I can’t—” She looked away for a moment, and when her gaze found his again, there were tears in her eyes. “What are you saying?”

He came around the counter, and she turned to face him. He moved as close as he dared, close enough that he *could* touch her, but not close enough that they were touching. “I’d like to give this—us—a try.”

“Even...even knowing what you know?”

“Especially knowing what I know. I didn’t realize I wanted a family until I met you. And now that I know I *do* want one, I don’t think I want it without you.”

She made a sound, a broken sob, and brought her hand to her mouth. A tear fell from her eye, and he reached out and caught it on his fingertip. “Don’t cry, sweetheart. Not about this. We’re going to be okay. I hope. I’m going to try.”

She nodded and hugged him, her fingers digging into his back. She suddenly pulled back and looked up at him. “Are you sure? This isn’t going to be easy, and everything we try might fail.”

He’d thought about this intermittently during his nearly all-night research session. “I know. There are no guarantees in life, as much as we want them. I wanted to be sure no one would ever get close enough to hurt me again. But here you are. I nearly let my own hurt and distrust keep me from something wonderful, and I don’t want to live like that. YOLO.”

She laughed. “Did you just say YOLO?”

He shrugged. “You do only live once. I’ve spent eight years drowning in regret, and I don’t want to do that anymore. I want to be happy and feel good, and with you, I get both of those things. I can’t make you promises for how this will go, but I can tell you that I love you. I’ve been in love before, and it wasn’t like this. Once I got my head back on straight, I thought about moving on without you, and I just didn’t want to do it. And before you ask me again—yes, knowing what I know. You’re who you are, Brooke, faulty reproductive system and all. And I love every piece of you.”

She stood on her toes and kissed him, her lips soft and gentle and so sweet. “I love you too. So much.”

He kissed her back, deepening the connection as he claimed her mouth with his. She twined her arms around his neck and held on tight.

When they came up for air a few moments later, she beamed up at him. “I have no idea where we’re going, but I’m so glad I’m going there with you.”

Cam swept her into his arms. “I know exactly where we’re going. The bedroom.” He carried her around the island before stopping short. “Shit. I left my wallet at home. I don’t suppose you have condoms?”

“Nope, and you don’t need one. Not really.”

He grinned at her and planted a fast kiss on her lips. “Well, I’m just going to consider that a little bonus.” He carried her into the bedroom and set her on the bed.

She looked up at him, her eyes searching. “You’re certain this is what you want?”

“More than anything.”

* * * *

The Arch and Fox restaurant hummed with conversation and a palpable excitement. Brooke stood with Cam as they talked with the critic from *Wine Enthusiast*. She and some others in the industry had come for a special tasting that afternoon and had been enthusiastic in their praise.

Brooke could tell that Cam was flying high. Dressed in an impeccable navy pinstriped suit, he looked good enough to eat. She'd never before considered the pride in having arm candy but had to admit she enjoyed the envious stares of the women who darted him interested glances. Glances that turned to disappointment as soon as they saw him touch Brooke's back or put his arm around her waist, which he did often.

All in all, it was a magical night. She'd been floating on air since Cam had come to see her last night, and she never wanted to come down.

She still couldn't believe the time he'd spent researching her infertility and possibilities for the future. Darren had never done that. As if she'd needed any reminders that Cam was *not* Darren.

No, Cam was sensitive and caring and the most supportive man she could ask to have in her life. They'd made love and stayed up far too late talking about all of the procedures she'd tried and, to a lesser extent, his experience with his ex-girlfriend that had hurt him so badly.

Brooke found she wanted to look Jennifer up and punch her face in, much as Cam wanted to do to Darren. She smiled at that thought.

As the wine critic excused himself, Cam leaned his head close and whispered in her ear, "What are you smiling at?"

"You. Us. Last night. Later. Pick something."

"All of it. I pick all of it." He brushed a kiss against her flesh, sending a shiver down her neck.

Hayden and Bex approached them. Hayden smiled at Brooke, then looked at Cam. "You ready?"

Cam nodded, and they went to stand in front of the stone fireplace. Luke and Jamie joined them.

"Don't they all look so handsome?" Bex asked. She was showing now, the gentle slope of her belly just visible beneath her dark purple dress.

"Very. Jamie and Luke better watch out. There are a lot of single women here. I've had to direct several death stares at a few of them because they wouldn't stop checking Cam out."

Bex laughed. "Oh, I still have to do that with Hayden. But you have to admit it's kind of satisfying to have such a hot guy."

Brooke watched Cam signal for everyone's attention, and her heart turned over. "Definitely."

"Thank you, everyone, for joining us tonight." Cam looked around the room. It was filled with industry professionals, Ribbon Ridgers, and a lot of family. Brooke had come early and been introduced to every Archer and Westcott. She was pretty sure she'd need a flow chart later.

"As many of you know, this winery started as a bit of a dare." Cam nodded toward his partners. "The four of us grew up together and never actually planned to do this. We were sitting around a table at The Arch and Vine, and we realized that each of us could contribute something valuable to a winery."

Jamie piped in. "It was me, actually. It was my idea."

Everyone laughed and no one louder than Cam. "That's true. Yes, it was wee Jamie's idea."

Jamie rolled his eyes but grinned.

Cam turned to his youngest brother, and Brooke could see the warmth in his eyes. “And a damn fine idea it was.” He looked back out over the dining room. “So this idea somehow managed to find its footing. We were lucky enough to score this incredible vineyard, and Luke has turned it into something special.”

Luke glanced down but smiled. “Still working on it, but it’s coming along.”

“See what I have to deal with?” Cam said. “One brother who wants to hog the spotlight and another who wants to dodge it.” He shook his head, smiling. “But none of this would work at all without the winemaking skills of my best friend, Hayden Archer. Without further ado, I’ll turn it over to him because I know he has a ton of stuff to say.”

Hayden stepped forward, but Cam didn’t back away yet. “One more thing,” he said. “I want to thank everyone here. Your support and friendship means a lot to us.” His eyes found his parents, whom Brooke had met earlier. “Mom and Dad, thank you.” Then his gaze settled on her. “And Brooke—I can’t wait to see where this adventure takes us.” He winked at her, then took a step back. “Okay, I’m done.”

Hayden gave him a look of mock exasperation, then grinned. “Thank *you*, Cam, for dreaming up this event tonight. And to my sister Sara, who coordinated it.” He continued with more thank-yous, then briefly talked about the wine they’d be pouring with dinner.

Soon after, they all sat and partook of the fabulous meal that Kyle’s staff had prepared. Kyle had felt bad that he couldn’t attend, but newborns kind of decimated one’s social calendar.

At the end of the night, after everyone had left, Brooke sat in a corner where she took off her shoes and massaged her aching feet. She wasn’t sure where Cam had gone but knew he was finishing up somewhere.

Just then he came from the kitchen, his hand behind his back. He walked to her table and sat down.

She was curious what he was hiding, but didn’t ask. “You must be exhausted.” He didn’t look it; his eyes were still bright.

“I am. We can go. In just a minute. I have something for you.”

“Behind your back?” She craned her neck, fruitlessly, to look.

He brought his hand around and handed her a bouquet. A dozen white roses and one red one in the middle.

Brooke’s throat knotted. After a moment, she managed to speak. “They’re beautiful, and they mean so much. Thank you.”

“Do you know what the red one is for?”

“Because you love me?”

He grinned and scooted forward in his chair until he was at the very edge. “Well, yes, but that’s not all. That red rose is our child. I don’t know where he or she will come from or when he or she will come, but they’re out there waiting for us. I know it.”

Her breath caught, and she just stared at this amazing man who’d captured her heart, her trust, and her dreams so completely. “When you say it, I believe it.”

He leaned forward, his mouth inches from hers. “Good.” He kissed her, and she wrapped her free hand around his neck, pulling him.

He fell off the chair and into her lap.

“Ack! My flowers.” She giggled.

He rolled away and fell to the floor, sprawling at her feet. “I think I’m going to stay here. I *am* exhausted.”

She set the flowers on the table and lay down next to him, curling against his side. “Okay.”

She splayed her hand over his chest. He'd long ago shed his coat and tie, and it wouldn't take much to divest him of his shirt...

He wrapped his hand around hers. "Oh, you don't have to stay, but I appreciate the offer."

"Wherever you go is where I want to be. You're stuck with me."

He turned to face her. "Good."

Then he kissed her, and she knew that nothing had ever been *so* good.

Epilogue

Late September, West Arch Estate

The vineyard was bustling with people and activity on this first day of the harvest. Every Westcott, Archer, their significant others, and even Brooke's family were here to help. They'd hired some workers, but not many since everyone wanted to pitch in.

Luke was overseeing everything, which meant he was running this way and that, with Hayden acting as second in command. Cam supposed he should be helping to manage things, but he was content to just pick grapes and make out with Brooke when no one was looking.

He looked at her backside as she bent to pick fruit and wished they were alone in the vineyard. He thought back to the midnight picnic they'd had up here a couple of weeks ago. They'd drunk Riesling and made love under the crescent moon. Up here, the sky seemed so close, like you could wrap yourself in the stars. Actually, that was how he felt when he was with her—as if he were embraced by the heavens. Wow, had he turned into a lovesick sap.

And it felt great.

She stood up and glanced back at him, then turned fully toward him. "What?"

"What what?"

She set her hand on her hip. "You have this weird look in your eye."

"Weird, really? Not lustful or infatuated?"

She laughed. "Okay, those too. But intensely so."

"Well, I was checking out your ass." He moved toward her and slipped his hand around her waist. "And thinking about that night we came up here to stargaze." He leaned forward and nuzzled her neck, but she didn't melt into him as he'd hoped.

Instead, she cleared her throat and whispered, "We have company."

Cam didn't let go of her waist but came around to stand by her side.

Evan Archer, Alaina's husband, stood there, his gaze inscrutable, as it so often was. "Sorry to interrupt, but it's lunchtime."

"Thanks," Cam said. "I'm hungry, as it happens." He tightened his grip on Brooke's waist, tickling her.

She tried to dance away, laughing, but he held her close.

"Yeah, well, if you want to stay up here for some alone time, I can try to make sure no one comes this way." There was no innuendo in his tone, no teasing, just a straightforward offer to give them some privacy. He turned and left without another word.

Cam pivoted and pulled Brooke against him. "Evan is such a great guy."

Brooke pressed her mouth to his. "Mmmm-hmmm. I like him and Alaina a lot." Her stomach rumbled against his, and he laughed.

"I guess we should go eat."

She pulled back and smiled at him. "Please? I'm starving."

He grabbed her hand. "Let's go."

They walked down the hill to where tables had been set up under massive canopies. Bex and Sara and some others had put out lunch in addition to wrangling children. There was quite a spread of food and drink.

Cam and Brooke filled their plates and sat down at a table where his parents and her parents

were getting to know each other. Brooke leaned toward him and whispered, “Is this weird?”

“Kind of, but it’s also sort of cute.”

Their dads had bonded over fishing and were even talking about taking a weekend trip together next summer.

“I guess we have to be in this for the long haul,” Brooke said as she scooped a bite of pasta salad.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, would you?”

She turned her head and her eyes were full of love. “Nope.”

Rhonda sat down opposite them. “Hey, guys. Thanks again for inviting all of us up this weekend.”

“Where are Isla and Will?” Brooke glanced around for Rhonda’s two children, who Cam had met last night.

“Will’s asleep inside. Sara and Bex set up a day-care situation with a couple of teenage sitters. And Dave’s got Isla.” She nodded toward her husband seated at another table. He sat beside the four-year-old Isla, who was busy trying to help Alaina and Evan’s daughter eat.

Cam watched Brooke for her reaction to all of this kid discussion. She seemed fine. Of course she was fine. They’d talked at length about her feelings of loss and inadequacy, and she’d told him that his support and love had given her the missing piece she’d really needed to move on and embrace the life she had. No, it wasn’t what she’d planned, but she felt better equipped now, with him at her side, to face the future, whatever it held.

And while they hadn’t specifically discussed getting married, they seemed to have formed a tacit agreement that they were headed in that direction. He knew that was what he wanted. Last night, he’d talked to her parents about his intent—not asking their permission per se, but making sure they knew how much he loved and valued their daughter and how integral she’d become to his life.

All he had to do now was find the right moment to give her the ring he’d picked up yesterday.

“Cam?” Rhonda said his name loudly, as if she’d been trying to get his attention. Maybe she had.

“Sorry, just thinking. What did I miss?” He looked between her and Brooke.

Rhonda rolled her eyes and grinned at the same time. “You two are so in love, it’s disgusting. I’ll bet money your mind was completely hung up on my sister.”

Cam looked over at Brooke, who wore a faint blush. “No one would take that bet, because duh. My mind is irrevocably hung up on her.”

Brooke’s blush deepened, and she reached over and squeezed his thigh, which sent a jolt of lust straight through him. Now he really wished they’d followed Evan’s suggestion up in the vineyard. After lunch maybe...

Kelsey joined them, sitting on the other side of Brooke. She and Brooke had become good friends, and they spent a lot of time working on the Ribbon Ridge exhibit for the library, which they were hoping to open early next year.

Brooke introduced Kelsey to her sister, and they shook hands over the table.

“What’s this I hear about some sort of excavation around here?” Rhonda asked. “Brooke told me a little—and that you’re working on it together—but didn’t finish the story last night.”

Kelsey swallowed a bite of food and nodded. “Yeah, we’re looking for the site of the original building on this property. A clapboard farmhouse built in 1879.”

“Problem is, we’re not entirely sure where to look,” Brooke said. “Fortunately, we’re in the

process of working with the county historical society to find out where it might've been. They're going to try to find maps from that time period, provided they have them among their records."

Rhonda leaned her elbow on the table, her fork dangling from her fingers. "That's so fascinating. I can't wait to hear what you find."

"We just hope we find something!" Kelsey said, laughing. "We'll all be so disappointed if we come up empty-handed."

Cam knew she spoke the truth. She and Brooke, along with Alaina and Crystal, were completely committed to this research project. He loved how immersed Brooke had become in Ribbon Ridge. For a guy who never planned past tomorrow, Cam had been surprised to realize he had dreams for his future, and he was even more shocked to see them start to come true.

After a bit, Cam stood to get water for himself and Brooke. He was waylaid by his parents, who gushed over how much they liked Brooke's folks. He knew his mother wanted to ask when they were going to get married, but he hadn't told her he planned to propose. She was a mix of shock and glee when it came to their relationship. She'd never imagined that he would be the first of her boys to settle down. Cam couldn't quite believe that either.

As he headed back toward the table with a couple of waters, his brothers and Hayden corralled him to the side.

"Hey, this is pretty crazy, right?" Jamie asked.

"What, you mean everyone here?" Hayden shook his head. "We have big, meddlesome families. Of course they'd want to come help." He grinned. "They're also pretty awesome."

Luke looked at Hayden. "Did I hear your dad say he wanted to intern with you when you blend?"

Hayden chuckled. "Yeah, the master brewer has decided he's interested in winemaking."

Cam laughed along with him. He'd known Rob Archer almost his entire life, and he was a beer man through and through, as evidenced by his incredibly successful chain of brewpubs and now line of beers, which they'd started bottling last year.

"That's pretty cool," Cam said. He knew how much it had to mean to Hayden that his dad was so interested. Rob had been disappointed when none of his children had taken up the craft of brewing beer. He was, however, delighted that his daughter-in-law Bex was keeping it in the family.

"I'm just amazed at how well this is all doing," Jamie said. "Really, when I first brought this up that day at The Arch and Vine, I never foresaw this."

Cam remembered that day vividly. He now realized it was the moment in which he'd decided his disconnected, ambivalent existence wasn't good enough. It was the moment he'd turned a corner and started on his way to finding Brooke. To finding happiness. "I did. At least, I hoped it would be this."

Hayden clapped his shoulder. "Me too, bro."

"Well, I didn't doubt it," Luke said. "I mean look at us. We're total studs." They all laughed. "And right now, this stud needs to get back out to the vineyard."

"Yeah, we all do," Hayden said, and they all took off.

Cam went back to the table and said he was heading back up the hill. Brooke immediately stood to join him. Hand in hand, they hiked back up to where they'd been picking.

Once they were back between their rows of grapes, Cam pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She tasted of the wine they'd had at lunch and something chocolate. "Did you have dessert?" he asked against her delicious mouth.

"Emily Archer brought brownies, and I couldn't resist."

Cam knew from twenty-five plus years of experience that Hayden's mom made the best brownies around. "Somehow they taste even better on your lips."

She giggled, and he kissed her again, taking her joy into himself and basking in its glow. After a minute or maybe two, she pulled back with a sigh. "We should really get back to work."

"Yep." But he didn't take his hands from her waist.

"You're going to have to let go."

"Never." Without thinking, he dropped to his knee in front of her.

Her eyes widened, and she brought her hand to her kiss-swollen mouth. "Cam. What are you doing?"

He couldn't contain his grin even as a thread of nervousness snaked through him. "Like you don't know." He pulled the ring from his pocket and unwrapped the tissue he'd placed it in. Taking her hand, he looked up into her eyes. "Brooke, you know how much I love you. I try to tell you multiple times every day." He smiled. "And I'm sure this isn't a surprise, but I'm ready to make it official, and I hope you are too. There's no one else I'd rather spend my life with. Will you marry me?"

"I never imagined I'd find someone who'd love me so completely and so unconditionally." Her smile faded. "You're sure? I know we've talked about it so much—"

He knew she meant her infertility, and they had talked about it a lot. "My love, no doubts, no second-guessing. I'm more sure of this than I've been of anything in my life. And I'm more than ready to start our journey together."

Her smile came back, lifting her lips and deepening her dimples. "Given that I rarely stay at my loft anymore, I think we already have." She tugged at his hand. "Stand up and kiss me, Cam. Yes, my answer is yes."

Joy burst through him, lighting every corner of his soul. "First things first. He slipped the diamond on her finger, happy that it fit perfectly.

She looked down at her hand and exhaled sharply. "It's gorgeous."

He rose to his feet. "It pales next to you."

She wrapped her hands around his neck and pulled him down for another kiss. When they came up for air, she held her hand up and looked at the ring again. "My sisters are going to be jealous. Oh man, everyone's going to be ecstatic. I think they'll likely throw an impromptu party."

He kissed her neck. "So long as I get you to myself at some point, it's all good. Actually, we're alone right now..."

She laughed low and seductive in her throat. "We are, but it's hot and bright and not that private. I can hear your mother laughing two rows over."

He reluctantly stopped licking the salty-sweet flesh beneath her ear. "Well, damn."

"Later," she promised.

He lovingly stroked her cheek. "I can't wait."

The end

Thank you so much for reading *So Good*! I hope you enjoyed your stay in Ribbon Ridge and that you'll come back for *So Right*, the next book in the *So Hot* series. You can catch up with the Archer family in the Ribbon Ridge series. Check out my entire backlist at www.darcyburke.com.

Ribbon Ridge is a fictional town based on several cities and towns dotting the Willamette Valley between Portland and the Oregon Coast. It's pinot noir wine country, very beautiful and picturesque, and a short drive from where I live. My brother actually dwells right in the heart of it in a tiny town with no stoplights. There is, however, an amazing antique mall in an historic schoolhouse (and apparently seven Pokestops).

Would you like to know when my next book is available? You can sign up for my Reader Club, follow me on Twitter at @darcyburke, or like my Facebook page at <http://facebook.com/DarcyBurkeFans>.

Reviews help others find a book that's right for them. I appreciate all reviews, whether positive or negative. I hope you'll consider leaving a review at your favorite online vendor or networking site.

If you like historical romance, check out my Regency-set series: *The Untouchables*, *Secrets and Scandals*, and *Legendary Rogues*.

I appreciate my readers so much. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

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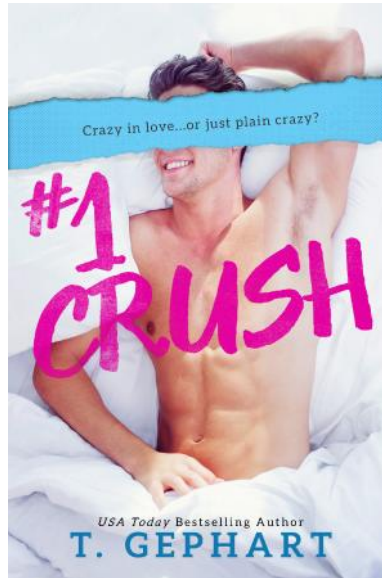
About the Author

Darcy Burke is the USA Today Bestselling Author of hot, action-packed historical and sexy, emotional contemporary romance. Darcy wrote her first book at age 11, a happily ever after about a swan addicted to magic and the female swan who loved him, with exceedingly poor illustrations.

A native Oregonian, Darcy lives on the edge of wine country with her guitar-strumming husband, their two hilarious kids who seem to have inherited the writing gene, two Bengal cats, and a third cat named after a fruit. In her “spare” time Darcy is a serial volunteer enrolled in a 12-step program where one learns to say “no,” but she keeps having to start over. She’s also a fair-weather runner, and her happy places are Disneyland and Labor Day weekend at the Gorge. Visit Darcy online at <http://smarturl.it/ws1001> and sign up for her [Reader Club](#), follow her on [Twitter](#) at <http://twitter.com/darcyburke>, or like her [Facebook](#) page, <http://www.facebook.com/darcyburkefans>.

#1 Crush

T Gephart



Dedication

To Alexander Skarsgård—For three fleeting minutes I got to be part of your world. You were a class act, and I will never forget your kindness.

To Lilliana Anderson—This started as your bedtime story but now you will have to share it with the rest of the world. Thanks for the laughs and listening to my crazy. You are a queen among women.

To Monica James—Thank you isn't enough. You were with me in spirit for the journey, and your support was irreplaceable. I adore you. #Bulgaria

Author's Note

#1 Crush was the fastest and one of the most enjoyable books I have ever written. I don't think I have ever laughed as much as I did writing this book. Not because I think it's the funniest, but because of the situations the main character finds herself in.

However, this is a work of fiction.

While some of the events, places, names, people or anything else may have a startling resemblance to something in real life—they are not real.

Not even a little.

So, put your lawsuits away and enjoy possibly the most ridiculous thing I have ever written.

Acknowledgements

My family puts up with a lot—namely my insanity and often ridiculous ideas—but without a doubt, I could not do any of this without their love and support. Gep, Jenna, Liam and Woodley—You are my heart in pieces, and when we're together I am whole.

Thanks to my amazing extended family and friends who are usually the recipients of my crazy messages, text, emails and stories. Some of you have been lucky—or unlucky depending on what side of the fence you sit—to have been front row to the insanity. Thanks for not judging me and loving all of me unconditionally.

Thank you, Lilliana Anderson and Monica James—you guys and this story, I don't think I ever stopped laughing.

Special thanks to MK and Danielle. I tried to warn you off and still you wanted to read it.

Thank you the amazing posse of authors who turn a blind eye to my crazy. Lili Saint Germain, JB Hartnett, Monica James, Skyla Mardi, CJ Duggan, Lilliana Anderson, Rachel Brookes, JD Nixon, Natasha Preston, Kirsty Mosely, Ker Dukey, LA Casey, Tillie Cole, Julia Kent, Helena Hunting, Christina Hobbs and Lauren Billings, Kelly Elliot, Jay Crownover, SC Stephens, Joanna Wylde, Kylie Scott, MK Harkins and Katy Evans—and to anyone I've left out, you all rock.

Hang Le—Duuuuuuudddeeee. I don't think I have ever loved a cover more. That's a lie. I love all of them. But this one is special because . . . we know the reasons.

Massive thanks, love and appreciation to all the bloggers and blogs who have, and continue to support me. So many of you share my covers, releases, sales without even so much as a word from me. It is a massive job and I see the incredible effort you put in. I'm sorry if I miss your shares or posts, but every single one of you is amazing.

Thanks to the T Gephart Entourage, enjoy the #Ridiculous.

Thanks to my Penny and Angela #UnimpressedCatIsBack. Love you ladies.

Thank you to my editor, Nichole Strauss, from Insight Editing Services. Different name, same badass editor. Couldn't do this without you, well I could but there'd be a lot more missed words, fucks, CAPS and mistakes. Adore you.

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And as always, thank you to YOU—insert your name here. I never take readers for granted and I know you are spoiled for choice. That you use that choice to read me is a blessing and honor I could never put into words. Thank you.

Chapter 1

Here's the thing.

I'm a smart girl. I don't suffer any delusions of grandeur nor do I have difficulty separating fact from fiction. In fact, I would consider myself a realist with a healthy side order of feet-firmly-on-the-ground. But that didn't mean I was boring, oh hell no. There was no lack of surprise when my antics landed me in a hot mess. Because, while I had a complete grasp on reality, I had trouble coloring in between the lines.

It could be that I was a middle child.

My type-A older sister was a successful dermatologist who married an even more successful cosmetic surgeon. Both of them beautiful and brainy, and if I didn't love them so much I'd be secretly plotting their demise. They had also given me a nephew and niece I completely adored, so there was that.

And my younger sister was an über-talented artist who was able to pull off the seemingly impossibly pairing of contemporary with impressionism. Critically acclaimed, with impeccable fashion sense and a loft apartment in Paris. Sure, a complete overachiever, but once again, I was more than happy for her.

So, it was natural that with all that brilliance filling up the branches of my family tree that I'd had a pretty tough legacy to live up to. Which I did with my own personal brand of flair.

Despite graduating from Columbia with a degree in journalism, I was working for the *New York Post* as a columnist. Sure, I usually got the eye roll reaction when I announced my occupation, but I needed more than just a career. And as much as I wanted to write for *The Times* or *Time*, I wanted to enjoy what was left of my twenties before I became responsible. Writing a column gave me flexibility; I could work from anywhere. And I could literally write whatever I wanted. Dude giving me crazy-eyes on the subway—last month's entry. New waxing lady giving me second degree burns—two weeks ago. Cute guy I met at Starbucks who espresso'd my orgasm, yes it was as terrible as it sounded—Tuesday. As long as I turned it in on time and kept it fun and flirty, my editor was happy.

And no, I wasn't like Carrie from *Sex and The City*. While I liked looking good, I wasn't obsessed with fashion or shoes. I didn't own a gorgeous Brownstone in Greenwich Village either, instead preferring my modest Brooklyn apartment. And my friends weren't freaks. Oh, and most importantly, I hated cosmopolitans. Hated them.

But like Carrie, I wasn't ready to settle down.

In any way.

And out of the three Monroe daughters, it was me my parents worried about the most. Because more than anything—a career, money, security—I craved adventure. And *not* the lusting-after-Manolos-from-the-store-window kind—thanks a lot Sarah Jessica Parker.

I wanted *real*, heart-stopping adventure.

"Hey Tia, you want to go drink at a bar tonight? I haven't been hungover since Tuesday, and I write better drunk." Lila, one of my closest friends, collapsed on my bed beside me as I continued to navigate the interwebs.

We had graduated together, but unlike me, she *had* taken a job at *The Times*. She could drink most men under the table, and despite her lamenting about lack of inebriation, she wasn't an alcoholic. She just liked to act dramatic, channeling her inner Hemmingway and swirl

martinis like she was an extra on *Mad Men*. Really, I was in no position to judge.

“Hey, did you see the latest shots?” I swiveled my laptop around so I could show her the photo in question. “He landed in LAX and was wearing that charcoal V-neck sweater that clings to his chest like body paint. I swear it just makes him look even more delicious.” I really was very fond of that V-neck, it did things to me no knitted sweater should.

“I’m sure he wears it purely for your benefit.” Lila snorted as she navigated through the other photos. “How did you even get these?” She studied the monitor closely, probably noticing they’d been time stamped two hours ago.

Yes, I knew I had a problem.

“Ahhhhh, you know I’ll never tell my sources.” Or admit I took secret pleasure in scouring the internet for prized candid snaps. “And quite frankly I’m surprised you think I would give that information so easily, didn’t we take some kind of oath in school?” I turned the keyboard around and gazed upon his ridiculously beautiful face. Who looks *that* good after a ten-hour plane ride? Maybe he really was a vampire?

“Eric Larsson is a fine piece of ass, I’ll give you that.” Lila threw her head back and laughed. “And this is a new record for you. I can’t believe you still have it as bad as you do.”

Lila was correct on two counts. One, his ass was most definitely fine. And two, he was my longest reigning crush.

Not *any* crush either.

Eric Larsson was my number one.

There had been other men—both regular and celebrity—who had garnered my attention over the years. Blond guys, dark haired guys—I didn’t really have a type. But none of them had even come close to Eric.

That man was perfection. All blond haired, blue eyed, six-foot-four inches of him—so perfect he almost didn’t seem real. Like the hand of God himself had crafted him, his body so insanely toned I wasn’t sure if it was sculpted from muscle or marble. And when he smiled, it was like staring straight into the sun. Those eyes. That mouth. The way the delicate lines of his face dipped and curved with a symmetry that seemed virtually impossible.

He was too much.

Too much.

No one deserved to be that good looking. It was greedy. And yet by the power of Odin and all the Viking gods, someone in the heavens had seen to it that he was. Which is why I mumbled my thank yous every morning to them as I stalked the latest installment of photos that found their way into my inbox.

Sure, my obsession with him was *slightly* creepy. Fine, a lot then. But I felt completely justified. It wasn’t just his ridiculous good looks that had the ability to reduce me to a mess of nonsensical stuttering. Oh, no. Because being a walking, talking piece of man-art wasn’t enough. He had to be *really* greedy and add charming, polite and funny to the list. And if that wasn’t enough, he had a slightly weird, dorky side I found adorable. His well-documented geek-outs making me giggle like an idiot.

Which I clearly was.

Because not only was Eric Larsson delicious in a way that made my girly parts tingle, he was a Hollywood movie star.

The famous kind.

Who was unattainable.

Oh, and we’d never met.

Yep, I know what you are thinking. I'm crazy. Wrap me up in a straight jacket and lock me away in a padded cell. Because I wasn't sixteen anymore, and crushing on a guy I'd never been face-to-face with was tragic. And all of that would be completely valid if I harbored delusions that we were actually going to be a couple. But . . . I actually didn't.

I wasn't looking to fall in love. Please, I wasn't completely insane. No, we weren't going to magically see each other across a crowded room and be drawn together like a cheesy rom com. There wasn't going to be a one-night stand where he decided he couldn't live without me. Nope, none of that was going to happen. And I was fine with all of that.

Chances were his public persona was nothing like I'd built him up in my head. All those qualities that had me gaga like a moron possibly weren't even real. He was probably an egotistical asshole with a small penis. I mean, come on. You didn't get all *that* and be gifted in the pants department, somewhere there had to be a trade off.

There was also almost zero chance he was a *nice* guy. *Nice* guys didn't look like that. And they sure as shit weren't famous. No, I'd dated plenty of *nice* guys. And while it was pleasant and even enjoyable, I got bored quickly. Because obviously there was something wrong with me. Note my unhealthy attraction to a man who doesn't know of my existence.

And if that laundry list of misdemeanors wasn't enough to convince me this wasn't going to be a happily-ever-after, there was also the fact he had a GIRLFRIEND. Yep, and not just a regular girl who sits on the couch and sucks down tacos like the rest of us either. No, you know the kind. Amazing body, perky breasts, perfect hair, supermodel whose legs had their own zip code. God help us all if they ever procreated, their children would be so genetically blindingly adorable we'd need polarized sunglasses just to look at them. How nice for them. Ugh.

"I need to meet him." The words spilled out of my mouth at the same rate they tumbled around in my head. It was a habit, and one I was trying to break. Because my mouth needed to learn it wasn't a good plan to make spontaneous and rash decisions. At the very least not announce them to the world.

Truth was, I'd been close to meeting *him* no less than three separate times. Three. Not like we were sorta in the same state one time, I'm talking three separate occasions where we'd been in the same location only minutes apart. Minutes. If that wasn't a cruel twist of fate then I don't know what was. So either I had been a jerk in a previous life and was paying for my ass-hat behavior *or* fate was the asshole. I couldn't confidently guess which one.

"Yeah, yeah. Of course you do." Lila laughed, rolling over onto her stomach enabling her to look at me more clearly. "It will be great. And the two of you will ride off into the sunset. And you will set me up with his hot friend Ryan and we can have a double wedding."

"What are you talking about?" My attention snapped to Lila, my focus on the information that I didn't seem to know. Could she know something about Eric I didn't? "What friend Ryan?"

"It's Hollywood, there's always a *Ryan*." Lila scoffed like she knew it to be a fact. "Or Scott, or Taylor, or Josh. Or whichever devastatingly handsome stereotype he chooses to hang out with."

"No, I'm serious." I waved off her notion of hooking up with fictional Ryan in favor of a real meeting with Eric.

The more the idea marinated the more I liked it. Because it would actually solve a lot of problems.

"Think about it. I meet him, I see what an asshole he is and I move on with my life. Simple. Because we both know he's going to be a disappointment."

Boom.

Cured.

It was brilliant.

“So you *want* him to be an asshole?” Her eyes narrowed in either shock or disbelief. It was hard to tell which, and honestly, either was acceptable.

“It’s not about what I want, it’s about what is.” I shifted in my seat clarifying my position. “I’m not sure why, but there is something about Eric Larsson that makes me short circuit. Like I’ve taken stupid pills and my brain cells drop out of my head.”

“I’d say it’s because he’s hot.”

I ignored Lila’s statement of Eric’s obvious hotness and pressed on. “So the best way to fix that is to see that he isn’t so special. I’m sure he’ll be just as good looking as in those pictures—let’s not get crazy. And that body of his, I mean he’s basically an amusement park for my vagina.” Not a lie, given half a chance I would find out the true meaning of *slippery dip*. “But, he’ll probably be a rude and arrogant prick. He’s an actor who looks like *that*.” I waved my hand in front of the screen presenting the evidence in case she’d forgotten. “And because he’s an actor, all that adorable stuff is probably fake too. When I see all of that, whatever allure he has will be lost. Spell broken. And then maybe my libido will stop dictating my attraction to him and I can move someone *else* into my number one crush position.” Hopefully someone I had a chance of getting naked with.

“Why don’t you just listen to your own pep talk, convince yourself he is probably a dick and save yourself the hassle?”

She had a point, but not one I was willing to contend with.

“Nope, I can’t work with probability or hypotheticals. I need to see it firsthand. I need hard evidence.” And not the kind that was housed in his pants. Or maybe—No, I had to stick with the plan.

“Fine, so you need to meet him. One small problem.” Seriously, Lila could only think of one? I could list a dozen off the top of my head. “You live in New York and he lives all the way on other side of the country. And I don’t think you can just Google his address.”

“Oh, I’m sure I could, but turning up on his doorstep would be too creeper even for me.”

Fine, I’ll admit I had narrowed it down to a general location without even trying. But that was as far as it went.

“It has to be a chance encounter or something.” I eased back into my chair, my mind flipping through possible scenarios. “And he can’t know I’m a fan. And there has to be conversation involved. And I need at least two minutes of eye contact and an acknowledgement.”

“What a list.” Lila laughed. “Still, if anyone is going to do it, it will be you.” She’d always had blind faith in me, even if at times I wasn’t sure I’d deserved it. “So now that we’ve established you are going to stalk and accost Eric Larsson in the near future and possibly end up with a criminal record, I insist we go out drinking. We need to celebrate your freedom while you still have it.”

She had a point. It could end badly. I’m talking mug-shot-end-up-in-a-cell badly. Not that I would focus on the negatives. Pfft, that wouldn’t be like me at all. So all the odds that were stacked against me could be sidelined for responsible Tia, if she ever decided to show up. I wasn’t a quitter. Nor did I weasel out of something because it was too tough. Whatever was going to happen, would happen, and I knew I could count on Lila to start a GoFundMe page if I needed legal representation. And it would make a good story, right?

“Agreed.” I nodded, mentally arming myself for the copious amounts of alcohol I would be consuming. “Because tomorrow I am going to need some serious strategy.”

Chapter 2

My head hurt.

I lifted it slightly off the pillow as the morning light—or it could have been afternoon, I really didn't know—pierced my eyeballs like a dagger as I stupidly raised my lids.

Bad move. Sight was overrated, and there was nothing I needed to see.

My eyes slammed shut again as I inwardly groaned. I outwardly groaned too, cursing myself—and Lila, those shots were such a bad idea—as I willed the room to stop spinning.

Ah, next day regret. It had been a while but there we were. At least I was alone in bed. Or I hoped I was.

My hand tentatively reached over to the other side of the mattress and sure enough, it was empty. Good. My stupidity had been limited to—my tongue rolled around in my mouth—vodka? Tequila? Gin? Probably all three.

“Ugh. Such a bad idea.” I hoped my future self was taking note. This had been a hell of a lot easier when I was on the *other* side of twenty-eight. I guess some things didn't improve with age. Hangovers, being one.

While lying in bed and complaining about my aching body and head sounded like a solid plan for the day, I had more important things to do. Namely working out a way I could get myself to the premiere of Eric Larsson's latest movie where he was going to walk the red carpet in two days.

Oh, my craziness wasn't cured after a night of heavy drinking. Actually, the opposite. Getting drunk only solidified my resolve. In fact, as the night progressed I became even further convinced this was the only way to proceed. In between shots of Patrón and copious Mojitos, the premiere seemed like The. Best. Idea. Ever. Next-day sobriety—or the beginnings of it—didn't convince me otherwise. Nope, I was too far gone.

And I wasn't going to be content with lining up along the barriers with all the other nameless, faceless screaming people. No. I needed an invite. *I mean, how hard can it be?* Studios handed those things out all the time. Surely these things had a tendency to * cough cough * get lost in the mail. It's not like anyone checked ID once you were there. You just flashed your ever-important pass and moseyed on in. So obtaining one of those all-important passes was my number one priority. If only . . .

“Oh shit!” Parts of the evening came flooding back to me.

Yes, I had totally convinced both myself and Lila—she was a complete enabler—that I was going to get into the movie premiere on Monday. Yes, I had made it clear that I wasn't going to be on the sidelines, needing up close and personal to get the eye contact and conversation I had predetermined necessary. But not content with just talking a good game, I had apparently put my money where my mouth was.

“Shit.” My body almost levitated off the bed as I fumbled for my phone. The change in position was not doing wonders for my monster headache. Nor were my eyes glaring at my phone screen as I tried to pull up my emails. Not sure why I bothered, it was just going to confirm what I already knew to be true.

“One ticket to LAX. Today.” The words did nothing but reinforce that I had purchased an airline ticket with zero actual plan on what I was going to do once I got to Los Angeles.

“Okay. Calm down. It could be worse,” I told myself, because having a heart attack when I

had non-refundable tickets would not be helpful.

I mean it *could* be worse. Although I was talking to myself and I wasn't sure that was a good thing, I hadn't done anything to get me on a FBI watch list just yet. It's not like anyone *knew* what my purpose for flying there was going to be. And as long as I didn't attract any attention to myself, I would be totally fine. I'd chalk it up to investigative journalism. I'd write a column about it—my covert operation—and kill two birds with one stone. It was a win/win.

#FirstAmendment

#FreedomOfThePress

#PleaseDon'tArrestMeOfficer

"Hey, sweet cakes, you have any tomato juice? I'm making Bloody Marys." Lila strolled in, not the slightest bit affected by last night's assault on our livers.

"Um. No. Why would I have tomato juice?" Ewww tomato juice. I swallowed heavily, the idea of a Bloody Mary making me want to gag. It wasn't going to take much; I was already mentally willing my stomach to chill the hell out.

"Well that blows." She scrunched up her nose in disappointment. "Screwdrivers it is then." Lila shrugged, completely ignoring my wide-eyed disbelief as she turned to leave.

"Lila, wait," I called out, wondering if she'd forgotten about my fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants idea. "I am flying to L.A. tonight. On a ticket I bought while drinking. I think now would be a good time to keep my blood alcohol level below the legal limit and formulate some kind of plan."

"Oh, you already had a plan, remember?"

"Really? Was it a good one?" I mean, I hoped drunk me had been more productive than just making flight reservations.

"Oh, it was brilliant. Although it was some next-level stalking on your part, remind me never to piss you off."

I scoured my mind hoping something would trigger, but nope, my brilliant plan stayed hidden. No ideas—brilliant or otherwise—came bubbling to the surface.

"Nothing huh?" Lila laughed, my crazy cross-eyed expression giving away I had no recollection. "You found out that one of his co-stars had a small role in some B-grade soap opera. One of *her* co-stars has kind of fallen off the radar. Rumor is she's in rehab and you were going to—"

"Oh. My. God."

I was going to burn in eternal hell.

"Like I said, brilliant." Lila threw her head back enjoying my panic as the pieces of my drunken genius slowly came together.

Valerie Vine—her real name—had hit a rough spot. While she had initially been America's darling, hopping from one daytime drama to the next, she had struggled in the last few years. Weight gain, erratic mood swings on set and a failed singing career had seen her unceremoniously dumped from her small-screen cash cow. Turning her back on the limelight and returning to her hometown of San Antonio, Texas, she hadn't been heard from or seen in months. Some of her Hollywood friends had even tried to reach out to her, hoping to salvage her career before she went further off the ledge.

Marilyn Steal—Eric Larsson's latest on-screen love interest—was one of those people.

"Valerie's my in," I said, shaking my head wondering if there was a fate worse than the hell burning eternity I'd already established was in my future. "Marilyn would give her an invitation to the premiere for sure if she thought she wanted to go."

“Yes, she would.” Lila nodded, her lips edging into an even bigger grin. “And no one would even suspect a thing. Hell, it’s the last name someone would use; most people would hardly know they are friends. Marilyn was like eighteen when she was on *The Always and The After*, it was like her first gig and she was on screen for maybe three episodes. Even in her IMDb profile, it’s buried. I can’t even believe you found all that in a few hours with a laptop and Wi-Fi connection. I’m seriously impressed.”

I’ll admit, when it came to information, I was gifted. My thirst for needing to know had always driven me to research, explore every angle and get to the bottom of the truth. It’s why journalism had been a natural choice for me. I also loved to write—sharing my ideas and points of view in a cleverer and easier to digest way. It was definitely lacking in current media.

“So.” I cleared my throat, the conscience I was missing last night making an appearance this morning. “I’m going to contact Marilyn’s people and impersonate Valerie’s personal assistant. Make the request that Valerie would like to attend the premiere but keep the details vague. Like she might come, or she might not. You can never really tell given her current mental state.”

Hell.

No two ways about it.

I could feel the burning flames already.

“And then once I procure the invite, I sashay my ass onto the red carpet like I belong there. Have my two-minute required eye contact *with* conversation and move on with my life.” And hopefully not end up in a police cruiser at the end of the night.

Perfect.

I was both giddy with excitement and disgusted in myself. Sadly, the disgust wasn’t winning in my internal battle as my heartbeat quickened.

I was going to do this.

I was going to meet Eric.

I was going to walk away.

And no one would have to get hurt.

“You’re not having second thoughts are you?” Lila’s eyebrow rose as she seemed to read my mind. Not that it was hard to do, the silence after I regurgitated my questionable plan pretty much spoke for itself.

“No. Of course not. I’m not going to impersonate her, and I’ll be vague. And no one ever has to know. And sometimes your hands get a little dirty for a story. This could totally be a story. Because I’m a writer and that’s what we do. It’s my community service.”

“Yeah, you are such a giver.” Lila laughed. “Now get out of bed and let’s have breakfast. You have to pack and make a few phone calls.”

It was almost midnight—local time—when my plane landed at LAX. The flight had been long and the killer two-hour layover in Dallas hadn’t helped. And while it was still technically Saturday where I was standing, my body was firmly on east coast time. Which made me the equivalent of a zombie, craving caffeine so I could have the strength to get to the hotel, but knowing I’d regret it when I wouldn’t be able to get to sleep. The struggle was real.

After collecting my suitcase and the biggest coffee I could find—I’d rather deal with the insomnia later than narcolepsy now—I caught a cab to a cheap hotel in Hollywood.

Sure, I could have given my credit card a workout and stayed somewhere nicer, but it wasn’t necessary. I wasn’t here to lounge around by the pool and soak up the California sun. Nope, I was on a mission. And the mission dictated I found somewhere cheap but accessible, where no

one asked too many questions. Just hand over my credit card, give me the key, I won't leave any weird unidentifiable stains on the carpet. The front desk person would grunt an acknowledgement but not look up from their copy of *The Enquirer*.

Thankfully the bleached-to-within-an-inch-of-her-life, over-tanned lady—and I'm guessing, because she had breasts but other than that it could go either way—at reception followed the script perfectly. Swiped my card, slid me my key and basically ignored me while I disappeared down the musky hall. Perfect.

It wasn't until the morning that the situation got critical.

I had twenty-four hours.

The invitation wasn't going to magically fly through the window like an invitation to Hogwarts. No, I was going to have to do some serious, serious hustling.

So with my cell pressed against my ear and my laptop on the unmade bed, I started what I had dubbed *Operation: Larsson*. Film distributors, the studio, agents, the catering company—no one was safe. I called them all, giving my rehearsed speech and waited patiently to see if I could charm—fine, swindle—someone into giving me what I needed. It was a delicate dance. Being assertive while not sounding like a bitch, being personable without sounding like a flirt and hoping to appeal to their humanitarian side. It was just one ticket. And hadn't poor Valerie suffered enough? Yes, we've already established I'm the worst person alive *and* a horrible opportunist, so save the judgment.

Each time I came up empty, but I wouldn't be deterred. Nope. My parents hadn't raised me to be a quitter, and I wasn't tapping out until every avenue had been exhausted.

Nearing the end of my list—the sound engineer didn't have any tickets but asked me out for a *non-business* related drink, ewww—and I was starting to get desperate.

Surely I hadn't come all this way to turn around and go home empty handed? *Okay, God—or whoever else was up there—there doesn't have to be conversation. Just let me get close* I bargained.

And just when I thought I would have to abandon my initial idea and repel down the side of the Dolby Theatre, it happened.

"Of course, we'd love to help out. We love Ms. Vine." The friendly voice on the other end of the phone giggled before taking a breath. "Is she well, we'd heard—"

"Yes, Ms. Vine has had her share of rumors swirling through the press." I cut them off before I was forced to confirm or deny something I actually knew nothing about. I swallowed hard, shaking my head as I continued. "One of the reasons she left L.A. and decided to go back home. People can be so unkind."

"Yes, Yes. Of course." She had the decency to sound a little embarrassed. "Well, we're glad she is in town, even if it's just for a visit."

"I would have contacted Ms. Steal directly." The words almost got stuck in my throat as I tried to authenticate my request, the Marilyn Steal connection not needing to be explained thank God. "But Valerie had hoped it would be a surprise. And of course she still suffers terrible anxiety . . ."

Hell.

Burning.

Eternally.

"So if she doesn't make it for whatever reason, we would hate for Marilyn to be disappointed."

Honestly I was amazed that I hadn't ignited already. If I'd been wearing pants—I could

think better in my underwear—they'd have definitely been on fire.

"Oh, I completely understand. We won't breathe a word of it." Her voice lowered to a whisper.

Yeah, because I was an idiot and believed *that*.

"I can stop by tomorrow morning when your office opens and pick up her invitation." The less information I gave these people the better; it was bad enough I used my real name.

Some might argue it was careless, reckless even, and lord knows I'd been both in the past. But I'd learned through previous exploits not to make the lies too elaborate, it made them harder to keep track of. Then before you knew it, you had no idea who you were supposed to be. So I kept it simple, Tia Monroe, personal assistant at your service.

"Oh, that won't be necessary," she said, I pictured the whole hand waving in midair. "We can send out a courier. At what hotel is Ms. Vine staying?"

FUCK.

Okay, let's not panic.

Stay calm and go with the flow.

C'mon, Tia, think.

"The Roosevelt." The words shot out of my mouth before thinking. "The Hollywood Roosevelt," I clarified like a moron, in case there was any confusion as to whether I meant *here* or another state we currently weren't in.

"Wonderful." She sounded delighted, no doubt smiling from ear to ear. "I'll send someone tomorrow morning. Please extend our best wishes to Ms. Vine and we hope she enjoys the night."

"Yes. Thanks." It was all I was capable of, my mind in free fall as I said a quick goodbye and ended the call. I abandoned my laptop and phone, my back collapsing against the mattress.

"Shit."

Chapter 3

I could usually talk myself into or out of trouble. It was a talent—that and thinking on my feet. Those two skills had safely seen me escape any major mishaps until this point, and something my mother warned me to use for good not evil. Which I did, for the most part.

Unfortunately today wasn't one of those days. The evil part of me clearly won as I strode out of my cheap no-tell hotel and cabbed it to The Roosevelt. I looked the part too, thankfully packing a tailored skirt and jacket before I'd left home. It was my something *respectful* to wear on the slim chance I needed to appear before a judge. See, realist—I knew I probably wasn't getting out of this unscathed.

In my head it all made perfect sense.

Sitting in the lobby of The Roosevelt waiting to intercept the courier.

Of course, there had been some serious side-eye and a few throats cleared before he arrived with my coveted package.

The first two attempts hadn't been for me—awkward—something I learned while trying to tackle unsuspecting couriers as they walked in the door.

Still, no harm done other than making a fool of myself in front of strangers.

Nothing new there. Think of it as fodder for a future article, always a silver lining.

But the third attempt had been fruitful. The spandex-wearing bike messenger carrying an invitation for none other than Valarie Vine, but being signed for by—you guessed it—Tia Monroe. And with a quick swish of my pen, the prized envelope was in my hands.

I couldn't breathe.

This was it.

It was to cure myself of this stupid obsession I reminded myself, not just to gaze lovingly at his ridiculously beautiful face. No, that wasn't the reason my pulse was thumping out of control. It was me readying myself for the disappointment that I was surely going to meet.

Now all I had to do was wait until tonight, and one way or another it would all be over.

Right, and I was now lying to myself as well as everyone else.

Lord help me, I was no longer convinced this was going to cure me of anything.

* * * *

I was going to throw up.

Nerves twisted in my gut as I stepped out of the cab and onto the sidewalk, a few feet away from the red carpet. Sure, I would have loved to roll up in some fancy car and step out to a flurry of flashes. But I was on a budget and a cab was cheaper, and the less attention I drew to myself the better. The last thing I needed was to be discovered and tossed out on my ass when I was this close. Not when I'd come this far.

Instead, I kept a low profile, straightening my classy, yet unremarkable little—the hem possibly a touch too short—black dress as I strode slowly to the theatre. It had to be timed just right. If I got there too soon I would be ushered in before Eric arrived. Show up to late and everyone would be inside. It was a delicate dance, and one where I'd have to rely on pure instincts.

Limos slowly arrived, the press clamoring around the shiny black cars as girls in the crowd

screamed at varying decibels. It was too early for him, something that was confirmed when some of his co-stars stepped out and waved to onlookers.

“Not yet,” I whispered to myself as I lurked like a creeper watching it unfold.

“Excuse me, Miss, are you coming through?” A man who was about ten feet tall and almost as wide—okay, slight exaggeration, but he was huge—looked down at the invite I clutched tightly in my hand.

“Err . . . I’m just waiting for a friend.” I pulled out my phone and diverted my attention. “Should be here any minute.”

“Okay, fine but I wouldn’t wait too long.” His warning tone hinting he had better things to do than deal with unimportant stragglers like me.

My heart raced as another shiny black car pulled up to the curb. Another round of screaming cued as the door opened and Marilyn stepped out. She was beautiful, even more stunning up close as she lifted her hand to the crowd and her blood-red lips spread into a huge grin. Her gorgeous gown was Valentino for sure, fitting her body perfectly like she’d been stitched into it minutes before. I was mesmerized as she turned to me and gave me a warm smile. Unlike so many other starlets and Hollywood types, Marilyn was rumored to be down to earth and genuine, something that when paired with all that beauty made her compelling to watch. Which was my biggest mistake.

While I stared like an idiot, I had unwittingly stepped onto the carpet and started moving forward. Not my original plan. Security was so glad I had moved along they hadn’t bothered to recheck my invitation, allowing me to walk unhindered as I floated behind the sea of flashes and reporters calling out her name. And it wasn’t until I had already progressed halfway up the red carpet that I had realized my mistake.

Shit!

Marilyn Steal was not who I was here to see.

Goddamn it I cursed under my breath as I turned, hoping I could slink my way back to the front again. Fat chance if Mr.-Ten-Foot-Tall had anything to do about it.

“Oh my God.” The words wheezed out of me as all the oxygen escaped from my lungs. My chest tightened like I’d been kicked right in between my ribs.

There he was a few feet behind me slowly making his way toward me.

“Eric, look here.”

“Eric, this way.”

Both sides of the line screamed at him as he patiently walked from side to side, signing autographs and taking selfies. Each step he took inching him closer to where I had frozen, my eyes bulging out of my head like a complete lunatic.

There he was.

Eric Larsson, right in front of me.

And not even internet stalking could have prepared me for what he looked like in real life.

Breathtaking.

So handsome he almost didn’t seem real, and as much as I tried I couldn’t stop staring.

Say something my mouth begged as my brain continued on its mental vacation. My eyes scanned every inch of his body like it was planning to build a 3-D replica.

Holy hell he was wearing the absolute *fuck* out of that suit. Every inch of the fabric curling around his delicious body like its life depended on it. And believe me, even though he was covered from head to toe in tailored Tom Ford perfection—I’d seen photos of him in this particular suit before—it did *nothing* to hide how obscenely hot he was.

My heart thumped loudly as he took another step closer, his eyes remaining on the crowd.
“Larsson.”

It rang out clear despite the noise around us. It took me a minute to realize that while my brain had stalled, my mouth hadn’t suffered the same fate. My lips still open as his name left them.

Who the hell yells out his last name? I panicked, unable to tear my eyes from him as his head lifted and his eyes settled on me.

Dear. Lord. In. Heaven. And. All. The. Saints.

Eric Larsson was looking at me.

At me.

At ME!

His brow lifted in acknowledgement as his lips curled, momentarily blinding me as he flashed his trademark smile.

Well, if that wasn’t an invitation, I didn’t know what was.

So, even though I was struggling to breathe—my ability to remain upright also not guaranteed—my feet moved me closer toward him. My internal pep talk worked overtime as I reminded myself we were on a mission. Two minutes of eye contact, conversation . . . and something about me finding out what an asshole he was.

“Hi.” The best I could do given the circumstances.

Intellectually I knew the man was tall. I mean, in my head I figured I knew what six-foot-four looked like. But as I lifted my eyes, it didn’t come close to where I should be looking, my gaze hitting his chin before I tilted my head even higher.

“Hi,” he responded, the single word sent a shiver down my spine as he unleashed another blinding smile.

Those eyes were something else. The clearest blue I had ever seen, and though I knew it wasn’t possible it seemed like they illuminated from the inside out. Like magical orbs, the weight of their stare hypnotized me, pulling me in closer like a force field. I couldn’t have looked away if I’d tried. Not that I tried, and not that I wanted to.

And oh Lord have mercy, did he smell *good*. Mouthwatering. Ridiculous that it would even get a mention given I already had those eyes, his face and his delectable couture-wrapped body to contend with. Yet there was his scent wafting up my nose uninvited. A sadistic mix of sexy, clean and masculine—probably Calvin Klein—overwhelmed me as I fought the urge to bury my head in his neck and inhale him like a line of cocaine.

Say something you dumbass. My mouth begged as my hand, completely of its own accord, reached out and rested on his arm.

Holy. Freaking. Shit. I. Was. Touching. Him.

Do not moan, I reminded myself.

“Congratulations on the movie.” Words poured out of my mouth, thankfully in a sequence that made sense, as my fingers struggled not to caress the fabric of his suit. My fingers didn’t listen, slowly stroking in small—slightly inappropriate and rather suggestive—circles.

Wow, this is a really, *really* nice suit.

Do not lick it.

Yes, my hand was still on him. And he didn’t ask me to move it, so it was staying exactly where it was.

“Thank you.” He seemed amused; the words paired with an intrigued smirk emitted the equivalent force of a concussion grenade. “I hope you are sticking around to enjoy it.” His brow

rose as his smile widened.

Oh my God, what does that mean?

What?

Lord knows any ability to reason had left me hours ago; I was amazed I still had the ability to stand.

And while reading between the lines was not a quality I currently possessed, I wasn't stupid enough to think he was flirting with me.

Which is probably why rather than answer him like the sane person I clearly wasn't, I stood there looking deranged.

How he was able to resist the crazed look I was giving him was a mystery.

"Are you okay?" He laughed, his eyes flashing down to where my fingers had unconsciously tightened around his arm.

I stayed mute, bewildered by how he could be so unfazed by the crazy woman who was gripping him like a life preserver. No guesses as to who that crazy woman was.

"Yes." Nod. "Fine." Nod. "I should go."

It wasn't my best work but all I was capable of as I unlatched my claw-like grip on his arm, caressing the soft fabric of his suit one last time—dear God, had it been constructed from the hair of angels—and turned around.

"Bye," I muttered under my breath as I walked toward the entrance of the theatre.

"Hey, wait," someone called out behind me, probably security wanting to haul my ass out of there for sexually harassing Eric Larsson's suit.

Crap, they're onto me.

Without skipping a beat and maintaining my focus on a man with a fascinating bald spot in front of me, I kept walking, ignoring whomever was trying to get my attention. My plan was simple, get in and seated ASAP because surely they wouldn't want to cause a scene and drag me out. At least that is what I was counting on when the usher gave me a pointed look as I walked aimlessly down an aisle.

"Your seat is here." She shone her flashlight at a vacant seat not far from the front. It was on the side with easy access to an exit. Good. I was already planning my possible escape route should it be necessary.

My head and body felt completely detached as I lowered myself into the chair. The people around me gave me polite smiles as I tried to tame my wide-eyed expression that was bound to tip off security I didn't belong there. I'd had a good run, surely at any minute I would be discovered for the fraud I was and I'd get tossed out on my ass.

My phone came out immediately, its screen my sole focus as I tried to look inconspicuous. Not an easy feat when I'd just touched Eric Larsson.

That hadn't even been part of the plan.

And God.

That smile.

Those eyes.

I couldn't even reconcile how wet he'd made me.

If I did go to jail, it would have totally been worth it.

And FYI, my panties were toast. How they hadn't spontaneously combusted was still a mystery.

Oddly enough, it hadn't occurred to me until now that I would have to sit through the movie after meeting him. Which was hysterical considering that's what the invite I procured was for.

The microphone popped at the front of the stage, the spotlights focusing on the man who identified himself as the director as he spoke. I had no idea what he was saying, his lips were moving but he could have been talking Swahili for all I knew. Slowly he introduced each of the actors who joined him up front.

Eric was the last to join the group, my heart beating wildly as I watched him confidently stride across from my side of the theatre, literally a couple of feet from where I was sitting.

He smiled in my general direction and despite it being unreasonable that he saw me in the dark, I convinced myself that smile had been for me. I was so far gone with the insanity, why stop now.

“Thanks for joining us.” He looked incredibly relaxed as he nodded to the rest of his cast. “I loved working with these guys, only thing I won’t miss are those three a.m. wake-up calls.”

Marilyn laughed before taking her turn at addressing the audience. I’m not even going to pretend I heard a word that she said. Instead I sat there silently, perched on the edge of my seat trying to send subliminal messages to Eric that he turn and look at me. Because that would help with my out of control heartbeat and inability to sit still. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Enjoy the movie.” Mr. Director nodded to the crowd as the spotlights dimmed. Eric and the rest of the cast exited stage left.

This was not how it was supposed to go down. The plan had been to meet him, find out he was a dick and be cured of my infatuation. Instead I’d been thrown headfirst even deeper into it.

Firstly, as impossible as it seemed, he was even better looking in person. He was gorgeous. That body. That smile. Those eyes. No shit, it was like staring directly into the sun.

Secondly, he *hadn’t* been an asshole. No, instead he’d been fucking charming and kind—well as much as you can be in a few minutes—and incredibly polite considering I was probably giving him crazy eyes.

And therein lies the problem. No asshole-ish behavior. That wasn’t going to work for me. Nope. Not one little bit.

So as the movie rolled—Eric’s face filling the massive screen—I realized two things.

One, this was going to take some more work on my part. And two, I was in serious trouble.

Chapter 4

Unlike the movie premiere, I hadn't even tried to get an invite to the after-party. Not because I thought I'd be pushing my luck—we'd already established I had issues with boundaries and authority—but because I hadn't thought that far ahead. Honestly, a rookie mistake and one I would not be making again if given the chance.

So when I stood at the end of the movie—which had been brilliant, no surprises there—I had another panic attack when the good-looking, tuxedo'd man with amazing hair sitting beside me asked me if I was going.

I hadn't even noticed him when I sat down—too caught up on not acting like a fugitive—which just goes to show how out of my mind I'd been.

"I'm Rafe and this is Blaine. You should come with us." His head tipped to his equally tanned, tall and good-looking friend who was smiling at me expectantly. "It will be good networking. You're an actress, right?"

"Umm. Yes. Yes, I am." Well, technically not a lie considering the performance I was currently giving. "Tia." I held out my hand, my smile a little too enthusiastic.

"Well, Tia." Rafe hesitated over my name. "Then you should definitely come. All the big dogs will be there, it will be a great career move."

"Yes, I think I should." I nodded, completely ignoring that Rafe and his buddy were probably looking at it as an opportunity to *network* themselves into my pants. Oh well, I guess if everyone was being dishonest I wouldn't have to feel guilty ditching them. I had already secured my place burning in Hell, what difference would an extra misdemeanor make.

Partly because I didn't want to lead them on any more than I already was, and partly to ensure I didn't wind up roofied in a strange hotel room—I agreed to meet Rafe and Blaine at Bar Koko, the location for the after-party. They'd offered to give me a ride—I'm sure not just the one in their car either—but didn't put up too much of a fight when I'd hustled myself into a cab and assured them I'd see them soon.

And like they'd said, Bar Koko wasn't too far away. The six-dollar cab ride would have been completely walkable if I wasn't in heels, in L.A. and pretending to be something I wasn't. So, I tipped my driver and reminded myself this could all be chalked up to research. Who doesn't love a good story?

"You made it." Rafe exited his shiny black Jaguar and tossed the valet the keys. "You ready to go in?" Blaine joined him on the sidewalk.

"Yep. Completely ready," I lied as I fixed the smile on my face and straightened my dress.

"Awesome." Rafe smiled as he put his hand around my waist and led me right past security.

They didn't even scan their guest list for our names. Not even check our ID. Just a smile from Rafe and boom we were in.

And instead of being thankful and walking right in, I had to open my big mouth. "Don't you think they should have better security?"

Blaine laughed and then gave Rafe a funny look. I'd seen that look before, the kind where everyone knows the joke except you.

"My dad owns the production company." Rafe smirked. "They pretty much let me do whatever I want in this town." His hand slid seductively down to my ass and gave it a squeeze. "You want to *audition* for me?"

Great.

Just fucking great.

While I had avoided being arrested for trespassing, I had somehow stumbled into the biggest fucking cliché of all mankind. I should have been horrified that the octopus—seriously, did he have more than two hands?—was currently groping my ass, but instead I was relieved. My way out of this mess was so easy, I almost felt sorry for him.

“Oh, wow. That’s so awesome.” The smile exploded on my face as I dug into my clutch and pulled out my cell. “I can’t wait to tell my mom I’m dating a millionaire.”

“Errr.” Rafe looked at me and very quickly dropped his hand, taking a step back.

“Let’s take our picture together. We make such a cute couple.” I angled the phone, switching the camera so we could take a selfie. “Get close so my mama can see how much you love me.”

“Um . . . Tia.” He blinked from the flash.

“Oh, I know. It’s sudden.” I threw myself at his chest, circling my hands around him tightly. “We just met and everything, but I can already tell you are the *real* deal. Tell me, do you believe in love at first sight? Because I’m feeling the magic between us.”

“Look, clearly there’s been a misunderstanding.” He laughed nervously, adjusting his bow tie and shooting wide-eyed looks at Blaine who was looking at me like I was insane. “Why don’t you enjoy the party and maybe we’ll catch up later.”

“Oh really?” I pouted trying to sound disappointed. “Make sure you come back for me though. I’ll miss you if you’re gone too long.” My head bobbed enthusiastically.

“Yeah, whatever.” He took a quick step backward, Blaine swift at his side. The unmistakable, “She’s fucking crazy,” heard as they scuttled away.

So long, asshole. I laughed heading toward the bar. Of course it would have been easy to do the whole indignant slapping him across the face or telling him I was going to wear his balls as a necklace. But you want to put the fear of God into a man like that all you need to do is throw commitment at him. It was the equivalent of wearing a sign that advertised you had herpes *and* gonorrhea. I’d guarantee you he was going to spend the rest of the evening avoiding me. And I wouldn’t get escorted to the door like a hand slap might have earned me. Winning all round.

“What are you having?” The bartender leaned across the bar.

I debated asking him to toss me a bottle of his most potent liquor to save time on refills, but I relented. Necking a bottle of tequila in a place like this wouldn’t be smart. Still, I was going to need more than champagne or a fucking Lemon Drop.

“Okay, so I’m probably going to be one of those customers you hate.” I didn’t bother smiling knowing the barman had little interest in anything other than my drink order. “And that’s totally fine. I will completely ignore you calling me an asshole or bitch or whatever colorful name you think of to your bar friends as long as you keep the drinks coming. Actually, I’m going to *need* them to keep coming. I promise your tip will be worth it.” I put down a fifty on the bar hoping that people weren’t tipping hundreds.

“Tough night?” He laughed as he leaned in closer.

“You could say that.” I smiled, easing my butt onto the newly vacated barstool. “There’s more fake smiles and plastic in this place than the Mattel factory.” I looked around at the extra tanned, tall, exaggerated smiling, *beautiful* people not far from us. “I’m positive no one here actually has real boobs.”

“Right.” He tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh. “So you have any preference to this drink I’m making?”

“Strrrroooooong.” I looked enviously at the shiny bottles lining the bar behind him. “Vodka is good. The higher the alcohol content the better. But mix me up something that resembles a cocktail so I don’t look like an alcoholic. And don’t even think of giving me a cosmo, in fact anything with juice is a no go. Juice is strictly a breakfast drink and my brain is already scrambled as it is without trying to figure out what time it is based on what I’m drinking.”

“Quite a list of demands.” A voice came from behind me.

Oh. Fuck.

I knew that voice. I didn’t even have to turn around, the shiver down my spine and the clenching of my girly-bits were enough of a confirmation.

I knew *who* it was.

“Heyyyyyyyy.” I swiveled around casually on my stool trying not to flash my panties and look nonchalant at the same time. Pretty sure I was only able to achieve one of those things. I went with keeping my panties hidden.

“Whatever you’re making, we’ll take two.” Eric moved closer, his hand resting on the bar. “It sounds interesting and she’s right about the juice.”

“On it.” The bartender left to go make our mystery drinks.

“Did you enjoy the movie? You looked pretty excited on the carpet. I hope we didn’t disappoint you.”

“I-I . . .” My mouth got stuck in a groove as words seemed to elude me. And then realization dropped. “You remember me?” Out of everything that came out of his mouth, that’s the part that stuck with me.

We met and spent maybe three minutes together tops. There were people before and no doubt people after, and out of all of them he remembered our brief, albeit crazy, encounter?

“It’s not everyday someone molests my suit on the red carpet.” He smiled, looking down at the arm I had fondled.

“Well to be fair, it’s a really nice suit.” I fought the urge to touch it—and him—again. I also didn’t add how incredible he looked in it. Yay me.

“My suit thanks you.” The blinding grin was back and I had to grip the bar so I didn’t topple off my stool. “So, are you going to tell me your name?” Those eyes of his bored into my soul and I knew I didn’t have a chance. “I’m Eric, but I’m assuming since you knew my last name you probably know my first.”

God he was charming. Seriously, he could have forgone the whole introduction thing, it was fairly clear I knew who he was. But instead he said his name, holding out his hand like a complete gentleman who was making my insides twist. So much for being an asshole. That plan was a bust.

“Yes, I know who you are. I’m Tia.” I accepted his hand, keeping the crazy eyes under wraps despite the skin-on-skin contact. “Tia Monroe.” Because just giving him my first name clearly wasn’t enough. I guess I should be glad I didn’t volunteer where I lived, my social security number and pin code for my bank account.

“Here you go.” The bartender returned, two highball glasses filled with mainly white liquid and ice placed on the bar in front of us. “Strong and no juice. I’ll get started on your next round.” He shot me a wink before leaving us again.

“I didn’t get to pay him. The fifty was the tip.” I reached for my purse, ready to flag the bartender back over. “I have cash.”

“It’s an open bar, the studio’s paying,” Eric leaned in and whispered, handing me a glass before taking one for himself.

“Thank you.” I lifted the glass and took a sniff. Wowza.

He wasn’t joking about it being strong, I’m pretty sure we could power the Space Shuttle on the contents of the glass. Oh well, too late now.

Eric watched me as I lowered the glass to my lips and took a drink. Those eyes were mesmerizing as I swallowed almost all of it, giving my esophagus third-degree burns. Not sure why I felt the need to take it in one big gulp, probably because I lost brain cells when I looked at *him*, and the fact he was looking at *me* meant I was basically rendered stupid. Oh well, at least the alcohol should help me not be so uptight. Or not. I really hadn’t thought this through.

“Wow, you must have been thirsty.” He laughed, taking a swig of his before lowering it back onto the bar. “Most girls I know sip their drinks through a straw.”

“I’m from New York,” I offered in way of an explanation. Which made no sense at all other than giving him even more information. Seriously, what the hell was wrong with me?

“Hmm.” He rubbed the base of his chin with his forefinger and narrowed his eyes. “And you’re an actress?” He seemed skeptical, smart man.

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded unable to actually say words and perpetuate the lie, not when he was looking at me. Safer to keep my lips closed, lord knows what they were capable of.

“Interesting.”

“Not really.”

“Is this where you tell me that you are a serious stage actress and look down on us lowly film people?” Eric baited, his lip curling at the edge. “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Oh hell no.” I lifted my glass and took another gulp. “Trust me, I am in no position to judge anyone.” And wasn’t that the truth.

“Well, then you are in the minority here. See all those people?” His arms swept across the room. “Every single one of them is judging.” His eyes fixed on mine. “So if you aren’t . . . well, then that makes you the exception.”

“Ha! If you only knew.” Abort, abort. What the hell was I saying? My lips pressed together in an effort to stop them. Rogue bastards couldn’t be trusted.

“Now I really want to know.” His smile was hidden behind the glass, wisely nursing his drink instead of downing it like I had.

“Oh, you know . . .” The heat prickled my neck as I fought for something to say. “I’m from New York.”

“So you said.” He grinned seeming to enjoy watching me wriggle around like a worm on a hook. “What part, it’s a big city.”

“Brooklyn,” I squeaked, shutting my mouth before I drew him a diagram of my neighborhood on a napkin.

One thing was for sure, I still had no idea what he was doing talking to me. Other than to possibly get my name so he knew how to address the restraining order, it didn’t make sense. His girlfriend—the stunning model with perfect hair—must have arrived separately. I’d caught sight of her when I was making my way into the theatre. She had been draped around Eric for some photos at the start, but I didn’t see her through the movie and she was noticeably absent now.

“Enough about me, let’s talk about you,” I scrambled, desperate to steer the conversation away from anything that might incriminate myself. “So, big night, huh? Your girlfriend joining you?” I looked around waiting for her to appear.

Because I couldn’t leave well enough alone and just enjoy him. Nope, I had to remind myself that while he hadn’t been the disappointment I’d hoped, he was still very much attached to someone else. Well done. Ugh.

“My girlfriend?” He looked confused for a minute before adding. “You mean Anna? You know each other?” His eyebrow rose, probably wondering what mental asylum I’d escaped from. Given the evidence he had in front of him i.e. my behavior, couldn’t say I blamed him.

“No, no I don’t know her.” I tried to smile, the crazy eyes at risk of making a return. “I’ve just seen . . . you know, magazines and stuff.” Truly I wasn’t an idiot even though I sounded like one. “I mean, I know of her work.” Slightly better, at least I didn’t bring up the dartboard I childishly pinned her photo to. Thank you Jesus for small mercies.

“Ahhh, yeah she had to fly to London. Fashion show.” He took another sip of his drink as two more glasses appeared on the bar. Awesome.

“Well, that’s too bad.”

Who was I right now? The new drink found its way into my hand and I once again swallowed it faster than I meant to.

Oh God, not this again. My plan to drink it fast was not wise as I started to feel slightly light-headed. As appealing as it was to get drunk, I couldn’t trust myself not to make a bigger fool of myself than I had already.

“Yeah, it is too bad.” Eric’s Adam’s apple bobbed slowly against his throat as he drank deliberately. And I was either drunker than I thought or ridiculously turned on, because I don’t think I had ever seen anything so erotic.

“I’m sorry.” I’m not sure why I said it and what exactly I was apologizing for. Maybe for objectifying him. There was a list of things really, so a general sorry wasn’t out of place. New plan—stop drinking immediately.

“Thank you.” He looked genuinely surprised, his eyes focusing on me like he hadn’t quite worked me out. “I think it’s your turn to tell me about yourself.”

“Hey Larsson, we heading out?” A tall, good-looking guy sidled up beside Eric saving me from *my turn*. “I’m bored with this party already.” His eyes dipped to me before flashing me a smile. “Who’s your friend?”

“Tia Monroe.” The way he said my name sounded so freaking sexy I had to remind myself not to groan. I also had to stop staring, and thinking how perfect it had looked coming from his lips. And how much I would *love* to see it again.

“Well, Tia Monroe.” Mystery guy ignored Eric, giving me his full attention. “You coming with us?”

No, of course not. I’ve just met you and nothing good can come of this. Is what I should have said. “Where?” I couldn’t help myself.

“In-N-Out Burger. It’s sort of a tradition.” Eric elbowed mystery man. “And ignore Ryan, he has problems with social boundaries.”

“Ryan? Your name is *Ryan*?” I didn’t even try to hide my eyes almost bulging out of my head. What were the chances? Lila was right, there really always *is* a Ryan.

“That’s me.” Ryan’s grin widened as he moved closer to me. “Have to admit that being with this guy,” he thumbed over his shoulder toward Eric, “isn’t easy. But that look you are giving me is doing wonders for my ego.”

“Easy boy, this is a nice place and I’m sure Tia doesn’t want her leg humped. And there is nothing wrong with your ego.” Eric folded his arms across his chest; the fabric of his shirt barely containing the muscles I knew lingered underneath.

It was like being in the twilight zone. Like I’d suddenly slipped through the cracks and got to see behind the green curtain. And let me be clear, I didn’t get to hang out with the cool kids when I was in high school—I was too much of a rogue—so hanging with them now made no

sense. Any minute someone was going to realize the mistake and Ha-Ha me.

“Now you’ve scared her, couldn’t stand that for once they preferred me to you.” Ryan waved his hand in front of my face. “Come back to me, Tia. I’m not ready to say goodbye.” He clasped my hand dramatically.

“I’d love to come.” It came barreling out of my mouth before my brain had given it proper consideration. “A burger sounds great.”

A burger sounds great? Why didn’t I just tell him I carried a watermelon and be done with it? And spoiler alert: I couldn’t be sure I didn’t look deranged as I scooted off the barstool, wanting to get a move on before they changed their minds. I was positive any minute the cool police were going to roll up and cite me for fraud.

“You heard her, lover boy.” Eric tapped Ryan on the shoulder. “Go get the car and we’ll get out of here.”

“Don’t fall in love with him while I’m gone.” Ryan gave me a pointed look before disappearing into the crowd.

“Sorry about him. He was dropped at birth.” Eric laughed, not at all surprised by Ryan’s behavior.

“No, he was fine. Excuse me a second, I think my phone just vibrated.”

Of course that was a complete lie.

I had messaged Lila and my sister while in the cab. It hadn’t been a detailed message but told them to expect a full report in the morning. Lila had sent me angry face emojis at the lack of details but didn’t call. My sister had told me she wanted to know as little as possible so she didn’t become an accessory after the fact.

Also, it was in the middle of the night on the east coast, so anyone who would be messaging me would be asleep. However, I was about to get into a car and go “get a burger” with two men I didn’t know. Being hot didn’t disqualify you from being a serial killer, though I doubted Eric would risk fame and fortune to strangle a nobody from Brooklyn. So at least I had that going for me.

But I had to at least tell someone, leave a clue so if I ended up in the trunk of a car hours from now, someone could locate me before my oxygen source ran out. I might have issues, but my brain was still thinking ahead. A quick text to Lila sufficed, letting her know that if I didn’t call her in two hours to call 9-1-1.

Mental note. Call Lila in two hours if I didn’t end up in the trunk bound and gagged so she wouldn’t call the police.

Eric watched me curiously as I typed out my message and set my reminder, the smile ever present on his face.

I should have been panicking. That would be the normal reaction, but we’d already established I was somewhere on the end of that bell curve. Maybe it was the alcohol—possible—or maybe I had been hypnotized by those amazing lips and smile—likely—but as I looked at him, I knew nothing bad would happen. It was going to really suck if I ended up being wrong.

“Wow, it’s almost midnight.” I smiled at him, finishing with my phone and slipping it back into my clutch. Not that I was tired, I had enough adrenaline pumping through me to raise Elvis from the dead.

“Do you turn into a pumpkin at midnight?” His lips twisted in amusement, a waft of cologne assaulting my nose. Do not sniff him, I reminded myself. That would be bad.

“Ahhhh. That’s a huge misconception.” And one a lot of people make. But I had studied fairytales at length—drove my parents insane when I pointed out inconsistencies—and knew this

particular fallacy. “Cinderella never turned into a pumpkin, her carriage did. Her fancy dress disappeared and she lost a shoe. Which honestly could happen to anyone after a massive party. I see a lot of it Saturday mornings on the subway.”

“Well, we’re both still clothed so I guess we dodged that bullet.” His eyebrow rose, a smirk spreading across his lips.

“It’s probably for the best we leave then.” I nodded, wondering whose life I was currently living. “Be a shame for something bad to happen to your suit.”

Like me licking it.

Which is exactly what I wanted to do.

Slowly.

Oh God, why is he looking at me like that? *Please tell me I’m not saying any of this out loud.*

We should definitely get out of here.

Eric broke eye contact with me for a minute and retrieved his phone from his pants pocket. “Car’s out front.” Silencing the message without responding to it. “Ryan’s waiting.” His grin hinted there was more to the message than he was sharing. But short of tackling him down—okay, I considered it for a minute—and reading it for myself, I would probably remain in the dark.

“Sure.” Did I follow him? Was I supposed to lead? No one should leave me in charge of these kinds of things because I end up standing there edging back and forward in place like I had some weird kind of Tourette’s.

“This way.” His hand edged on my lower back as he directed me through the crowd. The weight of his palm was so delicious I actually closed my eyes for a second just to enjoy it. Imagine what all of him pressed against me would feel like? Dear. Lord. And. All. The. Saints.

“What was that?” he asked as we stepped out into a service entry, the laneway empty except for an idling black SUV. “You sounded like you said something but I missed it.”

Oh, he didn’t miss shit. I groaned. Like a feral animal or a cat in heat, some indescribable noise bubbled from deep in my belly and escaped from my lips.

“Nothing.” Lies. I’d said so many tonight, what was an extra one. “I’ve never had In-N-Out Burger. I’m excited.” Our footsteps echoed off the concrete as we walked to the car.

See, I was capable of telling the truth occasionally, especially when it came to food.

“Well then. You’re in for a treat.”

Yeah, tell me something I didn’t know.

Chapter 5

Car etiquette wasn't my forte. Whenever a friend was driving, whoever called shotgun would get the front passenger seat. Slowpokes had to ride in the back. But theoretically it made sense for two friends to sit together. It would be weird for me to commandeer the front seat of a ride when I had only moments ago made their acquaintance.

So rather than have a philosophical discussion about where best to put my butt, I slithered into the back seat behind Ryan. This also solved the dilemma of what I could do in case his intentions weren't actually burger related. One ninja strike to the back of the skull and boom, I could incapacitate him and then roll out of the moving vehicle commando-style.

Sure, I didn't have any actual training. Minor detail. But my dad had brought us up on a steady diet of action movies growing up. And if Bruce Willis could take down a whole bunch of terrorists every Christmas Eve then I sure as hell could do this.

Eric closed the door on my side before walking around to the other side of the car and sliding into the backseat beside me. The front passenger seat left vacant as he closed the door.

"Asshole." Ryan fake coughed, his grin hinting he wasn't too annoyed. "So Tia, what do you do?" He glanced over his shoulder before putting the car in drive.

"Oh this and that." My lips pulled into a tight smile. Give them nothing, *nothing* my subconscious warned.

"Ahhh, so you're an out-of-work actress." He laughed. "Me too. My agent tried to get me to take some bullshit Rogaine campaign, but I said hell no. Who the hell would believe I needed it with this head of hair?"

"It's called acting for a reason, moron." Eric laughed, rolling his eyes as he relaxed into his seat. "That's literally what they pay you to do, pretend to be something you're not."

"Nah, I'm saving myself for greatness." Ryan laughed. "You shouldn't settle either, Tia. Don't let anyone tell you different."

"Thanks." I bit my lip wondering if I should save everyone the trouble and incapacitate myself. Ninja strikes in reverse were tricky; I'd probably knock them both out in the process.

"So." I was in the car with him, I might as well talk to Eric and find out why we had left the party. Up until this point the whole expedition was still pretty much a mystery. "Is there a reason why you left your own after-party to go to a burger place? I mean, surely you have people who can get you a burger?" Not to mention booze, the open bar should have been a huge selling point to stay.

"It's a tradition." Eric leaned forward. "When I started out, all we could afford was a burger to celebrate. Things are different now sure, but I see no point in messing with tradition. And I don't need people to get me a burger. The day I turn into one of those assholes I hope my friends will kick my conceited ass."

"I'll do it," Ryan offered, raising his hand.

"I'm sure you will." Eric laughed.

I had been so wrong. There wasn't a chance he was an asshole or rude or any other offensive stereotype I'd imagined. Hell, I was more of a diva than he was.

Goddamn it. Now I liked him even more.

Girlfriend, I reminded myself. A gorgeous one.

And I wasn't her.

“What about the people there who want to see you, won’t they be annoyed?” It would be hard not to notice the massive superstar you just spent almost two hours watching not being present at a party. The plastic boob parade would surely notice, unless they were *auditioning* for Rafe and Blaine. Always a possibility.

“They’ll get over it.” He shrugged, rolling his head against the headrest. He didn’t seem concerned. “I said hello to everyone who’s important. The rest don’t give a shit whether I’m there or not. As long as they are photographed and get incredibly drunk, they got what they came for.”

“Oh. I guess I didn’t really think about it that way.” Or any other way. Thinking was something I could probably do more of—back there, in that club, before I got in the car.

“What were *you* there for Tia?”

Those fucking eyes were going to be my undoing. Twin glaciers that made my blood stop flowing in my veins when he looked at me. I didn’t stand a chance.

“To see you.”

Like I said, I didn’t stand a chance. My mouth volunteered stuff it had no business to. I blamed those eyes.

“Really?” He seemed surprised, a pleased grin spreading across his lips. “Well that *is* interesting.”

“I freaking knew it.” Ryan who had been largely silent up to this point smacked his hand across the steering wheel. “Tia, I left you for like ten minutes? How could you forget me so soon? I told you not to fall in love with him.” He took a dramatic breath, clutching his chest with the hand that had bitch slapped the steering wheel. “I knew I shouldn’t have left you with him,” he stage-whispered to himself.

“And the rest of the cast,” I quickly added so I didn’t sound like a crazed fan who’d stalked Eric. Because who the hell did that? Shut up. I have no interest in fucking irony right now. “You know. I’ve never seen a big production up close. I was curious.” Yes, curious. Except I didn’t give a rat’s ass about the production.

“Hmmm.” He didn’t seem convinced which proved how smart he was.

I was supposed to be convincing myself he was terrible, not finding more virtues. Clearly I sucked at this. And because I couldn’t leave well enough alone, I had to ask.

“What does that mean?”

“I can see the attraction. To the seeing it all up close,” he clarified, his lips thinned into a tight smile. “It’s all pretty impressive.”

“Yeah. I guess.” *No, not really.* And from what I could tell he wasn’t all that sold on the big deal either.

“What?” The edges of his lips curled like he was suppressing a smile. “You weren’t impressed?” He leaned closer seemingly anxious for my reply.

“By all of that? Ha, nope.” Not the words I had intended to say. I’d been baited and instead of just nodding and smiling, I got reeled in like an amateur. “I mean . . . maybe.”

Yeah, too late. I could already see the satisfaction on his face.

“No, your first answer was right.” He shook his head. “It’s bullshit. I’m glad you weren’t impressed. That’s twice tonight you’ve proved you aren’t one of them. I like that. Don’t apologize.”

“Yeah, fuck the man,” Ryan called from the front, pumping his fist in the air.

“Major childhood trauma.” Eric tapped his finger against his temple as he nodded in Ryan’s direction.

“I heard that, asshole.”

“I intended for you to.”

The car pulled off the main road, the bright yellow, red and white sign greeting us. I wouldn't be lying if I said I wasn't slightly disappointed we had arrived. That was until I looked out the windshield and saw a sea of red brake lights. We were going to be here awhile.

“They're worth the wait.” Eric's chin tipped to the line of cars in front of us.

The burgers must be amazing because the drive thru was packed, bumper to bumper—rivaling Soviet Russian bread lines. No one was getting anywhere fast which was fine with me considering I had Eric Larsson sitting next to me. One hell of a view. They could basically serve me up liver with fava beans and a nice Chianti and I wouldn't complain. I really was a sick individual.

“Oh, I don't mind. I was just going to sit in my room ordering room service and probably eat overpriced hotel nuts. So really, you're saving me in a way.” Not to mention this development had surpassed my wildest expectations.

“If you're going to order room service make sure someone else is picking up the tab,” Ryan called from the front seat, his smirk visible from the rearview mirror. “Eric isn't a cheapskate either, even pays for the Pay-Per-View.”

Eric smiled rolling his eyes at the comment, which got me curious.

“You pay for his room service?” Seemed generous, I mean I assumed they were good friends, but still.

“He pays for everything,” Ryan volunteered. “And for that, he is handsomely rewarded. Driver. Wingman. Burger getter. Whatever he needs, I'm his man.” His head turned, eyeing Eric in the backseat. “So it's just as well I didn't take those shitty jobs advertising crap I don't need. Who else is going to keep it real with you and keep your ass out of trouble?”

“Something you remind me of daily.” Eric laughed, his eyes finding mine. “Besides, as much as he's a pain in my ass—”

“Lies. You love me,” Ryan interrupted.

“I like having him around. Reminds me where I came from and there's no one else I trust.”

“Wow, that's incredibly sweet.” The words slipped out of my mouth as I fought the urge not to swoon. Okay, maybe I did. Just a little.

He looked at me, studying me closer than I felt comfortable with. I had to remember to breathe and assure myself that no one had mindreading abilities. As long as my mouth and the rest of me behaved he would never know how much I wanted to touch him. How much I wanted to kiss him. Just once. Knowing that nothing would come of it. And yet, I still wanted it.

A car beeped rudely behind us, breaking our moment. Thank God too. If I had to keep looking at him, being this close, I might not be able to stop myself from doing something I wasn't decent enough to regret.

But my silent thanks only lasted a minute as the obnoxious horn continued. My body twitched, itching to get out of my seat, and when the horn blared again I had no choice but to twist around to see who the asshole was and where the hell was the fire.

“Always some asshole.” Eric followed my line of sight, the dumbass in the car behind us not caring he was getting the stare down.

Beeping at a stationary line seemed pretty redundant. I mean, where were we all going to go? It's not like we were sightseeing in the parking lot, so you would think logic would prevail and the moron would stop manhandling his horn.

Of course I had used the operative word that was *logic*, of which there seemed to be a

shortage. Both inside and outside of the car—I clearly wasn’t in a position to judge, even if I was judging. And even though his heavy-handed antics didn’t magically move the line, he continued. Blaring his fucking horn like we all didn’t know he was a complete jerk.

I should have sat silently and ignored him like the cars in front of us. Like the other occupants in the car. After all, other than pissing me off, it had no real effect on me. But I had a *real* problem with leaving shit alone. Case in point, I was in a car with Eric Larsson.

As if my body was on autopilot, my finger hit the switch lowering my window, the obnoxious horn louder when it didn’t have the tinted glass as a buffer. And without giving it any more thought—not that there had been any real thought to begin with—I freed myself from my seat belt and twisted my body as far out of the window as I could.

“Hey, asshole.” I glared at said asshole who was white knuckling the steering wheel of a bright red Prius. “You’re at a *drive thru* on a *Monday* night. If you had somewhere important to be, you’d be there. Stop beeping your fucking horn.”

I twisted back into my seat, feeling mildly satisfied. Getting out and beating on the guy’s hood would have been better but I compromised. And honestly, I had tried to resist, but a girl could only take so much.

Eric didn’t even try to hide his laugh, his torso shaking as he gave me an approving nod. Ryan on the other hand had his head twisted around looking at me like I’d grown another head.

“She’s from New York,” Eric offered, looking through the back window at the now silent Prius.

“Oh, well okay then.” Ryan shrugged like that had been enough of an explanation. “Well done, New York.” He shifted his attention back to the front as the line edged closer to the speaker.

“Yeah, well done, *New York*,” Eric echoed, my home state lingering erotically on his tongue as his fist playfully nudged me in the arm.

It wasn’t hard, a tap really, but he had touched me and that wasn’t something to be taken lightly.

“Thanks.” I awkwardly tapped him back, stopping myself from letting my hand linger.

Hey, I didn’t start it, but if touching was now on the table I couldn’t be expected to sit still. I could only be strong for so long.

Ryan placed our order of double-doubles—a burger I was told I was going to *love*—and fries, and we slowly inched closer to the window.

“Here’s your order.” A tiny blonde woman who couldn’t have been any older than nineteen stood smiling at the pick-up window. Her smile widening as she shyly passed Ryan a box of food and a tray of sodas.

Ryan handed her a fifty, but she shook her head refusing the money.

“It’s on the house. We get people like that all the time; it’s nice to be appreciated. Tell your friend in the backseat thank you from all of us.”

“Thanks, will do.” Ryan thanked her again and pulled out of the drive thru. “Free burgers. Tia, is it too soon to say I love you?” He handed back food and drinks to Eric, shooting me a wink before rejoining traffic.

“You should see what I can accomplish when I try.” I laughed sipping on my soda.

“I’d love to see that.” Eric pulled the wrapper down from his burger and took a bite.

Eating shouldn’t be sexy, especially not fast food. I was always nervous about spilling stuff on my dress or having the burger explode in my lap—we’ve all been there. But Eric made it look obscene. His lips moving slowly, the flexing of his jaw—I could feel myself staring. And even

though my mother had told me it was rude, I couldn't make myself stop.

"You're not one of those girls who doesn't eat, are you?" He looked down to the untouched burger beside me. "Because if you are, you are missing one hell of a burger."

"No, I eat," I said, housing my soda in the cup holder as I picked up my fries and shoved some into my mouth.

I wasn't sure what I was trying to accomplish, but seductive wasn't it. The handful I'd taken was too big, puffing my cheeks out as I tried to chew. My mouth looked like a blowfish, a stray fry protruding from my lips. How he was able to resist me was a mystery.

He smiled, reaching up to brush some salt off of my cheek. "It's good, huh?"

"Mm-hmm," I moaned, my mouth still mostly full. And PS, I wasn't agreeing about the virtues of In-N-Out Burger, even if it was delicious.

Thankfully he didn't keep watching, turning his attention back to his meal so I could swallow without it feeling like I was starring in a bad porno. True story, in my head I could already hear the cheesy 70's music as I swallowed hard. That old *Carl's Jr.* commercial featuring Paris Hilton had nothing on me.

"So, we going back to the party?" Ryan called out in between chews. "Or are you done?" The latter part of his question obviously directed at Eric.

I had just worked up the nerve to take a bite out of the burger, the wrapper folded underneath it to ensure I didn't make a mess, when Eric turned back toward me.

"What do you feel like doing?" He watched me take the most delicate bite I could. "You want to go back?"

"Hmmm?" I mumbled trying to make my jaw move faster before stopping suddenly, the flavors exploding across my tongue. "Oh my God, this is good. I mean I wasn't expecting much considering this looks like a glorified McDonald's."

Not to mention this was L.A, we had a zillion burger places on the east coast and even the worst ones were pretty good. I didn't hesitate and took another mouthful, anxious to see if that first great tasting bite had been a fluke. Nope, just as awesome as the second time around. "Wow."

"I told you." He seemed pleased, taking another bite. "If you have room after that, I know a great place for dessert."

I stopped chewing.

Swallowing hard.

Oh no. It *was* a bad porno.

And I wasn't sure if I was actually horrified about that.

Be horrified, damn it.

"No, not like that." He laughed, the look on my face betraying what was on my mind. "It's a diner, they make like a thousand different pies."

"Oh." I laughed nervously, halfway relieved, the other half disappointed. "I probably shouldn't."

And thank God the voice of reason decided to show up. Because this—whatever *this* was—had gone waaaaaaay past the point of being innocent. It needed to stop. Sooner than later.

"You sure?" He hesitated, and if I didn't know better I would have assumed he wanted me to stay. But that was projection. Me, wanting him to want me.

"Yes, I'm sure."

No! No, I'm fucking not. Why I picked that moment to be responsible was ridiculous. I was ridiculous, but I knew there was no way I could look at him eat pie and keep my tongue in my

own mouth. So I guess it was for the best. I mentally flipped myself off.

“If that’s what you want.” His voice was low, a rumble. And it took everything not to just throw myself at him because heading back to my room alone was not what I wanted.

“Yeah, I’ll just head back to my hotel.” *That’s it, keep talking. Do not leap into his lap.*

“You can drop me off at the party, and I’ll catch a cab.”

“A cab?” Ryan scoffed. “Are you knocking my driving, New York?”

“No, I just didn’t want you to go out of your way.”

“It’s not out of our way. Where are you staying?”

And therein lay the problem.

Because them going out of the way was the least of my concerns. My no-tell-dollar-by-the-hour hotel would blow this ruse right out of the water. Not to mention I didn’t fly out until Wednesday, so I’d rather lay low without signposting where I’d been hanging out waiting for the law to arrive.

“The Roosevelt.” It had served me well in the past, what was another little white lie.

“Please.”

“Nice place.” Eric leaned forward and tapped the driver’s seat. “You heard the lady, Ryan.”

“Yes, boss.” Ryan mock saluted as he headed in the direction of my fictitious hotel. I would call a cab from there and go back to my shitty room with no room service. So many things to look forward to. Not.

The drive there was relatively silent. I wasn’t consciously trying to keep my mouth shut but there wasn’t a lot to say. Strangely, even as the traffic and lights passed us by, it wasn’t awkward. I relaxed into the comfortable leather seats and soaked up what I knew would be the dying moments of my amazing night.

When I eventually got out of the car, it was going to be over. This semi-fantasy world I’d been floating in would end because none of it was real. I would get back on a plane, go back to my life and go back to admiring Eric Larsson from afar. That’s the way it was supposed to be. And while I hadn’t unveiled some vile and horrifying character traits that would cure me from this sick obsession—quite the opposite really—I would have to find some other way to get him out of my system. Because that’s what normal people did and I had to, at the very least, try and be normal.

“Here you go.” Ryan pulled up to the lobby of The Roosevelt, the ride ending too quickly.

“Thank you.” I unhooked my seatbelt and reached forward, resting my hand on his shoulder.

“Fuck the man,” I whispered in his ear.

“Hell yeah, New York!” He nodded, the grin threatening to split his face apart.

Before I had a chance to reach for the handle, my door opened, Eric Larsson and his fuck-me suit was standing on the other side of the car door waiting for me on the sidewalk. He looked so perfect, the lights from the lobby illuminating his face just right. His hair slightly mussed, his pristine blue eyes on me like I’d imagined them a thousand times. Except this wasn’t my imagination, he was right there. Life had a very sick sense of humor.

“Tia Monroe.” He smiled nodding his head slightly. “Thanks for making my night more interesting.”

He was thanking me? Was I in opposite world?

“Oh, you know. It was the least I could do.” I laughed like an idiot, my wayward hand leaping from the safety of my side and landing on his rock-hard chest.

Bad move.

I literally had to threaten amputating each finger, one at a time, to stop them from caressing

him. Honestly, I wasn't positive it wouldn't be worth losing a hand over.

"Well. Um. Thanks." Without thinking—something I hadn't been doing a lot of lately—I leaned in closer, reaching for a hug. If I thought the hand on his chest was a mistake, getting in his personal space was insanity of the highest order.

His sexy man scent assaulted me, wafting up my nose and chloroforming me before I had a chance to pull back to safety. That had to be the only explanation why I wrapped my arms around him like a boa constrictor and laid my head on his chest.

Which, in hindsight, only exacerbated the problem. All that sexy man up my nose up close and personal, I'm surprised I didn't strip down in the street and volunteer my vagina as tribute. Please Lord, if you are up there, don't let me be saying any of this out loud.

"Larsson." His name hissed out of my lips as I pulled back, my mind reminding me that as much as I wanted to inhale the man, it was neither possible nor socially acceptable.

And without saying another word, because I couldn't trust what those words would be, I unwrapped my arms and marched my ass into the lobby of a hotel I had no business being in. Which essentially was the theme of the night. Me being places I wasn't supposed to be.

Thankfully he didn't say anything either, but I could feel his eyes on me as I disappeared.

In all the times I'd imagined him, never, and I do mean never, had I imagined myself walking away. Yet here I was. One foot in front of the other and I was gone.

Chapter 6

Reality was an asshole.

It was also less favorable when you were in a bed that wasn't your own. No, I didn't turn around and thrust myself at Eric as he proclaimed his undying love for me. Taking me to his bed and doing things to me that would be guaranteed to make me walk funny.

This could have been for a number of reasons. The girlfriend was the most obvious. We'd just met and barely knew each other, another top contender. But probably the most important—all that attraction and insanity was purely sitting on only one side of the fence. Mine.

So, without the Jerry Maguire you-had-me-at-hello moment, I caught a cab back to Shitsville, making a pit stop in between to a liquor store. Thankfully for everyone involved I made it just before the two a.m. closing time, which saved me from further progressing my life of crime and breaking and entering. Because if I ever needed a drink, tonight—or more accurately this morning—was a time I needed it. I also picked up some juice so I could classify it as breakfast.

And that's why—when I woke up several vodka and orange juices later—I'd completely forgotten I was even in L.A. The whole monstrosity chalked up to a bizarre dirty dream gone bad. And in my dream, it had been *very* dirty.

But no, fate would not be so kind. I was instead hungover, passed out on the floor of a strange room in my bra and panties. The little black dress I'd been wearing had been removed at some point and was hanging precariously from the door handle. My favorite black pumps were still on my feet. So at least I hadn't been as tragic as Cinderella. Small victories.

Which is why when I woke up, hair plastered to the side of my mouth, I took a minute to recall the fuzzy vortex that was my memory. And like I'd been plugged into a light socket, it all came back to me in a flooding rush.

Even in my inebriated state, I could hear the sound of tolling bells.

Annunciating the arrival of the demons coming for my soul.

They were getting louder. The end was surely near.

Oh, wait a minute. I moved my head closer to my partially opened clutch, the ringing getting louder as my ear got closer.

Saved! It wasn't the demons after all. I whispered my silent thank you as I retrieved my phone and accepted the call.

"Hello?" I probably should have checked who it was, but my brain hadn't kicked into thinking mode yet.

"Oh, thank God!" Lila breathed a sigh of relief. "You didn't call me and I fell asleep and I forgot to call the cops, and oh thank God they didn't hack you up into tiny pieces." The words rushed out of her mouth with barely a breath between them. "I'd never have forgiven myself if you'd died."

"I wouldn't have either. Next time I'm assigning check-in duties to someone more responsible." I completely ignored that it had been my unplaced call that was responsible for the mess in the first place. The reminder I'd set had been silenced, confused as to why I had set an alarm.

"I'm sorry. I was just about to dial 9-1-1, but I figured I'd call you first. They get tetchy about false alarms."

“This is true. Thanks for that. The door being beaten down by L.A.’s finest is not how I wanted to wake up.”

I shuffled myself into a sitting position, which was a bad idea on all accounts. It made me woozy and further highlighted I was almost naked. Why I hadn’t made it to the bed was beyond me. Obviously it was too much to ask that I be *in it*, but lying on top would have been a suitable concession.

“So, don’t leave me in suspense,” Lila continued, “tell me everything. Do not leave anything out.”

Ugh. The recall.

It was a necessary evil, not because I wanted to relive my antics, but because I valued Lila’s point of view. She was more analytical than I was, whip smart and loyal to a fault. So if anyone could give me some insight into what the hell went down, it was her. She also withheld judgment not only because she was a journalist, but also because her mother had been a madam of a whorehouse. Something like that kicking around in your closet meant you were pretty open-minded. We also got free condoms, so there was that.

Slowly, I recounted the night, making sure to be as detailed as I could. She um-hmmed as I spoke, listening intently.

I didn’t embellish—I doubted it was even possible to be honest—and stuck to the facts. I had even considered watering down the truth but knew that would serve no purpose in the post-mortem so instead spewed out every little piece of insanity until we ended up back to the present.

Silence.

Dead air.

And if not for the sound of her breathing on the other end I would have been convinced we’d been disconnected.

“Do not just sit there silent, Lila, you are supposed to be giving me feedback. Weigh in here.” I squeezed the bridge of my nose trying to ward off a headache.

“I’m confused.” She sounded it too, which wasn’t a good sign. She was supposed to be my voice of reason, if she was confused, I had no hope.

“About what?” There had been a lot of ground covered; she was going to have to narrow it down a bit.

“All of it. He took you out for a burger?”

“It’s his tradition, we already covered that. I was the tagalong.” I waved my hands in the air in an effort to illustrate the point, even though she couldn’t see me.

“But it seems pretty private to share with someone you just met, right?”

“You can’t ask me to analyze his motives, Lila.” I groaned closing my eyes. Nope headache was still there. “I can barely handle my own.”

“Okay, but it sort of sounds like he was flirting and yet he made no moves on you at all.”

“He has a girlfriend. So if nothing else was learned, he is faithful.”

Not once did he try and kiss me. No meaningful touches that could be construed as intimate. And unless you count the playful tap he gave me on the shoulder and his hand pressing against my back when we left the party, he didn’t touch me at all. I, on the other hand, hadn’t been so innocent. Though kudos to me for not trying to kiss him, because as much as I knew he wasn’t mine, I still wanted to.

“Did you get his number?” She hesitated.

“Earth to Lila.” Now *I* was questioning *her* sanity. Like how in any scenario that would have been a possibility. “Did you not pay attention? He has a girlfriend. And I was basically an

imposter. What good could come of me having his number?"

"Ha! A little late in the game to be asking *what good will come*, that ship has sailed, sister." She laughed. "And I was right about Ryan. He sounds perfect for me. You could have at least gotten *his* number."

"Yes, because you dating his über-hot best friend was at the forefront of my mind while I was dissolving into a puddle. How selfish of me." I gave up on trying to remain upright and eased back onto the floor. "Lila, I was supposed to hate him."

"Well, sweet cheeks, things don't always end up the way we want them," she sighed. "Chalk it up to experience, write about it and go back to longing on the other side of a computer screen."

She was right. There was nothing that could be done. Literally nothing. Oh, I could dissect each second and try and tease out what I perceived as implied intention. I hadn't done that since tenth grade when Tommy Nesser kissed me against my locker but didn't ask me out. It hadn't done me much good then—Tommy announcing he was gay in our senior year—and I doubted it would do much good now.

"You still there?" Lila broke the silence, my thoughts and extrapolations being completely one-sided.

"Yes, here. You're right. I'll catch an earlier flight and come home. See you soon." And with a goodbye from both sides, the call was ended.

What I should have done was pick myself up—both literally and figuratively—off the floor, shower and head to the airport. My reason for being in L.A. was no longer relevant and the sooner I got back to normal the better.

But instead of dealing with all the common sense, my fingers wandered over my phone. Just an App selection here and a name typed into a search engine there and wham-o I was looking at the very face I had been staring at last night. Because I was a masochist and needed to torture myself a little more.

And as I scrolled the latest sightings—mostly photos from last night's premiere—nothing had been mentioned of his late-night burger excursion. Not a single photo, no three line did-you-know teaser. It was as if those precious moments had been locked away, hidden from the rest of the world. And for those moments he hadn't been the guy I'd seen in movies or magazines, he was just a guy.

And I was just a girl.

Standing in front of a boy.

Asking him to love her.

Ugh.

Thanks a lot *Notting Hill*! Fuck you, very much.

So, as I vowed to stop and be the adult my birthdate implied I was, I focused on one last photo. It was taken maybe a second or two before I met him, my body just outside of the frame. I recognized it, that smile as he greeted the crowd.

My hand gripped the phone tighter as I focused, my eyes traveling over every inch of the photo.

Staring at him.

And there from the safety behind the screen, he stared back at me.

His perfect fucking face.

* * * *

It was day three AE (After Eric), and life had returned to normal. Well, as normal as it got for a person like me.

A self-imposed Google ban was still in place, and while I often found myself in front of a search bar dying for his name to be placed in it, I resisted. Instead, I redirected my search to makeup websites and rewarded myself by purchasing lipstick. In the span of three days I had accumulated thirty-two tubes of varying shades of red. At some point my credit card was going to be cancelled for suspicious activity, or I'd have enough lipstick to cover every square inch of my skin the color of Satan. It could always be worse, at least I wasn't buying crack.

Even though I was distracted I still turned in my column pieces on time, this one about the essentiality of cat memes to today's society. And while I was nursing a case of do-I-really-have-to-put-on-pants, I left my apartment for my weekly catch up with my sister and her family. Everyone will be thankful to know I was, in fact, wearing pants.

Judith was a different kind of animal. While myself and my younger sister Piper liked to play a little faster and looser with scheduled commitments—Piper's made easier by being in another country—Judith ran her calendar with military precision. It was important to have structure she said, and her kids needed routine.

I could argue that all that up-tightness was putting her on a fast course to premature aging and possibly a heart attack—okay, so maybe sometimes I did argue that—but I loved her and spending time with her and her family was never a chore.

So with a bag of candy for my niece and nephew tucked into my purse—there was a reason why I was their favorite aunt—I got into my car and drove to their house.

While I lived in a small but comfortable apartment in Brooklyn, they had a large Brownstone with a yard. Complete with manicured lawns and an Audi minivan, she was a card-carrying member of the Lululemon brigade.

"You're early." Judith crossed her arms, the front door open as I climbed the steps. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." I smiled giving her a warm hug. "I just wanted to spend some time with my amazing sister, her GQ husband and their outstanding progeny. I couldn't wait a second longer."

"Now I know something's wrong." Her eyes squinted as her hand moved to my forehead. "No fever. Maybe it's a psychotic episode, Will can give me a second opinion." She pulled me out of the doorway into the house, the smell of the cooking pot roast wafting into the hall.

I wasn't lying when I said my brother-in-law was GQ material. Will was handsome, smart and successful, all of which were eclipsed by his love for my sister and his family. And he loved me too, completely tolerating my jokes about his quest to give Manhattan housewives bigger boobs and smaller thighs.

"Will, Tia's sick." We entered the sitting room—no fucking shit, they had an actual sitting room complete with wingback chairs—to find Will reading a newspaper beside a Tiffany lamp.

"Do you guys always have to look like *Better Homes and Gardens* are about to show up?" I rolled my eyes and collapsed into the vacant wingback chair, my torn jeans and vintage Ramones T-shirt completely clashing with their décor. "Fetch me my smoking jacket and my slippers, Judith. We'll take our brandies here." My arm flailed dramatically over my eyes.

"She seems fine to me." Will smirked as he lowered his paper. "But we don't have brandy here, Tia, you know I only drink cognac." He played along, a veteran to my antics.

"Does one boob cover it or do you need to do the pair?" I smiled sweetly at my brother-in-law. "I'm not current with the going price of fancy liquor."

“You rob a homeless person for those jeans or did you pay extra to look like a vagrant?” He laughed, not missing a beat.

“I swear you two act worse than the kids.” Judith sighed. “Dinner is in twenty, let’s keep the conversation PG shall we?”

“Fine, spoil our fun, Judith.” I childishly poked out my tongue as she disappeared to check on her pot roast. I was totally going to feed the kids candy before supper for retribution.

No sooner had I pulled out the extra-large bag of Sour Patch Kids then my phone started to ring. Will groaning at my loud, obnoxious ringtone before I answered, the number not one I knew.

“New York. You’re a tough girl to track down.”

My heart stopped.

Or maybe it skipped a beat.

Whatever was happening in my chest wasn’t normal and I should definitely get an EKG.

“Eric?” I whispered it, in case saying his name out loud might make the phone and the call evaporate.

“Sure is.” His voice vibrated through the phone. “I flew in this morning and I am dying for a burger. You know somewhere decent in the city?”

“Um.”

Blank.

I’d lived in the city my whole life and probably eaten at three-dozen burger places in that time, and not one of them came to mind. My memory gave me its middle finger as I braved this one on my own.

“Give me a minute.” I pulled the phone away from my ear to find Will looking with great interest.

“Drug dealer again?” He lifted a brow, not waiting for a response. “Take it in the study and make sure it’s not cut with contaminants. You can’t trust anyone these days.” He picked up his paper and went back to reading.

“Thanks.” I scampered to my feet and jostled into the study, my fingers fumbling with the door as I closed it behind me.

“Hiiiiiii.” The word came out longer and an octave higher than it needed to be. My butt lowered onto the soft leather of a large office chair as I eased into it.

“Hi,” Eric responded, kindly not mentioning that I sounded like I’d just sucked a helium balloon.

“So, I don’t remember giving you my number.”

Or more to the point, I *knew* I hadn’t. Unless somehow he’d managed astral projection or he’d received those mental messages I’d been sending.

“Are you mad?”

Was this a serious question? Like if someone were to ask you if you want to have an arm amputated? Or would you rather have low fat chocolate instead of Godiva?

“No, no,” I said more confidently. “Of course I’m not mad. I love surprises.”

What the hell was I saying?

“Good.” His exhale made me shiver. “I went back to The Roosevelt the next day, but strangely enough they couldn’t find a reservation under your name.”

“Ah, yeah, that.” They couldn’t find me probably because *Tia Monroe* wasn’t a guest. “It was under another name. I’m in witness protection.”

He laughed.

Not a chuckle or a polite chortle but an actual deep-full-diaphragm-required-body-shaking laugh. I bet he looked good doing it too; I wished I could see him.

“Witness protection, huh?” he managed in between laughing. “Should I worry the call is being monitored?”

“No, this is a secure line, you’re safe.”

“Good.” His voice was smooth, relaxed—liquid. “So, back to my original request. Burger. Good ones. In your great city.”

“Well, most people will tell you *Shake Shack*.”

“I’m not asking most people,” he rumbled, no longer laughing.

I wasn’t even going to pretend that statement alone didn’t make me want to cream my freaking pants.

“*Holiday’s* in Brooklyn.” The answer fired out of my mouth. “Best burgers you’ve ever tasted, I guarantee it.”

“Sounds like a challenge, New York. When are you free?”

Okay, here was where I got perplexed. Because we—and by *we* I meant me and my apparent multiple personalities—had yet to establish A: how he got my number, B: what he was doing in New York and C: where his long-legged, great-hair model girlfriend was.

Also, the request sounded vaguely like a date, which I knew it couldn’t be. Most importantly because of the C I had listed earlier. I was not long-legged or a model and while my hair was adequate, I barely knew him. I swear I was never going to banish myself from online searches again. Damn it and damn those thirty-two red lipsticks I didn’t need. If I’d been keeping up to date, I might know more, and I hated being at a disadvantage.

“Tia? You still with me?”

“Yes, sorry. Present.” I nodded, my affirmation unseen as he was on the freaking phone and couldn’t see me fucking nodding. “I’m here.”

“Good, and if witness protection doesn’t have any limitations, I would like to explore the guarantee you gave me. I have pretty high standards, and if a grievance needs to be lodged then your presence is required. It’s all stock standard in burger ordinance.”

Jesus. Freaking. Christ. And. All. The. Saints.

This man was killing me. Killing. Me.

How the hell was I supposed to say no to that? He’d plainly explained I’d be breaking regulations if I didn’t go, and as a law-abiding citizen I was obligated. And if that obligation wasn’t enough, I didn’t *want* to say no. Because this kind of shit didn’t happen to people outside of the movies—trust me, the irony was not lost on me. So, didn’t I owe it to every woman who’d hung a poster on her wall, wishing that crush would materialize, to see this through? It was public service. A duty, and I wanted to—very, very badly.

“Tomorrow,” I volunteered, the resistance futile. “We’ll go tomorrow. Lunchtime. Is this a number I can reach you on?”

“Yes, it sure is.”

“Okay, I’ll call you.” Wait did he want me to call him? “Or I can text you. To give you directions.” Lame. I was so lame.

“You can *call* me, but I don’t need directions.” His sexy voice rumbled. “As long as I have a name I can find what I need.”

No. Fucking. Shit.

Dead.

Seriously, I stood no chance.

If he told me he wanted to light me on fire tomorrow I'd probably pour the gasoline myself. Did he take classes to be that sexy? I imagined his college transcripts—English, Math, Drama, Panty-Melting—he was on the honor roll for sure.

“Great.” And between now and then I was going to find some game. “See you then.” And get some answers.

“Tia.” Will knocked at the door making me leap out of my seat and bang my knee against the large wooden desk.

“I'll be there in a minute.” I covered the phone with my hand as I hollered at the door praying he didn't hear. “Bye, Eric. Bye.”

Damn it. I said bye twice. I ended the call before I could mortify myself further and opened the study door.

“Sorry.” Will stood in the doorway, a cordless phone in his hand. “But Lila called the house and said it was urgent. She's been trying to reach you on your cell.” He handed me the handset and then closed the door, leaving me alone again.

This didn't sound good; he didn't even make a crack about me having two calls in a short space of time. Something wasn't right.

“Hey, is everything okay?” There was no way she could have found out about Eric calling me and our subsequent date/burger thing. Not unless my phone was indeed tapped and someone had been listening in, alerting Lila. The FBI were not to be messed with.

“Oh. My. God. Tia.” She stopped between each word and took a breath. Shit. Maybe she did know. “Have you been online?”

Huh?

“Um, in general?” Was that a trick question? “Of course. Did a war break out I don't know about?” I flicked to my CNN app on my cell and started scanning headlines.

“Eric broke up with his girlfriend.”

Kaboom.

It felt like a bomb had just exploded, my cerebellum taking shrapnel as my lungs wheezed out every breath of air.

Say what?

“Say what?” I repeated, this time so she could hear because I literally couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Yep, last time they were together was the movie premiere. She left right after and boarded a plane to London and they have been history since.” She barely took a breath as she shot out details excitedly.

“Lila, she is working in London doing . . . whatever models do in London.” My heartbeat started to normalize when it became obvious it had been a case of misinformation. It wasn't Lila's fault, she wasn't as disciplined as I was in matters of the tabloids. I'd seen break up/make up stories a million times, rarely were they true.

“It's not like she's been gone that long. They've worked in different cities before.” And had I not had a self-imposed exile from gossip sites and celebrity reports I would have already known this. Once again proving that nothing good could come from deprivation. Never again, I tell you. Never again.

“No, this isn't that,” Lila insisted, not willing to accept my reason. “Friends have confirmed the split, and if that wasn't enough she was seen cozying up to some other guy at a nightclub. And when reporters asked if she was missing Eric, she said no and full mouth kissed the other guy. I'd say that is pretty clear they aren't together.”

“Oh. Shit.” Breath pushed out of my lungs in a rush and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t make them expand again.

What does this mean?

Deep in the recesses of my brain I searched for some semblance of reason, something, anything where I understood what was happening. He was single? Could I be around him single when there were possibilities? That was a hazard I hadn’t even considered. Where there was a chance? I wasn’t sure whether to get on my knees and thank God for this amazing gift or lock myself in a padded cell. My emotions fluctuated madly, toggling between elated that I was even going to see him again and terrified beyond measure. Not for myself. Oh no. For him. Because there was no way in hell I could be trusted. Did the gods not know what I was capable of? Putting a *single, willing*—he contacted *me*—Eric in my path was like lighting a couch on fire and wondering if it was going to take down the whole house. Of course it would.

Maybe it was a trap? That old adage, *careful what you wish for*, thing.

“What oh shit?” Lila interrupted my freak out. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“He asked me out. I think, I’m not sure.” Or he could genuinely be looking for a tour guide. I couldn’t be trusted to make the distinction, not with my brain in tatters.

“Eric Larsson asked you on a date?” Lila screamed into the phone. A bleeding eardrum could probably be added to my list of trauma for the day as well.

“Sort of . . . Yes.”

“Sort of?”

“Okay, here is what is happening.” I took a deep breath.

It was time to take the wheel of the Titanic before it hit the iceberg. Crap, poor analogy. You know what I mean.

“I’m going to get through dinner with my sister and her family so she doesn’t put the curse of a million suns on my ass, and then I am going to go straight to my apartment. You’re going to meet me there. This is not the kind of conversation we can have over the phone.”

“Brilliant, see you there,” she answered without hesitation. “And bring me pot roast; your sister might have a stick up her ass most of the time, but she knows how to cook.”

“Done. See you soon.” The call ended and my eyes darted around the silent empty room.

“I hope the Viking gods and the other gods know what they’re doing.” My eyes lifted to the ceiling. “Because I’m probably going to break every commandment there is.”

Chapter 7

My living room had been converted into a situation slash war room. Multiple news sources had been checked and rechecked to establish that Eric Larsson had in fact split from Anna Lane. And while no official announcement had been made, there had been numerous sightings of her with other men. It was as good as we were going to get without verbal confirmation.

It was risky. If I assumed they were done and my tour expanded beyond the city, I could definitely get creative. It was *Eric Larsson* for Christ's sake; I'd have to at least kiss him, right? But if I made my move when actually they were on a Rachel-Ross-Friends-break, I would look like a desperate idiot. Not to mention blowing whatever chance I had of seeing him again. Assuming the chance existed.

But if I didn't try anything, and kept it purely platonic, he might assume I wasn't interested and forever banish me to the shadow lands beyond the horizon. The elephant graveyard of relationships, also known as *friend zone*. I was going to have to think on the fly and have the improvising skills of a Navy Seal.

Sun-Tzu once said, "Victorious warriors win first and then go to war." I wasn't entirely sure what that meant but it sounded good, so I was going to try and win first. Whatever *that* meant.

There had been no call to Eric.

Oh, I'd stored his number, assigned it a ringtone and uploaded a profile picture, but not once did I dial it. I couldn't. Because I had no idea what I was doing. It would be tipping my hand and showing I had nothing but a pair of twos, and I wasn't laying anything on the table until I had aces.

So instead of pacing nervously in my apartment or rechecking gossip sites for news of a reunion, I walked the short distance from my place to Holiday's.

It was more productive and I wasn't sure technically when *lunchtime* is. Generally speaking it could be anywhere from noon to like one thirty. I'd even had lunchtime meetings that started at two, so there was a huge amount of time that was open to interpretation. I was overthinking it for sure.

Which is why at eleven thirty—I was being overly cautious—I waved to Danny, the owner, and settled into my favorite booth toward the back. The place was so small you could still see it from the doorway, but it was the furthest from the kitchen, so conducive to conversation. And if that wasn't enough of a reason, it was the only booth that wasn't pressed against a large window, so you could eat your burger without feeling like a zoo animal.

"Your usual, Tia?" Danny didn't even bother with a notepad and pen, the menu wasn't complicated enough to not remember orders.

"Just a soda for now. I'm waiting for someone."

"I thought you looked more dolled up than usual. You don't usually put all that stuff on your face when you come here to eat."

There was no bullshit with Danny. He knew how to feed people and run a successful business, but he had no idea when it came to women. He also had no filter, which I respected even though the uninitiated usually thought he was a rude asshole.

"You turning on the charm to increase your tip?" I laughed. "I'm surprised Eddy hasn't divorced your ass with compliments like that."

"She threatens daily." He turned to go grab my soda, calling over his shoulder, "But she

hasn't found a man who handles a grill like I can."

Danny was right about me being *dolled up* more than usual. I'd even wandered in wearing my PJs one late night not too long ago. It was late, I was hungry and the thought of putting on pants was just too much.

Today I had made an effort. Wearing fitted jeans and a cute top, I had even tamed my hair into even smooth curls. And while I didn't go drag queen on my makeup, I had definitely paid more attention to its application before I left my apartment.

"And in case you were wondering, you look nice." He placed the soda in front of me. "But then you always do."

"Careful, Danny, you're getting soft in your old age. Next you will be selling tofu."

"Bite your tongue, woman!" He smiled and returned to his customers.

It wasn't busy yet but by noon the place would be packed. Literally fifteen minutes difference and it would be wall to wall. Which is why when Eric walked in fourteen minutes later—so I guess lunchtime is noon, good to know—the space had filled with people and he needed to scan the room.

Our eyes locked.

Fuck. Me.

My hands grabbed at the edge of the table as I took him in, striding toward me with a smile that was obliterating my ovaries. He was breathtaking.

Wearing dark jeans, a black T-shirt that clung to every muscle and a pair of mirrored aviators, every part of him a perfect mix of I-just-threw-this-on and I'm-dressed-by-Calvin-Klein. How did he make looking good seem so effortless? I was going to die.

"New York." A smile that had the yield of a nuclear weapon spread across his lips. "I was hoping your important witness protection business wouldn't keep you away."

Dying.

I was a fish flopping around on a pier, gasping for air being slayed by a beautiful man in a pair of designer jeans.

"Eric, how nice to see you again." I stood up, my hands fidgeting at my side. Do I handshake? Hug? Fuse my lips to his throat? There was no fucking protocol for what I was doing.

"Likewise." He inched closer and pulled me in for a hug, his hand pressing slightly against my back.

Dying.

Dead.

Gone.

There was no choice but for me to rest my head against his pecs. I probably didn't need to stroke my cheek against the fabric of his shirt, but he was wearing that incapacitating cologne again. I could not be held accountable. No one deserved to smell that good. He must have harnessed the tears of unicorns or something.

"So, what brings you to New York?" My mouth opened and some words that made sense fell out. Good words too, because I was honestly curious.

"I had a meeting with a director yesterday." He pulled away from me, waiting for me to take a seat before he took his own. "I usually just fly in for the day, but I decided to stick around for a while."

"Oh? New project?" Nothing had been added to IMDb, this was fresh news so I didn't need to feign my interest.

“We’ll see.” He smiled, taking off his sunglasses and placing them on the table. The next weapon in his arsenal unveiled—those ridiculously blue eyes.

“You ready?” Danny appeared at our side, the appearance of my company his prompt to come and get our order. “We have burgers, fries and hot dogs.” He looked at Eric. “Or you can look at a menu.”

“Not needed. I’ll have whatever she orders.” Eric tilted his head in my direction. “And a beer if you have it.”

“Sounds good. Two Tia regulars and a beer.” Danny recited the order, disappearing before he had a chance to confirm it.

“You’re putting a lot of trust in me. What if my regular order is some vegetarian option with a side salad instead of fries?” I bit my lip, more thrilled than I should be that he allowed me to order for him.

“I highly doubt it.” He eased back into his seat. “And I like to live dangerously.”

No. Shit.

I’d say tracking someone down and meeting up with them when you barely knew them was pretty dangerous.

Oh, where have I heard that before?

Yeah, that’s right. Me. He basically pulled a me, on *me*.

Oh, he was good.

“How did you get my number?” I took a sip of my soda making sure I smiled so I didn’t look annoyed. “You still haven’t said.”

He might have sidestepped it earlier, but he would have to be pretty slick to out me, me. And I could me, me better than anyone.

“I have my sources,” he whispered. “But you didn’t make it easy for me. Your social media was locked down, so I had to resort to old school methods.”

The social media lockdown had been initiated because of the paper. It was the first piece of advice my editor had given me. I said a lot of personal, sometimes controversial stuff as part of my column. I didn’t need some psycho on my doorstep wanting to rip out my heart because of my firm stance on *leggings aren’t pants*. So only my first name was printed and I work tweeted on a generic account. Everything else was on strictly need-to-know basis, with my “friends” being actual people that I knew.

“You looked me up? All just to make sure you got a good burger?” My eyebrows rose as I tried to suppress the grin. “There’s this thing called *Trip Adviser*, I hear it’s pretty good.”

“I’m going to let you in on a secret.” He leaned over the table, bringing his lips closer to my ear. “I’m not here for the burger.”

A chill ran right down my spine as every hair on my body stood on end. That wasn’t the only thing that was standing on end with my nipples poking against my bra trying to find a way out. And if he happened to look down, he would see it too, the twin beacons at my chest waving him in like an airplane making its final descent.

“Me?”

It probably didn’t need to be asked and I was seriously underselling my intelligence. But this wasn’t something I needed to be unclear on. I wasn’t arrogant enough to assume he was interested in me in the same way I was interested in him. Or that he had thought about pressing that obscene body of his against mine until we both forgot who we were. No, those had been my fantasies. So until he told me otherwise, I would assume his interest in me was something else. Maybe there was a part in his latest movie where he needed someone to scream out obscenities. I

had zero acting experience but swearing I could do on a dime. That, *that* would make sense.

“There aren’t a lot of women who intrigue me anymore.” He didn’t take his eyes off me when he spoke, ignoring the noise around us. “But you had me curious. So here I am.”

Well that was a whole lot of nothing. I intrigued him? Was I a Rubik’s Cube? A murder mystery? A Walkman circa 1980’s?

“Here you go. Two cheese burgers, no mayo, no onion with fries. Enjoy.” Danny lowered two plates on the table in front of us. “Yell out if you need anything, we’re getting hammered at the front.” He winked at me before leaving.

“No mayo?” Eric picked up his burger examining it. “What’s up with that?”

“I don’t do white condiments.”

He stopped looking at his burger and looked at me, his mouth twitching at the edges.

“Yes, yes. I know how it sounds.” I rolled my eyes, the reference not intending to be an obscene innuendo. “It’s a thing, I’m a weirdo.”

I stopped short of telling him I had no problem with what he was probably thinking—or what I was thinking—because that would be too weird even for me.

“Juice is strictly a breakfast drink, witness protection, doesn’t like white condiments. This is quite a list of things to remember.” The edges of his mouth twisted into a grin.

Breathe.

In and out.

Sun-Tzu could kiss my ass. I wasn’t winning shit.

“Did you break up with your girlfriend?” I asked with absolutely no segue. Tossing in a conversation grenade for no other reason than my mind was thinking it and I needed to know.

“Yes.” His one-word answer making me want to drop to my knees and give eternal thanks.

“So you are currently single?”

You can never be too sure, too many loopholes these days.

“Yes.”

“And you aren’t here for a burger.” My eyes dipped down to our plates, both still full of food, no bites taken.

“No.” His eyebrow rose.

“And I *intrigue* you?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t even look away, his intense gaze searing me like the stupid burger I was supposed to consume after the eye fucking he was giving me across the table. Oh, make no mistake, that’s exactly what was happening. All his one-word answers and his sexy face. He might as well have stuck his hand into my jeans and rubbed my clit. Same result was achieved.

I was turned on, confused as fuck and wondering how the hell in two minutes flat he’d gotten the upper hand.

“You’re not speechless are you, New York?” He picked up a fry, just one, and lazily brought it to his mouth, smirking.

No one ate one fry at a time. No. One.

“Eat your burger.” I tried to sound unfazed, picking mine up and taking a small bite. “If you’re still hungry after that I know a great place for dessert.”

His eyes widened, the words he’d once so innocently tossed my way coming back to haunt him. And newsflash, I didn’t mean a diner that served a thousand different kinds of pie.

“I’m looking forward to it.”

Well, that made two of us.

Chapter 8

Sex with Eric was something I'd imagined at least a million times. Maybe more. Possibly even a billion. He was my go-to whenever I needed a little help. There had been times when I'd been with an *actual* guy and still fantasized about Eric.

This didn't make me special; it just made me honest. Because guaranteed if you asked a girl if she had tucked away some dude who could take her to her happy place in a second, she would either answer yes or be lying. Most of us weren't innocent little wallflowers who blushed when you showed them a penis. Unless it was unsolicited; but that's another story.

So, as we rode the elevator, smoldering looks going on from both sides, I was faced with a very interesting conundrum.

I was in lust with him. No two ways about it and I wanted to feel him above me, below me, and everything in between. But I also liked him. Not because he looked amazing and his body was insane—okay, not only for that. But because I could see just below the surface he was more than that. Which was sort of ridiculous because I barely knew him. But even with that, knowing him for like three seconds, I could tell there was more.

So if we did *it*, would all of it end before it ever began? Could I accept being his one-night stand, because what else could this be? I mean it was Eric Larsson for Christ's sake, he wasn't going to date some nobody from Brooklyn. The fact I'd even considered it was proof to how much my mental wellbeing had slipped. Maybe I needed to join Valerie Vine in her rehab? At least I would get a chance to thank her properly for getting me this far.

Sex. No strings. One night. Maybe a few more—I wasn't sure how long he was in town for. Could I have him and then walk away?

My hormones were saying a resounding hell yes we'd cope. We'd be fine. We'd wrap all those memories up in a blanket and tuck them away for eternity. Treasure them. Tell stories when I was eighty in the nursing home about the time I slept with a famous person. Impress the fuck out of those nurses when I showed his picture. Mental note. Get at least one picture together.

But my head was saying that while I hadn't always made the smartest choices, this one might be bad. Real bad. *Might*, however was the operative word. A possibility. As in, maybe it will be okay. Which is why my hormones were winning the argument, my girlie parts rejoicing!

"So how long are you in town?" Had I asked that back at the burger place? Now was not the time to get awkward.

"A few days." The eye fucking continued, his hands yet to touch me.

"Well, if you need a tour guide . . ." Please Tia, get your shit together. This wasn't a freaking job interview. "I can point you in the right direction."

Please for the love of God and all that is holy make my mouth stop. I knew how to be seductive, why couldn't that part be running the show.

"I might take you up on that."

What does that mean? What does it mean!

"Here we are." The metal doors of the elevator thankfully opened on my floor, saving myself from further mortification. "I'm just here." My arm game-show-waved to my front door. "I'll just get my key." Unless Vanna White was standing behind it and wanted to do me a solid, opening the fucking door.

The commentary was killing me but I talked when I was nervous. It didn't happen often—I rarely got rattled—but it was my coping mechanism. Which I guess was a welcome change from the stunned silence I had been experiencing before, so there was that.

Eric watched carefully as I slid my key into the door and unlocked the fifty-two—okay three, my dad was super security conscious—locks before we could enter my apartment.

I should have thought this through.

While I wasn't messy by any stretch of the imagination, my apartment was definitely lived in. There was also the fact that my personal space wasn't ready to meet new people, and it had nothing to do with my furniture not matching.

The sexy bra and panties set I'd worn on Monday air-drying on the kitchen chair were my first misdemeanor. The thirty-two tubes of red lipstick on my coffee table were my second. I swear I couldn't have planned this worse if I'd tried.

"Ah, the place is a bit of a mess." I closed the door behind us. His eyes went straight to my harlot-red lingerie. "I wasn't expecting company."

He turned to face me, slowly, almost predatory. So fucking hot I couldn't stand it. His eyes on me the entire time.

"What *were* you expecting?" He moved in closer, his body inches from mine.

Oh God, touch me, I wanted to scream, the heat unfurling between my legs almost unbearable. My nipples pebbled underneath my T-shirt, my breasts dying for his hands, his mouth, his * fill in any body part that belonged to him here.* I needed to taste him, cover every inch of his tanned skin with my lips and my tongue and savor him, cat-like with a saucer of milk.

And let's not even talk about what was happening in my underwear, I was so wet and primed, just the slide of his finger would make me explode. Actually having sex? We're talking Chernobyl-level fall out.

There was no way I wasn't going to sleep with him. Not any scenario that would change my mind. I was so wound up that he could have developed leprosy at this point, lose all his limbs, and I'd *still* be a sure thing.

"Tia."

My name had never sounded as sexy as it did coming out of that mouth. My hands, no longer willing to wait patiently on the sidelines, grabbed the fabric of his T-shirt.

"Eric."

I'd barely gotten his name out when his lips came crashing down on mine, his breath hot as his tongue pried open my lips and took ownership of my entire mouth.

Oh Lord in heaven and all the freaking saints, he was good, pressing his body against mine, forcing me backward until my ass hit the wall. Which I was totally cool with, all that delicious weight pressed hard against me as his mouth continued to dominate mine.

And then he touched me. His massive hands reached for my arms and raised them above my head, pinning them between the apartment wall and wall of human muscle that made me gasp. It wasn't just his chest that was hard.

I was going to die.

There was no way I was going to survive this.

No. Fucking. Way.

And I was totally okay with that. I'd had a great life. Achieved a lot. Traveled. The future was overrated. I would die here today, victorious.

My body rubbed against him, desperately seeking more friction as his mouth moved to my neck and I struggled against his hold to free my arms.

In all the times I'd imagined kissing him, it wasn't even close to the reality. He was gold medal, black Amex, Michelin-star good. And I could only wonder how talented the other parts of him were, and if the erection pressed against me was only half as big as it felt I was going to pass out.

"I want you." It came out of my mouth so needy and desperate I should have been embarrassed. Lucky for me the part of my brain that controlled *that* had short-circuited about five minutes ago and I no longer cared.

"Do you?" He laughed at my throat, his hard-on taunting me as his hands trailed down my body until they reached my hips. He pulled me closer, the bulge in his jeans making me tingle in all the right places.

"Touch you." I had stopped speaking in whole sentences, my language reduced to unintelligible words and grunts. My hands didn't suffer the same affliction, braille reading every curve and ripple of his body with uncontained need.

What is happening? A voice in the recesses of my conscience called out. *You barely know this man and now you are going to sleep with him?*

Fuck you, another voice called out. *She's been good; this is her reward.*

"Yes." My fingers moved back up to his face, tracing the lines of his jaw to prove he wasn't a mirage. My mind still unconvinced I hadn't conjured up the wildest sex dream of all time.

"You sure, Tia?" He stopped kissing me for a second, his jagged breaths matching mine. "This hadn't been my plan today."

Now . . . let me think. Was I sure?

If I had an hour left to live, this is what I would want to be doing. If this meant I could never have sex again, I would happily retire my vagina. If sleeping with Eric meant I had to wear a scarlet letter or be burned at the fucking stake, I would get myself stitching right now. And I didn't even know how to sew.

HELL FUCKING YES I WAS SURE.

I nodded, my head bouncing off the wall as his hands went to lift up my T-shirt.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Dying. I was dying. Nothing deserved to feel this good, ever.

"Tia, are you home?"

No.

No.

No.

There was a loud knock at my door. The owner of the voice, none other than my sister Judith.

I was going to kill her.

KILL. HER.

"No," I said loudly both frustrated and disappointed. "Tia can't come to the door right now, please leave her a message after the beep. Beeeeeeep."

On a scale of one to ten, I would rather slather myself in honey and lay down in a pile of fire ants than open my fucking door.

"Tia, that doesn't work on me. I know you are there. Open up, I'm in a hurry."

"It's okay, answer it." Eric's hands left my body and I almost wept at the loss.

"I'm sorry." I cringed, my sister's life only spared because my niece and nephew would be

sad and motherless. “This will only be a minute.”

“It’s fine, New York.” He laughed, adjusting his T-shirt, the evidence it was about to be ripped off disappearing.

Deep breath.

“Judith.” I cracked open the door, my body blocking the entrance. “What did you need?” My smile so tight my cheeks hurt.

“What’s wrong with you?” She eyed me suspiciously, her foot pushing into the doorway. “Open the door, I need to drop off the suit.”

“Now is not a good time.” I glanced at the oversized white garment bag she had in her hand completely oblivious as to what the hell *suit* was inside. “What suit?”

“Seriously, Tia, let me in the goddamn door. I need to get back to work.” She pushed forward, the door swinging open enough that she caught sight of Eric.

It took her a minute.

Just one.

And then realization settled in. That the man in my apartment was the very same one who was the screen lock on my phone.

And my computer background.

And self-proclaimed number one crush.

“Tia.” She said my name but she was looking at him, her jaw almost hitting the floor.

“Yes. Now what was the suit I needed?” I tried acting cool, refusing to acknowledge the movie star in the room. “You don’t want to be late getting back to the office.”

“Hi, I’m Eric.” He put out his hand, giving Judith one of those panty-melting grins I was positive she didn’t deserve. “I’m Tia’s friend.”

“You’re her *friend*?” She narrowed her eyes in suspicious disbelief before turning to me. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Judith, don’t be so rude.” I laughed, playfully slapping her arm, begging her not to ruin this for me. Throwing me under the bus now was a steep price to pay for decapitating all her Barbies when I was seven. “Eric is a friend. Eric, this is Judith.”

“Hello.” She forced a smile, finally accepting his offer of a handshake. “Nice to meet you. Sorry, I wasn’t expecting anyone other than Tia.”

“Nice to meet you too,” he reciprocated before dropping his hand.

“So.” She turned her attention to me, her I’m-not-going-to-embarrass-you-but-you-have-a-lot-of-explaining-to-do look firmly in place. “Here is the rabbit suit for tomorrow. I picked it up and thought you might want to try it on.” She handed me the oversized garment bag, the information she’d given me not any more helpful than her previous statements.

“A rabbit suit?”

Did I slip into some kind of black hole? What the hell did I need a rabbit suit for? And why was Judith delivering it? Oh, did I die for real? This would be my hell. Having Eric Larsson in arms reach, having him rub his probably massive—hello, the man was huge—cock all over me and not be able to sleep with him. Followed by my sister in the room pussy blocking me with a fucking rabbit suit. It *had* to be hell, nothing else made any freaking sense.

“Tia, you said you would do it.” Her lips thinned, trying to maintain her smile. “I am counting on you.”

“Huh?”

Crickets. I had no idea what she was talking about.

“Bridget’s birthday party? The Alice in Wonderland theme? The white rabbit cancelled and

you agreed to fill in? Ringing any bells?” Her eyes widened, warning me “yes” was the only answer she was going to accept.

“Oooooohhhh, that suit.” Nope, I still had no idea. “Yes, thank you.” I draped it over the back of my couch. “Now let me see you out.” I all but pushed her back through the still-open doorway into the hall, shutting the door behind us.

“Are you crazy?” she hissed at me, pointing wildly to my closed apartment door. “What the hell is Eric Larsson doing in your apartment and why does he think you’re his friend? Drugging someone is illegal, Tia.”

“Relax. I didn’t drug anyone.” I held up my hands defensively trying to keep my voice down. Last thing I needed was to advertise the crazy I had successfully kept under wraps. I prayed he didn’t have his ear pressed against the door. Maybe I was the only one who did that.

“And please tell me you didn’t kidnap him and now he’s Stockholm Syndrome-ing you.” She was still hissing at me but this time her hands were perched on her hips. “Our parents would not be able to handle the trial, and orange would look hideous on you.”

“I didn’t kidnap him either; he is here of his own free will. I swear.”

Sure, maybe she had a point. Eric showing up in my apartment days after my whirlwind trip to L.A. to meet him—the unobtainable guy I’d been lusting over—looked suspect. But why she thought the worst was beyond me. I had never done anything *that* illegal. Okay, I had never done anything that illegal and gotten caught. Still, she was my blood, she was supposed to be supportive of me.

“Mind alternation? Hypnosis? Subliminal messages?” The hands from her hips were now waving in the air, her struggle to keep her voice down making her face turn red. “I knew you going to L.A. was a mistake.”

“Would you calm down.” I grabbed her arm and moved her further away from the door. “I didn’t do anything wrong, okay.”

“Really?” she scoffed, not buying it for a second. “So he just happened to wander into town and just show up at your apartment? C’mon, you’ll have to do better than that.”

Fine, in theory the situation was farfetched. Hell, I knew the truth and even I couldn’t believe it. Still, miracles happen all the time. Blind people see again, people in wheelchairs get up and walk, and occasionally movie stars turn up at the addresses of their fans. I was being rewarded. This shit was between me and the Viking gods—I was positive the regular Jesus Christ God wasn’t responsible, not with the amount of times I took his name in vain—and I deserved my reward.

“I’ll call you and explain everything later.” My need to end the conversation at an all-time high. “But now you have to leave.”

Eric had already been alone in my apartment too long. But I knew if I didn’t pacify my sister she would ruin whatever chance I had with him. So as much as I was anxious to get back inside—please Lord don’t let him change his mind—I also needed to deal with Judith first.

“Fine, but call me,” she relented seeming to calm down over my promise to explain. And I had yet to prove I was unreliable or done anything illegal so there was that.

“I will, promise.” I gave her my sweetest nothing-to-see here smile. “Now, don’t get mad.” I winced knowing there was no other way around it. “But what the hell is with this white rabbit suit?”

“Oh, come on!” She was mad again, her look almost murderous. “At dinner last night I mentioned our white rabbit had backed out for Bridget’s party. You know, your five-year-old niece who is having a birthday tomorrow afternoon? And you said, *I’ll do it. It can’t be too*

hard.” She changed her voice mimicking me. “So I went and got a suit this morning, this has been the only time I had between appointments.”

Well then. That explained a lot.

Yesterday I had been so preoccupied with news of Eric and Anna’s relationship demise and my strategic planning that I had no flipping idea what I had agreed to. I ate my pot roast, nodded in what I thought were the right places, but my mind was firmly on the task at hand. I surely couldn’t be held responsible for anything I said or did during that dinner. I would even argue that I didn’t have mental competency, unable to make rational decisions. Judith could have asked me to donate my heart and I would have agreed.

“It’s fine. I’ll do it.” It’s a rabbit suit, how hard could it be? “Just make sure I don’t get peed on. And I refuse to dance or anything like that.”

“You’ll be fine.” She rolled her eyes before turning to leave. “Call me.” Her parting words.

Well, this was fun. I had Eric still in my apartment, free to see God knows what—please Lord don’t let him don’t let him find my notes—and I had to walk back in there and explain why I was arguing about a bunny suit outside rather than getting naked with him.

He was going to think I was certifiable.

Honestly, he wouldn’t be wrong.

So I could ponder his assertions on my mental cognizance and meekly reenter, apologizing for the interruption. Or I could walk in, shoulders back, redirect his attention to something more interesting and hope getting naked was still an option. I chose option two.

“Hi.” Shoulders back, tits out and smile plastered on my face as I entered.

Eric looked up, his delicious body having moved to my sofa.

“Now, where were we?” I slithered as seductively as I could to where he was sitting. Judging from the look on his face it wasn’t as seductive as I’d assumed.

“White rabbit, huh?” His head tipped in the direction of the garment bag.

Oh God. I hoped he didn’t hear.

“I was curious, so I looked inside. It’s pretty . . . big and fluffy.” He laughed.

“What can I say, I’m a glutton for punishment and apparently I agreed in a moment of weakness.”

“Been there, done that.” He smiled. “Was that your agent?”

“Yesssssss.” I nodded slowly, knowing full well I was digging a bigger hole.

Still it did present itself with a rather unique solution. Legitimizing my so-called acting career. And let’s face it, after we slept together he would probably never see me again, so what did it matter that I perpetuate the tiny, almost microscopic little white lie.

“Well, my agent.” The lie passed easily from my lips. “She and I differ on what we think are good career choices.” I took a seat beside him, trying to keep my eyes from venturing down to his crotch. “She means well.”

“So she got you a gig at kid’s birthday party, there’s worse jobs, trust me.” His arm eased on the back of the sofa, the space now an open invitation, I was sure. “When I started out I was a burrito outside a Mexican restaurant. It didn’t last forever and it helped pay the bills.”

“Mmmm,” I agreed, waiting for my pants to ignite as I slipped into the gap his outstretched arm afforded me. “Anyway, I’m sure you don’t want to talk shop, right?”

“You’re right. Sorry.” His hand slipped onto my shoulder, bringing me in closer.

“No apology necessary.” I swatted his chest playfully. Hey, any opportunity I could get to touch him, I was going to take it. “Unless you obnoxiously beep your horn in drive thru lines, because we’ve already established I don’t condone that.”

“You are an enigma, New York.” He looked down at me and chuckled. “I have no idea who you are and yet, I want to know you.”

That was probably the most romantic thing any man had ever said to me. I wasn’t sure if that was tragic or amazing, but part of me felt sad. Because I knew he didn’t mean it to be.

“I can think of one way we could get to know each other better.”

Sure, it was probably a little forward, but it was a surefire way to get to know each other. We could play naked twenty questions. Ask a question, take off an item of clothing. It was a fun game, and once we were done with that, I could think of other things to play.

“As much as I hate to say it,” he sighed taking a deep breath. “I think I should probably go.”

No. No. My dreams of dirty, crazy sex with Eric Larsson were dissolving before my eyes. He was right here, in my apartment. We’d kissed, and not the kind that was in any way friendly. No, they’d been prelude-to-sex kisses, foreplay kisses. How could we go from rubbing against each other like animals to hey, I should go.

“Oh, okay.” I was desperately trying to hide my disappointment. “Sure, you probably have stuff to do.” Did I just get rejected for casual sex? A wave of embarrassment washed over me. I had practically thrown myself at him.

“Hey, look at me.” He tilted my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes. They were too blue, too intense for me to gaze at too long. “Leaving is hard for me, and when I say *hard*, I mean hard.” His head tipped toward his lap. “But when we do more than kiss, I want to take my time with you. And right now, I haven’t got that.”

Wow.

I wanted to tell him we didn’t need time. That slow passionate lovemaking was highly overrated, and what we needed was fast, dirty sex. I was willing to take what I could get, but now that he seemed to come to his senses, I wasn’t going to beg. Well, not any more than I had already. I still had my pride.

“I’ll walk you out.” My feet hit the floor as I lifted my body off the couch. “Hope you enjoy the rest of your stay.” I’d relegated myself to a tourism ambassador. Bon voyage, come again soon. Don’t eat the mints right before bed—they’ll keep you awake.

He stood up to join me, his hands lowering to my waist and pulling me in close. “I know a line when I hear one, Tia. Don’t do that with me.”

And before I could answer—and probably give him another line—he kissed me. Not as urgent as the first time, but not what I would call a goodbye kiss either. His lips and his mouth didn’t ask permission, not that I would have denied them.

No man had ever kissed like he did, so intense. It was hard to tell where my lips stopped and his began.

“I’ll see you soon.” He pulled his lips from mine, his hands slowly lifting from me. “And I will be enjoying the rest of my stay.”

And with not much more than a smirk, he turned and walked out the door. There was no discussion of whether or not I had plans. No confirmation of time or place, or how he intended to see me. Nope, just left me standing in my living room with a promise he’d be back *soon*. And when the hell was *soon* anyway? An hour? Tonight? Tomorrow? Lots of freaking leeway on *soon*. And we’d already established I didn’t do well with leeway.

Dear Lord in heaven and all the saints.

I may have bitten off more than I could chew.

Chapter 9

It turns out *soon* wasn't soon enough.

After he'd left I had tried to get on with my day—writing my latest column and being a productive member of society—the whole thing was making me antsy. Very fucking antsy.

Judith had been less than pleased when I confessed my sins. I'd stalled as long as I could but knew if I didn't call as promised she was going to stage an intervention with Mom and Dad. Damn her need to play by the rules; Piper was a hell of a lot more fun.

Big sis couldn't believe I was pretending to be an actress, which was ironic seeing as actresses pretended all the time anyway. Besides, I told her, it wasn't like I was defrauding the IRS. No one cared what my job description was. No one was getting hurt. Just a tiny, almost irrelevant white lie. No big deal at all.

The agent thing was a bone of contention. She huffed and puffed for a solid ten minutes citing she didn't want to be involved in my web of deceit. And that agents were usually shady assholes who drove expensive cars, and what was I trying to say about her. I thought it wise not to point out she drove an expensive car but reassured her she wasn't a shady asshole.

And so that day ended with no more appearances from Eric.

I had hoped he'd repel down the side of my building Spiderman style and make me his Mary Jane—the suit was totally optional. But alas no superheroes or movie stars knocked at my window. Or my door for that matter.

Waiting around had never been my forte. I peeked at Christmas presents and read movie spoilers; my constant need to know was at odds with patience as a concept.

I didn't sleep.

Tossed and turned, unable to power down. Not to mention how turned on I'd been, so sexually frustrated that even the two orgasms I'd given myself weren't enough to knock me out. My body was tired, but the more I tried to close my eyes, the more I felt resistance. My mind too wired to sleep and too scattered to work.

So, as another day dawned I kept busy. Worked on my column a little, bought another lipstick—this time pink, just to be different—and spent an hour folding paper napkins into origami swans. The instructions had boasted a feeling of peace and tranquility but those tiny folds were really just pissing me off.

I wasn't sure if it was a blessing or a curse that I had my niece's birthday party. I'd suited up in the huge white fluffy bunny outfit in order to fulfill my promise made under duress. Bridget of course was Alice, Judith was the Queen of Hearts, my two-year-old nephew Louis was the Cheshire cat and GQ Will was the Mad Hatter. I was told they looked amazing which I would have seen for myself if I hadn't had the stupid rabbit head on the entire time. Apparently it was too traumatizing for the twenty or so children running around if I took it off, Judith had said. I was already plotting my plans for revenge. At least I didn't get peed on, small victory.

It was late afternoon when I reached my bottom. A 9-1-1 call later to Lila and we were sitting in my apartment having one of our famed strategy meetings. I was still in my bunny costume—minus the head because there were no kids around to traumatize—when she suggested tequila and eating pizza. Probably because it was a Saturday night, and if I was going to be sitting home wearing a rabbit costume with my best friend, it was going to require a few drinks. And clearly we needed to be well-fed and lubricated to make informed decisions about what I

should do next. Common sense was *not* the theme of the day.

“You have his number, just call him.” Lila poured another round; we’d lost count of how many we’d consumed. Not that it affected her, no, it was only I who was struggling to keep upright. I blamed the weight of the suit.

“No. I’m not calling.” I pouted like a five-year-old, ironic given my current attire. “Too obvious. He wants me to call him, clearly. So I won’t.”

Which was ridiculous because I wanted to call him too, so my act of defiance was only punishing myself. I blamed the tequila for my twisted logic.

“So here’s a thought. Maybe something has happened to prevent him from calling. An emergency or something.”

“What? Come on, he’s an actor, not Spiderman.” Clearly we’d established that when he didn’t climb into my window last night. “What em-ergen-cy?” I slurred. “And where the hell is he that there’s no cell service? Pleeeeease, we don’t live in the Congo. And even there I’m positive some Telco has a tower.”

I probably should have stopped drinking. Reevaluated the situation sober and with a clear head in grown up clothes. It had only been twenty-four hours and you couldn’t even report a missing person in that time. All good thoughts a regular person would have, which I wasn’t most of the time.

Besides, I was sexually frustrated. He’d wound me up with an appetizer of kisses of mass destruction only to have the main course so cruelly taken away. It was orgasm deprivation, a punishment I was positive was against the Geneva Convention. I’d be contacting The Hague tomorrow. This kind of blatant use of sexual torture wouldn’t be tolerated.

It was approximately nine p.m. when the knock at the door happened. I had slowed my drinking so that I could adequately prepare my opening statement. Lila hadn’t. So it was debatable as to which of us was the most sober and the best to deal with whoever was at the door. Maybe she’d ordered another pizza or maybe it was the orgasm thief, wanting access to my lips again. At least this time I knew his game.

“Who goes there?” I shouted at the door. “State your purpose.” I laughed, silently hoping it was just the pizza man.

Lila giggled as my bunny paw tried twisting the five million locks—I mean three—on my door. Her assistance reserved to being my cheer squad from the couch. We should definitely stop drinking I decided as I pulled open the door.

“Ryan!” I flung myself at him, my bunny belly hindering me from getting too close. “Oh Lila, it’s Ryan.” I pulled him into the apartment, the man’s eyes as wide as saucers.

“New York?” His eyes traveled up the length of my furry, costumed body looking slightly different from when he’d seen me last. “Is that you?”

“Yes, yes it’s me.” I pulled his arm directing him to the couch. “Who else would it be?”

“Well, it’s kind of hard to tell in the bear suit.” He grinned. “New York, are you into some weird kinky shit you haven’t told me about?”

“Noooooooooooo, ewwwww.” I waved my bunny paws at him. “And I’m a rabbit, not a bear. I’m not wearing my head that’s why you’re confused.”

“I’m not even sure where to go with that,” he laughed. “But whatever.”

Oh, where the hell were my manners!

“This is my friend, Lila.” I all but shoved him onto the couch beside her. “You two should meet.”

When I first met Ryan I had forgotten to mention Lila as she’d requested. That had been bad

friend-ing on my part. But now that the opportunity had presented itself I would not be making that mistake again. Because I was a good friend, damn it.

“O-kay.” He looked between me and Lila; the grin spreading across his face. “Hi, Lila, no rabbit suit for you?”

“No, I’m the sensible one.” She tried her best to not laugh. “Pleased to meet you, Ryan.” She successfully shook his hand. Didn’t even look that drunk except from the mild blush on her face. I unfortunately hadn’t fared so well.

“You girls are toasted.” Ryan smirked, his hand raking through his beautiful unRogaine-needing hair. “Larsson is going to be pissed he missed out on this.”

“Oh, I bet he is.” Mention of Eric’s name had me reigniting my fury.

I got close to Ryan, leaning over him intim-a-bunnying him with my paw pointed right at his chest. “You tell Eric that I’m—” what the hell was the name of that convention again? Bermuda? No, that didn’t sound right. “Doing stuff and reporting him for crimes against animal rights . . . I mean civil rights . . . I mean human rights.” Yes, that’s the right one. “I’m going to Häagen-Dazs to tell them about it. He should be worried.”

“Oh, New York. You are too freaking precious right now.” He climbed to his feet, no longer content to sit on my couch. I guess he’d met Lila so the objective had been achieved; I couldn’t keep him there indefinitely. Especially when I couldn’t remember where I’d put my packing tape.

“Does one of you lovely ladies want to tell me where the coffee pot is?” In a flash he had moved from the living room to my kitchen, opening cupboards. It had been way too fast for any human to move. Something wasn’t right here. Maybe Ryan was Spiderman.

“Are you . . . a superhero?” My eyes squinted trying to reassess. “Show me your wrists, I demand it.” If they shot out Spidey silk I would be getting to the bottom of it.

“Well then, looks like we’re too far gone for coffee.” He smiled as he held out his arms. “The hangover is going to really suck in the morning.”

“Shhhh.” I examined his wrist finding nothing suspect. Mortal arms like the rest of us it looked like. He’s just a man.

“Wow, way to kill my ego, Tia.” He chuckled, lowering his arms beside him.

Oh, I must have said that out loud, shit. Last thing I wanted to do was make Ryan feel bad, he wasn’t the enemy. I needed to keep a better handle on my mouth.

“So where is Eric tonight?” Bunny paw waved with reckless abandon. “Visiting the graveyard of lost orgasms?” Oh, that was a good one. I hoped I remembered it in the morning; that was totally going into a column.

“Is that what you’re calling L.A.?” Ryan winced, totally missing the reference.

“He’s in L.A., he left the whole fucking state?” I said a little louder than I’d intended, my voice echoing off the walls.

When I’d told him to enjoy his stay it was assumed there was still *stay* to *enjoy*. If he was just going to up and leave, what the point was his promise to *see me soon*? What the hell happened after he left the apartment?

Maybe Judith was right, I *had* inadvertently hypnotized him and once he was free from my influence he realized what a mistake it was. My mom had always said I wielded more power than I gave myself credit for. I thought she was talking about my column, but maybe she meant other things too. Oh, I’d never repelled a man so far away before. Out of a nightclub sure, but never out of the goddamn state.

“He had a photo shoot. Some bullshit sexy man thing he didn’t want to do and was trying to

get out of. His agent got pissed, said it would hurt the film launch this close to release.” Ryan started to explain. “And because he didn’t want to disappoint anyone or act like a fucking diva, he figured it was easier just to go do the damn shoot. He’s tried to call you, but you weren’t answering, so ’cause I was still in town he asked me to look in on you.”

That was way too much to process with my limited sobriety. If he had tried to call me, why hadn’t I received the call? “I would have answered, but there’s been nothing.”

Nothing.

Not even a message.

Ryan was covering for the orgasm thief.

Traitor.

“Where’s your phone?” He looked at me and laughed, my evil eyes of disapproval probably not as fierce as I intended them to be. “Maybe there was something wrong with it? Flat battery?” he asked, politely not mentioning user error, meaning me. “Trust me, Eric doesn’t say he called if he didn’t.”

“Ummm.” I patted my lack of pockets, searching for my phone. “I don’t have it. No, wait it’s in my purse.” I ran to the kitchen table where I’d tossed my purse, my cell phone still inside it.

Sure enough, after retrieving it I had several missed calls and unread messages. All from Eric Larsson.

“Well, so he’s in L.A. then.” I scanned the messages matter-of-factly pretending I wasn’t relieved it hadn’t been my mystery powers that had repelled him. “Photo shoot.” I nodded to Lila confirming the reason why Eric hadn’t shown up on my doorstep delivering orgasms as promised.

Crisis had been averted it seemed. Well, I guess that was that.

“Awesome,” she cheered. “I’m glad we got that sorted out.” She tried to stand up, slightly unsteady on her feet. “I should probably go home.”

“Did you drive here? How are you getting home?” Ryan asked, a little too interested in her mode of transportation.

Hmmm, I sharpened my rabbit senses.

“Did you see my girl in the rabbit suit?” She waved in my direction. “I knew I was going to be drinking heavily. I can catch a cab home.” Lila slipped on her shoes, gathering her purse as she got ready to leave.

“I’ve got a car out front, I can give you a ride if you want?” Ryan offered, a slight smile curling on his lips.

“Now listen here, Mr. I-don’t-need-to-Rogaine-my-hair.” I stood up as straight as I was able, puffing out my chest. “That is my best friend and if you so much as hurt one hair on her head I will yank out all of yours, one by one.”

It wasn’t a threat either, that shit was a guarantee. No one hurt one of my friends and got away with it. I wasn’t too drunk that I wouldn’t remember either.

“I’ll be a saint. I promise.” He placed his hand on his heart.

“You better.” I breathed into his face. “Or else.”

To his credit, he didn’t laugh. I’m not sure how serious you could take a person when they were three sheets to the wind wearing an animal costume. But lucky for him he just nodded, asked me if I needed anything before they took off and then helped Lila out the door.

I wasn’t usually trusting but given that I had been “researching” Eric for some time and Ryan’s name had never been flagged, it could only mean two things. He was either a genuine

friend to Eric, who kept out of the limelight, refusing to sell out. Or he was an assassin. I hoped for both our sake's it was the first option. Mental note. "Research" Ryan—I don't know his last name—as soon as possible.

And on that thought I decided it was time to strip out of the bunny suit. Sadly it wasn't as sexy as it sounded, the fur now matted and slightly soiled from tequila and pizza. I was positive Judith was going to pitch a fit. Something about that made me laugh out loud.

Collapsing into bed should have been what I did, but I was hot and sticky and refused to get into my sheets without a shower. So, making sure I didn't slip on slick tiles and concuss myself, I quickly stepped under the spray and washed away the day.

Dread filled me.

Oh. Crap.

I was almost positive Ryan would give Eric an account—one-sided and probably wildly embellished—of the night. Eric had asked him to check on me so it would make sense there would be a follow up.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

That didn't seem fair. For him to have a skewed view of events based on a spectator who arrived later. I deserved right of reply. A rebuttal. A chance to have my say.

Yes, I concluded. I would have to call him. Not because I desperately wanted to hear his silky voice through the phone, so hot I'd have to fight the urge not to touch myself. No, it was so he didn't get inaccurate information.

So while part of my brain was reasoning it probably wasn't smart that I drunk dial the movie star I'd hoped to have wild, dirty sexy time with—thanks a lot frontal lobe, could have used you earlier—the other part decided it was best to clear the air. Internal cerebral debate ensued.

I couldn't help myself.

I picked up my phone.

Fine, I had poor impulse control. Sue me.

My heart thumped as I got between my sheets naked and selected his number in my contacts, never having used it before. It felt so illicit, so forbidden, that I had to remind myself I had obtained it honorably. Well sort of honorably, I wasn't about to get hung up on the semantics now.

I waited, my breath hitching with every passing second.

"New York." His husky voice crooned into the phone.

This wasn't phone sex, I reminded myself, pushing out a breath in a rush.

"Larsson."

I was a bad, bad girl thinking bad, bad things.

"I hear you had quite an eventful day. I'm disappointed to have missed it." He chuckled, his voice stroking me from the inside out. "Tell me, did you really threaten to pull out Ryan's hair?"

"Yes." The word elongated by another exhale, making it sound velvety and sexy.

If this writing gig didn't work out I could totally rock it as a phone sex operator. Or maybe I was still drunker than I thought.

"Hmmm." He let go of a deep breath of his own. "I was going to ask you about my apparent human rights charges. I had hoped to be able to mount a defense."

Not even going to pretend I didn't get inappropriately aroused by the way he said mount.

"But I'm finding it very difficult to concentrate when you sound . . . so relaxed."

"I'm very relaxed." I eased my head back on the pillow, stretching out against my soft cotton sheets. "And like you, I am finding it difficult to concentrate. Would it help to tell you

that I'm in bed, naked?"

"No." He coughed, his voice hoarse. "That wouldn't help at all."

"Ah, well that's too bad." My hands trailed lazily against my naked skin. "Sadly I'm all alone which means I will probably have to entertain myself."

"Hmmm. Another disappointment."

"What is?" My hand swept lower, lingering on my stomach. "That I have to entertain myself?"

"No, that I'm not there to watch you. Although I have to warn you, New York." His gravelly voice was making my skin tingle. "I've never been good at being a spectator."

"Well then, *you* have a problem." The words lingered on my lips. "So much disappointment. But I on the other hand—the pun completely intended—refuse to be disappointed. Good night."

My thumb hit the end button as the laugh bubbled up my throat. It gave me an immense sense of pleasure to know that I'd probably made him hard. Him now having the mental image of me touching myself.

Ha! Take that. Two could play at that game. If I was going to be frustrated and aroused then so could he. My victory was savored for a minute or two before I realized my mistake. I had the perfect opportunity to have Eric Larsson talk dirty to me and I hung up. Gah! I foiled myself.

Was it bad if I called back? No, I couldn't do that. It would show weakness and I wasn't weak. No, tonight I would suffer, hopefully learning a lesson.

Clearly I wasn't as good at this game as I first thought.

Chapter 10

Eric Larsson had his arms around me.

His embrace was warm and tender, and he stroked my hair as my head rested on his perfectly defined abs. I loved the way the ridges felt under my fingertips—all that toned, muscular flesh. It was hot and I needed to remember to lick them before I woke up.

Because I knew this was a dream.

And when I woke, it would all be gone.

It wasn't the first time I had dreamt of Eric Larsson. Hell, I'd lost count of his nocturnal visits; it was my favorite thing to do with my eyes closed.

Most of the time they would all start the same way. He'd be naked—it was a crime to have all of that covered up—and he'd be in my bed. Always mine. There was something about knowing his scent would linger on my sheets that turned me on. And I could have him as long as I wanted him.

Then he would kiss me. Leisurely at first, slowly teasing my lips with his teeth. But then the kiss would deepen, his mouth desperate to have mine.

In the past he'd give me sweet kisses, but he wasn't in the mood for that tonight. No, he was hungry, hungry for me as I was for him and he wasn't interested in being sweet. Which was good, because I didn't want sweet either.

God, I loved to be kissed. Properly kissed. Not lips smashing together indiscriminately. But with intention and passion. And he knew exactly the right way to kiss me, especially tonight.

His hand drifted down my body, his fingertips just grazing my skin and it slowly drove me crazy.

“More.”

I wanted more. So much more than what he was giving me. And because it was my dream, he would do exactly as I asked. Always, every time, without question.

“Like this?” His hand moved from my back and down the center of my chest, his splayed fingers sweeping along my breasts, teasing me further.

He wanted to play, draw it out, but I didn't want that. And since this was my dream and he had to do what I wanted, I grabbed his hand and placed it on my breast and held it there. My nipples hardened under his touch, and I could feel myself getting wetter.

“Tia.” He whispered my name as his mouth moved down my neck, a trail of kisses in its wake. “Baby, your body is incredible.”

“And tonight it's yours,” I whispered into the dark, loving the feeling of his hands and mouth on my skin. “Touch me, please.”

It was painfully slow, his lips taking their time making their way down my body as I writhed on the sheets. The contact not nearly enough.

“Here.” My hand captured his and moved it to the juncture between my thighs, “I need you here.”

“Tia.” His voice gravel as his hand touched me, my slick center ready for him as his fingers circled. “Fuck, baby.”

“Yes, fuck me. All of you. I need it.” I was done being polite. Screw that. I needed him, needed him to make me come. Feel myself clench around him as I exploded.

“Are you sure?” he asked, having never asked that before.

What the hell kind of dream was this? Yes I'm fucking sure.

"Yes."

A finger was thrust inside of me, my breath hitching at the invasion. I loved it, his thumb circling my clit before he added another finger. Those deft fingers and large hands proved their worth, the delicious pressure almost making me orgasm on the spot.

"Don't stop. Please just don't stop," I begged. I didn't care how needy I sounded. I was so close, my own hand pressed against his. Just a little more, I was just at the cusp, seconds from tipping over.

"Yes, yes." My hips moved seeking the additional friction I needed. "I'm so close." My eyes scrunched even tighter.

I couldn't wake up. Not now. Not when I was having the best sex dream of my life.

"This is the best dream of my life." My mouth echoed my thoughts. "I don't know how you got even better than last time, but you did."

"Tia, look at me." His voice rough, straining almost. "Baby, please open your eyes." His hand slowed, that delicious pressure easing as he started to withdraw his fingers.

"No, no, no. What are you doing?" I grabbed his hand holding it hostage between my legs. "If I open my eyes you will disappear and I don't want this to end. Not yet, I need you right now."

"You're killing me, Tia." He laughed, his lips pressing against my shoulder. "But you need to open your eyes."

Why, of all the dreams I'd had, Eric picked tonight to be so disobedient. It was really inconvenient and probably a little selfish on his part. He needed to stop fighting me and be my fantasy, damn it. Didn't he get the memo? This was the best sex dream of my life, I'd even told him so.

"Don't say no to me." My body turned to face him as my fingers moved down his body. "Not tonight. Don't you want me?"

"Jesus Christ, Tia." He cursed out my name. "Yes, I want you, but not like this. Please, open your eyes."

There was something in his voice, something that didn't sound right. An edge, a sharpness that I'd never heard. Definitely not something I would have conjured up. Which was odd because you would think of the millions of times we'd made love, I would have heard it all. We sure as hell had done it all.

Which could only mean.

Oh.

Shit.

This wasn't a dream at all and the minute I opened my eyes this was probably going to stop. There was no way I was going to face reality until I had at least had a taste.

Keeping my eyes tightly closed, my hand moved down his body. My fingers traced the curved lines of his chest, then his abs, moving lower until it hit a waistband. He wasn't naked—the cotton of his boxer briefs stretched across his very large and hard cock, keeping it under wraps as my fingers moved up and down his thick, swollen length.

He hissed, his body stilling as my hand grabbed him hard.

I refused to stop, moving my mouth over every part of him—kissing, licking, and tonguing.

"Tia." He groaned out my name as I went further down his body. "Fuck, if you don't stop now, I don't think I'm going to be able to stop you."

Too late.

I didn't care about his inability to stop, I only cared about tasting him. My tongue swirled against the tight muscles of his lower stomach, my hands working his length until I pushed down the waistband. My tongue swept along the head of his cock, my lips closing around it as I sucked it hard.

His fist knotted in my hair as his breath quickened, a guttural groan bubbled from this throat. And then with a yank he pulled my hair forcefully and I had no choice but to release his cock.

"Tia."

My eyes opened, taking just a minute to adjust to the surroundings.

In my bed was a mostly naked Eric.

And I was about to give him a blowjob.

"You need to know it's me." He tilted my head up so my now-open eyes could see his lust laden ones. "I want you, but I want there to be no doubts about what you're doing and who you are doing it with. Do you understand?"

His jaw was clenched tight, the words barely getting out. He looked massive in front of me, every muscle tightly coiled and ready to strike. This blew everything I'd ever imagined right out of the water. He looked so hot, so sexy, so worked up and *I* was the cause of that.

I wasn't sure whether to high five myself or pass out from the freaking shock.

"Yes." The only word I was able to say.

"How drunk are you?" His eyes narrowed, the hold on my hair tightening.

"I don't know." I answered honestly because I had no idea. "I probably shouldn't operate heavy machinery and driving is definitely out of the question."

A rush of air passed between his lips, still struggling. "Do you know who I am?"

"I'm drunk Eric, not dead." I couldn't help but laugh. "Yes." My hand grabbed his cock poking out of his thin cotton boxer briefs. "I know who you are."

"Good." He released my hair, his hands wrapping around my arms and lifting me onto his chest. "Because stopping you has been near impossible."

"So don't stop me."

"I'm not."

His lips came crushing down on mine, hands pressed hard against my waist as he lifted me higher. My knees fell to either side of his hips as I straddled him. The only thing between us the thin cotton boxer briefs he was still wearing.

I needed more contact, my hands moving from where they'd been resting on his chest to the waistband. My fingers clumsily shoving them down his hips until he took over, stripping himself bare for me.

"Back on me," he ordered, pulling me back onto his hard length. All my imagining and guessing in all that time hadn't come close to how good this felt. "I want to feel you, right here." His fingers pressed against my hips as I started to move.

His hard-on stroked my core as I rode him, rocking against him.

"Yes." My fingers gripped his shoulders as he met each one of my rocks with one of his own

"Fuck, Tia," he moaned as I felt him lengthen even more. "You are so wet for me."

He wasn't kidding either. If I thought the dream had turned me on, it wasn't even close to what was happening to my body now. It felt like there had been a hundred tiny wires attached to all of my skin and electricity running through it all at the same time.

"Touch me, please."

He lifted me, taking away his hard-on as he flipped me over, my back hitting the mattress. My eyes so wide there was a good chance they were going to drop out of my head.

I had no idea how he'd gotten inside my apartment, nor did I care. Not right now when he was looking at me like that. I was about to have sex with Eric Larsson, and it had already surpassed every fantasy I'd had. So if he'd busted my locks or climbed in my window, I was totally fine with that.

He hovered above me, his huge looming figure lowered. He smiled, like he knew what I was thinking. Little did he know I had imagined this a million times. His hands latched on to my breasts, his mouth moving down to meet his fingers. The hard pink peak being sucked between his lips.

"Oh God." My head strained to watch him as he moved further down, kissing my stomach before parting my thighs with his hands and giving me the most wicked grin I'd ever seen.

"Oh God," I repeated, my vocab completely depleted of any other nouns, adjectives or verbs as he lowered his mouth onto my pussy.

"Oh . . ." That was all I could manage.

His mouth covered me as his tongue pushed inside, my body exploding into a million tiny pieces.

I couldn't talk.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't move.

Falling.

Falling.

Falling.

My body convulsed as the pleasure traveled through every cell.

"Mmmm, I liked that." He slithered back on top of me, the weight of him against me making me shiver. "You taste so sweet."

Nope, still couldn't talk, my eyes nailed to the man who'd just gone down on me.

"Did I break you, New York?" He laughed, his elbows on either side of my body as his tongue flicked one of my nipples. "Just so you know, I'm not done yet."

Those hundred tiny wires pumping electricity into my body just got another surge.

"Good." My hips bucked against his hard-on. "Because I'd really liked to be fucked now." Holy shit, was this actually going to happen?

"Would you now?" His hips moved against mine, his smile taunting me. "Just as well, because if I'm not inside of you in the next minute I'm going to lose my fucking mind."

BOOM.

That was the sound of every hormone inside of me fragmenting into oblivion.

Arms, legs, lips, hands—all just a frenzied mess as we collided into each other. His breath hot against my neck as his erection slid against my core, both of us out of control.

"Condom," he growled, his lips sucking so hard against my shoulder I was positive it was going to bruise.

"Top drawer," I yelped, thankful for my Girl Scout mentality of always being prepared.

The drawer was yanked open, his hand pulling out one of the shiny silver wrappers. Never in my life had I been so glad to see the small square of wonder. When the stock markets opened, I was buying shares in every condom company I could.

His body lifted off me as he tore open the packet with his teeth, tossing aside the wrapper and gripping his cock with his free hand. My eyes wide as I watched him slowly slide up and down his length. My alarm clock throwing off just enough light so I could see.

"Fuck."

I'd touched it, and felt it, and seen parts of it—and none of those things prepared me for its magnificence.

It wasn't just big—it was huge.

And thick.

And perfect.

If Eric Larsson was a football team, his cock was definitely the MVP.

And he was going to use it on me.

Dear. Lord. In. Heaven. And. All. The. Saints.

"Give me that." I snatched the condom from his hand unwilling to be a spectator a second longer. My fingers carefully stretching the latex over the head of his perfect, massive cock as I rolled it down the shaft. He let out a groan as I grabbed him firmly, my small hand struggling to get around his girth.

"I thought I was fucking you, not getting a hand job," he hissed in my ear as his chest eased me back onto the bed. "I'm warning you, I don't think I can be gentle."

"I can take whatever you've got."

His knees edged my thighs out further as he took up the space between them. His massive frame towered above me as he rested his weight onto his elbows.

"Let's see if you mean that." The entire length of his cock thrust inside of me, my body tightening at the invasion.

"Fuck." He grunted, resting his forehead on mine as he gave me a minute to adjust. "You good?"

Warmness spread across my body as my hips lifted up to meet his. "I thought you said you were going to fuck me?" My teeth played with my bottom lip.

His eyes narrowed before the edges of his mouth twisted, his cock pulling out before thrusting back into me again . . . hard. The crashing force of our bodies pushed me further up the bed.

"Such a big mouth for such a little lady." Each thrust getting harder and faster with each rock of his hips.

"I never pretended to be a lady," I gritted, wrapping my legs around his waist.

And just like that, I had awoken the beast.

Eric leaned forward, holding onto the headboard for leverage as he pounded into me. My pussy gripped him like a vice as he filled me completely.

English was no longer a language we both knew.

Oh God, Yes, More—the only words spoken. That, and a series of primal guttural grunts when even they proved too much.

It was all too much.

Him and his wonderland body.

Sex was never going to be the same again.

"I'm going to come." My fingers gripped the sheets on either side of me, my knuckles turning white.

"Come for me, Tia. I want to feel it around my cock." He thrust again, hitting me right where I needed.

"Yes!" I screamed as I felt my body tense, every muscle pulled tight.

"Fuck, you're going to make me come." There was one more rock before he exploded inside of me. The bed shook as we both rode out the wave.

My vision gave out, the room going completely black as my body splintered apart.

I had really died, fucked to death by Eric Larsson.

And it had been a good way to go.

The pressure from between my legs eased and I actually mourned the loss, the mattress beside me compressing as lips found their way onto my shoulder. “You okay?”

“I died. But I went happy. I’d had a good life.”

Eric barked out a laugh, pulling my body close to him. “What a shame, I had hoped to fuck you again later. I’m not into necrophilia though.”

“I’m alive!” I screamed, my body jerking back to life. “It’s a miracle.”

Eric’s body shook as he laughed. “Quickest resurrection in history.”

“I’m an overachiever.” I nestled against his chest, the strong beat of his heart thumping against my hand.

“So . . . aren’t you supposed to be in L.A.?” If not for the thin sheen of sweat covering our bodies I would doubt any of it had actually happened.

“I was at JFK when you called.” His fingers pushed the hair off my face. “It was a bullshit shoot I’d hoped to get out of. Turns out *not* doing bullshit shoots pisses a whole lot of people off. I flew back and out the same day.”

“Oh.” His lack of communication making perfect sense now.

“Did you think I would leave without saying goodbye?” His eyebrow rose, a smile twitching at his lips daring me to answer.

“Well, I mean. No.” If someone could tell me what the right answer was here, I’d appreciate it. “I mean. I don’t know.”

“I’d never leave without saying goodbye.” All evidence of his smile disappeared as he kissed my forehead.

“I’m glad.” A sense of relief washed over me I didn’t quite understand.

“So that was quite some dream you were having.” His fingers tiptoed up my arm. “I’m really, *really* glad I was here for it. You want to tell me who the lucky guy was?”

This was a trap with a hundred percent certainty.

If I said him then I sounded like a pervert who’d been having dirty dreams about him. But if I invented some fictional guy then he might think he was like a substitute—which was ridiculous because Eric Larsson was no one’s pity fuck.

“You,” my stupid mouth volunteered before I’d had time to evaluate.

Awesome, pervert it was then. I couldn’t even be too pissed because it was accurate.

“I’m flattered.” His grin crept back as he whispered, “Whatever you imagined, I can tell you it’s better in real life.”

No. Fucking. Shit.

“Now who’s an overachiever?” I swatted his chest seguing away from talk of me and my dirty dreams. “And how the hell did you get into my apartment?”

Maybe I had ruled out the Spiderman theory too soon, the thirty million locks on my front door almost fail-safe. Spiderman or a career cat burglar—definitely one of the two.

“I knocked at your front door, you opened it. Naked.” He grinned. “I wasn’t about to leave.”

“I answered the door naked?”

Never.

Drinking.

Again.

I wasn’t sure if that made me the biggest whore in the tri-state area or a fucking genius. It got Eric into my bed, so calling it a mistake would be a major fallacy.

“Yeah, I hope I was your only visitor tonight.” He barked out a laugh. “That kiss at the door was also something else.” His smile faded. “Of course I had no idea you weren’t awake—your eyes were open. Nothing would have happened if I’d known.” His gaze intensified, needing me to believe him.

Oh, be still my heart.

He was such a nice guy it wasn’t fair. He couldn’t be good looking, funny, talented, be amazing in bed *and* be nice. How in the hell was I supposed to give that up? And make no mistake I would eventually have to give it up.

“Yeah, I have a tendency to sleep walk when I’m stressed.” It was a confession that I usually spilled after at least a month of dating. Sometimes not even then. I couldn’t believe I was giving him information that had always been so guarded. “That’s why there’s so many locks on my door. You couldn’t have known.” And clearly the magnetic force of my body wanting his was no match for all those locks.

“I have a friend who sleep walks. He pissed in my closet once.” His fingers traced the lines of my jaw. “But you’re the only person I know who sleep seduces.”

“I’ll need to add more locks.”

“Or sleep with me more often so that I’m the one who gets seduced.”

He had no idea what he was offering.

It was a red flag to a bull, a hurricane heading to shore, and he’d casually—like it was no big fucking deal—stepped into the path of the storm.

“Yeah, sounds like the better option.” Correction, the *only* option now worth considering.

“So, you want to sleep or—”

I didn’t let him finish. “Or, definitely or!”

“*Or* it is.”

Chapter 11

I'd had sex with Eric Larsson.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

And if he hadn't been sleeping peacefully beside me, I would have been convinced I'd conjured up the whole thing. It wouldn't be the first time. But it was the first time I had the ache between my legs to confirm it. Oh, how delicious that ache was. Proof of a night I would *never*—not in this life or the next—*ever* forget.

It had not been a dream.

I'd had sex with Eric Larsson.

Nope, it didn't sound any less amazing the second time I said it either.

Would I get a chance to do it again? Was this a one-time deal? My brain couldn't compute, scrambled while my body lay in a state of sated bliss.

Lord, I was going to die.

Die.

And I didn't care because I'd had sex with Eric Larsson.

I'd imagined waking up with Eric almost as much as I imagined sleeping with him.

I'd look amazing. Wearing stunning French lace lingerie with my arm draped daintily above my head to accentuate my tits. My hair would be evenly spread, fanning across the pillow, my curls looking like I just stepped out of a salon. And while it was totally impractical to wear makeup to bed, my face would still have the remnants of a perfect coverage foundation and on my lips a shimmery pink gloss. Oh, and my breath would be minty fresh.

He would roll over, an eye sliding open as he woke. My stunning cleavage would catch his eye before moving his focus to my face. It would be at that exact time I open my eyes and see him staring at me adoringly. He'd kiss me like he couldn't stand not to, whispering good morning against my lips—he would also have perfect minty fresh breath—and tell me how much he enjoyed last night.

And then we'd have sex again because well, how could you not?

But while reality had far exceeded my imagination last night, the morning brought a whole different ballgame.

My eyes tentatively opened, the daylight incinerating my eyeballs before I had a chance to close them again.

There was no lingerie making my boobs look sensational, instead they were squished between the mattress and my arm. My hair could have easily doubled for a bird's nest, housing at least four small to medium-sized songbirds. And my mouth tasted like I'd licked the floor of a truck stop restroom.

"Shit," I cursed softly, hoping like hell I wouldn't wake Eric and scare him half to death. I'm not sure what I looked like last night, but I was pretty sure it wasn't the Tasmanian Devil I probably resembled now.

Slowly—any slower and I'd be moving in reverse—I wiggled out from under him, easing my body to the edge of the bed. All I needed to do was get into my bathroom, transform myself back into something resembling a human, and slide back into bed. He'd be none the wiser. It was a perfect plan.

There were exactly ten steps to my bathroom.

I'd counted them numerous times when I'd been sick or drunk; memorized the path so I could do it with my eyes closed. No creaks in the floor, no major obstacles in the way. All I needed to do was lift my butt off the bed and with the agility and speed of a gazelle get myself into the bathroom. Home free.

My feet dropped to the floor while my legs adjusted, ready to accept my weight. And with enough core strength to make my gym instructor proud, I slowly lifted my butt off the mattress.

"What are you doing?"

Shit.

I hit the floor; arms and legs splayed on either side like I was taking live rounds in Afghanistan. My forehead not so gracefully bounced off the carpet as I took cover, flattening my body like a Marine.

Eric erupted into convulsions of laughter, unable to speak as he moved off the bed. His two perfect feet coming into view as I maintained my position.

"Tia, are you okay?" he was able to choke out in between laughs. "Let me help you up."

"No, don't look at me." My arms covered my head in a poorly thought out effort to hide myself. "I'm hideous. Look away. Look away now."

More laughter; his hand reaching down and latching onto my arm. "I assure you, you aren't hideous."

"No, no, I was supposed to be beautiful when you woke up. You can't see me like this. I'm a monster."

And then the laughter stopped, the two perfect feet joined by two perfect knees. "You are beautiful. You were last night, and you are right now."

Oh, for the love of God!

Couldn't he be even a tiny bit of an ass? Not a lot, just enough so I could A: confirm he was mortal and B: not feel totally inept in his presence.

"If you see me and you gasp in horror, I will not be held responsible for my future actions," I mumbled into the carpet wishing like hell he'd just let me stick to my original plan.

"I won't." He brought his head closer to mine, his mouth skirting above my ear. "Now, get off the damn floor." I felt him rise to his feet, standing inches away from me.

Slowly my head lifted, conscious not to go too fast.

Here is the female Homo sapiens in her natural habitat, just waking from a night of excessive copulation. She rises slowly as not to spook the male of the species, who sometimes disappear after the mating ritual. I could hear the Discovery Channel narration now.

"I'm waiting." He tapped his foot; my slow dance with humiliation taking too long apparently.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." I stood up quickly, revealing all my hideous glory. He couldn't say I didn't warn him.

"There. Satisfied?" My hands stretched either side of my body as I twirled around, giving him a good look from every angle.

"Yes, very." He grinned, his arms folded across his perfect fucking chest. The man didn't even have the decency to look bad in the morning. His mussed up bed hair just making him look even sexier.

"You know you could have pretended to be asleep and allow me my dignity. Like a regular guy." My finger poked him hard in the chest, frustration overriding my concern over my frightful appearance.

"I'm *not* a regular guy." The corner of his mouth curved.

Gah, he was impossible. Sexy, gorgeous, handsome beyond measure impossible.

“Come here, Tia.” His fingers linked around mine and he pulled me into his arms.

“Fine, I’m here.” Not as annoyed as I was pretending to be.

“Now what were you were going to do in that bathroom?” His brow arched, his eyes on mine.

“Shower, brush my teeth, slather myself with products I impulse bought that promised to make my skin look firmer and younger.” Couldn’t have lied even if I wanted to.

“Do you still want to do that?” He brushed the hair from my face, his stare making me forget why the hell I’d gotten out of bed in the first place.

“No, not really.”

“Good, because instead of doing *that*,” he tilted his head to the bathroom, “we could shower together.”

“That is such a good plan.”

It was so surreal. Pretending like he was just a *regular* guy. Because that’s what I needed to do if I had any hope of making it through this without losing my damn mind.

The man saw me at my worst and *still* wanted to have shower sex? And that was after having all-night sex? I must have done something amazing in a past life. Maybe I helped smuggle Anastasia Romanov out of Russia before she could be killed like the rest of her family.

“And then go get some breakfast.”

Or I was responsible for the assassination of JFK.

Brakes screeched in the background of my happy mood as the suggestion of leaving the apartment was uttered.

“Like go *out* to eat?”

Not good. Not at all. Maybe I’d misheard and he just wanted breakfast, which was still a problem because I hadn’t been to the store since I’d left to go to L.A. but still easier to deal with than a public outing.

“Yes, we do it a lot on the west coast, I assumed it’s a tradition that is shared by most of the continental United States. It’s a meal that comes before lunch, first thing in the day.” He smirked. “And don’t tell me you have some aversion to me seeing you eat because we’ve already had burgers twice.”

He had a point, but my concern wasn’t about him seeing me eat. It was about being *seen*, period. With both burger outings we’d dodged some serious bullets. First, going through a drive thru in a car with blacker than black tinted windows. Elvis could have been in the backseat and no one would have been wiser. And second, Holiday’s was the small burger place no celebrity ever went to. Locals wouldn’t give a rat’s ass about who was sitting in there.

Plus we hadn’t slept together yet.

Now it would be written all over me. His sexy man scent transferred to my skin. And all I needed was one fucking reporter or photographer getting a sniff and going paparazzi on my ass. I didn’t have bones in my closet, I had a fucking skeleton—of the actress I wasn’t.

“Why don’t we order in?” I suggested. “You can tell me all about your photo shoot and I can lick pancake syrup off your abs.”

Deflection.

As a middle child I was the queen of misdirection. *Keep your eyes on this hand while I steal your Halloween candy with this one.* I used to convince Judith it had been Piper, and Piper it had been Judith. No one suspected me for years. I’d been training for this my whole life.

“I like your way of thinking.” Eric’s eyes darkened, his hand lowering and grabbing my ass.

“Now let’s go get a shower so I can fuck you up against the tile.”

* * * *

Shower sex with Eric was out-freaking-standing. *Standing* being the operative word as his promise to fuck me up against the tile hadn’t been an idle one. My legs were still shaking—my thigh muscles pushed to their limits—but you couldn’t wipe the smile from my face. And I was never going to need the gym again.

Eric Larsson was sex on legs, and I was here to tell you that it was most definitely NOT false advertising. I pitied any man who had to follow that act, major disappointment. Worse than thinking you were going to Disney World only to end up in a swamp in Polk County, Florida. And even then I was underselling it, his MVP cock was seriously that good.

“So this sexiest man shoot?” I took a mouthful of pancake, the syrup licking bound to happen any minute. “They make you strip off or were you wearing clothes?”

Ordinarily I would have been a fan of the former. The more skin, the better. But my attitude had changed somewhat. No one else needed to see him like that, it’s not like he was a piece of meat for God’s sake. He had a brain. He was talented. It was offensive to exploit him. Yeah, yeah, finger pointing and name-calling. I was well aware of the hypocrisy.

“Suit in some photos. Jeans, no shirt in others.” He smiled, a strip of bacon between his fingers hesitating at his mouth. “Nothing I haven’t done before.”

Yeah, I know. I had probably a hundred or so similar photos saved to my cloud. Not that I would be admitting to *that*.

“Interesting.” I took a sip of juice; Lila wasn’t around so there was no liquor in it.

“It’s actually not. Lots of standing around. Hot lights. Posing for hours in weird positions. I could think of better ways to spend my time.” The edges of his mouth curled.

I assumed his cheeky grin meant something sexual, possibly something we hadn’t tried yet. There wasn’t a chance I was saying no. Whatever it was, I was totally game.

“Like getting to know the girl I’ve been sleeping with.”

Oh, I had been wrong.

“You know me,” I scoffed, throwing my head back and laughing like an idiot. “All the important stuff at least.”

“I know you live in Brooklyn, you’re an actress and your name is Tia Monroe.” He abandoned his breakfast of bacon and eggs to list his Tia based knowledge. “You think juice is only a breakfast drink, you hate cosmopolitans, you don’t eat white condiments, you have a tendency to sleep sex and in the mornings you lose your mind.”

“See, you know all the important stuff.” I waved my hand in the air dismissively, secretly impressed he’d remembered all of that. “More than I know about you, actually. I have no idea where you live.” Not a lie, although I had narrowed it down to a ten-mile radius.

“You want my address?”

“Is the Pope Catholic?”

He laughed, the light hitting his eyes. “It’s in the graveyard of lost orgasms.”

“Ugh, Ryan told you about that?” Mental note. Kill Ryan. I’d initially spared him when Lila texted me that she got home okay but now, he was being maimed at the very least.

“Couldn’t tell me fast enough.” The grin widened. “But seriously,” his thumb wiped off the pancake syrup from the corner of my mouth before putting it in his. “I want to know more.”

God, those eyes.

They were literally going to be my undoing.

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know.” My stupid mouth once again let the team down.

Seriously who needed truth serum, just sit me down in front of Eric Larsson and I’d confess to shit I hadn’t even done.

“Good. I like that.” He took another bite of his breakfast.

My gut churned with confliction.

On one hand, the idea of Eric wanting to get to know me was out of this world level of excitement. I’d assumed we’d have sex, he’d get bored and would be gone by morning. I hadn’t planned for the contingency we were currently in. But on the other hand, our relationship—and I used that word in the loosest possible terms—had started with a teeny-weeny bit of deceit. Could I come clean now and not have him hate me? But on the other hand—or maybe I was up to feet now—did I really expect this to continue? I mean honestly, look inside myself and believe—like for real, not in my wild crazy imagination—that it was going to last beyond a week. Maybe two?

He wasn’t going to fall in love with me. All of it was temporary and I needed to remember that however fun and exciting it was, that eventually he would leave. I would go back to my regular life and I wouldn’t be sad. Maybe I’d allow myself to be a little sad, because of all the awesome sex I’d be missing. Yes, that would be acceptable.

“I’m one of three kids, all girls.” I sighed, knowing despite my choices I was powerless to control the outcome. “My dad worked as a high school football coach until he retired. My mother taught English. They have an epic love story and still live in the same house they bought when they got married.”

“Four boys and me. Parents divorced. Father remarried.” He ran off his condensed life history. “No epic love story and we moved around a lot as kids.”

The information wasn’t new to me, but it was the first time I’d wished it had been.

“Tell me about your work.” He wanted more, his breakfast all but forgotten. “What have you done, what do you want to do? Do you have auditions coming up? Has Judith secured anything promising?”

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“She’s working on it. See she’s my sister also.” I tried to salvage some truth in the situation. “So it’s not like a huge priority right now. Which I’m fine with because I don’t think I’m ready for anything big right now.” I hoped I was digging myself out of a hole and not into a bigger one. “I’ve been thinking of doing some theatre. You know, small, alternative stuff where there is like five people in the audience. Get my chops up. Pay my dues and all that stuff.”

I was a terrible person.

A horrible lying, shitful person.

But if it meant a day or two more with him, then selfishly I was going to do whatever I needed to do.

Because it would eventually end. And then what did it matter if I’d been an actress, a janitor or a column writer for The Post.

“That sounds like an amazing idea. It’s actually really smart.” He seemed impressed. Which just made me feel worse.

I was a convincing unemployed actress.

Bravo.

“Most people want to go right into high-budget stuff, but the more you add to your resume,

the better. You know, if you have any scripts, I'd love to run lines with you."

I was a terrible person.

Shitful, lying, bad person.

"That would be awesome." The tight smile making the words difficult to speak. Or perhaps it was because I was lying my fucking ass off, with a better chance of ending up an old woman surrounded by *cats* than actually starring in a production of it. "But I would hate to feel like I was using you. You know, like I was taking advantage of you and I couldn't do that."

"Ah, New York, it's not taking advantage if I offer." His thumb stroked my cheek. "Besides, I haven't done theatre since I was like thirteen. Might be good to broaden my horizons."

"I'm all for broadening horizons."

Terrible.

Bad.

Person.

Chapter 12

“On your knees.”

I rolled over onto my stomach pushing myself up onto all fours. It was late or early—I’d given up checking the time—as Eric grabbed me by the waist.

“New York, you aren’t tired, are you?” His cock filled me in a rush. “I could stop if you want and you can go to sleep.” He started to slowly pull out.

“No. Don’t you dare,” I warned, my hips pushing hard against him, giving me back the part of his cock he’d taken away. “Don’t you fucking dare stop now.”

“Maybe I’ll just go slow then.” He slowly drew out before sliding back. “Give you a breather.” He had the audacity to freaking laugh.

“If I wanted slow I’d be fucking myself.” My body bucked against him, finding my own rhythm. “Now give me what I need.”

I’d never been shy when it came to sex. I wasn’t the type of girl who laid there and let a guy fumble his way to an orgasm. Life was too short for bad sex.

But with Eric I’d evolved into something else. My mouth spewed out some of the dirtiest, demanding shit I’d ever heard. And Eric loved it. My mouth and sexual appetite—getting him constantly hard.

“Is this what you need?” He slammed into me, his hands so firm around my hips I was positive I was going to bruise. His resolve to hold out tossed out the window as he continued to thrust.

“I’m sorry, are you fucking me or are you selling me life insurance?” I turned my neck as much as I could, giving him the biggest grin I could manage. “From this angle I can’t tell.”

“FUCK!” I screamed out, his hand coming down hard on my ass as he pushed in even deeper and faster than before.

“That’s right, and I can feel you want to come. Don’t try and stop it.” One of his hands dipped down to touch my clit, his thumb circling it as he fucked me.

“Yes.” My mouth involuntarily moaned.

“I want to feel you come, Tia.”

As much as I wanted to resist, my body took over, my pussy exploding around his cock as he came with me.

“That’s it.” He continued to move against me, teasing the last wave of ecstasy from me. “You feel so fucking good when you come. I’ll never get enough.”

And if I hadn’t been so physically exhausted, I wouldn’t have been able to contain the excitement of hearing *those* words from *his* mouth. I refused to read more into it, convinced it was the post-sex bliss doing the talking. Because I doubted I’d be able to ever get enough either.

Spent, we collapsed onto my sweat-soaked sheets, our breathing out of control.

“Life insurance? Really?” Eric laughed as he pulled me in closer to him, his hand resting on my ass. “I should smack your ass again just for the insult.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t like it, Larsson.” I gently bit his shoulder. “It’s probably about time you had sex with someone who can give as good as they get.”

“You are right about that.” His lips moved to my mouth. “We’ll add smart ass to the list of things I’ve learned about you.”

“And we’ll add ass man to yours,” I mumbled against his lips. “I’d always pegged you as

more of a legs man to be honest.”

“I’m very diverse.” His mouth covered mine as he kissed me. “And your ass is especially sexy.”

We hadn’t left the apartment since I allegedly answered the door naked. We ordered food, ate, talked and fucked. Mostly fucked. Binging on each other, neither of us able to get enough.

“Plans today?” He disposed of the condom, tossing it into a wastepaper basket beside my bed before rolling back toward me. “You have anything important to do?”

“Nothing pressing.” Unless you counted the column I needed to submit by tomorrow. Not sure when I was going to finish that. Sex with Eric or write about whether pole dancing could be an Olympic sport? Tough choice. “What about you?”

“I had an idea.” His teeth played with his bottom lip. Fuck it was adorable. “Something we can do, but I don’t know if you are going to freak out.”

“Is it anal?” I asked and cue my complete lack of shock. He wouldn’t be the first guy to ask. “Because if it is, I’m cool with that.”

“Um no.” His eyes widened in surprise, or maybe excitement. Guys really liked anal. “But I will say that I am now hard and wanting very much to fuck you in the ass.”

“No, I want to hear what the freaky thing you want to do is first.” I waved off his advances to touch my ass. “Come on, tell me. Is it really freaky? Bondage, hot wax?” As long as it wasn’t too crazy, I was game.

“My little nympho.” He chuckled before his voice turned serious. “More things to add to the list. And I intend to try every last one.”

“So . . .” I prompted, super curious about what it could be.

“So, I want you to have dinner with me, and meet a friend.”

The whole proposition was a landmine.

Abort, abort.

“What kind of *friend*?” I hadn’t even considered a threesome. It was one thing I was *not* cool with. No fucking way. “I’m not fucking your friend if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Can you get your mind off sex for two seconds?” He laughed, his body gently shaking as he kissed my forehead.

“There is no way I want you fucking any of my friends and I sure as shit am not going to facilitate it. In fact, here’s a rule.” His hand curled under my chin, tilting my head up. “You can’t fuck any of my friends.”

“Fine, and you can’t fuck any of mine.”

It was a good rule too. There wasn’t a lot I could do about the greater population, but if I didn’t have to see him with anyone I knew it would be a hell of a lot easier. Actually it wasn’t easier, I didn’t want him screwing anyone else either. Metal note. When this ends, negotiate celibacy.

“Good, so now we’re clear neither of us are going to screw each other’s friends.” He gave me a squeeze. “I want you to meet and talk to a friend of mine.”

This didn’t sound good. Firstly, we’d be out in public and subject to scrutiny. I didn’t care what people thought about me, or whether or not I belonged with Eric—ironic considering I used to do exactly that. *Shut up logic, no one asked you.* But I didn’t want was for my intricate web of deceit to be unraveled by some tabloid trash. If my downfall happened, it would be by my own hands, thank you very much.

“You don’t belong to a cult, do you?” Shit, that would have been a big miss on my part if he was, something like that usually made news. “I’m not going to meet your Grand Chief Hustler

who is going to try and convince me to join a pyramid scheme or some wacky religion and wear a Nike tracksuit or something?"

Or sell vitamins, cleaning materials or some other form of direct selling. I already had a Tupperware problem that I hid away in a dark closet never to be spoken about it public. It was a vulnerable time and I needed plastic containers.

"Where the hell do you come up with this stuff?" He threw his head back and barked out a throaty laugh.

"All I'm saying is that I'm not interested in being independently wealthy in three months while alienating all my friends. Plus, I look terrible in sweats."

"No, the meeting is with an agent." He paused as if waiting for a reaction. "He's a good friend of mine, he doesn't represent me." Another pause, my wide-eyed silence prompting him to continue. "But he's looking for clients. And I got to thinking about what you said about your sister and it made sense."

Really. It made sense? Because I was the one who said it and had no fucking idea what he was talking about. Holy fucking shit. An agent?

"Got you thinking how?" Translation, are you fucking insane?

"Well, business and family is hard." It was obvious he was choosing his words carefully. "And she probably means well, but I think you would benefit from someone who you don't have to see on the holidays. Keep the lines clear." He then went onto add. "You don't have to sign with him, just meet him."

Sign with him! Sign with him! I felt myself tumbling further down the rabbit hole. And it served me right too. I had done a lot of shit in my time, this however was currently topping the list.

"I don't know, Eric." Oh yes I fucking do, I wanted to say. "This doesn't sound like a good idea for either of us."

And halleluiah I was finally thinking, better late than never.

"How so?"

"Well, I already told you I don't like the idea of using you for stuff like that. If I'm going to be successful, I want to do it on my own, not because of who I know." Awesome, strong, shows integrity. I could do this.

"And the last thing I want to do is risk it affecting you in anyway. Say you put your neck out for me and I suck, then people lose credence in your recommendations. It could hurt your brand and that isn't something I will do."

While I was desperately trying to save my own ass from mortification, the sentiment behind all of that was entirely true. I'm an idiot, I'll own that. But the last thing I would ever do would be to allow anything I did to hurt him in any way. He wasn't just a guy on the screen anymore. Not just a name in credits. By some strike of out-of-this-world luck I'd had a chance to not only meet him but actually get to know him on some level. And yes, we'd had amazing sex. But for once it wasn't the most important thing about him. And I wasn't sure what the most important thing about him *was* at the moment, but I'd throw myself under a bus before I'd ever allow any of it to touch him.

"Wow." His mouth dropped open, his brows almost receding into his hairline.

"Wow what?" There was no way I could confidently gauge his reaction.

"You're the first person I've met in the last five years who hasn't wanted something from me." His eyes stayed focused on me. "I get it comes with the territory, people wanting you to help them meet someone. Or get them into this party or that audition. Not only have you not

asked for anything but you are actively refusing any of my help.”

“It’s not that I’m ungrateful.” Hell I was beyond stunned he’d even suggested it. There were people I’d known for years who wouldn’t have gone out that far on a limb. “But honestly, I’m fine.”

“You just keep surprising me, New York.” He smiled, his fingers trailing up my arm. “And that hasn’t happened in a really long time.”

“Well buckle up, Larsson. I’m not done yet.”

* * * *

It seemed like I was moving from one crisis aversion to the next. Not all that different to my life BE (Before Eric) so I was just trying to roll with it. And while I had put the kibosh on all talk of finding me an agent, it seemed that dinner with his pal was still going ahead. Eric wasn’t in New York often, and they were old friends and yada, yada—he had dinner plans.

Now the decision was did I stay home, hiding in my apartment like a fugitive, or go out and risk getting my photo taken. Rock. Hard place. Both had the capacity to suck.

Maybe I was being overly cautious. We weren’t officially dating, so I could be anyone. An assistant. His friend’s date. A lawyer. A whole range of possibilities. And as long as there were no PDA’s, who would even know? Wow, I’d worried about it for nothing. Besides, it was New York—no one cared, so why should I?

A surge of excitement buzzed through my body, the prospect of going out with Eric in public making me giddy. Besides, I was great with people. And I hadn’t left the apartment since Bridget’s birthday. It was going to be awesome.

“I’m just going to head back to my hotel first and grab some clean clothes.” Eric stood in my bedroom doorway, towel slung low around his waist. “Then I’ll go meet Jack for dinner. You going to wait up for me?”

“You know, if the invitation is still open, I’d like to tag along.” I tried not to get distracted by Eric being mostly naked, his chest still a little damp. “No business talk, just to get out of here for a few hours.”

“Well of course the invitation is still open. I’d love for you to come.” He sat down on the bed beside me, the mattress compressing under his weight. “What changed your mind?”

“Nothing in particular, just thought it might be fun.” Like taking a convertible out for a test drive you never intended purchasing.

“It will be, especially now.” He rewarded me with one of his famous panty-melting smiles. “And Jack’s great, he’s a good guy. Good friend too.”

“Can’t wait to meet him.” My fists mock pom-pom waved in the air. “Look how excited I am.”

“Just remember our rule, this is mine.” His hand wrapped possessively around my waist, planting a kiss on my lips. “I’m not sharing you with Jack.”

“All yours.” I kissed him back because it hadn’t lasted long enough the first time. “Do you think there are going to be any photographers there tonight?”

I threw it out casually, not trying to draw any attention to it at all. Just as a side note, an afterthought—you know, for curiosity.

“Are you worried about it?” His brow lifted, seeing through me in less than a minute.

“Pfft. No.” I scoffed. *Okay maybe just a little.* “I’m totally not worried.” Lies. “But I think it’s better if I just meet you there.”

“I’ll give you the battle because I won the war.” He shrugged conceding a lot faster than I anticipated. “You’re coming to dinner, and whether you arrive with me or not, you’ll be coming home with me.”

“So sure of yourself. We’ll see won’t we?”

“We will.”

I laughed.

He didn’t.

Oooh, it was going to be an interesting night.

* * * *

Dinner was at *So*—an overpriced, pretentious Japanese restaurant in the Flatiron district in Manhattan.

Will had taken Judith there one anniversary and raved about it. And because Lila and I had been curious, we had decided to take a chance as well because who didn’t love good food. So earlier in the year, we’d made a reservation. It was a two-month wait, but Will had assured us it would be worth it. He neglected to tell us we were going to have to donate a kidney to cover the check.

Which is why I had been slightly panicked when Eric had mentioned that *So* was the awesome venue his friend had picked for dinner. Well, I guess I hadn’t used my credit card for lipstick purchases in the last few days; it was due for a workout anyway.

What to wear had been a whole other drama. It needed careful consideration. Too sexy—I’d be mistaken for a hooker being entertained by two men. Too conservative—it would look like I was going to a job interview. Too casual—it was *So* for Christ’s sake, I wouldn’t be allowed in the door. Too fancy—it wasn’t a gala.

In the end I settled for a sleek, black, fitted dress with an exposed back. Business in the front and party in the back—a good compromise. And because I didn’t want to waste the effort, I twisted my hair into a loose topknot so you could actually see my back party. And the lipstick was predictably red.

I decided to take a cab rather than drive my own car, conscious I might be drinking. I was also conscious that my car was a ten-year-old Buick LaCrosse my father had been nagging me to take into the shop because it smelled like it was burning oil. So a cab it was.

Deciding to be fashionably late—fine, I had spent too much time deliberating on what to wear—I arrived at eight-fifteen, fifteen minutes after the agreed upon time. So when I got to *So*, both Eric and a relatively handsome man, who looked too young and not slimy enough to be an agent, were sitting at the table drinking a couple Hitachinos.

“Sorry I’m late.” I approached the table, the Maître d’ insisting he walk me over. Probably to check I belonged with them and wasn’t some random girl who was trying to crash their swanky dinner.

“New York, so glad you could join us.” Eric stood up to greet me, his eyes giving me a very deliberate head to toe. His hand hit my bare back as he leaned in and whispered, “I love that dress.”

And if his hot breath and sexy man scent—I still had no idea what it was, but I wanted to bathe in it—weren’t enough to soak my panties, Eric was all fancied up.

While he wasn’t wearing that amazing Tom Ford suit, he was rocking a pair of dress pants that did amazing things for his ass with a button-down shirt minus the tie. Almost too tempting to

strip him down one delicious layer at a time.

“Thank you.” I gave him a polite smile reminding myself we were in a respectable public place and licking him would be frowned upon. “You look great too.”

“Uh-hmm.” Jack cleared his throat, not so subtly reminding us we weren’t alone and eye fucking the hell out of each other. Public place. Frowned upon.

“Jack, this is Tia.” Eric did the introductions, keeping his eyes on me. “Tia, Jack.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jack.” I held out my hand and gave him a non-offensive-not-too-long-firm-but-not-bone-crushing handshake.

“Pleasure is mine.” His hand wrapped around mine. “Eric has told me all about you.”

“All lies.” I waved my hand dismissively and laughed. Ironically enough, probably true given how many I told. I sat down, the Maître d’ patiently waiting to push in my chair as Jack and Eric slowly retook theirs.

“I find that hard to believe.” He gave me a smile I didn’t yet trust.

Eric had yet to take his eyes off me, his tongue darting across his lips as I smiled back. He looked hungry and not for what was currently on the menu. I wasn’t even going to pretend that it didn’t thrill me the way he was looking at me.

“So, how did you guys get a table here?” The place was clearly packed. “There’s usually a two month wait on reservations.”

“I know the head chef.” Jack picked up his beer and took a swig. “We’re old friends.”

“Ahhhhh. Well, lucky you.” Oh, he was one of those. Call in a favor and bypass the line. Meanwhile, the little person had to save for a year to be able to afford dinner and probably had their reservation cancelled due to a seating issue and this douche swanned right in. Not sure why it bothered me, but it did.

“Your drink.” A waiter delivered a martini I didn’t order, placing the chilled glass in front of me.

Well, this was a pickle wasn’t it? I wasn’t the kind of girl to turn down a martini, but this one only had one olive instead of three. And its origins were unknown.

“Excuse me.” I waved to the waiter before he could disappear. “I don’t think this is mine.”

“It’s yours, notice the absence of juice.” Eric’s eyes dropped to the glass and then back to me. “I ordered it.”

“But it only has one olive.” My brow scrunched in confusion. Who the hell made a martini with one olive? I mean, why bother. “Everyone knows it’s either a lemon twist for vodka or three olives for gin. Unless it’s a Gibson and then it’s a cocktail onion.”

The waiter looked at me nervously before shooting his eyes to Eric. “I can have the bar add more olives?”

“No, no it’s fine.” I gave him a tight smile even though the one olive thing was making me twitchy. “All good.” I picked up the glass and took a sip in a show of good faith. *Amateurs*. For the amount these drinks cost they should surely get the garnishes right. And there was my next column piece. Boom.

“Something new for my list.” Eric hid his smirk behind his beer. “Every day is like an adventure.”

“So, Tia, Eric here tells me you’re an actress.” Jack gave me his full attention. “I’m afraid I’m not familiar with your work.”

And it had begun.

The man could have at least allowed me to finish my drink, because it was definitely not a conversation to be undertaken sober.

If I ever decided to pick a fictitious career again, I was going to be something simple like a gas station attendant. Maybe a busker who did interpretative dance on the subway for loose change. My fake career was almost taking as much effort as my real one.

"It's probably because we don't move in the same circles. New York is a big place and I'm not famous." I smiled sweetly but had an unmistakable hunch that this guy was on to me. Game on, buddy.

"We should talk, maybe in my office sometime this week." His eyes moved between me and Eric. "I have a pretty wide circle in the city. Lots of contacts."

Fuck.

He either knew or was flirting with me.

Lord, please let him be flirting with me.

"Tia isn't interested, Jack." Eric instinctively reached across the table, thumbing the top of my knuckles. "We agreed not to talk business tonight."

Firstly, was Eric Larsson holding my fucking hand in public? Holy Shit. Secondly, he wasn't liking the attention I was getting either. And assuming he thought it was flirting—and I assumed that he did—was he jealous?

It felt like my heart was going to stop beating in my chest and stage dive onto the table.

"It's okay, Eric." There wasn't a chance I was tearing my hand away even as I turned my attention to Jack. "I appreciate the offer, Jack, but I doubt we'd be a good fit."

"Of course. My mistake." He shrugged, signaling to the waiter he needed another drink.

"Are we ready for our first course?" The waiter placed another beer in front of Jack.

"Yes, we'd like to start." Eric nodded, his hand still on mine.

The other thing about *So*—other than being a pain in the ass to get a table and costing a body part once you were there—was there wasn't a menu.

Diners were hosted to a selection of ten small courses specially selected and prepared by the head chef based on seasonal ingredients. All very exciting except that I hated relinquishing control. Give me a menu, let me choose what I want and then feed me. It could still be fine dining; I just didn't want someone else making the decisions. I prayed the food gods would smile on us kindly.

First course was some kind of delicious soup. Okay, maybe this wasn't going to be so bad.

"So, when are you heading back to California?" Jack asked casually, the small bowl of soup brought to his lips. "You start pre-production soon don't you?"

"Next week," Eric answered.

Oh? That was news. He would be leaving next week? I kept my reaction neutral as his eyes flicked to me.

"Well, that's exciting." I took a sip from my small bowl, the pit of my stomach twisting. Maybe the soup wasn't so good after all. Yeah, on second thought, I hated this soup.

"This soup is really good, isn't it?" Another sip. "Different to the one I had last time I was here."

"Solid team behind it. One of my guys got a minor role," Jack continued, oblivious of how much I wanted to change the conversation.

"Yes, it's a great team," Eric agreed, also oblivious. "The director has been chasing me for six months; this was the first time I was able to commit."

"Of course he chased you, you're awesome," I interjected, forcing the smile and trying to be positive.

I wondered if old school hexes still worked. There was an old Italian lady near where my

parents lived that swore she could strike even the strongest man down. All she needed was a photo. Mental note. Find out who the director was and download a photo.

“And filming is four months, right? Matt—the guy I rep—is only signed on for some studio shots, but it looks like an intricate screenplay.”

Oh shut up, Jack. No one cared you knew everything.

“Yeah, four months isn’t too bad. I get to stay local this time.”

Yeah, yeah . . . not that long . . . Blah, blah . . . staying local. I wasn’t buying how wonderful it all was.

“Excuse me.” I stood up, not really sure why I was acting like a moron. “I’ll be back in just a minute.”

“You okay?” Eric stood, giving me a look of concern.

“Of course, just need the bathroom.” I deflected. “I’ll be right back.”

I grabbed my clutch and headed to the bathroom I really didn’t need. Or maybe I did, but not for its intended purpose.

Ugh.

My fingers wrapped themselves tightly around the counter as I looked at myself in the mirror.

Why did this feel so horrible? I knew he wasn’t sticking around and it’s not like we were dating. Hell, I didn’t even know what I was doing. Casual sex? He was a crush, a chance of a lifetime. I wasn’t even supposed to sleep with him, so in actuality I’d received even more than I’d hoped. There were thousands, maybe even millions, of women who would trade their right arm to be in my place. And here I was hiding in the bathroom acting like a baby. Of course he was going to leave. His life was on the other side of the country.

Okay, I tried to look at the positives. I had a whole week before he went. Five to seven days depending on when he said goodbye. Five to seven days where I could spend time with him. How cool was that? So we—whatever we were—had an expiration date. Big deal. At least I knew and could make every one of those days count. Who knew, maybe we could remain friends? It could happen. The important thing was to keep cool and not freak out.

Do not freak out.

Do. Not. Freak. Out.

“Are you okay?”

Eric’s voice shook me from my internal debate, the reminder to not freak out nullified as I saw him in the doorway.

“Fuck!” I let go of the counter and grabbed onto the nearby wall to steady myself. “You scared me.”

“Sorry, you were looking at yourself pretty intently.” He stepped further inside, closing the door behind him. “You having a staring competition with yourself?” The edge of his mouth curled into a half smile.

“Lipstick wasn’t even.” I pointed to the corner of my mouth. “I was trying to will it into submission.”

“Interesting technique.” His brow lifted. “Did it work?”

“No, not yet, but we were rudely interrupted.” I rolled my eyes pretending to be annoyed. “I was close too.”

“Is there anything else you’re not telling me, Tia?” He moved closer, the sadistic mix of sexy man scent and sexy eyes taunting me.

“No, of course not.” It was the biggest lie I’d told so far. “And in case you didn’t notice, this

is a ladies room.” I pointed to a basket of female lotions beside the sink.

“I had noticed.” His hands moved up my arms sending a jolt of electricity up my spine. “I just didn’t care.”

Jesus. Christ.

“You trying to cause a scandal in this tasteful establishment?” I rested my hands on his chest, the fabric of his shirt no match for the firm muscles underneath. “Eric, I’m shocked.” I pulled a funny face, my attempt to display shock failing miserably.

“Kiss me.” It wasn’t a question as he brushed his lips against mine.

“No, kiss me.” My tongue flicked out of my mouth and licked the edge of his lips.

His eyes darkened as he pressed his lips against mine hard, prying them open as his hands took hold of my body. He was hard, the bulge in his pants pressing against me as he moved us backward until I was pressed up against the wall.

We consumed each other, both of us desperate for the contact as the kiss deepened into something almost obscene.

I need more, much more.

As much as I could get for the next five to seven days.

And I wouldn’t spend one second of that time with regret.

“I want you,” he hissed against my mouth. “You’re driving me crazy.”

“It was *your* idea to come out for dinner, Larsson.” I smiled back sweetly. “We could be in my apartment naked right now eating out of plastic containers drinking martinis with three olives.”

“Clearly I made a massive error in judgment.” His teeth pulled against my bottom lip.

“I wasn’t going to put it out there and fracture your massive ego, but I’m glad you can see your flaws.” My tongue flicked out again.

“We need to get through dinner.” He rested his head against the wall caging me in an Eric prison. Let it be known I was not seeking parole.

“Yes, we do. Now go back to the table before everyone assumes we’re screwing in here.” I made a halfhearted—as in almost non-existent—attempt to shove him away.

“Maybe we should.” He rubbed his hard length against me. “Validate their suspicions.”

“Larsson sexes up no-name girl in swanky bathroom. Photos to follow.” My fingers jazz-handed in front of his face. “It has a nice ring to it I guess.”

“You are *not* a no name girl.” He tilted my chin, forcing me to look at him.

“You’re right. I’m fucking fabulous.” I gave him my best smile. “So go back to the table and you can sex me up as much as you want when we get home.” This time I gave him a real shove; movement was still minimal.

He slowly pulled back, his body straightening as he stepped back toward the door.

“That’s a deal I’m going to hold you to, New York.”

Chapter 13

Jack, it seemed, wasn't a sleazy asshole.

But the jury was still out if he knew I was lying through my teeth.

As it turned out, he was actually really nice and seemed to genuinely care about Eric and his career choices. They spoke at length about upcoming projects and who was directing what. I got the feeling that as much as this wasn't supposed to be a business meeting, it was rare the two of them got to discuss their work with people who understood. And I totally did not freak out.

Dinner was pleasant with the menu getting predictably more intricate as the night wore on, but I guess they had to justify their exorbitant price per head somehow.

Jack even picked up the tab for dinner, rebutting Eric's offer to pay and both of them shooting laser eyes at me when I'd pulled out my credit card. Honestly, I wasn't complaining. Anyone who fucked up olives in a cocktail didn't deserve my hard earned cash.

"You ladies done with your sushi?" Ryan pulled up to the curb in a blackened SUV, similar to what he'd been driving in L.A. "There was an all-you-can-eat place down the road for ten ninety-nine. I know where my money would have been."

"Ryan." I hugged him through the driver's side window. "It's so good to see you." The last time a little foggy given my inebriated state.

"New York, we could have been awesome together." He wiped a fake tear from the corner of his eye.

"You two want to continue your love fest on the street or should we get into the car?" Eric rested his hand around my waist.

"You're such a killjoy, Larsson." Ryan pouted as we climbed into the car, both of us into the back. "So, where are we going?"

"My place."

"The hotel."

Eric and I both answered at the same time.

"Awesome, guys. I'll just drive until you guys decide then?" Ryan tapped the steering wheel as he pulled into traffic. "Anytime you want to decide is cool by me."

"I need to go to my apartment, get some stuff done." Like my job, which I had neglected the last few days. "Maybe I can meet you later?"

"That wasn't the plan." Eric leveled me with a stare. "I have *stuff* I need to *do* too."

I assumed the *stuff* he needed *do* was sitting beside him in the backseat of the car.

"I'll be quick, promise." Especially knowing what was waiting for me at the finish line. "Quicker if you go back to your hotel and wait for me there. Be naked when I get there."

"New York, I'm still in the car you know." Ryan groaned from the front. "Let her do her shit, Larsson, you can spend some quality time with me. I'll hold your hand until she gets back."

"Asshole." Eric laughed, reaching across and popping Ryan in the shoulder. "Just drive to Brooklyn."

Eric leaned across and took my hand in his, his thumb gently circling my knuckles as we traveled through the busy city traffic. He might not have been ecstatic that we were going have to wait to finish what we'd started in the ladies room at *So*, but he wasn't going to fight me either.

Responsible Tia did exist. And as much as I wanted to make sweet, sweet love with Eric, if I wanted to keep my job—and for my bullshit of being unemployed not to turn into a self-fulfilling

prophecy—then I needed to work. I couldn't do it with him around for obvious reasons, so it was a necessary evil I was going to have to endure.

"So, Tia, your friend Lila . . ." Ryan broke the silence. "She single?"

I didn't need to see his face to know he was smiling.

Lila was stunning. Long blonde hair, with amazing long legs—she could have been a dancer. The ballet kind, not the one that requires a pole. But she was also incredibly smart, a gifted writer and driven to succeed. It was no wonder Ryan noticed.

"What did you do?" I warned, ready to start pulling out his silk tresses one by one.

"Nothing, I took her home just like I said I would," he called over his shoulder. "We made small talk on the way, she seemed pretty sober actually."

"Yeah, that's Lila. It takes a lot to get her drunk, even then she's like buzzed for a bit and then drinks herself sober. It's her thing."

My thing was apparently trying to keep up with her, which always ended up with me trying to find Jesus at the bottom of a toilet.

"Wow, sounds like my dream girl right there." Ryan sighed wistfully. "Of course, originally that was you," he quickly added. "But you had to go and break my heart. Lucky I bounce back quickly."

"Like you had a chance," Eric laughed. "Tia has better taste than that." His eyes connected with mine. Maybe being employed was overrated? When he looked at me like that, it was so hard to not lose IQ points.

"She's with you isn't she?" Ryan scoffed. "Her taste isn't great."

Another pop in the shoulder came his way courtesy of Eric.

"Lila's kind of serious," I volunteered. It felt a little weird talking about her, but I felt Ryan should know what he was dealing with. "Not that she isn't fun, because she is awesome, but she isn't interested in playing around."

In relationships we were completely different. She had boyfriends who doted on her who she kept for long stretches. Me, not so much. I always got bored too easily. She didn't sleep around with guys she didn't know, me—well we all know how I am.

"I'm just going to ask her on a date, New York." He shook his head. "I see why you chose *him* over me, you're both so fucking serious."

"And he's going to be respectful, aren't you, Ryan?" Eric added a word of warning.

"I'm always respectful."

We arrived at my apartment building and I climbed out of the car before I could change my mind. Work then play. I would be quick. All the things I was telling myself as Eric gave me a slow lingering kiss against the car door.

"Don't forget our deal." His hands cradled my face, his thumbs resting at my jaw. "My hotel room. Pack a bag. You might be there a while." His parting words.

Great, now I was never going to be able to focus. So, as I waved Eric and Ryan goodbye and took the elevator to my floor, I tried to shake off the crazy I'd been living for the last few days.

And because I was an idiot, I almost tossed my poor neglected laptop off my desk the moment it powered up, scaring myself stupid. Because staring back at me were the same eyes I'd just said goodbye to thanks to my Eric Larsson wallpaper. Mental note. Change that ASAP to something benign and harmless. A beach view. Puppies. Anything else.

My fingers moved across the keyboard, the even strokes comforting in a way like they had always been. It was reassuring to know I was good at something, that my sometimes silly views and anecdotes resonated with people. In some ways, what Eric and I did was the same, even if it

was different. We entertained, our audience laughed with us, they cried and sometimes they hated us too. So while I didn't share the same job description on my W2, we shared the same sentiment.

It was a good feeling, knowing we had stuff in common.

Ugh. I needed to stop doing that. Having things in common wasn't important. Five to seven days, that was what was important.

And because it was times like these when I needed the wise words of my BFF, and because we hadn't spoken in a while, I dialed the number of the one person who I knew got me.

"Hey, stranger."

"You done doing dirty things to number one crush?" Lila laughed into the phone, not a hint of animosity or jealousy or malice. "I'd like it noted that I gave you plenty of private time. No calls and/or unannounced visits."

"You're a true friend." Not everyone would have been so understanding or so accepting of my crazy. "But no, I'm not done."

"T, you know I love you, right? And I've always supported you?" The concern in her voice told me exactly where this was going. "But promise me you know what you are doing with this guy. I mean, *really* know."

Surprise, surprise.

I guess I should be glad she was looking out for me, knowing if places were reversed I'd be doing the exact same thing for her. I'd threatened to rip Ryan's hair out for fuck's sake and then given him a warning about Lila *not being that kind of girl*.

"I know, trust me, I know." My head nodded even though no one could see it. "He's leaving in a week." A huge breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding rushed out past my lips. "All good things come to an end."

"You convincing me or yourself?" Lila chuckled on the phone, not sounding convinced.

"Both of us." I laughed. "Honestly, I'll be fine. In a month this is going to be a *remember when* story, a year—a fond memory." I couldn't help but sigh. "I know he's not mine to keep."

"Have you talked about it? Like what will happen later?"

"And send him running in the opposite direction sooner rather than later? Yeah, don't think so."

Eric and I had fallen into whatever the hell we were doing. There was no definition, no parameters and sure as hell no, *where is this going?* talk. It felt like if that happened an invisible line would be crossed, shattering the fantasy snow globe I was currently in. I wanted to dance in the snow a little longer.

Just a little more.

"Be careful, Tia. Do not fall in love with him."

"Lila, I love lots of things about him. His face, his hair, his body—which incidentally is insane, and of course the sex. I love that he makes me laugh and when he looks at me, I feel like I'm the only woman in the world. But I'm not in love with him, I won't let him into my heart."

The last part was the saddest to say. I wasn't sure why, maybe it's because if we'd met under different circumstances and he wasn't who he was, he'd be exactly the kind of guy I'd date.

"Well then, enjoy the ride."

Indeed I intended to.

So with my work done and my call ended, I did what any rational person would do in my current position.

Packed a bag.

Because I was probably going to be a while.

This was not going to be a hardship.

* * * *

It was when I slipped into the cab—my oil-burning Buick left behind for all the previously listed reasons—that it occurred to me I had no idea where Eric was staying. It hadn't come up in our previous discussions. Important business such as sex got the top billing.

"Where are we heading?" the cab driver asked, his meter running as we sat out in front of my apartment building in the dark.

I was still wearing the backless dress I'd worn to dinner, changing into something else a time-consuming option not seriously considered.

"Give me just a minute." I pulled out my phone and started typing, sending a quick text message asking him where he was staying.

The Roosevelt- 45th Street (Feeling nostalgic? See you soon x

Oh har-har-ha! Of course, out of all the five-star swanky hotels in the whole of Manhattan, he'd pick The Roosevelt. A not so subtle nod to my hotel—which I never actually stayed in—from L.A. He was too fucking charming.

I leaned across to the glass and gave the driver the address. "The Roosevelt on 45th street in Manhattan." A nod all I got in response as he pulled away from the curb and headed into the city.

Are you naked? You should be naked.

I typed back trying not to get too excited over the x, aka kiss, left at the end of his message.

It was probably just habit, a reflex. I had once sent an email signed *Love Tia xxx* one late night where love or kisses had no business being. He was my seventy-year-old English professor. He wore tweed jackets with elbow patches and loafers—rarely was he amused. The other messages I sent to clarify I didn't love him or send kisses were just as bad. Never made that mistake again.

Wearing only a towel. I'll let you decide if that's naked enough for you.

No kiss this time. Interesting. And no, it wasn't naked enough.

Not even close, but I'll take care of it when I get there. Unwrapping is the number one skill listed on my resume. You're in good hands x

Fine, so maybe the kiss was intentional. A test. Because clearly I was a masochist and liked to torment myself.

I like your hands. And everything else.

Dear Lord in heaven and all the saints. I felt a rush of heat flood my body as I hugged the phone to my chest like an idiot.

The x was still MIA from his message, but I would deal with its significance—both in the first instance when it appeared, and then it missing in the second—later. I didn't send a response.

Instead, I relaxed against the probably questionable cloth seats of a NYC cab and waited until we pulled up to the hotel.

It was late—past midnight—with the hotel lobby mostly deserted.

"Can I help you ma'am?" The concierge welcomed me with a smile.

"Just visiting a friend." I tried to not advertise I had an overnight pack slung over my shoulder. "I'll just have to call him and find out what room he's in."

"I'll be more than happy to help you find your *friend*." He smiled tightly. "We just need a

name, and a check-in date would be helpful.”

Wait a minute.

Did he think I was—?

“Hey, I’m not a hooker.” My hands flew to my hips, my overnight bag swinging wildly behind me as I stood there glaring. “Not everyone who walks into a hotel late at night, in a nice dress, looking for a *friend*, is selling their body.”

“Ma’am, I wasn’t implying—”

“Yeah, sure you weren’t.” My eyes narrowed. Asshat.

“I’m terribly sorry, ma’am.” His face flushed as I continued to eyeball him, not willing to let him off the hook. “There has been a terrible misunderstanding. I was not and would never imply such a thing. Now, please allow me to find your friend.” The inflection on the word *friend*, no longer there.

“His name is Eric—” I stopped.

He wouldn’t use his actual name to check in would he? No, he wouldn’t. Crap. Why didn’t I ask him who the reservation was under? A room number? Now I definitely looked like a fucking hooker.

“Just a minute.” I held up my finger as I sifted in my purse for my phone. Sure, I could call Eric tell him I was down in the lobby and ask him to either authorize this jackass to send me up or give me the room number. But that would totally ruin my surprise of knocking on his door and pretending to be housekeeping like a bad porno. Because that was hilarious and I’d never had the opportunity, and something told me Eric would appreciate it. The dirty sex after, I would appreciate.

“Ryan York. I’m here to see Ryan York,” I responded, my earlier reconnaissance had been fruitful learning Ryan’s last name. I’d also learned he was a Scorpio and his Facebook profile was private, but for now the name was enough.

“Ahh, yes. Mr. York has two of our bedroom suites.” He looked at me and smiled. “I’ll get someone to escort you.” He waved over a bellboy, who scurried over unbelievably fast.

“Bill, can you please show this charming lady to Mr. York’s suites, please.” No further details given as he nodded to me and to Bill. Maybe he was telepathically transmitting the room number, or maybe it was common knowledge which rooms Ryan *and* Eric were occupying.

“Have a nice evening.” He nodded again as Bill offered to take my bag.

“I’ve got it.” I kept the bag slung over my shoulder. “It’s not heavy.” My heels echoed off the highly polished floor as he lead me through the ornate lobby to the elevators.

“Are you here for Ryan or Eric?” A slight smile edged at Bill’s lips as he pressed the button for the floor.

Oh for fuck’s sake.

Not this again.

“I’m not a hooker.”

“Oh, no. I didn’t think you were.” He had the decency to look mortified. “I just meant which of them are you seeing tonight? It seems they always have pretty girls going up to their room. You are really pretty.” He gave me a slightly more enthusiastic smile.

And now I wished he’d just thought I’d been a hooker.

Okay, so we had never had the *are we going to sleep with anyone else* talk. We agreed not to sleep with each other’s friends, which I assumed—probably rather stupidly—that non-friends were included as well. At least until it ended. Fuck, I was naïve.

“Eric.” I fastened my metaphorical mask as I ignored the part about all the other pretty girls.

"I'm here to see Eric." The doors opening at his name.

It was like magic, just a whisper of those magical letters and bam—everything opened.

Doors.

Legs.

Stop it.

"Just there." Bill pointed to the door in front of us. "Would you like me to knock for you?"

"No." I shook my head, scrounging in my purse for some cash. "Thanks." A scrunched up fiver the best I could do.

"No problem." He accepted the crumpled bill and placed it in his pocket. "Have a nice night."

Yeah. All I had to do was tuck that tiny bit of information away. Easy. Not. Gah.

My fist rattled on the wooden door, my "housekeeping," not as cheery as I would have liked.

The door swung open, the aforementioned towel still slung low around his waist, a sexy smile on his lips.

"New York." His eyes did a slow head to toe as if seeing me for the first time tonight. "It seems your resume is quite impressive."

"Yes, Mr. Larsson." I played along, my eyelashes batting like a southern belle debutante. "I'm here to clean your room."

I hip-swayed right past him, dropping my overnight bag and purse to the floor.

"It's not my room that's dirty." He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me in close.

"Mr. Larsson." His name rushed out in a breath. "I'd be happy to clean *anything* that is dirty." My fingers tiptoed along the top of his towel.

He laughed as the towel I'd loosened dropped to the floor.

"Oops, look how clumsy I am." My hand flew to my mouth in mock horror. "Allow me to pick it up." I turned, bending at the waist as I picked up the damp towel, my ass remaining in the air.

"Don't move." He came up behind me, his hands resting on my ass. "I want you to stay right there." His fingers traveled down my legs, moving to the hem of my dress. "I want you." He leaned over and whispered in my ear. "And I've been waiting all night."

For me, or anyone else? My brain asked what my mouth wouldn't.

I didn't move, my hands gripping the towel tighter as I closed my eyes. Five to seven days, enjoy it for God's sake. Don't turn needy now.

"Tia." His fingers stopped just as they reached the edge of my underwear. "What's wrong?"

Fuck.

Fuck.

FUCK.

That's what I should be doing. Instead I'm bent over, Eric Larsson right behind me with his hands up my dress and I'm acting like a fruitcake. God, I was mad. Absolutely pissed beyond measure that my body was listening to my brain. A brain, I might add, that had no business getting involved in any of it.

"Why did you break up with Anna?" I heard myself say as I slowly straightened, my body not turning toward him.

And now my mouth was against me too, bringing up his ex girlfriend. *Kudos assholes, the both of you!*

"You want to discuss this now?" He moved closer, his arms circling my waist as he turned me to face him. "You want to talk about a girl I used to date?"

“No, I don’t want to talk about her.” Thank you, Lord. “But you were with her and then you weren’t. And then you were with me.” Well . . . that prayer of thanks was premature, wasn’t it. Traitors. “And I have no right to ask but I need to know.”

“Were you wondering if you had anything to do with it?” He picked up the towel I had minutes ago stripped him of and rewrapped it around his waist. *No*, my hormones were screaming. *We don’t care about her; no one here wants to talk. Listen to us.*

“Yes,” my traitorous mouth answered. “I want to know.”

His eyes studied me as he took a step back.

I’m positive whatever hard-on he’d worked up was long gone, his *want for me* soured as I stood there. And as much as I wanted him, I wanted to know this more.

“Anna and I broke up two months ago.” His voice was stoic, unemotional. “We agreed to be seen together until after the film premiere. She believed it would be mutually beneficial, and I didn’t care enough to argue.” He shook his head. “But it was over. Very much over.”

“Wait, what?”

They’d been broken up for two whole months? I’d seen them in pictures, gleefully filling their cart at Trader Joe’s—it had been a sham?

“We agreed not to date anyone for those two months, keep up appearances, but we hadn’t been together in a long time.” He pushed out a breath before his lips curled into a half smile. “Even longer than the break up.”

“So when you met me, you were—”

“Single. And to be honest, even though you acted like you were under the influence of some serious happy pills, you were insanely hot.” The smile got wider. “Anna said goodbye before the movie even screened, snuck out the back door and headed to the airport. Ironically, I was glad she wasn’t around so I could try to find you.” He laughed. “Of course, a couple of days later a job she’d been earmarked for fell through and she was filmed drunk and making out with some other guy. Everyone made their own assumptions. We both knew the truth.”

“I think I need to sit down.” I felt the room spinning, my skin suddenly feeling too hot. “This dress is killing me.” I yanked at the zipper at my side, needing the dress to come off.

“Hmm. Not the way I’d planned it.” He laughed taking over for my uncooperative fingers as he tugged down the zipper. “But I’m enough of an asshole not to ignore the opportunity.”

With my zipper down, I—in the most non-seductive, unsexy and most uncoordinated way possible—pulled off my dress. The offending fabric dumped on the floor as I stood there topless in my panties.

Backless dress, so . . .

“Mmm.” Eric’s eyes hungered over my breasts but didn’t touch them. “That dress is my new favorite.”

He’d been single when I met him and still wasn’t seeing anyone. What did that mean?

“I still think I need to sit down.”

“That I can do.” He took my hand and pulled me into a hug, my breasts pressing against his naked chest. “Chair or bed? Your choice.”

“Bed,” I answered, not trusting myself not to fall on my ass right now.

“Good choice.” He walked me backward until my legs hit the mattress, gently easing me down on the bed before climbing on himself.

“Better?” His lips gently kissed my shoulder as I nodded. The towel he’d been wearing was now MIA. “So anything else you want to talk about?”

Well, there was no point not jumping off the cliff now, was there? It was all or nothing.

“Are you sleeping with other women?” I kept my eyes dead ahead, not wanting to see his face before I’d heard the words.

Whatever happened, I’d deal. But if I looked at him, and saw those eyes of his that made me feel like I’d taken stupid pills, I knew I’d be making bad decisions.

“Um, what?” He laughed, his arms wrapping around me. “Is this a joke?”

“No, no.” I tried to clarify; perhaps he hadn’t understood the question.

“I don’t mean sleep in the literal sense, I mean we *agreed* to not fuck each other’s friends. But what about other people, who I may not know or be aware of.”

“Wow, you are insane.” He barked out a laugh. “New York, you are killing me.”

“Please answer.” Not sure what the laugh meant. Was he laughing because I was ridiculous—very likely—believing he’d be monogamous? Or because he thought it was funny I was confused—also likely. And neither told me shit. “I won’t be mad, I just want to know.”

“No.” He stopped laughing, tilting my chin so he could look into my eyes. “I have not been fucking, sleeping or doing anything else with anyone else.”

A breath I had been unconsciously holding slowly eased out between my lips.

“Firstly, not sure when I’d have that kind of time. I’ve been spending almost every second with you.”

So those girls . . . must have been for Ryan. Wow, who knew he was such a player.

His thumb traced along my jaw. “And secondly, I assumed we were doing something here.”

Well. Fuck.

“Oh.” I prayed to the gods—all of them, hoping one of them would listen—that I hadn’t screwed up something amazing.

“Yes, oh.” He shook his head gently. “What did you think we were doing?”

It was like I knew it was the wrong answer but already having committed to it, my mouth saying exactly what had been on my mind.

“Sex.” I grimaced, bracing for whatever furor would befall me.

“You think I’d fly to New York just for sex?” His head tilted to the side in the biggest unspoken *are-you-serious* I’d ever seen.

“I don’t know.” Well, when he put it like that, there probably was more cost-effective ways of fulfilling sexual needs. “You said I intrigued you, it was confusing to me.”

It took him a minute—even though it felt like an hour—before he finally spoke.

“It means that the two minutes I spent with you on the red carpet was enough for me to know I needed to see you again. At the bar, I wasn’t ready to say goodbye and when our night ended, I wasn’t going to let it be over.”

Oh, sweet baby Jesus, my heart was about to burst.

“But I live here, and you live there.”

I hadn’t even got to the part where he was famous, gorgeous and rich and I wasn’t. I mean, I wasn’t poor, clearly had enough cash to fly across the country on a whim and buy too many lipsticks, but I wasn’t famous. At most I was “known”. As in the suspect was *known* to law enforcement. People read my columns and I got mail from readers who said they loved reading my work, they *knew* me. But no one was going to notice me on the street.

“It’s a few hours in an airplane, across a couple of time zones.” He gave me a smile, wrapping his arms around me. “No major deal.”

“No major deal.” I shrugged, my smile not convincing anyone.

Actually a big fucking deal, and I knew I was asking for trouble.

Epic-level trouble.

“We could try and see what happens?” The way his lips pressed against my neck, he could have convinced me of anything. Want to go see if we can find Atlantis and live underwater? Sure, show me the way.

“Yes, yes we could.” I was helpless to say anything else.

“So, you want to talk some more?” His arms tightened. “Or do you want to do something else?”

“Always something else.” I shoved away the evil thoughts of the trouble that would inevitably come. “Kiss me.”

Chapter 14

I was already in big trouble.

Instead of coming clean to Eric about the circumstances of our *chance* meeting—the procurement of my invitation and my less than honest details of employment—I panicked.

Yes, I know it was stupid.

I was asking for trouble.

It was all going to blow up in my face.

Yes, yes, yes to all of the above.

But when he'd said all those nice things and how we were going to try and make this relationship—holy shit, did that mean I was his girlfriend?—work, I just couldn't say it.

He would hate me, see the web of lies I'd woven and never trust me. There was no way he'd understand my reasons, seeing it as deceit instead of the tiny—microscopic—white lie that it was.

There was only one way to go from here. Slowly back away from the circumstances and establish a new truth. He'd never have to know. Besides, it was early days and if this didn't stand the test of time then what was the point in putting myself through what would be equivalent to the Salem Witch Trials.

Easier my way.

Safer too.

No one had to get hurt.

Day one ART (After Relationship Talk) was easy. We woke up late, had sex, had a late brunch and then had sex again. The perfect start to a day.

And we could have easily spent the day in bed—my preference—but decided to go to MoMA instead. He assured me this was regular couple behavior, but I wasn't convinced. I humored him though because he liked the idea of being out in public with me. I liked that he liked that and figured if I had to be the *no name* girl he was seen in New York with, that was the cross I was happy to bear. Besides, I was confident no one would make the connection between me and Tia the writer from *The Post*. Or at least I'd convinced myself of that.

We walked around the museum looking at the exhibits and I tried to be interested in what I was looking at. This was Piper's domain, she would have been happy to wax lyrically about each piece, talking about the medium used and the often tragic life of the artist. Spoiler alert: most of them were horny bastards with STD's or ended up in mental institutions.

There was a tranquility to it though, one that I hadn't expected and really enjoyed. Walking around, no one really paying us any attention. Sure he got approached a couple of times. A couple of autographs here, a cheeky selfie there, but for the most part they left us alone.

From there we walked to Central Park, blending in with the tourists and the street performers, and just enjoying the sunshine on a perfect spring day. We found a quiet spot on the grass and kissed like a pair of teenagers.

To finish, we went back to my apartment where I cooked dinner. Of course I hadn't seen the inside of a grocery store in too many days to count, so me cooking dinner turned into eating pizza on my living room floor.

Normal couple behavior was the theme of the day, and even though I'd been skeptical, I had to hand it to Eric. It had been what I'd imagined the perfect *first date* should be. With maybe

more kissing and touching than usual. Oh, and we had sex more than on a regular first date too.

Day two ART we hit a minor snag.

While the day had started out similar to day one, Judith had summoned me for family time. Refusing wasn't an option. She would have guilt tripped me into next week with a ferocity not even Opus Dei could have matched. Inviting Eric also wasn't an option. You can't bring your I-haven't-even-called-him-my-boyfriend-yet to a family dinner. No, bad ju-ju. Besides, etiquette dictated that family meetings happened only after an established commitment had been made. Sure he'd met Judith before but that was incidental and couldn't be helped, and he hadn't known who she was. Trust me, taking a new guy or girl to a family event too soon would be putting the curse of a million suns on the relationship. Most would crash and burn.

So we had reached an impasse.

My first instinct was to make up some intricate story about how I needed the evening free. But as I was trying to unbury myself from the weight of deathly sin, I figured it was better to just tell him the truth. It was a family dinner, and while I would love to have him there, I didn't want to risk the curse of a million suns. He was thankfully amused and not offended, and told me to enjoy my dinner with my sister and her family. I promised to make it up to him later that night. Compromise was awesome.

It was easy to see myself falling in love with him. Not in the way I thought I had in the past—that was lust, infatuation. But spending time with him, getting to know him and not this character I'd created in my head—I could feel the feelings starting to build. Real feelings, the kind that made your chest ache because your heart felt so full. He was kind and smart and so real. Which sounded stupid because of course he was real. But his body, his face—they were such a small part of who he was. And the Eric I was spending time with I really, really liked.

Day three ART, Eric had a morning meeting. He was great about balancing work and still spent an obscene amount of time with me, something I was struggling with. At no time did he take any of it for granted, and while he wasn't technically working, if a meeting needed to happen, he wouldn't say no.

So I kissed him goodbye, telling him of all the wonderful things we were going to do once he returned. As the door closed, I was already powering up my laptop ready to transcribe the notes for my column I'd been typing on my phone. Any opportunity I got. Bathrooms, quiet moments when Eric would go over scripts—I would scribe out my thoughts just waiting for the time when I could get them together later. I even caught up with Lila.

Look at me being all responsible. It was a piece of cake; I'm not sure why I was worried. All the while I had been slowly planting seeds that maybe show business wasn't for me. It wasn't as ingenious as I'd first thought.

Casually I'd mention how the stress of auditions made me want to vomit. Unfortunately, instead of telling me that was a sure indicator I was not right for the process, he informed me how heaps of his actor buddies went through the same thing. He recommended yoga and told me it would get better. Fucking yoga. Because twisting myself into a pretzel would help the situation that really didn't exist. I needed to try harder.

"You know, I'm thinking it might be time to try other things." I tried for the direct approach as I enjoyed my French toast. Breakfasts were better when we stayed at the hotel. No room service where I lived.

"Like sexually?" He grinned, sipping his coffee.

"No, I mean professionally." I swallowed. *Now or never, Tia.* "Maybe acting isn't for me."

"Really?" Eric lowered his cup, his attention focused on me. "Why do you say that?"

"I think maybe I was in love with the idea of it. You know, it seems so romantic." I smiled, knowing it was a mistake a lot of people made. "I just don't know if I love it, not like you do. Not like I should." My head shook gingerly like the thought had been weighing heavily on my mind.

It sounded better than I'd planned, I was even convincing myself.

"It's not an easy life, New York, I'll be the first to admit it." His hand slid across the table and encapsulated mine. "But it has to be a compulsion. There has to be no other option or the rejections, the criticism will break you."

I was home free.

Just a few more suggestions about how I didn't feel my soul alight when I ran a line or how my heart didn't sing when I stepped onto a stage and he would probably beg me to abandon ship. Nothing like a half-assed effort ruining it for all the serious folk. It was foolproof.

It wasn't until day five that my epic plan started to unravel.

I was at my apartment because Eric had some kind of meeting. Once again I hadn't paid close attention, thankful because it gave me time to work. And it couldn't have come at a better time, because if I didn't submit my column today by three, my editor was going to be on my doorstep. I'd already been late once this week.

"I have a surprise for you." He strolled in, all smiles, the keys I'd given him a day ago swinging from his fingers.

"Really?" I slowly looked up from my laptop, trying to close it without drawing too much attention. I wasn't great with surprises. "Can I eat it?" Hoping that while he was out in the city he'd strolled past Godiva and felt compelled to bring me back a coveted gold box.

"Um. No. But it's great and I know you are going to love it."

He looked so pleased with himself, I didn't know whether I should be excited or terrified.

"So are you going to tell me what it is?" I tried not to strangle the words as they left my throat, my anxiety climbing with each passing second.

"Nope, you are going to have to wait until tonight." His finger tapped me on the nose. "I think you should invite your sister, Judith, to come."

Wait. What. What?

"Judith?" Full-blown panic flooded through my body in a rush. "I'm pretty sure she can't get away, you know the kids. She's a busy lady."

Please Lord, whatever is happening make it stop. I will never tell a lie again.

"What about her husband? Will? I'm sure he can watch them for a few hours?" He started offering suggestions that normally would have been helpful. "Maybe they can get a sitter and both come out." He held up his hand ready to stop the barrage of rebuttals I was about to offer. "And before you start with the curse of a million suns, it's not a family event. We'll just be out together."

"Gee, Eric. I don't know. My family is sort of crazy." My hand rubbed the back of my neck praying for a freak storm dumping thirteen inches of snow on the city in May. "I don't know."

"So pick up the phone." He handed me my cell lying beside my now closed laptop. "And call. The most they can say is no. It's important to me."

Great.

I was so screwed.

Either I threw caution to the wind, hoping like hell his big surprise was something harmless he wanted to share with me and my sister—it still didn't make sense. Or I disappoint him and possibly raise a shit ton of questions as to why I didn't want to do this.

Rock meet hard place—and there I was, right in the middle.

“Sure.” My jaw tightened as I accepted the phone from his hand. “I’ll call.”

There was still a chance. It was Saturday, the chances of getting a last-minute babysitter was slim. And because both Judith and Will worked all through the week, they liked to spend as much time with Louis and Bridget as they could. They were good parents, and they weren’t about to dump their two adorable cherubs to go on a magic mystery tour for me.

“Tia.” Judith’s voice filled my ear. “What’s wrong, you never call on a Saturday.”

“Nothing’s wrong.” My cheeks hurt from trying to maintain the smile. “I just wanted to see how my amazing big sister was.”

“Will, Tia’s in jail,” Judith yelled somewhere in the distance. “Where are you?” Her attention directed back to me. “Remember, don’t say anything, you’re likely to incriminate yourself.”

“I’m not in jail.” The crazed laugh didn’t help my cause. “I just wanted to ask you something. Now, no pressure, I know it’s short notice.” Or at least I prayed it was.

Eric pulled the phone from my hand and unprecedented panic took every ounce of air from my lungs. I couldn’t breathe, the organs housed in my chest responsible for inflating absolutely paralyzed.

“Hi, Judith, it’s Eric. We met briefly last week.”

Make it stop. Make it stop.

Expelliarmus. Expelliarmus Goddamn it!

“Yes that’s right. Larsson.” He winked at me as he confirmed who he was. “I was hoping you and your husband, Will, might be able to join us tonight. I have a special surprise planned for Tia and I’d love to have you share it with her.”

“Don’t guilt her.” I tugged at his arm, desperate to get the phone back. “It’s my surprise after all.”

“Yes, tonight around nine.” He ignored me. “I know it’s short notice, you think you can get a sitter?”

“That sounds great. I’ll get your number from Tia and text you the details.”

It was a car crash. I could see it spinning out of control about to hit head on with an eighteen-wheeler, and I was powerless to stop it.

“Here you go.” He handed me back my cell, pleased with himself beyond measure as we went to sit on the couch.

“Judith?” The phone back at my ear.

“Sounds like we’re in for a fun evening.” She laughed, thoroughly enjoying the situation. “I can’t wait to see where this ends up.”

“You know if something comes up and you can’t make it.” I concentrated all my mental power into trying to send subliminal messages. “We’d understand. I know how busy you both are. It would be okay. Honestly.”

“And miss this? Are you kidding me?” Another laugh. “Probably would have been easier if you were in jail, huh?”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“See you tonight.” She gave me a gleeful goodbye.

“Uh-hm. Can’t wait.”

As my cell phone lowered, two glacier-blue eyes staring at me met mine. A smirk across his lips.

“You seem worried, is there a reason you don’t want your sister there?”

“Other than the curse I already told you about? No, of course not.”

“Good.” He rubbed his hands together evil villain style as he rose off the couch. “I have some things I need to organize for the rest of your surprise. You think you can keep yourself out of trouble until tonight?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s a gas station I’ve been meaning to hold up, now that my afternoon’s free, I could do that.”

The idea of being incarcerated only mildly less appealing than the hell I was probably going to endure until I found out.

“Try and be good.” He strode over to where I was sitting and gave me a lingering kiss. “I’ll be here at eight to pick you up. You can ask your friend Lila if she wants to come, the more the merrier.”

“And where will I tell her we’ll be going?” I mean, it was worth a shot, right?

“Nice try.” Another kiss. “Write down your sister’s number.”

There was no point giving him a fake number, if he’d found mine, he’d be able to find hers. And it was probably prolonging whatever suffering I already had coming to me.

“Here.” I handed him the Post-it I’d scribbled Judith’s cell number on. “I’m so excited.” I waved my imaginary pom-poms in the air.

“You’re such a bad liar.” He smiled tucking the Post-it into his pocket. “I’ll see you soon.” He gave me another lingering kiss before heading back out the door.

In blurred panic, my fingers speed dialed Lila as I paced around my living room.

“Lila,” I barked into the phone the minute she’d picked up. We had no time for pleasantries or hellos.

“Tia, what’s wrong?”

“Epic level shit is what’s wrong.” My feet continued to burn a hole in the floor. “Eric is planning something and I don’t know what it is, but he’s invited Judith and Will. It sounds bad. Oh my God, it’s going to be bad. You need to be there with me.”

The room started to spin as my vision slowly blackened at the edges.

“You’re hyperventilating, you need to calm down before you pass out.” Her steady voice attempted to talk me off the ledge.

“If I pass out, that’s a good excuse for not going out, right?” I sucked in more air. “Maybe I should go to an emergency room.”

“Tia, let’s try starting at the beginning.” Her voice was so soothing, so in control—why couldn’t I be more like her?

The details came out in a rush, telling her all about the cryptic surprise and phone conversation with my sister. I couldn’t even guess what it could be.

“You don’t think he’s going to propose, do you?” Lila asked, spit balling ideas.

“Please, we’ve known each other for five minutes. I’m the crazy one in this relationship.”

It hadn’t even entered into my mind, there was no way he would ask me to marry him. Hell, we hadn’t even done the *I love you* thing yet. He wasn’t that guy. He’d never been engaged before even though he’d had long-term relationships. Who even knew if he wanted to get married? Not like we’d talked about important stuff like marriage or kids.

Crap. I was going to pass out.

“I’m worried this is the end,” I heard myself saying, my heart hurting more than just a little at the prospect. “I’m not ready for this to be over.”

“Don’t be silly, Tia.” Lila gave a soft chuckle. “He obviously cares about you, whatever happens tonight isn’t going to be some crazy catalyst. He probably wants to spoil you. Meet your

friends and family, I'm sure it's not bad."

She could be right. She *had to be* right.

"It won't end," I said to myself more than to Lila. "Not when I'm starting to fall in love with him."

"Tia, you're falling in love with him?" I could hear the sympathy in her voice. I didn't fall in love easy, but when I did, I fell hard. "You need to tell him the truth."

"I will. I promise."

I just needed to find the right time.

Chapter 15

I'd taken a Xanax.

It was the only way I was going to get through the night without having a panic attack or drinking myself into a stupor. And with the edge knocked off, I was able to get myself ready for my mystery date.

I had no idea what to wear.

Eric had messaged earlier in the day saying to dress comfortable. Comfortable? Was he taking me on a hike? What did comfortable even mean? I was comfortable in a pair of panties and an old sleep shirt, but I wasn't going to be rocking that in public. I needed specifics.

So rather than trying to get further information from him—he was a locked vault, I was getting nothing—I called Judith and begged her to tell me what I should wear. She didn't give me shit initially but eventually I appealed to her need to be appropriately dressed for the right occasion, so she finally caved and told me to wear jeans, a nice top and heels. *That*, I could work with.

It was seven thirty when there was a knock at my door, my mascara wand still in my hand as I unlocked the twenty billion locks.

"Hey, you look great." Lila pulled me in for a hug, nodding approvingly at my tight black halter neck top and skinny jeans. "Any clues?"

"Nope, nothing. Eric should be here soon though, so I guess we'll find out," I responded calmly. Xanax was a wonderful thing.

Lila got comfortable on the couch while I continued to get ready.

Eric arrived right at eight, entering the apartment followed closely by Ryan.

"Hi, Ryan." Lila gave him a bright smile.

She might have been the more sensible one of the two of us but she wasn't blind. Ryan was looking particularly good tonight, and I was positive it had something to do with knowing Lila was going to be with us.

"What, no hug?" He circled his arms around Lila not asking permission before giving her a squeeze. "Did you miss me?"

"I've been busy." She wiggled out of his hug not looking all that annoyed.

"Hey you." Eric bypassed the Lila/Ryan sideshow as he pulled me in close. "I've wanted to do this all day." His lips moved to my neck as he lifted me off the floor.

"We could stay here," I suggested. "Make out on the couch."

"Sounds good to me." Ryan winked at Lila.

"Nope, too late." Eric breathed in my ear. "We have plans. Besides we wouldn't want to stand up your sister and brother-in-law, would we?"

"Right, should we be going then?" Better to get it over with.

"I just know you are going to love it." Eric lowered me back to the floor, his eyes so full of excitement I was starting to feel bad. He'd obviously gone to a lot of trouble; the least I could do was act appreciative.

"I can't wait." I gave his hand a squeeze as I grabbed my purse. "I know it is going to be awesome."

Eric circled his arm around my waist, walking to the front door. I took my time, making sure every one of the locks were engaged and then rechecked before the four of us piled into the

elevator and went down to the street level.

The black SUV with the super tinted windows Ryan had been driving was parked on the street. Mental note. Ask Eric if they had a fleet of them in different cities or if they rented them from the secret service.

Eric held open the door as I climbed into the back, following me in, and shut the door, leaving Lila sitting up front in the passenger seat. She didn't seem to mind and Ryan seemed happy he wasn't sitting solo like he usually was when Eric and I were in the car.

"You're going to need to put this on." Eric handed me a silk, black blindfold as the ignition started.

In different circumstances the appearance of a silk blindfold would have been exciting. Hell, I would have welcomed it. Silk ropes, a ball gag—sure, I was game. But getting into a car and being told to cover your eyes didn't usually lead to good things. I'd seen the movies; I knew how this turned out.

The wearer—me in this case—was either dumped in an abandoned alley or taken to the leader of a crime family or drug cartel. Neither of those scenarios were ideal considering I was wearing four-inch heels and running away usually followed.

"You're not serious." I laughed nervously, looking at the soft fabric eye mask dangling between my fingers.

"Very serious." Eric's head tilted to the blindfold. "You don't want to ruin the surprise, do you?" Cue the sexy eyes I couldn't say no to.

Oh, he was good. At some point he'd worked out my weakness, one of those looks from him and I'd agree to just about anything. Who am I kidding, I'd agree to anything even without the look.

"No, but I have no idea where we are going." I was stalling, trying to delay the inevitable. "And I promise I'll act surprised when we get there. I'll even close my eyes."

"You'll peek." His brow rose, daring me to deny it.

"She will," Lila called from the front. "She's predictable like that."

"You're supposed to be on my side." An annoyed glare was fired across to where she was sitting. "Why doesn't she have to wear a mask?"

"Because it's *your* surprise." Eric took the blindfold from my fingers and took my chin into his hands. "Look at me, Tia. I promise I won't let anything bad happen to you. Do you trust me?"

With my life—the thought kept to myself.

"Yes, I trust you." I nodded as he slid the mask over my eyes, my world plunging into darkness.

With one of my senses deprived, everything else heightened. Eric's fingers along my arm, the hum of the engine, each bump in the road. It was all amplified, the skin on my arms pimpling as I traveled into the unknown.

It wasn't a long drive, shorter than I'd anticipated, when the car came to a stop and I felt Ryan maneuver into a parking spot.

"Oh." I heard Lila gasp from the front seat.

The gasp on its own did not mean good things, coupled with the *oh*, and it spelled a world of trouble.

"Can I take it off?" My hands lifted to my eyes, anxious to see where I was as my pulse hammered out of control.

"No, not yet." Eric pulled my hands away and laid them in my lap. "I'm going to come

around and open the door and help you out.”

Awesome, so at least I wouldn’t fall on my face as I got out of the car.

The door beside me opened, a gentle breeze hitting my bare arms as I let Eric take my hands and ease me out of my seat. His fingers wrapped around my waist steadying me on my feet as he walked slowly behind me, guiding me like a marionette in the direction he wanted me to go.

“So are you going to tell me anything?” My head turned from side to side trying to decipher noises. The faint sound of music mixed with the bustle of traffic.

A bar.

It had to be a bar.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he whispered, his hot breath against my ear.

Translation: He wasn’t telling me shit.

“There are two steps, New York.” His hands shifted to my hips, tapping to indicate when I’d come to one. “Go slow, this would really suck if you broke a leg or something.”

Ryan and Lila both erupted into laughter.

“It’s not funny, assholes,” I hissed in my imposed blindness, my arms Frankenstein-ing in front of me.

“Ignore them.” Eric continued to guide me up one step and then the other, my feet stepping onto something soft and squishy. Carpet. Or a welcome mat. Definitely no longer pavement.

“Mr. Larsson, a pleasure.” A voice I didn’t recognize greeted us. “And this must be Ms. Monroe.”

“Um, yes.” I held out my hand in the vague direction of the voice. “Hi.”

A hand clasped against mine and shook it before responding. “We’re ready for you.”

What. The. Fuck.

My head literally swam with possibilities—none of which I’d want my sister, brother-in-law and best friend present to see.

“Let’s go through the back door.”

Lord, not words I wanted to hear considering my number one guess of our location was some kind of sex club.

“You guys can go inside through the front door, I’ll get Tia where she needs to be.” Eric’s voice turned to the side, his directions to Ryan and Lila.

“Tia.” I felt Lila squeeze my arm. “You’re going to be okay, just don’t freak out.”

“Well, I wasn’t until you told me not to.” My breathing started to quicken.

“She’ll be fine. I will be with her the whole time.” Eric squeezed the other arm.

We stepped through what I assumed was another doorway—it could have been the gates of hell at this point—the breeze that had been hitting my bare skin stopping instantly. Wherever we were, we were inside something.

Bar.

Club.

Hades.

The music was louder here and not necessarily current—which ruled out club—it was more eye-of-the-tiger inspiration type stuff that would be played at a rally of some kind. There were voices too; laughing, talking competing with whatever get-pumped tune was playing.

Eric continued to guide me, subtly turning my body in the direction he wanted me to travel until I heard the echo of my heels on a hardwood floor. We were no longer on the carpet.

And that’s when I heard the unmistakable hush, the music being dimmed and the heat of overhead lights.

Oh. God.

This wasn't hell.

This was worse.

I was on a fucking stage.

"Okay, you can look now," Eric whispered into my ear, my fingers lifting the blindfold from my eyes.

The spotlights seared my retinas, whatever sight I'd gained giving me a fuck you as white dots covered my vision. Not that I needed to see, the applause that had started confirming any doubt.

"You were saying how you'd lost your love for acting, and I remember you said you were thinking of doing some theatre. So here we are." His arm gestured to the room in front of us. People sitting around tables looked at me.

And there, front and center was Judith and Will, fucking smiling their asses off. Lila—who was sitting next to them—at least had the decency to try and hide her grin.

"Oh, Eric." The shock I was experiencing did not have to be manufactured. "You shouldn't have." As in seriously, you should not have done this.

And this wasn't just any stage either, Eric had taken me to the Brooklyn Barn—a place comedians, poets, musicians and actors came to test out material and find their chops on open mic nights. I'd been one time when I was in college when the dude I was dating was convinced he could do stand up. The interior hadn't changed and neither had my desire to ever come back. Yet there I was, on the fucking stage.

"I'm right here with you, New York." He gave me a hug, beaming with such pride it hurt to look. "It's going to be amazing."

If I'd ever had a reason to turn to religion, this would have been it. I'd never uttered so many silent prayers to so many deities in my life. Jesus, regular God, the Viking gods, and all the saints. I was covering all my bases, hoping someone up there would take pity on me.

"Thanks everyone." He waved the crowd into a hush. "This is Tia, and I know she's as excited as I am to be here."

Excited? I felt like I was dying, my heart was beating so fast I was positive it was probably going to explode.

"Eric." My hand tightened around his, my stomach doing some weird acrobatics I was sure was going to make me puke. "I can't do this."

"You can, I know you can." He squeezed my hand back with so much blind faith I wanted to cry. "You've got this."

I stood there with the spotlight in my eyes, people looking at me expecting to be entertained and I had literally no idea what I was supposed to do. Which is when the speakers popped either side of me, and the strains of a big band number started pouring out.

Dear Lord.

It was Frank Sinatra.

No guesses as to which song.

Yep, "New York, New York."

Eric took the mic off the stand, his sexy voice wrapping around the opening iconic lines like he'd been born to sing. My mouth dropped open as he moved around the stage like he owned it.

The crowd loved it, clapping enthusiastically as he crooned about the city that was just beyond the bridge. And all of that would have been fine. He could have serenaded both me and the crowd and I would have applauded the loudest. But it didn't end there. The situation took a

turn for worse as he stuck the microphone in front of me, expecting me to contribute.

Oh.

Hell.

No.

Seriously, what the actual fuck?

If it had been a dream, I would have opened my mouth and the voice of an angel would have come out. Perfect pitch with perfect timing, owning the lyrics Old Blue Eyes made famous. But ladies and gentlemen, it was not a dream.

So, instead of wowing everyone with my vocal prowess, I hit every key except the one I was supposed to be in, sounding more like a wounded animal than a human trying to sing.

And instead of laughing at me—like any reasonable person would have—Eric twirled me around and ballroom danced with me as we both sang into the microphone together. Fred and Ginger style, except in color, and only one of us had talent.

It was terrible. There was no way anyone with two eyes and ears could have thought any different. But as the song finished, he twirled me again, kissing me on the lips for everyone to see, and the applause erupted around us.

“That was so bad,” I laughed, wiping the tears from my eyes.

“So bad.” He nodded throwing his head in a laugh. “Your sister told me you could sing.”

I hid my head against his chest, unable to stop from giggling. “I’m going to kill her.”

With his arms still around me, we walked down the wooden steps to where my soon-to-be-deceased sister was sitting, tears streaming down her face. “That was the best thing I’ve ever seen.” She clutched her chest as she struggled to breathe. “Will, did you record it?”

“Sure did.” My brother-in-law—who also needed to pick out a headstone—smirked. “Got it all on my phone.”

“I hate you both.” I took a seat, giving them both my death stare as the next act climbed onto the stage.

“New York, you should never sing again.” Ryan laughed, his arm casually draped around the back of Lila’s chair.

“It wasn’t that bad.” Lila tried to stifle her grin. “I’ve seen way worse.”

“Where?” Ryan laughed. “Babe, if you think that was good, you have got to get out more.”

“She did awesome.” Eric kissed my cheek. “But next time we’ll pick a scene from something. That had been my initial plan.”

“I told him a musical number was more appropriate.” Judith grinned.

“And that’s why I love you.” Will pulled her in for a kiss.

“You’re both on my shit list.” I pointed at them accusingly. “Eric, I know you’ve met my sister Judith before, but this is her husband, Will. He plays with boobs for a living.” I smiled sweetly as I gestured to my brother-in-law.

“Whoa, I want that job.” Ryan’s hand shot out in Will’s direction. “I’m Ryan, Eric’s right hand man though by the sounds of things I’d rather be yours.”

“Will, and I’m a cosmetic surgeon. It’s not all boobs.” He shook Ryan’s hand before turning to Eric. “Unfortunately I can’t do anything about Tia being tone deaf. I’m a brilliant surgeon, but I don’t perform miracles.”

“That’s fine.” Eric exchanged a handshake. “Tone deaf works for me.”

“You are a sick individual.” I playfully elbowed him. “But that was the one and only time I’m ever singing in public, so I hope you enjoyed it.”

“I’ll make you a copy in case you want to relive it.” Will leaned in and whispered, “Or

blackmail, I know that's what I'm using mine for."

"No one is getting a copy." I help up my hands, glaring at Will. "I will cut you."

"You should have picked West Side Story, man." Ryan tipped his head toward me. "Your girl is itching for a knife fight."

Everyone laughed except me.

Not because I was mad, couldn't care less they were poking fun at me. No, my silence was because it was the first time I'd been referred to as Eric's girl. Hell, I had only ever whispered *girlfriend* to myself, never saying it out loud.

Eric turned his head, noticing I was quiet and smiled and I lost my breath. It felt like we were the only two people in the room.

Judith, Will, Lila, Ryan, everyone sitting around tables—they all disappeared. Not even the woman on stage doing a depressing spoken word existed. Just me, and him, and this feeling that my heart would break if I ever had to say goodbye.

"Did I get some of that magic back for you?" His hand interwove into mine as he pressed a kiss to my forehead.

"No," I shook my head. "You gave me an entirely different brand of magic."

Chapter 16

“Come with me.” Eric’s hands cupped my breasts, his hard-on pressed against my back. “Back to L.A.”

“I can’t think when you touch me.” My body arched into his, loving the sweep of his hand against my skin.

“Why do you think I’m asking you now?” He nipped my shoulder with his teeth. “I’m not stupid.”

“I can’t just up and leave.” I tried to argue as his hand slid lower, gliding down my body. “I have—” I couldn’t finish the sentence, my words getting lost as his fingers circled my clit.

“You were saying?” he breathed in my ear, one of his fingers pushing into me.

“Yes.” My eyes closed as he inserted another. “Oh, that feels so good.”

“So you’ll come to L.A.?” His thumb got in on the action, my hips rocking against his hand.

“I don’t know,” I moaned, needing more friction. “Yes.” No idea what I was agreeing to.

“I knew you’d see it my way.” His hand continued to pump. “I’m very persuasive.”

“You can’t . . . make me . . . come . . . while . . . discussing.” Nope, I tried but the words were too much, not when he was doing wonderful things with his hands.

“I want to make you come as often and as much as I can.” His tongue traveled up the side of my neck. “Right now is a good start.”

It was futile trying to resist; my traitorous body didn’t care that I was trying to form a proper thought. Instead, it “please sir, can I have some more’d” itself at his every command. We needed to make sure important discussions happened while dressed in the future.

“I don’t want to come on your hand,” I was able to manage, every single part of me on fire. “I want you in me.”

“Maybe later, I like what I’m doing.” He ignored me completely, his fingers buried inside of me as my legs started to shake.

I wasn’t sure why I was fighting, but I wanted what I wanted and that was his cock.

With the iron will of a warrior princess, I pulled my body away, rolling on top of him before he’d had a chance to react.

“New York, is this a power play?” He laughed as he grabbed my hands and pulled me down on him. “Because I like you aggressive. Massive turn on.”

“I need a condom.” I tried to free my hands from the vice-like grip he had on them. “I’m going to fuck you.” I sucked against his neck, rubbing my tits against him.

“Massive turn on,” he whispered as he let my hands go, his eyes following me as I grabbed a condom from the nightstand.

“See how much better this is?” My hips twisted against the ridge of his cock as I tore open the packet. “This is how I want to come.”

My fingers stretched the latex to cover the head of his cock, my hands traveling slowly down his large hard length and then back up. His eyes widened as I continued to stroke, slow and deliberate, watching him lengthen further in my hands.

I had intended to tease him a little, jerk him off and make him beg, but I wanted him too much, guiding him to my entrance as I straddled him.

“Tia,” he moaned as my hips rose and slammed down hard against him, his cock filling me. “Yes, this is better.” His stare locked onto mine.

I didn't speak, my hands pressing against his chest as I twisted my hips, loving the slide of him going in and out of my pussy. The control, the feeling of being so full of him turning me on so much I wasn't sure I could hold out.

"God, you feel good." His hands wrapped around my hips. "So. Fucking. Good."

My nipples hardened, the cool air hitting them as I rocked above him. I wanted it to be slow, to grind against him and make him beg. But my body had other ideas, the slow steady movement of my hips getting quicker.

"Yes." He met each one of my thrusts with one of his own as I rode him, my tempo trying hard to keep up with his.

"I'm going to come, Tia," he gritted out, his fingertips gripping my hips tight.

"I'm right there with you."

My body collapsed onto his chest as the wave of euphoria rippled through me, his cock pulsed against me as his hips continued to pump. I loved being on top, covering him in a blanket of my naked body while we came together.

"This is why you have to come with me to L.A." He brushed the hair away from my face. "So I can make you come."

"I would argue it was *me* who made *you* come."

"We'll split the difference." His chest shook, my lips pressed against it. "But you still need to come back with me."

* * * *

"You're on the fucking internet." I'd barely gotten inside Lila's apartment when she almost threw her iPad at me. "Photos of you around town and a few from the other night at the Brooklyn Barn. I did a search for videos and couldn't find any, but you know I'm not as good a stalker as you are."

It was true, since Eric and I had been seeing each other, my time performing online searches had been minimal. Time was a factor. Hot boyfriend, hot sex, working on my column and my double life pretending to be unemployed—I barely managed to eat.

"Damn it." I scrolled through the candid pics, in all of which Eric had somehow managed to look gorgeous and me—not so much. "I didn't even see cameras."

They were vultures, their lenses capturing private moments between us and then plastering them all over the internet for everyone to see. How was it even legal? And damn it, why did they have to get me from my bad side?

"Am I the only one who finds it ironic?" Lila tapped her foot, grinning at me above the screen. "That now *you* are in the pictures you once would have been Googling?"

"Save your irony." I waved my hand in the air. Pfft, I wasn't in the mood for logic. "You think my folks have seen these?" A photo of Eric kissing me on the lawn in Central Park filled the screen. Damn, it looked kind of hot. "Shit, what about my editor? Is my name in any of them?"

"I very much doubt your folks frequent these kinds of sites, T." She shook her head, thankfully being the voice of reason. Lord knows I was beyond it at this point. "As for your editor, who knows? I'd doubt he'd care. And as for your name, not that I can see."

I furiously clicked on each thumbnail trying to gain as many details as possible. No names. Mystery girl, female friend or companion was my current online moniker. Thank the Lord for small mercies.

“So what’s the plan?” Lila pushed me toward her kitchen table, the iPad still glued to my face as I scanned more pictures. “You seriously going to go to L.A?”

It had been an agreement made under duress—I couldn’t be held responsible for stuff I agreed to in post-Eric bliss—but one I hadn’t been all that sad about. It might be cool to get away for a couple of weeks. Take a peek inside his world. That he’d even asked, floored me.

It wasn’t an invitation to move in and I completely understood the difference, but deep down I wanted to go. I wanted to be with him.

“Well, I was . . . I’m just . . . I really like him, Lila.” I sunk into a chair. I hadn’t said the other L word but that was only because it was insanity to even think it this soon. Insanity. But even though the word hadn’t been said, it didn’t mean I hadn’t felt it.

I shook my head, trying to convince myself otherwise. “I know it’s crazy.”

“You do redefine the term.” Lila laughed.

“But I can’t help feeling the way I do.” I gently banged my head against her kitchen table, hoping to knock some sense into myself. “Worst part is.” I curtailed the head banging for a few minutes to look up at her. “I know how insane this is, and I’m still freaking doing it. I’m out of control.”

Like the Zika virus, or worse still, Ebola—my own pandemic ready to rival the Black Death.

“Babe, you’ve always been out of control.” Lila squeezed my hand, her attempt to reassure me falling a little short. “Anyone else I would have totally called the cops and had on a seventy-two hour psych hold. But you, it’s kind of your thing.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Maybe I needed that seventy-two hour psych hold. Twenty-four at the very least. “Lila, am I setting myself up for the most epic crash of all mankind? He’s a fucking movie star, I mean what the hell am I doing?”

It had been a pendulum since I’d gotten on this ride. Alternating between feeling like I was owning it like a boss and screaming wildly out of control. Both had their moments. Currently I was experiencing mad panic, and that had nothing to do with those photos on the internet. My issue was in my chest cavity and whether or not his blood pumper felt the same way I did.

“You’re doing what you’ve always done.” Lila eased back into her seat, displaying all the calm I didn’t have. “Living your crazy life the only way you know how.”

She was right. What else was I going to do? Trade in my oil burning Buick LaCrosse and buy a reliable car. Get a regular job in an office, sectioned off like cattle in cubicles. We all know I’d snap and be a headline. *Writer at The Times goes postal, full story at seven.*

“Just tell your folks, they will understand.” Her stern look reminding me I still had to do that. “And then go to LaLa land and see if you can’t find that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.”

“I can always come back, right?” I rationalized. I wasn’t selling all my worldly possessions and joining a cult. Any time I changed my mind, I could be on a plane and back in Brooklyn. “And I can write from anywhere.”

“Right.” Lila nodded even though we both knew I had already made my decision.

“And I think once we’re there.” My mind started projecting. “And things are going well.” That would be my hope at least. “And I tell him about my *tiny* omission at the start, he will be so in love with me he won’t care. Right?”

It wouldn’t matter. He would love me for who I was, not what I had pretended to be.

“Well, not the way I would have done it, but I guess you could do that.” Her grimace told me she wasn’t convinced.

“He’s not going to throw me out, not for something like that.” That would be ridiculous. I

wasn't an alien life form masquerading as a human or a Russian spy stealing national secrets. "I'm sure we'll laugh about it, he'll call me a moron and we'll move on."

"T, you know him better than I do."

She was right, I knew him.

I knew him to be kind and compassionate and so thoughtful. All those little things he had done for me. Trying to help me find my lost acting mojo, willing to introduce me to his agent friend to help me get better representation, volunteering to run lines or help me with auditions. He was amazing, and in the whole time I'd been with him I'd never seen him lose his temper. Actually I'd never even *read* about him losing his temper. No beating up reporters, no tantrums on set. Nada. So he either had the best PR team known to man or he had the temperament of a saint. All of which would come in handy if he was dating me.

I would get to L.A., settle in and tell him the whole truth.

And we'd laugh.

Because I'm an idiot.

"Just remember you're a New Yorker." Lila gave me a pointed look. "Don't turn into a weed-smoking vegan who gets freaked out by the snow."

"It will never happen."

"Good, because I don't want to have to drag your ass back."

Lila pulled out a prized pack of Milano's and I stayed to hang out. It felt like it had been ages since we just talked about regular stuff. While sharing the delicious chocolate-filled vanilla cookies, she told me about work and the guy who'd been attempting to ask her out for the past week. He was a sports journalist, so we both knew that wouldn't have worked out.

Neither of us said it but we knew it would be at least a few weeks before we did this again. Sure, we could talk on the phone, Skype and all of that. But sitting in each other's kitchens, eating cookies straight from the pack and gossiping about life was going to be put on hold for a while.

"I know what you're thinking." Lila took a bite of her cookie, her eyes closing as she enjoyed its decadent yumminess. "That we won't be able to do this next week."

"I hate it when you read my mind." Just another reason why Lila adult'd better than I did. The mindreading abilities not possessed by yours truly.

"I'm not a mind reader." She smiled. "But I have known you long enough to figure it out."

"You'll visit. I'll visit." I said it to her as much as I did to myself. Anything else was inconceivable to me. This wouldn't be the last time.

"Sure we will."

Chapter 17

For my parents, me jetting off on some new adventure wasn't anything new. They gave me the same *be careful* speech they always did but never once stood in my way. They had wanted all of their daughters to live life, to experience new adventures, and if me flying to California was going to make me happy, they were my biggest supporters.

My boss, he just didn't care. As long as I didn't miss deadlines and submitted on east coast time, I could be moving to the North Pole and he'd still have the same level of concern. Besides, at this stage it was only a few weeks. I'm almost positive that some people wouldn't have even noticed I was gone.

We—and by we, I mean me—decided that it would be better for me to fly out separately. Sure, there had been no-name girl sightings with unconfirmed reports Eric was seeing someone, and I no longer cared that people saw us together. But I would prefer to get off a transcontinental flight—probably looking like shit—and *not* have my photo taken. Vanity. I was only human after all.

The first time I'd made my I'm-going-to-see Eric flight, I had landed at night, zombieified because of the time zone difference. But even though I wasn't going to have a zoom lens pointed at me when I landed, I made sure I took an early flight so I would get in sometime in the afternoon. Of course that meant getting to JFK at ridiculous o'clock in the morning. It seemed no matter when I flew it was my destiny to be a zombie.

With preproduction starting that morning, Eric was already at the studio. That meant Ryan picked me up from the airport, his smile being the first one I saw as I collected my bags.

The next thing I saw was his sign, a piece of paper he held at his chest that said *New York*.

"We know what each other look like, was there really a need for the sign?" I gave him a hug, crushing the piece of paper.

"You are so much like *him*." He rolled his eyes. "Always ruining my fun. I liked you better when you were drunk wearing a bear outfit." He shot me a wink taking my bags from my hands.

"It was a bunny," I corrected, hoping I hadn't completely desecrated the white rabbit suit. Judith never said whether she got her deposit back.

"Hey, whatever kink you're into, sweetheart." A smirk flirted across his lips. "I'm not here to judge."

We walked out of the terminal to where he'd parked his predictable black SUV he always seemed to drive. He definitely had a fleet. My bags were loaded into the back and for the first time ever when riding with Ryan I sat up in front, which earned me a big smile.

"You wanna go to his house or do something else?" Ryan pulled out of the airport parking and onto the main road.

"Probably go to the house first, I need to humanize myself again." I hoped Eric had one of those crazy massive showerheads that shot water in every direction. I might never get out. "Is it really big?"

I didn't really care but was sort of curious as to what I was in for.

"New York." Ryan whistled through his teeth, cracking a grin. "If you can't answer *that* for yourself, then I can't help you."

"His house, you perv." I backhanded him across the chest. "I wanted to know if his *house* was big."

“It’s standard size for someone like him.” He shrugged, not giving me much more to go on.

The keywords there were *someone like him*. I had no idea what that meant. Not in real terms. The size of his house, the least of my problems.

Thinking about fitting into this new world—a place I still felt I had no business being in—made me feel antsy. So I did what I always did, shoved it down deep and pretended it didn’t bother me.

The rest of the ride was filled with talk about everything and nothing. Ryan told me all about growing up with Eric, how while he usually acted as chauffeur, it was something more than that. It was important to Eric that he had his best friend on the road with him, a way of making sure he always stayed grounded. You could tell by the way he spoke about him it was a genuine friendship. There was no jealousy over his best friend’s success and if the roles had been reversed, Eric would have done the same for him.

Ryan was easy to be around and when there were pauses in the conversation, they didn’t feel awkward. He didn’t know it yet, but I was adopting him as my friend. Not just someone who I knew because of Eric but because he seemed like the real deal. This was a huge responsibility, so I hoped he was up for the challenge. I had high hopes for us.

We left the main roads and tracked further into the hills. I didn’t know if these were *the* Hollywood Hills—tourist signage was noticeably absent—but the driveways were largely spaced apart and all had massive gates in front of them. The surveillance cameras were also a tip off this wasn’t a *regular* neighborhood.

We finally came to a stop in front of a large black gate. I assumed this one was Eric’s. Just like the other driveways, it was hard to see the actual house from the road. Ryan pressed a few keys on the silver box on the side and boom, the gate slid open so we were able to continue to what I assumed would be the house.

I was wrong.

It wasn’t a house.

It was a fucking estate.

Hands pressed to the car window, mouth wide with my eyes bugging out of my skull. I was glad the only other person was on the inside of the car.

“Standard size?” I pointed to the palace we were currently parked in front of. “Are you kidding me?”

“You’re impressed too easily, you need to work on that.” He laughed as he exited the car. “You haven’t even been inside yet.”

Turns out, he was right.

It was waaaaay more than I’d been expecting.

The door opened to a huge entranceway, the highly polished marble floor only upstaged by the insane double staircase.

“Bedrooms are up there.” He tipped his chin in the direction to the second floor. “We can dump your bags and then we can do the tour.”

We climbed the stairs and entered what I assumed was the master bedroom. Of course I was guessing at this point, the massive room with the oversized bed was possibly like the others.

“It’s Eric’s room.” Ryan showed what great judgment I’d had in picking him to be my friend. He wasn’t as good as Lila yet, but mind reading was a good quality to have.

“Speak of the Devil.” He winked, fishing out his vibrating cell from the pocket of his jeans. “My Lord.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, the ease of their friendship something that warmed my heart.

“Yes, I picked her up from the airport. She’s still hogtied in the trunk though.” Ryan smirked thoroughly enjoying himself. “Do you want her deposited somewhere in particular or should I just leave her on your front porch?”

There was a slight pause before he handed the phone over to me. “He wants to talk to you, proof of life and all that.”

“Hello.” I smiled into the phone which was stupid seeing as he couldn’t see me.

“New York, I’m so glad you made it.” Just the sound of his voice gave me goose bumps. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be the one to pick you up from the airport.”

“No, it’s fine.” My hand waved in the air, the effort lost due to Eric not being able to see. “You have to work, I completely understand. Besides, Ryan has been fantastic.” My words making Ryan stand up a little straighter and give me an appreciative nod.

“Yeah, I’m sure he has.” He laughed. “I’m not sure what time I can get away, we’re doing table reads at the moment.” I could hear the echo of regret. “I was hoping to be done already.”

“Eric, seriously, I’m fine.” I’d never expected him to drop everything to come entertain me. I was completely capable of snooping—I mean looking around the house/mansion all on my own. “Do whatever you have to do and I’ll be waiting for you when you get back.”

“I’m sorry, Tia. We’ll do something special on the weekend, I promise.”

“Just being here is special, I’m fine. See you soon.” I handed the phone back to Ryan.

“Yeah, I promise to not show her your dungeon.” Ryan winked before turning and walking out of the room to finish the call. I could hear the faint murmur of his voice as I took in the room.

It was good to have a moment alone, giving me time to take it all in. Not just the room—which was larger than my entire apartment—but the reality of it all. I knew I wasn’t in Kansas anymore but the Land of Oz was slightly more overwhelming than I’d anticipated.

We’d been in a bubble in New York, between my apartment and his hotel suite—a suspended type of reality. We’d seemed more equal, the divide not so large. But here, it was his world, and I was a stranger. It gnawed at me a little, something I knew I was going to have to keep in check. He wasn’t the big house, the money, the fancy cars I was almost positive would be parked in the garage. He was the same gorgeous, funny, talented guy I’d assigned as my number one crush. And more recently, the guy I’d fallen in love with.

“Hey, are you hungry?” Ryan appeared back at the door, I was too lost in my thoughts to notice he’d come back. “I do not cook but we can order in.”

“Were you instructed to babysit me?” I asked suspiciously, the phone he’d been talking on still in his hand.

“No. Of course not.” He scoffed, trying to look indignant.

“Fine, yes,” he responded when he was met with my raised eyebrow of disbelief.

“You don’t need to hold my hand, I’m more than capable of being in the big house all by myself,” I assured him. “Besides, I’m still on east coast time so I’ll probably shower and crash soon.”

“Can’t we eat first?” He didn’t move, staying in the doorway. “I’m hungry and if I’m feeding you, then I can use my expense account. I know you’d hate for me to pay for my own dinner, wouldn’t you?”

“Okay, we’ll have dinner,” I agreed, the sandwich I’d eaten on the plane hours ago and not at all satisfying. “But here’s the compromise. I’ll pay.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen.” He laughed stretching out his arms wide. “Take a look around, New York. Your dude is loaded. He finds out I let you pay, it will be my ass he chews out, not yours.”

“So don’t tell him.” I shrugged, unable to stop myself from taunting him a little more. “You tell Eric everything you do?”

“No, of course not.”

“So, let’s order noodles and I’ll pay.” I bent down to my pile of bags on the floor to retrieve my credit card stuffed inside one of them. “He probably won’t even ask.”

“Still not a good idea.” His hand didn’t move when I held it out in front of him.

“We going to argue or we going to eat, I thought you said you were hungry.” I waved my Visa, trying to tempt him.

“Fine, whatever.” He rolled his eyes, snatching the card from my fingers. “I know you’re going to argue with me until I agree, so let’s just save us both the time.”

“You know me so well already.” I clasped my hands under my chin and grinned.

Ryan ordered dinner and then took me through the rest of the house. Imagine your Barbie dream house when you were ten years old. Then imagine the Beast’s castle from *Beauty and the Beast*, but without the talking clocks and cutlery. If those two properties made sweet, sweet love and had a house baby you’d be somewhere in the vicinity of Eric’s place. *Impressive* wasn’t grand enough a word.

It was warm, so we decided to eat outside beside the lagoon—sorry pool—in the outdoor entertainment area. It wasn’t hard to picture it filled with big-breasted blondes with tiny bikinis, all of them fawning over Eric. I shook the thought off, convincing myself it was just my stupid insecurities and he wasn’t like that. After all, if he’d wanted a big-breasted blonde, he could have had that already.

With our feet dangling in the warm pool water, we ate noodles straight from the box with chopsticks. The sun slowly started to set, coloring the sky a soft shade of pink.

“You sure you don’t want me to hang around?” Ryan asked bundling the take out boxes into the trash. “We can watch something in the theatre room, he has like a thousand movies.”

“Nah, I’m tired.” I pulled my feet out of the water and slipped them back into my flip-flops. I’d actually remembered to pack a pair. “Besides, I still haven’t washed the airplane smell off me.”

“Cool, well, I live in the pool house right over there.” He pointed to the white cottage just across from the lagoon. “So I’m not far if you need anything.”

“You live in the pool house?” My eyes moved between him and the charming little house opposite, about one hundredth the size of the house behind us.

“Eric’s gone so much he hated to have the place empty all the time.” He shrugged like it was the most natural thing in the world. “I’d house sit whenever I wasn’t with him, but I got sick of living in his house. So the two of us built me my own place.”

“You built it?” Cue my one millionth wide-eyed mouth drop since we’d arrived.

“Sure did.” He nodded proudly. “We had contractors come in and help, but Eric and I both worked on it. Still one of the best summers we had since he moved in here. I think he’s secretly pissed I’m the one who gets to live in it.” The admission seemed to make him proud.

“Maybe tomorrow you can show me the inside.”

“Sure.”

It was weird, knowing that tiny piece of information I doubted other people knew. It felt precious, like something I needed to tuck up near my heart and keep it safe.

“He’s a really nice guy.” I found myself thinking out loud, my eyes following the gentle ripples in the warm pool water.

“When he wants to be,” Ryan laughed. “He can also be a prick just like the rest of us.”

“Like?” The chance for further insight too big of a temptation to resist.

“He once convinced me—while we were both drunk—I’d signed up to join the Army.”

“What?” I half-laughed not sure what a proper response should be.

“Yep,” He smirked, clearly not too annoyed about it now. “Even had a recruiter come to the door with the paperwork. It seemed so legit and I thought what the hell. I even shaved my head to prepare for basic training.”

“Wait? You actually *joined* the Army?”

“Almost. He let me sweat it out a whole day before he told me the whole thing was bullshit.” He barked out a laugh. “Asshole.”

“That’s insane. I can’t believe he did that.”

“Nah, I had convinced him the week before he’d slept with Casey Kendall and her twin sister Cathy.” His eyes lit up with pride. “I had it coming.”

“Wow.” I blew out softly, the idea of Eric with other women even in the past annoyed me more than it should.

None of my business, I reminded myself. I hadn’t been a nun before I’d met him either. I had no right to have any thought about it either way. Pity, I wasn’t feeling logical as silent jealousy surged through me.

“He didn’t.” Ryan correctly read my mood. “Not for lack of trying on their part.”

“Well, thanks for having dinner with me.” I pushed those errant thoughts away and pulled him into a goodnight hug even though it wasn’t even close to his bedtime. “It was fun.”

“Thanks for paying.” He hugged me back.

Taking the trash, he waved goodbye and walked around the pool to his front door. I waited until he was inside before I turned and wandered back into the mostly dark house alone.

It was so hard not to feel like an intruder even though I knew I was a guest, the space almost too large.

I eventually found Eric’s bedroom again, missing the room entirely the first time and ending up in a guest bedroom down the hall. Once inside I pulled out a sexy negligée I’d bought a few months ago from Victoria’s Secret and hadn’t had the opportunity to wear. Whenever Eric and I were together it usually went from clothed to naked, super quick. There was no time in between to get into something sexy. Not that I was complaining, but I was looking forward to surprising him.

When I saw his bathroom, I was immediately faced with a dilemma. On one side of the massive white-tiled room was a humungous claw-footed tub that could easily accommodate three full-grown people. While on the other was an obscene glass-paneled box that had so many water jets I wasn’t convinced it wasn’t a decontamination shower from the CDC.

The shower and its inappropriate amount of jets won.

It was heaven, feeling the water wash over me, the pressured spray gently massaging my skin. I could have stayed in there for hours. When my eyes started to close, I decided it would be a good time to get out. Eric coming home to a crime scene in the bathroom when I passed out and hit my head on all the glass wouldn’t be a good thing. Would kind of negate the intention of the sexy negligée.

My skin was brushed pink as I toweled off and slipped into my nightwear, my hair still damp as I walked back into the bedroom. It was only nine and I was wiped-out.

I wanted to wait for him, be awake when he got home, but my body was fighting a losing battle. Rationalizing that I’d be more rested after a nap, I laid my head on the pillow, damp hair and all, and closed my eyes for a few minutes.

Just to recharge.

So when he got home we could have in-another-state sex.

Oh my God, I was going to marry this bed.

The room was dark when I opened my eyes. The drapes I'd forgotten to close had been pulled tight making the room impenetrable to outside light. Eric must have come home.

I couldn't have been asleep for more than an hour, my head still feeling like cotton wool. My arm stretched over onto the other side of the bed, my fingers expecting to hit a warm body, but instead they were met with cold sheets.

"Eric?" My back jacked off the mattress so fast it gave me a head rush.

Nothing, the dark giving me no response.

I padded out of bed and moved to the bathroom, the shower I'd been in an hour or so ago the place most likely he'd be. But as I snapped on the overhead light and the room was illuminated, like the bedroom I found it empty. It smelled of him though, his sexy man scent lingering in the air as I inhaled. He'd been here.

My nose sniffed the air, Nancy Drew-ing my way through the room. A wet towel hanging out of the hamper, the bath mat still damp. He'd been here.

"Eric," I called out again, my bare feet running back through the bedroom and into the hall. "Hey, are you here?"

Silence.

Nothing.

Nada.

The house was just as quiet as it had been when I'd come upstairs from dinner—no lights and no noise.

Rather than turning on every light in the house and playing a late night session of hide-and-go-seek, I decided to go back to the bedroom and check my phone. See what time it was first and send him a message second. It would probably be a good plan to invest in some walkie-talkies sometime in the next few days too, make tracking down each other in the Larsson Manse a little easier.

"What. The. Fuck." I stared at the lit-up screen, five a.m. staring me in the face.

My hour or so nap had been an entire night's sleep. Or coma would be a more appropriate description since Eric obviously came home at some point, possibly got into bed with me, and I slept through the entire thing. We were supposed to have new-state sex which obviously hadn't happened because my sexy negligée I'd slipped on before bed was still very much on me.

I wasn't sure if I was more sad or disappointed as I slid back into bed and dialed his number.

"Good morning, gorgeous." His morning voice huskier than usual. "You're up early."

"Hey." My voice struggled to maintain composure. "Why didn't you wake me? I wanted to see you."

"You looked so peaceful sleeping and I didn't want to wake you. That thing you were wearing last night made it difficult though, I had a hard-on all night." He chuckled against my ear.

"I wished you'd woken me." I tried hard not to sound like I was sulking. "I tried to wait up, but the flight and the time zones . . ." I took a breath. "I wanted to see you." I was positive I'd already said that.

"I'm sorry." He sounded disappointed. "If it is any consolation, I held you most of the night. The early morning sucked, but I'm hoping to finish up early tonight."

"Okay." I took another breath trying to force a smile. "Well, have a good day, I'll see you

later.”

“See you soon, New York.”

It was a day.

I could survive a freaking day.

There were heaps of things I could do to keep myself occupied. Work would be a smart choice. Get my next column knocked out so I could avoid writing in the bathroom like I had over the past week. Exploring his house was also a good option. I loved to snoop. I hadn't even peered into his medicine cabinet last night—checking out all those rooms? That would be a two-day exercise at least. Not sure why I was worried about entertaining myself. I had plenty to keep me out of trouble. And when Eric got home I could give him my undivided attention.

So that's what I did. First, I pulled out my laptop, figuring I'd be responsible for a change. I spent a couple of solid hours discussing whether sexy man scent was a mental phenomenon or if pheromones actually existed. The jury was still out. After I'd completed my column and submitted it to my editor—early I might add—I decided that snooping should be my next priority. After all, if I was going to be staying here for a while then I should know my surroundings. Say, in case of a fire and I needed to find the closest evacuation point, or to see where Eric stashed his porn. All valid reasons to explore.

And as I strode from room to room, opening drawers and cupboards—I'd yet to find any porn—it became apparent that while the house was undeniably grand, it was also very boring. Sure, the furniture in his living room alone was worth more than two years of my salary but it was all very meh. Did he actually like this stuff or was it just here to fill rooms? I made a mental note to discuss it over dinner.

Ryan didn't seem to be home through the day either. Even though we had informal plans for me to see the inside of his Eric/Ryan built cottage, the place had been a ghost town.

So I continued exploring Eric's house. His fridge and cupboards were stocked to the brim with food, but I wasn't really in the mood to eat. It was while I was standing at his kitchen counter nibbling on some crackers I had the idea that I could cook dinner. Take advantage of the insane kitchen with all its fancy gadgets—the likes that would never be seen in mine.

It was a perfect solution. And one that meant I could surprise Eric and show my gratitude at the same time. Plus there'd been that time where I'd offered to cook in my apartment and didn't, so I sort of owed him anyway.

Pulling ingredients out of the fridge, I had the makings of pasta sauce. It was simple enough and once I got it simmering, it could cook for hours. This was important as I didn't know exactly when dinner was. Plus calling to ask Eric when he would be home seemed too needy-girlfriend for my liking.

It was late afternoon when Ryan poked his head into the kitchen, the smell of homemade pasta sauce and basil smoking him out.

“Wow, you can cook?” He lifted the lid of the simmering pot and took a deep, lingering sniff. “This smells amazing.”

“Yes, I can cook.” I shook my head wondering how anyone my age could survive without knowing the basics at least. “It was either learn to cook or starve and I liked eating too much.”

“I like eating too but prefer to toss money at the problem.”

“You mean Eric's money.”

“His, mine, as long as I get to eat who cares?” He picked up the wooden spoon and gave the sauce a stir before bringing to his mouth to taste. “Fuck me, this is good.”

“I'm glad, now don't even think of putting that spoon back in. Lord knows where your

mouth has been.” I pulled out a new spoon in case he got any ideas. “Sooooo . . . any idea when Eric’s getting home tonight?” I asked casually, not at all sounding needy.

“Well, he’d want to be getting home soon, or he’s going to be missing out.” He tipped his chin to the simmering pot.

“Yeah, he’ll be missing out all right.” And I wasn’t talking about the fucking sauce. I missed him and needed to adequately show how much.

With my mouth.

And other parts.

I pushed away the sinking feeling in my stomach that he might not show.

No, he *would* come home. I reminded myself he wouldn’t ask me to come all this way to be decorative.

Still it was hours, and I was just about to say fuck it when I heard a car pull up, my pulse kicking into marathon pace as I waited for him to come through the doorway.

“HmMMM something smells good.” Eric strode into the kitchen, looking tired and unshaven. “You’re cooking?” He moved closer, putting his arms around me and pulled me in for a kiss.

It felt so normal, his arms around me as he kissed me—the most natural thing in the world. Just like any other *regular* couple, seeing each other at the end of the day. And for a few moments I believed that was true. That even though we weren’t a regular couple, we were doing more than playing *house*. That the man who had his arms around me wasn’t just a movie star, but a man who had found his way into my heart.

“Mm-hm.” I mumbled against his mouth not wanting to break the contact even to say words. I allowed myself to indulge the fantasy a little longer.

“Can you hurry up and do whatever it is you’re going to do so we can eat?” Ryan called out from behind us.

“Ignore him.” Eric flipped him off as his other hand tightened around me. “He didn’t get hugged enough as a child.”

Eric kissed me again and then reluctantly let me go. It didn’t take me long to finish dinner, but he found a way to keep his hands on me the whole time. I liked being touched, and it made me feel like he’d missed me as much as I’d missed him.

We ate dinner at his round kitchen table—the one piece of furniture that looked semi-normal—and while the conversation was easy, I wished that I had Eric all to myself. I didn’t have to wait too long though, Ryan disappearing as soon as the food had. He must have sensed it too, our desperation to be alone.

“You want to go to bed?” Eric asked, loading the last of the dishes into the dishwasher.

“Yes.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. “I want to go anywhere you’re going.”

“Good, because that question was more rhetorical.” He walked me backward toward the stairs. “I didn’t want to have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you there, but I would have.”

“Such a beast.” I laughed against his chest, the tossing over the shoulder completely unnecessary.

It was a challenge getting up the stairs. Neither of us was looking where we were going, only able to find our way by his stellar recollection of the layout of his house. Our bodies were intertwined as we made our way to his bedroom, one of his hands throwing open the door while the other stayed on me. Even though we’d spent the night together last night, this would be the first time I was actually conscious for it.

It felt different, him being in the room with me. Like I somehow couldn't get close enough even though there was virtually nothing between us.

"Hey." He pulled away from me for a second, holding my face in his hands. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I just really want to hold you right now."

It was weird. Ordinarily the idea of being this close to Eric and not sleeping with him would be unthinkable. Why stare at a piece of cake and not eat it? Insanity. But the last few days made me realize that I wanted more than just sex from him. And what I was craving tonight wasn't lust. I wanted to feel affection not just attraction.

"I feel it too." I nodded, looking into his eyes. "I want you to hold me."

We stripped off slow, but it wasn't sexual, our clothes being discarded on the floor as we slipped in between the sheets. His body consuming mine as he wrapped his arms around me. It felt like a shield, like nothing bad could ever happen while he held me.

God, I was in love with him. Not falling, not could be, but certifiably in love with him. And even though it had happened so fast, there wasn't a thing I could do to stop it.

"What are you thinking about?" His hand moved up my back, pulling me closer against his chest.

"Nothing," I lied, "I'm just happy."

I wanted to tell him.

To look into his eyes and tell him that I loved him. I wanted to say those words and possibly hear them back, but it was too soon.

If there was even a chance that he wasn't on the same page, it would kill me. Not to mention he would probably run a million miles in the opposite direction. I would lose him, completely lose him and I'd rather hide my feelings than risk it. Because as brave as I pretended to be, I'd never been more scared of anything in my life.

"I'm glad you're happy. I'm happy too," he whispered, his lips finding mine. "You sure you don't want to tell me anything?"

It was as if he knew.

Either that or I'd mumbled something in my sleep. Crap, I had a tendency to do that sometimes so I couldn't be sure. Still, I couldn't be held accountable for things I said while I was unconscious.

"No, nothing." My head shook even though my heart was nodding. "I mean my mind is a random place so there is lots of stuff I could tell you, but they really aren't conducive to this moment."

"Okay, New York." The chuckle deep in his throat. "Just know you can tell me anything, whether it's conducive to the moment or not."

And didn't that just make me love him more.

Eric Larsson was no longer my number one crush. No, he was way beyond that. And I prayed with everything I had he wouldn't be my number one heartbreak.

Chapter 18

It had been a week.

The days had melded into one another, and I'd fallen into a ridiculous state of bliss. Eric was gone most of the day, which gave me time to work, and when he came home we'd spend every moment together. I missed my life in New York, my friends and family—but I couldn't even contemplate going back. Not yet, maybe not ever.

Some nights we'd slip into bed and talk until we both fell asleep. I'd tell him about my childhood or what it was like growing up with two sisters and he'd do the same. His stories about being the oldest of five boys were hilarious, I actually pitied their poor mother. Sometimes we'd talk about nothing at all important, but it meant everything to me.

I learned he was a huge football fan, but didn't get to enough games because of work. He also told me he once got kicked out of an Oakland Raider's game for being drunk and disorderly but escaped being arrested because the officer's daughter had been a fan. A signed ticket stub and a photo secured his freedom and after that he stopped drinking so heavily. It hadn't happened often he said, but being so young and famous made it easy to act stupid. He saw so many of his Hollywood buddies make the same mistake, throw their careers away on a good time. And he didn't want to be that guy you saw stumbling out of a club at three in the morning just because he could. He also shared that other than act he'd never wanted to do anything else, his path so clear he hadn't even considered another option.

I wasn't able to share as much, which cut me deeply. I told him about college, conveniently omitting my major. Instead concentrated on my time discovering myself on the road, traveling the world.

Other times we wouldn't talk at all. He would hold me and make love to me with an intensity that threatened to consume me whole. I thought I'd been in love before; I thought I'd had a man make love to me but never, *never* like this.

But at no time did either of us discuss what was happening. What it meant for us to be together, or how each other was feeling. No real plans made as to how long I'd stay or if he wanted me to. I wasn't going to be the first to say anything and so we were stuck in this weird state of limbo where everything was wonderful but nothing felt permanent.

It was a Tuesday when Eric asked me to meet him for lunch. Shooting for his new movie hadn't started, but he was still required at the studio and he wanted me to visit him during the day.

Of course I agreed. Hell, I'd been curious to see where he'd been spending his time and who he was working with. Not that I would have demanded an invitation, I wasn't that insecure, but since he offered you could bet your ass I said yes.

Ryan had offered to drive me despite repeated assurances that I could A: Drive and B: Operate a GPS if given the address.

"You're not driving my car, New York." He shook his head, arms folded tightly across his chest.

"So, let me drive one of Eric's cars." I held out my hand hoping a key would drop into it.

Eric not only had a BMW i8 that he'd been driving to and from the studio but also Audi A8 and a Porsche Panamera. All a little pretentious for me and about a million times faster than my Buick but I was positive nothing I couldn't handle.

“You get road rage at a drive thru, you think getting behind the wheel of a seventy thousand dollar set of wheels is a good idea?” His smirk dared me to argue.

“I just have less tolerance for people’s bullshit,” I corrected, hoping to remind him what had prompted my reaction. “If people wouldn’t act like assholes on the road then they wouldn’t have to worry about my road rage.”

His raised eyebrow and smirk told me he wasn’t buying it, the car keys staying locked safely in his palm.

“Just get in the car, it will be fun. We’ll sing show tunes.” He gave me his best jazz hands as he opened the passenger side door. “I’m lying about the show tunes of course, because I don’t know any and you sound like a cat dying when you sing.”

“Just shut up and drive.” I flipped him off and then pulled the car door shut.

Ryan chuckled as he hopped into the front seat and started the engine.

It was a beautiful day, the sun was warm even through the obscenely tinted black glass and other than being annoyed at being chauffeured around I was in a great mood.

We drove out of the hills and to the studio which didn’t look as exciting as I thought it would. It was less Disney back lots and more airplane hangar, with large white and grey buildings sprawling across a huge landscape of grey concrete. There was a boom gate though, and a blue uniformed guard in a hut checking ID as we entered so my illusion wasn’t totally shattered.

“One guard?” I scoffed as we cruised through the entrance and headed toward the spot designated for parking. “It would be so easy to sneak in here.”

“You can’t just walk onto a film set.” Ryan laughed not buying it. “You’d get maybe five feet before someone would kick you out.”

“I bet I could do it.” No one expected me to be able to sneak into a film premiere but that hadn’t been too difficult. Not that I could ever use that as proof. Yeah, maybe I should just shut up.

Ryan parked, ignoring my thoughts on the lax security and escorted me to a white shed looking building not far from the car. He took off to amuse himself when he saw Eric was standing right outside.

“Hello, you.” I threw my arms around his neck and my lips at his face. “How’s your day been so far? Did you get to pretend kill anyone?”

“Three people.” He kissed me back, looking a lot more relaxed than he had been. “My character is a total asshole, I love it.”

“Good, because I love you.” It slipped before I could stop it. “I love you to be happy.” I added as I panicked.

Red Alert.

Red Alert.

It wasn’t Eric’s character that was an asshole, it was my mouth. And it needed to go on complete lockdown.

“So you want to go meet the cast and crew?” He thankfully ignored my jackass mouth or fell for my lame cover up.

“Sure.” I tried to hiss out of the lips I’d condemned to muteness, my tight jaw no doubt making me look like a freak.

“Something wrong?” He took a step back to look at my face. “You look like a ventriloquist.”

“No, no. Nothing’s wrong.” I permitted the words to pass once I had triple checked that was

all that was going to come out.

“Ok-ay.” His brow rose, not buying it for a second. “By the way.” He whispered in my ear. “When you start acting weird, it’s like a massive turn on.”

“You have issues.” Secretly thrilled my weirdo was his personal brand of seduction. I was bucket loads of crazy so he was in for a treat.

“People in glass houses,” he warned, kissing my neck as my back hit the aluminum wall of the shed.

You know what? Meeting people was highly overrated. I was sure they were all very nice people, but I didn’t need to see who he was working with. And as for lunch, I would rather spend the limited time that we had exploring each other than the offerings at the craft table. Besides, we had such little time together these days, so I wasn’t about to throw away an opportunity when he wasn’t exhausted from working long hours and we were both awake. It was intoxicating being around him.

My fingers yanked against his shirt, my nails making contact with his skin as I moved my mouth on his. He seemed surprised but had excellent improv skills, following my lead as my tongue sought his.

There were people walking around in the distance but I didn’t care, I wanted my mouth on him and there wasn’t a thing in the world that could convince me it was a bad idea. So I kissed him like my life depended on it because at that moment that’s exactly how I felt.

His fingers knotted into my hair as his body pressed against me. I could feel the length of his cock hard in his jeans as he rubbed up against me, my nipples pebbling under my shirt.

“You want to do this here?” His mouth moved against my throat licking the length of it. “I’m about to bust out of my jeans and if it’s between you and getting fired, I’m going to choose you.”

“Really?” The thrill ran through my body like a jolt of electricity.

Inside I was burning. Consumed, needing more contact. Part of it was sexual—sure, a HUGE part—but there were other things too. My heart swelled to at least three times the size at the suggestion he’d choose me over his work. That *I* had made him feel as crazy as he made *me*—made me feel like a Goddess, powerful and worshipped.

“There will be other jobs, I’m sure.” His hands moved to my ass as his mouth took control.

A wolf-whistle from the distance snapped Eric’s head up, his hands staying where they were.

“You’re not going to be jerk off material for a bunch of assholes.” His fingers moved to my hips and he hauled me off the ground. “Even though it’s killing me right now not having you.”

“Is there anyone inside?” My eyes went to the shed we’d been dry humping against.

“Everyone comes back in thirty minutes, and that’s not nearly long enough for me.” He brushed the hair away from my face before his mouth curled up at the edge. “It won’t be my best work.”

“I don’t care.” My hands fisted at his t-shirt. “Take me inside, Eric.”

I didn’t care. Not about who saw or what they thought or what it said about me.

I could tell he wanted to, the way he was breathing out of control, the way his hands were gripping me tight. But something was holding him back.

“Fuck.” He whispered against the top of my head, lowering my body slowly until my feet hit the floor. “I need you, Tia. But not half way.”

“What do you mean?” I didn’t understand. We could be quick, and even the worst sex with Eric was still earthshatteringly awesome.

“You’re not here for a quickie in a dirty trailer.” He seemed annoyed, and I wasn’t sure if it was at me or at himself. “I wanted you to come see what I do, meet the people I do it with because it’s important to me. I wanted you to see this isn’t a game to me.”

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t sure why I was apologizing but it felt like I should. Maybe for being a rampant nymphomaniac, that would probably be my first guess.

“No, don’t say sorry for that.” He tilted my chin to look at me. “What am I going to do with you?” His lips fought a grin.

“Well you didn’t want to go with my initial suggestion so I really can’t help you with that.” I shrugged hoping to lighten the mood.

“You are killing me.” He kissed me softly against the lips. “Let’s go meet everyone before my break is over.”

He wrapped his hand around my waist and guided me to another building. Ryan was already inside talking to a redhead while others sat around tables and chairs talking loudly.

“Hey Sadie, this is Tia Monroe.” He introduced me to a woman who happened to be walking past. “Tia, this is the screenwriter, Sadie Douglas.”

Okay so first thing that I thought of—other than I always pictured screenwriters as old or nerdy looking and this one was young and pretty—is *Sadie* had a title, screenwriter. Me, I got nothing. Not girlfriend. Not friend. Not girl living at my house. Zip.

“Pleased to meet you, Sadie.” I shook her hand while my brain slowly tried to process the evidence. I was overthinking; it probably wasn’t even intentional.

“Nice to meet you too, Tia.” She politely smiled, her hand leaving mine. “Just here to look around?”

“Yeah, something like that.” Admitting I was there to spend time with my boyfriend seemed ridiculously territorial especially when he hadn’t introduced me as such. Besides, he had his hand on my hip that should have been enough of an advertisement. There was nothing to worry about.

“Good, great.” She gave me another smile before turning to Eric. “You get a chance to go over the script I gave you last week?”

“Yeah, I did.” Eric dropped his hand from my hip as he engaged her. “I really like the direction. You think we can pull it off?”

“Absolutely, I already have the major players.” She touched him lightly on the arm, glancing at me before pushing out her tits. I irrationally want to scratch her eyes out. “Just need you as a green light for the lead.” Another smile, her eyes twinkling.

Yep, definitely wanted to scratch her eyes out.

“Green light from me.” Eric nodded, giving her a smile back.

“Great. I’ll get the final revision to you by tomorrow morning.” Another touch on the arm. Didn’t they have laws about touching people in the work place? I was sure this kind of behavior was frowned upon. She was waaaaaay too touchy-feely for my liking. Mental note. Google the hell out of Sadie Douglas.

“I’m anxious to roll with it as soon as possible.”

To his credit Eric didn’t seem to react to twinkle-eyes, touchy Sadie other than professionally. He didn’t give her any extra attention other than answering her questions. Although I had begun to wonder if I was invisible, the two of them conversing as if they were in a bubble—one that didn’t include me.

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you later.” Sadie turned back to me as if remembering I’d been there the whole time. “Bye Tia, it was good to meet you.”

“Sorry, Tia.” Eric kissed my forehead, genuinely looking apologetic. “That was rude of me,

it won't happen again."

"No, of course. It's fine. You need to work, right?" I brushed it off, the jealous girlfriend not a role I was anxious to play. Yeah, yeah. The freaking irony.

With his hand on my lower back, Eric moved me through the room. Each time I met a new person, an introduction was made. Barry, the director, Sam, co-star, Travis, the boom operator—all of them with job descriptions. Me, I was Tia Monroe. It gnawed at me more than I wanted it to and after a while I tuned out, flipping into autopilot as I politician'd my way through the crowd.

"You meet everyone?" Eric asked as he walked me back to the SUV.

"Think so." There were a lot of people though, so pretty sure I couldn't pick anyone out of line up if I had to. "Everyone seems nice."

"Nice, not a word I hear a lot from you." Eric turned his hands either side of me resting on the hood of the car.

"It just means nice."

I was so full of shit.

What I really wanted to say was they seemed lovely and why hadn't he told them I was his girlfriend? Other questions included, did I have any reason to be jealous and did Sadie make goo-goo eyes at him every time she saw him? And out of all of that, I said nothing. Because on top of being full of shit, I was also a coward.

"Tia, you know you can tell me anything, right?" He moved closer, searing me with those beautiful blue eyes. When he looked at me that way it was hard to remember why I was mad. *Damn it.* No wonder I couldn't think straight.

"I know." The only answer I was capable of giving.

He waited a beat, like he wasn't convinced and then lifted his hands off the hood.

"I'll be home in a few hours." He blasted me with another shot of those eyes as a shiver ran down my spine.

"Great."

"Tia." He paused then shook his head like he changed his mind. "I'll see you when I get back." He kissed me sweetly on the lips and then pulled away.

"Eric," I called out just as he turned to walk away.

"Yeah?" He spun around, my heart pounding as he waited.

I love you.

"Have a good day."

Coward.

"Thanks, New York." He smiled and then walked away.

* * * *

I was prepared for it to be weird when Eric got home that night. But it wasn't. He was his usual charming self, and we made love before falling asleep. There was something unspoken between us and I was sure he could feel it, but he didn't bring it up and we'd already established I was a coward. So whatever it was stayed buried.

Surprisingly, when I woke up the next morning I was more upbeat than I'd anticipated. And another thing, Eric was taking me out.

Not like the regular dates we'd been on in New York, it was a private party at some Hollywood big deal's house. Still, going out was going out and I was good with people. Besides,

a lot of the people I'd met the day before on the set were going to be there and it gave me the opportunity to do more recon. I still hadn't had a chance to fully investigate Sadie and being able to see these people in their natural habitat would also prove interesting. I tried to not get too excited about what it meant that Eric was taking me. It's not like he'd just take any random person to a private function. Or at least I didn't think he would.

As the party/function/whatever wasn't until later in the day, it gave us both the opportunity to spend the morning together. That was something we hadn't done since I'd arrived with Eric's work schedule being pretty grueling.

Our days in New York had been a vacation while L.A. was our new reality. He worked so hard, and yet he always found time for me. A stolen minute here, an hour there—and I was just so happy to take what I could get. I couldn't even be angry, awed at how much he managed to pack into a day. And even though it wasn't what I was used to, or what I would have chosen for myself, there wasn't a chance I wanted to give it up.

Eric was already up and in his massive kitchen cooking breakfast when I wandered down the stairs. I'd given up trying to look alluring when I woke up in the mornings, preferring to spend my time in bed rather than in the bathroom. But not willing to let go of the fantasy completely, I decided to head down to the kitchen in one of his T-shirts—even freshly laundered it still smelled sexy—with no panties. And yes, I was aware it was cliché, and I didn't care, the sight of him at the stove in a pair of boxer briefs almost more than I could stand.

"Hungry?" He winked, shooting me a smile as he turned his attention to the eggs he was scrambling. Made sense to do that to the eggs considering he'd already done it to my brain. That body of his should definitely be illegal.

"Yes, very." I tried to not make it sound as illicit as it sounded in my head. Oh, who was I kidding? If it was going out of my mouth and I was looking at him, then I couldn't be blamed if it sounded obscene.

"I was talking about breakfast, but I think you had other things in mind." He smirked, his tongue darting wildly across his beautiful lips. "Did I leave you unsatisfied, New York?"

"No." The word more a groan than an answer.

He switched off the gas, taking the frying pan off the stove before he strode over to where I was standing. "There is nothing I'd love to do more right now than make sure." He kissed my mouth, owning it with his own. "But my mom called and is stopping by for breakfast. And her seeing *me* eating *you* is probably not what she had in mind."

"What!" My head snapped back so quickly I was surprised I didn't have whiplash. "Your mom is coming here? Now?"

"Yes," he answered, with absolutely no concern.

"But I can't meet your mom, the curse." I whispered it like even saying it out loud would be enough to condemn us.

"There is no curse." He threw his head back in a big throaty laugh. "And I've already met your sister, remember?"

"No, that was different." I wasn't sure how exactly but I was positive that had fallen into loophole territory. "I'm not even wearing underwear."

"Oh, really?" His hand slid seductively up my thigh stalling when it reached my bare ass. "Hmmm, so you aren't." His finger moved lower, teasing me as his mouth moved back to mine.

"I can't believe you are touching my ass when your mother is on her way," I mumbled against his lips, conflicted. On one hand I did not want him to move either his hand or his mouth. But on the other hand I didn't want the first time his mom saw me was to be naked, screwing her

son in a kitchen. No, first impressions mattered and they should almost always be clothed.

“You trying to kill my hard-on?” He laughed, slapping my ass with no sense of urgency. “We should both probably go get dressed.”

He slowly released me, walking back to the stove and placing the scrambled egg-filled frying pan into the oven before turning back.

“You keep standing there like that.” His eyes raked up and down my body. “And it’s going to be difficult for me to be respectful.”

“I’m going, I’m going.” I sprinted off into the direction of the stairs mentally trying to calculate what would make a good wardrobe choice for meeting his mom.

I felt so unprepared and it had nothing to do with not knowing what to wear. I wanted to make a good impression, for her to like me and know I was good for her son. Hell, this is exactly why there needed to be an appropriate wait time, so I could physically and metaphorically get my shit together. This was going to doom us for sure.

I finally decided on a dress, the long cotton fabric hugged my skin without being too revealing and I twisted my hair into a messy bun. No time for make up, I had to hope I didn’t look like a hot mess.

Eric was able to look effortlessly flawless in half the time. He threw on a pair of jeans and the T-shirt I had been wearing when angling for my morning seduction. His smirk told me that it had been intentional, making me look at that shirt and remember what I intended to do with him before I heard his mom was coming. It was sort of sadistic but of course turned me on because I had issues.

As the doorbell rang, I told myself at least five hundred times that it was no big deal. She was a normal person and probably lovely, and I had nothing to worry about. My pep talk did nothing to calm me down.

“Mom.” Eric pulled open his front door and welcomed a beautiful, blonde lady who didn’t look old enough to be his mother with a hug. “Come in, there’s someone I want you to meet.”

I tried to swallow—both literally and figuratively—as I stepped forward with a bright smile. “Hi, I’m Tia.” I held out my hand like an idiot.

“Tia, it’s lovely to meet you.” She engulfed me with her arms, ignoring my offer of a handshake. “I’m Kate.”

“Hi.” My arms circled her in a weird and awkward hug. “It’s nice to meet you too.” My hand gave her a weird shoulder tap. I swear I was better than this at meeting people. The whole being in love with her son throwing my game completely out the window.

“Mom, don’t smother her.” Eric rolled his eyes freeing me from the grips of his mother. “I like this one.” His finger tapped me on the nose.

Oh sweet baby Jesus, he said he liked me to his mother. That was the equivalent to having both Park Place and Boardwalk in Monopoly. Loaded with houses and hotels. And some poor asshole landed there. I couldn’t stop smiling.

“Well clearly you like her or I wouldn’t be meeting her, would I?” Kate waved her hand dismissively. “Now, let’s have breakfast before you decide it’s no longer cool to visit with your mother.”

“Never.” Eric gave her a kiss on the cheek and gestured to the kitchen. “I’m almost done cooking.”

Whatever insecurities I’d had from the day before about Eric not calling me his girlfriend were tossed out the window as I sat with his mother. Who the hell cared what he called me, it was his actions that mattered. And while most guys would have tried to keep it cool in front of

their family, Eric didn't care, kissing my hand and touching me all through the meal. And I totally saw where he got his charisma from, Kate was both beautiful and charming.

"She's fantastic," I whispered to Eric when she excused herself to go to the bathroom. "She's so funny and warm. I just love her." My mouth gushed before I could stop it.

It wasn't just his mom, but that he'd let me into his life. Meeting his family, his friends—this was as real as it got. There wasn't a part of me that wasn't his, and I felt like maybe, *maybe* he was mine.

"I knew you would. Aren't you glad I didn't listen to you?" He eased back into his chair, a smug grin on his face.

"Oh no, one good experience does not negate the rules of engagement," I warned. "Don't be thinking you can just go flaunting the rules."

"Well, I hate to eat and run." Kate stood, dabbing the edges of her mouth with a napkin. "But I promised your grandmother I'd take her to the salon. Maybe we can get your brothers together for a dinner sometime soon." She looked at Eric with expectation. "I'm positive they'd want to meet Tia too."

"We have to wait a little longer for that." Eric tried to hide his grin. "Apparently I'm flaunting the rules."

"He means he's busy." I discreetly elbowed him in the ribs. "Eric's schedule is pretty intense at the moment."

"Yeah that too." Eric pulled me closer to him and kissed the top of my head. "Maybe in a week or two, I have to consult the manual."

Another elbow to the ribs.

"Schedule," Eric coughed out. "I meant schedule."

"Well that sounds great." Kate looked between us, clearly too polite to say what she was really thinking. "Call me." She gave Eric a kiss on the cheek. "And hope to see you both soon." And she was out the door with a wave.

"You." I gently shoved him in the chest. "You are terrible."

"Am I?" He didn't seem to be taking me seriously. "Not what you were saying last night." He folded his arms across his chest, enjoying making me squirm.

"Yeah, that's because you were naked. I can't think straight when you're naked." Even half naked was difficult. Actually being in the same room with clothes on was a challenge, who was I trying to kid.

"So from now on all our important discussions should happen naked then?" His eyebrows wiggled suggestively.

"Your mother just left." I pointed to the door, pretending to be horrified.

"Which means she isn't here to see this." His hands moved to my chin and pulled me in for a kiss. Whatever I was supposed to be thinking about went flying out the window as his hungry mouth played with mine.

God, the man could kiss.

No shit, if they ever want to solve the world poverty crisis all they had to do was stick the man in a kissing booth and boom, money for days. Not that I'd want to share those lips with anyone else. Oh hell no. For now they were mine and that's exactly how I intended to keep them.

Chapter 19

I knew New York. Lived there my whole life and could get to any of the five boroughs with my eyes closed. But L.A. was a different kind of animal.

Firstly, I didn't do maps. I could follow the voice prompts of a GPS just fine but if you asked me to go old school and Map Quest my way somewhere, I'd end up tossing the directions out the window and Lewis and Clark-ing my way instead.

My sense of direction was also questionable. I knew all about the sun rising in the east and setting in the west blah, blah, blah, but that never seemed to help. Which was a roundabout way of saying I currently had no idea where we were.

Eric was at the wheel of his BMW i8—his current flavor of the month—while I sat in the passenger side staring out the window, the scenery mostly passing in a blur. Eric liked to drive fast, which is why he favored sports cars and not the SUVs Ryan usually drove. And as something I struggled to do in my Buick, I could understand why it was intoxicating.

"If you hate it, let me know and we'll leave." Eric rolled to a stop in front of a sprawling beach house, possibly in Malibu. "We can stay as little or as long as you like, I just want to make an appearance."

"We're here and I'm wearing your favorite dress." I smoothed down the front of the backless black dress I'd worn when we went out to dinner with his agent friend. "I want to walk around and make you crazy all night." It was the least I could do for not telling me I was meeting his mom earlier.

"I'm already crazy." His eyes moved up and down my body, the confined space of the car feeling smaller all of a sudden.

"So, we going to sit in the car some more and fog up the windows?" I tapped the window beside me to illustrate the point. "Or are we going to go in?"

"We'll go in and I'll try to keep my hands to myself." He opened his car door as I did the same.

Beach house was a total misnomer. The place was a fucking mansion with some sand at the back because it backed up to the ocean. This wasn't a run of the mill kind of shack you'd find up on the Jersey Shore. We are talking Hampton level of epic.

The valet took the keys with Eric taking my hand as we walked up to the front door, the music spilling out onto the street even though the door was closed.

"Hey, you made it." A middle-aged man with too much girth and not enough hair opened the door to greet us. "Come in, we're all in the back."

"This is Tia." He gave my standard introduction to big balding dude. "Tia, Bourke." Hmmm, he didn't get a title. Interesting.

"Wow." Bourke gave me a quick head to toe before smacking Eric on the back. "She's stunning, no wonder you've kept her hidden."

"No, I'm just a vampire," I deadpanned, my red lips trying not to smile. "I'm not great with the daylight."

Bourke barked out a throaty laugh, his large belly ho-ho-ho-ing even though it wasn't anywhere close to Christmas as he gave Eric another back slap. "She's fantastic, I love her." He tipped his head to the bar. "Enjoy yourselves."

"Will do." Eric's hand pressed to my lower back.

“Bye.” I waved as we left Bourke and walked to the outdoor area.

There were people all over, but it hadn’t descended into Animal House level of crazy yet. Lots of drinking, people swimming in the pool and dancing on a make shift dance floor. But other than the loud music and expensive booze, it wasn’t any different from any other party, the amount of fake boobs and hair extensions on display a lot less than I’d expected.

“Eric.” Sadie AKA screenwriter I hadn’t properly vetted yet walked over and gave Eric a hug. “I was hoping you would come.”

Yeah, well I already made that happen.

“Sorry?” She looked at me as did Eric, my internal thoughts clearly not as internal as I’d planned.

Mind to mouth, you don’t have to say everything. Filter.

“Nothing, I was just saying hello.” My fingers did a lame curl in the air as I waved.

“Well hello to you too. So nice to see you again.” She also gave me an arm rub, obviously saving her hugs for Eric.

While in her work clothes—the boring chinos and the hoodie she’d been wearing when I met her—she’d looked young and pretty, the tight dress and make up transformed her into bombshell. It was classic nerdy-to-knock-out with a hair shake and the removal of glasses, and I didn’t like the way she looked at my man.

“Likewise.” I gave her a tight smile placing my hand on Eric’s chest while my other arm wrapped around his waist. “So Sadie, you here with anyone?”

“Ummm . . . no.” She looked at Eric and smiled, flicking her long pretty hair back before turning back to me. “I’m here alone.”

I couldn’t believe this woman.

I was right there, with my hands on him, and she was flirting with him.

“Well that’s good to know.” I moved slightly making Eric’s hand drop from my lower back to my butt. It was ridiculous, but I didn’t care. His brow rose, biting back his smile when he saw what I was doing.

“Yeah it is.” Her teeth played with her bottom lip.

Okay, so I was acting like a teenager trying to stop the Prom Queen from hooking up with my quarterback boyfriend. It was poor form and part of me was furious I was behaving so childish. But the other part of me—the one with my hand on Eric’s rock-hard abs—was telling me there was nothing wrong with being assertive. Especially when she was being so brazen.

“So, how long are you planning on sticking around?” She took a seductive sip of her drink, completely ignoring my territorial vibe as she turned to Eric. “Are you going home together?”

What? What!

The nerve.

I’d seen flirting before, but this was next-level stuff. Short of unzipping his pants and sucking his dick in front of me, this woman couldn’t be more offensive. Sure, at the studio maybe it hadn’t been clear we were together, but with his hand on my ass and mine all over him, she had to have gotten the message.

“Yes, we are.” I couldn’t stop it, too furious to care how possessive I sounded. “He’s taking me home where he’s going to fuck me so hard—”

“Okay, Sadie.” Eric’s hand clapped around my mouth as I mumbled in his palm. “We’ll catch up later.” He tipped his head goodbye before looking down at me. “Tia, let’s go get a drink.” He walked us away from the vixen, his hand still plastered to my mouth.

“What are you doing?” I pulled his hand away from my mouth as soon as we were out of

earshot and whispered. "I don't know how you can just stand there? Where I come from when someone tries to flirt with your guy, she knows better not to do it in front of the girl he's with."

"She wasn't flirting with me," he said calmly like I hadn't just seen Sadie flicking her hair and eye batting less than a minute ago.

"Are you serious?" I reared back, genuinely surprised. "Look, I know you are probably immune." Poor guy, it was a curse as much as a blessing when you looked as good as he did. "With the amount of vagina that is tossed your way, I can understand how you wouldn't see it. But I am telling you, that . . ." I waved my hands to the direction we'd come from. "Was flirting. Not great flirting because honestly I've seen Judith flirt better than that and she's terrible, but still flirting."

"You are so fucking adorable when you're jealous." He bit back a grin, lowering his head to whisper in my ear. "Seriously, I'm not sure whether to laugh or find a quiet place and fuck you hard like you said I was going to."

Well, I know what my preference would be if anyone cared to ask.

"But I can tell you with absolutely certainty." His voice gravel as his hand tightened around my waist. "That Sadie was not flirting with *me*."

"Well then . . . wait . . . are you saying?" My brain misfired, unable to process what I was hearing.

"She was flirting with *you*. Sadie is a lesbian." He laughed, thoroughly amused by the situation. "She's not interested in *any* dick, especially not mine. So the *vagina* that was being tossed, New York, that was all for you."

"But she . . . And at the studio . . . She was like all over you." I tried and failed to make proper sentences, my head turning to Sadie who was eye batting and hair flicking with a beautiful leggy brunette.

Well. What do you know? I guess I had that all wrong. It was rare, but could happen from time to time.

"We work together, you think she couldn't speak to me about a script later?" He laughed, his hands wrapping around me. "It's because I was with you. She thought you were hot, not that I blame her. I suspected, but then she asked me about you after you left."

Information I probably could have benefitted from earlier.

"So why didn't you introduce me as your girlfriend?" Something I'd wanted to ask but always chickened out. Not tonight though, not when I was fueled up to my eyeteeth with emotion. I guess I should thank Sadie for that. "I mean, I assume I'm your girlfriend, right?"

He took a breath, running his hand through his hair mussing it up so he looked even sexier. "Because being my girlfriend isn't who you are." Next he slayed me with his eyes. "You're Tia and you're fucking amazing in your own right. I'm not going to try to take ownership of that because you happen to be dating me."

Dear God in heaven and all the saints.

"Wow, that's." I swallowed, anything I had to say not even close to being as sweet, thoughtful or as romantic as that. "Beautiful. I don't think anyone has ever said anything so amazing to me."

"Their loss, and I'm not sorry about that." His lips brushed against mine as he pulled me close to his chest. "Anything else you want to talk about?"

"No, no that's it."

"Okay, let's go meet some other people." His head tipped to the party we were in the middle of. "Let's not worry about telling them how I'm going to fuck you later. I'm pretty sure it's

assumed.”

“Sounds good.”

We ambled back into the group, picking up a much needed drink from the bar first. Not because I was nervous, the reason my heart was racing so fast was for an entirely different reason.

With drinks in our hand we went and sat by the pool and mingled. Every time Eric introduced me it was just as Tia, and now that I understood why, it gave me a secret thrill.

Most everyone was normal. There were a few guys who had Kanye complexes with the Kardashian wannabes not far behind, but they were the exception and not the rule. And everyone was nice to me, not a sneer or evil eye thrown my way the whole time, no more vaginas either. No, it had been me that had been the judgmental asshole not them, but I was learning.

And when it was time to go we thanked our host, said goodbye and got into Eric’s car. It was all so normal, and completely unexpected.

It was hard being in a confined space and not touching him, the surge of sexual electricity flowing between us. Words just didn’t seem adequate, so we sat there in silence, the stereo low over the hum of the engine.

Eric’s hands gripped the steering wheel tight as we stopped at the front of his estate, the code inputted into the silver box before the large black gates slid open.

All I had to do was wait a few more minutes and we’d be up in his bedroom. There, I could do all the things I had been doing a million times in my head during the drive. I wanted him. Desperately. So much the dull ache between my legs was almost unbearable, needing the release.

“What are you doing?” Eric laughed, both of us looking down into his lap where my hand happened be to rubbing the front of his jeans.

It hadn’t been premeditated, my body giving a *fuck you* to my brain as my hands staged their own rebellion. They wanted to touch him and even minutes were too long to wait.

He was already hard, a large firm ridge pressing against the front of his jeans swelling further as the heel of my hand rubbed against it.

“I thought it was pretty obvious.” I smiled, my fingers slowly unzipping. This may not have been the original plan, but I sure as hell liked where it was heading.

“You’re going to give me a hand job, in my car?” The edges of his mouth twisted into a grin as he looked around, the outside security lights the only company visible. “I feel like we’re sixteen and I’m dropping you home just before curfew.” He unfastened his seatbelt, leaned forward and eased the seat back.

“Mm-hmm. I hope my parents don’t see.” Biting my lip as I committed to the role-play. My free hand unhooked my seatbelt, the rest of me tingling even though he hadn’t touched me yet.

With his zipper down, my hand slipped in between the cotton of his boxer briefs and made contact with his skin. A harsh hiss passing through Eric’s lips as my fingers gripped his shaft tight.

The windows in the car started to fog, our breathing heavy as I stroked his thick length up and then down. It was slow at first, taking my time as my palm covered as much of his skin as possible, my hand twisted when it got to the top. A small bead of pre-cum spilled out of his cock, feeling it on my palm exciting me further.

“Fuck, I love your hands on me.” His lids lowered to half way, watching me work him. “God, that feels so good.”

I loved watching the rise and fall of his chest quicken; the breaths out of his mouth becoming more ragged with each stroke. But most of all I loved watching him unravel and

knowing I was the cause.

His hips bucked, trying to control the rhythm but I wouldn't let him have that. My grip tightened as I maintained my pace, squeezing him harder as my other hand moved to his balls.

"You're driving me insane." His ice blue eyes flashed at me, so full of want it was making me wet. Torn between wanting to have him inside of me and watching him come in my hand, I gave him what he craved, moving a little faster up and down his length. I watched the entire time, watching him as he followed my hand stroke the length of his cock.

"Tia." He stretched out his legs in front of him, his hips lifting off the seat. "Fuck."

"I love watching you," I said lowering my mouth into his lap, my tongue swirling around the head of his cock as he let out a groan.

I wanted—no *needed*—to taste him, stretching my lips around him as I licked him. Lips. Tongue. Mouth. Hands. I continued my assault, working him over until he was so hard he could have cut glass.

"Mmmmm." My lips tag teamed with my hand, the slide up and down a little faster as I sucked him harder and deeper into my throat.

My tongue swirled up and down as I pumped him with my hand. My eyes on him as he rocked his hips in his seat and I could see he was fighting the orgasm. Desperate to get off, but not allowing himself the pleasure.

"You keep doing that and I'm going to come in your mouth." He yanked on my hair to stop me, his voice was so raw and rough I almost came myself. "Is that what you want, Tia? For me to come in your mouth?"

I didn't respond, too worked up to even know what I wanted.

"I want to touch you." He tightened his grip on my hair. "I want to feel how wet you got sucking my cock."

"But I—"

"But nothing." He didn't let me finish, his gaze searing me in place. "You think it's easy to look at you all night and not take you somewhere quiet so I could be inside of you?" His voice deepened. "I want to touch you."

My body rose out of its seat on his command and shifted onto his lap, the tight space forcing us close as his hard-on rested against my core.

"Pull up your dress." His lips vibrated against my mouth.

My hands complied even as my brain short-circuited, lifting the dress as his hands moved to my thighs.

"Were you thinking about my cock the whole ride home?" he asked, forehead resting on mine.

He didn't give me a chance to respond, one of his fingers slipped into my panties, becoming instantly coated. "New York, you are so fucking wet."

His brow furrowed, the hand not inside of me moved to my ass as he gripped me. The sound of tearing fabric cut through the air as my underwear disintegrated in his hand.

I panted as air hit my bare skin, his finger moved further, slipping inside of me while his other tossed the shredded fabric aside and then palmed my breast. His hard cock so close to my core all I had to do was lift and he would be inside of me.

"This is what I was thinking about." His thumb rubbed against my clit as my breathing got heavier, another finger added as his hand started to pump. "I wanted to feel you wet for me making those little noises you are now."

His fingers knew exactly where to touch, rubbing my core as I moved against him, the

friction not enough for me.

“Greedy.” He kissed me, his lips spreading into a grin. “I like that.”

My nipples tightened under my dress, my body primed to explode as my breath came out in short bursts, the length of his cock between my slit as I rocked my hips. “Fuck me, please.”

I was begging and I didn’t care, needing to feel him fill me more than I needed anything.

“Are you sure?” The head of his hard-on hovering at my entrance, his hand stopping as he waited for my reply.

“Yes.” My fingernails bit into his shoulders as he pushed inside of me hard. The feel of him so overwhelming I cried out his name.

“Tia.” He growled and thrust again, his hands at my hips guiding me. “You feel so fucking good.”

“Eric.” I bucked against him, the clothes on my skin feeling like they were on fire. “Yes, like that. Yes.”

It was so tight, the way our bodies were contorted pushed against each other, almost sharing the same breath. I loved the sweet delicious sting of his cock filling me over and over again as our lips tangled, words too much as we dissolved into grunts and groans.

“I’m going to—” I couldn’t finish the sentence, the tremor consuming me as the orgasm took hold. Waves of pleasure rippling through every inch of my body as it shook against him.

“Tia.” I felt him jerk against me, the convulsions of my pussy milking him as I came. “I need to pull out.”

“No.” My hips pressed down, pushing him further inside. “It’s okay, I need to feel you inside of me.”

“Fuck,” he gritted out, his hands so tight against my hips I could feel how desperate he was, his hot load filling me as his cock pulsed inside. “Oh my God.” His orgasm barreled out of him as he lost control, his lips fevered against mine as his tongue fucked my mouth.

It was so intense, the windows in the car completely fogged by our out-of-control breathing as our mouths consumed each other.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he whispered against my mouth. “That was some hand job.” He barked out a throaty laugh.

“I got distracted. It happens a lot when you’re around,” I admitted, so relaxed and pliable against him I couldn’t have lied if I tried.

“Your dress is probably toast though.” His hands settled on my dress hitched up around my hips. “Pity, I liked this one.”

“I’m more worried we made a mess in your fancy car.” I looked down to my lap, but it was too dark to see anything.

“I don’t give a fuck about the car,” he growled. “What I do care about is that we’re in here and my bedroom is over there.” His head tipped to the dark house we’d parked in front of. “And I want to tear off the rest of your clothes and lay you out on my bed.”

“I thought you liked this dress?” I laughed, loving the urgency in his voice.

“I did, past tense.” His fingers moved across my still bare ass. “I already said what a pity it was.”

We both laughed, our foreheads resting against each other. It felt so natural to be around him it was hard to imagine a time when I wasn’t. Knowing that time wasn’t so long ago made the feeling even more surreal.

“Ummm. Just so you know.” I wasn’t sure if the unprotected sex was on his mind as much as mine. “I’m on the pill. I’m not trying to trap you or anything and I haven’t had sex without a

condom in years.”

“I wasn’t worried, New York. I trust you.” His hand brushed against my cheek. “And if I had any doubts I was putting you at risk, I wouldn’t have done it.”

“Okay.” I swallowed, the emotion thick in my throat. “We should probably go inside.”

“Yeah. We should.” His hand moved along my jaw. “I have a huge day tomorrow but I’m not willing to give up the rest of the night.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“I think you will like the *feel* of it even better.”

Chapter 20

I had been acting crazy.

Sure, being neurotic wasn't exactly a foreign concept, but this was even pushing the boundaries for me. I loved Eric, and yes it was sudden and probably too soon, but it's the way I felt, nonetheless. And I could hide behind it being irrational or I could do the one thing I hadn't done from the start.

I could come clean.

I'd lied. I'd misrepresented myself when we first met, and yeah, I may in the process, have misled him a little. But it didn't change who I was. And it sure as hell didn't change how I felt. So if I had any hope at all I needed to lay all my cards on the table and tell him the truth.

I, Tia Monroe, was a columnist. I wasn't an actress unless you counted my preschool Christmas production where I played one of the wise men—Cindy Weisman had won the coveted role of Mary. And while I didn't do what I said I did, I was the same person. The person who was completely and utterly in love with him.

Last night felt like a turning point, we'd made love so many times I'd lost count. But it wasn't just that, the emotion had amplified, and I knew he felt it too. I needed to tell him; I owed him that and I couldn't let another day go by where there was anything other than honesty between us.

He'd already left when I woke up, he'd told me he had a huge day so it was usual for him to be already gone. That meant I wouldn't get my chance until tonight. This was a good thing because it gave me time to prepare rather than tossing an unrehearsed mess at his feet. No, this required planning. A nice dinner, a nice outfit, sexy lingerie, and definitely a drink or two. All things I would do to aid in the coming clean.

So while I could have spent the day pacing like an inmate on death row, I decided to take one of those fine looking cars in the garage out and pick up a few things. Ryan driving me wasn't an option. Too many questions and not necessarily who I wanted with me when I went to buy new lingerie. Besides, I'd discovered the keys earlier in a wooden box in the study so all I had to do was pick which one and go. Eric wouldn't mind, he'd told me to make myself at home and use whatever I needed. And while he hadn't specifically mentioned the cars, he hadn't said not to either. I'd even drive the speed limit and be extra careful when I parked. Last thing I wanted was something bad to happen to one of his expensive cars.

Ryan—if he didn't have something important to do—usually slept until ten, so I was dressed and in the garage by nine. The Audi was the lucky car chosen to be my ride.

As quietly as I could I started the car and drove down the driveway, the large front gate opening when I'd rolled past the sensors. I'd forgotten I was going to need the code to get back in but I figured I'd jump off that bridge when I came to it, the gate slowly closing behind me as I stepped on the gas and drove away.

The Audi drove like a dream. While the idea of spending the kind of cash it took to acquire one made me want to dry heave, I could appreciate its beauty and power. And I sure enjoyed the feel of it in my hands. No pungent smell of burnt oil either. It was going to be tough to going back to driving my Buick.

With my phone as my co-pilot and navigator, I was able to get to downtown with no major issues at all. I didn't even flip anyone off—difficult because they'd sure as hell deserved it—

suppressing the urge and being proud at how well I was doing.

Because of my good behavior I'd decided to reward myself with breakfast before I got started. I spied a parking lot with a coffee shop nearby and decided it was fate. Park the car somewhere safe and get caffeinated, win/win. The morning was already shaping up to be awesome and if this was any indication of how the rest of the day was going to be, then I had nothing to worry about.

The coffee place was packed, the line curling around toward the door as hungry and thirsty customers waited to get their fix. As I really wasn't in a hurry, I took a deep breath and enjoyed the smell of coffee and baked goods permeating the air as I stood in line behind a young, blonde, wish-they-all-could-be-California girl.

Oh, and she couldn't have been cast more appropriately. Short denim cut-offs, vintage band T-shirt, flip-flops and oversized sunglasses perched against her whiter-than-white hair. She even had a tote bag, laptop sticking out the top. I guess in case there was a stock market crash and she needed to sell her shares in avocado or something. Or to blog about her morning latte.

Gah, I was such a judgmental bitch. I should probably work on that. Or at the very least discuss stereotypes and perceptions in my next column so I could call it work related.

Life-size Barbie turned and smiled so I returned the gesture. There was no need to be rude, even though before I had my morning caffeine hit I could be incredibly antisocial.

"Hey, you're that girl." David Lee Roth's dream girl turned back around, eyeing me more carefully.

"Sorry?" I looked around in case she was talking to someone else. Nope, there was a dude wearing skinny jeans, a man-bun and beard behind me. I was the only girl in her field of vision.

"Yeah, it is you." She nodded more insistently making up her mind I was in fact, the *girl*. "You're Eric Larsson's new girlfriend."

Well. There's that.

I hadn't really expected public recognition. I'd assumed that when he was with me I'd receive some level of interest, but solo, I was just a nobody like anyone else.

"I'm just here to get breakfast." I did my best to maintain a smile as I sidestepped the question entirely.

"There's photos of you kissing him all over the net." She leaned in and whispered like she was my new BFF. "It's no big deal, if he was my boyfriend I'd be telling everyone. You guys looked hot."

What I should have done was continued to be non-committal, smile politely and then make eye contact with the oversized menu board above the counter. But like lots of times in my life, I didn't do what I *should* have done.

"What photos?" I asked, common sense MIA as curiosity got the better of me. I was my own worst enemy.

"Hang on a second." She pulled out her laptop and balanced it on a nearby table. Her bright pink fingers tapped as she pulled up a webpage, turning the screen so I could see. "See, there. That's you, right?" Her pink nails pointed to a photo of me and Eric, his tongue solidly down my throat and his hands all over my ass.

"Shit."

Not only had some asshole managed to get photos of Eric and I dry humping on set a few days ago—something I hadn't even considered—but they'd also printed my name. And that wasn't the half of it.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit.

I ran out of the coffee shop leaving Barbie deserted and my breakfast forgotten as I speed dialed my phone. On a scale of one to bad—this was the end of the world.

“Lila, they know who I am.” My panicked voice double barreled down the line as soon as she answered.

“Tia, what are you talking about?” She’d didn’t share the same sense of alarm. No, it was only me who was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“The press, they know my name.” I tried not to hyperventilate on the street. “And that’s not all. There were details too. Where I live, where I went to college, that I write for *The Post*. All of it. I don’t know how, but they know everything and all of it is online.”

How they’d even gotten all that information was beyond me. I’d been dating Eric fairly safely under the radar and no one had even given me a second thought. I was totally okay with *no name friend*. But for some reason with the emergence of the new photos also came a full dossier on me. They’d FBI profiled me into next week. There was even a graduation picture for fuck’s sake. In the cruelest of fates, I’d been exposed.

Twenty-four hours.

In twenty-four hours it wouldn’t have made a difference because Eric would have known everything. Instead I was now racing against the clock to make sure I told him before he read about it online.

“T, where are you?” Lila asked, my heavy breathing peppered with the noise of traffic.

“I’m on the street somewhere.” The panic bubbled up my throat. “I don’t know.” I looked around trying to remember exactly where I was. Not that it mattered where my geographical location was. I was in hell as far as I was concerned.

“All right, try and keep calm.” Lila tried to be the voice of reason. “Where’s Eric?”

“At the studio. Not with me.” *It would be okay*. He wouldn’t have time to read anything. He was rarely even online. Too busy doing movie star shit to worry about what the tabloids were saying about his love life. And surely Ryan wouldn’t bother with online gossip sites. Or his agent. Or his mom. Holy shit. What if someone else saw and told him? No. They wouldn’t. No one would see. It was gossip, not the leading headline on the news. *It would be okay*.

“Okay, can you get somewhere safe? I don’t think having a freak out on the street is a good thing.”

This was true. For all I knew I could have a zoom lens pointed at me watching me have a Britney Spears meltdown as we spoke. And I sure as hell wasn’t going to give them that.

“Yes, I have a car. I can drive.” My body swished around with the phone pressed to my ear trying to remember where the parking lot was. It was close, why couldn’t I remember which direction? The world swirled in an uncertain blur as everything around me looked unfamiliar.

“Drive carefully, get somewhere safe and then call Eric immediately. Call me if you need *anything*.”

“Okay.” My eyes closed still no closer to knowing which direction I needed to go. “Thanks, Lila. I miss you.”

There were people who said stuff like that—*call me if you need anything*—but there weren’t many people who meant it. Lila on the other hand would move heaven and earth to help a friend even from the other side of the country. But as much as I cared about her, and her me, this was a mess I was going to have to get out of on my own.

Breathe.

I tried to get a handle on my out-of-control pulse and talk myself off a ledge. Nothing bad had happened yet. All I needed to do was find the car, drive home and call Eric. I had planned on

telling him everything today anyway, it was going to be okay. And then the dust would clear and I could tell him how much I loved him.

I loved him.

And the path wouldn't have taken me here for it all to end now.

It just wouldn't.

Oh God, I really hoped it wouldn't.

* * * *

I'd walked in a circle for over thirty minutes before I found the parking lot. It was exactly three feet away from where I had started, its bright white sign taunting me. Amazing how under a fog of fear even the simplest of tasks seemed impossible.

Cursing a few times—okay more than just a few—I found the Audi exactly where I'd left it with not even a rogue fingerprint covering its shiny black paint. Well, at least that was a plus, and I didn't have to add car damage to my confessional.

It took me longer to get back, the drive slower than usual as I recited in my head things I needed to say. I just had to make him understand, there was no way around it. And I would keep talking until I'd convinced him. I had to admit, my feeling of confidence wasn't sky high.

I'd made it all the way to the large closed gate when I remembered I didn't have a code. And just as I was about to press the intercom—hoping Ryan would answer and open it for me—when the closed gate slowly opened all by itself.

The miracle not so miraculous once I saw why.

As I pulled up beside the house, standing at the front door was Eric. His hands folded tightly across his chest. And he didn't look happy.

Fuck.

He knew.

Slowly I exited the car, trying to not make any sudden moves that could be seen as hostile as I walked toward him, the keys still in my hand.

"Eric . . ." The rest of the sentence got lost on its way out of my mouth.

"Tia." He said my name with so much distaste, my blood turned cold. "You have fun?" His eyes narrowed as they moved to his car and then rested back on me.

"I can explain." I held up my hands defensively praying I still had a chance.

"Really?" His lip curled into a smile but there was nothing warm about it. "I don't think you can."

"Look, I know there were things you didn't know about me." I forced myself to keep talking. "And I'm sorry, I wanted to tell you. But everything just snowballed—"

"Please spare us both the bullshit, Tia."

I hated the way he was looking at me, with such distrust. It was as if any feelings he had toward me had been erased. Like they'd never existed.

"Eric, you have every right to be mad. But I—"

"I trusted you and you're a fucking reporter," he roared, his eyes so full of hate I actually took a step back. "I invited you into my bed. Into my home. For what? A story?"

"No, you weren't a story, I swear. I'm not that kind of reporter." The distinction not one he seemed to care about as I tried in vain to explain. "It was all real, I promise. I'm still the same person."

"It was all real?" He shook his head, his brows knitting like he couldn't believe what I was

saying. “And you.” He took a step closer, so close I could touch him if I just reached out my hand, and sneered. “I don’t even know *you*.”

It felt like I’d been punched in the chest, the breath knocked out of me as I clutched at my heart as I struggled to speak.

“Please.” My lungs fought to expand. “I’m sorry. Let me explain.”

I knew it was a losing battle. Nothing I could say would change any of it. And worst of all I couldn’t even blame him. It was my fault, I had done all of it. And yet, I wanted so desperately to hold him and tell him that it was still me. That though there were parts of it that weren’t true, most of it—my feelings, the things we shared—were as real as it got.

He didn’t speak, the lips that had once kissed me thinned into a tight line. His eyes filled with a mixture of hurt and anger as he towered above me.

“I’m so sorry.” I knew it wasn’t enough, but I had to say it anyway, my eyes stinging as I fought back tears.

“Yeah, I am too,” he said quietly as he took a step back.

I was just about to ask what for when I heard the siren, the flashing lights quick to follow. His eyes followed the police cruiser as it stopped beside us and two uniformed officers stepped out.

“Sir, is this the stolen vehicle you reported an hour ago?” Officer One walked toward us while the other looked at the Audi.

“Yes it is,” he responded emotionless. “It was taken early this morning from my garage.”

“No, no I didn’t steal anything.” Oh shit. Things had gone from bad to worse. “I borrowed it.” My heart pounding so hard against my chest I was positive everyone could hear. “I didn’t steal it.” I lifted my hand to display the keys.

“Ma’am, can you keep your hands where we can see them?” They both reached for their guns. “Just keep them right where they are and don’t make any moves.”

“I was staying here.” I kept my hands visible, hoping that I did nothing that constituted a sudden move. “I just borrowed the car. Look, it’s fine. I brought it right back.”

They looked at me skeptically, their hands still on their holsters. No doubt in their version of the story I was some psycho who had stolen a car and was stupid and/or crazy enough to come back to the scene of the crime.

Officer One turned to Eric. “Sir, is this person known to you?”

“No, she’s not,” he answered coldly, his eyes devoid of any feeling as they made contact with mine.

“Eric,” I pleaded, confused as to what the fuck was going down.

“Ma’am, do you have any identification on you?” Officer Two asked.

“Yes, it’s in my purse in the car.” I motioned with my head, worried pointing might be perceived as hostile. *Keep calm, Tia*, you’ve done nothing wrong.

Fine, I’d done stuff wrong but nothing illegal. Nothing I could go to jail for.

Officer Two went around to the driver’s side door and cracked it open, my purse lying on the passenger side. He pulled out my purse and rested it on the hood of the Audi.

Officer One moved closer. “Ma’am, do you have any weapons or drugs on you or in this vehicle?”

“No, no.” I dropped my hands in panic. “Eric. Please.” He could end this, he could end it right now. Why was he doing this?

“Eric.” It was hard to look at him, to see that look in his eyes. Eyes that had once held nothing but kindness, now held no warmth at all. Did he hate me that much? Able to go from

amazing and loving to *this* . . . whatever this version of him was.

“Ma’am, I’ll remind you to keep calm and keep your hands where we can see them, okay.” He looked to his partner as he moved in closer. “Now please answer the question. Do you have any weapons or drugs on you or in this vehicle at this time?”

“No, of course not.” I held as still as I was able, willing myself not to cry.

“Ma’am, I’m informing you at this time we are searching your bag for your identification and for any concealed weapons or drugs, do you understand?” Officer One nodded to his partner.

“Search my bag, there’s nothing there.”

Officer Two dumped out the contents of my purse onto the hood of the Audi. My mascara wand and lipstick rolled onto the ground as everything else spilled out. Officer Two sifted through my belongings until he found my license.

“No weapons or drugs,” Officer Two reported. “Tia Monroe, New York resident. I’m going to call it in and see if she checks out.”

“Ma’am, can you please slowly raise your hands to your head and lay with your face against the hood of the car?” His chin tipped toward the Audi. “We need to search you too.”

“Eric, please.” I was begging, I didn’t even care how desperate I sounded. I *was* desperate. He knew I hadn’t stolen his car, and if he wanted to hate me then that was fair. But I couldn’t understand how he could do this to me.

“Ma’am, I’ll ask you again to please comply and raise your hands above your head and lay against the hood of the car.”

My hands slowly lifted, pressing against the back of my head as I turned and lay on the still-warm hood of the Audi.

Everything moved into slow motion as I closed my eyes and felt the officer slowly pat me down. He was gentle, which was absurd considering I was supposed to be a criminal, and was mindful not to touch me inappropriately.

“Ma’am.” He tapped me on the arm, my eyes still tightly shut. “Are you okay?”

I nodded slowly, unable to speak because if I did, I knew I was going to cry.

“Sir, are we correct in assuming you are wanting to press charges for the theft of your vehicle?” one of them asked. I stopped caring which, my heart breaking with each passing second.

“Yes, that would be correct,” Eric answered.

I didn’t even look at him. Not willing to see the man I thought I loved want to hurt me so damn much. It was better if I just said nothing, did nothing and hoped this was over soon.

“Tia Monroe. At this time we are placing you under arrest for violation of California penal code 487.” His hand carefully twisted mine from where they were on my head and placed them at base of my back. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

The first cuff went on, the metal pinching against my skin.

“You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you.”

The second cuff went on.

“Do you understand the rights I have just read to you?”

“Yes.” It was barely a whisper but loud enough for him to hear.

After that they could have said anything and I wouldn’t have heard or remembered, everything turning into a blur as I was placed into the back of the police cruiser.

I think they asked questions but I didn’t respond. Maintaining my right to remain silent as I

sat motionless in the car while my purse with my retrieved belongings was placed on the seat opposite.

It was a bad dream, I kept telling myself. One I was going to wake from at any minute. But no, the more I tried to will myself awake, the more I realized it was real.

I didn't look at Eric—I couldn't—but I felt his eyes on me as we drove away from his house.

And even with my heart and life in pieces, I couldn't hate him.

Chapter 21

“Ms. Monroe?” one of the officers called. “The press has been tipped off, so we’re going to take you in through the back of the station. I think it’s better for everyone if all of that is avoided.”

I nodded, showing them I understood. Not that it was important. Front, back—I was being taken to a police station—it really didn’t matter at this point.

I had paid no attention to where they’d taken me. My eyes had been closed for most of the drive, with my head resting against the headrest trying to block it all out. My hands were killing me, but really that was the least of my problems.

We pulled into the parking lot of a white building. There was a sign warning unauthorized cars would be towed and that the main entrance was around the front.

The car stopped next to a thick security door with both the officers getting out of the car and walking around to the back.

“Ms. Monroe, watch your head.” One of them put their hand on my head as I shuffled my butt to the edge of my seat and tried to stand up. Incidentally harder than it looked when your hands were handcuffed behind your back.

Standing up as best I could, Officer Two grabbed my bag from the backseat while Officer One led me to the door. He kept one hand on me as he fished out his keys, unlocking the security door and gently guiding me through into a narrow corridor.

The noise from the station carried up the hall, voices and phones ringing intermingled, as I kept my focus straight ahead. I couldn’t see anyone but I guessed they were too busy doing important stuff to worry about me. We stopped in front of a door, Officer One nodding to Officer Two.

“Ms. Monroe, we’re going to take you into an interrogation room where you will be able to make a call. There are recording devices in the room but that equipment will not be active until we question you.” Officer Two opened the door and I was led into the room.

It wasn’t what I expected. The room was small with dirty white walls and a regular looking table and metal chairs in the middle. A large wall-mounted clock ticked but otherwise it was all so unremarkable, and not as scary as I anticipated. There was a microphone set up on the table and what looked to be cameras set up in two corners of the room, but I was oddly disappointed to see there wasn’t a double-sided mirror. Huh. Who knew? I guess some of that stuff was really just in the movies.

“Ms. Monroe.” I turned as Officer One said my name. “Did you hear what I said?”

“I can make a call and it won’t be recorded,” I responded, making sure I didn’t say anything that could be seen as incriminating.

“Yes, but I also asked if we removed the handcuffs if we can trust you to keep calm?” His chin jerked to my hands still cuffed around my back.

“Yes, yes. I’ll keep calm.”

I mean, what did they think I was going to do? I was in a fucking police station and the most deadly weapon in my purse was a credit card. And while I prayed like hell this would all turn into a big misunderstanding, the last thing I wanted was to give them extra charges to add to my rap sheet.

“Dave, bring in the phone.” He nodded to his partner as he removed my cuffs.

Dave dutifully returned with a phone he plugged into a wall, the cord just stretching enough for it to sit on the table. Both giving each other a look as they moved toward the door.

"Press one for an outside line. You have ten minutes."

They both stepped out and closed the door with a thud.

One call.

And who the hell did I call?

My sister was probably the best option but then I would no doubt have to endure the biggest I-told-you-so known to man. Of course if I bypassed Judith and called my brother-in-law he would just tell her anyway which would lead me back to the first outcome. Lila was my next choice. She would forgo the lecture and rustle up whatever funds she could get her hands on to pay some lawyer to set me free. But I also knew she would be on the first plane over, putting aside whatever was going on in her life to help me straighten out mine. And that wasn't fair.

Calling my folks wasn't an option. I didn't want to be responsible for sending one of them to the emergency room and my dad already had a weak heart. No, I wouldn't do that to them. They deserved better.

So, as I picked up the phone and dialed, I was either making the biggest mistake of my whole entire life or I was finally becoming a grown up. It was coin toss, and either way I just knew there was only one person I wanted to call.

"Hello?" Eric answered sounding confused.

"Hey, it's Tia. Please don't hang up." The words rushed out, hoping he had an ounce of compassion left. "I only get one phone call."

"You have one phone call and you're calling me?" I wasn't sure if he sounded surprised or was marveling at my stupidity.

"Yes, so please, don't hang up." I closed my eyes praying he'd give me a chance. I waited, half expecting to hear the click of the call disconnecting.

"Okay," he said, filling the silence.

"Okay." A deep breath pushed out against my lips. "I'm not calling to excuse what I did. I should never have lied to you, even though when this all started I'd just assumed I'd never have to see you again."

"So why *are* you calling?" he asked, probably wondering why I was wasting my time if not to plead my case.

"Because regardless of how we met, what happened between us was real. And I know that you probably don't believe me, but it was real for me, Eric."

"Tia," he sighed.

"No wait." I didn't give him a chance to finish. "I only have a few minutes left so I need to get this out." I glanced at the clock on the wall, the numbers ticking quicker than minutes ever had. "I don't know what is going to happen to me after, and I'll probably never get this chance again. I love you." I said the words I'd been dying to say. "And the last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you. And I know I did." I swallowed, the lump in my throat making it harder. "And I'd rather spend months behind bars than ever do that again." *Don't cry*, I begged. *Tell him how you feel but do not cry*. "I wish I had told you when I had the chance. I wish I hadn't been so fucking stupid, but I didn't trust myself not to fuck it up. I was scared, and I guess in the end I lost you anyway." My voice hitched, the sob getting caught in my throat.

"New York," he breathed out softly and it just about broke me in two.

Hearing him calling me that was too much, and I knew I had a minute before I completely lost it.

“I’m sorry.” The tears rolled down my cheek silently. “I’m sorry for not being truthful, I’m sorry about taking the car and I’m sorry for hurting you. I am so *so* sorry. But I love you and I’m not taking it back.”

I ended the call before he had a chance to speak. I couldn’t bear to hear what he had to say; scared he would say he didn’t love me, or worse that he didn’t even care. No, I’d rather hear nothing at all than hear that, so instead I wrapped my hands around myself and cried.

Chapter 22

I wasn't sure how long I'd been in there alone. Ten minutes, ten hours, ten days—it didn't matter, it felt like an eternity to me as I wiped the tears from my eyes.

"Uh, ma'am." Officer One poked his head in through the door, his eyes softening as he looked at my tearstained face. "Can we ask you some questions?"

I cleared my throat, trying to find some composure. "I'm not answering any questions without legal representation. I'd like a lawyer."

"Sure, it's going to take some time to organize that for you." He nodded, whispering something to someone just outside the door. "Can we get you anything to drink?" His eyes moved back to me.

"No. It's fine. I don't need anything." I shrugged, a drink wasn't going to change the situation for me.

"Okay, then sit tight. We'll get you a public defender." He tried to smile and then closed the door.

I'd never been in real trouble before. Not something I needed a lawyer for. If I had called Judith or Will instead of Eric, they would have read me the riot act for being so stupid and then probably would've sent someone over. That would have been the smarter choice, but even with hindsight, I didn't regret my call. I'd deal with the public defender; it couldn't be any worse than it already was.

There was another knock at the door, this time it was Officer Two, the one who was called Dave.

He strode in, taking a seat opposite me and let out a long breath. "Look, Tia. Can I call you Tia?" He waited for me to nod before he went on. "I honestly feel pretty terrible about this situation. I think you are probably a nice girl and you just made a mistake."

"Dave." The door flew open again, Officer One standing in the doorway. "I'll remind you *we* have a job to do." A stern look passing between them.

"I know, I was just . . . it's a shitty situation."

"Not our call."

"Hey." I carefully waved my hands, not wanting to alarm anyone and keep them cuff-free as long as possible. "You can save the good cop, bad cop routine. I already said I'm not answering anything until I get a lawyer."

Perhaps Dave was genuinely sorry, but while my stupidity had been at an all-time high in the past, I wasn't going to continue to perpetuate it. No, I needed my head in the game.

After a minute of serious eye ping-pong between them, there was another knock at the door. This time a man wearing a suit appeared in the doorway.

He was more handsome than I'd expected, my eyes narrowing as I took him in. He was young too, with that just out of law school vibe and I could almost smell the Ivy League degree. If the cocky grin on his face wasn't enough, the expensive suit and watch on his wrist sure were.

"Tia Monroe?" he asked, acknowledging the two officers in the room with a curt nod.

"Yep, that's me. Are you my lawyer?" I asked, hoping maybe he was the intern and the real lawyer was outside. You know, maybe someone who'd won a few cases and hadn't passed the bar last week.

"Yes, I am." He tapped his briefcase striding further into the room before looking at the two

officers. “Can you give me some time to confer with my client?”

Well I guess that solved that, at least he had the jargon part down. I tried not to panic, hoping the Mike Ross from Suits wannabe actually had the skills to get me off the hook, and wasn’t just putting in the hours until he got junior partner at a *proper* law firm.

Dave and the other officer—I never got his name—seemed mildly annoyed. “Keep your shirt on, Roman, we were just waiting for someone to show up.” Dave rolled his eyes as he stood up and walked to the door, Officer One following close behind.

“So Tia, I’m Roman Pierce.” Yep, definitely Ivy League. Harvard would be my guess. He eased into the chair Dave had been sitting in and opened his briefcase. “I’m here to represent you.”

“Great.” I tried to smile, watching him pull out a laptop and lay it on the table, opening the screen away from me. “I’m innocent.”

“Yeah, let’s get the details first. I don’t like to open with that right away.” He gave me a cocky grin-wink combo that didn’t immediately put me at ease.

“Hey, Mr. Pierce.” I resisted the urge to just call the officers and beg them for another phone call. Or maybe I could just represent myself? “Can I ask you a question?”

“That’s usually *my* job.” He didn’t look up, powering up his shiny MacBook.

“I know, but I’m just curious.” I fake laughed, watching him until his eyes came back to me. “And please don’t take this the wrong way, but have you done this before?”

“Been in an interrogation room with a woman?” His smile got wider, seeming to enjoy it. “Let me guess, you want to know if you’re my first?” He leaned back into his chair, his fingers tenting in front of him.

“Well, yeah,” I answered with no hesitation. “It’s kind of a big deal that I don’t go to jail for something I didn’t do, so it would make me feel better knowing you have experience.”

Sure, I was probably offending the only person in a position to help me. But if he was going to use me to fill his pro-bono case quota then I wanted to know he at least had the chops to take care of this. Call me crazy, but I’d just lost the only man I’d ever loved and felt like absolute shit for hurting him, I’d rather not lose my freedom as well.

“Really?” He smirked not acting the least bit offended. “Something you *didn’t* do?” He baited me, clearly not believing my declaration of innocence.

“Yes, it’s a misunderstanding,” I snapped, getting slightly annoyed. “That’s all it is, I shouldn’t even be here.”

“Hmmm.” He stroked his chin slowly like he was giving my statement some serious thought. “Did you or did you not take Eric Larsson’s Audi A8 without permission?” He held up his hand to stop me from answering before he finished. “A car that contained *your* purse and whose keys *you* were in possession of.”

“Yes, but it wasn’t like that,” I answered impatiently, wishing this douchebag would stop believing what the cops had obviously told him and listen to what I had to say. “I was staying with Eric.”

I left out the part where I was sleeping with him too because I could only imagine what Roman Asshole Pierce might conclude about that.

“The *same* Eric Larsson who, when questioned, denied knowledge of you and maintained he wanted to press charges?” he challenged, knowing exactly what the answer was.

“Yes, but he was mad.” I tried to explain taking a breath before continuing. “I lied to him, he was hurt.”

The last thing I wanted to do was tell Roman Pierce anything to do with Eric. And yeah, I

probably didn't want to rehash what a dumbass I had been too. But I was through lying, and if telling the truth made me look like an idiot, I'd own that.

"Look, Tia." Roman closed his laptop and sat up straighter in his chair, the smug grin making another appearance. "Maybe you should worry less about my ability in a courtroom and work on learning to cry on cue, okay?" He leaned over the table and whispered, "Judges eat that shit up."

"What? No, fuck you," I sneered across the table, "I'm not going to cry for an audience."

"Fine." He rolled his eyes faking a yawn. "You got anything sexier to wear? Something," he gestured to my chest, "to let us see the girls a little better."

"Fuck. You," I repeated, my butt lifting off the chair so fast it flipped and rattled noisily on the floor. I looked him dead in the eye, wanting to slap that grin right off his face. I also reminded myself not to touch him because an assault charge would not be a good thing right now, so to weigh that option carefully. "You are no longer my attorney." I compromised, slapping the metal desk instead.

The door flew open, my noisy outburst attracting the attention of the officers who both ran in to investigate. Their eyes bounced between the two of us trying to assess which one of us was responsible for the tossed chair. Since Roman was still sitting on his, it was a dead giveaway who the guilty party was.

"What the hell is going on in here?"

"Anyone hurt?"

They talked over each other, looking at Roman for answers. The asshole remaining cool as a cucumber and looking somewhat amused.

"She's a livewire, that's for sure." Roman stood, laughing as he put his laptop in the briefcase. "Well, that was fun." The bastard gave me another wink.

Oh no, he did not just wink at me.

Big. Mistake.

Maybe jail wasn't so bad.

My body flew forward, completely out of control as Dave and the other guy grabbed me just before I made contact. Their hands holding me back as I tried to lunge again.

"Tia?" His voice stopped me dead in my tracks as I struggled to turn around, even with a police officer on each arm I was able to see Eric standing in the open doorway like an apparition.

"Eric." Just saying his name sucked the air out of my lungs. "You came?" I wasn't sure if the last part had been audible, my chest burning as I tried to breathe.

"Of course I came. Are you okay?" His eyes widened as he saw me restrained. "Let her go."

Hands remained on me as I visibly sagged, my body swaying heavily on my feet.

"I thought I told you to let her go," he growled at the two men holding me, his tone and menacing look enough for them to drop their hands immediately.

I didn't care it made no sense they were listening to him or that he was even here, I was just so relieved to see him that none of that stuff even mattered.

"She was going to kill Roman." Dave jacked up his belt, offering an explanation as to why I was being manhandled.

"Um, this is highly irregular, sir, you aren't supposed to be in here." Officer One shot Dave a concerned look. "How did you get past security?"

"I think we're beyond that," Eric fired over his shoulder, his arms scanning mine to see if I was okay. "Did they hurt you?"

"You are such a dick," Roman laughed, not at all concerned about the death stare he was

getting. "She was handling herself just fine."

"You." Eric reached out and punched Roman in the arm. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Wait a minute!" I held up my hands, the situation going from bad to fucking insanity in three point two seconds.

What the hell just happened?

"You know him?" My eyes moved from Eric to Roman, the reality starting to unfold like slow motion.

"All my life." Roman rubbed his arm. "I'm his brother." Another cocky smile. "The better looking one."

Boom.

It was like a bomb had gone off in my head. The similarities that were glaringly obvious now had been missed in my panic. Both of them tall, blue-eyed and handsome. The smiles were almost identical as well—Roman's more cocky to Eric's sexy.

"I told you this was a bad fucking idea." Dave shook his head, and suddenly he looked familiar too. "Did I not fucking tell you this was bad?"

"What the hell just happened?" I looked around the room, so confused I wasn't sure if it was a bad dream, I was hallucinating or I'd somehow slipped into a wormhole. "Someone needs to start talking. Now."

"These morons are my brothers." Eric waved to the three men who, now that I saw them all side by side, there was no mistaking were all from the same family. "Or at least they were, they might not be after I murder them."

"Dude, come on." The guy who I had previously known as Officer One erupted. "You can't blame us. Roman was the one staring at her tits."

"Jealousy is ugly on you, Nick," Roman deadpanned, straightening his tie. "I was perfection."

"You are all his brothers?" I asked what had already been confirmed, the extra information still not helping me understand. "I still don't know what the hell is happening."

I felt like I was slowly going insane and everyone else around me was just as crazy.

"Can you guys give us a minute?" Eric looked at his brothers, the three of them grunting as they filed out of the room.

"Eric, please." I grabbed onto his arms. "I am so fucking confused right now."

More than anything I needed information, being in the dark was freaking me the hell out.

"Tia, I am so sorry." His lips kissed my forehead, his chest expanding as he let out a long, steady breath. "This whole thing was a set up, but it wasn't supposed to get this far."

"Well, obviously." I tried to rein in my emotions. So many were swirling around in my body, I wasn't sure which one should get attention first. "Unless it is a freak coincidence two of your brothers are cops and the other is a lawyer."

"Actually Roman is a lawyer. He has a law degree and graduated from Yale." Eric winced apologetically. So I was wrong about Harvard, but not about him smelling like Ivy League. I knew it.

"But Nick and Dave are actors. The station noise? It's a soundtrack." He watched for my reaction.

"What?" My head snapped up so fast I almost head butted him, my mouth opening and closing with no words actually coming out.

"Sit down, Tia, this might take a while." He led me to the chair Roman had been sitting in,

the one I hadn't flipped.

Automatically I sat down as the back of my legs hit the chair, my butt dropping into the seat as Eric went and picked up the chair I'd tossed. He righted it, dragged it across from me and then sat down himself, his hand reaching across to mine, his thumb stroking across my knuckles as he held it.

"So, I knew about you being a writer for *The Post*." His eyes glued to mine. "And not being an actress."

"You . . . knew?" The words got caught in my throat as I took another breath. "How long?"

"Since the day after I met you." He answered with no hesitation.

"Wait, the day after?" I clutched my chest, the answer not seeming to make sense. "So *before* you even came to New York?"

"Yes, the whole time." His head dipped, forcing me to look into his eyes. "That night, after I left you at the hotel, I made a couple of calls." He ran his hand through his hair roughly. "There was no Tia Monroe listed at The Roosevelt or on the invitation list for the premiere, so I investigated."

"And?"

"And Valerie Vine didn't attend which was strange considering her *personal assistant* personally accepted the invitation that day."

"Oh. Shit," I coughed out, comprehending how *much* he knew.

"Actually pretty creative." He smiled, almost sort of proud. "You're resourceful, I'll give you that. Still not sure why you did it, but you should have probably used a different cell phone number or definitely a fake name if you didn't want to be found."

"I didn't think anyone would look," I answered honestly, who the hell was going to care about a scammed invite.

"Well, you were wrong about that."

The way he looked at me made me swallow, heat simmering just below the surface but still contained. It made it hard to breathe; thinking was another challenge.

"So, wait. If you knew the whole time." My brain had a moment of clarity, the cogs turning wildly as I started to make connections. "All that other stuff, trying to help me."

The dinner with the agent, offers to go over scripts, the fucking Brooklyn Barn fiasco where I murdered the memory of Frank Sinatra. It had all been . . . a game?

"Honestly," he laughed, "I thought you would just tell me the truth. I mean, Tia. Come on. There were a million chances. I kept waiting for you to just admit the truth."

He was right, there had been. And each time I thought I would, I chickened out, burying it and believing that if I did, if he knew, it would all be over.

"I couldn't," I said softly, the other parts I wanted to say left unspoken.

Not able to explain how terrified I'd been, how much I'd cared so much that losing him was unfathomable. So much so that I would do anything to keep him, even though it was insane and irrational and mostly ridiculous.

"And when you *didn't*," he corrected, not understanding the reasons why. "It became sort of a game. See how far each one of us was willing to go. I'm an actor, Tia. It's what I do for a living, but I shouldn't have taken it this far. I should have told you before they took you away."

"But you said . . . it wasn't a game to you."

I remembered the way he looked at me, the way he'd brushed the hair out of my face, and with more intensity than I'd ever seen, tell me that.

"*You* were not a game," he pointed out.

Were. As in, past tense.

As in, I went through this all for nothing.

Worse than that. He knew, and instead of putting me out of my misery, he played with me like a cat with a mouse. Pushing to see how far he could go before I'd crack.

How much more did he know?

Did he know that it all started because of him, because I just wanted to see him just once?

Did he know about my ridiculous infatuation, my stupid crush?

Was I entertainment?

Embarrassment flooded me, the realization of how stupid I'd been. Ignorant to the fact that a man like him would never have taken a girl like me seriously. I was a cocktail party story, a giggle over dinner, the time he tricked a girl into thinking she was in love with him only to punk her in the end.

Well done.

Bravo.

He was way better at this game than I could ever be.

"I need to go." I stood up, no longer wanting to be in the same room with him. "I'm assuming that you aren't going to be pressing actual charges for the car?" The words were a struggle, but I managed to get them out without my voice shaking. No tears either. He wouldn't get that.

"Tia, what are you talking about?" He looked confused, lifting out of his seat to reach for me. "Of course I'm not pressing charges. I couldn't give a fuck about the car."

"Okay." I pulled away, widening the distance between us. *Do not cry. Do not cry.* "Well then, I'm free to go."

"What?" His eyes searched mine looking for answers, confused. "You're leaving?"

Did he think I was going to stick around? Laugh about how I'd been humiliated? About how probably everyone had known but me? I thought back to the phone call, the one I made when I honestly believed I had one last chance to talk to anyone. And out of all the anyones I could have called, I'd made the only choice I could. Him.

God, I was such an idiot.

My feet took a step toward the door, my heart beating so hard in my chest I was sure I was going to break my ribs apart. I had told him I loved him and not only had he not said it back, but he admitted he'd been acting this whole time.

"Let me go, Eric." I pushed against his chest when he stood in my way. His large frame blocking the only exit I had.

"You're just going to walk away now?" He stood in front of me, eyes burning into mine.

It was too much to take.

He was too much to take, and I knew if I stood there a second longer I would crumble, telling him again how much I loved him and give him my heart again to break into a million pieces.

Because that's how pathetic I was.

Knowing I'd been a plaything and still not able to hate him.

"Yes, I think we've both taken it as far as we can go." I forced myself to look at him, to not be the coward I knew I was. "Let's call it even."

It took everything I had, every ounce of reserve in the tank, for me to force a smile. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but I did it. Not willing to show how much I'd been broken.

Did I even have a right to be mad? He'd been following my lead; it had been me who had

started this mess. *I* had lied. *I* had been deceitful. *I* had pretended first. Could I really be angry at him for playing along? For doing what I had done, only more convincing?

“New York.” He grabbed my arm. Those two words hurting me more than any physical blow could. The last of my defenses were broken. I was broken.

“Goodbye, Eric.” I ripped my arm out of his hold and walked out the doorway.

I didn’t look back, my eyes glued to the hall I’d walked down earlier in handcuffs, believing my world was ending. Turns out, I had been right.

“Tia.” He called after me, my feet picking up the pace as I prayed the door in front of me was unlocked.

“Tia.” He was no longer standing still, his footsteps echoing off the floor as my fingers fumbled with the door handle and yanked it open.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, I said my silent prayer of thanks—I’d given up on the Viking gods, clearly they weren’t on my side—as I stepped out into the sunshine.

And ignoring the thundering sound of feet behind me and my name echoing, I filled my lungs with as much air as I could.

And I ran.

Chapter 23

I wasn't a runner.

Hell, to say I was even fit was probably a gross understatement. So when I decided running was a good idea, I knew it was going to take me no longer than ten seconds to regret that decision.

Firstly, because I didn't have enough of a head start.

Eric was ginormous; it would take me three strides to every one of his. Not ideal.

Secondly, I had no fucking idea where I was or where I was going. We'd already established I had a questionable sense of direction and even poorer mapping skills. And in my rush to get away I'd left my phone—as well as everything else—behind. So I was Siri-less and shit out of luck.

And thirdly and most importantly, I. Was. Not. A. Runner.

Which is why the minute I was out the door, instead of running out into the street and possibly into lung failure, I changed tactics.

I darted around the side of the building, the thin gap between the brick and the fence line giving me just enough room to slip through unnoticed. While Eric screamed my name, opening the door and searching the street in front of him, I crouched down, flattening myself behind two trashcans until I saw him continuing to run into the distance.

It would take him five minutes at most before he would realize there was no way I could have put that much distance between us and double back. I had to make those five minutes count. Oh, and I still had no idea where I was and where I was going.

Moving as quietly as I could—I had no idea if the Larsson posse was somewhere close ready to ambush me—I continued to the front of the building. Which to my surprise actually *was* a police station, just obviously one that had been decommissioned and was being used as a film set. Big white flyers notified the public of filming times and reminded them not to trespass, but thankfully no one else was around.

But my thanks was short lived when I'd made it just a few feet up the road and a familiar black SUV pulled up.

Fuck.

It was Ryan.

"New York?" He rolled to a stop in front of me. "Is that you?"

"Please go." I kept my head down and continued walking, hoping we weren't attracting any further attention. "And just give me a few extra minutes before you tell him, okay?"

I knew where his allegiances lay, and chances were he was probably already texting Eric, but I just needed a little more time. More distance. More something.

"Get in." The car continued to creep along side of me. "I won't tell anyone anything, but you need to get in the car right now."

My head turned to face him. For the first time since I'd met him he wasn't smiling or joking; he was serious but his eyes were kind.

"You're upset, and I won't ask you anything, but I'm not leaving you on the street. So you get in the car and we get out of here, or I call Eric."

It was risky and could have been a complete trap. After all, what was to stop him from calling Eric anyway after I was already in the car? Not that I had a lot of options. My phone,

money and everything else had been left in the police station. It's not like I could catch a cab. Hell, I didn't even have ID.

"Fine." I huffed, hating that I was forced to make a choice. "But if you call him, Ryan, I'm going to punch you right in the balls." I opened the passenger side door and slid into the seat.

It wasn't an idle threat either. I figured if I clocked him right in the groin I'd incapacitate him long enough for me to get away. Plus, hopefully him knowing the score up front would curtail any plans to rat me out.

"Wow, you went straight for the balls?" He smiled as he eased back into traffic. "Such a badass."

I didn't answer, my feet nervously tapping on the floor with my hands knotted in my lap, the fake police station fading into the distance as we continued driving.

"Where do you want to go?" Ryan broke the silence, eyeing me from the side. "I'm assuming you don't want to go back to the house of the who should not be named."

"No, I don't want to go there." My voice was a whisper, the urge to cry so overwhelming my eyes started to water. *Not now damn it*, I begged. I didn't want anyone to see me cry. "I don't know where to go." The words wavy as they croaked out.

"Don't cry, Tia." A hand reached across and covered my still knotted fingers.

"Did you know?" I didn't look up, keeping my vision focused on my knuckles. I'm not sure why I even bothered asking him to be honest, of course he knew.

"That you're a writer and not an actress?" I felt more than saw his head turn toward me as he returned his hand to the wheel. "Or that he orchestrated this elaborate plan so it would be out in the open?"

"Well, I guess that answers everything." I shrugged, wondering why I had put myself in the hands of the enemy. "You can drop me off anywhere, I'll just walk."

"Nope, can't do that." He shook his head returning to gaze out the windshield. "I already said I wasn't telling anyone anything, so you're stuck with me until you have some kind of a plan."

I shook my head, unable to respond.

For once in my life I had no plan. No idea what to do from here. And worst of all, I wasn't even sure what I wanted to do.

"Drive it is," he said drily, not willing to concede.

The ringing of Ryan's phone punched through the silence, startling me. The bright screen mounted on the dashboard lit up with Eric's name and I shook my head in panic.

"I said I wouldn't," he reminded me before accepting the call, putting the phone on speaker. "Your Majesty, what can I do for you?"

"Ryan, where the fuck are you? Have you seen Tia?" Eric sounded desperate, his voice tearing through the phone.

I should have been happy he was frantic, glad that he was suffering a little after what he'd just done. He deserved it. But I wasn't happy, and just hearing his voice made my heart hurt more.

"What do you mean where am I?" Ryan smirked, pretending to sound indignant. "I called Nick like you asked. He told me you were there with your own car and that neither you nor any of your bonehead brothers needed a ride home. So I turned around and left. And why . . ." he turned, looking at me as he said the words, "would I have seen Tia? Isn't she supposed to be with you?"

He was smart. Not outright lying, but definitely evasive.

“Fuck!” Eric shouted making me jump in my seat. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. No she is not with me. She’s gone and I have no fucking idea where she is.”

“Well in that case.” Ryan grinned, almost enjoying himself. “She’s in the car with me.” My mouth dropped open, my hands waving in the air. “And we’re running away together.”

What?

My eyes narrowed as I watched Ryan try to stifle a laugh. “If you’re nice, you’ll be invited to the wedding. Or not. It might be awkward, and I don’t want to upset my future bride.”

“Cut the shit, Ryan. This isn’t a fucking joke.” He sounded less than impressed, agitation biting his tone. “She left her phone, her purse, everything.” He blew out a long exhale, sounding almost defeated. I guess that made two of us, the lump in my throat making it hard to breathe as he continued. “I’m going to circle around a few more times, Roman has gone to check the house, and Nick and Dave are hanging at the location in case she goes back. Can you . . . I don’t know. Look, if you think of where she could be, call me.”

“Yep, can do,” Ryan quipped, his hand hovering over the end button. “Hey, before I go.” He side-eyed me, his finger still in position. “If I see her, you want me to tell her anything?”

There was a pause, the sound of air rushing out of Eric’s lips before he took another breath. “Tell her I’m an asshole. That I’m sorry and I need to know she’s safe.”

“Will do.” His finger pressed the end key and then he turned to me. “So, Eric’s an asshole—”

“I heard him.” I pointed to the phone, the call having just ended.

“I know.” Ryan shrugged. “But I figured it needed to be said again.”

I felt a tiny smile twist at the corners of my mouth, which was ridiculous considering everything that had happened. But Ryan was a really good guy.

“Thanks for not saying anything.”

“I don’t like being in the middle of this shit, New York.” He continued to look forward, staying focused on a road I had no idea where it went. “He’s my best friend, and fuck, he’s been good to me.”

“Which is why I said you could drop—”

“But I don’t always agree with him.” He held up his hand, ignoring the interruption. “I will tell you this, I have never—and I do mean never—seen him as twisted up over a girl as he has been over you.”

I didn’t answer, wanting to hear more but knowing I had no right to ask. It already felt like I had asked Ryan to do more than what was fair, to push further—it just wasn’t right.

“So I’m just going to say it.” His voice answered my silence. “You are both fucking nuts.”

“Probably,” I agreed. *Definitely* is what I should have said.

“And you both should fucking talk to each other.”

“Maybe.”

God, I wanted to, but I was so scared. I had put my heart on the line, what if he didn’t feel the same way?

“He cares about you.” He responded as if reading my thought. “A lot. So if you don’t feel that way then you should tell him.”

Little did he know I had, I just wasn’t sure I could do it again.

“And no fucking pressure, but if you do want to run away with me we can be in Vegas in four hours.” He bit his bottom lip, trying to hide the grin. “It would solve the issue of whether we invite Eric to the wedding.”

“I’m not running away to Vegas to marry you, Ryan.” I reached across to shove him lightly,

the smile creeping across my face.

“Fair enough, you probably want a big traditional wedding. That’s cool. We’ll wait a little longer.”

I couldn’t help but marvel at his genius. Ryan had told Eric exactly where I was—albeit skewing the details—which meant he hadn’t outright lied to Eric while still maintaining his word to me.

“You’re a good guy, Ryan.” A wave of warmth flowed through my body, slowly easing some of the tension. Nothing had changed with Eric, but I didn’t feel as alone as I had before I got in the car. “Thank you for everything.”

“No problem, New York.” He turned his head giving me a wink. “You’re pretty good yourself.”

I sighed, my back relaxing into the seat. I still had no idea where I was going. Both metaphorically and literally. I was so fucking confused, and missing home, and angry, and sad, and . . . why couldn’t I just have a crystal fucking ball so I knew how this all turned out? One thing I knew was, despite everything, I still loved him. As much as I wanted to turn off those feelings—knowing it would be easier—I couldn’t.

“Do you love him?” Ryan asked, pulling his mind reading trick again. Or I might have been talking out loud. I couldn’t confidently rule it out.

“Yes,” I answered quietly. Because saying it—even to myself—scared the fucking shit out of me.

“I should never have left you at the bar that first time we met.” He tsked, his hand tapping the steering wheel before stage whispering, “I knew it.”

It made me laugh, which was crazy considering everything else going on in my head. But it felt good—the sound making its way up my throat as I dried my eyes. I would be okay; it had been a crazy ride but if I could laugh about it. I would be okay.

Chapter 24

I tuned out for the rest of the drive, the rock of the car lulling me into a weird trance. I saw the road and cars outside but nothing really stuck, my brain in neutral as we drove up to a familiar gate.

Oh fuck.

Shit.

This was Eric's gate.

"What are we doing here?" My fingers gripped the seatbelt across my chest tight as the gate slowly opened. "Ryan, this is Eric's house."

"Oops." His hand covered his mouth in mock surprise. "Don't know how that happened."

"I-I—" I had no idea what to say. I didn't even know if Eric was home or whether I even wanted to see him.

"Don't freak out, you don't have to talk to him if you don't want to." The car moved forward slowly, the gate sliding closed behind us. "But your stuff is here, so we're going to get it. And then if you want to go to a hotel or stay with me until you figure this out, we can do that."

"You would let me stay with you?" The possibility hadn't even entered my mind. Not that I had thought of some other plan. One that solved the issue of getting my *stuff*—as Ryan had so elegantly put it—and a place to sleep for the night.

"Sure, if you want." He shrugged like it was no big deal. "But the man has messaged me ten times and is going out of his mind." He held up the phone that had been silenced and switched to vibrate at some point, the unanswered messages displayed on the screen. "I think it's reasonable that we let him know you're all right."

"Okay." And with that okay, Ryan continued down the driveway.

It was reasonable, and probably necessary, because if Eric had called Judith or Will or even Lila looking for clues as to my whereabouts, I was probably hours away for having some very frantic loved ones lose their minds.

As we drove toward the house Eric was pacing outside his front door with the phone pressed to his ear. His hand was raking through his hair roughly, with every muscle in his body so tightly coiled I could see the tension even through his clothes. He turned when he heard the car approaching, the phone lowering from his ear as his eyes widened, seeing me in the passenger side of the car. He didn't move though, standing still in place waiting until the car came to a stop in front of him.

"Holy shit," I cursed out a breath. He looked terrible.

"Yeah, this is going to be fun." Ryan popped open his door and exited the car. He gave Eric a chin-tip wordless greeting before coming around to my door and opening it. My exit a lot slower than his had been.

"Tia." My name tore at his throat. He tilted his head for just a second, looking at Ryan before he came back to me. "I thought you didn't know where she was?"

"I told you she was in the car with me." Ryan rolled his eyes, whistling through his teeth. "It's not my fault if you didn't listen."

"Can we talk?" he asked, his eyes locking on mine.

And as much as I was not ready for any conversation, I knew I wouldn't say no to him. More than that, I knew I couldn't.

“Do not upset my future wife,” Ryan clipped, looking to me for a nod of reassurance before making a move to leave.

“Noted,” Eric said, not even turning in Ryan’s direction.

Ryan strode past us and walked into Eric’s house. I didn’t doubt he would probably be close and most likely listening, something that actually gave me comfort.

Eric stepped closer but didn’t touch me, his eyes—as usual—burning me alive as we stood toe to toe. The sound of our breathing cracking through the silence.

“Thank fuck you are okay.” He was the first one to speak, his chest expanding heavily as he pushed out a breath. “I was losing my fucking mind.”

“Ryan found me and convinced me to get in his car.” I shrugged, not sure what else to say. “I needed distance.”

“I am so fucking glad he was there.” He closed his eyes, the lids slowly opening as they refocused on me. “And what about now, do you still need distance?”

I didn’t answer.

Truth was, I didn’t know what I needed.

My heart was telling me I *needed* him, for him to wrap his arms around me and kiss me. To erase all the stupid stuff we’d both done. For him to love me and let me love him back.

But my head was telling me I *needed* something else. To go home, to accept it was all doomed from the start and to cut my losses. I would get over it, get over *him*, there would eventually be someone else.

I wasn’t convinced.

“Well, this is really fucked up.” He raked his hand through his hair, the ends jutting out messily in every direction.

Even when he wasn’t trying, he still looked delicious, and it was getting harder and harder to stand there and not touch him. Not just because he was gorgeous and had the ability to make my toes curl with a single smoldering look either. It had gone waaaaaaaaay beyond that.

“New York.”

God, I both loved and hated when he called me that, my insides twisted into a knot.

“Please say something.”

“I don’t know what to say,” I blurted out, the internal pressure cooker of my head, my heart and my hormones exploding. “I’m not even sure what I’m fucking mad at right now. At you? At me?”

Was I still even mad?

Maybe I was hurt?

Embarrassed?

Hell if I knew. “Whether I should be packing up my stuff and getting the hell out of here or—”

“I vote for *or*,” he cut in, not letting me finish.

“You don’t even know what *or* is.” My hands waved furiously. You know, in case my verbal spillage wasn’t enough to prove I was losing it.

“It’s the opposite of you packing up your stuff and leaving. So whatever it is, it’s what I want,” he said seriously without a hint of sarcasm. “Don’t go.”

God. This man.

I was supposed to be in a middle of a tirade, saying a whole bunch of something. And he had to go and be sweet.

“Aren’t you even the slightest bit annoyed? I basically lied to you from the moment we

met.”

It didn’t make sense. If I was angry, he should at least be a little put out. Why was I the only one acting like a lunatic? And why the hell was I pointing it out? I wasn’t supposed to be making it easier for him, Goddamn it.

“No.” His lips twisted, fighting back a smile.

“What do you mean no? How can you not be angry?” I was basically a hazard to myself and had no idea when to shut up.

“Because you are a terrible liar.” He stopped fighting, the corners of his mouth curling.

“And I could tell that, while you weren’t an actress—seriously, you were terrible—I knew the other parts were authentic.”

“But you let me go on . . . digging a bigger hole.” Seriously, who needed enemies? I was doing a pretty good job at sabotaging myself, I was surprised he hadn’t agreed with me and gone to get my bags.

“Yeah, well it amused the hell out of me. Probably more than it should.” He coughed out a laugh. “Not because I was laughing at you, but because you were so fucking adorable. And you were so committed to it.”

His fists balled at the side like he was trying to keep them where they were. “Which is why I devised that stupid plan. The press was already looking for a name, I gave it to them. I thought the truth would come out and we’d laugh about it. Not my finest hour.”

“I can’t believe you had me fake arrested.” I couldn’t help it. My hand leapt from the safety of my side and landed on his chest. It was meant to be a shove, but once it was there it didn’t move, sticking to his pectorals like the traitor that it was. “You looked so angry and hurt.” My voice softened remembering his face, the pain I left behind, knowing it had been because of me.

“I was acting.” My hand on his chest seemed to give him permission, moving his to cover mine. “I was intrigued, and curious as hell. But I knew you weren’t intentionally being deceitful.”

“I believed you, I thought it was real.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” His hands moved mine to his lips, kissing my fingertips gently, watching me the entire time like I might spook. “It played out longer than it should. I figured you could use a little payback, not because I was angry but because no matter what I threw at you, you wouldn’t come clean. I should have told you before they took you. And I was on my way out the door to come see you when you called. But then you said things to me.” He stopped, moving my hand from his lips, and placing it back to his heart. I could feel its steady rhythm under my fingertips. “Did you mean it? What you said to me on the phone?”

Crap.

The phone call.

The one where I not only admitted that I loved him but I wouldn’t take it back.

“Yes. I meant it.”

There had been enough lies between us and I wasn’t allowing another. Not now, not when my hand was on him and he was looking at me that way. Like maybe, just maybe he felt something too.

“You still feel that way?” He dipped his head to the side, meeting my gaze.

“Damn it, Eric,” I huffed, frustrated. “You’re not allowed to look at me like that.”

It made me crazy stupid. And I wasn’t sure I was ready to say it to his face, especially when it would be the second time and I hadn’t heard it back.

“Look how?” His brow arched as he continued to smolder. And either he was oblivious or

pretending he didn't know how dangerous those eyes of his were.

"Like that." I waved my free hand in front of his face, the one on his chest insisting on staying where it was. "It's not fair."

"Tia, you're gorgeous, smart, funny and talented. And I've read every single column you've written." He momentarily distracted me from the smoldering with that piece of information, my head doing the saaaaay-whattt? my mouth didn't.

"Every. Single. One." Each word punctuated like a statement and he was back to smoldering again. "From the minute I saw you, I couldn't keep my eyes off you. You excited the hell out of me and deep down I knew I'd have no choice but to fall in love with you."

"I love you," my mouth spilled, not bothering to check if it had been given the green light from my heart or my head. "I love you," I said again because once hadn't been enough.

"Good." His hand grabbed my waist and pulled me in closer, my body hitting his. "Because I love you too, and I wasn't going to let you walk away."

He didn't ask, bending his neck and covering my mouth with his like it had always been his for the taking. It was hard, and intense and a tangle of tongues and lips. Combinations of gasps and growls in place of words completed the rest of the conversation.

My breasts pressed against his chest as his hands moved all over my body. Mine were busy too, reacquainting themselves with his every dip, curve and bulge in his body. He was hard, and demanding—leaving me dizzy as I melted into him, a mess of limbs desperate to get closer.

Nothing was solved, but for now I didn't care. I loved him and he loved me, and that was enough.

"Seriously?" Ryan spoke from behind us. "Making out with my future wife, Larsson." He tsked, shaking his head as he sidled Eric "Right in front of me? I thought you had more class."

"Do you want to tell him or should I?" Eric licked the shell of my ear, his hands not moving from my body.

"We love each other." I grinned like an idiot, my own hands having a hard time behaving despite an audience.

"Tell me something I don't know." He rolled his eyes, trying hard not to smile. "Every single time I leave you both alone together you fall in love. It's so fucking predictable."

"Which means your delusions of marrying *my* girlfriend are over, buddy." Eric kissed my neck, his hands traveling up the side of my body.

"New York," Ryan gasped, clutching his chest. "Breaking my heart." He wiped a fake tear from his eye. "So I'm assuming you're sticking around then? Or did you want me to take you somewhere else?"

"I might stick around a little longer." The idea of going anywhere made me feel physically ill. "If that's okay with Eric."

"More than okay," he whispered against my hair, kissing the top of my head.

"Thank you, Ryan." I unraveled my body from Eric's long enough to give him a hug. My arms wrapped around him and squeezed. "Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome." He squeezed back. "Now if my work here is done, I'm going to go call Lila and let her know everything here is cool."

"You don't have her number." Eric's brow furrowed, looking to me like he missed something.

"I didn't give it to him." I shrugged not knowing any more than he did.

"You didn't, but you are." Ryan fished out his phone from the pocket of his jeans and handed it to me, a big grin across his face. "Think of it as dual purpose. I can tell her that the

crisis has been averted so you two can go do whatever you two are going to do.” He held up his hand hinting he didn’t want to know what that was. “And *I* get her number, which sounds reasonable if you ask me.”

“Make sure she gets sweet Ryan.” I scrolled his contacts and added Lila’s cell. “And don’t leave voice messages, she hates those. If she doesn’t answer, text her.”

“Thanks for the tip.” He retrieved his phone, shoving it back into his pocket. “I’ll see you both later.” He gave us a salute and walked around to the back of the house.

With Ryan disappearing, standing outside when there was a perfectly good house—uh-hmm mansion—seemed a tad ridiculous. Of course ridiculous had been sort of our theme, so it wasn’t unexpected.

“You wanna go inside?” Eric pressed his lips to my hair, his arms still locked around me in an Eric cage.

“Sure.” I gave his arms a light squeeze.

It felt so good to be back in them. If you’d asked me when I came through those gates if I’d be walking back into Eric’s house covered by the man in question, I’d have told you to lay off the crack. It seemed that fate—which in this case was named Ryan—had other ideas, and I was more than grateful to be proven wrong.

“So.” Eric spun me around in his arms so that we were facing each other walking me into the foyer of the house. “As much as I want to take you upstairs and fuck you up against a wall.” He planted a kiss against my neck. “My brothers are in the kitchen and I need to know if we’re good here first.”

Ugh.

Could we do the wall fucking first? I’d be quiet.

Eric pulled me into the living room, giving us a little more privacy. “Are you good here, Tia? I need to hear you say it.”

“Well . . .” I bit my lip, needing to pull up my big girl panties and spill the rest of the intricate plot which brought us to where we were. “So you know how we met.” *When I basically misappropriated an invite, using information I obtained under false pretenses*, I didn’t add.

“Yeesssss,” he said slowly, brow arching waiting for me to continue.

If he knew about my crush thing—AKA mild obsession—he either had the best poker face known to man. *Or* had reached such a pinnacle of acting prowess that he’d be giving Daniel Day Lewis a run for his money at the Academy Awards. I wasn’t confident enough to rule either one out, which was why I decided to just go with the truth.

“So, you said that you worked out how I got into the premiere but not why.” I shuffled to the couch, tugging at his arm to follow.

This conversation was definitely better sitting down. So when he found out all the nitty-gritty details it would take him longer to run out the door.

“So you want to tell me *why* you were there?” He sat down on the couch, pulling me with him into his lap. “You never wrote about it in your column, which is what I originally assumed you were doing it for.”

Yeah, I never did legitimize the trip by writing about it, which in hindsight was a blessing. Can you imagine if I had post-mortemed my encounter with Eric and then unbeknownst to me, he read it? We are talking next level restraining order. I still wasn’t sure he wasn’t going to freak the hell out now.

“Okay.” I took a breath. The sooner I got it over with the better. “So. I was there to meet you.”

Silence.

I wasn't even sure he blinked.

"Sorry, what?" He tilted his head like he hadn't heard me correctly.

"I was there." Swallow. "To meet." Swallow. "You."

More silence.

He wasn't even moving, just sitting there with the blankest look on his face like he couldn't work out if I was joking or insane. Oh please God, say something.

Now I was freaking out.

Fuck.

This was so bad.

Why wasn't he saying anything?

Fuck.

"Okay, so I know it sounds sort of crazy." *Sort of crazy?* I sounded like a fucking stalker. "But I did not intend for any of this to happen. It wasn't the plan. I just wanted to meet you. Because you were my number one crush. And I figured if I met you, then I could stop thinking about you. Not that I thought about you every second or anything. But it was probably a lot more than I should." I word vomited every insane thing that had ever come into my mind because apparently my actions weren't enough to prove I was ready for an asylum. "It sounds bad, I know that. But it's not."

Who the hell was I kidding? It *sounded* bad? It was bad.

"I was . . ." His brow furrowed not fully comprehending the magnitude of craziness that had just spilled out of my mouth. Fair call, to be honest. "Your *crush*?"

"Yes." The word literally squeezed out of my diaphragm like someone had stood on a dog's chew toy.

I almost couldn't look. His face was completely vacant. Even those eyes, which usually made my girlie parts turn into Jell-O, ceased fire on their panty-melting assault. He looked like was either contemplating String Theory *or*—and most likely—had just discovered that the girl he was dating and made love declarations to, was certifiable.

And then like a supernova it happened. A titanic explosion as he threw his head back and erupted into a huge full body laugh. His body contorted. Every muscle in his face crinkled and tears formed at the edges of his eyes. With a laugh that was so deep, throaty and uncontained I wasn't sure he wasn't having a seizure.

"Oh, New York." He wiped his eyes with the heel of his palms. "You did all of *that*." He waved his hand in the air at the implied that. "Just to meet *me*?"

I was still no closer to knowing whether we were going to be wall fucking later or heading to the courthouse for a restraining order.

"Well . . ." Fuck, it's not like I could sugarcoat it any other way. "Yeah."

His arms were so quick around me I didn't have time to gauge their intention. Was it a hug or was he restraining me for the cops—the real ones this time. Could have gone either way, to be honest.

And then I felt his lips, the slide of his tongue against my throat as his fingers trailed across to my breast. It was either the weirdest most erotic citizen's arrest of all time, or Eric Larsson was making out with me.

Please Lord, let it be the latter.

Our mouths collided, lips and tongues fusing together with a supporting symphony of arms and legs. I was all over him, or maybe it was he who was all over me—there was no way to

know for sure.

“That is the best story I’ve ever heard.” Kiss, suck, lick. His fingers curled around my throat as his mouth traveled down my neck. “Is it weird that it turns me on?”

“I’m in no position to judge.” I closed my eyes, loving the feeling of his lips on my skin. “Labels are for narrow-minded assholes anyway.”

Oh Lord in heaven and all the saints.

It was like Christmas, New Year and a birthday all rolled into one. And best of all, I had nothing left to hide.

“Wait.” His lips and hands stilled, which almost stopped my heart. “*I* approached *you* in the bar.”

“Yeah.” I didn’t dare breathe. Goddamn it, I knew it was too good to be true.

“So what if I hadn’t seen you?” He narrowed his eyes, remembering that while I may have right place/right time’d myself, it had been he who saw me at the after-party. “Or more importantly, what if I hadn’t spoken to you?”

“Honestly.” I shrugged, not even pretending I didn’t know. “I probably would have had a few drinks and then gone back to my hotel and touched myself. I can’t say the last part didn’t happen anyway.” I mean the crazy was already off the leash, there was no point holding anything back now.

“Did you do that a lot?” His eyes darkened, his voice dropping an octave and sending a shiver down my spine. “Touch yourself when you thought of me?”

“Probably more than I should admit.” Except that I was admitting it and I wasn’t even embarrassed.

“Fuck, New York.” He groaned, leaning his head back squeezing his eyes tight.

“Well, I’m hopeful that is going to happen.”

It was over now, seriously any filter had been obliterated, and it was anyone’s guess as to which inappropriate verbal spillage was going to happen next. Acceptance was a wonderful thing.

“My brothers are in the mother fucking kitchen,” he cursed, his chest moving up and down as he breathed deeply. “It’s about the only time I wished I was an only child.”

“See, I don’t want to tell you I told you so, but . . .”

I didn’t need to finish. It was quite obvious that it was the curse at work. Not that it mattered now, if we were still together after false pretenses and false arrests and everything in between, I’d hedge a bet we’d survive a family meeting. Even if it was sooner than advised.

“Fine. You were right and I was wrong,” Eric groaned, his head slowly banging against the back of the couch. “We’ll go into the kitchen.” He sat up trying to convince himself as much as he was me. “Meet them properly and *then* I will kick them out.”

It was a good strategy, and one I could agree on. Not because I had anything against them per se, other than their obvious involvement in the ruse. But because I was desperate to be alone with Eric.

“Are they going to cuff me again? My wrists are already bruised from the last time.” I lifted my hands, my skin already purpling from the metal.

Oddly enough it wasn’t the strangest thing that had come out of my mouth today. There was a positive.

“If anyone cuffs you, it will be me.” Eric nibbled at my lips. “Actually, I’ll tell Nick to leave the cuffs. Let’s go.”

Chapter 25

Eric's house was huge. Which was a good thing considering we'd basically been dry humping on his couch while he had company. Lucky for everyone we'd been in the *front* living room. Yeah, there was more than one, with the informal and more lived in one being toward the back of the house. Meanwhile, his three younger brothers—the fourth unaccounted for at this stage—were sitting around his kitchen nook with beers in their hands, chatting. Like they hadn't just convinced me I was destined for jailbird orange less than a few hours ago. Strange was definitely the theme of the day.

"Gentlemen." Eric stood behind me as we entered the kitchen, three heads snapping in our direction at the sound of his voice. "As you can see we've located Tia. Tia, this is Nick, Dave and Roman." His finger pointed to each of them with a corresponding name. "And you've already met Tia, so you can all fuck off now." He bit back the grin.

He wasn't even trying to be nice, the suggestion of meeting them all properly tossed aside in favor of a quick goodbye. Not to say I was thrilled with our impromptu reunion, but there was no need to be rude.

"Eric." I elbowed him before directing my attention to the assembly of Larsson brothers sitting in front of me. "Hi, it's nice to you."

"And it begins." Nick was the first to stand, tipping his chin to his brother and then to me. "He uses us and then tosses us aside as soon as he gets the girl back." He sighed before flashing a grin. "Hi, Tia, I'm Nick. Sorry about before."

"Don't be such an ass kisser, Nick." Roman stood, joining his brother. "And you." His brows lifted as he looked at me. "You're just going to take him back?" Roman hid a smile behind a fake yawn. "I'm disappointed in you, Tia." He shook his head, striding over toward me slowly. "You could have at least let him sweat it out a little more."

"Don't listen to him." Not to be left out, Dave was also on his feet. "The only thing *disappointing* was Roman's performance." He clocked Roman playfully in the gut. "Now tell the truth, you didn't buy him as a lawyer, did you?"

"Hey moron, I *am* a fucking lawyer," Roman countered with a slap to the back of Dave's head.

"Blah, blah, I got a law degree, blah," Nick interjected, clearly siding with Dave. "Next time we'll get Alex to do it."

"Alex, our nineteen-year-old brother who is still in college? Yeah. *That* will be convincing." Roman rolled his eyes. "I'm related to a bunch of imbeciles."

"Yeah, maybe we should have waited," Eric whispered in my ear as we watched them argue.

Given that I hadn't *investigated* much of his family on Google—an oversight that could have saved me A LOT of trauma—Eric gave me the quick rundown. He was the oldest of five Larsson boys. FIVE.

All of them tall, athletic and strikingly handsome, there was no denying they were all from the same family.

Roman—who was a year younger than Eric—probably looked the most like him. He was also the only Larsson to shun show business and go into law. He used his mother's maiden name of Pierce for professional reasons, not wanting to attract the level of crazy—uh-hm—that followed his older brother. Next came Dave and then Nick—who were also a year apart and two

years younger than Roman—both sporting darker hair and darker eyes. And while they had been acting since leaving college, they hadn't received the same attention or accolades that their more famous older sibling had. Though Nick had recently landed a role in a new police drama series on Netflix where—you guessed it—he played a cop. He was instrumental in securing the costumes, props, squad car and location for project make-Tia-come-clean-and-lose-about-five-years-off-her-life. Eventually, I would have to seek my revenge. I was a middle child after all.

"And Alex is still in college." Eric finished the rundown of his family. "Berkeley. And assuming you haven't been completely scared away by these guys, you can meet him some time soon."

"I don't scare easily." I laughed, thankfully not pointing out that if anyone should be afraid it should be him. The whole *you were my crush, I masturbated to your image constantly, somehow wrangled a meeting and then fell in love with you*—probably a little fresh in his mind.

"Neither do I." His lips pressed against my neck.

Touché, Eric Larsson. Touché.

"Anyone else feel like we're no longer welcome?" Roman deadpanned, his head tipping toward Eric's hand that had made its way to my ass.

"Yeah, you should probably go," Eric not so subtly hinted. "We have more things we need to discuss." His lips against my throat punctuated the sentence.

"Yeah, *talking*, that's exactly what you're going to be doing." Roman rolled his eyes. "Come on losers, let's get out of here." He rounded up the other two and with quick goodbyes they were all gone.

"So." Eric's eyes darkened, the hunger evident in not only his voice but also his body as his hands traveled up my torso, palming my breast. "I need to know what fantasies you had about me. When you would think about me, what did I do to you?"

"You want to know what I thought about?" I swallowed, feeling the familiar pull between my legs as my body tingled.

"Yes, everything." He pushed me against his granite bench top, panty-melting smolder in full effect. "Then I'm going to systematically go through them all, one by one."

"Well . . ." The man was asking and by God I was telling him. "Usually they start with kissing." My teeth played with my bottom lip as he stalked closer.

"Kissing," he said, lips starting at my ear and pressed small sweet kisses along my jaw till he got to my mouth. And then, those kisses weren't so sweet, his tongue prying open my lips as he consumed me. Hot, heavy and intense.

"That wasn't." The words came out in a gasp, not entirely sure I should be opening my mouth other than to kiss him back. "Where I wanted you to kiss."

He stopped, hands gripping the granite hard on either side of my body. "Oh, really." A chuckle bubbled up his throat. "I should have known."

With his eyes locked on mine, his hand moved between my legs, his agile fingers caressing me through the denim of my jeans. "Is this where you wanted to be kissed?"

"Yes." I nodded, already feeling wetter than I should be considering he'd only just started.

It wouldn't take long, not with him looking at me like that. I was positive the minute he made contact with my bare skin I was going to explode into a thousand pieces.

"Not here," Eric growled, yanking me forward so my body hit his chest with a thud. "I want you laid out on my bed."

I didn't even have time to argue, my world turning upside down as he tossed me over his shoulder like a marauder and hauled me up the stairs to his bedroom.

“Eric.” His name left me with a whoosh, the air knocked out my lungs as my back hit the mattress. “Kiss me.”

“I intend to kiss every last inch of you.” He started tearing at his clothes and tossing them aside.

I watched in awe as he stripped, quickly and efficiently peeling his shirt, jeans, socks and boxer briefs off to reveal his deliciously toned flesh.

God, I was so worked up. This was going to be over embarrassingly fast.

With his body bare, he turned his attention to mine. His fingers worked from the bottom up, discarding each layer of my clothes with no more care than he’d shown his own.

I was completely naked, lying on the top of his comforter as he kneeled on the floor. His eyes so fucking dark, it was as if his pupils had invaded his irises.

“Shit.” I gasped as his palms parted my legs and traveled toward my thighs. My breasts heaved with each breath.

“Watch me,” he whispered against the apex of my thigh, the gentle stubble of his chin tickling my skin. “Watch me kiss you.”

I was going to come. He hadn’t even put his mouth on me yet and I was going to come.

Hot breath blew across my core, my back arching as he sealed his mouth around me and sucked my clit.

“Eric.” My fingers bunched at the covers either side of me, my hips rising to meet his mouth as his tongue lapped at my pussy. “That feels so—”

“Good?” He lifted his head for a minute and inserted a finger, his thumb rubbing my clit before returning with his tongue.

I didn’t get to answer, the sensations overwhelming me as the wave washed over me in a rush, every single part of my body obliterated as I came on his hand and his mouth.

“I love the way you taste.” He slid out the finger he’d been fucking me with and placed it into his mouth and sucked. “So fucking sweet.” His eyes closed as his lips curled around it.

“Holy shit, that was amazing.” My body shook, the tremors of my orgasm still echoing through me as I lay on the bed.

“Now what, New York?” His hands were back in between my legs, rubbing my sensitive skin and making me shiver. “I just kiss you and make you come?”

“No.” I struggled to bring my breathing to heel, my pulse beating out of control. “Then I kiss you.”

His eyes widened as I turned, positioning my body so my lips were in line with his cock, and took him in my mouth.

Like he hadn’t been, I wasn’t slow or soft. His hard-on lengthened in my mouth as I sucked him in deep, my fingernails grazing up his shaft before I started to pump.

I loved to watch him. Peeking underneath my lashes as I hollowed out my cheeks while I sucked.

“Fuck.” His body tensed as my tongue trailed up his hard length, twisting around the head of his cock and then trailing back down the other side.

And because I didn’t want my mouth to have all the fun, my hand had started to pump, sliding up and down tight against his skin while the other hand cupped his balls, squeezing gently.

He wasn’t going to stand a chance.

I watched as he tried to fight it, his body coiling as he tensed and even tried to pull away from my mouth, but I wasn’t going to stop.

I sucked and licked hard, my hands working him over in unrelenting bursts. I wanted to feel him come in my mouth, for him to lose control and unravel just as I had.

"Tia," he groaned, unable to fight it any longer as he rocked his hips, fucking my mouth. "I'm going to come."

"Come for me," I mumbled against his dick, my teeth grazing his skin.

"Fuck," he cursed out, gripping my hair as his hot load spilled down my throat. My mouth clamped around him, continuing to suck until I was sure I'd swallowed every last drop.

I'd gone down on him before, but never like this. It was as if I no longer had to hide exactly how much I wanted him, the byproduct enough to blow us both apart.

"I love your fucking mouth." He pulled out from between my lips and laid down beside me. "I love every single part of you."

"Mmm." I licked my lips, my hands still around his semi hard cock as his hands moved to my breasts. His fingers twisted my nipples as I continued to jerk him off.

"I love these too." He sealed his mouth around one of my stiff peaks and sucked, using his teeth to bite a little as well. "You have the most amazing set of tits I've ever seen." He moved his lips to the other one, giving it the same level of attention.

"I love your mouth on me." One of my hands kneaded my breast, feeling him suck one of my fingers into his mouth as he played with my nipples. "It makes me so hot."

I couldn't believe that so soon after coming, my body tightened as warmth spread across my lower belly. My pussy so slick it was begging to be touched.

"I want to see you touch yourself." His voice rumbled, as if reading my thoughts. "Like you did in your hotel room the night you met me."

Oh Lord in heaven and all the fucking saints.

I was on fire. Fire. Burning from the inside out.

I didn't argue, locking my eyes on him as my hand slid down my belly and in between my legs. My fingers coated in my heat as I rubbed circles against my clit.

"God, I love watching you." He parted my knees, fully exposing my pussy as he watched me finger myself. The slick sound of my core and gentle moans from my mouth were making him lose control.

"I want to watch you too." I lifted my head, seeing he'd already taken his heavy cock into his hand and was slowly stroking it. "Oh, Eric." My back arched, the sight of him jerking off while I touched myself driving me slowly insane.

"I can't wait any longer," he groaned, pushing the head of his cock to my entrance and rubbing it against my clit.

He hissed as my fingers touched myself and then him, his hand still stroking his shaft as I grabbed him.

"I need to be in you." His voice guttural and raw, tearing at this throat.

"Please." I lifted my lips to meet his as he filled me in one hard rush.

He lifted my legs over his knees as his hips pumped into me, dragging his cock out slowly before sliding back in fast.

"Yes. Oh my God." My shoulders lifted off the mattress as my pelvis flexed, I wanted him in as deep as I could get.

"Touch yourself," he demanded, gripping my legs as he thrust into me. "I want to watch you while I fuck you."

My hand didn't wait a second longer, reaching in between my legs and circling my clit as he pushed inside. It was too much, my body overwhelmed by every sensation.

“Tia.” My name like a prayer on his lips, was my final undoing.

“Eric!” I screamed, coming around his cock as he exploded into me with one last final thrust.

Our bodies collided, falling onto the mattress in a web of limbs and slick skin. I couldn’t move, every part of me shaking and so deliriously spent.

“We make your fantasy come true?” Eric rolled over taking me with him, tucking me up close to chest. “Because if we didn’t, you know I’m going to have to do it again.”

“Do you even need to ask?” I laughed, my body sore in all the right places. “You made my fantasy come true the first time you slept with me, *that*—what we just did—I couldn’t have even imagined. And trust me, I imagined plenty.”

I couldn’t move. My limbs felt like pudding, and I lost the ability to maneuver them in any meaningful way. And I wasn’t just tired physically; mentally I was exhausted from the emotional rollercoaster of the day.

And what a day.

I still couldn’t believe it. That by some miracle it had all worked out.

There were no more secrets. Eric knew the truth—the whole truth so help me God *truth*. Not only about who I was and what I did, but how I felt. And he was still here. But not only that, he loved me.

He. Loved. Me.

I wasn’t sure if a heart could burst, but if it were possible, mine was literally falling apart at the seams.

“What are you thinking about?” Eric’s hot breath on my neck made me shiver while the sweep of his hand instantly calmed me.

“Thinking about you. And me. And us.” I hummed, feeling like I was floating on a cloud.

“Look at me, New York.” His arms loosened so I could twist around to face him, his gorgeous blue eyes so clear I could almost see my own reflection.

“I love you,” he said with no hesitation.

“I love you too.” The words not feeling like they were enough. “I love you so much, I just want to keep saying it.”

“And I want to keep hearing it.” He brushed off the damp hair sticking to my forehead. “I don’t care how we got here or where we’re going, but I know I want it to be with you.”

God.

My heart.

Bursting.

“You know I’m crazy, right?” I felt like he needed the disclaimer. One more opportunity to opt out. “And what you’re signing up for?”

“Yeah, I know.” His gentle laugh vibrating through his body. “What about you? It’s not all hot sex. There are going to be long days and I travel all the time. And there’s the press. Trust me when I tell you it’s no field trip. You think you can put up with all of that?”

He asked so earnestly, his brow furrowed like there was a chance of any other outcome. Little did he know that his world could be on fire, and I would happily stand by his side and burn with him.

“There’s nowhere else I want to be, Eric. No one else I want to be with.”

The world could stop turning.

I could take my last breath.

And I’d not regret a second of it.

He'd stopped being my crush a while ago, and now he was my forever.

Epilogue

In a perfect world, Eric and I would have woken up the next day and climbed a magical beanstalk to our castle in the clouds. But as much as I was living the best kind of fairytale, we also had a big dose of reality to deal with.

My life had always been in New York—my family, my friends, my job. And while I was happy to travel the country or even the world whenever wanderlust took hold, my soul was tethered to the east coast.

The huge problem was while my soul was on the opposite side of the country, my heart now belonged to Eric. And Eric lived in Los Angeles.

Biggie verses Tupac.

Things were bound to get bloody.

“So you’re going to move?” Lila paused, her voice dropping to a whisper. “To *L.A.*?”

It had been one blissful, perfect—insert other adjective that basically means *the best* here—month. All the things we had spoken about that night had happened. Eric had started filming and was gone a lot. The press intensity on me and our relationship had increased. And while the sex was still smoking hot, it wasn’t as frequent as it had once been. Because life. And even adding all of that into the equation, I wouldn’t change a thing.

And yes, I had been back home a couple of times—seeing my family and Lila—but it became increasingly obvious that I needed to make a choice. And for me, there really could only be one.

“Well, we haven’t really talked about it yet but yeah, I will probably be moving here. He has a mansion in The Hills, I have an apartment in Brooklyn. He has to be here for work, I can work pretty much anywhere. It makes sense that I’m the one who relocates.”

Hearing it out loud didn’t soften the blow. While I was eternally grateful—thanking all the gods—both Viking and traditional—that I had the love of the most amazing man alive, I was still giving up a lot. And yes, I realize how unappreciative I sounded which was why I was keeping those thoughts to myself.

“Wow, I just never thought you would *leave*, leave.” She sighed softly, her voice with just a hint of sadness. “But I’m happy for you though.” Trademark Lila was trying to be upbeat. “I mean who the hell knew you’d end up shackled up with Eric Larsson? I guess if it was going to happen to anyone, it would have to be you.”

“Thanks, Lila,” I chuckled. Looking at Eric had been made a whole lot easier these days, no web browser needed. And waking up in his bed every morning was out of this world awesome. “Promise me you’ll visit me all the time.”

“Promise me you aren’t going to start wearing Ugg boots with shorts,” she countered.

“Deal,” I readily agreed.

“I’ll visit then.”

“It might be nice.” I tried to find the silver lining. “No shoveling snow to get out your front door in the winter, I’ll probably not even need a coat.”

“Yeah, that might be cool.” Lila’s voice drifted, reflecting in thought. “Though I bet even though we bitch about it every year, you’re going to miss it.”

“That’s not helping,” I groaned. “I’ll have Eric. That’s worth more than anything. And I can still keep my job if I want it, Mr. Walker couldn’t give a rat’s ass where I live. As long as I keep

the quirky pieces coming on time, he has no issue with sending my pay check to a California address.”

“Well that’s good.”

See, another positive.

I had won like five lotteries all at the same time.

Life was fucking awesome.

“New York.”

I sensed him before he’d said my name. Felt him even before his arm had curled around my waist. And even though I hadn’t turned around yet, the stupid grin I always seemed to wear whenever Eric was in the room was already on my face.

“I’m talking to Lila.” I twisted in his arms, planting a kiss on his lips and pointed to the phone at my ear. You know, in case he missed it.

“Hi, Lila.” He leaned across to the speaker, his mouth inches from mine. “Can I steal Tia for a few minutes, I guarantee you she’ll call you back.”

“You need me?” I pulled the phone away from my ear, curiosity getting the better of me.

Sure, we barely kept our mouths or our bodies off each other whenever we were in the same room. Ryan complained the whole time he drove whenever we were in the car together. But Eric had started filming last week, so not only was he gone for twelve—sometimes longer—hours a day, but even when he was home, he didn’t usually only need me *for a few minutes*.

“Yep, I sure do.” His lips moving to the side of my neck, something he knew was impossible for me to resist. “I have to head back to the studio so I need to be quick.”

Wow.

I think I actually groaned.

“Can you two wait until I’m off the phone?” Lila laughed, confirming my appreciation for Eric and his mouth hadn’t been silent. “I don’t need to hear my best friend getting busy with her movie star boyfriend.”

“I’ll call you back.” I ended the call without a proper goodbye.

I would totally call her the minute Eric went back to the studio, but for now I wanted whatever time I had with him.

“Where do you want me?” I started unzipping my dress, my shoes getting kicked off carelessly. “How much time do you have?”

“You’re adorable.” He laughed, stilling my hand at my zipper and moving it back up instead of down. “And the five minutes I have aren’t enough for me to have sex with you. I start that and I won’t make it back today.”

“I bet you can make me come in three,” I offered, knowing it was possible. I was fairly sure he’d proven it at least twice.

“I bet I can.” His lips curled into a smile as his hands anchored themselves on my hips. “But I wanted to talk to you instead.”

Oh-oh.

Talk.

Not sex.

And he looked serious.

Maybe my declarations of awesome and lottery wins had been premature.

“Is it . . . bad?” I swallowed, my brain free falling into every bad scenario it could. It had been too good to be true and this was where he told me it wasn’t working out for him.

“No, it’s not bad. Or at least I don’t think it is.”

“Please tell me, you know hypotheticals are my downfall.”

“My sweet, sweet, New York.” He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “Relax.”

Moving his hands away from my hips, he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out an envelope.

Honestly, for a split second I thought it might have been a ring.

Because even though it hadn’t been that long, if I hadn’t scared him away with my crazy by now, it probably wasn’t going to happen. We’d even talked about marriage. So it was natural that serious talk plus reaching for something equals marriage proposal. But that didn’t look likely.

“You’re giving me stationery?” I eyed the envelope in his fingers, still not sure if I was supposed to take it.

“Nope, I’m giving you what’s inside of the stationery.” His fingers tapped the envelope trying to entice me to take it.

Hmmm.

Yep, still no clue.

As my abilities to see through the paper and find out what was inside were lacking, I took it out of his hands and carefully opened it up. And there, looking rather insignificant was a printed out email.

“Still don’t get it.”

“Read it, New York.”

I unfolded the sheet of paper, and it was then when I saw the sender/recipient part that I screamed.

It had been addressed to Eric from a realtor.

IN NEW YORK!

“Oh my God, what did you do?” I tried to read the writing but the lines on the pages started to get wavy.

“Well, *we*,” he corrected, “bought a house in Brooklyn. I’m keeping the L.A house, but there is no reason why we can’t commute between the two. And while I think your apartment is great and all, it’s not big enough when we decide to start a family.”

“What?”

My heart stopped.

Or maybe it skipped a beat.

I was still breathing, so I hadn’t died. That was good.

“I told you that whatever or wherever we go, I want it to be with you.” His fingers moved to my jaw. “And I’m talking long term—marriage, babies—and everything before and after. I’m not proposing in a five-minute lunch break, you deserve better than that. But I need you to know that this isn’t temporary and I also can’t take you away from a city that you love. Well, not entirely take you away.”

I threw myself at him.

Literally leapt from my own two feet onto him, arms slung around his neck so that if he hadn’t caught me with his arms I would have dropped onto my ass on the floor.

“I love you,” I mumbled into his neck, my heart so full I wasn’t sure there was enough room in my chest.

“I love you too.”

I had no doubt on whether we would stand the test of time. Or that one day when we were old and grey, people would scoff on how we came to be.

And if I was honest, it was five different kinds of ridiculous.

He had been my number one crush.

A man who had captured my attention before I knew he was destined for my heart.

Which just proves that even if your dreams are insane, so far removed from reality that even you don't believe they are possible.

Do it anyway.

THE END

To keep up to date with all T Gephart's news, appearances and releases, please subscribe to her mailing list.

About T. Gephart

T Gephart is an indie author from Melbourne, Australia.

T's approach to life has been somewhat unconventional. Rather than going to University, she jumped on a plane to Los Angeles, USA in search of adventure. While this first trip left her somewhat underwhelmed and largely depleted of funds it fueled her appetite for travel and life experience.

With a rather eclectic resume, which reads more like the fiction she writes than an actual employment history, T struggled to find her niche in the world.

While on a subsequent trip the United States in 1999, T met and married her husband. Their whirlwind courtship and interesting impromptu convenience store wedding set the tone for their life together, which is anything but ordinary. They have lived in Louisiana, Guam and Australia and have traveled extensively throughout the US. T has two beautiful young children and one four legged child, Woodley, the wonder dog.

An avid reader, T became increasingly frustrated by the lack of strong female characters in the books she was reading. She wanted to read about a woman she could identify with, someone strong, independent and confident and who didn't lack femininity. Out of this need, she decided to pen her first book, A Twist of Fate. T set herself the challenge to write something that was interesting, compelling and yet easy enough to read that was still enjoyable. Pulling from her own past "colorful" experiences and the amazing personalities she has surrounded herself with, she had no shortage of inspiration. With a strong slant on erotic fiction, her core characters are empowered women who don't have to sacrifice their femininity. She enjoyed the process so much that when it was over she couldn't let it go.

T loves to travel, laugh and surround herself with colorful characters. This inevitably spills into her writing and makes for an interesting journey - she is well and truly enjoying the ride!

Based on her life experiences, T has plenty of material for her books and has a wealth of ideas to keep you all enthralled.

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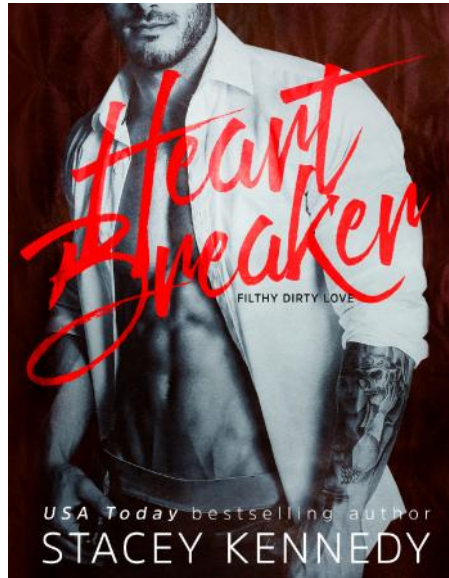
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HEARTBREAKER

By Stacey Kennedy



Dedication

As always, for my readers.

Acknowledgments

Much love to my family; my readers; my editor, Christa; my copy editor, Chelle; my assistant, Michelle; the kick-ass authors in my sprint group; and my cover designer, Sara. This book couldn't have happened without all of you! And to everyone at 1001 Dark Nights, thanks for welcoming me into the family.

Prologue

Bedroom eyes had been watching her most of the night, and Joss couldn't take it anymore. She'd eye fucked him on the dance floor until he finally joined her, and she'd spent the last half an hour grinding into him in what he obviously read as an invitation.

The minute the stylish single bathroom door clicked shut and locked, sex packaged in a black T-shirt and dark blue jeans was on her. He strode forward, sending her walking backward until her back slammed against the bathroom wall in Seattle's hottest dance club, Wicked. His tongue dove into her mouth, overwhelming her, while his lips rhythmically danced with hers. His hands explored her back and her bottom, squeezing her cheeks tightly.

"Damn, sugar, you taste good," he murmured, dropping his head onto her shoulder and nuzzling her neck.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head as his breath fluttered across her flesh just below her ear. If her panties weren't already drenched from the confidence in his low, sultry voice, the feeling of strength in his hard body against hers sealed the deal. She thrust her hands into his stylish, gelled, light brown hair, begging him to lift his head. She needed that mouth on hers.

When he finally did look at her, butterflies fluttered within her belly. This guy didn't draw desire out of her; he yanked it out of her soul. His hand came to her chin while he stared at her.

No, while he *examined* her, in the same way she couldn't stop looking at him. Broad shoulders. Ripped arms. Chiseled jaw. Short beard. Intense blue eyes that had the special little something that made her decide he would be her first one-night stand. Something powerful and potent. Something real and intense.

Then, still staring deeply into her eyes, he broke the silence. "I feel like I'm biting into the forbidden fruit with you."

"The forbidden fruit?" she repeated, breathless.

He watched her, brows drawn tight. "You don't seem like the type of girl who has a quickie in the bathroom of a bar."

"What makes you say that?" she asked.

His mouth twitched as he dragged a thumb across her bottom lip. "You seem like a very good girl, who plays very much by the rules."

"I'm the one who instigated this, so I'm not sure why you think that." She didn't want to be a *good girl*. Tonight, she wanted to be as bad as she could possibly be.

"No, sweetheart." He gave her an arrogant smile. "I instigated this. You simply reacted to my offer." He tucked her hair behind her ear, then watched his fingers trace her jawline. "I want to make sure you understand this is a one-time deal. I'm not looking for a girlfriend. I won't call you after tonight. You'll never see me again. Are you sure you won't wake up tomorrow with a world of regret?"

She startled a little at his honesty. Her ex-boyfriend Nick, who'd ended their six-year relationship over the phone, didn't have an honest bone in his sleazeball body. Nor did he care what she thought about anything. His feelings always came first.

Odd, she thought. Weren't one-night stands supposed to be all about regretting them the next day? She smiled at bedroom eyes and leaned into his hand. "I don't regret this now. I won't regret it tomorrow." In the morning, she left for the police academy. Finding a boyfriend was the last thing on her mind. Tonight was all about forgetting Nick, ignoring that he'd thought her life

in Seattle was too boring. About disregarding the heartbreak. This moment was all about taking something that she wanted because she could. "I want this. I want you."

"That's good enough for me." The thickness of his body pushed her thighs apart and his erection pressed against the junction between her legs. She rocked against him, and he grinned. "You like that, do you?" He shoved her skirt over her hips, and grabbed her legs, allowing them to wrap around his hips as he pinned her to the wall.

"God, yes." She held onto his shoulders and ground herself against him again, unable to help it. That's what this guy did to her. He made her reach for pleasure, to not be shy about what she craved.

Unable to get enough of him, wanting desperately to be closer and far more naked, she shifted her hips, rubbing her panty-covered clit against the front of his jeans, feeling the thickness of his cock. He dropped his head against her neck, and the scruff on his cheeks brushed across her skin. She shivered as he licked and nibbled and swirled his tongue until her breathing deepened and her body flushed with unnatural heat. Only then did he take her lips again, kissing her in a way she'd only fantasized about.

Dominant. Possessive.

Each time his tongue dove into her mouth, he owned her fully and completely. And *fuck*, the guy could kiss. There was nothing messy and unsure about the way he moved. His sculpted lips were amazing. His tongue sensually stroking hers was perfection. He tasted like *man*.

Using his shoulders to gain leverage, she rocked her hips, her breath speeding up, her heart pounding. He growled against her mouth, and she shivered, losing herself in the power he exuded. His growl came again, this time throatier. She shifted faster and harder against him, digging her nails into his shoulders.

Then his piercing eyes met hers, studying her intently. A slow smile spread across his face. "Oh, sugar, I like you."

His voice. Good Lord, that voice had power, one that surely shouldn't belong to anyone. It made her needy and desperate. She prided herself on her control, but when it came to this guy, she had none. It didn't matter that she was in a bathroom at a bar. It didn't matter that she'd only just met him. She wanted him to ravage her in a very dirty and filthy way.

Eyes on her, he licked his lips, and his brows drew together. Intense. Passionate. Determined. He grabbed her butt cheeks and began shifting her against his cock, bringing her to the edge. The way he watched her with those captivating eyes sent her soaring.

"Yes, girl, give me what I want," he stated.

And just like that, she did.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and trembled against him. Her moans cut off, and her breath became stuck in her throat. All she could do was hang onto him while she rode out her quivering orgasm.

Then she crashed...and crashed *hard*, panting and whimpering.

Only when the world realigned, and she felt the wetness of his lips brushing against hers, pulling her slowly back from the high, could she even think about moving. She forced her eyes open, finding his gaze locked on hers, his sinful smile instantly warming her.

"Christ, you are a sexy little thing," he told her, releasing her wobbly legs.

He yanked the front of her top down until her breast was exposed and the tight nipple stood out, begging for his mouth. His low moan of obvious delight tightened her thighs as he grasped her breast in his strong hand. He dragged his mouth across her nipple and groaned. "I could play with this perfect body all night long," he told her, sucking her taut bud to the roof of his mouth.

Being already oversensitive, she gasped, unable to stand still as his mouth popped off, only to suck deeper the next time. She grasped his thick forearms, loving how the muscles flexed beneath her touch as he yanked down the other side of her shirt and bra, exposing her other nipple to the cool air. When he sucked deeply, a loud knock on the door echoed against the bathroom walls.

“Ignore it,” he said.

She decided she didn’t care about the damn door, as he released her breast and began sliding his palm slowly up her thigh. Her breathing deepened when he nudged her skirt up, his hand coming closer and closer to where she wanted him.

Another knock banged against the door, shaking it on its hinges, yet his hand moved higher...and higher still. He tucked his fingers into the side of her panties, sliding over her slick heat.

The side of his mouth arched. “Soaking wet, sugar?” he murmured. “Do you always get so hot so easily?”

She leaned her head back against the wall and squeezed her eyes shut, “No.”

“Ah, so you like me touching you?” he asked softly, stroking her swollen clit with light flicks of his finger.

“Yes,” she whispered, not even understanding how he made her this aroused. The man had gifts. Magical ones.

His finger froze. “Look at me.”

She reopened her eyes and found the look of a man who knew his worth.

“Only me?” he repeated.

Something so powerful crossed between them, it was at once frightening and exhilarating. Something she’d never experienced before with Nick. He’d always made love for his orgasm, not hers. This passion was addictive. A night she’d surely never forget.

“Only you,” she answered honestly.

“That’s a sexy answer coming from a very pretty mouth.” He slid his thumb gently over her throbbing clit, back and forth, teasing the little bud. “You have a choice to make. You can leave this bathroom now and take what I’ve already given you. Or you can let me give you all that I have to give.”

Instead of using dirty words she was never very good at and usually ended up blushing over, she reached for his belt. She unhooked the leather and then shoved his pants and boxer briefs down, watching his mouth curve. His thick cock sprang free, and she began stroking him. When she dragged her hand over the thick, bulging veins straining for release and up to the rounded tip, he gave a guttural moan.

Determined to pleasure him in the way he had her, she slid her finger over the slit, gathering his pre-cum and sliding the silkiness over his cock head. He reached for the front of his T-shirt, pulling it over his head to rest on the back of his neck, giving her a fine view of his ripped body. From a squared chest to a well-defined six-pack to a V at the waist, he clearly spent a lot of time in the gym. Not too big to look ridiculous but not too thin either.

Gloriously perfect.

She bit her bottom lip and traced the valleys of his muscles, feeling each one flex beneath her finger. Slowly, and not caring who knocked on the door, she let herself explore the body she couldn’t even believe she got to touch. The guys she’d met in university didn’t look like this.

This guy was all man. All delicious, fuckable man.

“You’re...” She gazed into his powerful eyes and lost her voice.

His left eyebrow rose. "I'm *what*?"

She felt drunk from the endorphins as she glanced at his body once more before meeting his gaze again. "You're so damn hot."

His grin was full of sin. "Tell me what you want, sugar."

"I want you." She grabbed his thick cock and used his pre-cum again to lubricate him as she stroked, urging him to take her.

"Inside you?" His hips shot forward, and he thrust himself into her hand.

"Yes. Fuck me."

His eyes flared. Obviously, he appreciated boldness. He reached for his pants at his knees, taking out his wallet and then grabbing a condom.

When she moved her touch away, he tsked. "I was enjoying those hands."

Heat flushed through her, and she began stroking him again. His low moan slid sensually over her, flooding her with urgency. He watched her as she slowly dragged her hand over his shaft from base to tip, memorizing the feel of his dick. She took his heavy balls into her hand before teasing them with light touches. He groaned, and his jaw clenched as he unwrapped the condom.

That left eyebrow arched again. "Since you're so good with your hands..." He offered the condom.

Desperation consumed her as she took the condom and quickly applied the latex over his shaft. She only looked away for a moment before she stared into those intense eyes again, letting him see how much she liked touching him. Allowing him to witness how crazy he made her.

As soon as she'd fully sheathed him, his hands were on her face, his mouth on hers again, slowly nipping her until he deepened the kiss, taking her to a place that inflamed her body. God, she could feel everything. Every whisper of breath from his nose. Every slide of his thumbs across her cheeks. *He* became all she knew as his condom-covered cock rested against her stomach.

"I won't be gentle," he murmured across her mouth.

"Good," was all she got out before he spun her around.

The cool metal of the bathroom stall pressed against her taut nipples, her cheek resting there, too. She stared into the heat of his eyes in the mirror next to them above the sink.

He slid his hand up to her neck, holding tightly. "Do you see how sexy you are? How much I want you?"

"Yes." Her voice cracked with urgency. Her legs began shaking, but it wasn't nervousness. It was pure, unadulterated desire.

Intensity washed over his expression when he removed her panties and then grabbed her ass, spreading her cheeks. She felt the tip of his cock press against her, and then with a shift of his hips, he thrust deeply inside.

She bowed against him and moaned.

That's when she learned something very important about this man. Sex was the endgame for him. Or at least tonight it was. Maybe he'd been too built up or pushed too far by all the teasing she'd done on the dance floor, but he hadn't been exaggerating earlier.

He didn't do gentle.

One of his arms wrapped crossways over her chest, pinning her to him. The other hand held her hip, his fingers digging into her flesh while he pounded into her, leaving her no choice but to come into her climax. Tears leaked from her eyes with every pound of his hips.

He was so deep.

Perfect.

Hard.

Screams poured from her mouth as he took her right to the very point of euphoria. The difference between him and her ex: he delivered on his promise. With a final hard slap of his pelvis against her ass, she bucked and jerked against him, moving her hips, claiming the pleasure he offered.

With his final roar as he took his, too, he didn't only claim her body, he owned her soul.

Chapter 1

One year later . . .

In the west precinct of the Seattle Police Department, Joss O'Neil purposefully sat in the back of the briefing room, her mind far from the job. The epic one-night stand she'd experienced a year ago captivated her thoughts. Perhaps having wild sex in the bathroom of a nightclub hadn't been the classiest spot to give in to her desires. But the guy she'd met that night had given her the hottest sex of her life. She vividly remembered the way he'd touched her and how he'd made her feel. Wanted. Sexy.

Then life had happened, as had five months of the police academy and another eighteen weeks of field training. While that night hadn't been far from her mind during her training, there was a good reason that guy was at the forefront of her thoughts now.

Bedroom eyes stood at the front of the room behind a long table, addressing a group of ten police officers sitting in rows in front of him.

Maddox Hunt. Police lieutenant. Total badass.

From what she'd learned recently, he was also the resident heartbreaker. Or so she'd been told by her best friend, Emilia when she'd started in the west. Once Emilia had seen Joss drooling over Maddox, she'd said not to expect much in the way of getting a date out of him. Apparently, there'd been whispers around the station that Maddox liked his sex kinky and his relationships fleeting. But a guy with serious commitment issues didn't deter Joss—it sealed the deal. Then and now.

A relationship had been the last thing on her mind at the nightclub. Even a year later, she wasn't looking for anything long-term. She'd given six long years to Nick the prick, who'd then broken up with her after he found a better life in New York City. The blow had stung. She'd been hurt, devastated over the breakup. Nick had been her life for a big chunk of her high school years and during university, too. Most of all, she'd been angry with herself. When had she lost her backbone? Where had her voice gone? When he'd broken up with her, she'd sobbed like her life was over. *Barf!*

Never again.

Never again would she be that quiet woman who didn't think of her feelings first. Never again would she stay silent and not speak up for the life she wanted. Never again would she settle for a man who didn't touch her with the passion she deserved.

Leaning back in her seat, watching Maddox addressing the group, she remembered that she'd woken up the morning after the nightclub incident without a single bit of remorse. Even now, she didn't regret a damn thing. The filthy, dirty sex he'd given her that night had been all she was after.

Still, though, even after seven days of working for the Seattle Police Department, she had a hard time accepting that he was her lieutenant. When she'd been offered the job with the Seattle PD in the west precinct under the command of Eric Dalton, the police chief and a close family friend, she hadn't even considered that her one-night stand might be her superior.

Somehow, that meant she had to forget that everything Maddox did screamed *sex*. The way he moved like a tiger ready to pounce. The way he spoke, low and confidently. How his intense eyes watched her sometimes. It had only been one week of them working together, and already

she couldn't take any more. Hell, her deprived vagina was silently weeping.

"You really have got to stop looking at him like that," Emilia whispered, dragging Joss's attention to her.

Joss leaned to the side. Coming closer to Emilia, she whispered, "It's near impossible when he looks like *that*. Couldn't he have gotten...I don't know...uglier in the past year? Seriously, I think he looks better than I even remember him looking before."

Emilia laughed quietly.

She knew Joss inside and out, and she'd listened to Joss endlessly gush about Maddox for the days following the one-night stand before the police academy had taken over their lives.

Emilia was two years older, with warm, hazel eyes and honey-colored hair that she usually wore in a bun—mostly because the job required it. They'd met five years ago because Nick was best friends with Troy, the guy Emilia had been dating and who she'd ultimately married.

"You also had three martinis the night you two defaced the bathroom," Emilia said with a sassy smile. "Maybe your head was a little fuzzy?"

"We may have christened the bathroom, but there was no defacing," Joss defended.

Emilia snickered, a hand over her mouth. "Maybe, but regardless, you're right. That guy..." She glanced toward Maddox standing at the front of the room and stared a little dreamily at him. "He's seriously *hot*. And if I weren't married, I would be *so* jealous that you got to touch him." She looked sideways at Joss, a sly smile crossing her face. "Okay, maybe I am a little jealous. But protocol is a finicky bitch, and that sexy beast is now your superior, so stop looking like you want to eat him."

"I don't want to eat him." Joss looked from left to right, glad no one sat anywhere near them. Most of her fellow rookies sat as close as they could get to Maddox. Not her. She didn't want to smell his woodsy cologne and feel all that sexiness wafting off him. "I only want to lick him and claim him as mine."

Emilia's light brows rose over her eyes. "You lick it. You bought it."

"Exactly." Joss laughed.

"Ladies."

Joss's lips snapped shut, and she jerked her head to the front of the room, finding Maddox with his narrowed eyes directly on Emilia. Which also wasn't a surprise. As much as she'd been avoiding Maddox, he'd been avoiding her, too. He never talked to her alone, and when he did look at her, there was so much distance, he seemed like a completely different person than the one she remembered. In the nightclub, he'd had heat in his eyes. Intensity. Now...*nothing*.

Heartbreaker, indeed.

That night, *blistering hot*.

A year later, *ice cold*.

His left eyebrow arched, and as it did, he said, "Is there something you would like to share with the rest of us?"

"No, sir," Emilia said, firmly shaking her head, fighting a smile.

Only then did Maddox look at Joss. "And you, O'Neil?" he asked curtly.

"No, sir, nothing to share."

The muscles in his jaw clenched twice before he looked away, allowing Joss to breathe again. He turned and addressed the group. "We've had a good week," he told the crowd, pressing his knuckles against the table in front of him.

She watched him closely, noting that he had a special way about him. He commanded a crowd in a way she hadn't seen before. People respected him. Trusted him.

That energy filled the space when he added, “And a good first week should be celebrated.”

“Uh-oh, prepare to panic,” Emilia whispered under her breath.

The mother of all curse words echoed in Joss’s mind as Maddox calmly added, “Tonight I’ll be hosting a barbeque in my backyard, as has been my annual tradition with my team.” He straightened from the desk and crossed his arms over his thick chest, glancing from face to face. “Let me know if you aren’t able to make it.”

“I can’t, sir,” Emilia spoke up, raising her hand. “My shift doesn’t end until midnight tonight.”

“I’m sorry we’ll miss you,” Maddox said, again scanning the room. “Anyone else?”

In the front row, Tommy began, “My mother had surgery, and I need to be there for her...”

Joss leaned over to Emilia and whispered, “There is no way in hell I’m going there alone.”

“Sadly, I think you are,” Emilia whispered back.

Joss could barely stop herself from throwing herself at Maddox, and that was while she was in her uniform with a clear moral barricade stopping her. At his house? Out of uniform? With booze available? Oh, she was in big trouble.

Joss began considering every option to get out of this. Dammit, she’d never been a good liar. Usually, if she attempted even a little white lie, she ended up making a complete ass of herself and stumbling over her words. “Can’t I suddenly be viscerously sick and send him an email?” she asked Emilia.

“An email, Joss?” Emilia snorted, resting her arms on the table. “He’ll know why you’re avoiding him. Do you want to have *that* conversation with him? He’s going to know that you’re bailing because you two fucked like rabid bunnies.”

“Oh, dear Lord.” Joss groaned, dropping her head into her hands. It was bad enough seeing him for these briefings every day and having to pass him in the hallway. “I can’t do this, Emilia.” Joss lifted her head, glancing at her best friend. “You need to help me think of a way to get out of it.”

Emilia paused, her eyes flicking up to the ceiling while she nibbled her lip. Only a second later, she shrugged. “Sorry, buttercup, I’ve got nothing. It’ll be worse if you don’t go. I know he said it like it’s a choice, but it’s not.” She peered in Maddox’s direction and shuddered. “And believe me, Maddox—with all that alpha broodiness—really isn’t the type of guy to not call you out on it. I wouldn’t put it past him to do it in front of everyone either. Is that what you want?”

“No, of course not,” Joss grumbled, miserable. Sadly, Emilia knew him best from working alongside Maddox in the east precinct before transferring to the west. “I honestly don’t know how I’m going to get through this.”

“Hmmm...” Emilia pondered, tapping a finger against her lip. “Oh, I know. What about your mother? If anything can kill your raging hormones, it’s your mom being there. Bring her.”

“I wish I could.” Sally O’Neil loved to talk. If her mother were there, Joss could be silent, while pretending she wasn’t thinking very dirty things about her boss. “But my parents are still in Paris.” Every year, they took a few months off to travel the world. Retirement life had its perks.

Emilia sighed. “Okay, well, that’s a shame. Even your dad would help if he were around.”

Joss nodded, knowing Emilia was right. Dad was a retired cop. He could talk shop while Joss faded into the shadows. It wasn’t that she couldn’t control herself around Maddox. Of course, she could. The problem was, she kept thinking she would slip up around him. Let him see how much she still wanted him, if he hadn’t already seen it. And how awful would that be, considering he’d told her plainly: *this is a one-time deal*? Especially considering their night

together had happened a year ago.

The last thing she wanted was to look pathetic and horny.

She focused back on Maddox, watching him talking to the others as they began to rise from their seats. His presence rattled her in ways she hadn't anticipated nor was prepared for. She was supposed to have forgotten him. That's what you did with one-night stands. You screwed and moved on. But it almost felt like they had unfinished business.

Sexy, unfinished business.

As the cops began leaving the room, Maddox's eyes met hers. Those intense, warm eyes held hers, and her breath became instantly trapped in her throat. The same butterflies that had whipped around in her belly a year ago returned. Heat flooded her, and warm wetness slicked between her thighs, making her panties feel *tight*. Energy seeped into the room so heavily, goose bumps rose on her flesh. And like she had that night in the bar, she felt *seen*.

"So, what are you going to do?" Emilia asked, snapping Joss's attention away from Maddox.

She blinked, rose, and tucked her chair under the table. "I'm going to go to that damn party." What other choice did she have?

"Atta girl." Emilia smiled and patted Joss on the back. "Put on those big girl panties with pride."

Joss snorted a laugh and followed Emilia out of the room, thinking to herself: *I secretly wish he'd rip those panties right off.*

* * * *

The workday ended uneventfully. It wasn't until later that night at the barbeque while Maddox was flipping the burger patties cooking on the grill that things began to look up.

From his spot on his large, redwood deck, he glanced to the reason his cock was semi-hard, and his balls had felt stuck in a vise grip all damn day.

Joss O'Neil.

She stood near his outdoor stone bar, chatting with two other male rookies who'd obviously taken a clear interest in her. He understood why. She mesmerized him the same way. Long, chocolate-brown hair. Light green eyes with gold flecks around the irises. Pouty lips that had once ravished him with blazing hot kisses. And a body with enough curves she felt like a woman beneath his callused hands. Maddox had liked that difference between them. His hardness to her softness was a contrast he enjoyed.

He wasn't entirely sure what it was about this girl exactly, but she pushed at all his basic instincts. Pursue. Claim. Protect. And as he watched one of the men place his hand on her arm and laugh at something she said, he fought against the desire to march over there and interject himself into the conversation, putting her focus on him. But he knew better. He never went back for seconds. Besides, she was now his subordinate, and touching her could put him in the line of fire for a sexual harassment lawsuit.

"That's her, isn't it?"

Maddox glanced left, finding Greyson Crawford, his college roommate, offering him a beer. Maddox took the beer, and Grey ran his fingers through his dark blond hair, his gray eyes pinned on Joss across the way. "Yeah, that's her," Maddox replied. Truth be told, he hadn't intended to tell Grey about Joss. That was until his foul mood lately had left him with no option but to explain.

While most cops at the party had loved ones at home, or even family to spend their

weekends with, Maddox had Grey. Regardless that Grey wasn't on the force, his close relationship with Maddox meant an invite to events meant for cops. Sure, some cops didn't like an outsider in their midst, but Maddox welcomed the day someone said something to him about Grey's presence.

With the shit Maddox saw on the job, and what he'd seen some children go through in the foster system, he never mourned that his mother had left when he was four years old and didn't return. Nor did he feel bad about his father, John Hunt, who lived in a nursing home due to his worsening Alzheimer's. But when Grey demanded answers for Maddox's tense mood in a way only a brother would, Maddox had to oblige.

"I see what all the fuss is about and why this chick has you working out harder than you have in years," Grey said, finally glancing back at Maddox. "She's gorgeous."

"Those words don't do her justice," he admitted.

Joss was a woman of equal innocence and naughtiness. That was the sweetest type. His favorite, in fact. He recalled in vivid detail the way she'd melted under his hands a year ago, and that's what had been driving him crazy all week. He needed to get her out of his head. He needed to stop smelling her sugary perfume when she wasn't there. He needed to stop hearing her sexy-as-fuck moans when she came during his dreams.

Grey downed a big gulp of beer, watching Maddox closely. When he lowered the bottle, he noted, "I see by that twitch in your eye, you're still being the gentleman."

"My eye is not twitching," Maddox snorted, beginning to move the cooked burgers off the grill to the serving plate. Once he'd finished, he tossed on some more meat then called out, "Burgers up."

Grey silently watched the crowd, who, like vultures, claimed all the patties. Not until everyone was out of hearing distance did he continue. "Bullshit. You're twitching like a man who needs a fix."

Maddox couldn't deny that. He felt like an addict who was scrambling to put his life back together again. She was simply *there* in his mind. All the time. He'd jerked off every morning and every night—sometimes twice—since she'd come back into his life. "Regardless," he told Grey, tending to the burgers, "there are obstacles in my way. Very serious ones."

Grey barked a laugh. "And when has that ever stopped you before?"

Never. He took what he wanted when he wanted it. The problem was, he never conquered a woman a second time. Doing so could lead to an attachment. And he'd learned from his father that that never led anywhere good. "The last thing I need is a sexual harassment lawsuit," he said, offering up a concern Grey could understand.

"You're right, you don't," Grey agreed. "Though you could test the waters and see if she's looking for what you are. Perhaps she's trustworthy enough that something playful between you would be doable."

Maddox flipped the burgers then looked up and examined Joss grabbing a beer from the cooler. Her white summer dress highlighted her spectacular curves, enticing him to bend her over that cooler. The memories of her were vivid. How creamy her skin was, the way she moaned, the way she smelled, the way she tasted, he remembered it all. And so did his throbbing cock.

"It's risky," Maddox said, glancing back to Grey. "Too risky."

Grey grinned. "Which makes it even more fun."

Sounded great to Maddox, too. That was the problem.

While he tended to the burgers, flipping the ones needing it, he considered all the ways he could make this happen with her again and then rejected each idea. Besides the fact that their

shared professional life was a huge obstacle, and even though he did have a feeling after working with her for a week that she was trustworthy, touching her again broke his one unbreakable rule: Don't screw twice.

Tension tightened the muscles across his shoulder blades when Grey, who was looking at the bonfire, asked, "So, these are your new rookies, huh?"

"Some of them." Maddox reached for his beer resting by the grill and downed a big gulp, scanning the crowd in his backyard. Some of his team sat around the bonfire, while others hung around the outdoor bar. When his father had gone into the home, Maddox had sold his bachelor pad and opted for the house that had been in the Hunt family for three generations. "Not a bad-looking bunch, are they?"

Grey's eyes zeroed in on Holly, the most recent rookie to join the team. "You are a lucky son-of-a-bitch, you know that, right?"

Maddox grinned, knowing why Holly drew Grey's attention. He loved blondes, and the curvier, the better. Maddox tipped his beer bottle toward Grey. "That might be true if I were allowed to touch. Which you well know I'm not."

Grey tsked, shaking his head in obvious disappointment. "You can't touch women who look like *that* and who come with their very own pair of handcuffs?" He glanced at Holly again, who was approaching the bar. "What a waste."

Maddox chuckled, tending to the burgers again, fully understanding Grey's point. A fondness for kinky sex was one thing Grey and he had always had in common. They'd even shared a couple of women once or twice throughout the years. There wasn't a fantasy Maddox had that hadn't been fulfilled. He made sure of it.

Though, over time, the show had eventually gotten old.

Grey went through girlfriends like he went through boxers. Maddox stuck to one-night stands to keep things interesting and to give him the distance he preferred. He'd never been a man who wanted one woman.

That was until Joss had walked back into his life a week ago.

Round and round his mind went. He'd stop ruminating about her for a second, only to start thinking about her again. He sighed and rearranged the burgers on the grill for even cooking. Somehow, she had gotten under his skin. Maybe it was how she'd melted under his touch. Or how she'd responded so beautifully to him. For the last year, he'd searched for the same high he'd gotten with her, only to be let down time and time again. Others didn't compare. Didn't even come close.

As the food on the tray continued to vanish, he knew he needed to put a stop to this, and he had to do it tonight. She controlled him too much. He thought about her too often. This was his test, and he couldn't fail. Surely, if he could stand being around her outside of work, he could gain control of the lust running rampant within.

With those thoughts on his mind, he gave the patties one last flip, then found Grey openly eye fucking Holly. "Please do your best to behave tonight," he told him sternly.

Grey slowly looked at him, one eyebrow arching. "And do you plan to behave yourself?"

"You know I have to."

Grey pushed away from the pole he leaned against and grinned. "Luckily for me, I'm not a cop, and I choose that sexy little blonde over there." He pulled on the hem of his shirt, straightening it, and strode off, eyes set on Holly.

Maddox shook his head, yet wasn't concerned. Years of friendship had taught Maddox to trust whatever Grey did. Even if he ended up taking one of Maddox's rookies home, she'd leave

his house feeling respected and satisfied. If it didn't affect his job, Maddox didn't care who screwed, and he never understood why the police department frowned upon relationships between cops.

Life happened, and so did love. Why fight a natural thing?

"May I?"

Maddox turned toward the sweet, soft voice, instantly captivated by Joss's soulful green eyes. He went from semi-hard to rock-hard so fast, he fought off a groan. "Yes, of course. Please, help yourself." He gave her a gentle smile, hoping to hide the carnal thoughts racing through his mind, those of bending her over and thrusting himself deep inside her sexy, lush body until she was quivering her release. He cleared his throat. "Are you enjoying the party?"

"Very much so, thank you." She smiled, scooping up the burger onto the bun on her plate. "You have a lovely home."

The smile she gave him was so fake, it narrowed Maddox's eyes. He craved the realness he'd seen in her before. That's what had captured his thoughts over the last goddamn year. That's what was in his head every time his lips touched another woman. Their smiles weren't honest like hers. She'd appeared to hide nothing of herself, bared everything as if she didn't owe the world a damn thing. That transparency had mindfucked him.

He stared at her now, noting how she squeezed her plate tightly, knuckles turning white, telling him that she was doing her best not to shake. Another thing that had made his restraint even more difficult. She didn't hide how much she still wanted him. Her desire was there in her rosy cheeks and her parted lips and her deep breaths.

"So...um...thanks for the burger...and for the party." She lifted her head, and her light eyes met his.

The energy pinging between them was like a punch to his chest. His muscles tensed, breath halted. The softness, the yearning, the ache he so desperately felt, too, all crossed her expression, hardening him to steel. For a year, he'd forced himself to believe that he'd imagined this potent energy between them. That it was inconceivable to think their connection held this much power. Yet there it was, right there in front of him. Tangible. Intense. Real. His nostrils flared as he inhaled the sweet scent that had haunted him.

"Oh, shit," she gasped, breaking eye contact.

Without saying anything more, but not needing to because her subsequent silence spoke volumes about her desires, she scrambled away.

Maddox clenched his jaw muscles, watching the way she stiffly walked away. Fuck, he understood the need coursing through her. The same urgency pulsed through him. Could he trust her? He'd read the reports and the glowing recommendations she'd received. She didn't seem flaky or a woman out to screw over her superior.

Even if he could breathe again, the spell she'd cast over him wasn't broken. The addiction ran wildly out of control in the same way it had when he'd first met her on that dance floor. That's when he knew an undeniable truth.

This girl didn't only make him want to break his rules.

She made him want to abolish them.

Chapter 2

In desperate need of an escape and to breathe air that was far away from Maddox, Joss left the partygoers behind and strode along a lighted pathway next to the outdoor bar that led somewhere. Truth be told, it didn't matter where it led. Anywhere was better than being near Maddox's pulsing energy that made her mind a damn circus.

An hour. That's all it had taken for her to do what she'd sworn she wouldn't do—melt in his goddamn presence. She'd let herself feel all the passion he embodied and allowed herself to remember the way he'd made her feel that night at the bar. Sexy. Desirable. Alive.

Dear God, she wanted to experience all of it again. Over and over until she was sweaty, exhausted, and completely satisfied.

As she strode along the pathway, the chill of the breeze created goose bumps on her arms, and she hugged herself, rubbing them away. The voices behind her grew quieter, the relief she'd been looking for. She needed to think. She needed to put Maddox behind her. She needed to look at him like her lieutenant, not the man who'd given her the hottest night of her life. One she simply couldn't forget.

He seemed to be capable of that, always seeming so professional, so why couldn't she?

Careful not to slip on the rocky ground in her two-inch heels, she recalled how much she'd changed after that night in the bar. She hadn't been the same because she missed the way Maddox had made her feel, which made her regret agreeing to the one-night stand plan. Even if she didn't want a relationship, she for sure wanted to bone him again.

From time to time, she'd wondered if maybe it'd been the one-night-stand fantasy that had caused her mild obsession with him, but she knew that couldn't be true. She still felt drawn to him in ways she couldn't explain—an entire year later. Every night in those quiet moments before sleep took her, she thought of him...his touch...his passion...his rawness.

She rubbed her arms again, warming her skin, knowing he'd ruined her for any other man. No one compared. Sure, she'd tried to go on a couple of double dates with Emilia and Troy and Troy's firefighter buddies, but none of them had that something special that Maddox possessed. No one even came close.

Now, like some punishment, she had to be near him when all she wanted to do was forget him. Her career mattered, she reminded herself firmly. She had to get past this. She had put all her focus into finishing at the top of her class, both in university while she'd obtained her criminal justice degree and in the police academy to stand out from the rest. She couldn't fuck this up. Nor could she allow a sex scandal with her lieutenant to crumble her dreams of making detective in a few years. The last thing she needed was Maddox requesting that she transfer because of her inability to stop ogling him.

She heaved a long sigh when she discovered that the path stopped at a bench with a perfect view of Elliott Bay. The bright half moon lit up the sky, making the water glisten like black glass. She heaved an even longer sigh and dropped down onto the bench, staring out into the peaceful night. Off in the distance, lights sparkled off a couple of boats. Right as she glanced up to the starry sky, the sudden crack of a branch caused her to glance left.

Maddox stood at the end of the pathway a few feet from her, his hands shoved into the pockets of his pants. He wore a plain white T-shirt and jeans, but nothing about him was plain. His strong biceps, thick forearms, and powerful thighs standing out in the pale moonlight were

all she could see.

Warmth began to flow rapidly through her veins, her nipples tightening into taut buds. She squeezed her thighs together, feeding pleasure to her clit. This was what he did to her. That simply. What no one else had done to her this past year. He harnessed something powerful that spoke to her on every level. He had the on/off switch, and she was basically just along for the ride.

He stared at her for a long time before addressing her. "Why did you leave? Is everything okay?"

God, she didn't want to have to say it. Her heart began to race, and her palms grew sweaty. "Listen, I'm sorry I looked at you that way," she said, lifting her chin and holding his stare. "I know it was wrong. It won't happen again."

He paused. Then, "You think I don't like when you look at me like that?"

She swallowed deeply at his implication and in response to the low tenor of his voice. The same warm, sensual tone she'd thought of every night since she'd first heard him speak. Her mind began to spin, her body yearning for him to come closer. "Do you?"

"Of course, I do," he murmured. "It tempts me to do things I shouldn't."

She blinked in surprise, butterflies filling her belly. "To be honest, that's not what I expected you to say."

"What did you expect?"

"For you to agree that this is wrong."

"This *is* wrong," he confirmed, beginning to approach her. Like a hunter stalking his prey, he closed in with large, unhurried strides. She rose, and the heat of his body encased her. "I'm aware of how complicated this is. I know that, professionally, I shouldn't touch you. It's incredibly risky. I also don't fucking care. Do you?"

She stared into the warmth of his eyes, instantly drawn in. "I thought you didn't come back for seconds?"

His left eyebrow arched. "Are you saying no?"

She considered him. The risks were real and true. Unavoidable. Yet with him close, being the guy she remembered from the club, wanting her in the way he wanted her before, those risks seemed small in comparison to the reward. "I want you," she whispered.

The side of his mouth curved, and he pressed the strength of his body against hers, letting her discover his erection. "It can only be tonight. One more taste to cure the hunger."

"Yes, only tonight, like a dream," she echoed his concerns, knowing the roadblocks between them. She, his subordinate. He, her superior.

"That's right, sugar," he murmured, sliding his hand across her lower back, pulling her into him, nice and close. "Like a filthy, dirty dream." He tilted his head down to her, his warm breath brushing across her lips. "A dream where the good girl wants to make some bad decisions."

"With the one guy who's very good at being bad." She knew his thing. After this, he'd bail again. Too many complications stood between them. Too many risks. Even now, voices from the party carried through the air, screaming *danger* at her. Anyone could catch them. At any minute. Her career would be tarnished as the gossip of them together spread.

Though the thought of being caught titillated her in the same way she'd been excited at the nightclub. Again, in Maddox's presence, she felt awakened and alive. Her blood pulsed. Her heart hammered in her ears. Her body ached to be claimed by him.

He dragged his mouth back over hers and whispered against her lips, "I've thought about touching you for the last week. I've thought about bending you over and taking what I want."

“Then take me.”

He didn’t need further invitation, his lips sealed across hers. It didn’t matter that anyone could catch them. Or that he was her superior. She wanted him for tonight. She wanted to feel what she’d felt a year ago.

At first, his kiss was sweet, gentle even, lightly teasing. His tongue slid against her bottom lip until she opened for him. His mouth brushed against hers, his hands soft on her face. She moaned, a needy sound she didn’t recognize, and pressed herself against the length of his body. A low growl rose from his throat as he cupped her nape and yanked her closer, deepening the kiss. His tongue dove into her mouth, stroking with a perfect rhythm, causing heat to flare. She wasn’t thinking consequences when his hand left her face, traveling to her bottom where he ground her up against him. Her body instantly remembered *him*, her nipples puckering in anticipation, her sex becoming drenched.

She moaned again, the sound raw with desperation.

He grunted, low and deep, and then backed way, resting his forehead against hers, breathless. “I can’t do this right. It’s going to be quick and hard.”

The air brushed across her overly sensitive skin, making her yearn for his rough touches. “Maddox,” she whispered, not even recognizing the heady desire she heard echoing in her voice. “Please...”

He leaned away then and looked at her. His brows drew together as he cupped her face. “I like hearing you beg, sweetheart. Do it again.”

“Fuck me. Please.”

The side of his mouth arched in that sexy way it did. Eyes locked on her, he reached into his back pocket. The energy he tossed out into the world caused her clit to throb. No one had ever wanted her like this. Like he was starved for her. He looked so damn desperate to consume her; he made her want him just as much.

Her inner muscles clenched in anticipation as she watched him free himself and apply the condom. She was reduced to a panting mess of need before she was back in his arms. He lifted her slightly, carrying her behind a tree and into the shadows. She gathered her dress, lifting it over her hips, desperate for him to take her away. He pushed his jeans and boxer briefs down to his knees and removed her panties, quickly bunching them into a ball in his hands.

“You can’t be loud,” he told her, assisting her to lean against a boulder she hadn’t known was there until she felt the large rock beneath her bare bottom. He grasped her leg and added, “We don’t want trouble.”

That was the only warning he gave before he tucked her thigh across his hip and entered her, right to the hilt.

She gasped, shocked at how he filled her. It’d been a long year since she’d taken a lover, and Maddox was so very deliciously hard inside her. She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding herself tightly to him. Every time he shifted his hips forward, she quietly gasped, and when he withdrew, her inner muscles squeezed to keep him deep inside.

“Christ, you’re tight.” He grunted, low and deep, shifting her leg higher onto his arm, his lips sealing over hers again.

Each swipe of his tongue deepened the kiss more until all her thoughts fled her mind, and all that remained was him and her, and the crackling heat between them. He pumped his cock, slowly at first, then faster and faster until her breath grew raspy. His skin never slapped against hers, the only sound was the faint sucking noise of his body entering hers, but she didn’t need the force of his body banging against hers.

His cock was enough. All she needed. God, he was perfect inside her. Owning her. Taking her. Possessing her.

Pressure and weight filled her lower body. She broke off the kiss and dropped her head back, the warm air brushing across her face as he moved faster now. It all became too much, too intense. His body against hers flooded her with an unnatural heat, making her tumble into sensations only he could bring.

His hand suddenly slapped over her mouth, silencing the moans she didn't know were spilling out.

She lifted her head, finding his dark eyes pinned on her. "Fuck, how I want to make you scream," he growled.

His captivating eyes. His sculpted, sexy mouth. The intensity on his face. The pressure of his palm against her lips, forcing her silence. The thickness of his cock, filling her perfectly. His low and heavy breaths, consuming her. The voices carrying on the wind, reminding her of the danger of being caught...they all drove her higher. Until she couldn't take anymore.

"Oh, God, yes," she whispered beneath his hand, her inner muscles quivering.

His gaze smoldered. "Do that again, sweetheart."

The choice to convulse around him didn't belong to her, but she obliged naturally. She squeezed his shaft, climbing the cliff of euphoria. Everything about him drove her higher and higher. The way he looked at her, watched her with those hungry eyes. The way he held her like she wouldn't break, stretching her leg high so he could get as deep as he wanted. The way he filled her, taking her with abandon as if he couldn't get enough of her.

All those reasons pushed her closer to the edge, but it was his growl that sounded an awful lot like possession that sent her free falling. To be wanted so vocally gave her all she'd been missing. At whatever he saw on her face, his cock grew harder and bigger inside her. Tears leaked from her eyes as he pumped his hips a little faster now, a bit more out of control. His fingers tightened into a fist in her hair, his teeth bit his bottom lip, and when he thrust forward and groaned, giving a deep shudder, spilling himself inside her, she unraveled. She bucked and jerked against him until she rode out every single second of her climax.

Some time later, her mind returned to her, and she began to catch her breath.

"Even sweeter than I remembered, sugar," he murmured, slowly kissing her mouth until she found the strength to kiss him back. Only then did he slide his mouth from hers, gently placing butterfly kisses on her neck as she heard him zip up his pants.

Then she looked at him.

In the darkness, she watched him lift her panties. "Goddamn perfect." He brought the lace to his nose and inhaled deeply. She should be embarrassed, but his low moan of approval left no room for shame. "A small gift to remember you by, yes?"

She nodded, speechless.

He gave her that sexy half smile. Then, he was gone, as if her second taste of Maddox Hunt had all been a dream that she'd imagined while sitting on the bench staring out at the dark water.

Chapter 3

Maddox woke the following morning on edge. As his morning continued at work, things only got worse. From his spot behind his desk in his small office, Maddox glanced at the clock on his computer monitor: *11:00 a.m.* He sighed. This day had begun to annoy him. Seconds felt like minutes. Minutes felt like hours. While Saturday shifts went hand-in-hand with a cop's life, Maddox wanted to be anywhere but there. So far, all he'd done was reports, and all he wanted to do was Joss—in every dirty way he'd been thinking about since he'd gotten another taste of her.

Last night, he'd taken another bite of the forbidden fruit. He'd done so in hopes that he'd appease his hunger. Only problem? Touching her again made the fire for her burn even brighter. She hadn't been as good as he remembered. She'd been better. The way her body surrendered to him, heated for him so intently, responded to him so beautifully, caused him to want her again. And again. And again...until he extinguished the inferno between them.

He'd dug himself into a hole. Joss was an addiction he craved to feed, not cure. And that was a fucking problem.

"Hunt."

Maddox glanced up, and his back straightened like a steel rod as Chief of Police, Eric Dalton, entered his office. He froze in his seat as rapid thoughts blasted through his mind. Part of him knew he had this coming. He'd touched someone he shouldn't, and the chief would call him out on it. The stronger part of him said that Joss would never report him. She had far more to lose than he did, including her reputation. Maddox's job was already established. Sure, the scandal would be a blow to his career for a little while, but he'd recover. Joss? It wouldn't be so easy to repair the damage.

Dalton added, "Got a minute?"

"Yes, of course, sir. Good morning." Maddox rose, offering his hand, prepared to defend his personal life.

As the chief took the seat in front of the desk, Maddox studied him, getting a read on his mood. Eric was a tall man with a soft middle. The years had been tough on his face, and his deep-set wrinkles around his eyes and forehead were likely both from the long years of police work and the cigarettes Maddox could smell wafting off him. While Chief Dalton held a tough exterior, his light blue eyes were soft and trusting and were likely why so many Seattleites respected him.

Once the chief got settled in the chair, he said, "I hear you had a party last night to celebrate the new rookies."

Maddox paused, awaiting the reprimand. When it didn't come, he answered, "I did. The party went well."

Dalton gave an easy smile. "It's a good tradition that you do. Keep it up."

Maddox exhaled the breath he'd been holding and leaned back in his chair. The chief's posture was casual and laid-back, telling Maddox nothing had been said to him. He watched as Dalton ran a hand over his eyes, and on a hunch, Maddox offered, "We have some fresh coffee, sir, if you'd like a cup."

"It's that obvious, huh?" Dalton asked with a heavy sigh. "It's all right, Hunt. I've already had three cups. We have a situation brewing in the east, and it kept me up for a good portion of the night last night."

Maddox noted the dark circles under the chief's eyes, and while he had his suspicions about what the trouble was, he wouldn't speculate. "Will the trouble impact us here in the west?"

"No, I don't believe so." Dalton rubbed his face once more and then lowered his hand. His eyes were troubled. "I'm assuming that you've heard the rumors circulating about Harvey Scott, the captain in the east?"

The department's rumor mill had been in overdrive lately. From what Maddox had heard, Harvey was an alcoholic who was spiraling out of control after the recent death of his wife. The police had been called twice after Harvey's drunken rage impacted the public. While Maddox hadn't been sure if the rumors were true, the darkness in Dalton's eyes confirmed that they were. Keeping his thoughts to himself, Maddox replied, "I'm not one to listen to the rumors, sir."

"That's good of you." Dalton crossed his legs, resting his arms on the armrest. "However, sadly, in this case, the rumors are very much true. Things are a mess over there in the east, and it's been an exhausting process trying to figure out which way to proceed."

Maddox had questions, of course. It simply wasn't his business to ask them.

Dalton's face twisted as he drew in a long, deep breath before continuing. "The captain is making a fine ass out of himself, and last night, it appears the media might have gotten wind of it."

"Not a good look for the department," Maddox offered.

Dalton snorted. "I imagine you're right about that. And I further suspect that no matter how much I'd like to give Harvey another chance, that right may even be stripped from me."

Regardless of his words, the chief's eyes suddenly softened, and he stretched out his legs, crossing his ankles. "I'm sorry, Maddox, I didn't come here to unload on you. Tell me, how is your father doing?"

Dad and Dalton had worked together as beat cops for a handful of years back in the day. "Health-wise, he's doing well. His mind, however, is failing him."

"Alzheimer's, right?"

"Yeah, that's right." Maddox stretched out his fingers to avoid the fists that always came when talk of his father ensued. Speaking with others who knew the father Maddox had grown up with was hard. To watch a strong, proud man lose himself wasn't easy. "He has glimpses of his past every so often, but nothing more than that."

The chief looked troubled by this news, his expression tightening. "He doesn't remember you?"

"No, sir."

"Damn shame that is," the chief said, clucking with his mouth and shaking his head. "I'm sorry to hear that, Maddox. I know that being your father meant a lot to him."

"Thank you, sir. It is what it is, and truthfully, he's happy and spending his days surrounded by pretty nurses." Maddox smiled.

"There's always an upside to everything, I suppose."

Maddox agreed with a nod. He'd accepted his father's diagnosis after receiving it. There wasn't anything he could do to stop the way the disease ate away at his father's mind, so he'd made peace with it.

Now, when he went and visited his dad, Maddox played the part of support worker at the nursing home, instead of the son his father had raised. The reminder of everything he'd forgotten usually sent his father into a rage. So Maddox stopped reminding him.

Obviously sensing that Maddox didn't want to continue, Dalton shifted to a surprising topic. "I actually came by today to ask how Joss O'Neil's first week was?"

Maddox froze. "I wasn't aware that you knew O'Neil," he stated gently, not to overstep. "May I ask how you two are acquainted?"

"Her father used to be my partner. Didn't you know that?"

Maddox's heart rate began to slow, a connection forming that he hadn't expected. "No, I wasn't aware."

The chief paused as three rookies chatting loudly amongst themselves passed by Maddox's office. One look at Dalton and their mouths snapped shut. The chief chuckled, seemingly amused by the power he held over the younger generation of cops, before addressing Maddox again. "It's old news, I'm sure," he explained, pulling on the cuffs of his shirt. "We were partners during our thirties and early forties, a few years after I worked beat with your dad. Our families became very close during that time, and her father called me last night since they're traveling in Paris. He was concerned that maybe some of the staff would give her a bit of a hard time considering the connection I have to her family."

Maddox's jaw clenched tightly as he realized everything Joss had stacked against her. She was going to have to fight harder than most to get the respect she deserved because she was so well connected, and that was without having an affair with her superior.

"So, how's Jossie doing?" Dalton asked.

Jossie?

I'm a dead man. He took a sip of his coffee to gather his thoughts, set the mug down next to his computer's keyboard, and explained, "She's a good asset to the team. Clever. Fair. Hardworking." *Beautiful. Intriguing. Strong.*

The chief smiled. "She hasn't received any trouble, has she?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Maddox replied. "But I'm not sure she'd come to me if she had."

"What makes you say that?"

Maddox snorted softly. "Because I'm her superior officer, she's a rookie, and I'm a man."

"I suppose you're right," Dalton continued thoughtfully. "Although, word does spread quickly if anyone feels that someone is being treated differently." He paused, watching Maddox closely. Obviously, whatever he saw in Maddox's expression comforted him since he continued. "Regardless that there hasn't been any trouble yet, Joss means a great deal to my family and me. I can trust that you'll take care of her while she's here, Hunt?"

And there was the warning.

Maddox saw the threat in Dalton's narrowed eyes. Joss was clearly beloved by him. That's when Maddox knew the complication he'd thought he faced before was nothing compared to what he was up against now.

The thing was, no one dictated Maddox's life, not even the police chief.

Regardless of the mess he'd landed himself in, and even if a plan to move forward wasn't solidified, he stared into Dalton's eyes and made an easy promise, "Of course, sir. She's safe on my team."

* * * *

At the end of his shift, Maddox had planned to go to the gym and burn off some steam. He'd questioned himself a thousand times when it came to Joss. If things went south with her, the risks were hefty ones. Earlier today with Dalton only reminded him that he walked on dangerous ground. Logic told him to steer clear of her. And yet, there he was. At her front door.

Now decided, he lifted his hand and knocked twice.

Not a second later, the door whisked open. The light from her living room spilled out into the night, and the remaining strands of his indecision evaporated. Tonight, she wore gray jogging pants and a purple T-shirt. Her hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, and her face was fresh, without any makeup. When heat flooded him, swelling his cock, he knew he'd made the right decision to see her tonight. There was nowhere else he wanted to be than right there with her.

When she took him in on her porch, her eyes went huge. "What are you doing here?" she gasped, glancing behind him as if he'd brought people with pitchforks to get her.

Beginning to feel unwanted, he shoved his hands into his pockets and chuckled. "Is this usually how you greet your guests?"

She didn't laugh with him. In fact, she looked stunned, unmoving. She blinked twice. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." He frowned. "I'd like to talk to you. If that's all right."

She blinked again. "Why?"

He began to narrow his eyes on her. "Joss, I want to talk to you. If you'd like me to leave, tell me to go, and I'll go."

"No, no, it's not that." She opened the door a little wider, the shock lessening *slightly* on her face. "You have me thinking that someone saw us last night, and now I'm being slut-shamed at the station. Please tell me that's not true."

"Believe me," he said seriously, giving her a measured look. "If you were being slut-shamed, I'd be dealing with that instead of standing here at your front door trying to talk to you."

"Oh, thank God." She sagged against the door, obviously relieved. When she straightened, her expression turned curious. "If you're not here because we've been found out, then why *are* you here?"

He paused. Then, "I've come to talk about us."

Now it was her turn to pause. "But I thought there was no 'us?'"

"There wasn't, but I'd like to change that."

She stepped away from the door, folding her arms. "Color me confused, but doesn't that go against your 'I don't date' policy?"

"Which is exactly the problem, isn't it?" He couldn't beat around the bush. Things needed to be crystal-clear. "I'd like to propose something to you that may work for both of us. I'd prefer to do that inside your house, instead of outside on your porch. May I come in?"

She watched him a moment, nibbling on her lip before she opened the door fully, letting him inside. He entered then moved into her living room. Her home was cute and quaint—much like the woman on his mind lately. Simple, but classy. Warm, and inviting.

Once he'd reached her couch, he turned around to face her and got right to the point of his visit. "Here's the thing. I want to explore what's going on between us a little more, if you're up for that."

She leaned against the living room's doorframe, giving him a cute, quizzical look. "I'm sorry, but I'm not exactly sure what you're asking me here. Last night was supposed to get me out of your system. Weren't you the one who said you don't date?"

"You're right, I did. I *don't*," he replied, taking a seat on the armrest of her couch and folding his arms, watching her carefully. "We wouldn't be dating."

"So you're suggesting something more in the way of friends-with-benefits?"

"That's right." Maddox needed to be careful, more careful than he'd ever been before with any woman. No broken hearts. Get his *fix*, sedate his craving for her. Then they could both move on. But the past had proven that it would take more than two quick fucks to fulfill him. He

needed to explore her fully, enjoy her entirely. “What do you think of that idea?”

Again she nibbled her bottom lip, considering him. “Have you had a lot of these types of relationships?”

“No,” he admitted, knowing full well what his admission implied, but there was no going back. To have her, he needed honesty and trust. And he wanted to have her again and again until he calmed this insatiable need. “I already told you, I never come back for seconds.”

She hesitated. Then shook her head. “But you want thirds with me?”

“Yes.”

Another pause. Her eyes searching his. “Why?”

He rose from the armrest and moved to her in two large strides. Her sugary scent engulfed him as he took her into his arms. He noted the sexy smile she gave him seconds before he sealed his mouth across hers to make a point. In the same manner she had before, she melted against him, going all soft and warm and meeting him with a passion that spoke to him on every level as a man.

There was a connection between them that was as rare as it was perfect. A connection that he’d tried to refuse yet one that had become stronger since he’d touched her again. A connection he needed to explore.

When he broke off the kiss and backed away, her cheeks were rosy, and her lips were pink and swollen. Her light eyes screamed *fuck me*. “That’s why,” he told her, dragging his thumb across her damp lips. “There’s something here, no? Something that’s a little bit curious and wildly addictive. But there are also risks. Risks that are very serious because of our jobs. I’ve made my choice to accept those risks. But you need to make them for yourself.”

She blinked once, then her eyes became less heated and more focused. “I’m willing to take those risks, too, if you can promise that this thing between us doesn’t become public knowledge.”

His mouth twitched. “You think *I’m* going to kiss and tell?”

She didn’t falter and shrugged. “Everyone has friends. I don’t mind you sharing your life with those friends, but I want to make sure you trust them enough not to say anything. This”—she gestured between them—“getting out would be a big headache for me.”

He parted his lips to respond and then shut them, stunned. A smart, strong mind was incredibly sexy. She threw him off his game a little. He’d expected to be the one worried that she would talk.

Regardless, he explained, “My close friend Grey knows about you, but considering our jobs,” he added to reassure her, “and the trouble it would bring for us, I don’t intend to speak of our relationship in detail with him or with anyone else. Do you?”

She walked around him and took the spot on the armrest where he’d been sitting earlier. “To be perfectly honest, I’ve already told Emilia every single detail about what happened between us.”

Emilia was part of the police force. He didn’t like that connection. “Even what happened at the barbeque?”

“Not yet, but I will.” At his frown, she added, “She’s my best friend, Maddox. We don’t have secrets. But I can promise that she’s also a vault. What I tell her will never get out.”

The honesty between the two women left Maddox feeling uncertain. On one hand, he didn’t know Emilia like Joss did. On the other hand, Emilia clearly hadn’t told anyone about Joss and Maddox’s one-night stand a year ago, so he put his trust into Joss now. “All right,” he said, conceding. “If you trust her, then that’s good enough for me.” Besides, Joss had a lot to lose if

this information got out, including her reputation. That meant she trusted Emilia a great deal. “Now, let’s be very clear on this, all right? If you want out, you’ll tell me, yes?”

She paused, watching him intently and then burst out laughing.

“Something funny?” He frowned.

“Sorry, but yes.” She sighed away her laughter, her cheeks flushing pink, her eyes twinkling. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re the biggest contradiction ever?” Her mouth twitched as she obviously fought more laughter. “Did you know that you have a reputation for being a heartbreaker?”

“Yes, I’m aware,” he grumbled, not proud of that title. He never meant to break a woman’s heart. He never made them any promises. But some women couldn’t handle a one-night stand even if they originally said they could. Hence why this conversation was so important. “But do let me in on why me being a supposed heartbreaker is so amusing to you.”

Her eyes still laughed at him. “From what I’ve seen of you so far, you seem upfront and honest, so I’m trying to understand how anyone could have misread you so much.”

“And that’s funny to you?”

She smiled. “What’s funny is how serious you are about all this.”

“I don’t play games,” he reiterated. “I can’t give you a relationship, but I can give you an adventure. You need to be okay with that for us to proceed. I don’t want to hurt you.”

She rose then and moved to him, placing her hands on his folded arms. “You won’t hurt me. I can handle a friends-with-benefits relationship with you. This is good, and if it ever becomes not good, I’ll tell you.”

“We’re all clear, then? No misunderstandings?”

“Crystal-clear. Just sex. I got it.” She gave a sexy grin, pressed herself against him, and practically purred, “So, about this *just* sex we’re having. What exactly do you have in mind?”

“Something filthy, of course.” He grinned, unfolding his arms to grab hold of her.

“Oh, I like the sound of that.” She rose on her tiptoes, begging him for a kiss.

He ignored the offer, determined to say what he needed to. “We can start off slow—”

“No, Maddox, that’s not what I want,” she said, wiggling against him, inviting him to take her right there in her living room. “I don’t want gentle. I don’t want careful. I want what you’ve given me already.”

He stared at her mouth and swiped his thumb across her parted lips. “And what’s that?”

“Something raw and real. Passionate and wild.”

He dropped his head, bringing his mouth so close to hers, he could feel her warm breath against his lips. “If that’s what you want, then there’s something you’ll need to do for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Wait.”

His grin rose at the surprise rushing across her features. When he walked by her, she called, “Wait for what?”

Once he’d reached the door, he grabbed the handle and glanced over his shoulder with a smile. “For the game to begin, sweetheart.”

Chapter 4

Bright and early the following morning, Joss entered the station, passing by Maddox's office. Heat flooded her with no effort on his part. Maybe it was the intensity in him when he focused on whatever he was doing or maybe it was something else, Joss didn't know. Regardless, he looked hotter than ever before, and how *that* was possible was another thing she didn't know.

The more she thought about it, the more she wondered if it was because of the offer he'd made. Really, she'd never met anyone like him. So bold. Arrogant without being overly cocky. Demanding in the best kind of way. He simply knew what he wanted, took it, and made no apologies for it. She liked that about him. Perhaps that's what drew her to him.

She squeezed the strap of her bag and slowed her stride, getting a good look at him sitting behind his desk. One hand was behind his head as he stretched out his thick chest and talked on the telephone. She stumbled a little, and her shoe scuffed the floor. That's when his eyes met hers. Slowly, he lowered his hand, his posture stiffening. A rush of energy flooded her. Exactly as it had last night when he'd come to her house. Her lower body pooled with heat, yearning for his touch...his hot kisses...and his dominating, powerful sex.

His eyes followed her, the seconds feeling like minutes. Regardless of the dangers of being with Maddox, he was not a guy to say no to—not that night at the bar or the night at the barbeque or when he'd offered her more last night. He delivered where Nick had failed. His touches brought out something in her, something new and refreshing and exciting and thrilling. Nick had always felt like he silenced her. Like he didn't want her to be who she was. The control Maddox possessed was the exact opposite. Somehow, his dominance and intensity freed her, making her feel like she was breathing easier. Making her happier than she'd felt in a while. And all he asked for in return was no attachment.

No mess. No emotions. Exactly what she wanted, too.

He finally blinked, the spell gone, and as fast as she'd seen his desire, his shields snapped into place and his expression hardened. She didn't take it personally—she understood, and she appreciated it, too. Police stations, like any workplace, could be rumor central, and her new job mattered to her. She'd worked hellishly hard to get where she was. The last thing she wanted was for others to think she'd screwed her way to the top.

Her eye contact broke when she moved past the door, and she exhaled the breath she hadn't even known she'd been holding. And in that same second, a firm grip latched on to her arm, yanking her sideways. "What the—" She was tossed into the station's family bathroom.

Emilia hastily turned around and locked the door.

Joss blinked, aghast. "You did *not* pull me into the bathroom. What if someone saw you, what in the hell would they think?"

"Whatever. No one saw me." Emilia waved her off, her eyes twinkling. "Besides, it's the only room where we know we won't be overheard." She moved to the sink and turned the faucet on all the way, then spun around and pointed a finger at Joss. "You banged him, didn't you?"

"Seriously?" Joss snorted, rolling her eyes. "By what you saw on my face as I walked down the hallway, you could tell that?"

Emilia scanned Joss over from head-to-toe. "Oh, hell yeah, it's *that* obvious. You have that glow. I know that glow. I saw it the day after you slept with him in the bar. So, spill. Every.

Single. Detail.”

Joss shook her head, watching Emilia lean in, practically salivating. “Yes, we banged. Yes, it was unbelievable. Yes, I’d do him again in a second, which before you say it, I know is a terrible idea considering the shitstorm that would rain down on us if the chief found out.”

Especially considering that Chief Dalton was a close family friend and he’d have no qualms about laying into her. “But this...Maddox and me...it needs to stay far under the radar. We’re not dating. We screwed, that’s it. So you can’t say a word to anyone. Like, ever. Maddox could lose his job. My reputation is on the line.” And her job mattered. Her father was a cop. Her grandfather had been a cop, too. Hell, she’d grown up surrounded by cops. She wanted to make them all proud. A sex scandal wasn’t part of her career goals. “Did I cover it all?”

“Pfft.” Emilia barked a laugh. “Not even close, honey. How did this happen? The last time we talked, I thought you were only joking about wanting to sleep with him again. Like, I don’t want to be a Debbie Downer, but this could backfire—hugely—in your face.”

“Yes, I know.” Joss reached for Emilia’s arm, giving it a squeeze. “I know what I’m doing, Emilia, but...”—she paused choosing her words carefully—“for so long, I always thought about what Nick wanted and how I could make him happy. Then I met Maddox, and that first night at the bar, things exploded between us. With him, it’s all about me. I know the risks here. I’m well aware of them, but I’m sick of always doing the right thing or taking the careful route. We’ve talked, and I trust that he’s going to keep whatever we do between us.”

“So this is going to continue, then?” Emilia asked.

Joss gave a half-shrug. “Yeah, we’ve worked out a no-strings arrangement. It’s just sex.”

“Hmmm,” Emilia said, nibbling her lips. “He does seem rather trustworthy and close-lipped. Just be careful, okay? Remember what I told you about him?”

Joss couldn’t forget. That little reminder seemed ingrained in her mind. “He’s broken a heart or two because he doesn’t do relationships because of whatever fear or commitment issues he has.”

“That’s right, so you gotta remember that, ‘kay?” Emilia moved to the sink and switched off the water. She turned back to Joss, softening her voice. “You’re not built like him. You’re a girl who loves love. You don’t jump in and out of random men’s beds.”

Joss nearly argued with Emilia on that point. Maybe she had once been the girl who badly wanted to be in love. Double dates. Family Christmas celebrations. Walks in the park. She’d been the girl who loved all those things. But where did that get her in the end? Heartbroken. At least with Maddox, she already knew he was a heartbreaker. He’d drawn the lines clearly for her. All she had to do was not cross them.

Easy.

She placed her hand on Emilia’s shoulder and smiled. “I love you for worrying about me, I really do. I know he’s not a relationship guy, and I’m not looking for that either. What he can give me...that’s what I want.”

“Just sex?”

Joss grinned. “Just kinky, dominating, off-the-charts-hot sex.”

Emilia laughed, her shoulders beginning to lower from their high position. “All right. Last bit of advice: Don’t do it.”

“Do what?”

She pointed. “Fall in love with him.”

Joss snorted and turned the bathroom’s door handle. “You don’t need to worry about that. I can promise with total certainty that will *not* happen.” Because as hot as Maddox was, as

incredible a lover as he was, Joss knew better than to fall in love with the wrong type of guy, one with clear commitment issues.

When she swung the door open, she came face-to-face with Maddox.

“Oops,” she gasped, taking a step back.

Stance wide, arms folded, narrowed eyes directly on her, he asked curtly, “Ladies, do you mind explaining why you are both in the family bathroom?”

Joss thought up every scenario from using the bathroom together to fix her makeup to changing her clothes, even if logically that didn’t make sense since she wasn’t holding anything.

Her lips parted to comment, when Emilia blurted out, “Sorry, sir, I asked Joss to bring me a pair of underwear into work because I”—she gave a shy smile—“sir, it’s a ladies’ problem that I’m sure you don’t want to hear about.”

Maddox’s eyes narrowed on Emilia before he snorted, shaking his head. “Don’t let me find you both in there again.”

“Yes, sir,” Joss said, nudging Emilia forward down the hallway. But, of course, she had to look, and when she glanced over her shoulder, she found Maddox’s eyes not on their heads but on her ass. Soon, those eyes met hers and warmth filled her belly.

There was a whole lot of promise in them.

“Ooh, he looked pissed.” Emilia laughed, dragging Joss’s attention to her. “Good thing you can kiss up later.”

Joss ignored that, refusing to *ever* talk about her and Maddox openly at the station. “Your period?” She snickered, nudging her shoulder into Emilia’s. “That’s what you came up with?”

“Nothin’ shuts up men faster than period talk.” Emilia grinned.

Joss laughed, though also wondered if Maddox would be the type of guy to buy tampons, or if he’d bail before she even got her period. Luckily, she realized, it didn’t matter. Those were things guys in relationships did. She could buy her own damn tampons.

Emilia entered the locker room first, and Joss followed closely behind. There wasn’t much to this space except two rows of lockers with benches, and some showers and toilets off in the corner of the room.

Joss approached her locker, hearing voices coming from the showers. She placed her bag down and opened the locker, immediately shutting it with a gasp.

“What’s wrong?” Emilia asked, wide-eyed.

“Oh. My. God,” Joss breathed.

“What, Joss?” Emilia bounced on her feet, attempting to open the locker. “What is it?”

Slowly, Joss cracked her locker open and remained assured that what she’d seen the first time was, in fact, there. She took another look around the locker room, ensuring in her state of shock that no one else had walked in.

Which they hadn’t.

She carefully opened her locker, finding panties. Not just any panties, but her panties from the night at the barbeque, along with a note and a small black box with a pink ribbon on it. She couldn’t believe that Maddox had risked coming into the women’s changing room to put this in her locker. While she knew he probably had the staff’s schedule on his mind and would know when the room was empty, it was still risky. Though she quickly realized that’s what was so exciting and thrilling about Maddox. He took risks for the erotic experience. And hell, she appreciated that about him.

Ignoring the box for now, she opened the note clearly written in Maddox’s handwriting.

8 p.m. My house. I’ll be waiting inside.

Wear this for me.

~M

She glanced around once more as she placed her panties and the note into her bag, then she reached for the box. With quick fingers, she removed the ribbon, so afraid someone was going to walk in on them.

One look inside told her he'd bought her dark purple and black lingerie.

"You have *got* to be kidding me," Emilia mused, as Joss placed the box inside her bag and zipped it up. "He's not only gorgeous, and kinky as fuck, but he buys you sexy lingerie." Emilia sighed and rested a hand on Joss's shoulder. "Girl, my vagina is officially jealous of yours."

* * * *

That night, right at 8:00 p.m. sharp, a knock sounded on Maddox's door. He exited the living room of his childhood home, sure his father had never imagined the sex that would unfold in this house tonight. Built in the 1920s, the house had an old-world charm with its covered porch and heavy columns in the corners. Inside, stacked moldings surrounded the doors and the windows, and on the floors were narrow, plank oak hardwood. Back when Maddox had sold his bachelor pad and moved his furniture in, he'd applied a fresh coat of earth-toned paint to the walls, keeping things light and simple. The only thing remaining of his father's touches were his dad's paintings and personal photographs on the walls. Those Maddox couldn't take down.

As he leaned against the living room's doorframe, the dark wood front door opened, and Joss appeared, wearing a short black dress and tall heels. The moment her eyes connected with his, they warmed with her smile. "Hi," she said.

"Hello." He grinned and winked.

That same craving for her filled his gut as her cheeks flushed while she took him in. Passion couldn't be taught, and Joss was off-the-charts passionate about him. He rather liked that about her. The way she melted for him and hungered for him was a combination he'd never seen in a woman before, which is what drew him in for more. Even now, he watched how her eyes grew heated as she glanced at his bare chest then down to the bulge in his blue jeans.

By the time her heated gaze rose back to his, his cock had hardened to steel. Tonight, he intended to satisfy them both. "Are you ready for the games to begin?" he asked her.

She shut the door then turned back to him with a smile. "More than ready. What comes next?"

He crossed his arms, watching her closely. "You undress for me, sugar."

She glanced from his staircase to his living room then back to his eyes. "You want me to take my clothes off right here?"

He nodded.

"While you're still clothed?"

"Yes, but leave your lingerie on," he told her, enjoying the way her cheeks flushed deeper. "Just lose the dress."

She watched him, and he saw the thoughts rushing across her expression, even if he couldn't hear them. Uncertainty showed in the nibble of her bottom lip. Concern was obvious in the furrow of her brow. Then he saw what he'd hope to see, the lift of her chin telling him that she'd pushed past all those insecurities to go after something a little more daring and exciting.

Keeping her eyes locked on his, she slowly unzipped her dress and then slid the straps off her shoulders. He followed her every move, letting her know how much he liked seeing her bare

herself to him. Besides, he knew she'd get off on this as much as he would.

From the very first time he touched her, he'd wondered if she hungered for a new flavor where sex was concerned. Her flushed cheeks and dilated pupils indicated that he hadn't been wrong about her desires. She wanted to be sexy and sensual. And he wanted to create those moments where she could be.

Once the fabric had fluttered to the dark hardwood floor, she kicked her dress away and remained in her high heels. Only then did he approach her, slowly arrowing in on his his target. *Her.*

The closer he got, the more her sugary-sweet perfume infused the air. His nostrils flared as he inhaled her scent fully. While her tantalizing aroma twitched his cock, the sight of her wearing the lingerie he'd bought made his balls heavy with need.

Black and dark purple lace decorated her creamy white flesh while a garter belt sat perfectly around her hips, all leading down to thigh-high stockings. She was soft and curvy and lush and ready, and it was all he could do not to slam her against the door and bury himself balls-deep inside her.

"You look absolutely gorgeous tonight, Joss," he said when he reached her.

She gave him a sweet smile. "Thank you."

Needing a little taste, he took her chin in his hand and sealed his mouth across hers. He sensed her reach for him to deepen the kiss but he leaned away, ensuring they still had their minds straight enough for the conversation ahead of them.

Her cheeks flushed deeper when he tilted her chin up, giving her the good once-over she deserved. She wore thick black liner atop her eyelids along with thick black lashes and purple shadow in a few different shades. "I've never seen you wear so much makeup before."

"It seemed fitting for tonight," she said with a soft smile. "Do you like it?"

He turned her head from side to side. She'd put in a lot of effort to look good for him tonight. "You're gorgeous, with and without the makeup." He dropped another quick kiss on her mouth before taking her hand. "Come. We need to chat a little bit before we begin."

As he strode forward into the living room, he noted the odd sense of trust that he could feel between them. She didn't doubt his motives and followed without hesitation. He liked that about her. She was like an open book, allowing him to read all the pages within.

When he reached his leather couches resting in the middle of the room, he motioned for her to sit while he moved to the stone fireplace. He needed distance, not trusting himself to be so close to her. Not with her looking like that and smelling as good as she did. Christ, he could only imagine how she tasted.

Sweet and ripe, he guessed.

To rein in those thoughts, he drew in a deep, stabilizing breath before turning to her. He found her sitting on the couch with her legs crossed like a goddess sprawled out for his taking. While the thought tempted him, he was intent on getting the night's activities started, and long ago, he'd been taught rules that were now engrained in his soul. Clear communication being one of them.

He moved to the coffee table in front of her and took off the black velvet blanket covering the antique tray.

Her mouth formed a perfect *O*. He smiled at her surprise, waiting for her eyes to lift to him before addressing her. "Tonight, I'd like to use everything I've chosen here. Any objections?"

She visibly swallowed then studied each object with great care, gnawing on her bottom lip. "You're going to use all of them on me?"

“Is that a problem?”

She looked from toy to toy before glancing at him again. “To be honest, I never imagined anyone would want to use all these on me.”

“Well, I do.”

“Why?”

He arched a brow at her. “Because I’m a filthy, dirty man, Joss.”

She laughed softly, her eyes twinkling. “Obviously one who’s unashamed of that fact.”

“Why should I be ashamed?” he asked, moving back to the fireplace, giving her some distance to breathe and think clearly. “I like sex. The more erotic, the better. Sure, I could use my fingers or my tongue or my cock to make you come. Or even better, I could use all these lovely things I have laid out before you and then use my fingers, my tongue, and my cock and make you fucking explode. Which would you rather?”

“Definitely the latter.” She grinned.

He chuckled with her, leaning against the fireplace and folding his arms before he got serious again. “This is meant to be fun. Even to be playful. If there is anything you don’t like about what you see here, tell me. If I use anything on you, and you decide later you don’t enjoy it, tell me.”

“And you’ll stop?”

“I’ll always stop,” he reassured her. “Say *yellow*, and I’ll know I need to slow down. Say *red*, and I’ll stop everything completely. But the point here is not to get you to level red. The point is to get you off and give you orgasms. All clear?”

“Crystal,” she said, resting her hands on her crossed legs.

He watched her give the items one last look, seemingly a little more relaxed now, before he added, “You can also change your mind, you know. We can still take this slowly. Build up to more of what you’re seeing here.”

“Oh, hell no,” she said with a firm shake of her head. “I’m in this. All the way.”

“And you can stop this at any time, yes?” he reminded her.

She examined him and then smiled softly. “I trust you, Maddox. I know I’m safe here.”

“Which is important. The more you trust me, the more fun we’ll have.” While she trusted him on a professional level, as her superior, soon, she’d know his kinky side fully and trust in that, too. “To be perfectly honest, and to reassure you, I’m not a sexual sadist. Whatever I touch you with, whether that be my hand or a toy, is for your pleasure, not for my enjoyment of causing you pain. Your orgasms are the endgame.”

“Then what do you get out of this?” she asked.

“I get to control you. I get to do whatever I want to you, in all the filthy ways that turn me on.”

“That’s enough for you?”

If only she could see herself through his eyes. Sex with her wasn’t ordinary. The high she gave him was only becoming more addictive. “More than enough, sugar,” he reassured her.

Obviously, she believed him because she didn’t press the matter more, and she glanced at the toys again. “So, in this little game of yours, what comes next?”

“You kneel for me.”

With a sexy little smile, she rose.

She went to take a step toward him, and he said, “No, Joss.” When her foot lowered back to the floor, her smoldering eyes locked onto him, he added, “Crawl to me.”

For a few long seconds, she studied him, clearly wondering if he was serious. He stayed

quiet, letting the silence and his firm look answer for him.

Slowly, she lowered to her knees, her chest rising and falling quickly.

He watched her closely and loved pushing the limits of a strong woman as she began crawling toward him. He didn't doubt that in her past, she'd had very vanilla sex with men who didn't ask what he'd ask of her. That's what he liked. He saw things in her that a vanilla man wouldn't see. A yearning to surrender shone within her. The willingness to submit under a dominant touch. The craving to experience something a little more intense, and definitely a bit wicked.

Sex in the nightclub. Sex outside. Rough sex. She liked pushing past the ordinary. He planned to exploit that knowledge and satisfy them both in the process.

And, of course, watching Joss go to her knees for him was a bonus.

He was a filthy, dirty bastard, after all.

Chapter 5

Oh. My. Motherfucking. God.

Never in her life would Joss have thought she'd crawl for a man. Maybe at first, the whole thing was awkward. Not now. Not with Maddox looking at her with those hungry eyes like he planned to fuck the living shit out of her, all because she'd done as he asked. Not with how she could see how much he liked watching her crawl to him. For those reasons and more, embarrassment simply never rose.

When she finally stopped in front of him, he dragged a thumb across her mouth. A trademark move for him that she'd begun to enjoy. "Be a good girl and take off my pants," he told her.

Intent to get him naked fast, she reached up and undid his belt and then unhooked the button of his jeans. He kept watching her with those intense eyes, stripping all her layers until he found the rawness of her. That's where he looked, right into her soul, and she let him as she pulled his pants down to his knees, freeing his erection.

After he'd kicked his pants away, he grabbed the base of his thick cock with bulging veins on the side. "Do you see what watching you crawl does to me?"

God, he looked so hard. "Yes."

Chin angled down, his eyes locked on hers, he stroked himself from base to tip and groaned. "Do you want my cock, Joss?"

She licked her lips, wanting to touch him. To taste him. "Yes."

"Where?"

She leaned up on her knees and ran her hands up his legs until her face was in front of his cock, offering herself.

He arched that left eyebrow, continuing to stroke himself. "I want you to tell me. I like hearing it from your pretty little mouth. Where do you want my cock?"

She paused. Then took his lead. "In my pretty little mouth."

"That's right, sugar." He gave her a sexy smile and dragged the tip of his cock across her lips, his full attention focused there.

When she took him into her hand, he removed his and she didn't wait—she slid him into her mouth and against her tongue. A ravenous moan she'd never heard before rose from her throat and filled the air as she tasted the saltiness of his pre-cum on her tongue and inhaled the musky scent belonging to him alone. She worked her lips over his shaft, up and down, while her hand followed. He groaned and ran his fingers gently over her cheek, never taking his eyes off her. There was something to his softness that she liked, because she knew it was purposeful, controlled even. Like, at any second, he could take over and make her body burn. Though for now, he was patient, letting her play.

Until she could tell that she'd teased too much, pushed too far.

His dark eyes greeted her as he stepped out of her reach. "I see that you're still good with your hands." He offered his hand, and when she slid her fingers into his and rose, he winked. "But I might just say you're even better with your mouth." He yanked her close and sealed his lips over hers. Strong and forceful, yet exactly what she needed and more.

When he broke the kiss and backed away, she was breathless and hot and wet and ready for whatever the hell he wanted. All of which he apparently knew by the smirk he gave her.

“Come, let’s take this upstairs,” he said, keeping her hand in his.

On his way out of the living room, he gathered the tray of toys and led her up the staircase to his bedroom.

Once inside, she found it to be much like the man, simple yet sleek. Light gray paint on the walls, along with a few pieces of metal art, a dresser with a TV on top and a king-size bed against the wall.

“Wait right here for me,” he said, leaving her at the doorway.

He approached the bed, placing the tray on the nightstand, and she soon discovered that the sides of the bed lifted. She watched, curious, as he knelt on one knee and locked the plank of wood into place, revealing metal loops lining the wood.

In a matter of minutes, he had worked his way around the mattress. What had started out as a masculine bed now looked like a bondage table with a big mattress in the middle.

“Did you build this?” she asked, watching his back muscles flex to perfection.

He locked the final plank into place and then glanced over his shoulder with a nod and his sexy half smile. “Do you like it?”

“It’s...” The craftsmanship was impeccable, truly. The wood was stunning with all the knots and colors throughout. “It’s really quite impressive, and I’m a little amazed that you spent this much time on something used for sex.”

“I imagine after tonight you’ll understand why I spent so much time on it, and you’ll appreciate that I did.” He chuckled, obviously knowing a secret she didn’t, while he returned to the tray on the nightstand. There, he picked up the black rope that appeared softer than any rope she’d ever seen in a hardware store. “Come here, sugar.”

Her heart raced as she moved to him, but she wanted this. For so long, she’d had a boring sex life. Maddox offered her adventure, and she wanted to dive in, giving him the control to show her all the things she didn’t know.

When she reached him, he gently took her arm and began wrapping her wrist as he explained what he was doing in a soft, gentle voice. “The knot I’ll use is one I can release in seconds if you don’t enjoy the sensation of being bound. All you need to say is *red*, and the rope will be gone. Understand?”

“Yes,” she whispered, suddenly feeling warmer than before. The rope was soft but strong, like a man’s firm hands, keeping her safe and yet eliciting danger. She studied Maddox and quickly decided that it was *him* that brought the heat, not the rope itself. It was the way he touched her, so skilled, clearly he knew exactly what he was doing. By the time he laid her on the mattress with both wrists wrapped in rope cuffs, her chest rose and fell with her heavy breaths.

Silently, he continued binding her wrists to the bed, and as the minutes drew on, the silence became daunting. He was so serious, so focused, so intent, all kicking up her heart rate in anticipation. *What comes next?*

The answer came a second later when he broke the silence. “Down the road, when trust is cemented between us, we can look to binding your ankles, too.”

She rolled her eyes and frowned at him. “I told you I could handle—”

“Did you roll your eyes at me?”

The firmness in his voice made her rethink her answer. “I would say yes but I’m thinking that would be the wrong answer, so let’s go with no.”

That left eyebrow lifted. “Now you’re lying to me?”

She gave him a quick smile and dropped her head back against the pillow. “All right, so I’m

going to stay quiet and not roll my eyes since, apparently, that makes you huffy.”

“Probably a good thing since if you do it again, we stop and you go home.”

She jerked her head up off the pillow, finding his eyes as stern as his voice. “You would do that?”

“Disrespecting me because I’m thinking of your best interests and safety is a dead stop to this game.”

She watched him for a moment, and found that answer instilled a whole lot of trust. “Point proven. Carry on.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I intend to.” He chuckled and winked, the playful nature to him returning as if it had never left.

Once he’d finished with the second binding, hooking the rope into the metal loop, she was tied tightly to the bed and unable to flee. He moved away to the tray again for only a moment then returned to her. Darkness fell over her eyes as a blindfold was settled into place. There was nothing but her heavy breaths and heart rate hammering in her ears until she heard a *click*...and another *click*. A lighter, maybe?

“Anything too tight? Or uncomfortable?” he asked, running a hand over her stomach until he reached her panties and tucked them to the side of her sex.

“No,” she replied, her voice husky even to her ears.

“Tell me if that changes. Or say, *red*? Clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Very nice,” he commented, sliding his hand back up her body until he slid her bra beneath her breasts, exposing her taut nipples to the warm air.

Then he was gone.

Her breathing deepened, a sense of worry speeding up her heart rate. His chuckle came a second later. “You enjoy the sense of danger, yes?”

“Yes,” she admitted. They both knew it was true. She liked the sense of getting caught by someone. She also liked not knowing what was going to happen next and that right now, at this moment, she had no control over anything. Of course, it wasn’t logical, maybe even a little naïve. Yet Maddox was right—she was drenched, more turned on than she’d ever been in her life.

Maybe that was why he’d chosen to bind and blindfold her. The thought ripped from her mind as he cupped her pussy with pulsating squeezes, and she clearly soaked his hand.

“Gorgeous,” he murmured before his hands were gone, and she felt the cold void of his absence spill across her.

She listened carefully, waiting for him to return. Only silence greeted her. Until his fingers slid over her body again, feeling different this time, holding more power, more passion even. He began touching her...*truly touching her* in ways she’d never been touched. He clearly liked caressing her, stroking her, fondling her, maybe even got off on it. She didn’t doubt his cock was as hard as steel because she could feel his arousal in his hands. Her chest rose and fell with each of his sweet soft caresses, as her mind slipped further away, becoming lost in *him*.

“Very, very pretty,” he murmured, squeezing her sex again before giving it a light tap.

She moaned at the contradiction of his touches. Sometimes, soft and gentle. Other times, hard and firm. Always perfect. She turned her head from side to side, desperately trying to catch her breath. There was a pause. A long enough pause that she began to wonder where he’d gone and what he was doing there.

Luckily for her, she didn’t have to wonder long, as balmy liquid dripped onto her torso. She

gasped and arched into the warm sensation, the rope pulling on her wrists. Each slide of the liquid heat warmed beautifully across her skin. Unable to stay still, she writhed against the mattress, falling into the heady sensation she equated to a warm bath.

Then the warmth was gone.

Silence.

Her heavy breathing and soft moans were the only thing she heard. The only thing she could understand. Until his touch came again, as he slid his hands up her thighs, and the warmth of his touch slowed her breaths. His hands weren't soft like before. They were rougher, more demanding, as his touch traveled higher up her body, removing some wax as he went. Once he'd reached her breasts, he tweaked her nipples, pulling on the tight buds until she was arching into him, begging him to pull harder, to give her *more*.

Silence.

She wiggled against the mattress, so wet, soaking for him to fill her, stretch her, own her. "Maddox," she whispered, unsure if she could take more. Handle more of him.

The wax answered her, landing right on her breast, and she heard his reply. He wasn't finished with her. Not yet. She moaned as the warmth was a little hotter this time, landing directly on her nipple.

Silence.

That's when she heard the click and the buzzing sounds of the vibrator she'd seen on the tray before her clit awakened under its pressure. She whimpered as more wax fell along her body right above her pussy, drawing all her attention to where he played. She moaned relentlessly now, not caring how desperate she sounded, not caring that she'd never been so loud in her life. She arched up into the vibe, rubbing herself against it.

She needed *more*.

Her fingers clenched into fists when the vibe suddenly sped up to a higher speed. Beneath the blindfold, her eyes rolled back into her head and she groaned, losing herself in her body being pleased in ways it never had before. That's when she felt something along her mouth, a soft tickle.

"Open for me, sugar."

She parted her lips and he slipped a votive candle inside. Her mouth shut, holding tight, and she began breathing heavily from her nose. She wanted to thrash against the pleasure but the candle in her mouth kept her still, as did his hand on her neck.

She couldn't moan. She couldn't move. The buzz on her clit tickling in all the right ways, pleasuring her perfectly. Her fists were tight, her ass was up off the bed, her climax right... *there*.

Then, the mattress dipped down on her left, and the candle was pulled from her mouth. Maddox placed his hand on her pelvis, pinning her to the bed and pressing the vibe harder against her.

"Come, sweetheart."

And Lord, did she ever.

She thrashed wildly against the bed, screaming against the heat and intensity she couldn't control.

The next few minutes were a blur as she felt drunk from the pleasure. But soon, the vibe was turned off and the blindfold was gone and she saw *him*. Naked. Damp with sweat. Hungry with need. His dark eyes locked onto hers, intense and gorgeous, while he waited on his knees in between her spread legs, his condom-covered cock standing up, ready to take her.

She quivered from the power that only he produced as he leaned his hard body atop hers. He

pressed himself against the wax covering her and slid his hands up her bound arms to grab her wrists, holding her tightly. He stared deeply at her as he entered her, making it as personal as a man could make it.

Slowly, he began shifting his hips, his cock sliding perfectly in and out. She watched him closely, too, seeing the way his attention moved from the ropes at her wrists to her face to her mouth to her breasts. He leaned on one arm, massaging her breast, sliding the remainder of the wax off and tweaking her nipple.

The strength of his body against hers, matched with his thick shaft stroking her inner walls, flooded weight into her lower half. She was so sensitive. Too sensitive. And as he began thrusting faster, his pelvis smacking against her engorged clit, her orgasm rose with no warning.

There, in the safety of his body against hers, in the sensations that he built to the highest peak, was where she lost herself again. His brows drew more and more together, the focus in his face becoming more and more intense as she squeezed him. Her arousal spread out between them, and she couldn't be ashamed over how wet she was because he thrust harder, more hurried and urgent. Until he'd claimed all of her, taking her as high as he could take her. Only then did he drop his head into her neck, hold her bottom in his firm hands, and give a low grunt as he bucked and jerked his pleasure.

In his strength, her teeth clenched, toes pointed out, as euphoria didn't glide over her—it *crashed*, sending her drowning in sensations until she lay boneless, breathless, unable to move even a pinky finger. She whimpered and quivered beneath him, knowing she hadn't only been fucked by him, she'd been owned.

He continued to blanket her, unmoving, catching his breath for many minutes until he eventually groaned, his breath tickling her neck. "Christ, you come so hard and sound so fucking good. You're making me blow far sooner than my pride likes."

She chuckled, stretching out her fingers, the rope still tight on her wrists.

He kissed her warm, sweaty neck, then rose and had her released from the headboard within seconds. Somehow, he ended up on his back, and she lay in his arms while he removed the rope cuffs. "This was a taste of what I can offer you. You can take what we had here and leave. Or you can accept this little game of ours and take more." That left eyebrow lifted. "Decide."

The decision was an easy one, and she answered within a split second. "More." She lifted her head off his sweaty chest and stared at him right in the eyes. "I want more."

His sexy half smile returned. "Then more you'll have, sweetheart."

Chapter 6

Two orgasms later, the sheet beneath Joss had been changed. She'd been wiped down, and at some point, Maddox had ended up back in the bed next to her. She couldn't recall all the steps that had gotten her to being cradled in his arms, only that she was glad she was. Warm and comfortable, she lay tucked into his side, his chest slowly lifting and falling beneath her cheek with his relaxed breaths.

He'd been silent over the passing minutes until his fingers began to trail over her hip and he asked, "If I asked you something personal, would you answer me?"

"Of course." She rose a little higher on his chest, resting her chin on her hands, getting a better look at him. She found his eyes...they were guarded. "What's on that mind of yours?"

He tucked an arm behind his head. "How many lovers have you had?"

Not the *personal* question she'd anticipated. "Why do you want to know?"

He gave a gentle smile. "Call me curious."

She thought about avoiding the truth, not sure what he'd conclude from her answer, but she figured...*what the hell?* "Two. You and my ex-boyfriend, Nick."

"Just two?"

She considered him, trying to get a read on his thoughts. His emotions were very much in check, leaving his face unreadable. "I'm not sure if I should be offended that you sound surprised. Do I seem easy to you?"

"Easy?" His expression turned clearly thoughtful. "No, not easy, but willing and eager."

She paused. Then, "Is that a good thing?"

"For me?" His eyes heated, his voice thick with promise. "Yes."

She examined him again, trying to figure him out. Usually, she was good at reading people. But this guy had a very strong shield up, keeping her out.

Before she could say as much, he smoothed the lines along her forehead and asked, "Was the other man like me?"

"Like you in what way?"

He shifted then, moving onto his side with his arm still tucked under his head. "Did he have a particular fondness for kinky sex?"

She noted how the blanket rested at his hips, showing off the hard, beautiful lines of his body before answering him with a snort. "I think Nick only knew two sexual positions."

"Hmmm," Maddox said, his eyebrows furrowing.

"Why does that seem to bother you?"

"Bother me?" He chuckled softly, shaking his head against the pillow. "Joss, why would it bother me that your ex-boyfriend was clearly a boring fuck? While I suspected you hadn't had much experience with the kinkier side of sex, it does make me curious how you made such a big jump. You went from one lover to having a one-night stand in a nightclub to now being tied up and fucked by me."

She could see his point. "Well,"—she recalled what had gone through her mind when she'd met Maddox at the bar that night—"after Nick and I broke up, I guess I was looking for something a little crazy and wild."

"And you're sure you're still looking for that?"

The concern on his face made her laugh. "You know, you can really stop worrying that I'm

suddenly going to wake up and realize that I can't handle a sexual relationship with you. To be perfectly honest, wanting to date a guy that has clear commitment issues and who doesn't want to date me isn't in my relationship goals."

"It's amazing how you do that." He snorted a laugh.

"Do what?" she asked, tracing the curve of his six-pack.

"You speak as if you have nothing to hide."

She half shrugged, running her finger over his squared chest. "That's because I don't have anything to hide with you. For a long time, I hid my feelings with Nick, always trying to make him and the rest of our family members happy. With you, and because of our arrangement, I don't have to hide anything because I don't need to make sure you're happy."

He watched her finger move down his abs before looking into her eyes again. "And that's a good thing?"

"That's a *really* good thing," she confirmed. "For the first time ever, I feel like I can be myself."

"Well, then, I'm glad you feel that way." He looked to the ceiling again with a smile, then shut his eyes. "I find you...refreshing, so keep being yourself."

She smiled, too, even if he couldn't see it.

Right as she moved to lean her head back against his shoulder, he asked, with his eyes still shut, "Is Nick also why you're so determined to stay single?"

Back to this again? She wasn't sure why he kept focusing on her love life. Shouldn't he stay far away from this subject? "Shouldn't you be happy that I am single?"

"Of course, I am," he said, glancing at her with soft eyes. "But you're not like the other women I've been with. You're..." His eyebrows drew together, "You're a little too sweet, a little too real, a little too honest. You seem like a relationship girl, more than someone who's just looking for sex."

She smiled at the compliments he gave, and she supposed she could see why women became attached to Maddox. "I'm single because I don't want a boyfriend."

"Is there a reason for that?"

"Because I've been there and done that, and I don't want to do it again right now."

"You seem pretty certain of that." His brow arched as he tucked the fallen strands of her hair behind her ear. "Did this guy hurt you?"

"Yes. Horribly."

Something flashed across his eyes then, and she grinned, unable to help it. "You'd better stop looking at me like that, or I'm going to start believing that you're actually capable of caring about someone."

He jerked his gaze away, staring once again at the ceiling. "I never said I couldn't care about someone. I said I couldn't give what most women want."

"Well, I had what most women want, and then it ended in tears and heartbreak and wasted years."

He gave her a quick look. "What did he do to you?"

"Oh, you know, broke up with me," she said with a dry laugh. "At that time in my life, it seemed like the worst thing that could have happened to me. Now...well, now things are different, of course."

"There had to be a reason for why he ended things."

"I wanted a simple life in Seattle. He wanted a fancy life in New York City. I know that doesn't seem like a big deal, but to me, it was. I gave him six years of my life and was totally

wrapped up in him. I thought we'd get married. I planned on it, going so far as to look at bridal magazines and keep articles and stuff. My future had him in it. Then he took away the life we'd built together, and I unraveled."

"You don't look all that beaten up about it anymore," Maddox commented.

She smiled, proud of that. "Because I'm not beaten up about it. I don't miss him, if that's what you're wondering. Of course, it took some time, but I realized how much of myself I'd given to him when he didn't deserve it. How his dreams mattered over mine. How I had honestly considered leaving everything behind to go to New York with him, all to be someone that I wasn't. Honestly, it bordered on pathetic."

"Why pathetic? Obviously, you cared for him."

"Because he didn't want me in New York with him."

"Oh," Maddox muttered.

"Oh." She laughed softly. "Apparently, I wasn't fancy enough for his new lavish lifestyle. Which he told me when he broke up with me on the telephone."

"Ouch," Maddox said with a frown.

She gave a firm nod. "Which is exactly why I'm not broken up about Nick anymore. He's a prick, and I'm lucky to not have wasted more years on him than I did."

"Well, from my point of view, the relationship made you strong," Maddox said, brushing his fingers across her cheek. "You're incredibly put-together, which makes you different. I'm not used to being with girls like you."

"What are you used to, then?"

"Girls who say they're fine with a one-time thing and then hunt me down afterwards. Girls who think they can change me."

This she had to know. "What kind of girl do you think I am?"

His eyes locked onto hers intensely. "A girl who sees me for what I am and is okay with it."

She wasn't sure why that one line brought so much emotion between them, but it did. His eyes were heated. She felt warmth slide within her, too. But she reminded herself that emotions didn't belong between them. Maddox wasn't hers to figure out, and that was refreshing. It didn't matter what was going on in his head. She liked his company. She liked his brand of sex. The rest didn't much matter. "Well, to answer your original question of why I'm single," she added to put an end to the entire conversation, "I think what most women want out of a relationship is highly overrated."

He gave her his sexy grin before shutting his eyes again. "And that, Joss, is the sexiest thing you've said all night."

She laughed, but then she began wondering over him. "All right, you asked me something, so if I asked you a personal question, would you answer?" She cleverly used his words back on him.

"Depends." His mouth twitched. "Shoot."

"Have you always been so kinky?"

His eyes opened then and turned his head against the pillow. "No, not always. At one time, I was a teen that would've fucked anything that breathed on me."

"Like most teenage boys, I suspect."

He nodded with a smile. "It wasn't until my early twenties that I was introduced to kink."

"Introduced, in what way?" she asked hesitantly.

He shifted on his side again, the blanket inching its way lower off his torso. His gaze fell to her breast, and he began tracing her nipple. As the bud hardened beneath his touch, he said,

“What I did to you tonight, she did to me.”

She shivered as warmth pooled low in her body, his tickling touch circling her areola being a tease of something more to come. “I can’t even picture that, to be honest. You being tied up and not in full control seems so unlike you.”

“It is unlike me now, but it wasn’t back then.” His finger travelled slowly around the curve of her breast. “Back then, I had no idea what I was doing.” His eyes lifted to hers, and they smoldered, as he added, “What twenty-one-year-old kid does? You’re still figuring yourself out.”

“That’s when you got into all this? At twenty-one?” At his nod, she sorted through a hundred questions. “Do I even want to know how old the woman was?”

“Thirty-four.”

“Of course, she was older than you,” Joss said with a laugh. “Let me guess, your professor, right?”

He shook his head, sliding his fingers down the center of her chest to her belly button.

“Doctor?” she asked.

“No.”

“Therapist?”

His eyes snapped to hers, and he frowned. “Definitely not.”

“Well, then, who was it?” she said. “Because I know it has to be something scandalous.”

He laughed easily, dragging his fingers back up her torso to her neck, then sliding them across her lips. “Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s not that exciting.” His eyes followed his fingers as he caressed her shoulder. “I met her while working at a bar as a bouncer. She was a bartender there.”

Joss shivered as the heat from his touch caused her pussy to dampen with need, but she managed, “And this woman taught you about kink?”

“That’s right,” he murmured.

God, his voice got low and throaty, and she was finding it hard to concentrate. “So, what happened? Did you date?”

“No, we didn’t date.” He slid his fingers back down over her ribcage to her nipple again, where he circled her areola. “I told you I don’t date seriously. We fucked for a few months.”

“Ah, I see,” she commented. “I’m not the only one who you were with more than once?”

“She was the only other one,” he said with a measured look, “and that was back in my twenties.”

Interesting point, which Joss decided not to look too deep into. She reminded herself that’s what she liked about Maddox. He didn’t want her to figure him out. No messy emotions. Bliss. “Then you ended the relationship?”

He nodded.

“Why?”

The side of his mouth arched then, and he climbed on top of her, sliding in between her thighs. “Because I decided I wanted to be in control.”

Joss’s heart rate kicked up, having all that man and muscle pressed against her. He blanketed her in the most spectacular way. “And she wouldn’t let you be in control?”

“It’s not what she wanted.”

“So that was it?”

“That was it.”

And that was the end of the conversation, too.

His mouth sealed across hers, and by the time he deepened the kiss, she’d forgotten the

remainder of her questions. He grabbed the blanket off her, tossing it to the side, and slid an arm underneath her. She squealed as he flipped her over onto her knees.

Behind her, he wrapped an arm around her middle, lifting her, until her back pressed against his chest and his hand massaged her breast. He lowered his head into her neck and inhaled deeply. "You smell like a sugar cookie, did you know that?" His nose slid from the base of her neck all the way up to her ear.

She wanted to respond, she did, but she couldn't. All she could do was shiver at the strength at her back. At the feel of his lips. At the gloriousness of his hand massaging her breast.

"It's the most incredible smell," he added in her silence.

When he began nibbling and licking and scraping his teeth across her neck, she couldn't be still in his arms any longer. She wiggled against him, wanting more of his touch. Obviously, he heard her plea since his hands moved to her breasts and squeezed tightly, working over her until he pinched her nipples. She moaned with each perfect tug, which turned into a hiss as one of his hands cupped her sex. He teasingly squeezed her pussy, and she unabashedly swayed her hips, rubbing her sex against his hand. "Please," she begged.

"Please, *what?*"

"Please touch me."

"Like this?" he murmured, stroking her engorged clit.

She leaned her head back against his shoulder, reveling in the warmth building within. "Yes. Like that."

"Oh, but I think we can do better, don't you?" He dragged his hand from between her thighs up her torso to her mouth where she parted her lips, and he slid his fingers against her tongue.

With his fingers now soaking wet, he returned to them to her swollen clit. Like her own personal vibrator, he worked the bud fast, back and forth, pinching, swirling, bringing her higher. She began gasping and trembling, desperate for him to give her more. "What do you want, Joss?" he demanded, voice hard.

"Your tongue," she rasped.

He pushed her forward, sending her facedown onto the mattress. She grasped the sheets beneath her hands as he pulled on her hips, angling her bottom high in the air. Heat flooded her as he spread her bottom, opening her in ways no man had ever exposed her.

Then he hesitated, and she knew by his groan and the way his fingers tightened on her butt cheeks that he studied every inch of her. She'd never felt more vulnerable, and that rawness soaked her pussy in need. Her fingers clenched around the bed sheets when his tongue found her sensitive flesh, and she moaned and arched against him. He licked from the top of her sex right to her puckered hole, and back again. Over and over, he stroked and sucked her folds, teased her clit, and licked her slit. He never stopped, always driving her higher, until she began shifting her hips, boldly rubbing her sex across his mouth, needing more.

"Maddox..." she begged, not even knowing what she begged for.

He grasped her hips and then flipped her onto her back. She arched against the mattress as his mouth sealed over her clit. The stubble of his facial hair tickled against her inner thighs, seconds before his mouth covered her clit again and he sucked...*hard*.

She grabbed his head between her legs, holding him tightly to her. He teased and swirled and tickled the bundle of nerves until she fought for breath. Until she was unable to stay still, no matter that his arms were locked around her legs, holding her to him. She rocked her hips, gyrating against him, and he released one arm, pinning her with the other to the mattress. A rough moan escaped her dry throat as one finger entered her. Then another. He stroked her in

perfect rhythm, while his tongue flicked her clit.

Pleasure roared through her, causing her chin to angle up and her muscles to seize, when suddenly his mouth popped off. His body then pressed against hers, and he sealed his lips over hers. She smelled herself on his mouth, as he angled his hand so that his palm connected with her clit. She tried to arch into the pleasure, but he thrust his free hand into her hair, pinning her.

All she was left to do was embrace the intensity that she had no control over.

Right as she began to quiver, he freed her.

“Give me what I want.”

She unraveled, exactly as he requested. Her toes pointed, body frozen beneath the strength of his, and she free fell into the pleasure only he could offer. Ripple after ripple, she rode the waves of climax. And then she relished the satisfaction thereafter that only he could deliver.

When she began to catch her breath, he kissed away her whimpers and cupped her sex until the pulsating climax lessened. Then he brushed his mouth across hers in a whisper of a kiss. “I gave you a beautiful orgasm, didn’t I?”

“Yes.” She tried to slow her heart rate.

He lifted off her, leaning on one of his arms, and arched that brow of his again. “I do believe I deserve to be thanked, don’t you?”

She chuckled, sure he was joking. When his firm expression greeted her, she realized he was dead serious. She had some hesitation, yet at the same time, she thanked a waiter for a good meal. Maddox had feasted on her to perfection, making her feel far more amazing than any waiter would. She leaned up and pressed her lips against his. “Thank you for my orgasm.”

When she leaned away, power flared in his eyes. “Thank you for my orgasm, *what?*”

She lifted her head off the bed again and kissed his strong mouth, knowing precisely what he wanted by his authoritative tone. “Thank you for my orgasm, sir.”

“Pretty little things from a pretty little mouth.” The tip of his tongue slid across the edge of her bottom lip. “Keep talking like that, Joss, and I might think you’re perfect.”

She threaded her hands into his hair, holding him close. “Keep touching me like you do, and I might think you are, too.”

Chapter 7

The next morning, after leaving Maddox's house late the night before, Joss woke up happy and satisfied in her bed. She had spent the morning running errands and then enjoyed an afternoon of shopping with Emilia. By the time she entered her condo minutes before 5:00 p.m., she was glad to be home and unlocked the door with a smile. Sure, her yellow-brick house in the Fremont neighborhood was tiny, being only eleven hundred square feet, but it had an awesome private, brick patio out back. She also never had to cut her grass, or shovel her driveway the once or twice a year the city got snow.

Once Emilia had followed her inside, Joss shut the door and dropped her purse onto the small table by the door. She was so ready to enjoy a few hours of girl time before heading into the night shift. Of all the shifts, the night shift was her least favorite and the hardest on her body, but when Tommy needed a couple more days off due to his mother's surgery, how could Joss say no?

As Emilia kicked off her shoes, she asked, "So, then, after he went down on you, you left?"

Joss laughed and shook her head, unzipping her boots. Her best friend had been stuck on Joss's sexy night for half an hour now. "Yes, I left." She moved past Emilia and headed toward the kitchen at the end of the hallway. "I'm not sure why this concept is so hard for you to understand. He rocked my world. Then I kissed him goodbye and went home to sleep."

"But did he say anything before you left?" Emilia asked, right on Joss's heels as she moved to her black countertop.

Joss grabbed two glasses out of the cupboard then turned back to Emilia with a grin. "He said, 'Thank me for your orgasm.'"

Emilia's eyes widened and twinkled. "And you thanked him?"

"Of course, I did. It wasn't that hard. Nick never made me orgasm. Not once in the entire time we were together. The only time I got off was when I helped him. I will happily thank Maddox until I'm blue in the face if he keeps doing all the things he's doing."

Emilia blinked. "Then what happened?"

"He kissed me silly, slapped my ass, and sent me on my way."

"Jesus Christ, that's so hot." Emilia sagged against the countertop, fanning herself.

Joss burst out laughing. "Right? He's like an erotic dream come true." She approached the fridge and took out the jug of iced tea and set to filling their glasses. "I honestly wouldn't have believed a man could breathe passion like a dragon breathes fire, but Maddox does. It's like sex pours out of him. I've never seen anything like it. He's filthy and dirty, but it isn't creepy, it's just fucking sexy."

Emilia's mouth twitched. "Maybe we should introduce Maddox to Troy." She put down the grocery bag containing the cupcakes they'd picked up at the bakery on the corner. "Seriously, I need some of this excitement and orgasms in my life."

"Oh, yeah, I can only imagine how that will go. 'Hey, Troy, meet Maddox. We think he should teach you a thing or two about sex.'" She laughed, placing the cap back on the jug. "Could you imagine?"

"Well, no," Emilia said with a shudder. "Troy would never forgive me. But still, maybe I should go get lingerie or something."

Joss waggled her eyebrows. "And maybe some rope, too."

“Oh my God.” Emilia burst out laughing, grabbing the box of cupcakes out of the bag. “I’m not sure we’re ready to take things to that level. Right now, I’d be happy with a spank or two.”

Joss returned the iced tea jug to the fridge, realizing how much she liked that Maddox was at that level. She didn’t think there was anything wrong with what Emilia had. She and Troy were perfect for each other, and Joss knew they had a good sex life and a very loving relationship. But explosive, mind-blowing, rock-your-fucking-world-apart sex, Joss was sure they probably didn’t have that.

Once Emilia had placed two cupcakes on a plate, Joss followed her into the living room with the iced teas in hand, and Emilia asked, “All right, so tell me...do you just have sex and leave, or is there cuddling and talking, too?”

“We cuddled and talked a little last night.”

“And that’s not weird for you?” Emilia asked, taking a seat on the couch and placing the plate on the wooden coffee table. “To be honest, I can’t really picture you being so okay with something so detached. You’re always so open and honest.”

Joss dropped down next to her friend, placing the glasses down next to the plate while she pondered. Last night, Maddox had questioned her reasons for sleeping with him. Now Emilia did, too? Why couldn’t everyone get on board with the idea? “We’re not detached necessarily,” she explained. “It’s simply different than what I had with Nick. Sure, it’s a little out of the ordinary in terms of us not calling ourselves a couple or doing normal ‘couple stuff,’ but it’s a partnership nonetheless. He gets something from me, and I get something from him.”

Emilia’s eyes tightened with concern. “You sure that’s enough for you?”

“For now, it’s enough for me.” Joss settled against the couch and tucked her legs up underneath her. “Yes, I could go do the whole online dating thing and maybe meet someone. Hell, maybe I’d find my forever guy. But honestly, I don’t even have the energy to go on dates. You know how it is. Most of the dates would end with you calling to save me so I could bolt.”

Emilia smirked, tucking one leg underneath her. “Okay, but seriously, how much fun would that be? I’d come up with some of the best excuses to get you out of a bad date.”

“I’m sure they’d be hilarious,” Joss agreed. “But if I’ve learned anything from the break-up with Nick, it’s that I need to think more about myself than anyone else. So, sure, Maddox and I are unconventional, but it’s fun and exciting, and I’m okay with things being casual.”

“But what if they get serious?”

“They won’t.”

“How do you know that?”

Joss laughed. “Because, Emilia, he doesn’t date. End of story.”

“All right, fine. I’m going to accept what you’re telling me as truth.” Emilia picked up her cupcake and licked some icing off the top before asking, “I guess the one question is: Does Maddox make you happy?”

“Maddox gives me orgasms, and *that* makes me happy.” Joss hesitated, rethinking.

“Honestly, he’s actually kinda sweet and thoughtful in a way that isn’t thrown in your face. He keeps asking me if I’m okay with our arrangement, like somehow he thinks he’s corrupting me.”

“He is, isn’t he?” Emilia smiled, taking a bite of her cupcake.

“Yes, but I’m aware of it,” Joss countered, trying to get Emilia on the same page.

“Everything is out in the open and so clear that there can’t be any misunderstandings.”

“Well, there is that,” Emilia said, wiping the crumbs off her mouth.

Joss looked down at her cupcake with chocolate sprinkles on the plate but wasn’t ready to eat it yet. “I know this isn’t like me, Emilia, and maybe it’s all crazy, but he’s exactly what I

need right now. There's something about him that's so carefree and wild. He doesn't live by normal rules. There're no expectations there. I don't have to worry about things getting confusing and messy because I know he can't give me a relationship."

Emilia placed her cupcake down and frowned. "Good point, but I think that's what usually scares off women."

"I'm sure it is, but I'm not that girl."

Something crossed Emilia's face that Joss couldn't quite place. Concern, maybe? "Aren't you worried that you'll start liking him?" she asked gently, licking some icing off her finger. "I know he's being all upfront and honest, and while that makes him a decent guy, what if you fall in love with him?" She gave a knowing look. "I mean, from what you say about him, I imagine it would be pretty easy to do."

"Maybe, if things were different. But they aren't, and emotionally, he's completely unavailable. He keeps telling me over and over again that he doesn't date, and that sex is all he can give me. How do you fall for a guy who won't let you in at all?"

"And he doesn't let you in?"

"He's cautious about what he says. Careful, for sure. The second I get too deep, he brings on Alpha Maddox - Sex God to stop the conversation."

Emilia chuckled, taking another bite of her cupcake.

"I know you're worried about me, and I love you for it," Joss said with a smile, squeezing Emilia's forearm. "But he's not a guy you fall in love with. Lust, oh yeah, I'm all over it. But I've already loved someone who didn't love me back. Why would I willingly go into that again?"

"I suppose that's very true," Emilia conceded. "I guess you never know, the unimaginable could happen and he could fall head over heels in love with you, and you could live happily ever after."

Joss reached for her cupcake and laughed. "Now that is a true fantasy if I've ever heard one."

"Why a fantasy?" Emilia nibbled her cupcake with a frown. "You're beautiful, smart, and clearly someone he hasn't been able to forget. Don't overlook the fact that he wanted more of you, too."

Joss pondered before deciding not to look too deeply into it. She couldn't go there. Not even once. She couldn't ever cross that emotional line and examine why Maddox did the things he did. Hell, she simply didn't want to. No strings. That's where her happiness lay. "He came back looking for more because we had incredible sex together."

"Are you sure that's all it is?"

"Very sure. That's all he can give me." She peeled back the wrapper on her cupcake and, before taking a bite, said, "He's clear about that, Emilia, and I believe him." She swallowed then added, "Besides, sleeping with him is one thing. Dating him would complicate everything. First, one of us would have to transfer to a new division to avoid the conflict. Then, there would need to be a whole lot of explaining from Maddox about how he'd gotten involved with me in the first place. Not to mention, I'd likely have to lie to ensure that he didn't face suspension." Her head hurt even thinking about it. "It's a mess that I don't want, and I can only imagine he doesn't want it either."

"Yeah," Emilia said, licking the chocolate icing off her finger, "but sometimes, relationships are messy before they get all neat and tidy. All I'm saying is that you're both taking big risks here. Him, professionally. You, emotionally. I guess I'm wondering why either of you would

take such big risks just for sex?”

Joss nearly allowed herself to fall into that train of thought, wondering about all the emotional intricacies, before she stopped herself. “Because the sex is amazing,” was the only answer she felt needed to be said.

Emilia gave a look like she didn’t believe Joss and lifted up the final piece of her cupcake. “Well, then, here’s to many more emotionally unavailable orgasms and sexy secrets.”

Joss laughed. “Hear, hear.”

* * * *

Maddox had planned to head to the gym for his usual workout after his shift ended. Tonight, he opted to take a run later in the evening on the Burke-Gilman Trail. An invite from Grey’s mother, Anne Crawford, wasn’t something he could decline. When he’d arrived at the Lake Washington south shore mansion belonging to Grey’s mother, he found Grey waiting for him in the kitchen with a cold beer in his hand and one ready for Maddox. Anne was nowhere in sight, nor was Grey’s sister, Riley. The house hadn’t always been so grand or modern, but it had been a house handed down in Grey’s father’s family for generations. The Crawfords had renovated the home years back when Grey was at the University of Washington.

“Are you seeing Joss again tonight?” Grey asked, taking a seat in the chair across from Maddox at the kitchen table.

Maddox shook his head and leaned back in his chair, raising his beer bottle to his mouth. Before he took a gulp, he said, “I decided tonight I’d much rather see your pretty face.”

Grey snorted. “No, really, you’ve already ended it? I gotta say, I’m surprised. You seemed to enjoy this one, more than any of the others.”

“I do enjoy her,” Maddox admitted, placing the bottle back down on the natural wood table. He hadn’t intended to tell Grey much about Joss, but being his closest buddy, he knew he’d have to tell him that she was still in his life. “And, no, it’s not over. She’s taken on a couple of night shifts. I’m seeing her again on Wednesday.”

A perk of his job was to always be on the day shift, but it annoyed him—and his greedy cock—greatly to not see her for the next couple of nights. She’d been in his thoughts all day today. Before the idea could arise that he should text her to somehow squeeze in a quick visit, he stopped it. Surely, he could go a couple of days without seeing her again.

“Well, that’s a pity,” Grey muttered, reaching for his cell phone in his pocket and giving it a quick look before glancing at Maddox again. “Though, it’s good to see you’re keeping this one around for longer than a night.”

“Don’t get your hopes up.” Maddox paused as the front door opened and closed. “You know this won’t last long.”

“Such a shame that is, though...” Grey fired off either a text or email before he gave Maddox a knowing look. “I thought this one might be different. You’ve got a certain sparkle in your eye.”

“My eyes are not sparkling.” Maddox frowned.

Grey placed his phone back down on the table and smiled. “Oh, sure they are. They’re like twinkling stars in the sky.”

Maddox snorted, lifting his beer to his mouth. “Fuck off, Grey.”

“Language,” Anne said, entering the kitchen, giving both him and Grey a look. “Haven’t I taught you boys better?”

"Sorry, ma'am." Maddox narrowed his eyes at Grey before rising and kissing Anne on the cheek, Grey laughing the entire time. "You are looking lovelier than ever, Anne." She was the mother every kid wanted. There wasn't a day that Maddox came over when there weren't fresh cookies in the cookie jar. "Did you get your hair done?"

"Just yesterday." She patted her short, shiny, dyed silver hair. "I'm not sure I like the style."

"It's beautiful." Maddox smiled. "Don't change a thing."

"Suck up," Grey whispered beneath his breath.

"Ignore him," Anne said, taking Maddox's chin in her hand and looking at him intently.

"You look happy. This girl who is making your eyes sparkle, she must be good for you."

Maddox sighed and gave Grey, who was now grinning from ear-to-ear, another glare.

"Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome," Grey said with a firm nod, glancing back to his cell phone.

"Tell me about her," said Anne, drawing Maddox's attention to her while she frowned at Grey. "Greyson, don't make me tell you again. Put that cell phone away. It does not belong at the dinner table."

Grey's sigh was even deeper than Maddox's as he tucked his phone into his pocket. "Yes, Maddox," Grey said, lifting his head. "Do tell my mother all about the apple of your eye."

Maddox turned to Anne, who awaited his answer. Christ, he couldn't lie to this woman. She'd been so very kind to him over the years, inviting him into her house for every holiday and for any celebration after his father went into the home. The Crawfords were the closest thing he had to a family now. "Her name is Joss O'Neil. There isn't much to tell because we're not serious."

"Maybe you should be serious with her," Anne said, moving into the kitchen toward the stove. "If she's causing such a kerfuffle in your life that Greyson is commenting on it, she must be special."

"She's not causing a...*kerfuffle*," he corrected gently, returning to his chair. "She's a very nice young woman who I'm getting to know."

"Yes, Maddox," Grey said seriously. "Maybe you should make this relationship a little more serious."

When Anne turned toward the cupboards and grabbed some bowls, Maddox flipped off Grey before Anne glanced back to them.

Grey chuckled.

Maddox focused on Anne and said, "Whatever you've cooked smells delicious."

"It's beef stew. I know how much you love it." She began scooping the stew out into the bowls before returning to the table and placing his bowl in front of him. The twinkle in her eye told him he wasn't getting off that easily. "There must be more you can tell me about this young lady. Grey has been a bachelor for so long now—"

"It's been a month, Mother," Grey muttered.

She shot him a little glare, hands on her hips. "A month that you're not finding yourself a beautiful bride who can give me cute grandkids."

Maddox grinned and reached for his spoon, glad Grey now had his turn.

Anne tsked. "Don't look at him like that, Maddox." She shook her finger at him, and Maddox wiped the smile off his face, as she added, "Just because I didn't give birth to you doesn't mean I don't expect the same from you. I don't care which of you gives me grandkids, I want them, and before you all turn forty would be much appreciated."

Maddox smiled softly, feeling bad for her. He'd never give her what she asked for. A wife?

Children? *No.* That domesticated life wasn't for him. But Anne was sweet to include him in the conversation. "You always have Riley to make those dreams happen for you."

"She's only twenty-seven. She still has time," Anne continued, moving to the stove to scoop up some stew for Grey. "Tell me all there is to know about Joss."

When she returned to the table, placing Grey's bowl in front of him, Maddox obliged her. "She's a cop, too, and sweet like you. I'm sure you'd adore her."

Grey picked up his spoon. "That sounds like you plan to bring her over to meet Mom."

"Oh, yes, what a wonderful idea," Anne exclaimed, taking a seat next to Grey after fetching herself a bowl of stew.

Maddox heaved a sigh and shoved some beef and potatoes into his mouth to avoid a conversation he didn't want to have. It wasn't like he was some fucked-up guy that didn't understand *why* men liked commitment. Of course, he got it. That lifestyle simply wasn't for him. His father had shown him what love and commitment could do to someone. He remembered the sadness his father had carried for many years after his mother left. Maddox didn't want that type of headache in his life.

To change the subject, Maddox asked Anne, "Have you been enjoying the Bridge Club still?" She'd only recently become a member after she'd decided one of the women at her knitting group hated her.

"Very much so," Anne said, blowing on the stew on her spoon. "The ladies were so very welcoming, and we're all going to see a musical this weekend."

"That's great to hear." Maddox smiled, happy for her. Grey's father had died ten years ago from a heart attack. The man had smoked a pack of cigarettes a day and didn't watch what he ate. It wasn't a big surprise to anyone when he died, even if he did pass away in his fifties.

"So, more about this woman..." Anne pressed.

Maddox frowned down at his bowl. Weren't they done with this? "I'm afraid there's nothing more to tell."

"Are you seeing her often?" Anne asked.

"No."

"He's lying to you, Mom," Grey stated with a full mouth. "He's seen *a lot* of her recently."

Maddox lowered his spoon into his bowl and glared at the shit-stirrer. Payback would be a bitch.

Anne didn't pay any attention to Maddox's glare and said in her sweetest voice, "I'm sure she's already madly in love with you."

"Actually"—he softened his expression when he addressed Anne—"she isn't." That's what he liked about Joss, even if he still felt a smidgen of concern when it came to that subject. She seemed too good, too sweet, too full of heart to be a woman not out to find love. He trusted that she knew exactly what she was doing, and he only hoped that it didn't come back to bite him in the ass later.

"You must be wrong," Anne said, fixing the flower brooch on her purple sweater. "How could she not fall head over heels for you? Maybe she needs to hear you say you love her first. You know us ladies like a confident man."

"Mother," Grey muttered, scraping up the remainder of stew in his bowl.

Anne gave Grey another look and then said to Maddox, "All I'm saying is, maybe it's about time you make this woman a little something more than a fleeting romance."

"Please," said Grey, rising and pushing his chair under the table before picking up his bowl. "Maddox only believes in *fleeting romances*."

“Don’t listen to him.” Anne rose and came to Maddox’s side. She placed a hand on his shoulder, giving him a warm smile. “Do not become a man who ends up alone.” She pinched his cheek, giving him her cutest grin. “You’re too charming and handsome for that.”

He didn’t respond, not having a suitable response. While Anne moved back to the stove and turned it off, he stared at her back. He *was* that guy. He liked being alone. He liked life uncomplicated. That wasn’t something he could change about himself.

“Believe me, Mom,” Grey added, scooping some more stew out of the pot. “He’s going to be that old guy whose most beloved thing is his recliner.”

Maddox snorted. “You know that I’m already in love with my recliner.”

Grey glanced over his shoulder and grinned. “You’re right, I do know that.”

“I wouldn’t speak too soon, Greyson,” Anne admonished, pinching his cheek now. “At the rate you’re going, you’ll be sitting in the chair next to him.”

Maddox barked a laugh.

Anne always did get the last word in, and it was usually the wisest.

Chapter 8

The following days were a bit of blur, with Joss taking on two night shifts. By late afternoon on Wednesday—and after three cups of coffee—she began to feel normal again. She drove through Seattle’s busy downtown, tapping her fingers against her steering wheel to the beat of the soft rock playing through her radio.

When the car in front of her slowed, her cell phone rang from her purse resting on the passenger seat. She contemplated not answering it. Though she quickly thought better of it as she glanced away from the taillights of the car in front of her to her car’s dashboard touch screen, seeing both that it was 4:00 p.m. and that her parents were calling for their weekly chat.

With everything that’d happened lately, she’d forgotten about their call. For a second, guilt crashed over her in a thick wave until she let herself off the hook. She was on her way to Maddox’s, and lately, he seemed to steal up all the space in her mind. She rolled to a stop at the red light, her windshield wipers rhythmically sweeping away the steady rain, and she clicked the button on her steering wheel, enabling the Bluetooth. “Hello.”

“*Bonjour*,” Mom quipped.

“Oh dear Lord,” Joss said with a laugh. “I seriously hope you don’t try to speak French in front of others.” Knowing her mother, she’d walk around with a dictionary in her fanny pack.

“Of course, I do,” Mom defended, an obvious smile in her voice. “Besides, my French isn’t that terrible, is it?”

“Yes, it’s completely horrible. You shouldn’t try it at all,” Joss joked.

“Leave your mother alone,” Dad interjected, playfully defending his wife. “She sounds lovely, and people seem to understand us.”

“Well, that might not be totally true,” Mom added. “I think they feel sorry for us.”

“There is that,” Dad mused.

Joss smiled and watched the pedestrians stride by the hood of her blue Jetta. Some with umbrellas. Some getting soaking wet and not seeming to care much about the rain. “How’s Paris?” she asked.

“So romantic,” Mom said with a dreamy sigh. “You must come see this place, Jossie. You would love it.”

“Maybe one day,” Joss said, not sure exactly when that day would be. First, she lived and breathed becoming a police officer. Now she had a job to think about. Besides, trips were expensive, and she never liked taking a handout from her parents. They’d both worked hard. She wanted them to live it up, not spoil her. “Are you still sightseeing?” She stepped on the gas pedal, slowly getting back up to speed.

Mom answered her. “That’s all we’ve been doing. There’s so much to see here. We’ve been around to see some lovely churches, the Louvre Museum. Tomorrow, we’re doing the Seine river cruise and lunch at the Eiffel Tower.”

“Man, that sounds amazing.”

“Beyond amazing,” Dad agreed.

Joss smiled, glad for them. Her parents deserved these trips of a lifetime they took every year, and she was proud they’d killed their bucket list instead of sitting at home spending their days around Seattle. “Make sure to take lots of pictures so I can see it all when you get back.”

Dad said, “We’re posting some to Facebook tomorrow. Have you been following us on

there?”

“Yep.” *Sort of.* Work and Maddox had been filling her spare time. She hadn’t had time for Facebook. “I’ll keep an eye out for them. Can’t wait to see what you post.”

She took her first right, stopping for an elderly lady crossing the street where she shouldn’t be, when Dad asked, “What’s in the plans for tonight? Are you working?”

“Not tonight, no. I’ve just finished a couple of night shifts.”

“Brutal,” Dad commented.

“Very,” she agreed, tapping her fingers impatiently against the steering wheel, watching for the lady to inch her way across the road with her walker. “Luckily, I have tomorrow and Friday off, then I’m back to work on Saturday morning and then off again on Sunday and Monday before going into a long stretch of shifts.” She lifted her foot off the brake and pressed the gas, slowly getting back up to speed once more.

“It won’t always be like this, Jossie,” Dad said softly. “You need to put in your time, and then you’ll get the good steady shifts.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” Joss said, mainly because her life wasn’t all that bad right now. Sure, the hours sucked and switching from day shifts to night shifts was hell. But she had a lot to look forward to, including some filthy, dirty sex with Maddox in a few minutes.

As if Mom had read her mind, she asked, “Nothing else new or exciting?” Which in Motherland meant, *are you dating?*

Joss considered telling them that she was seeing someone, so they didn’t think she was a hermit, but they’d never understand if she said that she and Maddox weren’t serious. Answering endless questions wasn’t in Joss’s plans for the night. “Nope, same old, same old.” And to get the subject shifted quickly, she added, “On Friday, I’m going to Jeremy Walsh’s retirement party.”

Dad piped up then. “It’s about damn time he’s getting outta there. Say hello to the old guy for me.”

“I’ll be sure to send Mr. Walsh your regards,” Joss said with a smile, slowing down as the car in front of her turned right. “But maybe I’ll leave off the ‘old guy’ part.”

“Don’t you dare,” Dad said with a laugh.

When he stopped, Mom added in her sweet, soothing voice, “Okay, my darling, we’ll let you get back to things. We’re thinking we’ll be coming back in few weeks’ time.”

“Send me flight details when you have them, so I know when to pick you up from the airport.”

“Will do,” Dad said.

“Love you, Jossie,” Mom said.

“Love you, too. Bye.”

Joss stopped at the red light and pressed the button on her steering wheel, ending the conversation. The radio came back to life. She continued tapping her fingers against the steering wheel to the beat of the music, her mind going to Maddox. She hadn’t seen him since Sunday night—two whole days of hungering for his touch. Even their schedules didn’t cross over, and she never saw him at the station, not a single time.

By Tuesday night, when she hadn’t even gotten a text from him, she’d thought their fling had run its course, but when she’d returned home this morning, she’d found another gift box waiting for her on her front porch, along with a note giving the time she was meant to arrive at his house.

Now, the lingerie he’d bought her was on beneath her dress as she drove to his house, rested,

ready, and eager.

What did he plan for tonight? More wax? More rope?

A loud honk startled her, and she snapped her eyes up to the rearview mirror, seeing someone flipping her off. She stepped on the gas, finding, at some point, the light had turned green.

For the rest of the drive to Maddox's, she forced herself not to think about the sexy night ahead or the slow heat building between her thighs. Only when she pulled into his driveway did she allow her mind to return to him. Her fishnet stockings felt tight around her thighs, and the garter clips still felt attached, but she almost wished she could look herself over before seeing him again, make sure everything was perfectly in place.

She exited her car and shut the door, and then her heels clicked against the driveway as she approached his red brick, two-story house. Before she could even get there, the door opened, and her mouth went dry.

Maddox filled the doorway in a dark pair of blue jeans and nothing else. No shoes, no socks, no shirt... *I am one lucky girl.*

Ripple after ripple, his body exuded masculinity. Her fingers twitched to explore him, to admire the body he clearly spent time maintaining. "Hi," she said when she reached him.

"Hi."

The slight curve to his mouth was worthy of salivation. He stepped back from the doorway, letting her enter. He shut the door behind her, then turned to her, folding his arms. "Ready to play?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." She grinned.

He looked her over from head-to-toe, then arched that left eyebrow. "You have far too many clothes on, and I'd sure like to see the gift I delivered to you today."

Slowly and playfully, she removed her dress until it fluttered to the floor, leaving her in the black, lacy lingerie.

He stayed where he was, those intense eyes watching her very carefully. "The bra, too, please."

Her belly quivered with butterflies, and a hot shiver slid through her at the power his stare contained. She reached back, unhooking her bra and letting the girls free.

When her arms lowered to her sides, he approached, glancing at her taut nipples with that sexy smile before looking her in the eye. He took her chin in his strong grip. "I want you to know that it's taking all of my strength not to fuck you right here, right now. You've not been far from my mind these past couple of days. This view..." He glanced her over from head-to-toe once more before his heated eyes lifted to hers again. "I've missed it."

She inhaled sharply. "I'm sure the lingerie helps. Thank you for the gift. It's beautiful."

His eyes narrowed. "Believe me, it's the woman in the lingerie that makes this view so stunning."

She might have thought a little bit about what that statement meant if he hadn't sealed his mouth over hers. Good God, the man could kiss. His hands slid across her face, his thick, hard body pressed against her, his tongue dove perfectly into her mouth, tangling with hers.

Only when she became breathless and rubbed herself against his erection did he break the kiss with a grin. "Impatient tonight, hmm?"

"Very," she admitted.

"Not yet," he murmured, taking her hand. "I have a surprise for you."

He led her into his living room on the right, and the moment he stepped aside, letting her see

the room, her breath became trapped in her throat. She scanned the space from left to right, finding candles atop every hard surface. Too many candles to count, and since the curtains were drawn, the flames lit the room in a beautiful, romantic glow.

"I gotta be honest here," she said, glancing over the white taper candles, pillars, votives...amazed by what he'd done. "I've had a guy take me to dinner, buy me flowers, run me a bath even, but this..." She glanced at him, finding his expression soft and gentle, "...is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me."

He smiled, but that was his only answer.

Not that she'd expected him to comment on such a statement, and instantly, she reprimanded herself. That was emotional talk. She couldn't go there. He didn't want her to, and she didn't want to either.

She pressed her lips tightly together and watched him as he moved to the stereo next to the fireplace. There, he turned on the power, blasting electronic music through the living room.

When he turned to her again, she found intensity in him that she'd never seen before, and somehow, the music matched his mood. Sure, he could've picked something sensual, but that didn't seem to fix Maddox. The hard beats and rhythmic drums and deep bass sent goose bumps crawling over her flesh.

Though maybe it was simply the change in him causing that. Because now she saw something different there—something freer, more raw, more powerful. She saw *him*, without shields or concerns over her, and she felt something release within.

His strength, his care, his affection, she melted into it all.

He took a step forward and caught her chin in his grip. "What do you want tonight, Joss?" "You."

* * * *

Something had changed in her. Maddox could feel it right down to his bones, and he sensed his reaction to the way she looked at him now, the softening of the barriers he kept up. Joss stood there, bared and available, a beauty waiting for him to do any filthy, dirty thing he wanted. There in her eyes, he saw the sweet and tender moment when she'd surrendered her body to him. That trust she'd hand-delivered him warmed something dead and cold within.

Locked into her request, he held out his hand to her, and she tangled her fingers with his. He led her to the table where he'd set out the tray of toys. "Any objections to what I've decided for you tonight?" he asked, glancing down at her next to him.

Her long hair slid along her shoulder when she glanced at the black leather flogger and the red-and-black leather cuffs before she shook her head at him. "No objections."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "What was that?"

"No objections, sir." She gave a sweet smile.

He grinned and winked. "Very nice." Drawn into her smile, he brushed his knuckles across her cheeks, enjoying the way her eyes lit up when he touched her—so full of life. Determined to let the games begin, he grabbed the hair elastic and hairbrush off the antique tray and then moved in behind her. "To your knees, sweetheart."

She faced the fireplace and slowly slid to her knees. He got right to work, moving in behind her and placing the elastic between his lips as he began to brush her hair. She inhaled and exhaled with slow breaths, hands resting on her thighs. When he could easily run his fingers through her tresses, and all the knots were out, he began French braiding.

When he reached the end of Joss's hair, he fastened the elastic then tucked the braid over her shoulder. He liked the little shiver she gave him as he dragged his fingers along the long line of her neck, and his dick throbbed in agreement. The heat between them couldn't be ignored.

Ready to get started, he returned to her front, and she ran her hand down the braid, making him smile. "Surprised I can do such a thing?"

"Yes," she said with a laugh. "Very."

He'd learned the skill from spending so much time with Grey's sister, Riley, over the years. She'd always begged him to paint her nails and do all types of girly things. Something he'd never been able to refuse her. But now he only thought of one woman as he dragged his thumb across Joss's bottom lip, realizing how much he liked surprising her. Most of all, he liked seeing her smile.

With those gorgeous, heated eyes of hers on him, she sucked the tip of his thumb into her mouth before he released her, moving back to the tray again. He reached for the dark red-and-black cuffs with the soft inner lining. "Tonight, I'd prefer silence," he told her, stroking the softness of the skin on her inner arms then placing one cuff around her wrist and fastening the buckle. "The only words I want to hear from that pretty little mouth are 'Yes, sir' or our established safeword if something feels wrong. Clear?"

"Yes, sir."

Using gentle fingers and slow movements, drawing the moment out, he attached the other cuff, nice and tight, and then slid his fingers into the O-rings. "Come up now." While she rose, he examined her nipples, finding them taut. He doubted that was due to coldness in the room and assumed he'd find her cunt drenched.

Most women didn't become aroused by the anticipation of being taken, and he was only too glad that Joss reveled in these quiet, intimate moments as he did. While he kept his fingers tucked into the rings, his cock throbbed as he led her to the fireplace. Right above the mantle, he'd placed a D-ring, keeping it hidden from visitors who would never understand his sexual preferences.

While he clipped both of her wrists to the D-ring, she stayed perfectly silent. Even as he adjusted her arms straight above her head, keeping her face protected, she never made a single comment. He liked that about her. Most women talked when told not to. And the silence both calmed and warmed him, oddly more comfortable than any silence before.

Done with binding her, he stepped back, admiring his work. Her skin, her curves, her round bottom, all glowing with the beautiful warm hue of the candles, was a sight he'd not soon forget. He dragged his fingernails down her spine until he reached her ass, where he squeezed each cheek, warming her up.

She moaned, and he smiled, speaking only to ensure she felt safe. "I've never seen anything as beautiful as you bound like this, sugar."

Again, she moaned, and the desire within confirmed her comfort.

Pleased by her reaction to how he'd placed her, he ran his hand over her warm bottom before he reached for the flogger. He stepped in behind her and dragged the leather tails across her creamy, smooth back, showing her what he intended to treat her to tonight.

She wiggled her bottom, and he liked how willing she was, especially never having experienced a flogging before. That show of trust weaved around him, getting right down deep inside. He put a little distance between them, gazing over her glowing flesh, then he flicked the leather out gently, introducing her to the idea and the sensation. Her harsh breath spread out into the air when he slid his hand over where he'd struck, letting her know that his safe touch would

always follow. Again, he took a step back, putting some space between them, then he tested her. Each flick of the leathers came a little bit harder until he saw her flinch, noticed the level at which she felt pain.

Now armed with the knowledge he needed to understand her, his canvas to paint, he found the rhythm of the music. Using a figure-eight pattern, he began flogging her, never going too hard, warming up the flesh that he liked seeing turn a pinkish hue.

As the minutes drew on and her moans deepened, he let himself become lost in the dance between them, connecting with her on levels that fulfilled him. A good flogging often felt like a massage, and he sensed her relax, could see the moment when she went into that quiet space of her mind where thoughts and worries didn't exist and even time stopped.

He let her stay there for a while, allowing her to enjoy the relief that a flogging brought, and even enjoyed the reprieve himself. Over and over again, he shifted back and forth on his heels sending the flogger out to her. *Thud...thud...thud...* the leather met her flesh, while the hypnotic music released all his tension as he danced with the flogger, setting them both free.

When her upper back and bottom had turned a pretty pink, he lowered the flogger. While he could've continued, as he enjoyed being connected to her this way, the relaxation didn't fulfill the intensity he craved to create. Before he moved on, he tucked the flogger under his arm and closed the distance between them, stroking her back. She startled and gasped, and he smiled. Apparently, she'd gone in deep. There was something very special in how easily she trusted him. Something he wanted to taste again and again.

He leaned in and placed his lips against her warm shoulder while he removed her panties. Feeling her quivering beneath his mouth, he slid his tongue from one shoulder to the other while he reached around and stroked her nipples. Both were erect in firm points. Curious now, he slid one hand down to the junction between her thighs and he groaned at what he discovered. A soaking wet pussy.

To show her how aroused she truly was, he slid his fingers across her drenched slit then gathered up her juices, circling her opening. She moaned, dropping her head back against his shoulder, and he rewarded her with a firm stroke of her engorged clit. Her body responded beautifully, instantly quivering, eager to blow.

He wasn't ready, not nearly done with her, and again, stepped back. Even with the space between them, the air felt charged, fueled with intensity. He waited, leaving her standing there to wonder what he planned to do before he sent the flogger hard onto her ass. He dragged the tails through his hand then sent it out to her again.

And again.

And again.

He never let up, he never stopped. Not until he reached that level where she'd earlier responded to pain. She moaned loudly and arched, and he heard her plea for more.

The music sped up, the strings of the violins being played faster and faster, and his flogging naturally followed along. Her skin flushed deeper now, a perfect shade of red on her bottom. The glow of the candles warmed the color of her skin. His canvas turning out far better than he'd imagined, his cock strained painfully to blow. The dance continued, his heart rate increased, his chest rose and fell with his heavy breaths. Only when he noticed her quivering legs did he stop. He stepped in behind her and cupped her neck, feeling her hammering pulse beneath his fingers. He slid his touch down her chest, delighted by the dampness of her sweaty flesh before he moved his hand around the warmth of her bottom. The heat against his palm brought urgency.

Though, again, he needed more. His soul wanted to claim her.

He knew he couldn't be gentle when he dropped the flogger onto the tray and grabbed the condom. Not with this beauty bound and hot and ready for him to own. He returned to her back and opened his jeans, letting them fall to his knees. Glancing over her glowing flesh, he sheathed himself in the condom. He grabbed the base of his cock, spread her cheeks, feeling the warmth of her bottom and entered her slick heat in one swift stroke, right to the hilt.

She gasped and rose on her tiptoes. He grabbed her waist, holding her to him, as he began pumping his hips. In and out, his hard cock thrust into her, straining to blow, and her inner walls clamped against him, wildly begging for a release. Skin slapped against skin. His pelvis slapping her warm bottom that he'd awakened over and over again until he felt her early quivers.

Her climax arrived with such intensity that it threatened to overtake him with little warning. Again, she rose on her tiptoes, her inner muscles squeezing his cock hard enough to make him cross-eyed. She went silent for a long moment before her scream of release blasted across him, drawing up his balls. And when she exploded, he slammed forward, roaring his release.

Time got away from him as he rested his head against her neck, catching his breath. Only when her soft whisper broke the silence did his senses return to him. Even then, it took him a minute to make out the words she'd whispered. "Thank you, sir."

Something changed in him then. Something in her voice sounded so very meaningful. Something that made him not want to hear those words, said in that husky tone, from anyone else.

Something that screamed *mine*.

* * * *

Once Joss could properly walk again, she went in search of food. Apparently, orgasms forced the body to refuel. When all she found was protein and vegetables in Maddox's fridge, she suggested going out. Of course, she'd expected his refusal, but she'd been armed and ready to win.

Twenty minutes later, she watched him slide into the booth across from her in the quiet pizzeria downtown, and she couldn't help but smile. She'd never seen anyone look quite as uncomfortable and miserable all at the same time.

"This feels like a date," Maddox grumbled, putting a voice to his unhappiness. "I'm still trying to figure out how in the hell you got me here."

She fought a laugh, passing him a menu. Perhaps some women would back down in the face of a growly man, but she'd grown up around cops. She'd been around strong personalities her entire life. "No, this isn't a date," she said, hoping to show him where her mind was at, which wasn't on relationship goals. "This is us getting the best pizza in Seattle because I'm starving and you had nothing to eat at your house." She grabbed the menu, giving it a once-over. "Besides, it can't be a date because I know it's *not* a date." She lowered the menu and looked at him, finding his intense eyes fixated on her. "You know, just because we're friends-with-benefits doesn't mean we can't still be friends and get to know each other a little bit better. Sometimes, friends have dinner together."

He snorted, not seeming overly thrilled about being here, but finally heaved a long sigh and glanced at his menu. "I'm not sure I agree with you, but somehow, you possess powers to coerce me that I have no shields against."

She grinned behind her menu, proud she'd gotten him to do the unthinkable. Dear God, going for pizza wasn't a marriage proposal. Obviously, he hadn't had many female friends over

the years. Which only told her how much she didn't know about Maddox. Something she intended to change tonight.

Before she could dig a bit deeper into the complex mind of Maddox Hunt, the pretty blonde waitress came over. Her top, a little too tight, the V in her shirt, a little too low, and her skinny jeans looked painted on.

"What can I get ya?" she asked Maddox, holding onto her pen and notepad.

"Iced tea for me," Joss told the waitress loudly, watching the chick now openly ogling Maddox. She shook her head and glanced at the man of the hour, asking, "How about a medium pizza with all the toppings?"

He nodded. "A pint, too."

"Perfect," the waitress practically purred at him, gathering their menus in a way that put her cleavage far too close to Maddox's face. "I'll be back with those drinks shortly."

When the waitress leaned away, Joss frowned at her, but she noticed his eyes were on her, not on the waitress's girls. Glad for that, and as the waitress took off to fetch their orders, Joss set her focus on Maddox, intent to peel back his complicated layers. In a non-threatening, non-pushy way, of course. "So," she said, lacing her fingers together on top of the table. "Tell me more about your family."

"Why?" He leaned back against the booth's shiny red cushion and folded his arms.

"Uh, because I want to know more about you?" she scoffed, shaking her head at him. "Is that really so weird or so terrible?"

He regarded her a minute, obviously deciding if he wanted to allow this to happen. Apparently, he did, since he answered, "I'm an only child and pretty much on my own. I have an uncle who lives in Vancouver. I think I saw him maybe three times growing up, and haven't seen him in the last ten years at all."

"And what about your parents?" she asked.

"There was only my father and me."

The waitress returned with their drinks then, and Joss ignored Ms. Googly Eyes, keeping the focus right where she wanted it. On Maddox. When the waitress left the table again, Joss asked, "You didn't have a mom growing up?"

"No."

She noted the tension around his eyes, even if she could tell he fought hard not to react to the question. Now, wondering if she should leave this type of questioning alone, she pulled her drink closer to her and held the straw, taking a sip of her iced tea. Once she'd swallowed the cool, sweet tea, she decided to press on. "Feel free to tell me to stuff it, but do you mind telling me what happened to her?"

Maddox took hold of his frosty beer glass, and before taking a sip, he replied, "She left when I was four and never came back." Then he downed a quarter of his beer.

Joss bristled, disbelieving of what she heard. To leave your child? How could a mother do that? There had to be more to the story. "Why did she leave? Did your parent's divorce or something?"

He regarded her again and then sighed, lowering his glass to the table. "My father never told me why."

"Really?" That made no sense. "Your father never shared with you why your mother just picked up and left and never came back?"

"We're men," was his dry explanation as he wiped the frothy beer off his lips. "We don't sit around and talk like you and I are doing now. Which only reminds me why I don't go for dinner

with women, by the way.”

She chuckled, not deterred. “Oh, come on, it’s not so bad.”

He arched that left brow at her. “Discussing the past only leads to memories of things you can’t change, so why even go there?” He had a point, so she stayed silent as he continued.

“Besides, my father hated her. Why would I bring her up?”

Interesting. She took a sip of her drink again, studying him. Maddox was tough and brooding, all muscles and confidence, not a hint of sadness about what had happened to him during his younger years. He also didn’t pity himself or have any serious emotional scars she could see. Regardless of the childhood he’d been handed by having a shitty mother, he’d created a pretty damn good life for himself.

Though realizing that also made her conclude something else. “I guess I can see now why you hate commitment.”

His left eyebrow arched again. “How is what I told you related at all to commitment?”

“Of course, it’s related,” she said, waiting for a couple to stride by their table before adding, “Being in a committed relationship isn’t important to you because you’ve never seen what happens when two people choose to love each other forever.”

She paused, watching his reaction to what she’d said.

His jaw muscles clenched twice, telling her the subject was a touchy one. “I take it you have seen that?” he asked.

She sighed, glad she hadn’t overstepped, and circled the straw in her glass around an ice cube. “Yup, I have *those* parents. They’re still grossly in love, even after twenty-eight years of marriage.”

Maddox didn’t respond to that, but she wondered if he would have if the pizza hadn’t come at that moment. The waitress again went out of her way to get Maddox to notice her chest when she placed the pizza near him. Joss didn’t mind one bit that Maddox stared down at the pizza, unmoving, even if she wondered what lay so heavily on his mind.

To keep things light, Joss rubbed her hands together. “See, this is so much better than broccoli and chicken.” She reached for a piece of pizza, placing it on a plate and sliding that one to Maddox before taking a piece for herself, ready to dig in. Cheese, bread, meat, and grease...and a huge orgasm earlier—life had never been better. Even now, she noticed how her bottom still felt warm. She never would’ve believed that a flogging could feel so relaxing, and she didn’t know if it was the orgasm alone, but she felt lit up inside.

She took a big bite of the pizza, moaning when the grease hit her lips, figuring they’d eat in silence, though Maddox surprised her.

“It didn’t matter, you know.”

She glanced up at him through her lashes, swallowing her pizza. His soft eyes were fixated on her face. “What didn’t matter?” she asked.

“Not having a mother,” he said, reaching for two more pieces of pizza and placing them onto his plate. Apparently, the one piece she’d given him wasn’t sufficient. And that didn’t surprise Joss. The man surely had a *large* appetite. He lifted his pizza to his mouth, and before taking a big bite said, “My father was enough.”

She wasn’t sure a mother’s love could ever be replaced, but she wasn’t going to tell Maddox that. It all began to make sense to her, though. Maddox didn’t want a girlfriend because he didn’t know what he was missing. He’d never had it, and he hadn’t witnessed a good relationship as a child. Heck, she understood the need to protect oneself. He left women before they could leave him. She got it. “Does your dad live here in Seattle?” she asked.

“Yeah, he does.”

She swallowed her bite, waiting for him to say more. When he didn’t, she asked, “He didn’t remarry at all?”

“No.”

“Is there a reason for that?”

“Never asked him.”

Ever the more curious. “Hmmm...”

Maddox paused with the pizza halfway to his lips, and the side of his mouth curved. “And what exactly does that ‘hmmm’ mean?”

“Oh, nothing really.” She reached for her straw and took a sip of her drink before replying. “Just figuring you out is all.”

“Perfect,” he said, grabbing his napkin and wiping his face. “So now we can reach the point where you think you can fix whatever is wrong with me and somehow correct the fact that I don’t want to be in a committed relationship.”

She noted the dry tone of his voice, even the irritation in it. “Well,” she said in a light voice, hoping he’d truly hear her, “from the way I see it, you’re honorable, straightforward, hardworking, caring toward other’s needs, and strong. I’m not exactly sure what needs fixing.”

Maddox lowered his pizza and stared into her eyes intently. The seconds drew on as his brows furrowed. Her body heated, both under the powerful command of his regard and in all the things he wasn’t saying out loud but she could hear anyway.

“But who am I to say,” she added quickly to break the silence, realizing she was making things a little too emotional. “I’m nowhere near perfect, so I’m probably not the best judge of someone’s character anyway.”

He didn’t reply, instead he gathered up his last piece of pizza. He ate the entire slice in silence before he grabbed his napkin, wiping his hands, looking at her again. “You’re wrong, you know.”

“Wrong?”

He pushed his plate away and stared at her with those stern eyes. “You’re the perfect *you*. The only you in this world. It doesn’t get more perfect than that.”

“Oh, you’d better be careful,” she said seriously, “I might start thinking you’re capable of being loving.”

He barked out a laugh then leaned away. “You’re right. You’re a terrible judge of character.”

Chapter 9

The next morning, Maddox awoke with a jolt. Fully aware that something was different, he snapped his eyes open and turned his head on the pillow. Joss lay next to him, snoring softly. The sun beamed through the window, casting a warm glow onto her bare thigh sticking out of the dark gray duvet. Apparently, after he'd taken her again last night, he'd fallen asleep.

That never happened. Women never stayed the night. Ever. He made sure of it. He stared at her, his gut twisting as he realized how many rules he was unconsciously breaking with her. She crashed through indestructible walls with very little effort, and without him even realizing she was doing it, and he didn't know how she fucking did that. Last night, he'd outright refused to go to dinner with her, and yet, somehow, she'd outsmarted him and basically dragged him there, making him feel like an idiot if he didn't follow.

Now, as she slept peacefully, her hair curtaining her face and her cheeks rosy, his mind churned. She lay there like a sleeping beauty for him to wake with a single kiss. He couldn't help but ask himself: *What is it about you?* Over and over again, he pondered the question, never getting a solid answer on why she captivated him so much.

He sighed, and that stirred her, causing her to rub her face into the pillow and open her eyes. She blinked twice. Then, "Hi."

"Good morning," he said, voice tight. His head spun. What in the hell was going on with him? Last night he'd enjoyed going for pizza with her. He liked listening to her speak and watching her smile. Most of all, he liked waking up next to her. And that was a problem.

He turned onto his side and stared into the gorgeous depths of her soulful eyes, wondering how she possessed the powers she did. What sort of trickery was she using to get him to respond to her in the ways she wanted, without him even thinking about putting up his shields to stop her?

She slowly lifted her head off the pillow, giving him a measured look. "Is everything all right?" she asked, her eyes searching his intently.

Her hair was a mess, sticking up wildly, and somehow, she looked more beautiful than ever. "You confuse me."

She considered him carefully for a good few seconds before she laughed easily, rolling onto her back. "Is that a good thing or a bad thing?"

He wasn't laughing, far from it. "I don't know," he answered honestly, trying to find solid ground again. He wasn't supposed to enjoy her this much. He was supposed to curb his hunger for her, not fall further, wanting even more of her than she'd originally offered.

Her smile remained when she tucked her hand between her face and the pillow, eyes even twinkling. "Well, Mr. Serious, if you don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing, then what *do* you know?"

"I know that I'm surprised I didn't ask you to leave last night." He hesitated, letting that truth sink in. He pushed the blanket farther down his torso, his skin flushing hot. "To be perfectly frank with you, I can't decide if your presence weakens me, or if you're smarter than me because you're crafty and getting me to do stuff I wouldn't normally do."

She burst out laughing and gave that sparkling smile he was growing fond of before replying. "Let's call it a little bit of both and leave it at that." She pushed against him, sending him onto his back as she climbed onto his lap. Her hair flowed around her face, her bare breasts

dangling deliciously in his face, all stealing the thoughts from his mind. "You need to calm down and stop being so serious. Let's stop thinking and stay focused on what really matters."

He fisted his hands, afraid if he touched her, he wouldn't be able to stop. "What matters?"

She gave him a sexy grin and purred, "Getting each other off, of course." She lifted her hips and found his morning wood and rubbed her warm and wet folds against him. Back and forth, she slid her damp sex from the base to tip, until he awakened, growing harder for her.

The tease was enough to remove his hesitations. With a groan, he slid his hands up her back, as she sealed her mouth across his, teasing him with her perfect taste.

"I know where we stand, Maddox," she whispered against his mouth, "and I know that waking up next to you this morning doesn't mean that I get to leave my toothbrush here." She rubbed her clit against his hard shaft and moaned, hot desire filling her eyes.

When she moved away, he watched as the little vixen reached for the condom he'd left on the bedside table, along with the two already opened wrappers from the night before. Playfully and with that sexy smile of hers, she opened the foil and quickly sheathed his cock in the latex. He groaned as she slid her hand over him, but soon, that pleasure was nothing compared to when she held onto his cock like she owned him and lowered down, slowly taking him in.

He grasped her hip, stopping her, using his other hand to cup her nape. "You want to fuck me, sweetheart?" he asked her.

She fought against his grip on her hip, rose a little, then swallowed him up again, her long hair curtaining her face, trailing along her breasts. "Please," she breathed.

Lost in those eyes, he slid his hand across her face, bringing her mouth back to his, and tangled his tongue with hers. He kissed her until she was breathless, then he said, "Go on then, darlin'. Show me what you've got."

Letting her control things for now, he released her, laying his head back onto the pillow, watching her bounce atop him. She grabbed the headboard, holding onto that as she worked herself over him, taking him in deeply. He groaned when she arched her back, shoving her breasts out to him.

He took her up on her offer and massaged each breast, a perfect handful with taut nipples, great for pinching. She began moaning, so he squeezed harder and harder until she dropped forward, her breath raspy by his ear. She placed her head into his neck and shifted her hips back and forth, and his hands came to her hips. Forward and backward, she rocked against him, harder and faster, until her inner walls hugged him tightly. In the pulsating grip of his shaft, he sensed her climax. Doing what he could to help, he assisted her, shifting her even faster now. His cock slapped the inside of her channel until she was gasping with pleasure, and he was moaning against her slick heat strangling him.

"Fuck, you're tight and wet," he growled, pinching his eyes shut as her pleasure brought his higher, flexing all his muscles. He dug his fingers into her hips and continued bouncing her atop him, feeling her wet pussy get wetter by the second until her slick juices spread out between them.

"Maddox," she gasped, straightening up, her hands coming to his chest. Her back angled, chin pointed to the ceiling. She rocked her hips, back and forth, her moans growing louder and louder. "Oh fuck, oh fuck," she whimpered.

Christ, he wanted her to get there too because her tight cunt drove him to places he never wanted to return from. Damn sure that he'd never get enough of her, he gripped her thighs and gave her the leverage she needed, and rocked her hard, ignoring the burning of his muscles. Over and over again, he helped her fuck him with force and speed. He slapped her ass hard, again and

again, until she no longer rocked her hips.

“Give me what I want,” he ordered with a bite to his voice, latching on to her nipple and sucking it deeply into his mouth.

She froze.

He saw the early quivers, the pink flushing over her chest. He heard the hitch of her breath before her high-pitched scream blasted through the air, and he’d had all the teasing he could stand. He grabbed her in his arms, flipped her onto her belly then reentered her from behind.

Those screams never stopped as he pinned her beneath him with one hand pressing against her shoulder blades. Urgent now to finish, he pounded into her. Wet, sucking noises filled the air until those sounds got louder, and he felt her inner walls clamp against his shaft like a vise grip, forcing him to thrust harder and grunt against the burn in his muscles. Sweat slicked his skin as he shut his eyes, focusing on his pleasure as he felt hers rise.

Unadulterated screams he’d never heard from her filled his ears, and those sweet, beautiful sounds drew him toward the edge. Fire burned in his body as he roared and blanketed her back, becoming hard as steel. The sound of her losing control, the scent of their sex, her damp, lush body beneath him, all drew up his balls. When she unraveled, thrashing against him and soaking him, he exploded, bucking and jerking, holding her tightly against him while his seed blasted into the condom.

By the time his climax released him, he’d collapsed onto her sweaty back, while her convulsing cunt continued to milk him, greedily draining every drop. Breathless, he slid off her onto his back, arms resting at his sides, legs sprawled out, while she lay face-first on the mattress, catching her breath.

Sometime later, she lifted her face off the bed. She looked well fucked with flushed cheeks and a perfect, satisfied smile. “Seriously, are you even real?” she asked with a soft laugh.

He chuckled, sliding her damp hair away from his face. “What?”

“Honestly,” she said, her head stuck to the mattress, apparently unable to move. “Emilia and I were joking that you were a Sex God, but I’m actually starting to think there might be some truth to that. I have *never* come so hard in my life. How in the hell do you do that?”

“I can do that because I care enough to take the time to understand how your body works,” he told her seriously. “But believe me, Joss, I could ask you the same question.”

“If I were real?” She laughed, and at his nod, she added, “What about me makes you wonder if I’m real?”

He paused. Then, “Everything.”

Emotion rushed into her eyes before it was gone in a flash. She slid off the bed and said, “You’ve got half an hour to get to work, and I have a busy day of errands ahead of me. I should probably go.” She fetched her clothing off the floor.

From his spot on the bed, he watched her round, sexy ass jiggle while she bent down and gathered her panties. Before, the distance was something he would’ve welcomed. Now, her running from him brought a sense of coldness he didn’t like. “Come here,” he said.

She turned to him, holding her clothes to her chest, and sat next to him on the bed. He started into her eyes, seeing that she had her emotions locked up tight. Not that he blamed her. He’d set up the rules, and he was the heartbreaker, after all. Regardless, he didn’t like it and intended to fix that coldness.

He sat up and slid his hand across her cheek, sealing his mouth over hers. While he’d started off kissing her slowly and sweetly, he soon threaded his hand in her hair, deepening the kiss until he felt her heavy breathing through her nose and sensed her body leaning into him.

Only then did he lean away, finding her eyes heated once again. “Now you can go,” he told her, regaining some of the control he’d just lost.

She chuckled softly and backed away. Her cheeks were flushed again, her lips puffy from his kiss. “Is it completely necessary to a) fuck me until I can’t walk and b) always send me off wanting more of you?”

“Absolutely, yes.” He grinned. “And I do it because a) I can and b) I want to.”

* * * *

Later that morning, Joss had been doing laundry at home when a text pinged her cell phone: *Meet me at Discovery Park at noon by the lighthouse.* Since the park was twenty minutes from the station, she assumed Maddox had something else going on this afternoon, allowing for a longer lunch. Whatever the reason, she was glad for the interruption from chores she didn’t want to do anyway.

Once she tossed on a pair of jeans and a flowy, violet blouse and applied a little makeup, she drove the fifteen minutes to the park. When she reached the Visitor’s Center, she parked her car next to Maddox’s cherry-red Dodge Challenger with a black racing stripe on the hood before making the trek along the trail leading to the beach and the lighthouse.

By the time she reached the beach, her skin was flushed and sweaty, and she was only too glad that she’d worn her hair in a messy bun instead of putting in the curls she’d considered before leaving the house. But after this, she’d go back to chores, so why bother? That was the benefit of being with Maddox. She didn’t have to always impress him like she would a boyfriend, trying to look perfect for him. She knew she’d get sex again from Maddox, and she knew he was happy with her not having to worry about these things.

The warm sun beamed down on her when she stared out at the water, and she smiled, breathing in the fresh air. Resting along the edge of Elliott Bay, the West Point Lighthouse stood proud, with the white tower and a small cottage tucked beside it. As pretty as the view was, nothing looked better than Maddox sitting on the rocks, staring out at Puget Sound. She felt the pull to go to him, the warm touch his closeness always brought. As she approached, she noticed they weren’t alone here, telling her sexy times would have to wait. Though she also wouldn’t put it past him to have sex with her, not giving a shit who saw them. But she did have some hard limits, and that was one of them.

When she reached the rocky edge and carefully began to step from rock to rock, she was glad for her flats. Maddox had yet to notice her, obviously lost in his thoughts, so she tapped her foot against the rock, saying, “Shouldn’t you be working?”

He glanced sideways, the sun warming the color of his eyes. “I have a meeting at headquarters this afternoon so I booked it a little early.” He gave his sexy half-smile. “And you don’t need to worry. I looked around. There’s not a cop in sight.”

“Lucky us.” She laughed, glancing at the water, taking in the view. Off in the distance, a sailboat glided by with a couple of people sunbathing on the deck. “I forgot how beautiful this place is. I haven’t been here since I was a kid.”

“My dad and I spent a lot of time here,” he said, drawing her attention back to him.

She stared into his commanding eyes, realizing she’d never asked an important question about his father, but could only assume. “I’m guessing your dad is a cop?”

“He was, yeah,” Maddox replied, leaning back on his hands. “John Hunt. He used to work with Eric, so you might have heard of him, though you were probably pretty little when they

were beat cops together.”

The name sounded familiar, and she shouldn’t have been surprised. Cops bred cops. And Eric had been around a long time. “Maybe. Eric knows a lot of people.”

She began to study Maddox and noted a softness about him that she hadn’t seen all that much. He seemed thoughtful, gentle, even.

Before she could find out what was on his mind, he grabbed a plastic bag and held it up. “I picked us up some Thai on the way. Come, sit. We’d better dig in before it gets cold.”

“Lunch?” she said with a sly smile, carefully making her way to a flat rock next to him. “Dear God, you’d better watch out, someone might think this is a date.”

He snorted and offered his hand, assisting her to sit, and while she did, he added, “Like you said, O’Neil.” He reached into the bag, taking out the Thai paper boxes. “It can’t be a date if we both know it’s not a date.”

“I did say that, didn’t I?” She accepted the box and the chopsticks, then grinned at him. “I’m so wise.”

He chuckled. “Don’t get cocky now.”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll leave all that alpha cockiness to you.” She liked the way he laughed now, the sound coming easier than she remembered. She opened the box, discovering that he’d brought her chicken Pad Thai. Even more curious, she asked, “And just how did you know that Pad Thai is my favorite?”

He didn’t look at her, opening his box, revealing chicken and vegetables. “On your first day at the station, you brought your leftovers in for your lunch, so I went on the hunch that you enjoyed it.”

“Wait. You saw me reheating my lunch?”

“I did.” His mouth twitched.

She recalled back to that day. She thought she’d been alone. “I don’t remember seeing you in the lunchroom.”

“Of course, you don’t,” he said, scooping up some chicken with his chopsticks, giving her a knowing look. “I made sure you didn’t see me.”

She watched him eat and saw the little hint of a smile on his face. “You cannot say something like that and not tell me more. Were you looking at me a lot during that first week?”

He turned his head to her then, those warm eyes meeting hers again, causing butterflies to whip around her belly. “There wasn’t a time you entered a room that I didn’t see you.”

There wasn’t a time when I didn’t feel you she wanted to say but stopped herself. There were rules he’d put in place to ensure things didn’t get messy. And she’d agreed to them, welcomed them, even. Being with Maddox made sense if she kept things distant. Getting involved with a guy with clear commitment issues would only lead her to heartbreak. Nope, not going to happen.

No matter that she sensed the warmth from his admission spiral within, she couldn’t walk through that door, not even once. And lately, whether because of the sex they had or maybe this softening of Maddox, she found that door wanting to open so damn bad.

She kept all the things she wanted to say locked down deep and gathered up some Pad Thai noodles, devouring them. Rules were important with Maddox because they created clear boundaries. She couldn’t forget that.

While they ate, she reminded herself of all those things and watched a freighter off in the distance gliding through the water. She didn’t mind the silence, but small talk kept them in a safe place. Determined to bring things back to where they needed to be, she glanced at Maddox, taking his lead from earlier. “You said you came here a lot with your father, what did you guys

do?”

“Bike, hike, explore,” he said before shoving a big piece of broccoli into his mouth.

“Sounds fun,” she said.

Maddox nodded and mumbled with a full mouth, “We did a lot together, and most of the things we did were outside. My father loved the outdoors.”

Weird choice of words. “He doesn’t like it outside anymore?”

“No,” Maddox said, swallowing his food. He reached for a bottle of water in the bag, handing her one first before opening his and taking a sip. “My father has Alzheimer’s.”

“Gosh, that’s terrible, Maddox. I’m so sorry.” She placed a hand on his forearm.

He glanced at her hand on his arm for a long moment before his eyes lifted to hers, looking even warmer than before. “Nothin’ to feel sorry about. It is what it is.” He took another bite of his lunch, then glanced out to the water. “Besides, he’s happy and doing well at the nursing home he’s been living at.”

“What nursing home?”

“Seattle Springs.”

She knew of the home and knew it was a nice place. “I’m guessing that means it’s pretty bad if he’s living there?”

Maddox nodded. “It might be worse if he was miserable, but honestly, he seems happier than he was before, far more content, in fact. Sure, he doesn’t remember his old life or me for that matter—”

“He doesn’t remember you?” she interjected gently, pressing a hand to her heart.

Maddox lowered his chopsticks back into the box and smiled gently, sliding his fingers down her arm. “Stop looking so sad, sugar. It’s okay, really. When I visit him, we still have good talks and watch the games together. No, he’s not the father I remember, but this is where life has taken us.”

She stared at him, her chest feeling as if a hundred pounds pressed against it. First, Maddox had lost his mother. Then his father. “Well, I’m sorry, but I find this all very heartbreaking.”

“Children being abused is heartbreaking,” Maddox retorted, picking up his chopsticks again. “I had an amazing childhood with a man who gave me everything. I wanted for nothing. Every memory I have is a happy one. By the time the disease set in, I was a grown man, living my own life.”

“Still,” she said, not bothering with her food anymore. “It’s tough to have your father suddenly have no idea who you are.”

“You get used to it.”

She sighed, wishing she could get through to him, even though she told herself she shouldn’t let herself go there. More and more, she began to see the man behind the sizzling touches, and she liked him. Yes, Maddox could own her body, making her feel far more alive than ever before. Though this sweet, unselfish side of him was endearing. He made her want to love all over him, even if she knew how bad an idea that was.

“Just so you know,” she said firmly, letting her barriers down for a moment. “No one should have to get used to the fact that a person who loves them is gone. Just because there’s evil in this world, and worse things happen to other people, doesn’t mean that what you’ve experienced wasn’t difficult. You deserve to be loved, and I’m sorry that love for you hasn’t always been easy.”

Maddox finished his last bite and then gave her a soft smile. “That’s a very sweet thought coming from a very sweet woman.” He inhaled a long breath, and her breath caught in her throat

when he glanced out at the water and added, “But in my world, that sweetness does not exist.”

“Well, then, maybe it should.”

He paused. Then, “Maybe.”

Chapter 10

The next evening, after Maddox's day shift that had started with his mood shitty and ended the same way, he sat on a stool at the bar of Frisky Frikin—the wood-paneled, cozy, British pub—and downed the remainder of his pint. Desperate to wash away his continuing tense mood, he gestured at the bartender for another.

"Coming right up," the pretty blonde said, hurrying off to fetch his drink.

When he'd arrived at the pub to celebrate Jeremy Walsh's retirement after twenty-five years of serving Seattle, he found the pub full of his fellow cops, which wasn't out of the ordinary. This pub was a regular hangout for those on the force. Though, right now, he wanted to be anywhere but here. Christ, he didn't know where he wanted to be or what he wanted to do.

Yesterday, he hadn't known what drove him to text Joss, asking her to meet him for lunch. He only knew he couldn't stand *not* seeing her. Even now, a sense of loneliness he wasn't used to slid into him, making him feel needy and goddamn desperate. This wasn't him. He fucked women and left them, disposing of them before they could dispose of him. That's what made sense. That's what made him not hate the woman who'd given birth to him and then left. That's what had helped him get through his younger years, never wondering how a mother could leave her son and not look in on him again. That's what made him wake up every day and not miss her and not wonder where she was now.

To keep from spinning into a dark place he never went, he downed a big swig of his beer. The icy crawl of abandonment he had felt as a child crept back into him, and he downed another sip, washing that coldness away.

"Hi, Maddox."

He snapped his head sideways, and while he noted that it had been Emilia who addressed him, only Joss filled his vision. She wore a black lace top that fit her like a glove—showing the perfect tease of cleavage—and tight skinny jeans with tall black boots. She'd styled her hair down tonight with a little curl at the ends, and her makeup was dark, reminding him of when she'd shown up at his house that first night in the lingerie he'd bought for her.

His fingers tightened into fists, and it took all his strength not to move to her and take her into his arms, showing her how crazy she made him. Her shiny, pink lips called for him to taste her. Her sugary smell demanded that he devour her. Under his stare, her eyes began to dilate, inviting him to own her.

With the loud crowd around them, and his cock swelling in his pants, Maddox realized a truth he couldn't deny. Something had changed, not just in him, or her, but in the two of them together. He didn't know when it had happened or even how, but he could feel it running in his blood like extreme adrenaline.

The problem was, he didn't know what to do about it.

Before, he'd ended things when a woman showed any signs of attachment. But he didn't want to end things with Joss. Yesterday, he'd told her things he'd never told anyone about his father. She'd listened as if only he mattered and had extended affection to him, filling the cracks of coldness in his soul. Even now, he liked the way she looked at him, as if she saw no one else but him. He wasn't ready to end this yet, and she didn't seem to be either, and with that thought cemented in his mind, he realized he never wanted to be cured of his addiction to her.

"So, um..." said Emilia, obviously in response to Maddox's awkward silence and staredown

of Joss, "...Maddox, this is my husband, Troy," she introduced.

Maddox blinked, forced himself to gain control, and looked at Troy. "Good to meet you, Troy." He offered his hand, noting Troy's height. At least six foot five, he towered over the women, and with his gelled, spiky, dark hair, he only looked taller.

"Nice meeting you, too." Troy returned the handshake then dropped Maddox's hand to pull Emilia into his side, nice and close. "Thanks for taking such good care of my girl on the job."

Emilia glanced up at her husband and smiled in a way Maddox had never seen her smile at anyone.

"My pleasure," Maddox told Troy. The bartender placed his beer in front of him, and he nodded in thanks, before adding, "I'm lucky to have her on my team."

"No truer statement has ever been said." Troy kissed the top of Emilia's head.

Maddox noted Joss glancing away and looking at her boots. Even he felt like a fourth wheel there. As he watched Troy and Emilia embrace each other and flirt, he wondered what that would be like. To grab Joss for all to see? To place that kind of statement out into the world so that everyone knew she was his?

Before he could decide, Troy released Emilia and said, "Why don't I get you girls some drinks? Beers?"

Joss snapped her head up "God, yes, please." She shoved her thumbs into her pockets and rocked from side-to-side. "I think I might want something a little stiffer, too, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Troy said before heading off toward an open space at the bar.

Emilia glanced from Joss to Maddox to Joss again before calling out to Troy, "Here, I'll come with ya." She gave Maddox a quick grin before scurrying off.

Maddox sighed as the sounds around him seemed louder than before. The rock music playing through the speakers. The guy eating the peanuts next to them. The conversations all blending together in a loud roar. He shut his eyes and drew in a deep breath before he reopened them to glance around. Only a foot away stood the police chief, and near him was a female police officer Maddox knew was known to gossip around the office. Though when he looked back at Joss, he noted the way she nibbled her lip and swayed her hips. He didn't want her to feel alone. "This is difficult," he told her.

She sighed, her shoulders sagging with her soft laugh. "Surprisingly, yes."

Maddox stared into her eyes, feeling the strands of his control slipping away. Before he could somehow fix the awkwardness and make everything okay again, a hand was thrust into Joss's face.

"Joss, right?"

Maddox mentally cursed and turned to Grey, not shocked to find a beaming smile on his buddy's face. While Maddox had asked Grey to meet him here tonight for drinks, Grey's timing matched with Maddox's mood made him regret sending the invite.

"That's right, I'm Joss," she said, offering a sweet, polite smile while returning the handshake. "You're Greyson?"

"Greyson Crawford." He released her hand to smack Maddox on the back, his grin firmly in place. "My friends call me Grey, and I'm as close to a brother as Maddox's got."

"Oh," she said, eyes wide with surprise.

Maddox saw her lips part, desperate to ask more, but he also knew she wouldn't. Too much interest in him would give her away, and she was too smart for that. Seconds passed like minutes, and as the awkwardness only grew, he wondered how he could let this happen. Things never got awkward, not for him. He made sure of it.

Before he could try again to rectify things and correct whatever the fuck was going on between him and Joss, Emilia's voice suddenly cut through the air. "Joss, come here. We've got shots."

Joss heaved a heavy sigh, her posture relaxing even more. It became glaringly obvious that she wanted to get away from the tension between them as she gave Grey a tight smile. "Nice to see you again." Those pretty eyes shifted to Maddox and pierced into his soul as she added with a smile that had him by the balls, "Enjoy your night."

Maddox watched her walk away from him before he tore his gaze away. He'd created rules to ensure that things never became weird, to guarantee that he didn't falter in public, especially with so many cops around. But that fucking beautiful woman right there was breaking apart the very fabric of who he was, making him want things he'd never wanted before with anyone.

He had to fix this problem. And he needed to do it now.

Grey bumped into Maddox's arm, snapping him out of his thoughts, and as Grey turned to the bartender, he said, "Give me a pint of whatever you have on tap." He slid onto the stool next to Maddox and leaned in, keeping the conversation private. "Better be careful, you two will repeat history and end up in the bathroom of this pub doing things that could give you a lot of grief."

Maddox snorted and drank back two gulps of his beer. "That won't happen." Though even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. Everything had changed, and without hesitation, he'd take her in that bathroom and fuck the shit out of her in a second if she gave him that sexy look that she'd originally given him in the nightclub.

The look that had changed him as a man, making him want her in ways he'd never wanted anyone. The same look she'd given him at the barbeque. A look that was as equally sweet as it was sexy.

A look that screamed *mine*.

Maddox blinked out of his thoughts, watching as Grey gave one of his charming smiles to the pretty bartender, who smiled back at him.

Grey took a gulp of his beer then turned to Maddox with a knowing look. "So, after that little show there, I take it things have gotten a little more serious than you led me to believe?"

"It's not serious," Maddox stated, frowning down at his beer bottle. "I don't get serious, and you know that."

Grey snorted. "Rules are rules, yes, I know." He tipped his beer toward Maddox, his expression knowing. "Maybe it's about damn time you broke those rules."

Then what? What would happen after he broke the rules? He liked rules. That's why he liked the law. Things were clear, uncomplicated. He wasn't governed by emotions; he was led by logic. Now he didn't know which way to go. He felt like that lost little boy who'd sat on the front porch, wondering where his mother had gone.

He turned his head in Joss's direction, watching her down her shot, and felt the confusion roll through him before glancing at Grey again, "This has become complicated, but it's nothing that can't be fixed."

"Really?" Grey mused, giving something over Maddox's shoulder a quick look. "You're good then with how things are between you?"

"Yes."

Grey took a swig of his beer. "She's free to be with other men, then?"

"Of course. She's free to do whatever she wants, we're not a couple," Maddox bit off, ignoring the way his muscles seized.

“Well, good, I’m glad to hear that,” Grey said, wiping the beer off his mouth before adding, “Or you might have a problem.”

“What problem?” Maddox frowned.

Grey gestured over Maddox’s shoulder with a flick of his chin. “The fact that your girl is in the arms of another man.”

Maddox jerked his head to the side, and his chest tightened. His eyes narrowed on the guy sliding his hand across Joss’s back in a way that sure looked like ownership to him. The man was so close to her, there was no distance between them, and Maddox couldn’t stop watching. Logical or not, his fists tightened as a rage he’d never known before stormed through him.

No one touched something that belonged to him.

For a short time tonight, he’d thought he had a handle on himself and had even made himself believe that he could control whatever was going on between him and Joss. Now, he realized he was dead wrong.

When the man turned Joss toward him and wrapped her into a tender hug, Maddox’s gaze snapped away, and he shut his eyes, inhaling and exhaling until the anger calmed. He shot off the stool, ignoring Grey calling out to him, and walked out the pub’s door. Instead of doing what he craved to do: removing the guy’s hands himself.

* * * *

The citrusy cologne filling Joss’s nostrils reminded her of some very happy times, causing her to nearly lean into Nick’s warm body before she’d thought better of it. She quickly pushed against his chest, now inhaling the booze wafting off him, and hastily removed herself from his arms.

“Damn, Joss, you look”—his bright blue eyes roamed over her from head to toe before reaching her face again—“you look really great.”

A compliment from Nick hadn’t been on her to-do list tonight, but nonetheless, it felt nice to hear that rather than the last words he’d said to her when he dumped her. Besides, she probably looked fitter than he remembered. Police academy did that to a body. She studied the man in front of her, the one who’d once held her heart in his grip. He looked the same, with his all-American good looks, straight, white teeth, stylish, brown hair, preppy clothes, and a sparkling smile that could charm anyone. “What are you doing here?” she asked, shocked spitless that he was there.

He snorted a laugh, shoving his hands into the pockets of his blue jeans. “I came home to see the family and thought I’d meet up with some friends for drinks. Why? Is that a crime?” His grin turned a little devilish. “Are you going to arrest me?”

“No. No, of course, not.” Joss attempted to smile and even laugh a little, but she failed miserably. She wished she’d seen him before he’d taken her into his arms to prepare herself for this conversation. Then maybe she wouldn’t feel like she was Alice falling down the rabbit hole. “Sorry. I’m just surprised to see you.”

The tension between his brows faded, his posture slowly relaxing. “I haven’t been home in a while, but my mom kept hounding me, so I made a quick trip back for the weekend.”

Which was only a reminder of *why* they’d broken up. Nick didn’t want a blue-collar job and looked down his nose at those who did. He had his sights on something more white-collar, including building an empire in New York City on Wall Street. The decision to go to the prestigious, Ivy League Harvard to pursue a career as a stockbroker when Joss had chosen the

University of Washington led to their demise. After he'd been introduced to the lavish lifestyle of the upper elite in New York City, his simple life in Seattle with Joss hadn't looked so appealing anymore.

I think we need a break was the last thing she remembered Nick saying to her. Now, over a year later, there he stood, half-drunk and ogling her. She stared at him, feeling like she didn't even know the guy in front of her anymore. Or maybe she'd changed so much in the last year she felt different around him.

"Yeah, yeah, get me a Heineken," he called out over the music and voices in the crowd to Timothy, another friend from high school, who was standing at the bar ordering drinks.

"On it," Timothy replied, turning back to the bartender, waving a twenty-dollar bill at her.

Joss snorted and rolled her eyes. It shouldn't have surprised her that Timothy had dismissed her as if she weren't even there. Timothy had disowned Joss when she and Nick broke up, going so far as to not say a word to her when he saw her on the street. But, seriously, how and why would someone be such a dick?

She didn't miss their friendship back then, and she certainly didn't now. Hell, staring into Nick's baby blue eyes now, she realized she wasn't the same person as when she'd last seen him and his get-along gang. It just so happened she liked the person she was now far more than the woman she'd been with Nick.

Stronger. Smarter. Sexier.

She lifted her chin a little higher when he finally looked at her again, giving her that warm smile she used to love so much. "My mom told me that you're a cop now. Congrats on that."

"Yeah, I am. Thanks." She forced a smile, wondering how his mom knew about her, but she also didn't doubt that the woman checked in on Joss's life through others. When the relationship ended, Nick's nosy mom had seemed more upset than Joss. But wasn't that the dream? Perfect family. Perfect love. Perfect white-picket fence.

Before she could barf on Nick's shiny, fancy shoes, he chuckled, nudging her arm, his eyes twinkling. "To be honest, Jossie, I can't even picture you in the uniform."

She nearly rolled her eyes at him now but refrained. Kicking him off his high horse wasn't worth her time. He also wasn't leaving, and this conversation would get back to his mother. She ignored his stupid remark and tried to be kind by asking, "How are things going for you in New York?"

"Honestly, it's amazing. I'm the youngest..." He began a string of conversation that Joss had trouble focusing on.

She narrowed her eyes, trying hard to listen to the words coming from his mouth. It wasn't that Nick's dreams didn't matter to her. She had madly loved this guy, or so she'd thought at the time. She was glad that things had worked out for him. But now, having had some distance from Nick, she found the whole conversation so materialistic, it bored her to death.

When Nick had finally stopped speaking, Joss smiled. "That's great. I'm happy things worked out for you." *And even happier I'm no longer yours.*

The song blasting through the speakers switched to something a bit harder, and a man began belting it out behind her, as Nick studied her. "You seem so different." He crossed his thin arms, giving her a thorough once-over as if she were his to examine. "I can't tell what it is. Is it your hair?"

"No." *It's my body. It's my soul.* "Nope, same old hair, same old me." And that old her hadn't been enough for him.

Now things were different, she guessed. She realized that for a long time, she'd thought

maybe she wasn't enough. That if she'd been better or done things differently, he would've been happier with her. She mentally slapped herself upside the head. There wasn't a damn thing wrong with her.

Though, as she watched him look at her with a blank expression as if he didn't know her at all, she realized there wasn't anything wrong with him either. They were two people who'd once shared a lot in common until their lives took two different paths. She didn't hate Nick, she discovered. In fact, she found that she felt some tenderness toward him. He'd claimed her innocence, and that would always be special between them. She'd shared her teens and early twenties with him. But there was someone else who'd dominated her mind during her mid-twenties. Year twenty-four to twenty-five to be exact.

Nick's mouth began to move, but her mind was stuck elsewhere. On Maddox. He'd altered the course of her life, making her care less about Nick and more about what she needed to be happy. He'd kept his promises. He'd always been upfront with her. He'd helped her explore a new side of herself that she didn't even know. He accepted her for who she was, and didn't shame her for all the things she wasn't.

Being with him was easy and fun. Uncomplicated.

She turned, looking for the man who hadn't ripped her heart apart and tossed her away as if she didn't matter. By the bar, she found Grey staring at the pub's front door, drinking his beer and shaking his head, but she couldn't find Maddox in the crowd.

"Joss."

"Huh?" She snapped her head forward, finding Nick frowning at her.

"I asked if you're seeing anyone," he said.

"I..." *No, I'm not*, nearly escaped her mouth but that felt wrong. What she had with Maddox seemed far more intense than what she'd had with Nick, and they were together six years.

And that was confusing.

"You *what*?" Nick asked, waving her on impatiently.

"I have to go." She turned and strode away, hearing Nick call out to her. But he wasn't who mattered. Not anymore.

She scanned the crowd again, unable to see Maddox anywhere. Instead, she found Emilia and Troy standing near the pool tables by Jeremy Walsh, the man being celebrated tonight.

"Where's Maddox?" she asked Emilia when she reached her.

"I don't know," Emilia said, glancing around. "I haven't seen him since we first came in here."

Being so tall, Troy easily scanned the area. "I don't see him."

Her stomach roiled, and she wasn't exactly sure why, only knowing that something was very wrong.

Emilia's fingers suddenly gripped Joss's arm. "Are you okay?" she asked.

The hairs on the back of Joss's neck stood up, coldness invading her body. "Yeah, yeah, I'm okay. I...I'll be right back," she said, and with steps that seemed to take a lifetime, she moved toward Grey at the bar.

He noticed her approaching and gave her a gentle smile when she reached him, before answering her unasked question, "He's gone."

"Maddox left?" she asked to be sure.

Grey nodded. "Yup." He grinned and winked. "Not that I don't love hanging with cops all the time, but now that Maddox has stood me up, I'll be on my way, too. Would you like me to send a message to Maddox for you?"

“Um...” The loud voices carried over her as bodies moved by her in a blur. Sure, it was easy to jump to conclusions about *why* he’d left. Deep in her heart, a little flutter wanted to believe that Maddox had decided for himself that the rules of the game needed to change. That maybe they could see where this relationship would take them. “Do you know why he left?” she asked.

“I can’t say for sure,” Greyson said, then took a swig of his beer before turning to face her more fully and giving her a knowing look. “But I would think that seeing you in the arms of another man might have had something to do with it.”

She blinked. “Why?”

Grey arched an eyebrow at her. “Why would seeing you with another guy bother him?”

“Yes, exactly. Why?” she repeated firmly, holding her ground, wanting answers from someone who was clearly close to Maddox.

Grey took another sip of beer, watching her closely before he put his glass down on the bar and answered her. “To be honest, if I know one thing about Maddox, it’s that he doesn’t share well. Tonight, he had to share you with others in a way he hasn’t since you two reconnected.”

That didn’t make any sense. “I thought he didn’t date. How can you know that about him?”

“I wasn’t born yesterday,” Grey said, giving her a grin. “Maddox may not date, but I’ve had personal experience in my life with jealous boyfriends, and if the flare of nostrils wasn’t an indicator that he couldn’t stand seeing you with that guy, I don’t know what is.”

She gave him a *look* and folded her arms. “But he’s not my boyfriend, so your theory doesn’t add up.”

Grey leaned forward, staring at her as if willing her to see something she couldn’t see yet. “Maybe that’s the problem.” He grabbed his beer and tilted the tip of the glass toward her. “Maybe he should be.”

* * * *

The pub’s door shut behind him with a bang, and the night was darker than it’d been in a while, mostly due to the cloud cover from the rainy day. Maddox moved toward his car waiting for him in the parking lot. The air felt moist from the obvious rainfall that had happened while he was in the pub, and he wouldn’t have minded some drops of rain to fall on him to cool him off. Since that didn’t happen, he planned to go on a drive to clear his goddamn head.

Pull it together, Hunt.

For fuck’s sake, he’d come all too close to removing that guy’s hands off Joss in front of a pub full of cops. An epic fucking disaster, considering he’d get suspended in a heartbeat, and her reputation was on the line. He couldn’t forget that little detail in all this. No matter what lay between them, their jobs were an issue that remained.

He tilted his head up to the sky and drew in the moist air, trying to get a handle on things. On one hand, he wanted to end this with Joss and put him out of his goddamn misery. Things between them were becoming complicated. Too complicated. At first, his hunger for her had him overlooking how professionally risky she was. Now, she was making him emotional. And that could only lead to him getting suspended, or worse.

On the other hand, the thought of letting her go and never touching her again gutted him. There was no way he could walk away now. His plan to shed his need for her had failed. He’d become a full-out junkie, and he knew something between them had to change, or he was going to fuck up in a tremendous way.

He lowered his head, sure the air was thicker and far harder to draw in, when he closed in on

his car. Tight and tense, he rolled his shoulders, stretching out the muscles where the stress simmered. He reached into his pocket, taking out his car keys, and right as he pressed the button on his key fob to open the doors, a soft voice broke the silence.

“Why are you leaving?”

He planted his feet hard on the ground while he returned his keys to his pocket. Overwhelmed by the hot emotions swirling inside him, he pressed his hands against his car and shut his eyes, letting the coolness of the metal shed some of the heat from within. He didn’t want to face her now. He didn’t trust himself with her, not when she’d want answers.

Answers that he wasn’t prepared to give her.

“Maddox.”

Her soft voice brushed across him again, weaving its way through him to where no woman had ever touched before. She stood right behind him, but he didn’t have to look to see that, he could *feel* her there. And it fucked with his goddamn head. He wanted her. All of her. Every fucking inch of her until she couldn’t give him any more.

Everything was wrong, and yet it was also so very right.

The energy between them pulsed, and it surrounded him in a cloud so thick and heavy, he couldn’t stand it any longer. He spun on his heels and closed the distance between them, hearing her squeak as he thrust his hands into her hair, sealing his lips against hers.

“Maddox,” she gasped, trying to step away.

He glanced toward the pub, seeing no one at the door. “We’re alone,” he reassured her, then his lips were on hers, and he grunted as she met him with equal fervor. “That’s right,” he growled against her mouth, placing a hand on her lower back and tugging her into him. “Give me what I need.”

She did, again and again, until his balls ached and dick hardened to pain.

Only when her body molded to his did he dare back away. A bad move on his part because once he set his eyes on her, the last strands of his control evaporated. She stood, a breathless mess of beauty, her lips swollen and pink from his rough kiss. He lifted his eyes to hers. “I’m a second away from losing all control.”

She placed a gentle hand on his face, eyebrows drawn together. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t like seeing another man touch you,” he stated the truth harshly, not caring about the ramifications such a statement would deliver to her.

Her lips parted to respond, but he sealed his mouth across hers again, not letting her say a word. Whatever she said, he wouldn’t like. She didn’t want to be attached as much as he didn’t. Everything she’d told him throughout their time together echoed in his ears, reminding him why it worked between them. They both held dangerous jobs. Neither wanted anything serious.

As he dove his tongue into her mouth, holding her face in his hands, he knew his jealousy was uncalled for. He didn’t need her to tell him that he was changing the rules of the game. But he was fucking changing the rules, and there was nothing stopping it.

He moved his lips roughly against hers, not giving her a chance to think or speak or do anything but let him claim her. He ravished her with kisses until she began panting and wiggling against him. That was when he couldn’t take any more. “I need to be inside you.”

“Yes,” she breathed.

He snapped his eyes open, pleased that no one was at the pub’s front door, watching them. He wasn’t thinking ramifications as he pulled her into the shadows by the back door of the pub. His cock throbbed in his pants, straining to blow and claim her.

There, in a dark corner, where he knew it’d be hard for anyone to see them, he eased her into

that space. He held onto her arms, pinning them tightly to her body. She gasped, but obviously not a sound of fear or pain at being handled so roughly. She smelled of desire. She tasted of sin. She looked like his.

With fast and jerky hands, he grabbed his wallet from his back pocket and somehow managed to get the condom out, letting the rest of his wallet fall to the ground. He didn't look at her when he dropped his pants and applied the latex, nor did he lift his eyes as he yanked her skinny jeans down to her knees. His eyes met hers only when he shoved his thick cock into the small space between her thighs. She stared at him intently, desperation flooding her expression in the seconds before he shifted his hips, finding her slit, and entered her.

Some nights were for pleasure. Tonight wasn't about that, and Maddox knew it. *Mine* echoed in his soul as he pumped his hips, possessing her. Desperate to get closer, he bracketed her face and stole the moan she offered, taking each one as if even those belonged to him.

She grunted when he fisted his hands in her hair. He gritted his teeth and pounded into her, sliding his mouth to her neck where he bit the skin there. He heard the hitch of her breath and felt her hard tremble, so he bit harder and harder until she was quivering.

He wanted to mark her, every goddamn inch of her. Holding her tighter to the wall, keeping his body over hers to protect her from anyone who dared to come between them, he shifted his hips harder, sliding up into her until he couldn't push anymore. She moaned loudly, and he slapped a hand over her mouth, keeping her silent as he took what belonged to him.

In and out, his cock branded her, exactly as he intended.

Then he opened his eyes, locking gazes with hers, and the heat, the tension, the adrenaline flooding him eased. There in her eyes, he saw something he never wanted to let go of—dark pleasure. His balls drew up tightly against his body. With her, he couldn't hold back, he couldn't wait.

In his mind, this wasn't about pleasure, at least it hadn't started out like that, but the look in those eyes changed everything. Her soul had changed him. She *owned him*. And there was no going back. He pumped his hips hard and fast and growled an inhuman sound. The sudden rush of endorphins flooding him, feeling her climax rolling into her, all had him slamming his hips forward and grunting his release.

He dropped a hand to the brick wall behind her, pressing his forehead against hers, giving himself the minute he needed to recover.

"Maddox," she whispered.

When he lifted his head, her worried eyes met his, her hand coming to cup his face again. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, leaning away, out of her reach. "You should head back inside."

"Okay, hold up," she retorted, grabbing her pants and wiggling back into them. "You go from *that* to asking me to leave with your dick still out? What in the hell is going on with you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine," he told her, and himself. "We could get caught out here. That's something neither of us wants. I'll be there in a few minutes. Promise." All lies. Nothing was fine.

"Okay, I'm going to believe what you're telling me," she said gently before rising on her tiptoes to kiss his mouth, softly, intimately.

It wasn't a kiss he was used to, and that was what made Joss so different. She held confidence with him. She didn't shy away from his strong personality. She met it head-on and never let him push her away. She melted into him as if her soul undeniably trusted him, and that's what kept him coming back for more.

He couldn't ever forget her.

When she'd broken the kiss, he reached for his pants, pulling them up over his hips. Then she said, "Don't be long, okay? Now that we've gotten that out of the way, surely we can handle one night of keeping our hands off each other."

He faked a smile because she smiled at him. She thought this was passion. She thought he couldn't control his lust around her, but she was wrong. *You are mine, sugar.* And that was the fucking problem. Not only because of their jobs and the complication that came with that. But because he didn't love women. He didn't need them. Because the second he did, it might make his mother leaving a little more real, a little more raw, a little more of something he had to face and deal with.

When she slid out from under his arm, he kept his hands pressed against the brick wall, knowing if he didn't, he'd grab her again and fuck her until she drained him dry. He dropped his head, catching his breath, hearing the clicking of her heels moving off in the distance.

Below his feet lay his wallet on the damp pavement, wide open and showing his bank and credit cards. He'd known many men who kept a photo of their women in their wallets. He'd never understood that desire before. The need to make sure someone was always with you.

Until now.

Chapter 11

When Joss had left for work this morning, the sky was bright and sunny, the wind barely there. Her mind was on Maddox and the way he'd changed last night at the pub. Something seemed different about him—conflicted for sure. She kept telling herself to stop thinking about what was on his mind and just keep enjoying the sex he gave her, leaving it at that. But her mind kept circling back to him, every damn time. She figured her day would be spent in a vicious cycle, wondering over Maddox and telling herself not to, over and over again. That was until a couple of hours into her shift when everything changed.

Hours upon hours Joss had spent learning about tragic deaths at the academy. She'd even learned how to handle tragedies with the greatest of care. Though when she arrived first on the scene of the three-car accident, her training couldn't have properly prepared her for the real thing.

The call had come in mere moments before, and Joss had only been a couple of minutes away from the accident. She put her police car into park and flicked her siren off, but left the lights still flashing. She'd parked her car sideways across the road, blocking any other cars from getting close, remembering all the training she'd been given.

While she exited her police car and moved to the scene at the T-intersection, a sense of calm descended. "Stay back," she ordered to the crowd, who had gathered on the corner of the road. "It's not safe. Stay back."

The crowd stepped back onto the sidewalk, and some even began returning to the burger joint they'd obviously come from. That's when Joss noticed all the phones pointed at the scene, filming the destruction that had happened on this beautiful sunny Saturday morning. She stayed focused on her job, ignoring the phones now pointed at her, and scanned the area.

Across the road was an abandoned gas station, with a body shop kitty-corner to the burger joint. There was no sense of danger now, but as she took in the mangled cars in front of her, she suspected that death had come calling.

Pieces of ripped apart metal were scattered from one side of the road to the other. The smell of burnt-chemical from the deployed airbags lingered heavily in the air when she approached the first car, and the scent of engine coolant from an obviously cracked radiator wrinkled her nose.

When she reached the red Honda, she heard a soft cry but couldn't distinguish exactly where it had come from. The bumper of the Honda was bashed in, and a man sat in the driver's seat. He was slumped over, blood pouring from a wound somewhere on his face. She slid her hand through the broken driver's side window, immediately catching the scent of booze wafting off him. *A drunk driver*, she thought to herself as she pressed her fingers against his pulse point. The man moaned.

"Sir." She squeezed his shoulder. When that didn't work, she dug her fingers into his arm. "Sir. Wake up."

He moaned again and mumbled something incoherent. She'd seen the same reaction many times from people who were drunk and disorderly. He looked about three-times over the limit, and he didn't seem injured past the cut on his head.

"The paramedics are a minute behind me. Stay inside your vehicle," she told him, not wanting to move him in case she was wrong about him being completely shitfaced and he had neck injuries.

Besides, there were others that needed her. She had to keep going. And his car wasn't about to go up in flames.

While she hoped that her backup and the ambulance got there soon, she forced her feet to move forward, even though she felt sick with guilt at leaving an injured man behind. The crowd behind her grew restless, and she could hear them talking amongst themselves as she closed in on the second car. The soft cry came again, but she still couldn't make out where the sound was coming from or if the person was male or female. Regardless that she wanted to find the person belonging to that cry echoing in misery, she couldn't allow her mind to stray. She kept her thoughts centered on her job.

When she reached the black Jeep, she noted that the front had been smashed in quite a bit, but she couldn't see any other damage or smell any hints of fire or gasoline. She reached the driver's side window. It must've been open at the time of the accident because she didn't find any broken glass. She peered inside, finding two young women in the car, maybe eighteen at most. "Are you both all right?" She couldn't see any visible wounds on either of them, but the airbags were deployed, and both girls looked shaken.

"Yeah, yeah, we're okay," the driver said, sudden tears welling in her eyes.

"Can you move?" Joss asked.

"I think so," the passenger said, her chin trembling.

Joss unlocked the driver's side door and then opened it, holding onto the young woman's arm as she exited. "Go sit by the tree over there." She pointed at the old gas station. "The ambulance will be here shortly." She held onto the driver a little bit longer until she felt stable on her feet.

As the driver moved to safety, Joss quickly helped the passenger across the street before moving on to the last car at the scene. Her chest clenched as she prepared herself for what she'd find. The last car was in the worst shape. Beaten up from the front and the back and the right side, Joss couldn't even tell what kind of car it was, only that it was navy blue.

The driver's door was open, but both airbags had been deployed. She leaned into the car, finding the windshield smashed in, and she imagined that meant that somewhere out in front of the car lay a body. Her throat tightened as the soft cry came again, and this time, she knew it had come from someone who'd been in this car. She drew in a deep breath, preparing herself to find death greeting her, but that's not what she found.

A man sat up with his back to her.

"Sir," she said, slowly moving toward him. "Sir. Police. Are you all right?" Upon further inspection, she noticed that he was holding onto someone, and that someone had blood covering her from head-to-toe. Obviously, she'd been the one who had gone through the windshield. "Sir. Police."

"My wife," the man said, his voice soft and distant. "She took her seatbelt off to reach for her bracelet on the floor. It was only for a second. She only took it off for a second..."

"Sir," Joss said again, placing her hand on his shoulder, and he turned his head, meeting her gaze.

In that moment, all her training failed her. Nothing could have prepared her for dealing with someone else's emotions when the pain was this raw, this real, this soon. She fought tears, her lungs fighting for air. "Sir," she managed. "Please let me see if I can help her."

He shook his head, tears spilling from his eyes. "There's nothing you can do for my Rosie. She's gone."

Joss swallowed emotion and went to her knees next to him, reaching for the woman wearing

the pretty, flowered dress covered by splatters of red.

“No.” The man squeezed his arms tighter, pressing the side of his face against his wife’s, regardless of the blood between them. “No, don’t take her. Not yet.”

“I won’t take her. I promise.” She moved in slowly, pressing her finger against the woman’s bloody neck and shut her eyes, wishing for a *thump* indicating that this woman’s life wasn’t over yet.

Her wish never came true.

Blaring sirens erupted and snapped Joss into action. She placed her hand on the man’s shoulder again and said the only thing she could think of. “I’m so very sorry.” *So very sorry I can’t bring her back to you.* Her legs were shaky when she rose and glanced over the mangled car, discovering two other police cars were on the scene now, plus a fire truck and an ambulance.

At Joss’s feet, the man sobbed, rocking his wife. “My Rosie. My poor, lovely Rosie.”

“What have you got?”

It took Joss a second to realize a paramedic was talking to her. She turned her head and shook it.

“DOA?” the paramedic mouthed.

Joss nodded.

No emotions had shown on his face before he hurried off toward the girls at the gas station. That was the job, and Joss realized she needed to learn that skill of keeping emotions out of it as she glanced at the man at her feet again.

When his sad eyes met hers, she could barely breathe, and tears prickled her eyes when he whispered, “She was my everything.”

* * * *

Later that night, Maddox arrived at Joss’s a little bit before dinner, finding her car in the driveway. He’d had today off, and spent the morning at the gym and then the rest of the afternoon servicing his car. Until the call from the sergeant in his division updating him on the accident brought him to Joss’s doorstep. Dealing with any kind of trauma was an adjustment for new rookies, and even Maddox still remembered the worst ones he’d seen in vivid detail. Those horrors never went away.

While last night weighed heavily on his mind, as did the fact that he’d lost control of himself, he needed to see her. Once he reached her front door, he knocked and waited, but she never came. He considered leaving, but his instincts told him not to. She shouldn’t be alone after what she’d seen today. In fact, after a hard scene, Maddox always spent time with Grey because Grey didn’t see the things Maddox did, and somehow, his friend always grounded him. That was his way to unload and get his head right after seeing things that no one should ever see.

He reached for the door handle, finding the portal unlocked, and as he opened it, he called, “Joss?”

“In here.”

The coldness in her voice strained the muscles across his shoulders, causing him to hurry inside and shut the door behind him. Only a few steps down her hallway, he found her sitting on the couch in her living room. Her legs were tucked underneath her, a blanket wrapped tightly around her, and a glass of red wine was in her hand. “I heard about today,” he told her, noting her puffy eyes and pink cheeks. Obviously, she’d been crying.

“You did?” she whispered.

He nodded and approached her, hastily taking the wineglass from her hand. "This isn't a good idea." He placed the glass behind him on the coffee table out of her reach before turning to her again. "Never drink after a bad scene. It won't lead anywhere good. Talk about it to those who understand the reality of seeing the things we do, but don't wash away what you feel with booze."

She stayed silent, staring deeply into his eyes.

He frowned at what he saw in her expression. She'd always been such a bright light. Strong and steady. Not now. She was entirely something different. Something dark. "Talk to me," he said gently.

She paused. Then, "I'm not okay."

"I see that." Right then, he realized that when she wasn't okay, he wasn't either. A heavy feeling sat in the center of his chest. He needed to touch her, not only to be close to her, but for himself. The distance between them gutted him. He took a step forward, but her sharp voice stopped him.

"Please don't come any closer."

A chill ran through him, and he became instantly alarmed at the emotion in her voice and her eyes. "Please tell me what you're thinking," was all he could think to say.

She pulled the blanket up to her chin, staring at the wineglass in front of her on the table. "I imagine you came here because you think the death today rattled me."

He shoved his hands into his pockets, fisting his hands. "Hasn't it?"

"A little, of course, but it's not the woman's death that I can't stop thinking about."

The coldness in her voice tightened his jaw. She didn't sound like herself, and he didn't realize how fond he'd grown of the warmth she exuded until it was gone. "Then what's upset you?"

"The husband," she replied, still staring at her wineglass.

"The man you saved?" he asked, not understanding.

She nodded, eyes glossing over, obviously lost in a memory. "When I arrived and found him, he was holding his dead wife in his arms." She shut her eyes, closing out the world, a haunted look crossing her face. "When I moved to him, he told me that she was already gone and there was nothing I could do to help her."

"You can't control whether someone lives or dies," Maddox added gently, hoping to pull her out of the darkness. "I'm sure you did what you could to help them."

"I'm not upset that I couldn't help them." Her eyes stayed shut, but a single tear slid down her cheek. "What upsets me is what he said to me."

Maddox stared at the tear that slowly but surely gutted him, a coldness sliding alongside the blood in his veins. "What did he say?"

"She was my everything." She paused. Then she opened her eyes, and emotion hit Maddox straight in the chest as she added, "But it was how he said it. The connection I had to him in those seconds where he realized that his happy life as he knew it had ended."

Maddox's throat tightened, and he folded his arms, fighting against himself not to move to her and take her into his arms. She might have told him to stay away, but all he wanted to do was go to her.

She drew in a long, deep breath before speaking again. "A stranger that I don't know changed me today." Her green eyes held his blue gaze, so much being said without saying anything at all. "And as I've sat here since I came home, I can't help but wonder what we're doing."

His lips parted to answer her, but his reply never came. It would have been easy to say that maybe, just maybe, he could try a relationship with her and see how it worked out, but she was right. It was one complication after another with them. A relationship with her was never in the cards. Their jobs were a hefty barrier between them and couldn't be ignored.

She sighed at his silence and slowly shook her head. "I mean, we're not dating, but kinda-sorta dating. We're not committed to each other, but you're not okay with another guy getting close to me. I know this was all supposed to be fun, but *is* it only fun, or are we fooling ourselves?"

Beneath his folded arms, his fists clenched, his chest rising and falling quickly with his heavy breaths while she continued. "Tomorrow, you'll still be my superior, and I'll still be your subordinate. You could get suspended for starting a relationship with me, and that's drama I don't need at the beginning of my career." Her eyes glazed over; obviously, her thoughts running rampant. "Nothing will change these truths. Nothing we can do will change the outcome of what's standing in our way."

I want to keep you was what he wanted to say. Again, words failed him. Not because he couldn't say them but because it was unfair of him to put her in that situation. *Just sex* made sense. Anything more would complicate everything. Those were truths he couldn't ignore.

As if reading his mind, she added, "Before, I guess you were right when you said I was the kind of girl who wants love. Maybe I forgot. Maybe it's because I'd been hurt before, I don't know. But I am that girl, and nothing I do will change that." She hesitated and sighed deeply before she went on. "I don't know when things got so messy or complicated, but they have, haven't they? And pretending they haven't is only going to take us down a road that can't lead anywhere good."

He glanced at the floor and shut his eyes, wanting to rewind time to before he'd touched her. Because she was leaving him. He knew it, and the life slowly began to squeeze out of him, seemingly all too familiar.

Obviously unable to see the torture within him, she added, "Just because I didn't find the kind of love I saw today with Nick, and I can't have that with you, it will never change the fact that I *want* a man to look at me that way. I *want* to be his everything."

Maddox could barely breathe, but he managed, "I never wanted to hurt you."

"I know you didn't, and as of right now, you haven't." She gave him the softest, sweetest smile. "But we've changed, haven't we? This is no longer *just sex*. Somewhere along the way, we complicated things. I know you care about me. I don't even question that. But can you ever do what a man needs to do to love a woman? To pick her over everyone else? To stop having her be a secret and make a statement to the world that she belongs to him? To stop thinking she's like your mother and going to leave you? I honestly don't know."

Her last words were like a knife to his gut, and he locked his knees not to wobble when she continued. "I like you, a lot, in fact. But I promised myself I'd never make things this complicated again. Us...*this*...it wasn't supposed to be like this. We were supposed to have sex. But now, everything is different. And I can't hope and wonder if you're going to be the guy I need you to be because then I'm setting myself up to get hurt." She paused. Then, her voice and expression hardened. "I won't do that again. I want a guy who wants me back. Fully and completely. Not in a way that suits him." She blinked, and when her eyes locked on to his again, he realized he'd already lost her as she said, "I promised myself I would never be that quiet girl who sits back with a perfect smile, pretending that everything is okay. Not again. I need something real. I need something honest. And we had that for a little while."

His breath caught in his throat as she rose from her spot on the couch. With each step she took toward him, the air seemed impossible to breathe. A soft smile reached her face as her hands came to his forearms, and he felt his muscles strain, though not from the heat of desire. This was a desire to grab on to what belonged to him and keep her safe.

“I’m sorry that this got complicated. I never wanted that. You’ve been nothing but amazing to me, and I don’t regret a single moment with you.” She hesitated then, and that’s when Maddox saw what this was truly all about. She cared for him, deeply, it seemed, and this was self-preservation. “But right now, I can walk away from you without hurting. If I let this go on any longer, I won’t be able to do that.”

His heart hammered in his ears as she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her warm lips against his in a sweet, soft kiss that said so much without saying anything at all.

When she backed away, tears slid down her cheeks. “Goodbye, Maddox.”

The room closed in on him, a cold sweat washing over him as she strode away. Then the world as he knew it spun on its axis as her bedroom door clicked shut.

Chapter 12

The following night after the breakup, and unable to sleep or get anything right in his mind, Maddox left his house for the gym but instead arrived at Seattle Springs, the nursing home where his father had lived for two years. Everything looked different now, nothing the same. Truth was, he didn't know how to fix everything, but he didn't know how to let Joss go either. He strode through the main doors and turned right, entering the sitting room.

He leaned against the doorframe and smiled, staring at the man sitting in the corner by the window, reading a book. Amusing to say the least because, before Alzheimer's, his father had hated reading. That was the weirdness of the disease. His father didn't even act like himself anymore, except for being a night owl. Once a stoic, hard-ass cop, now he'd become a scholar who discussed things that forced Maddox to read a few books so he understood what his father talked about.

"Today's a good day."

Maddox turned toward the sweet voice, finding Nancy, a nurse that'd been at the nursing home since his father moved in. "Those have been few and far between. Any reason for the change?" Maddox asked.

Nancy half shrugged, giving her gentle smile. "I'm not sure, but he's been like this all day. He's very lucid and aware. Go talk to him while it lasts." She turned on her heels, picking up a tray with plastic drinking cups on her way out into the hall.

Maddox moved toward the two cotton wingback chairs resting in front of the bay window. "Hello," he said with a smile, not using a name since that could set his father off. He'd been everything from George to Harry to Edward, but never John, his real name. "I'm Maddox, and I'd like to visit with you today if that's all right." Which is what the support staff told him to say whenever he approached his father.

"Yes, of course, please take a seat," said John, closing the book and putting it on the round side table next to him.

Maddox took his seat, finding his father dressed in a white shirt with a blue sweater overtop and beige slacks. Appearance-wise, no one would ever know there was anything wrong with him. He had the same bright eyes, the same color as Maddox's. Same medium build. Same deep wrinkles around his eyes. Same gray hair. But this man was a shell of what his father used to be. "What book are you reading there?" Maddox asked.

"It's a love story I found on my bedside table this afternoon after my nap, along with a whole basket of things," John said sheepishly. "I know it seems silly for a man of my age to read such things, but I was such a failure at love during my life, I wondered how other men managed it."

Maddox smiled, not commenting on the fact that his father before would've bet a million dollars he'd never read a romance novel. The truth was, his father probably made up a whirlwind romance in his mind that didn't even exist. "You couldn't have been that bad with the ladies, a handsome fella like yourself."

John barked a laugh and slapped his once strong leg that now looked far frailer. "I did enjoy my fair share of ladies, of course, but there was one woman who mattered above all the others."

Nancy returned then, placing two hot apple ciders, a new favorite drink of his father's, onto the coffee table between them. "Thank you," Maddox said to her before picking up the mug and

addressing his father again, indulging the conversation. “Tell me more about this woman.”

He took a sip of his cider, as his father explained, “She was the mother of my only son.”

“You had a son?” Maddox asked, lowering his mug back to the table. Last time, his father had said he had a daughter, which of course wasn’t true. The time before that, he’d had twins.

John began to frown. “No...no, I don’t know why I said that.”

“About this woman,” Maddox added quickly, moving the conversation along not to let John get too focused on what he didn’t know. The key to pleasant conversations with John was not reminding him of all the things he couldn’t remember. “Was she pretty?”

“Pretty?” John said, a big smile spreading across his face, eyes twinkling. “She was one of those girls that shined as bright as a million suns in the sky.”

Maddox chuckled. Apparently, the old man had been reading quite a few romance novels.

A thought he kept to himself as John continued. “For some reason, she married a guy like me”—a sudden darkness rose to his face, voice growing thicker—“and, truthfully, that was the biggest mistake she could’ve made. I was her demise.”

Maddox leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “What do you mean by ‘her demise?’”

John sipped his cider before putting his mug back on the coffee table. “I never told her I loved her, can you believe such a thing?”

“Yes, actually, I can,” Maddox said, never having said those three words to any woman either. It was not something built into his vocabulary. He couldn’t recall his father having ever said it to him either.

“I’m not sure why that seemed so hard at the time, but it was. It felt like it weakened me to say it, or maybe it gave her control over me. I’m not sure. It’s something I’ve wondered over the years, you know. Was it because no one ever told me ‘I love you?’ Could it be that I never learned from my parents how to express emotions like that?”

Maddox reached for his cider again, washing away the discomfort rising in his throat. “What happened to this woman?”

“She died.”

There was a ring of truth to his father’s voice, a little more clarity than usual. As odd as it was, there was something inside Maddox, telling him to dig a little here when normally he wouldn’t. “When did she die?”

Another orderly walked by, heading down the hallway when John answered, “A week after she’d left my son and me. She’d been in a car accident, and I was called because I was her next of kin.”

Maddox frowned. “You can’t think you’re responsible for her death.”

“It’s my biggest regret in my life,” his father added dryly, reaching for his mug and taking another sip. “If I’d only treated her better, she wouldn’t have left us. She wouldn’t have been driving that night to look for a new apartment suitable to raise a child.”

Maddox almost commented on the child again but knew to stay away. This was the most his father had talked in at least six months. Usually, his conversations were so far out there, it was hard to follow along sometimes.

Letting his father go on, Maddox stayed silent, as John said, “If I’d called her and begged for her to come back... If I had worked less and been there for her more. If I had treated her like the angel she was. She’d still be here, not only for me. But also for my son.” He suddenly reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, then he took out a black-and-white photo, offering it to Maddox. “This is my Lilianna.”

At his mother's name, Maddox froze, unable to speak, and squeezed his fingers around the picture of his mom and him. He tried to get his mind around this, reading between the lines to gauge if this was another of his father's stories. Back when he was a young kid and had asked why he didn't have a mom, his father replied, "*Because some kids don't. Sorry, buddy, I'm all you've got.*"

He'd never asked again. Even as a young boy, he'd seen the discomfort his dad felt at having to have that conversation. It was never said but fully understood. Now, as he looked at his mother's sweet smile and long, flowing, golden locks, he wondered if he should've asked more. And fought for the answers he hadn't known he wanted until this moment.

Those thoughts led him down a path of wondering if the anger he'd felt toward women growing up might have only been anger at himself for pushing them away. Before he could spiral out of control, and knowing the likelihood that this story could also be completely made-up, he asked, "Did you tell your son about what happened to his mother?"

"No." John hung his head, voice soft. "No, I'm afraid I didn't."

"Why not?"

"Because I was so deeply ashamed," John said softly, placing his mug back onto the table and linking his hands together on his lap. "I know what you must think of me, but I was so embarrassed that my failures had led to his mother leaving. That she felt a new life was better than the life she had with me. Then I couldn't face telling him the truth. That I had caused her death."

Maddox's chest rose and fell with his heavy breaths. He couldn't be sure his father was even telling the truth, but a little voice inside believed him. And he didn't know what to do with this information.

John ran a hand over his face and drew in a long, deep breath before speaking again. "Do you think if I had told my son the truth, he would've forgiven me?"

Maddox stared at a stranger. So honest. So transparent. So regretful. So emotional. So unlike his father. Above all else, he stared at a man who'd done his best for him, and Maddox had only good memories. "Yes, I do think if you had told your son the truth, he would have forgiven you." He paused. Then, not only for his father but for himself, too, he added, "And I'd bet he never would have blamed you at all."

One second, John gave a soft, warm smile. The next, his expression became a little colder, a bit detached. "What were we talking about?" He blinked, his eyes widening, fear present in their depths. "Who are you?"

Maddox rose, taking his exit before an outburst happened. "Sorry to disturb you, sir. I'd brought you a cup of cider." He pointed to the half-drunk mug on the table. "I thought you might like a drink before bed."

"Ah, yes, yes I do. Thank you." John picked up the warm beverage and glanced out the window, taking a long sip as if he hadn't dropped the biggest bombshell on Maddox's life. As Maddox turned to leave, John piped up. "Oh, and if you don't mind, please tell that nurse Joss to come back. She was so lovely."

"Sorry," Maddox said slowly. "Did you say *Joss*?"

"I believe that was her name," John said with a smile. "She came to see me today. I think...or was that yesterday?" He paused, shaking his head, then added, "I wonder if it was her who brought me this book."

"This nurse," Maddox pressed, still reeling, "what else did she bring you?"

John pointed over Maddox's shoulder. "Have a look. It's all right there."

Maddox moved toward the basket sitting on a table. His dead, cold heart skipped a couple of beats as he stared at what was obviously a care basket. Countless books in different genres. Candies and mixed nuts. “Did she say why she was here?” he asked.

Nancy entered the room and answered with a gentle smile, “To visit a fellow cop who deserved some company.”

Knowing Joss had been sweet and thoughtful had never been a question in his mind. He glanced back to the gift basket and realized that sweetness made her unforgettable by not only him but also his father, a man who couldn’t even remember his son.

* * * *

Two days after the breakup, and early into the morning, Maddox had slept only a handful of hours. The sun beamed through the window, and from his place on his couch, Maddox glanced up from the coffee table to find Grey entering the living room, as was the norm every Sunday morning.

“What’s all this?” Grey asked, waving to the pile of papers spread out on the table. “And why are you not ready for the gym?”

Working out was the last thing on Maddox’s mind. He leaned back on his couch and folded his arms. “Documents about my mother.”

Grey’s brows shot up to his hairline, and as he settled into Maddox’s favorite black leather recliner angled perfectly toward the TV in the corner of the room, he asked, “What documents?”

Maddox was sure he’d spoken to Grey about his mother over the years, but it wasn’t often, which explained the curiosity shining in Grey’s expression.

“Yesterday I went and visited my father,” Maddox explained, staring down at the photograph of his mother. He discovered he looked a lot like her. Same hair color, same eyes even, only she was far more feminine than him with soft features. “Of course, my father didn’t know it was me,” Maddox added to Grey, “but he began telling me a story about the love of his life and how he’d wronged her enough that she left him.”

Grey glanced over the documents on the table with a frown before looking up at Maddox again. “That’s not what he told you before, right?”

Maddox shook his head, ran his hands over his face, and drew in a deep breath before answering, “I can only recall him ever talking about her once. I think I was six, maybe, and had asked about her. He told me that she’d left us. He never explained to me why, or why she hadn’t come back.”

“Did he tell you why she left when you saw him yesterday?” Grey asked.

Maddox picked up the driver’s license photo of his mother that he’d gotten from the DMV. Lilianna Hunt was a beautiful woman but appeared haunted, troubled. Even now, Maddox swore he could see the pain of her life in her face, especially her eyes. He stared into them now, as he began explaining what his father had told him yesterday.

By the time he was finished, Grey’s mouth was set in a firm line. “I suppose that gives a reason for *why* she left,” he offered.

Maddox nodded. “It does.” And while that fulfilled the little question inside him—*how does a mother leave her child?*—the part of his soul where a mother’s love should be, remained cold. “But it’s the reason she never came back that’s far more interesting.”

“What reason is that?” Grey asked.

Maddox picked up the police report in front of him that he’d printed off, offering it to Grey.

Grey's eyes scanned over the document then his gaze returned to Maddox in a flash. "Fuck, man. She died?"

Maddox bobbed his head, wishing that hadn't been the case. There'd been many times over the years that he nearly considered looking into her. He had the means to at the station, but he'd always stopped himself, thinking she wanted nothing to do with him. "Honestly, I didn't think the old man was telling the truth when he told me yesterday." Because he didn't think his father would ever lie to him. Their relationship had been good, tight. His father had been there for every football and baseball game. An honorable, good cop, Maddox had been proud to be his son. This didn't make him proud. "From what I've seen, it appears he was right—she died a week after she left, while she was out looking for an apartment to raise me."

Grey read the report detailing the accident again and then shook his head in obvious disbelief. "I don't understand why your father would keep this from you."

"Shame," Maddox offered the only thing he could come up with. And he'd considered every option out there. "From what he said, he felt responsible for her death. I can only imagine that he didn't want to upset me."

"Or he didn't want to face the truth himself." Grey tossed the paper back onto the coffee table. "I guess that explains why you look so torn up. Have you even slept?"

"Not much." Maddox dropped his head and ran his hands through his hair, trying to get ahead of this. "I wondered from time to time why she never came back or even checked in on me." He lifted his head, looking at the one person who'd always been a constant in his life. "I couldn't wrap my head around what kind of mother would do that?"

"A terrible one," Grey muttered.

"Exactly, but was she so terrible?" Maddox rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease the tension in his muscles. "Or have I punished the wrong person my entire life?" All night long and into the early morning, he remembered all the times he'd cursed his mother when he was younger. He remembered the time in his teens when he'd decided he didn't need her or any woman for that matter. And he vividly recalled the time he'd decided not to live in the pursuit of love but put his career above his personal life. Though without his mother as the enemy, those choices would have never been made. "Fuck, I don't even know why I'm thinking about all this shit. It's in the past. It's done."

"Oh, I know why you're up in arms," said Grey, leaning back in his seat, resting his ankle on his opposite knee. "It's because when you start questioning yourself about your mother, you start wondering why you haven't made the sweet lady in your life a little more permanent."

"This isn't about Joss, it's about my mom," Maddox bit off, rising to his feet. He moved to the window, staring out into the cloudy day.

"Bullshit," Grey countered. "Why do you think I've been razzing you?"

Maddox snorted, not looking back at his friend. "Because you enjoy irritating me."

"Well, yeah, I do," Grey said with a soft chuckle. "Regardless, I'm saying she's getting under your skin because she can, and that's never happened to you before. She's different. You're different *with* her."

Maddox snorted again, then he turned to Grey. "What are you, my therapist?"

Grey didn't even flinch, holding his stare intently. "We're as close as brothers, Maddox. I know you, and I know what this woman is doing to you, even if you don't want to accept it."

Maddox knew he'd typically shut down here, ignore what Grey had to say to him, and tell him to fuck off. Instead, today, for whatever reason, he couldn't. Everything was different, and he couldn't get a handle on anything. "Regardless of what you think might be going on, the

conversation is pointless. Joss ended it.”

“When?”

“A couple days ago.”

Grey’s eyebrows began to narrow, voice growing hard. “What did you do?”

“How do you know it’s something *I* did?”

Grey arched an eyebrow.

Maddox scoffed, retuning to stare out the window. “Who’s at fault is beside the point. It’s done. Over.”

“Of course, who is at fault matters,” Grey said, “because if it were your fault—which I’m sure it was—then you can fix it.”

A bird soared by the window, and Maddox watched it fly high in the sky. “I can’t fix it. She realized I can’t be the man she needs.”

“She said that?” Grey asked, his voice incredulous.

Maddox glanced over his shoulder, finding Grey’s expression incredulous too. “Not in so many words.”

Grey frowned, his eyes narrowed, thoughtful, before he said, “Listen, I saw her that night at the bar when I told her you’d left. She’s a good girl who’s listening to you because you told her not to care about you. But she does. That can’t be faked.”

Maddox turned back to the window and shoved his hands into his pockets, staring out at the trees waving in the wind. “Her caring about me isn’t the issue.” He knew she cared. She’d told him as much. This wasn’t so much about her, as it was about him. “I know there’s something between us.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Maddox sighed, not sure how to answer Grey. The words seemed too complicated to even explain. His life as he’d known it had shifted, taking a new direction. He lived by logic. He’d made choices for his life because of his past. Relationships were trouble...that was what he knew. Women were difficult...that was what he’d seen. Those were the things he had known and experienced in his life. He had made rules: Don’t date. Don’t love.

That was the way he lived.

Now... “Nothing looks the same, Grey,” he admitted, not only to his friend but also to himself. “Nothing feels the same.” He paused. Then, still staring out the window, he added, “It’s all fucking different now.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“She’s making me want things I’ve never wanted before. Christ, I fucking miss her. I don’t know what I’m doing without her. How is that not a bad thing?”

A pause. Then, “Man up, you fucking baby.”

Maddox glanced over his shoulder. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” Grey said, slowly rising from his seat, expression tight. “First, you whine about how you shouldn’t have touched her. Then, you’re lucky enough to get to be with that beautiful, sweet woman, not once, but a handful of times, and you’re still fucking whining.”

“Grey,” Maddox warned.

He stepped forward, eyes narrowed into slits. “You’ve got this great girl who’s cool as shit. She’s not clingy. She’s perfectly happy accepting the dipshit that you are. And instead of going and loving the hell out of her, you’re sitting here with me, whining about missing her. Want me to get you some diapers or a bottle, maybe a blankie so I can tuck you in for naptime?”

Maddox’s glare deepened. “Please, Grey, tell me what you really think.”

Grey stepped closer, nearly nose-to-nose with Maddox, and did exactly that. “You’ve learned that your mother, who you thought had abandoned you, didn’t. You can’t fall on that crutch anymore to avoid getting close to this girl, who, from the way I see it, is the greatest thing that’s ever happened to you.”

It seemed so simple from Grey’s point of view, but... “Our jobs—”

“Are a fucking issue that you can fix,” Grey retorted harshly. “You made the mess, yes. Now, go clean it up.” He slapped a hand on Maddox’s shoulder. “Take my advice, buddy. Go swallow your goddamn pride, do what you need to do to right this situation, and go claim what’s fucking yours.”

Chapter 13

Day three without Maddox...well, sucked. All through the passing days, Joss thought over her decision, doubted herself, then decided it was for the best. Self-preservation was her only recourse, but it didn't mean she had to like it. Even Emilia had warned her. *Don't fall in love with him.*

Since she'd started back up with Maddox, she'd kept worrying about falling in love with him. The truth was, she'd been in love with him all along. Sure, at first, she was in love with the way he touched her. But then she'd realized the guy behind the sizzling touches was even better. Honorable, sweet at the right moments, strong when he needed to be. For the first time, she couldn't hide behind the shield she kept up to protect herself. He'd been the guy she'd always been looking for, and that's why no one measured up to him.

But he'd recently changed the game. He'd gotten jealous, and that had only made things more confusing. Sure, it would have been easy to hope that he'd be the guy she wanted him to be. Of course, she could hope that he would decide that she was the one for him and they could be together, no longer hiding and pretending they didn't have something special between them. But then she'd end up being like every girl from his past, just like he'd said: *"Girls who think they can change me."*

Hell-to-the-no, she would not be that girl, she decided...*again*...as she held onto the paper cup of her piping-hot coffee and strode through police headquarters, studying how different HQ was than the other precincts in Seattle. Criminals didn't get processed at this downtown location, so for the most part, the building looked cleaner, friendlier. Hell, even fancier.

Once she'd reached the big corner office, she found the man she needed to talk to today sitting behind his desk, reading documents set out before him. The city skyline was a stunning view out the wall of windows behind him as she knocked on the door.

The Chief of Police glanced up and then greeted her with a warm smile. "Joss. What a terrific surprise. Please, come in." He rose immediately and moved to her as she entered his office, then he took her into a warm embrace.

She rested her cheek against his shoulder, hugging him right back. She figured that most rookies found Eric to be a little intimidating, but she never had. Beneath his tough exterior was a big, cuddly bear, whom she had many fond memories of from when she was a child. Most of her summers while growing up had been spent at Eric's family lake house. His daughter, Lana, had been Joss's childhood friend from as early as she could remember until tenth grade. Eric's bitter divorce, and Lana's mother's move to Chicago, was the only reason Lana and Joss weren't still close. Of course, they had tried to keep in touch over email, but sadly, life often got in the way.

When Eric finally leaned away, he gave her a long look. "You're looking well." He tapped her arms and smiled. "And strong. Look what the academy's done to you."

"Toughened me up, for sure." She smiled back.

"Please, take a seat." He waved to the chairs in front of his desk. "How are things?"

There were a million ways to answer that question. Instead of making this conversation too complicated, she took her seat and said, "Things are great. And you?"

"Busy, as always," Eric said, returning to his chair behind his desk. "But it's a good busy. Are they treating you well in the west?"

"Very well, thank you."

Eric leaned forward in his seat and steepled his fingers beneath his chin. "I'm pleased to hear that. And while I love to see you, I'm guessing your visit today isn't personal?"

"Actually, it kinda is." It had taken all her courage to come here today because this could backfire in her face in the most epic of ways, but she'd never let something that scared her before hinder her, so... "I was wondering if it were possible for me to request a transfer?"

Eric's brows drew together, obvious irritation rising to his face. "Did you not tell me the west was treating you well?"

"Oh, they are," she retorted quickly, twining her hands in her lap, desperate to stop the slight shake. "It's not the precinct, or any of my superiors, or fellow cops for that matter. It's personal."

Eric exhaled deeply and leaned back in his chair, watching her carefully. "Did they discover we have a close relationship? I know sometimes the men can be a bit—"

"No." She shook her head. "It's not that."

"Then what exactly is the problem?"

"Well..." She lifted her paper cup in her hand and took a quick sip of her coffee, pausing the conversation, trying to think up a good excuse. She didn't want to out Maddox to Eric, fearing he'd be reprimanded. "I've become involved with someone there, and while it's not affecting my performance now, I fear that it might in the future."

"You've gotten involved, hmm?" Eric remarked with a slow building smile. "How about we don't beat around the bush and say it for what it is—you've been secretly dating Maddox Hunt."

Joss nearly spit her coffee out of her mouth and began coughing.

"Please don't die in my office," Eric mused. "Your father would never forgive me."

"You knew about us?" She wiped her mouth and barely managed, "Why haven't you reprimanded me and suspended him?"

"First, you both have been very discreet. I haven't heard a single whisper about the two of you dating," Eric replied. "Secondly, while the department frowns upon these types of things, unless I have to intervene, I don't. No one can control who they fall in love with."

She blinked, shaking her head to clear the confusion in it. "Okay, wait, hold on, I need a minute. This isn't what I expected to happen here." Eric chuckled, and she blinked, processing. Then she asked, "How do you know I've been seeing him?"

"Before I answer that, since your father would want me to tell you this, let me remind you that you need to be careful with these types of things," he said sternly from behind his desk, being the imposing man he was. "News of affairs like this has a way of getting around stations like wildfire. You don't want something like this hanging over you. I've seen it before. Every promotion is tainted. Every award polluted."

"Yes, sir, I know," she agreed, well aware of those concerns from the very beginning. "Hence the reason I'm here. But please tell me how you knew we were seeing each other."

"Maddox told me."

She sensed the color draining from her face as the world tumbled around her. The telephone on Eric's desk rang, and he held up an index finger then answered the phone. "Yes. Yes. All right. Please hold any other calls. Thank you, Beth." He hung up the phone and explained, "Maddox came to see me at home last night, but to be honest, I had already suspected something might be on going between you two."

"Why?"

Eric picked up a pen, tapping the tip against his desk. "I saw you two in an intimate conversation outside the pub at the retirement party."

Her cheeks warmed, waiting for him to add, *and I saw Maddox kiss you*. When those words

never came, she managed, “Why are you being so...okay with all of this?” she wondered her thoughts aloud.

Eric leaned back in his seat, his chair squeaking beneath him before he addressed her again. “Because some rules, Joss, don’t even make sense to those who must enforce them.”

She blinked again. “Well, I guess, thank you for that.”

“You’re family. I would have done the same for Lana if she’d been in a similar situation.” He hesitated then, and with his head cocked, he added, “But tell me, have things gone south with you and Hunt, is that what this is all about?”

“Not south, just ended,” she explained as best she could.

Eric’s lips thinned. “Was he respectful?”

“Yes, very,” Joss said with a chuckle, not minding Eric’s protective side. She didn’t see anything wrong with having some good guys looking out for her. “I’ve got nothing bad to say, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

Eric regarded her for a long moment, continuing to tap the pen against his desk. “I’m glad to hear that since last night I offered Hunt the position of captain in the east and he accepted the promotion. He’ll be moving to the east by the end of the week.”

Her stomach roiled, and all the things she thought she knew and thought she’d figured out didn’t matter anymore. If that were true, and the work issue between them no longer remained, he obviously didn’t feel as attached as she did.

She guessed she should have known that. Even if she was mad at herself for feeling this little moment of pity when she hoped he might have felt the same way she did. Emotions were funny things that sometimes she wished she could tell to *fuck off*. “Did he take the promotion because of our relationship?” she asked.

Eric nodded. “Maddox had originally asked for a transfer, but earlier yesterday, the captain in the east stepped down. We both feel it’s also in your best interests for him to transfer out of the west. Did I make the wrong decision by allowing this promotion to happen?”

She let the pain roll through her once more before she stuffed it back into that place where all women stuff their heartache. “No, it’s the right decision, and he deserves to be captain.”

Everything was as it should be, at least from the outside. She was strong, taking control of her life, not letting a man lead her way. She fought for what she wanted, never accepting less than she deserved.

Even so, it didn’t mean she had to like it.

Being the woman she thought she wanted to be somehow felt all wrong without Maddox.

* * * *

Later that night, Joss entered the Frisky Frikin’ with Emilia and Troy, right as the kickoff began on the television screens hung on the wood-paneled walls. She was ready to drink her sorrows away. Sometimes, that was all a woman could do after life disappointed her. Perhaps it was a bad time to realize how much she wanted Maddox in her life. Maybe, deep down, she had hoped that when she walked away, he would wake the hell up and change his mind about relationships. That had never happened. Not even after he transferred to a new station where the conflict lessened. Not even after Eric had so clearly given his approval of them being together. Love sucked. Relationships sucked. Men sucked. She began to regret coming to the pub.

Tonight, as they strode past the bar toward the tables, she found the pub full of cops that she’d met through her father either randomly or at some of the events the police put on in the

community. There were a few cops from the west, too. Trying her best not to mope, she followed behind Emilia and Troy as they moved to an empty table. The ruckus from the crowd after the touchdown was a welcome blessing. She couldn't get too lost in her dark thoughts.

Even though Maddox said drinking wasn't a good idea, and she agreed with him, she knew she wasn't drinking because of the death a few days ago. She drank because she had fallen for a guy with huge commitment issues when she'd promised herself that wouldn't happen. Again, love sucked. Relationships sucked. Men sucked.

Troy stopped at one of the round tables and dropped down onto the first stool, followed by Emilia. Joss slid onto her stool across from them—a perfect third wheel. Depressing as shit, but she swallowed the discomfort and knew in half an hour she'd forget all about it with the help of vodka.

Emilia picked up the wine list. Joss stared at them, wondering how they did it, and how they made love look so damn easy. Before she could think better of it, she said, "You guys are so lucky, do you know that? I mean, for cripe's sake, you've been together since high school, and have somehow made it work."

Troy's brows rose before he quickly looked away toward the TV screens, obviously the only amount of girl talk he intended to do tonight.

"Okay, that kinda came out of nowhere." Emilia laughed, placing the wine list back on the table. "Things weren't always so easy, you know. I think every couple has some complications along the way. Don't you think, Troy?"

He gave a pinched expression and nodded, glancing back to the television screens.

Emilia rolled her eyes at her husband before saying to Joss, "Honestly, I don't think there's a magic answer here for why we've worked out. I know people believe in soul mates and all that jazz, and while I think there's some truth to finding the person that makes your soul light up, relationships are all about putting in the hard work. You both have to choose to be in it one hundred percent and then the rest kinda falls into place."

"Exactly," Joss agreed, placing her chin on her hand, trying very hard not to pout. "But what if the other half of the equation doesn't want to?"

"I don't see the waitress anywhere. I'll go grab us drinks." Troy rose and hurried off.

Joss snorted a laugh. "I think we scared him off."

"Please. Any kind of in-depth conversation scares him off." Emilia glanced at her hubby walking toward the bar before adding to Joss, "But that's okay, because that emotionally unavailable teddy bear is all mine." She drew in a big, deep breath before she spoke again, giving Joss a measured look. "Okay, so listen, I know I said falling in love with Maddox would be the worst thing ever, but I'm going to take that back."

Joss's brows rose. "Huh?"

"Oh, don't look so shocked." Emilia grinned. "I've been watching him, even though he doesn't know it. I am the best friend, after all." She gave a big smile, causing her eyes to twinkle. "And let me tell you, girl, he seems different with you."

"I know he cares for me, Emilia," Joss said with a sigh, waving at a couple of cops that her father knew before glancing back at Emilia. "But he can't seem to say it aloud. When I ended things, I gave him the chance to finally acknowledge that we're"—she made quotations with her fingers—"together, and he didn't take it."

"Maybe he needs a little time," Emilia offered.

"Maybe what he needs is a big smack to the head." Joss smiled, and Emilia laughed, glancing over Joss's shoulder, clearly looking for her missing husband. "But honestly," Joss

added, garnering Emilia's attention again. "How pathetic would it make me if I stayed, knowing that I'd always be his secret, never his girlfriend?"

"Okay, I see your point." Emilia's eyes narrowed with her long sigh before she slapped her hands against the table. "Well, let's hope the idiot wakes the fuck up and sees that you're great for him."

"The idiot has woken the fuck up."

Emilia's eyes widened, and she slapped her hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry, sir," she said beneath her hand.

Joss froze in her seat, her heart beating a mile a minute. Maddox stood right behind her. Sure, she'd heard his voice, but she could feel the heat of him slowly brushing across her back, sliding down her neck, raising goose bumps all over her flesh.

Emilia slowly lowered her hand. "I...I...shit...I have no idea what to say here." She slapped her hand across her mouth again, eyes huge. "And I just swore," she mumbled.

"I think you've said enough," Maddox said, voice amused. "Besides, I'll forgive you since those words are well deserved." Then his voice shifted, becoming lower, harder. "Joss, look at me."

The air rushed from her lungs as she slowly spun on her stool, and all those things she'd been saying to Emilia didn't matter anymore. Logic couldn't compare to what she felt with Maddox because it wasn't a logic thing. It was emotional. And it was magical, from day one until now. "Is it a coincidence that you're here?" She had to know.

He shook his head.

"You came here to see me?"

He nodded, eyes intent on her, flaring hot with emotion.

"How did you know I'd be here?" she asked, locked in all that powerful energy he was tossing her way.

"I overheard Emilia telling someone at work that you were all coming here tonight."

Joss glanced at Emilia, and her best friend nodded. "I might have said something." She turned to Maddox. "I didn't even see you there."

"He seems to have that spy technique mastered." Joss smiled at Maddox.

His eyes crinkled, but he wasn't moving toward her, just standing near the other table. "I heard that you went and saw my father."

She flinched and recoiled—sure he wouldn't have found that out. "Sorry, I know I probably shouldn't have done that, but I..." She stopped short, beginning to wonder how he'd found out she was there. "Wait, did a nurse tell you? I asked them not to bother you with it."

The pub faded around her as he took a step forward. "My father told me."

"He remembered me?" She gasped.

Maddox grinned. "He did, and do you honestly believe I'd be upset that you went and gave my father a care package?"

She nodded, barely able to breathe, realizing this was how Maddox looked when all his shields were down. Oh, hell, he looked different, the energy between them *felt* different. The hairs on her body rose like static electricity between them.

Still, he stood so far away as he said, "Sugar, you're far sweeter than I think you even realize. Of course, I'm not upset you went there, and of course my father found you unforgettable." His head tilted then, watching her very carefully. "You won't let me stop thinking about you, will you? Every time I try to stay away, you do something that draws me right back."

“Um...” She nibbled her lip, glancing at Emilia, whose mouth was nearly hitting the table, before looking at Maddox again. “I didn’t do that to get your attention or anything.”

He didn’t respond to that but took another step forward, saying instead, “You won’t stop being this woman who does everything and anything to put herself into the spots in my soul no one could ever reach.”

She could barely catch her breath, her heart now in her throat. “I’m not doing that on purpose.”

That left brow of his lifted. “And yet you do it every single time, don’t you? Again and again, somehow you make me forget every rule and make me want things I’ve never wanted before.”

After a quick look around the pub, she noted that they were drawing a crowd. Too many eyes were on them, including Sandy’s, a well-known gossip in the west. Joss frowned, turning to Maddox, and whispering, “Maybe we shouldn’t talk about this here.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be,” he retorted, freezing her in her seat. His soft, gentle expression said so much without saying anything at all. Something had changed in him. Something big. “I found out yesterday that my mother died a week after she left us. That’s why she never came back. My father never told me because he was too ashamed. Even if I understand his reasons, I can’t live in the same shadow I’ve been living in. And do you know why?”

“Why?” she heard herself whisper, feeling slightly detached.

“I refuse to do what he did and make the same mistakes he made.” Maddox took another step toward her. “I want to be the man you need me to be to make you happy, not a man who disappoints you.”

The world faded around her. Only him, that’s all she saw. “I don’t want to change you.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “And that, sugar, is what makes you, *you*, but when it comes to this, it’s not up to you.” His voice deepened a little as his gaze roamed over her face, like he was searching for answers and had somehow found them. “I kept wondering what it was about you that made you unforgettable from that first night I touched you.”

She blinked, glancing from side-to-side. He was admitting things very publicly. Sure, she knew both their jobs were no longer at risk, but still, Maddox had to know that the cops would gossip about this. “Um, Maddox, what are you—”

He took another step toward her, the heat of his body closing in on her, stealing her voice, as he asked, “You know what I realized?”

“What?” she barely managed.

“I’m in love with you.” Her mouth dropped open, and he laughed softly at the shock in her expression. “Yeah, I know, it surprised me, too. But that’s what made you so different. You got right into here”—he pointed to his chest—“so easily, I didn’t even see it happening. And once you were there, there was no letting you go.” He paused, shutting his eyes for a moment, and when they reopened, heady emotion filled their depths. “I won’t walk away from the woman I love, and I promise I won’t hurt you for loving me back.”

He lifted his hand, cupping her face, and while she leaned into his touch, tears filled her eyes. “So, Joss, I have one last question to ask you. Will you date me?”

She smiled through the tears, sliding a little more off her stool, getting closer to him. “Date a heartbreaker, would that be wise?”

“Probably not, it’s very risky,” he replied with a grin.

She angled her head and stared into his eyes and saw her future. Not a dull moment, she was sure. Love was messy and crazy and wild, and she knew behind it all, she wanted to experience it

with the one guy who made it an adventure. Somehow, he didn't want to change her. She didn't want to change him. And yet, they had changed enough to be perfectly imperfect together. "Yes, Maddox, since I'm completely in love with you, too, I guess it would be all right for us to date."

A smile so big and warm crossed his face before she was in his arms. The crowd in the pub roared, whistled, and clapped, and he kissed her exactly like the first time her lips had met his.

That one time in a nightclub that had changed her life forever.

Chapter 14

After Joss had gotten through the awkwardness of everyone clapping at them on their way out the pub's door, she followed Maddox to his house. She had apologized profusely to Emilia for bailing on their drinks, but of course, Emilia understood. In fact, she'd pushed Joss toward the door after a hug of a lifetime. There were a thousand things to think of. One being how she was going to tell her parents that she'd gone from single to dating the captain of the east precinct overnight. Her dad would definitely hear about that from his cronies. But she realized as Maddox shut the door behind her and turned to her with a smile that she didn't have to do this alone, and her parents were going to love him.

She wondered what they would do next? They were entering new territory here, and she was curious if things would change a little between them, but his sexy smile told her things hadn't changed all that much.

That left eyebrow arched. "Are you ready to play, sugar?"

"Always, sir." She grinned.

"Wait here for a minute," he said, leaning forward and kissing her on the forehead.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

His grin turned wicked, and instead of answering her, he said, "Take those clothes off while I'm gone. Bra and panties only."

As she watched him move up the stairs as if he had all the time in the world, she set to undressing, leaving her jeans and blouse at the door, remaining in only a white bra and white cotton boyshorts. Hell, given how she'd felt the past few days, she was only too glad she wasn't wearing granny panties.

Only a handful of minutes later, Maddox appeared on the top landing, shirtless, his pants unbuttoned. Heat flooded her, and when he reached her, she said, "I'm one lucky lady."

His mouth twitched. "Believe me, I'm the lucky one here. I'm still counting my blessings that you said yes to date me. But since you've agreed to be mine now, let me have a look at you." He lifted his finger and motioned for her to turn in a circle. She obliged him and turned toward the door, and he groaned, low and deep. He squeezed her right butt cheek, then her left. "Your ass looks incredible in these."

"I thought you only liked fancy, lacy things," she said, spinning back to him.

"On you?" That eyebrow arched. "I like anything, sugar, and sometimes even better...nothing at all."

She swallowed the added moisture in her mouth at the way he looked at her—like she was truly *his*—before he pulled a blindfold from his back pocket. Darkness soon slid over her eyes as the covering settled into place. She shivered when he stepped in behind her, sliding his fingers down her spine before he kissed her shoulder.

"I'm going to hide," he murmured. "You're going to find me. Then I'll reward you."

She exhaled as the strength and heat at her back vanished when he stepped away. Her eyes were shut beneath the blindfold, but she noticed that she could hear him stride forward. She smiled and listened carefully to his footsteps. Within seconds, it became instantly obvious that he'd gone upstairs.

Thump...thump...thump...

She counted each step, and by the tenth, she knew he hadn't gone into the bedroom. The

footsteps came overhead, telling her that he'd traveled farther down the hallway.

Then *silence*.

Silence that told her the chase was on. A chase not necessarily easy half-nude. Slowly, barefoot, she made her way up the stairs, holding onto the railing. Once at the top, she counted the steps that she'd heard him make. The silence around her was thick and heavy. All she could hear were her harsh breaths and her heart hammering in her ears.

Soon, she'd find him. Her pussy drenched with anticipation.

She held her hands out in front of her, ensuring she didn't bump into anything until suddenly those hands touched smooth, warm, and hard skin. "Caught you," she said with a smile.

"Good girl," he murmured, sliding his hands around to her ass, squeezing her cheeks. "Now for that reward, sweetheart." He took her hand, leading her somewhere that took her another seven steps to get there.

Again, the strength of his warm body came at her back when he gathered up her hair, placing it over her shoulder. His hands stroked her body from her face to her neck to the curve of her side to her bottom, there wasn't a single part of her untouched by him. She moaned when his fingers tickled her inner thighs, traveling higher until he slipped his fingers inside her boyshorts and stroked her soaking-wet sex.

"You like finding me, hmmm?" he observed.

She moaned, dropping her head back on his shoulder. "Now that I have you, I never want to lose you."

"You never will." He lowered his lips to her neck, his finger gone from inside her boyshorts. She shivered as his hands traveled over her while he returned to her front. He unhooked her bra, sliding it off her shoulders, then he reached down and removed her boyshorts. His mouth was on hers a moment later, and that's all she knew...all she cared about as she melted into the promise of pleasure.

When he backed away, the cold void of his departure sank in deep, and she whimpered for his return. Yet again, she stood there in the darkness, waiting for whatever he planned to do next. Which came only a second later when something soft dragged against her arm.

She sighed and softened as he began wrapping the rope around her upper body. First, the soft strands slid across the back of her neck, and then she began to feel the tugs against her torso as he placed knots along her front.

His fingers paused when he kissed her shoulder, saying softly, "Grab your forearms behind your back." She did as told, and he kissed her neck, "That's my girl." He stepped in behind her and began sliding the rope through her arms until they were bound tightly at her back.

"Beautiful," he murmured, sliding his fingers along the curve of her breast.

Again, he moved away.

She tilted her head, hearing a *click*, then she understood why, as he returned to her and slid a wet silicone object across her slit.

"Spread your legs," he said, causing her to shiver.

She slid her feet apart, letting him insert the dildo inside her, obviously coated in lube from the container he'd opened. The dildo wasn't small in nature, by any means, but not as big as Maddox either. He gently pushed the toy up inside her until she felt a flatter piece of silicone press across her clit. The tease of being full and the pressure was enough to make her circle her hips, eager for more.

"Ah, you like this?"

"Yes, sir."

His low chuckle brushed across her, while he began to fasten straps around her hips and legs until the dildo rested inside her and the vibe pressed tightly against her clit. "I'm sure you'll like this more," he said, then the vibe against her clit came to life—a slow, weak buzz tickling her sensitive bud.

Again, he moved away, like before, but now, the pause was longer.

So long that she assumed he watched her while the vibrator teased her and the dildo stretched her. Time passed slowly, and only when she began to breathe deeper and moan a little louder did he return to her. Not to her front, this time he moved behind her, spreading her butt cheeks.

She gasped as sudden wetness spread across her anus and there was pressure pushed against her puckered knot. She knew she could say *red* and stop this, but she didn't want to, trusting him. The pressure gave her more, and more was what she wanted.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head when he kissed her spine, slowly swirling his tongue across her flesh. "Push out a little, sugar."

She moaned against the pressure, breathing deeply as the new toy pressed against her anus. He stayed silent, being calm and gentle, while her mind fought to understand the discomfort at her bottom, mixed with the pleasure deep inside. She released a long, slow breath as the toy settled inside her, filling her body in ways she'd never been.

"Perfect," he said, kissing her shoulder.

She wanted to answer him, she did, but at that moment, he chose to remove the blindfold. There were no words. She blinked a couple of times, clearing her eyesight until she realized she stood in his bathroom. And the way he'd positioned her, she was staring at herself, bound in black rope like she wore a black bikini top without the fabric covering her breasts. Her arms were back behind her, with a very naked and erect Maddox next to her.

"See how pretty you are?" He cupped her breast and massaged the one, tweaking her nipple. "How perfect you look?"

Again, she tried to respond, but...*click*.

In the mirror, she watched her eyes widen and cheeks flush deep in color as the vibrator turned to a higher speed.

"Enjoy this," he said with a smile, before kissing her shoulder again and stepping in behind her.

With his smoldering eyes locked on hers in the mirror, he clicked the button again and now the dildo began vibrating, too. Her knees went weak, and she had to lock them, ensuring she didn't fall over. He watched her intently as he clicked the remote again.

"Oh, shit." She dropped her head back against his shoulder as he pinched her nipple tightly. His hand slid up to her neck, holding a little tighter than before as he began grinding his rock-hard cock against her bottom, taking pleasure he wanted from her.

Click.

She gasped against the harsh buzz on her clit, and his low chuckle only made her shiver harder. She was barely able to watch him move to the bathroom counter. There, she watched him apply a condom and then add generous amounts of lube to his cock.

When he returned to her, he grasped her chin. "Do I get to have all of you, Joss?"

"Yes, sir," she barely managed.

He stepped in behind her and slipped his fingers between her butt cheeks, stroking around the butt plug. His low groan told her he liked how she looked, ready and stuffed full, as he slowly withdrew the butt plug, placing it on a towel next to him. Then he stepped in close, held

her hip, and looked at her through the mirror. “Ever imagined what it’d be like to be with two men?”

She nodded, gasping and quivering.

A slow smile spread across his face before he buried his face against her neck and licked her from shoulder to ear as he whispered, “I’ll never share you, sugar, but I’ll do my best to fulfill every one of your fantasies.” The tip of his cock pressed against her puckered knot. “Breathe out.” Then he pushed his hips forward, pressing past the tight rim. “Now breathe in.”

She groaned, her legs trembling, as he slowly inched his way inside her, stretching her in ways she’d never been stretched. His fingers dug into her hip as he took his time, being gentle until he settled in deep, past the tight rim. His eyes shut, pleasure washing over his expression. She exhaled the breath she’d be holding, panting, overwhelmed by him. By it all.

When he opened his eyes, he began shifting his hips, slow and gentle.

She moaned, trying to understand the sensations. The intense pleasure on her clit. The fullness in her pussy. The tightness and pressure in her anus. She gasped and moaned and grunted against it all, until he began shifting easier, her body far more accepting, and he moved a little faster now. His one hand slid over her breast, and he massaged her before his fingers moved toward her nipple where he pinched the bud in his tight grip.

Three things happened all at once in the most unexpected way. The vibe kicked up to the final speed. The fullness she experienced morphed into hot pleasure flooding her. And she wasn’t sure if she screamed or bucked or jerked or even if he had climaxed with her, all she knew was she orgasmed...and orgasmed...and orgasmed...until suddenly she wasn’t orgasming anymore, she was lying in a heap on the cold bathroom floor.

Minutes passed in blur of confusion. She couldn’t remember when he’d withdrawn his cock or removed the vibe and dildo, all she recalled was being wiped down with a warm cloth before he removed the rope then took her in his arms.

Now, being carried from the bathroom into the bedroom, she rested her head against his warm, damp chest. At the bed, he lay her down in the middle, and the mattress dipped when he joined her.

On his side, he ran his fingers down her stomach, staring into her eyes. She lay there, watching him, too. Silent. Recovering. For many, many, long minutes. Only when her mind returned fully did she dare talk. “So, is this the kinda love I have to look forward to?”

He gave her his sexy half-grin. “Yes, and it’s the best kind of love there is.”

“Oh, yeah, what kind of love do we have?” she asked, snuggling into him, feeling sore in the best kind of way.

He gathered her in his arms, pulling her as close as she could get, and chuckled. “Filthy, dirty love, of course.”

“Filthy, dirty love?” She laughed. “Sounds promising.”

“Oh, sugar, but it is that.”

“And will it always be?”

He stared at her and promised, “Always. Forever.”

Epilogue

From inside his kitchen, Maddox glanced out at his backyard through the window above the sink, where things had begun again for him and Joss. Exactly one year after his last party for the new rookies and his fellow cops, the backyard looked different now, or maybe he simply saw the world through new eyes.

He grabbed the plate of burgers off the counter and then exited through the patio door. From her spot at the outdoor sitting area around the fire pit, Joss smiled at him before she focused on her mother again. How beautiful she looked there with her wedding ring sparkling off the string of lights wound around their pergola, lighting up the outdoor space.

So many changes had happened, that nothing quite looked the same anymore. But they were the best kinds of changes. Their whirlwind adventure into dating had only lasted three months before Maddox insisted that she move in with him, and three days after that, he put a ring on her finger. Now, Maddox and Joss had been married for four months, and he liked all the finishing touches she'd put on the house.

Though the changes weren't only personal, they were professional, too. While Maddox was the captain in the east, Joss stayed in the west, where in another two years, she'd likely get the promotion to detective that she'd wished for. The truth was, as much as Maddox feared that his career would overshadow hers, her connection to the chief kept everyone's lips tightly shut. Besides, in the year that she'd been a cop, her work ethic stood apart from any connection she had to any of her superiors.

The warm air brushed across him as he moved to the grill, finding Grey in an eerily similar spot as where he'd been last year when Joss had come back into Maddox's life and changed everything.

"You know," Grey said when Maddox reached him. "I still think you're the luckiest bastard out there." He motioned to the rookies, who stood off near the bar quietly mingling among themselves. "Every year, I think they actually get hotter."

"And every year, they also get younger," Maddox reminded him, placing the burgers on the hot grill.

Grey frowned, tipping his beer at Maddox. "Careful. You're beginning to sound like my mother."

Maddox barked a laugh. "Then kill me."

"Seriously, though," Grey added with a smile, glancing at Joss, who sat with her parents over on the patio couches. "Look at you two, you've become totally domesticated."

"Even more than you know." Maddox added the burgers to the grill, knowing what he said next would cause a ripple. "Soon there will be three of us."

Grey's head snapped around to Maddox, eyes wide. "She's pregnant?"

Maddox smiled. "Just three months now."

"Congrats, man." Grey yanked Maddox into him, smacking his back in a rough man-hug. "You're going to be a father." He leaned away, giving Maddox another hard smack on the back, grinning from ear-to-ear. "My mother will be so pleased."

"I'm sure she will." Maddox laughed.

Grey looked at Joss again before leaning back against the post, folding his arms. "You know, a year ago I never would've believed this would be where you ended up."

Maddox began flipping the burgers, one by one. “Doesn’t it make you wonder where you’ll be a year from now?”

Unusual softness filled Grey’s eyes. “I’ll probably be right back here, holding onto your sweet babe while you’re flipping burgers for your new rookies.”

“Or you’ll be holding onto *your* wife,” Maddox offered.

Grey snorted and shook his head. “Nah, buddy, the domesticated shit is for you, not me.”

Maddox smiled and glanced down at the burgers cooking on the grill. Once, he’d thought along those same lines, too, and now he knew all it took was one woman to blow that thought into a hundred pieces. He hoped Grey found what he had, but he also wasn’t planning to get all gushy and tell Grey that either.

When he’d flipped some of the new patties, he began taking off the cooked ones from earlier and placing them on a serving plate. He kept two off to the side, and called to the crowd, “Burgers up.”

“I’d better grab one before they’re gone. These people are like vultures,” Grey said, rushing forward and making himself a plate.

Maddox laughed to himself and added a couple of buns to the two burgers he’d kept aside and then approached Joss and her parents. She was laughing at something her mother had said, but when she caught sight of him, she smiled as he set one burger on Joss’s plate and another on her mother’s. “Dinner’s up, ladies,” he told them.

Joss’s father snorted. “Better stop it, Maddox. You’re starting to make me look bad.”

“Well, sir.” Maddox straightened and shoved his hands into his pockets. “You’ve got quite the head start on impressing your ladies. I need to catch up.”

Her father chuckled softly as he rose from his seat. He squeezed Maddox’s shoulder in a familiar embrace Maddox had grown to enjoy this past year before heading off to fetch his dinner.

“Oh, I’d better get another drink, too,” her mother said, rising from her chair. When Maddox reached for her wineglass, she added, “You don’t need to spoil me all the time, Maddox. I’ve got this.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled, letting her take the glass from his hand.

Once she’d headed off to fetch her drink, Maddox took her seat, pulling it closer to Joss. “Doing okay, sugar?” he asked, stroking her cheek.

Her nose scrunched, and she frowned at her burger. “I think you’d better take that away from me.” Her concerned eyes came to his, mouth pinched tightly.

Swiftly, he grabbed the plate and moved it behind him, not in the direction of the wind. “Burgers are on the list of what you can’t eat?”

“Apparently,” she said with a sigh, placing a hand on her lower belly. “Honestly, at this rate, our kid is going to be a vegetarian.”

“That will never happen,” Maddox said seriously with a firm shake of his head, placing his hand on her belly. “My son will like eating meat as much as he enjoys hunting for it.”

Joss gave him a sweet smile, placing her hand on top of his. “And how do you know we’re having a boy?”

“I don’t, of course, but I have a feeling.”

“A feeling, hmm?” She stroked her fingers across his hand, looking up at him through her lashes. “But what if it’s a girl, will you be disappointed?”

He chuckled softly, rubbing her belly. “Of course, not. That just means I’ll need my shotgun for other reasons than hunting.”

“You’re not going to threaten our child’s crushes.” Joss frowned at him.

He smiled. “Wanna bet?”

Joss barked a laugh, and he loved that laugh. So happy. So free. So perfect. So his. “You’ll never change, will you? Always the broody, alpha guy?”

“No,” he said, “And you forgot something on my title, didn’t you?”

She hesitated. Then chuckled again. “Sex God.”

“That’s it, sugar. And you know why I won’t change?”

“Why?” She smiled.

He cupped her nape, pulling her close, and before he sealed his mouth across hers, he murmured, “Because you like it.”

And he’d make sure she always liked the adventure and loved him. Today. Tomorrow. And Always.

Also by Stacey Kennedy

Filthy Dirty Love

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[Tied to His Betrayal](#)

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About Stacey Kennedy

USA Today bestselling author Stacey Kennedy has written more than thirty romances, including titles in her wildly hot Club Sin, Dirty Little Secrets, and Filthy Dirty Love series. Her books are about real people with real-life problems, searching for that special thing we call love...in a very sexy way. When she's not burning up the pages and setting e-readers ablaze, she's living her happily ever after with her husband and two young children in southwestern Ontario. She's a firm believer that wine, chocolate, and sinfully sexy books can cure all of life's problems. To keep in touch with Stacey, get updates right to your inbox at staceykennedy.com/newsletter/.

Read on for an excerpt from the conclusion of the Filthy Dirty Love series: SKIRT CHASER

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Chapter 1

She's a goddamn temptress.

Downtown Seattle, in a high-rise that offered views of Elliott Bay, the Space Needle, and the Seattle Great Wheel, Greyson Crawford held back a groan. Sitting behind his grand desk in his corner office, he watched as Evie Richards bent down, picking up the piece of paper that had fallen to the ground. The heat to his groin was swift and unbearable, and he bit the inside of his cheek, fighting against the brutal hardening of his cock. He couldn't quite put a finger on what was so spectacular. Maybe her long, flowing, blond hair? Her curvaceous, hourglass figure? Her piercing, light green eyes? Whatever it was, she was pure temptation dressed in a proper, professional, black dress that he wanted to rip the fuck off her.

One month.

Thirty days.

Seven hundred and twenty hours.

No matter how he looked at it, the past days working alongside her had been a horrendous torture. He'd slowly been counting down this day to come. The day that Evie's contract with his company, Crawford Architecture, was done. Soon, she'd move on, ready to wow some other big company in Seattle that needed her on-point interior design expertise.

Today was the day that he could officially seduce her into his bed.

As she rose, righting her skirt to its proper, knee-length place, he wanted nothing more than to yank that skirt over her hips and redden that round ass a little. Through the glass wall separating his office from the main area with its large cubicles for his engineering and design staff, he watched her move to the temporary desk she'd been given, and reach for her cell phone by her keyboard.

For one month now, he'd endeavored to keep their relationship professional. Grey knew the rules. One, don't mix business and pleasure. Two, keep his hands off his employees. Throughout her contract, he'd teased her with a little light flirtation to let his interest be known. He'd never crossed the line, though. Soon, he would. But until she left his office today, officially ending her contract, he had to wait. Patiently. Like a lion ready to take its prey.

Right then, she placed her phone back on the desk, tears filling her eyes. Even from where he sat, he could see the tremble in her hands. There was a stillness about her that raised his mental alarms, as her eyes were frozen on the screen.

Grey began to rise from his seat, as Janet, his longtime assistant, suddenly approached Evie's desk. His eyes were only on Evie, and when she spotted Janet, tears flooded her face, her mouth moving with words that Grey couldn't hear.

Janet reached out, placing a comforting hand on Evie's shoulder.

His back straightened like a steel rod, and he was striding to his door and out of the office before his next breath. He didn't get there in time, and before he could reach her cubicle, Evie suddenly ran into the hallway and past him, her makeup trailing black lines down her face.

Determined to get answers, he moved toward her desk, finding Janet staring down at Evie's cell phone. "What was that all about?" he asked.

"Oh," Janet said in her high-pitched voice, her short, blond bob hiding her round face as she

picked up Evie's phone. "I guess her best friend is engaged to her ex-boyfriend, and this weekend they're having a destination wedding." She spun the phone around, showing Grey the screen, displaying a photo of a blond woman wearing nothing but a bright red string bikini. Next to her, a brown-haired guy rested an arm possessively around the woman's shoulders. Can't wait for you to get here! was written in bold red letters at the bottom of the photo. "Evie is the maid of honor."

Janet handed him the phone, and as he gazed upon the woman, he said, "Let me get this straight. Evie is the maid of honor in her best friend's wedding who is marrying Evie's ex-boyfriend?"

Janet gave a tight smile and nodded. "Now you understand why she's upset. I think the reality of it all maybe just hit her."

"I suppose that explains the tears," Grey surmised.

Janet nodded, a scowl marring her usually sweet face. "Poor girl, if these are the people she has in her life."

Grey stared down at the photo before the screen went black, confused. Evie didn't seem the type to allow anyone to make her feel small. Christ, her confidence was one of the things he found so damn titillating. "Leave this with me," he told Janet, holding up the phone. "I'll see that she gets it back."

"Oh, I'm sure you will," Janet said, pointing a long, red-painted fingernail at him. "Don't you dare make her more upset. She is a very sweet girl. She's not like your usuals."

"I'm well aware," Grey retorted, shoving his hand into his pocket, not at all insulted. Janet, as well as Grey's closest friend, Maddox Hunt, a cop with the Seattle Police Department, might be the only two people who knew him enough to know that statement was warranted.

Sometime back in college, with a reputation that followed him into his thirty-fifth year now, he'd been called a skirt-chasing ladies' man. He had lived up to that name, and he didn't make apologies for it either. He liked women, usually only once, but sometimes more than one at a time. Sure, he'd done the relationship thing before, but women tended to get a) clingy and b) boring.

Not Evie.

She tempted him in ways no one had. And it wasn't just the game of playing hard to get. There was something different about this woman...something that made him count down the days until she stopped working for him.

"All right, as long as we've got that clear," Janet said, giving a tender smile, patting Grey's arm. "Be gentle with this one."

When Janet headed back to her desk outside of Grey's office, he looked back to the black screen on the phone. What kind of thoughtless friend would not only date an ex but then ask you to stand up for the wedding? There had to be more to the story.

Determined to get to the bottom of it, and erase those tears the bastards had caused, he kept Evie's phone in his hand and then moved down the hallway, looking for her. Midway down the corridor, he noticed that his CFO's assistant, Trina, was glancing at the women's washroom.

"Did Evie go in there?" he asked Trina when he reached her.

"Yeah," Trina said with a soft nod. "She seemed upset."

Grey glanced at the closed black door with the woman's washroom logo. "Is anyone else in there?"

"I can't be sure since I haven't really been paying attention, but I don't think so."

Good enough for him. "I'd appreciate it if you could ensure that no one else goes in until I

come out.”

Trina didn't even bat an eye. “Yes, sir.”

Of course, she wouldn't. Grey was her boss, and this was certainly none of her business. Even if his company had typical office gossip, and he knew word of this would get around, no one would ever dare chatter to his face.

Intent and careful to take his time not to scare any other employees in the restroom, he entered the simple and modern bathroom with the five stalls. Only one door was closed, and there was no one at the sink, so he moved toward the vanity and leaned against it. Hands shoved into his pockets, he stared at the closed door, giving Evie the time she needed. That's when he heard her soft cries, and with those pained noises, something inside of him tensed.

It was a sensation strong enough to make him question what it was about this woman that drew him in so intently. She'd gotten a grip on his mind and body so tightly that he pondered her situation, and his, and what he could do about both. He'd become so lost in his thoughts that he didn't realize she'd opened the door until she was leaving the stall and striding out.

Head down, she hadn't noticed him yet, so he called out to her, “Evie.”

A scream ripping from her throat, hands pressing against her chest. “Holy shit!”

He couldn't help but chuckle. “I'm sorry for scaring you.” His amusement washed away when he took a good look at her face. There was so much pain there. He didn't like it.

The shock from her face slowly faded. “Why are you in here?” she asked.

“To return your phone to you.” He moved to her, watching her following his every step. The heat in her eyes was instant, and that'd always been the problem. She wanted him. Christ, did she want him, he could tell. But she was smart and clever, never one to cross the professional line either. She was also a good girl, who likely needed love before sex. Maybe that was the real reason she didn't ever cross the line. Maybe it was less about the job and more about protecting her heart from a guy that screamed danger. He could understand why

Though he never was a man who took the easy road, and he sure as shit liked a challenge. He stared into her gorgeous eyes, and a plan formed. One that got him what he wanted, and yet would benefit her, too. He'd never been a sly or shady guy, but he was a good businessman. And that meant using a situation to his advantage.

“So, that's it. You got out the good cry you needed to,” he said to her, and he liked the way her lips parted when he leaned in toward her; it showed him just how much she yearned for his kiss. “Your ex is marrying your best friend,” he added. “He's an asshole. She's a bitch. This is happening, but it's how you deal with it that truly matters.”

“He's not an asshole,” she said softly, shaking her head. “And she's not a bitch. I've helped plan their wedding for the last year, and I'm happy for them. I think...maybe it hadn't sunk in or something.” She drew in a deep breath, releasing it out her nose and added with a soft smile, “But I'm better now. I'm sorry I fell apart out there.”

“One, I disagree with you,” he retorted sternly. “I'm not convinced these aren't terrible people. And two, do not apologize that their selfishness hurt you. In fact, I'd say it's time to get revenge, don't you think?”

The side of her mouth arched slightly. He noted her long exhale, and he knew that had nothing to do with emotions. That it was this push and pull thing going on between them. Call it chemistry, intensity, whatever, it was as addictive as it was captivating. “How exactly do I do that?” She grabbed a paper towel, got it a bit wet with cold water, and then began wiping off her makeup, adding, “Murder them?” She gave him her sexy smile that pooled heat in his groin.

Grey chuckled, leaning his hip against the counter. “Perhaps that's a bit extreme. Murder

means jail time, and you going away is definitely not what I want.”

She slowly glanced at him then, cheeks flushing pink, and the dilation of her pupils was obvious. That look had snagged him the very first day after his COO hired her to design the lobby of the interior of their latest multi-million-dollar high-rise.

Now, the look intensified, hardening his cock, centering his mind on all the wicked things he’d like to do to her. He stepped toward her, as she spun around, leaning against the counter, wide eyes on him. There was something about her, maybe her innocence, maybe this unexplainable connection that had only grown since he worked alongside her, but it captured him in an unbreakable spell.

In the seconds that passed, the desire practically wafted off her, scented so sweet his cock went hard just that easily. As it always did, the space between them felt charged with electricity, but he’d never gotten this close to her before. He never let her feel the extent of how he wanted her. Now, he held nothing back.

“I have a better idea than jail time,” he told her, giving her enough distance that if she wanted to move and leave the bathroom, she could. When she stayed put, he added, “Show these bastards up. Take me with you, and make them both ragingly jealous.”

Her eyes searched his, then she broke out in loud laughter. “Yeah, right. Hilarious.”

She might have said one thing, but the only thing he noticed was that she wasn’t moving, eyes locked on him. “I’m not kidding,” he said, erasing the distance between them, placing both hands on either side of her, trapping her between him and the counter.

“You’re not kidding,” she said, more of a statement than a question.

Grey glanced from her bottom lip she nibbled to her flushed cheeks to her smoldering eyes... Christ, what he’d do to this woman. It would be indecent. “I would never joke about something that so clearly upsets you,” he told her seriously. “I can only imagine you want to one-up them. I know I would. Use me to do it.”

“She’s my best friend,” she said softly. “I don’t need to one-up her.”

He let his gaze roam over her pretty face before looking into her smoldering eyes again. “Tell me it’s never crossed your mind what it would feel like to walk in there not like a sad third wheel but like a woman who owns the world.”

“And how would that ever happen?”

“You’ll have me on your arm.”

Her mouth twisted. “You’re pretty sure of yourself.”

“Angel, I am never the third wheel of anything,” he told her, dead serious. “I’m the engine, the accelerator, and the whole damn car.”

She swallowed deeply and studied him, *hard*. “All right,” she eventually said, “say I’m game and actually agree to this crazy plan, what do you get out of it?”

“I get you.” He brought his mouth close enough to tease her. She wanted his kiss, angling her head backward, parting her lips. He dragged his nose across hers, and added, “I get to have you in all the ways you know I want you. Beneath me, over me, against a wall, on your knees, screaming my name, whatever I want. Completely under my control.” And to ensure there were no misunderstandings, he sternly added, “My game. My rules. Your surrender, until we’re back in Seattle.”

In a breathy voice, she asked, “Tell me why any sane woman would do this?”

He grinned at her—a sly smile that worked its charm on many women but seemed to have an even greater effect on her. He watched the way the heat rippled through her, and her breath grew rough and raspy, and fuck, did he want to make her moan.

“First, and most importantly,” he answered, staying on point, “*you* will do this because we both know you’ve been looking for a good reason to say yes to a little guilt-free, no-strings-attached with me. So, here it is. I’m giving you the perfect scenario for us to make that happen. The rules are clear. There can be no misunderstandings.”

She hadn’t blinked. “And second?”

“Secondly,” he said, moving his nose to her neck, inhaling her scent of sugar and spice while he slid back up her smooth skin to her ear, feeling her shuddering under his touch. “I’m that guy that every woman, including your bitch of a best friend, will want.” He lifted his head, staring into her lust-filled eyes. “I’m the perfect guy to show your shithead ex-boyfriend you’ve moved up in the world.”

She finally blinked. “When exactly would this arrangement start?”

“Tonight. My house. Eight o’clock. Bring your suitcase.” He paused, considered his next steps. “Send your flight and resort details to my email so I can get that squared away.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

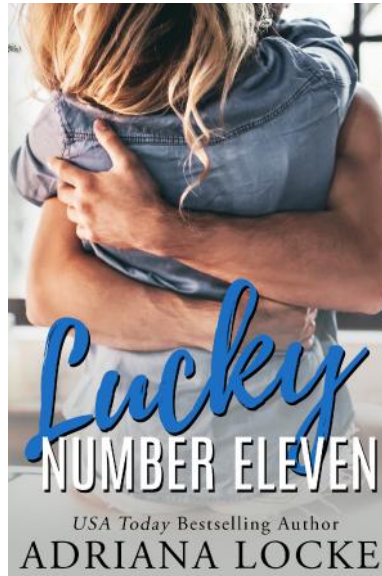
He took her chin, tilting her eyes to lock onto his. “The proper reply is: ‘Yes, Grey, I agree to your terms.’”

Silence fell.

A slowly seductive, delicious darkness slid over her eyes with her grin. “Yes, Grey, I agree to your terms.”

Lucky Number Eleven

By Adriana Locke



Dedication

To Layla James. You're so incredibly loved.

And to Carleen. You're the best.

Acknowledgements

First, I'd like to thank my Creator for life, love, and listening.

Life is a funny thing. We're constantly trying to balance what we want to do with what we need to do. Rarely are those things the same. I'd like to thank my family for understanding that and for being so patient while I manage both sides of the coin.

Sending big hugs to Mom, Peggy, and Rob for their support and enthusiasm of my work. You are loved.

Another book with my amazing team. Kari (Kari March Designs), Lisa (Adept Edits), Christine (Type A Formatting), Kylie (Give Me Books) and Red Coat PR—thank you for working with me. You are the best in the business.

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My betas rock. You know who you are. Thank you for your loyalty and energy and time. You made this book so much better.

Oh, Carleen. There aren't words, my friend. (Even though you can't squee.) I'm convinced we share the same brain in so many ways. Thank you for . . . everything.

Kara saved my life. Thank you so much for stepping in and helping a girl out. I appreciate you!

Thank you to Ebbie for managing the FitBit Challenge in Books by Adriana Locke, Jade for helping to manage All Locked Up on Goodreads, and Deva for spearheading our Locke Fantasy Football League. You guys are sincerely the best!

We made it, Mandi Beck. (Now to send Lisa something nice.)

Thank you, readers, for taking a chance on Lucky Number Eleven. I know how many choices you have. Thank you for choosing this.

Dear bloggers, what would we do without you? You are so appreciated.

And last but not least, thank you to Dawson, who helped inspire a line in this book.

Exposé Top Story: Best Making Headlines

The temperature skyrocketed in Chicago this week and it had nothing to do with the weather. Our two favorite ballers went head-to-head (or should we say helmet-to-helmet?) on the practice field and there's video to prove it.

Sources tell us the (sweaty, aggressive, hot-as-hell) fight that got Branch "Lucky" Best, Finn Miller, and visiting Columbus quarterback Callum Worthington ejected from practice (you must see this video!) was not over a fumbled play. It was over nothing less than Layla James Miller, Finn's younger sister.

Does Layla's name sound familiar? It should. Until about five minutes ago, you could find her on Callum's well-formed arm . . . until he gave us whiplash showing up in Tahiti with the face of Ares Cosmetics, Carly Mathewson. But Callum and Layla aren't dating anymore, so where's the beef?

Give us a sec.

Layla James is now *scoring* with Branch. Yeah. We'll give that a minute to sink in.

Word has it Finn isn't all that hyped about his sister *playing ball* with his (former?) best friend. Branch's playboy image is well-known and even better documented. A keyword search of his name on our site alone brings up thousands of hits of him with women and rarely are two the same.

The question remains: why does Callum care?

We'll have to wait and see. In the meantime, we'll be crying in our Rosé and hoping our favorite bromance gets back on track. (And, seriously, go watch that video!)

Chapter 1

Branch

A few months prior . . .

“This is why you’re hot.”

“Really?” I sit back, lifting a water bottle to my lips and smirk. My eyes don’t leave hers. “I had no idea.”

That’s a lie. This look, the one that’s currently melting her panties straight off her teeny little waist, has worked in my favor since I discovered it at the ripe old age of fourteen. Should it have worked on my math teacher? Probably not. But it did make acing algebra about a hundred times easier. I could use it then without even really knowing what I was doing. Now, with fifteen years of experience under my belt, I can play this look like a fiddle.

Fanning her face with a stack of index cards outlining the questions she’s supposed to ask me for *Exposé Magazine*—something I don’t even think she realizes she’s doing—she blinks rapidly. “Tell me something no one knows about you.”

I place the bottle on the little table beside me and shift in my seat. Her last question is the only question that is asked in every single interview I’ve ever done. Every last one. And they all think it’s so original.

I used to humor reporters and give them something to print, but in the last couple of years, I’ve thought better of it. Maybe my self-promotion has gotten better. Maybe there’s less to tell (since they already know so damn much). Or maybe I’m simply a little more cynical than I used to be. Either way, I loathe this question. It’s like just because I’m a public figure they’re entitled to every detail of my life.

“Branch,” she gulps, her cheeks turning a shade of crimson, “my notes from this interview aren’t going to be very . . . helpful.”

“And why is that?”

She refuses to look at me.

“Let me see your notes,” I say, reaching for the index cards.

“Um, no.”

“Oh, come on,” I tease. “What’s on there?”

“Just . . . I need something substantial so I don’t get fired.” The slightly pouty lips, dipped chin is a look women give me all the time.

“Nice tactic.”

“Tactic?”

“Yeah. You’re appealing to my emotions.”

“I don’t know what else to appeal to.”

Roaming my eyes down her face to the low-cut blouse that showcases a nice set of B-cups, I let them linger for a long couple of seconds before bringing them back to her eyes. I lift a brow. “I’m sure you have no idea other than appealing to my . . . *emotions*.”

“Well . . .” Her gaze drops to the paper on her lap as she turns an even deeper shade of red.

“How many interviews have you done?”

“Total? Or sports?”

“Total.”

“Five,” she admits with a sigh. “I only got this one because the sports writer got meningitis.”

“So you’re here by default?” I ask, leaning forward. My arms resting on my knees, I clasp my hands in front of me.

“No. I’m here because I begged for the opportunity.”

“To interview me?” I nudge.

“Something like that.”

“Do you beg often?”

Her tongue darts across her lips, leaving a trail of wetness. “Only when necessary.”

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. There’s something about the gesture, a tinge of normalcy behind the overt sexiness, that makes me reconsider. As I try to talk myself out of giving in, I also wrack my brain for some fun fact that can help her save her job just in case she’s not feeding me a load of shit like I suspect she is.

“I hate dogs.”

Her eyes light up like a scoreboard. “You hate dogs?”

“I know, I know—this is a complete asshole thing to say. I get it. But the Blaney’s Doberman left a lasting mark on more things than the back of my right thigh. For some people, it’s clowns. For me, it’s four-legged beasts. To each their own.”

Her pen flurries across a legal pad, the sound reminiscent of Coach’s dry erase marker on the whiteboard at practice. “What else do you hate?”

“Oh, no. I gave you one thing,” I say, not falling into her trap.

“What do you love then?”

“My mama.”

The door leading into the makeshift interview room opens. Finn Miller struts in, yanking a pair of sunglasses off his face. “Ready, Party Boy?” he grins.

“Yeah, I think we’re done here.” I look back at the reporter as she gulps. “Got what you need?”

“More or less,” she says slowly, innuendo thick in her tone.

Finn chuckles beside me as I slide off the leather chair.

“Thank you, Branch. For everything,” she says, her voice all breathy.

“Dear Lord, what did you give this one?” Finn asks.

“An exclusive,” I joke, shoving my Legends hat backwards on my blond hair.

“Oh, that’s what we’re calling it these days?”

The reporter, whose name I didn’t catch, clutches her notes to her chest. “Maybe we can all three do something together one day.”

“That’s called a threesome and I’m in,” Finn deadpans.

Her mouth drops open. “I meant an interview!”

“Sure you did,” he chuckles, holding the door open for me. “Let’s go, Branch. Time’s a-wastin’.”

“Good luck with your column.” Giving her a nod, I follow Finn into the deserted hallway.

There’s a spring in his step that worries me a little as we make our way towards the elevators. Why I agreed to accompany him on a weekend getaway without actually getting details is beyond me. The last time I did this we ended up ice fishing in Michigan. Who does that?

“Where are we going again?” I ask, hoping he’ll forget he didn’t tell me and just spill it.

No such luck.

He punches the down button for the elevator and leans against the wall. “You’ll love it. I

promise.”

By the cheesy grin on his face, I have doubts.

Chapter 2

Layla

“How ya doing over there?” Poppy Quinn wrinkles her perfect button nose at me from the driver’s seat. “That face isn’t my favorite on you.”

“Um, I only have one face.”

“That would be incorrect,” she says matter-of-factly, turning her gaze back to the winding road ahead. “You have a bunch of faces and that one, the one you’re making right now, makes me feel like downing a shot of tequila.”

“Everything makes you feel like downing a shot of tequila.”

The scenery turned green at some point over the last hour, the greyscale of Chicago washing away with the vividness of lush grasses and dense forests as we head south. I’ve taken this trek countless times to the little cabin my parents purchased on Lake Michigan when I was a baby. My older brother, Finn, and I spent every summer up here until we moved out and went to college.

Glancing at Poppy’s furrowed brow, I sigh. “I’m fine. I promise.”

“It was the song on the radio, wasn’t it? You were fine until it came on.”

“I *am* fine,” I insist, sitting up a little taller in my seat. “I’m on my way to my favorite place in the world with my favorite person in the world,” I say, laughing as she dramatically places a hand on her heart.

“That’s so touching. Hits me right in the feels.”

“What’s there to be upset about?” I forge on. “Just that my ex-boyfriend is on a vacation to Tahiti, one that I was supposed to be on with him, that I *planned*, mind you. Instead, he’s with Carly Mathewson, the model he’s probably been cheating on me with. No biggie.”

Fists clenched at my sides, I imagine Callum Worthington with that blonde bimbo in the perfect over-the-water bungalow that I picked out.

My feelings about him are all over the place. I had myself convinced I was in love with him, but I’m too *not* upset about not being with him anymore to have really loved him. My anger isn’t even from losing him. It’s from feeling like I was a little placeholder in his bed until he was ready to move a new body into my place.

The fact that she’s a freaking model is just icing on the cake.

My mom says mistakes aren’t mistakes unless you fail to learn from them. I definitely learned from this Callum ordeal—most of all that I’d be capable of setting my morality aside if the situation were right. I’d have no qualms about going all *Misery* on him if I could get away with it. My conscience is eased by the fact he’d probably like the attention. Second of all, I learned to trust my gut.

I was at a football game with a friend that interviewed players for a pseudo-sports blog. Callum and I started talking while she was finishing up with the coach, and when I looked up, it was a year later and he was telling me he didn’t want to see me anymore.

My gut told me that day to stay away from him. I was turned off by how much he talked about himself and found some of the simplest things annoying. Still, his charm could be turned on and his gestures grand when he wanted them to be and it was enough for me to consider I was just being picky.

I should've been pickier.

"You know," I say, "I just wish I knew why."

"Why what?"

"Why he bothered to lead me along if I didn't matter . . . and I obviously didn't matter. Did he love me? Did he cheat on me with *everyone* I suspected?" Looking at Poppy over my shoulder, I shrug. "It just hurts my feelings."

"I'm going to try super hard to remember that I have to validate your feelings, even when they're stupid—"

"Really?"

"Yes, *really*," she insists. "It's been three months and who the hell cares why he told you to leave? Just be glad he did."

"Yeah . . ."

"You can't seriously miss the dick."

"Oh, I do miss the dick," I say, tongue-in-cheek.

Her laugh floats through the car, her long, dark locks shining in the summer sunlight. "So he could deliver more than a well-timed pass, huh?"

"He was decent. Not the best, not the worst. I think he thought just being Callum Worthington gave him another couple of inches."

"I told you not to trust a quarterback," she reminds me. "You should listen to me more. I know things."

"And you knew he was no good just because he's a quarterback?"

"Yup. Think about it. Quarterbacks only release the ball. In the grand scheme of things, it's telling about their make-up."

"Oh, smart one, please tell me more."

"Let's backtrack," she says, making a circle pattern in the air with her finger. "You dated a kicker before Callum, right?"

"Yes."

"And you had to constantly bolster his confidence, right?"

"Yes."

"That's because kickers have all the pressure. Ever heard of 'icing the kicker'?"

"What does this have to do with Callum?" I laugh.

"Quarterbacks don't take hits well and if they don't perform, they're traded for something better. *Plus*," she continues, "they pass the ball. They don't hold on to it for long. It's a clear sign of commitment issues. Once they're in the pocket for too long, if you feel me, or feel too much pressure, they down the ball. Throw that thing at the ground if they have to."

"You're crazy," I giggle.

"I'm a thinker," she says, tapping her temple. "On that note, I don't think you should date more football players."

"You and Finn both."

"Me and Finn. I like the sound of that," she winks. Before I can reply, she hustles on. "If you're all *not* heartbroken, why are you hauling my city ass to the country for the weekend? You know I don't do things like . . . *this*," she says with a wave towards the cornfields lining both sides of the road.

"I'm not heartbroken, but that doesn't mean I want to sit around and think about being traded for a model. That bruises the 'ol ego a little, you know?"

"Just tell Finn to put a bounty on him when they play Columbus."

“I think that’s already done,” I laugh. “He had a moving company come get my stuff back to Chicago and the one guy told me my brother said he had their bail money plus a bonus if they could get a fist in Callum’s face.”

“I love your brother.”

I give her a look.

Poppy and my brother have definitely hooked up in the past. It’s usually for just a night, sometimes two, in the midst of a celebration. They’re both fun, kind of goofy, and two of the biggest flirts I know. They’re also two of my favorite people in the world. I think they could be great for each other, with some work. While loyalty may be a strong trait of both, monogamy is not.

“I don’t like that face either,” she grins. “It’s judgey.”

“Weren’t you just telling me a minute ago how bad football players are for my health?”

“No, I was telling you how bad kickers and quarterbacks are. I didn’t say a word about tight ends, and I think Finn Miller has one hell of a tight end.”

“Ew,” I say, making a face. “That’s my brother.”

“That’s one heck of a fine specimen whether he’s your brother or not—”

“There!” I spot the rusted blue gate that indicates the start of our property and almost jump up and down in my seat. “Ooh! This is it!”

“Don’t have a heart attack on me.”

The gravel cracks under the weight of the SUV as we slip through the gates and follow a narrow track up the hill.

“You’ll love it up here,” I gush, taking in the familiar surroundings. “The lake is beautiful, and there are no neighbors for a mile or so in any direction. There’s a little town not too far away where you can get the best lemon cake ice cream anywhere.”

“Sounds rad,” she mutters.

“It *is* rad,” I sigh happily. “I haven’t been up here since Callum tossed me to the curb so he could move Carly in or whatever the hell he’s doing, so just pretend to love it so I can be happy.”

“That’s what I’m here for. To make you happy.”

“This is why I love you,” I say, patting her on the shoulder.

With each roll of the tires, my problems drift a little further away and memories of my childhood roll in. Summers filled with flip-flops, hamburgers grilled on the back porch, s’mores, and lightning bugs come fluttering back, making my cheeks ache.

The windows go down as butterflies scatter from the tall grass lining the driveway and the glistening water appears in front of us. It’s the color of the sky before a storm—a deep, dark blue. Waves splash happily against the shoreline, and I close my eyes and just revel in being here.

Poppy pilots the car to the front of the house and shuts off the ignition. “Oh, this is gorgeous.”

“It so is,” I sigh, opening my eyes and pointing towards the lake. “Look at how peaceful the water is today.”

“Uh, I was talking about *that* . . .”

Chapter 3

Layla

"You're right, Layla. I'm going to *love* it here."

"Shut up," I hiss, trying desperately to take my eyes off the chiseled, sweaty man standing in the middle of my lawn next to my brother. "Who the hell is that?"

"That would be your hottie brother. And, damn, girl, he looks even better in the off-season when he's not quite so leaned out. That ass . . ."

"Not Finn," I groan, leaning forward to get a better glimpse as Mystery Man moves, the sun ricocheting off his drenched body. "Who is with him?"

"I don't know his name, but he looks like a damn good time."

They look our way and I slump back in my seat. "These windows are tinted, right?"

"If not, I'm fairly certain we aren't making a great impression," she laughs. "I'm assuming Finn isn't expecting us?"

My head bobs side-to-side as I watch Finn's friend. A pair of bright blue mesh shorts riding low on his hips, his thick, muscled body widening as my gaze travels up to his shoulders.

Finn says something to him that makes him throw the football he's holding towards my brother. He laughs, and although I can't hear the sound, it makes me smile too.

"You're fucked."

"Yes, please." Clearing my throat, I try to thrust my way back to reality. "Okay. Enough. We are all adults here."

"Which is why we need to stop gawking at their ridiculous bodies and imagining what their sweat tastes like and—"

"Really, Poppy?"

She laughs, picking her sunglasses up from the middle console. "You were thinking it."

"Here's the thing," I say, feeling some sense come back to me, "whoever that is was brought here by my brother. Between that and the way his body screams *athlete*, that means one thing."

"That his sex appeal is off the charts? Because I concur. If that man wants to give me babies, I'll take them."

I flip her a look. "It means that he's trouble. A football player. The kind of guy you just told me I need to stay away from."

"You do. Doesn't mean I do," she says, putting on her glasses and stepping out of the car.

"Damn you, Poppy." Heaving a deep breath, I open my door and step into the warm afternoon air. "Hey, Finn!"

My voice is a little wobblier than I'd prefer and my gaze a little too weighted on my sibling, but I can't look past him. My peripheral vision is catching enough movement to keep me feeling like I'm being swamped by the waves of Lake Michigan.

"What are you doing here?" Finn comes my way, his grin stretched ear-to-ear as he tosses the ball back to his friend. "I didn't know you were coming up."

"Last-minute decision," I say, tucking a strand of my sandy blonde hair behind my ear. "Didn't know you were headed this way either."

"Branch and I thought we'd get away for a few days before the pre-season starts." He looks away from me and his features darken just a bit. "Hey, Poppy Quinn."

“Hey, Finn Miller,” she flirts. “Good to see you.”

“I don’t know how it gets any better than seeing you.”

“Always a charmer,” she smiles. “So, this is Branch Best, huh?”

“That’s me.”

His voice is more Southern than I expected, which only adds another cinder block to my already sinking mental capacity. The honeyed twang that’s just barely detectable is enough to make my knees threaten to give out.

His eyes fall on mine, the pools of blue twinkling in the light. The corners of his lips tug up into a sexy, playful grin. One thickly-veined arm extends in front of Finn as he reaches towards me. “I’m Branch Best. And you are?”

“My sister,” Finn warns, knocking his hand away. “No touching, Best.”

“It’s a handshake!”

“It starts with a handshake with you,” Finn explains. “Or a spilled drink. Or an exchange of insurance information . . .”

“She ran into me.”

“Maybe to start. But I’m pretty sure I walked in on you running right into her.”

Poppy and I laugh as Branch sticks a football in Finn’s stomach, making him bend over long enough for Branch to extend a hand to me again and flip me the most adorable smile I’ve ever seen. “Branch Best. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Before I can think twice, I slip my palm into his. On contact, I jump and instinctively pull away, but he clasps down onto my hand with his large, calloused fingers. He grins again. “Do you have a name, Finn’s sister?”

“Layla. Layla James,” I say. Gulping a breath to steady myself from the warmth radiating off him, I get a lungful of . . . *sex*. Or that’s what it screams at Defcon One to my brain, anyway. It’s a scent that pulls me towards him, makes me want to climb his slippery, impressive body like a tree. “Nice to meet you,” I say, still sorting the heated, spiced scent through my senses.

He does me a giant favor and releases my hand. “Are you guys staying here this weekend?”

“We were going to,” I say, looking at Finn. “Are you?”

“Yeah.”

“It’ll be one giant sleepover,” Branch winks, getting an elbow in the side from my brother.

“One question,” Poppy interjects, looking at Branch. “What position are you?”

“I typically like the bottom so I can watch—oomph,” he says, getting another elbow from Finn. “Wide receiver. Why?”

Looking at Poppy, I can’t help but laugh as her eyes light up.

“You got a problem with wide receivers?” Branch asks.

“You do,” Finn interjects, giving me a narrowed glare. “They aren’t any better than quarterbacks.”

Branch looks from me, to Finn, and back to me. “Why do we not like quarterbacks?”

“My sister was dating Callum Worthington.”

“No shit?” His face puckers like he just bit into a lemon. “How in the hell did that cocksucker end up with you?”

“He didn’t. We’re not together anymore.”

Branch’s eyes heat, the look causing my pulse to quicken. “I’m not a bit sorry to hear that.”

“You better forget you heard any of that,” Finn warns. “This is my sister, Branch. Not a cheerleader or reporter or some chick from a dating app. Got it?”

“Finn, relax,” I say, shoving a swallow past the lump in my throat. “I appreciate the big

brother spiel, but I can handle myself.”

“I know you can,” he says, pulling his gaze away from Branch. “But you can’t handle him.”

Chapter 4

Branch

“Hey, you about ready to head into town and raise some hell?” Finn asks from the doorway. “There’s a little bar downtown or a bigger one a few miles the other way. Your call.”

Pulling my gaze from the window, I look at my friend. “Small town girls are more fun. Let’s start there and work our way through.”

Finn laughs and disappears around the corner. “Give me twenty. Just going to jump in the shower.”

Swiping the cross necklace my grandmother gave me when I graduated high school, I put it on. It rested in a shoe box up until a couple of years ago when I found it looking for something else. It’s made up of these little wooden beads with red shiny ones sprinkled in, and more days than not, it hangs around my neck.

It’s an odd choice for me. My only adornments typically include a gold watch—the first expensive thing I purchased after I signed my contract, the smirk I got from my dad that both gets me in and out of trouble, and a tattoo that spells my last name running down my right forearm. Jewelry really isn’t my thing, yet this little trinket has somehow become some sort of security blanket. I just feel better, more grounded, more *me*, when I have it on.

Twisting the beads between my fingers, the house is quiet as I head down the hallway towards the kitchen for a glass of lemonade. Wooden beams loom overhead, the staircase flooded with the final rays of sun filtering through the stained glass window. I hit the landing and turn the corner and stop just short of my target.

Layla stands at the kitchen counter in a pair of grey cotton shorts and a white tank top. I haven’t seen her since the little meet-and-greet in the front yard a couple of hours ago. She and her friend disappeared to the lake while Finn corralled me back to the house for a game of pool and away from any shot at seeing his sister.

She tucks a piece of hair that’s fallen from her ponytail behind her ear as she examines a slew of things that appear to have spilled from a bag sitting askew on the black marble worktop. I can’t take my eyes off her. It was hard enough to act normal earlier today with Finn standing by my side, but now he’s not here.

I stand in the doorway like a fucking stalker and gawk at this woman who’s made me feel like a damn bloodhound since she stepped out of the car.

She’s positively gorgeous in the most unassuming way and has an energy that just makes me want to be near her. I find myself wanting to hear her voice, searching for her laugh, looking to see where she is . . . and it’s so annoying.

Her brows tug together, a cascade of lines forming across her creamy skin. My fingers itch to run along the ridges, smoothing them out, feeling the softness of her skin beneath mine.

Instead, they go to my cock and attempt, in vain, to smooth *it* out. The movement catches her attention and she shoots upright.

“Branch!” she exclaims, a hand going to the base of her throat. “I didn’t hear you come in.”

“How do you think I got the Most Valuable Player title last year?” I wink. “I’m quick.”

A smile plays coyly on her lips. “Noted.”

Our gazes lock together somewhere over the marble island separating us as her innuendo

becomes apparent. It's all I can do not to think about her body beneath mine, my palms memorizing the curve of her hip, the bow of the small of her back.

"I'm also very good with my hands," I add.

"So I see." She tries to hide her grin as she brushes her line of sight down my body and to my hand resting on my now throbbing cock, then back to my face.

A smile tugs at my lips as she laughs, a soft, unpretentious giggle. "That's not helping anything, Sunshine."

I stride across the kitchen, looking around as discreetly as I can and am relieved that I don't see Poppy. A little one-on-one with this girl is the perfect way to kick start a weekend to remember.

Taking a seat across the island from Layla, every effort is made not to pant at the sight of her ample tits filling out her skintight shirt.

"Sunshine?" she asks, leaning against the counter.

"Your hair," I say, working on a whim. "It reminds me of the sun."

"My hair is a dirty dishwater blonde. Not so sunny."

"But there are blonder streaks," I say, feeling my cheeks heat. "Anyway, what are you doing? You have a little bit of everything here."

Sorting through the various items, I hope my attempt at distraction works. "Sunglasses, lip stuff, medicine, a tampon," I say, holding up the slender package.

She rips it out of my hands. "Give me that."

"Words every man wants to hear," I crack, watching the apples of her cheeks turn a couple of shades red. "I've had two interactions with you so far and you've been feisty in both. I'm guessing this is a thing with you."

"Apparently."

"I like it."

She flips her gaze back to me. This time it's softer, a bit of hesitation in her golden eyes. "It's gotten me in trouble a time or two in my life."

"Trouble's not a bad thing, you know."

"Said from the man who won Best Baller Bad Boy from *Exposé Magazine* a couple of months ago," she laughs.

"Ah, so you do know who I am," I tease. "I was afraid there for a minute."

"I bet you were terrified." She lifts a wallet off the counter and plucks up a small, circular tin. "Found it!"

"What is it?"

"It's lip balm, but not just any lip balm," she says, opening the lid. "It's the best honey-based balm in the universe and I thought I'd lost it."

She slides a finger along the top of the container, and then, like a vixen I didn't quite have her pegged to be, rolls it along her bottom lip.

"That's not helping either," I groan, my hand going to my lap. "I tell you what—your brother has you all wrong."

Smacking her lips together, the sound echoing around the room, she tosses the tin down again. "How's that?"

"What? Your lips? They're fucking amazing."

"No," she laughs. "How does my brother have me all wrong?"

"He talks about you like you're this harmless, helpless little thing. I'd venture to say you're neither."

"I'd venture to say you're right."

I sift through the mess in front of me again, wondering what else there is to know about Ms. Layla James Miller. Spotting a business card propped against a hairbrush, I pick it up.

"Give me that," she says, reaching for it.

There's a level of panic in her voice that only makes me more curious. Leaning back in the seat, I bring the off-white card to my face. "Logan Curie, Sex Therapist."

I almost drop the damn card.

"Give me that, Branch."

I don't. I look at it again. The words have not changed.

There's a streak of alarm hidden just below the surface of her lit-up eyes and high cheekbones that prickles something in my chest. There are a million questions on the tip of my tongue and a million-plus-one offers I'm willing to make to cure whatever ailments may have her seeing a sex therapist. But there's something in the horror she's trying to hide that keeps me from it.

I hand her the card.

"Go ahead," she says, refusing to look at me as she shuffles the discarded items back into an oversized yellow bag. "Ask."

"I have nothing to ask."

"Yes, you do," she snorts. "Just do it so we can move on."

"You don't have to tell me anything," I say, grabbing a couple of almonds out of a dish in front of me and popping them into my mouth.

A hefty sigh passes those lips I want to lick as she hangs her head. "We're going to be here all weekend. I don't want to look at you and see the questions in your eyes every time, okay? Just ask me and let's get this over with."

Contemplating if she'd actually answer as to why she has a sex therapist's card in her purse and if I really want to put her on the spot, I toss another almond into my mouth and grin. "Fine. You're right. Layla, do you need help getting off?"

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing as I watch her head snap up. Her eyes widen as her mouth hangs open.

"Fuck you," she says on a laugh.

"Yes, please." Pausing to give her a moment to recoup, I lean back in my chair. "I'm kidding. Wait. No, I'm not. I'd totally bend you over this counter in a half a second if I thought that's what you wanted and Finn wouldn't walk in and castrate me. But, being that I'm only ninety-eight percent sure that's what you want and a solid hundred-percent sure Finn would remove my balls, I am only playing."

"Ninety-eight, huh?"

"Fine. Ninety-nine," I grin.

"You're all the same," she scoffs, placing both hands on the counter. "You think I'm a guaranteed thing because people wear your name on the back of their jerseys."

"Ah, come on, Layla. You know you want me," I tease. "It's okay to admit it."

"You flirted. I smiled. That's hardly asking you to put your cock in me."

Those words shoot fire through my veins, a charge that lands between my legs. If it fazes her, she doesn't let on. She stands all sweet and innocent, taking in my reaction.

My equilibrium is thrown off, my head spinning a little faster than I care to admit—much faster than I care for her to know.

"You think that was flirting? You ain't seen nothing yet."

“So that wasn’t flirting? What was it then?”

“I was just trying to do you a favor,” I say with a shrug.

She laughs. “Oh, you were, were you?”

“You were what?” Finn’s voice rings from the doorway, announcing his arrival.

My shoulders slump, irritation scratching my nerves as I sense him coming up next to me. “I was offering to help your sister with a few things this weekend.”

“You’re not helping her with shit, you jack hole.”

“I’m an expert in the field she needs help with,” I goad, looking at Layla out of the corner of my eye. “Just trying to be a nice guy.”

“There’s nothing nice about you,” Finn jokes. “Now come on. There are plenty of women down at Crave who would love for you to show them your expertise tonight.”

Standing up, I keep one eye on Layla. Her brother’s comments have washed away some of the playfulness from her features and I’d give my left nut to get it back somehow. Opening my mouth, I close it again when Finn begins to talk.

“Heading down to the bar for a few,” Finn tells his sister. “Call me if you need anything.”

“Be careful. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“It’s Linton,” he laughs. “If I do, I’ll call the Sherriff. The last time it just took two autographed pictures and a couple of passes to a game.”

She looks at me. Her eyes are electric, moving with so many things I’d like to ask her about, but can’t. Not right now. “Have fun,” she says, throwing her bag over her shoulder. “I’m going to find Poppy and take a nap.”

Finn heads to the door and I follow. Before I turn the corner, I stop. “Offer stands, Sunshine.”

With a wink that brings back some of the lightness to her beautiful face, I follow her brother out the door.

Chapter 5

Branch

“She’s *so* gross.” The girl on my lap points at a female with her tongue down Finn’s throat a table away. Despite the dim lighting of Crave and the packed house, Finn’s current entertainment is putting on a performance for the ages. “You can see her ass cheeks out the bottom of her skirt.”

“You can’t sell it if you don’t advertise.” I take another slug of the beer I’ve been nursing for the last hour. Setting the bottle down, I take in her lifted, colored-in brow. “She shows ass. You show tits. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is I’m not a whore,” she says with a hint of superiority that irks me.

“You might want to be careful with that.”

She twists her lips together, considering if I am insinuating that her following me into the john, locking the door, dropping to her knees, and giving me head like a porn star—all without even giving me her name—constitutes a whore in my book. I let her ponder that.

“I only offered that because it was you, Branch Best.”

“And maybe she’s only tongue-fucking him because he’s Finn Miller,” I volley back, watching my best friend almost fall out of his chair. “A very, very drunk Finn Miller. Up you go.”

We get to our feet, and I turn to the group of people that have congregated around Finn and I. They’re all pretty much sloshed, thanks to Finn’s open tab, friendly spirit, and recent signing bonus for a contract extension.

“See y’all next time I’m in town,” I tell them. “Don’t burn the place down.”

“Can I get one more picture?” Peck, a guy I’ve taken a handful of photos with tonight stands, his cell phone in hand.

“No more pictures,” the bartender says, coming around the end of the bar. He gives me a knowing look. “Peck, watch the bar for me for a minute, will ya?”

Peck nods and meanders to the backside of the counter, giving me a nod of his hat as he takes an order.

“You’re trusting him back there?” I laugh.

“He’s harmless. Known him since I was a baby.” He extends a hand and we shake. “Name’s Machlan Gibson. Nice to meet ya.”

“Thanks for letting us crash your bar,” I laugh, watching Finn straight hit the floor. The crowd around us bursts into laughter. “I gotta get him out of here before this shit ends up online.”

“Hey!” Machlan booms. Instantly, the crowd quiets down. “Nobody’s gonna be posting any of this online or you’re banned for life and I’ll tell your mama all the sordid things I know about you. Got it?” Once he’s made eye contact with half his patrons, he turns back to me. “Now let’s get him out of here before Peck gets heavy-handed with the whiskey and all hell breaks loose.”

It takes the two of us to get Finn’s six-seven ass to his feet and strapped into the passenger’s side of my black Rover. The crowd surprises me by staying inside on Machlan’s command and giving us some room.

“Hey, thanks again, Machlan,” I say as the window rolls down and I get settled into the driver’s seat. “Shit. I forgot to pay the tab.”

“Don’t worry about it. Finn will get even with me.”

“You do realize he probably owes you a few hundred, right?”

“He’ll be in and settle up. I’ve known the Millers most of my life.” He shakes my hand again and turns back to the bar. “Thanks for coming in tonight.”

Flicking on the ignition, the lights come to life. I pull down the small road with the town’s only two streetlights to the stop sign at the “T” at the end of the road.

Finn snores beside me, drool coming out of the side of his mouth. Laughing, I swing a left, and within seconds, it’s nothing but unlit countryside.

“What are you laughing at, asshole?” Finn mutters, not bothering to open his eyes.

“You have slobber all over your cheek.”

“It’s a part of the process. It’s how you still know you’re alive. You can feel the spit.” One eye fights to open. “You’re sober, right?”

“I’m driving, aren’t I?”

He lets his lid drop closed as he snuggles into the leather seat. “I like it here.”

“You’re more than welcome to sleep in my car, but don’t get your spit all over the place. I have limits, man.”

“I mean, here. In Linton. At the cabin.”

“You just liked the way that girl fondled you,” I chuckle.

“I did. Not gonna lie. But I also like just being with normal people for a change.”

“Maybe you’re just drunk as hell.”

Maybe not, too. There’s a feeling up here that I can’t quite put my finger on. It reminds me of being home, back in Tennessee, a place I haven’t visited in a long damn time. The quiet, the way the night actually gets so dark the stars look like little silver lights in the sky, the way the people shake your hand and ask you how you are and then actually wait for your response. They’re all things I’d almost forgotten about. I’d stopped expecting them and now that I’ve witnessed them after all these years, I realize how much I like them.

“Do you ever miss just being a normal person?” Finn asks, as if he’s reading my mind.

“I’ve always been exceptional, so I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He acts like he didn’t hear me. “I’m not saying I don’t enjoy an easy lay, because God knows I do. But do you remember a point when it wasn’t just laid out there for you because you’re on the starting line-up for the Legends? You know, when you had to actually work for it?”

“Yeah,” I say, forcing a swallow that burns all the way down. “The ones smart enough to make you work for it are smart enough to stay the hell away.”

“If I ever settle down, I want to be sure she’s with me because she wants a life with me. Not because the first ten choices didn’t.”

Finn moans on, blubbing in his drunken stupor while my mind twists with a few things it’s been toying with lately. Like, how I am nearing thirty and have an excessively large bank account, but little else to show for myself.

When I was drafted, I thought the contract and endorsements and money were everything. I didn’t see the shady side of things, the parts that are downright disturbing. Despite my college coach’s advice to “find balance,” I didn’t and now I live this life I’ve started to feel is very lopsided, and I have no idea how to find the happy medium of fame and normalcy.

Finn laughs as I pull the car next to Poppy’s. Turning off the headlights, I spy a candle flickering on the screened-in porch. My pulse quickens as I wonder if Layla’s out there.

“All of this is the alcohol talking,” Finn chuckles. “I kinda wax poetic when I drink

whiskey.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s a fucking truth serum for you.”

“I need a serum that will magically plant me in my bed,” he groans.

“Can you walk? You’re a big motherfucker to carry in by myself.”

“I’d pay to see that,” he says, struggling to sit up. “Can I do it without puking? That’s the real question.”

Climbing out of the car, I make my way around the front and help him out of his seat. He makes it to the house okay, but stops at the front door to vomit in the hedges.

“You are one nasty motherfucker,” I laugh, opening the door as he walks in. “How much did you drink?”

“Too much.” He grips the handrail leading upstairs and wobbles his way to the landing.

“Did you pay Mach?”

“Nope. You’ll need to settle that tomorrow.”

“I don’t even want to know what that looks like.” He stumbles into his room at the end of the hall and falls face-first into the blankets. He’s snoring before his dangling feet stop moving.

Turning to go, I stop in my tracks at the sight before me. Layla is standing just inches away. Her straight hair hangs loose over her narrow shoulders, her body’s curves on full display in the clingy white one-piece shorts and tee-shirt thing she has on.

“I can smell the liquor from here,” she says, waving her hand back and forth in front of her face as she peers around the corner at Finn. “He’s in one piece. I’ll call Machlan and let him know.”

A niggle of jealousy fires away. “You know Machlan?”

“Of course.” She pulls the door closed and then stands with her hands on her hips. “Crave is our favorite place. They have great hamburgers and sometimes, if Peck is in a good mood, the best steaks you’ve ever had.”

“I make a good steak. How do you like it?”

“Well done.” She walks by me, the scent of pineapples trailing behind her. She doesn’t look over her shoulder to see if I follow, and while I’m sure I seem like a lost puppy, I do, indeed follow.

“Well done isn’t even steak anymore,” I contend, a couple of steps behind her. “It’s overpriced hamburger at that point.”

“So you probably don’t agree with dipping it in ketchup either?”

I just look at her, making her laugh. She flips on the lights in the kitchen and retrieves a bottle of red wine from the fridge.

“I did a whole piece on dipping sauces on my blog,” she says, bottle in hand. “I tried a Chimichurri, an ancho-chile-almond sauce, this fruit one that had plums and cherries that was supposed to be out of this world.” She wrinkles her nose. “Turns out, I just like ketchup.”

“I just like that you’ve thought so much about it,” I chuckle.

“I’m not a normal girl. You hear men complain all the time about their girlfriend not knowing what they want for dinner. Look, I knew what I wanted for dinner at lunchtime because I’ve been thinking about it since then.”

Her face has been stripped of makeup, a set of diamond stud earrings shine from her earlobes. She looks fresh, clean, so natural. My chest tingles like I’ve just taken a shot of Jager, and I haven’t had any damn Jager all night.

She bends over and picks up a napkin off the floor. Her cleavage is on full display, her shirt scooping so low it’s obvious there’s no bra on those babies.

She lifts a glass from the counter and pours a glass half-full with wine. "Want some?"

"I definitely want some," I croak, licking my lips.

She rolls her eyes. "Wine, Best. Do you want some wine?"

"I better not," I say. "Have any lemonade in there?"

"I do." She sets down the wine glass and grabs a clean one from the cabinet. "I'll pour some and head to the porch. Why don't you go wash Crave off yourself."

"How about I pour the lemonade and you wash me?"

"I can't deal with you," she laughs and leaves the room.

I watch her go, her ass swaying to the beat of a song I can't hear. Leaping off the stool, I head to the shower. She's right—I gotta get something off, but it isn't Crave.

Chapter 6

Layla

The lightning bugs flicker away on the other side of the screens that separate the porch from the outdoors. Warm, summery air whispers through the little room off the living area as the ceiling fan whirls overhead.

It's a perfect summertime night at the lake house, the water gently brushing the shore just a few yards away.

My laptop sits untouched on the loveseat beside me, discarded after a couple of hours of my brain's refusal to think about anything other than Branch Best. Once Poppy went to sleep—claiming this place is the most relaxing place she's ever been, I tried to work on a couple of blog posts for next week. I got nothing except a complete description of Branch in the text box which looked a whole lot more like a sex box by the time I wrote "The End."

The depiction, although thorough and glowing and including a prediction of what the rest of him might look like, does nothing to accurately sum up the way he looks standing in the doorway in nothing but a pair of steely grey shorts and a smirk that takes my breath away.

"Hey," he says finally, shoving off the doorframe. His biceps flex, his stomach muscles rippling as he makes his way towards me. "I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"I wish you were," I sigh. "I can't get anything done."

"I've heard that." He slides into the wicker seat across from me and pops his bare feet up on the coffee table that separates us.

"You've heard what? That I'm lazy today?" I say, trying to ignore the way the air in the room just shifted like it's accommodating his presence.

"No. That I'm distracting."

"You say that like it's a badge of honor."

"It is."

"Maybe they mean you're annoying."

He grins, knowing damn good and well that's not what anyone means. Settling into the cinnamon-hued cushions, he changes topics. "So, why can't you work?"

"I don't know. I thought coming up here would sort of decompress my mind and I could get back into the flow of things. But I've just sat here all night and looked at the water and struggled to find any inspiration at all."

"What is it you do again?"

"I have a lifestyle blog."

He furrows a brow. "So you're a reporter?"

"Uh, no. Not at all. I just write about things I love, things I think other women like me might like. Food, fashion, a little home décor stuff which is funny since I'm living out of boxes right now."

"I moved into my house before the start of last season and I still have boxes to unpack," he shrugs. "I figure maybe one day I'll just toss everything. I mean, if I haven't used it in almost a year, what are the odds I really need it?"

"That gives me heart palpitations. You can't just throw stuff away. You have to look at it first. It could be important!"

“If I look at it, I’ll want to keep it which means I’ll have to put it away. It’s easier to chuck it.”

Tucking my legs under me, a lightness in my chest that I haven’t been able to find in a few weeks trickles over me. “Just pay someone to do it.”

“And find something online for sale in a few weeks? Come on,” he cracks. “I can see the headline now: ‘Branch Best’s underwear up for auction. Starting price one dollar.’ It would be a disaster.”

Laughing, I reach forward and pick up his lemonade. He reaches for it, our fingers brushing along the cool, damp glass as he takes it from me.

“Where’s Poppy?” he asks, getting comfortable again. “I haven’t seen her since this morning.”

“Asleep. Although she downplays herself, she’s kind of a big deal at her job. She works tons of hours and until the middle of the night a lot of times. I think she just realized she could sleep and no one would bother her.”

“Except Finn,” Branch winks.

“She’d love that.”

“The two of them ever have a thing?”

“You really have to ask me that?” I ask, taking a sip of my wine. “I don’t know how often they see each other, I just know they have. There’s not enough time in the day for that kind of information overload.”

Branch laughs, his eyes dancing. “He kind of goes through the women, doesn’t he?”

“Don’t you all? I’ve seen enough stories about you to know you’re no saint.”

“You know how the media gets,” he grins. “They make a lot of shit up. Exaggerate stuff all to hell, although I’ll admit I’m no saint. It’s so much more fun being a sinner.”

My cheeks heat and I pray to God he doesn’t have x-ray vision and can see through my closed computer and read all the various sinner-y things I sex-box’d out earlier.

“It’s a part of the job,” he says easily. “You dated Callum. You know how it works.”

At the sound of his name, it’s like I’m doused with a bucket of ice water. Callum’s cocky face next to Carly’s on a jet ski that surfaced this morning on every entertainment website I dared to check flashes before my eyes.

“Sorry,” Branch says, his tone lowered. “I shouldn’t have brought him up.”

“No, it’s fine,” I lie. “I just have to stop feeling like my head is on fire when his name is mentioned.”

“The break-up went well, I take it.”

I glare at him, causing him to crack a smile. “You know what? Let’s keep talking about him so I’ll end up hating him so much I won’t do this again. For the fourth time.”

“So, this is a habit of yours?”

“Two football players and a hockey guy. I’m done. Habit broken.”

“Well, I’ve officially dated a model and an actress and I’m done too.”

“With models or actresses?” I ask.

“Dating,” he laughs. “It’s just not for me.”

“I read a book once,” I say, stretching my legs out in front of me, “that said you’re supposed to date people that share your values. Like, if you’re super religious, find your guy at church. If you love to read, go to a bookstore. Blah, blah, blah. That’s my new angle.”

“I think I’ll just have to be single. Finn doesn’t do it for me.”

Not expecting that comeback, I can’t help but laugh. “Good, because Poppy would be tough

competition for you this weekend. She's just getting started."

"Well, so am I . . ."

My gaze flips to his, and he snatches it like a flytrap. His pupils are dilated, his bottom lip combing between his teeth, as he rakes my libido over hot coals.

"Why are you guys so anti-monogamous?" I ask, clearing my throat to try to break the hold Branch has on me. "Brick layers can be monogamous. So can electricians and teachers—"

"You had me until teachers," he says, leaning up. "Have you seen what teachers look like these days? Shit, man. Some days, I consider admitting I cheated my way through high school and asking to be re-enrolled."

"You're an ass," I chuckle.

Refusing to look his way, I keep my eyes on the water. His gaze is heavy despite the fact I won't return it. It's too deep, too hot, too *everything*.

"You should consider yourself lucky," he says finally. There's enough grit in his tone to make me look at him again.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"We aren't the guys you keep around."

"I've noticed," I grimace.

He strokes his chin, watching me with a furrowed brow. "Guys come into this league off these huge college careers. They're courted for everything and have shit thrown at them from all avenues—money, women, even men, if they want it. You get cars and clothes and your mom's light bill paid if that's what needs to happen. And then things get even worse. More money. More conniving women. Bigger egos. It fucks us up."

"Are you fucked up?" I ask, the wind seeming to chill just a bit as it rustles across my skin.

"Probably." He sits back in his chair and releases a sigh. "When I came to Chicago, I met this girl pretty quick. She wanted to be a photographer, but had this purity about her. Just salt of the Earth, if that makes sense."

"I love that description."

He smiles sadly. "Within a year, she'd changed completely. She was taking modeling jobs, being really hard on herself. She was in the spotlight so much with me that I think it got to her. We fought constantly over everything. She became really self-conscious. I looked at her at one point and didn't even know who she was anymore or if she wanted me because she loved me or if she loved the money and opportunities," he sighs. "It became so convoluted and she became a really nasty person."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know," he sighs. "She had a meltdown, rightfully so, over some shit she saw in a magazine. Packed her bags and left and that was that."

"You didn't call her? Go after her?" I ask. "At least check on her?"

"A part of me figured she was better off. Another part thought it would end at some point anyway. But," he says, leaning forward, "what gets me now is that I probably did that to her. I was off doing rookie shit. Partying. Enjoying this newfound fame and money and being the guy everyone wanted to be around. It was a crazy, crazy time in my life. Hers probably got sacrificed as a part of that."

I'm not sure what to say. It almost feels like a confession, like he's telling me some truth I'm supposed to pay attention to. It's nothing I don't know, yet I feel sorry for him. This weighs on him, there's no doubt. And whether his theory is right or wrong, it's sad either way.

"I have checked on her on social media," he admits, sitting back. "She seems to be doing

okay.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Yeah. I just wonder what would’ve happened to her had she not known me. She had the world at her feet, capable of so much. It was a rude awakening to both of us, I think.”

“A rude awakening to what?”

“To the reality, at least in my world. This is a culture, not just a team. There’s a reason some guys make it in the league and other guys don’t. You ever wonder why a certain guy with great stats coming out of college doesn’t get drafted or why he gets cut loose early? Coaches know he can’t take the culture. It’s that different. Don’t get me wrong,” he says, lifting his lemonade again. “I love my life. I wouldn’t trade who I am or what I do with anyone in the world. But I’m smart enough to know it for what it is and not fuck someone else up with it.”

“Such a hero,” I wink, bringing my glass to my lips as he does the same.

“Hardly. My point is you should feel lucky you saw the light in time.”

We sit quietly, the waves washing away most of the heaviness of our conversation. A few small glances are traded, a couple of hesitant smiles, as we relax in each other’s company.

After I’ve downed a lot of the wine and Branch’s glass is nearly empty, I don’t realize I laugh out loud until he calls me out on it.

“What are you laughing at?” he asks.

“Just . . . it doesn’t feel like I’m sitting with *the* Branch Best,” I tease.

“Did you have expectations, Sunshine?”

“I didn’t realize it, but I guess I did.”

“In what way? I never leave a woman unfulfilled. It’s a thing with me.”

I take in his tanned face and thick, wide shoulders and almost shiver. The wine is making its way through my veins, pumping me full of the buzz that’s just barely enough to distort my judgment.

As I open my mouth with every intention of telling him I need to go to bed, he shoots me the smirk that has a straight shot to the apex of my thighs.

Words, ones I shouldn’t be uttering, come toppling past my lips.

“I guess I expected . . . *more*,” I tease, lifting my shoulders just a touch for effect.

“You want more? I have so much *more* you’d be screaming for less.”

The gravel in his tone roughs over my skin, sending a cascade of goosebumps rippling across me. The confidence in his dark, hooded eyes nearly elicits a moan from my parted lips.

It takes every bit of effort I have to keep my head about me. As I fight the wine, I’m wise enough to know I have to get away from him or be a complete hypocrite and just start shedding my clothes.

“That’s what they all say,” I chime as smoothly as I can. I lift my eyes to his as I stand.

Big. Mistake.

Without a movement, with not so much as a flick of his thickly roped muscles, he does everything he’s hinted at. He undresses me, kisses my skin, draws a line from my temple, down my chest, over my belly, and down my legs using nothing more than his gorgeous, azure eyes.

I stand in front of him, pinned to the spot by nothing more than a gaze so hot I almost blister.

“I’m heading upstairs,” I tell him, squeezing the computer to my chest. “Can you make sure the doors are locked before you turn in?”

“Sure.”

He waits for me to say something else, but I don’t. I walk by, the side of my thigh brushing

against him, and take the stairs two at a time.

Once I'm in my room, I lean against the closed door and heave a breath of non-Branch air.

"At least you're not thinking of Callum," I whisper out loud. Padding across the hardwood floor, I climb into bed to the sound of lapping waves outside my window.

Chapter 7

Layla

“Wakey, wakey!” Poppy’s head pokes around the corner. “You up yet?”

“Does it look like it?” I groan, pulling the comforter over my head. The sunlight is streaming through the windows thanks to my mistake of not pulling the blinds last night. One of the many perils of red wine. “What time is it?”

“Almost noon. Get your ass up, my friend.”

“I don’t wanna.”

The mattress sinks with her weight as she takes a seat on the edge. “Too much wine last night?”

“Not really. Just tired.”

The blanket is jerked away and her perky face is peering down at me. “What did you do when I went to bed? Anything you want to tell me?” She presses my cheek with the tip of her finger. “You don’t look like you got laid.”

“Because I didn’t,” I laugh. “Get off me.”

“I can see why with that mindset.”

I swat at her until she stands, unable to control my laughter as I see her attire. Cut-off jean shorts, a strapless red tube top with a white bikini beneath that squeezes her boobs together into one huge cleavage show, and gold hoop earrings paint quite a picture, one I’m confident was created for my brother’s benefit.

“What?” she says, fingering a hoop. “Are these too much?”

“*You* are too much,” I laugh, scooting up against the padded headboard. “Why are you up already?”

“Because I went to bed too early. *And* because Finn and Branch have been up doing push-ups and wind-sprints across the front lawn for the last hour and I wasn’t about to miss that. *And* because I wanted to make my super morning smoothie for Finn.”

“You made my brother a smoothie?” I deadpan.

“And he slurped it all up,” she says, wiggling her eyebrows. “Okay. Enough distraction. Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me why your cheeks just turned pink. What happened, Lay?” Her voice turns sassy as a hand falls on her hip. “Spit it out. Or did you swallow?”

“Stop it,” I laugh. “Nothing happened. Branch brought Finn home pretty late and I happened to be up working on my blog. We sat on the porch and I had some wine and he had some lemonade and that was it.”

“No touching?”

“No touching. I promise. I’d tell you.” Closing my eyes, the lines of his chiseled torso greet me.

“Let’s put on our bikinis and head to the lake. That should help your cause.”

“First of all, it’s not my cause. He’s worse than Callum!”

“He’s *hotter* than Callum.”

“Second,” I insist, shooting her a look, “weren’t you just telling me yesterday to stay away

from guys like him?”

“I said nothing about wide receivers. That’s a whole different game.” She looks at me like I’m crazy for not following along. “Think about it. Their job is to hold on to the ball at all costs. They’ll take a hit, get pushed out of bounds, but what do they not do? They don’t fumble. They score, and baby, when he scores, you better give me every little detail.”

“Oh, my God,” I groan, swinging my legs out of bed. “It’s way, way too early for this.”

“But,” she sing-songs, “you’re out of bed. That’s a win.”

“You better have coffee made.”

After a pit stop in the bathroom, I make my way into the kitchen. Branch is sitting at the island, laughing at something Finn said. My brother is standing in the kitchen next to Poppy, coffee mugs in all of their hands.

“Well, good morning,” Finn says. “I was starting to think you were avoiding us.”

“I was up late working,” I say, pointedly not looking at Branch while I make a cup of coffee for myself.

“How’s the blog?” Finn asks.

“Good, more or less. I’m a little behind from being sick last week, but once I get these last couple of posts made, I’ll be caught up. I was hoping to sit on the beach today and see if I can bang them out.”

Branch begins to choke, causing us all to jump. When I turn around, he’s sitting at the table, his eyes wide, trying to get himself composed. “Sorry,” he coughs. “Too much creamer.” He glances at me, a shit-eating grin on his face.

“You have a problem with me completing my tasks today?” I ask, pressing my lips together to keep from smiling.

“Nope. I hope you *bang them all out*.”

Poppy’s laugh beside me catches my attention and makes me realize she and Finn weren’t paying a bit of attention to Branch’s comment. With a shake of my head, I turn to my brother.

“What are you guys doing today?” I ask. “I thought you and Branch might take the boat out or something.”

“We might. But I need to run in and pay my bill at Crave first, and unless Machlan’s machine is running which you know it’s probably not, I’ll have to head to the ATM and get cash.”

“Can you take that much cash from an ATM? Isn’t there a limit?” Branch jokes.

“Fuck off,” Finn says, turning his attention to Poppy. “Hey, uh, didn’t you say you needed something from town?”

“Oh, uh, yes,” she says, thinking on the fly. “I do. A lot of things.”

I look at my friend. “What could you possibly need from town?”

“Oh, just some things I couldn’t fit in my suitcase. Essentials, you know.”

“Such as . . .” I goad.

“Diet Coke,” she offers. “Sunscreen. A fucking phone charger, okay? Does it matter?”

Branch and I die laughing as her cheeks turn red.

“You are so full of shit,” I say, catching my breath as she struts out of the room.

“I’d ask you to go,” my brother says to Branch, “but, you know . . .”

“No worries. I’ll stay here and . . . behave.”

“I’m gonna trust you fear me enough to do just that,” Finn says, clapping him on the shoulder. “You good, sis?”

“I’m good. Tell Machlan I said hi. And if Peck’s there, tell that bastard he owes me. He’ll

know what for.”

“Peck?” Poppy asks, sticking her head around the corner. “Is that someone’s real name?”

“It’s a nickname,” Finn laughs, guiding her towards the door. “We’ll let you figure out what for.”

* * * *

My toes wiggle into the soft, golden sand as I close my notebook. The sun is warm, but not too hot as I sit on the beach and finally get some work done.

The words came fast and easy today. That doesn’t happen often. The ideas I had for blog posts came to life and I mapped out an entire fall series in the last hour.

My chin lifts to the sun and I close my eyes and revel in the satisfaction of feeling my life get back on track. Since my break-up, I’ve spent the last three months in chaos. Moving from Columbus, getting settled, and finding more freelance writing work to support my new digs in Chicago left me exhausted and uninspired.

A new idea pops into my mind and when I open my eyes, I scream. Branch laughs, dropping onto the sand beside me.

“How did you not hear me?” he asks. “I even stepped on some kind of burr back there and shouted some pretty ungentlemanly things.”

“I don’t think anyone has ever accused you of being a gentleman.”

“You don’t know that. My grandma happens to think I’m the sweetest boy she’s ever known.”

“She had how many daughters?”

He laughs, putting his arms back into the sand and stretching his long, lean body out in the sun. Wearing only a pair of white and green swim trunks and a necklace of some sort, he sits only inches away. My eyes refuse to look anywhere but at the lines cut into his abs.

“You’re a smartass, you know that?” he asks.

“It’s been said.” Sitting up, I brush the sand off my hands. “What does your grandma think about her grandson being a football star?”

“I don’t know. She wears my jersey to her card games on Thursday nights and asks me to send her signed pictures for her friends and members of her church. I guess you could say she’s a fan.”

“I bet she is.”

“Hell, to be honest, she’d probably be just as much of a fan if I dug ditches for a living. I’m the only grandson she has from the three daughters she gave birth to,” he says, rolling his eyes that my joke was actually right. “I’m kind of the favorite.”

“And you struggle with accepting that, I see,” I giggle.

“It’s a lot of pressure! I can’t let Gram down.”

We laugh softly, the breeze coming off just cool enough to keep the sweat away. Boats float around, their flags waving brightly against the bright blue sky.

“So, tell me about you,” he says.

“You know Finn and you’ve met my parents.”

“How do you know I’ve met your parents?”

“Let’s just say Mom was impressed,” I shrug.

“Ah. That’s why she sends me baskets of those peanut butter chip brownies when she sends Finn his monthly care packages.”

“She sends you those?” I bark, dropping my jaw. “Those are my favorite and she never sends them to me.”

He looks adorably amused as he strokes a hand down the center of his stomach. “You don’t have the goods, Sunshine.”

Scooping up a handful of sand, I toss it on his legs. “I officially loathe you.”

“Just for that?” he laughs. “It usually takes at least one date before they loathe me.”

The necklace bounces against his chest as he laughs, the little beads sparkling in the light. I reach over and pick up the end, turning it over in my palm. “What’s this?”

“That’s from Gram. It was a graduation gift from high school. My grandfather had one like it, only his beads were yellow and mine are red.”

He watches me examine the intricately carved wooden beads and the shiny red ones. They’re the color of rubies and heavier than I expect.

“This is beautiful, Branch.”

“Thanks. I kind of like it.” His head turns to mine and the soft smile deepens into a smirk. “I kind of like you in that bikini too.”

The necklace drops to his chest as I squirm away from him. “I thought we were having a moment.”

“Sunshine, I’ll give you as many moments as you want.”

“I don’t want any of those moments with you,” I say, picking up my notepad again. “It would just amp up that ego that’s already out of control.”

“I beg to differ,” he gasps. “My ego is totally in control, thank you very much. I can’t help it. I just say what I think and what you want to hear, even if you won’t admit it.”

Finding my pen half-covered with sand, I scribble out a few things that have been lingering in my head. When I look at Branch, he’s grinning.

“What?” I ask.

“I want to ask you a question.”

“Okay.”

“Will you play catch with me?”

“What?” I laugh. “Are you serious?”

“Finn’s not here and I have no one to play with.”

“Branch,” I say, holding up my hands, “football is not my thing.”

“It doesn’t have to be your thing. You just have to catch the ball and then throw it back to me.”

Plopping my stuff back down on the sand, I shake my head. “I know how to play catch. That’s not the point.”

“Then you have no excuse,” he says, hopping to his feet. “Come on.”

He reaches down, extending a large, rough hand. His fingers have obviously been broken a number of times, different digits extruding different ways. It’s kind of gross and kind of sexy, but before I can think about it too much, my hand is in his and he’s yanking me to my feet.

Jogging down the beach, he stops and faces me. I’m half afraid I’m going to stand here and gawk at him and get hit upside the head like in a cheesy romantic comedy. I see how that happens now. It’s a real thing.

He brings his arm to his side, the cuts in his arm muscles on full display as he brings the ball to his ear and launches it my way. It’s fast and hard and I catch it like the professional’s little sister that I am.

“Hell, yeah!” he says, beaming. “You can catch a ball too?”

“Did you forget who I am?” I place my fingers on the laces like Finn taught me when I was ten. Pulling it back to the side of my head, I let it sail back with a flick of my wrist.

I’ve never thrown a more perfect spiral than this pass. Branch stands, arms to his sides, as he watches it spin through the air. Just before it almost hits him in the chest, he swipes it out of the air.

“Color me impressed.” He tucks the ball at his side. “Did Finn teach you that?”

“Of course. Who else?”

He winds the ball back and throws it to me again. “Maybe Callum?”

“Callum didn’t teach me anything,” I say, snapping the ball out of the air. “He was too busy doing other things. And other people.”

I toss it back to him.

“Now you don’t know that,” he jokes. “He might’ve been meeting friends for coffee.”

“Are you trying to piss me off?” I catch his pass. “Because if so, you’re doing a damn good job.”

“Don’t be pissed at me. I’m not the asshole who cheated on you.”

“But you would, wouldn’t you? I mean, don’t you all?”

He snags the pigskin and stands still. “I’m offended you’d lump us all together like that.”

“You are not.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he chuckles, passing the ball to me again. “I’m not. But, no, I don’t think everyone cheats. A large percentage, probably. But I don’t cheat because I don’t make commitments. See? Problem solved.”

I’m about to tell him what a bullshit answer that is . . . until I think about it.

“You know what? I think you’re right,” I tell him.

“I am?”

“Yeah, I’m as amazed as you.”

He narrows his eyes, but a smile plays on his lips. “It saves you so much time and pain. If they do something stupid, not your problem. If you don’t want to go to the movie to see some crazy shit, who cares? If you want to have your cock sucked by a stripper on the Strip, so be it.”

The ball hits the sand at my feet. I don’t blink, just raise a brow. “For one, that was the shittiest pass I’ve ever seen. For two, I don’t have to worry about getting my cock sucked.”

“Thank God,” he says, jogging towards me. He lifts the ball. “If you have a cock, my weekend plans are fucked.”

“Ha.” I head towards my towel, feeling his gaze burn into my bottoms. “If that’s your plan, you need a backup.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“Of course it does,” I say, putting my notepad in my bag. “Isn’t that all you really want? A challenge? A game to conquer?”

He scoffs, but I can tell I’m right. Looking up from my kneeling position, the longest, most confident look crosses his handsome face. “I don’t know what I really want.”

With that line, he surprises me. Leaving me sitting on the sand, ball tucked to his side, he walks back to the cabin.

Chapter 8

Branch

“Then he comes down the stairs with his—”

“Stop!” Layla shouts, covering her ears. “I can’t hear any more of this.”

“I wasn’t even to the good part,” I laugh, setting down my bottle of beer. “Come on. Just let me finish.”

“No,” she laughs. “No. No more. I can’t.”

Poppy wipes tears from her eyes from laughing so hard at my tale from the locker room. Finn stands next to her, watching me tell the story. He knows half of what I’ve just said isn’t one hundred percent true, but it was good enough to entertain the girls. And him. He was laughing too.

Music plays on the overhead system as we shoot the shit. Finn brought back beer and steaks for the grill from his earlier trip to Linton. While the girls made some dips for chips and some vegetables Poppy apparently insisted on that almost caused bloodshed in the grocery, Finn and I worked the grill. It’s been one of the best, most relaxing afternoons I’ve had in a long time.

“Tell them the story about the direct message with the donkey nuts,” Finn requests.

“Okay, so this girl—”

“Answer me this,” Layla cuts me off. “Do you ever get normal messages? I mean, these stories are insane. Is your inbox full of crazies?”

“It was until those pictures of the commissioner’s daughter got leaked last year,” I grimace, thinking back on the mess I had on my hands from that little episode. “After that, Coach made us all shut off our inboxes on social media.”

“I thought that was a lie!” Poppy exclaims. “Seriously? Those pics of her were real?”

I grin. “The pictures were real. But her tits weren’t.”

“Good to know,” Layla flinches, swirling wine around in her glass.”

“Nah, it wasn’t that good,” I say, the look on her face making my stomach ache. “I wish I hadn’t fucked around with her at all, to tell you the truth. Caused a lot of headaches.”

Poppy stands in front of Finn and leans back, her back against his chest. He catches my eye over her head and shoots me a wink.

“Hey, Branch,” Poppy says. “Why do they call you Lucky?”

“Because he’s lucky someone hasn’t killed him by now,” Finn cracks.

“So funny,” I say with a poker face. “The year Finn and I started in the league, we played our division rivals the very first game thanks to a mistake by the people who set the schedules. That game usually doesn’t happen until later in the season. Anyway, two of our wide receivers were out with injuries, so I was in. We were down by a touchdown and time was ticking.”

I think back to that moment, my skin breaking out with goosebumps. “So, a pass was made that got deflected. The ball shot up in the air, maybe ten yards downfield from where I was. Somehow I get under it, but only as it was almost hitting the ground. The defense started making the ‘incomplete pass’ sign, just trying to sway the refs, you know? And I jumped up, demanding I caught it.”

“You were running around screaming it, if I recall,” Finn snorts. “He was pointing at the screens overhead, forcing everyone to watch the replay.”

“I wasn’t letting them *not* see it. I caught that thing.”

“Did they give you the catch?” Layla asks.

“Yeah, after a review. Everyone kept saying it was the luckiest catch ever and the name kind of stuck.”

“Do you think you’re lucky?” Layla’s voice is quiet, almost thoughtful, against the music and Poppy’s giggling at whatever Finn is whispering in her ear.

I sink into a chair beside her. Setting my beer on the table, I peel at the label. “I don’t know that I believe in luck, really.”

“Why not?”

“I think luck is just being ready when an opportunity presents itself. There are a lot of people that could be lucky if they spent more time preparing and less time moping or bitching or being scared.” Taking a deep breath, I stop fucking with the bottle and look into her gorgeous eyes. “Does that make any sense at all?”

The way she looks at me makes me want to come undone. It’s like she cracks open my outer shell and watches me bleed in front of her, something I don’t do for anyone.

People can’t handle that level of truth, that vision of what you look like or say that isn’t what they think it’ll be. When you’re a public figure, everyone thinks they know you and you better live up to that or they’ll call your ass out. It’s a burden to keep that façade up, but I always have to.

“It does make sense,” she agrees. “It’s easy to call people lucky because it doesn’t give them anything. Like, it doesn’t acknowledge anything about them—their work ethic, or decision making skills, or sacrifice. It’s just they’re lucky. I’ve always thought it was kind of bullshit.”

“You and me both,” I whisper.

Before things can get any deeper, her phone buzzes on the table. “Oh, shit.”

“Who is it?” I ask.

“Callum.”

She almost spits his name, her eyes narrowed as she watches it glow. Finn and Poppy are too busy in their own world to notice the way Layla just tensed up.

“He called earlier and I told him not to call me back. I mean, he’s in fucking Tahiti with another woman. Why would he even want to call me?”

“For this reason right here,” I say, spinning the phone around on the table. “It keeps you talking about him.”

“I don’t want to talk about him. I want him to die.” She looks at me. “Not really. I don’t need that karma on my head. I just . . . I wouldn’t be sad if something really bad happened to his knee, okay?”

Laughing, I pick up the phone with a crazy idea. “Let me answer it.”

“What?” she squawks. “Why would I do that?”

“Because it would be fun.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Oh, come on,” I say. “You aren’t dating him, right? What do you have to lose?”

“What do I have to gain?” she counters.

“A little amusement.”

She gives in, unlocks the phone, and swipes the call. Handing me the phone, she tilts her head like she’s second-guessing her decision. I grab it before she changes her mind.

Callum is a complete dick. His reputation around the league sucks, stories float around about him every year in regards to the way he treats his team. I’ve seen him at clubs throughout the

years and watched him interact with different people. It's a wonder someone hasn't rung him up.

A little shot of adrenaline hits me as I bring it to my ear. "Hello?"

I keep the phone pulled slightly away so he doesn't hear my breathing. There's no reason to distract him from the fact a man just answered her phone. Let that sink in a little.

"Who is this?" he says finally.

"Who is this?"

"I asked first."

"True, but you called me," I remind him, winking at Layla whose hands are folded together and hovering near her mouth. "Seems to me you should introduce yourself."

"Where the hell is Layla?"

"She's . . . preoccupied," I say, getting entirely too much enjoyment out of his irritation.

"Can I help you with something?"

His breathing rackets through the line like a linebacker watching you across the field, ready to take you out. "Put her on the phone."

"She's really not in a position to talk right now. Can I give her a message?"

"Who the fuck is this?" he snaps.

"Branch Best."

The stunned silence gives me all I was after, a little shock to the cocksucker. If anything, it'll make him realize he's not God. If anything more, maybe he'll leave Layla alone.

"What the hell is she doing with you?"

"Oh, just the usual . . ."

"Just the usual, huh?" he jeers.

"Well, usual for me. Not sure what usual is for you. How are you doing, anyway? We haven't talked for a while. We should totally hang out more . . ."

I think it's the friendliness in my voice that he knows I don't mean that causes something to break on his end. The sound of glass shattering in the distance shouldn't make me laugh, but it does.

"Bad day, Callum?"

"Fuck you, Best. Fuck. You."

"So hateful."

The line goes dead.

"Was he pissed?" Layla asks.

Finn and Poppy are watching, having caught on to what was happening. Finn shoots me a look and I know he and I will discuss this later.

In the meantime, I turn back to Layla. "Do you think he was pissed? He's an angry boy."

"Ugh," she groans, taking the phone from me. "Maybe he'll stop calling me now."

"Tell him to call me," Finn demands. "He's just trying to keep you on the hook, Lay. Just cut all ties with him."

"I'm trying. I didn't answer earlier or text him back yesterday. I'm over it."

Finn's right, but I want to chime in and tell her the exact game he's playing. Hell, I've played it before. He's going to string her along until he's ready to dip his stick in her again.

She sits next to me, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. Her forehead is pinched as she turns her phone completely off and I find myself wishing I could do something to make him stop bothering her. But I can't. It's not my place.

Poppy's face breaks into a smile as she looks at Layla. "Glad to hear it. Come on," she says, heading towards her and offering her a hand. "Finn, turn this music up."

Finn does as instructed and a new hit song floats through the house. Layla gets to her feet and joins Poppy in dancing through the kitchen, shaking their asses and laughing their heads off.

I grab a beer and sit down and watch Finn join them, dirty dancing with Poppy as Layla pours another glass of wine. The laughter is a constant here, as is the comfortable, homey mood. I wonder what Christmas would be like here with a giant tree in the living room, one so tall it hits the ten-foot high rafters. I consider being snowed in with a fire in the stone fireplace or watching fireworks over the water on the Fourth.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I chuckle, bringing the beer back to my lips. “Get your ass in check, Best.”

Chapter 9

Layla

"I like that one."

My computer almost flies off my lap as I jump at the sound of the voice behind me. "Damn it, Branch!"

Falling back against the lounge chair, I press one hand against my chest. My heart is pounding against my rib cage at an alarming rate. At first, it's because I didn't hear Branch come onto the patio. Then I see him. And smell him. And hear his sexy chuckle as he takes a seat on the chair beside me and then I know the tempo has nothing to do with being scared and everything to do with being *Branched*.

The more time I spend with him, the more I see that he's not just the player I see in the media. I went to bed thinking about how he talked to Callum last night and what Callum must be thinking and the way Branch looked at me the rest of the night.

We had fun afterwards, staying up entirely too late talking and playing gin rummy. Through the laughter and jokes, Branch and I had a weird vibe between us, almost like we were both afraid to get quite too close to the other.

"I like the first one," he says, touching my computer screen. His forearm extends above me, *this close* to hitting my breast but not quite. "I mean, if you're wanting an opinion. You've wavered back and forth between the two images for ten minutes now."

"How long exactly have you been standing there?"

"Long enough," he grins, stretching back again. "If you don't mind me asking, how do you make money doing that?"

I select the image he prefers, the one I was leaning towards anyway, hit save and then close my computer. Before I answer him, I take him in.

He's stretched out beside me in a pair of purple shorts. His hair is wet like he just got out of the shower, the dark blond strands sticking together and up every which way. There's a dose of stubble dotting his cheeks and chin that gives him a touch of scoundrel that appeals to every sexual organ in my body and most of the others.

Clenching my thighs together, I watch *him* watch *me*. He seems unhurried, like he has nowhere to go and the genuine curiosity laced in his question makes me give in.

"I get paid in different ways," I admit. "There's ad space on my blog and I have a newsletter that works the same way. I also write pieces for magazines and a few affiliates." He still seems interested, so I continue. "I've also just started to sell online training courses about decorating, makeup, and blogging. You'd be surprised how many options are out there if you aren't scared to work."

"Maybe that's what I can do when I retire. Do online training courses about actual training."

"You could. Teach younger athletes how to work out like a champion."

"That would be one course. I hear the big money is in porn."

"I think that's true, but only if you have the goods," I sigh. "Big goods, big money. Little goods, little money."

"By goods, do you mean cock?"

Laughing, I nod my head. "Yes. Sorry that wasn't clear."

“So I could just quit football now and work in porn? I don’t know what the concussion risk is like, but I’m guessing a lot lower.”

“I would think so. Does everything go back to sex with you?” I ask, lifting a brow.

“Babe,” he grins, “if a guy ever tells you they don’t think about sex at least twenty times a day, they’re lying.”

“I just assume every time a guy opens their mouth they’re lying.”

His laugh makes me laugh, and before I know it, I’m completely lost in his grin. And eyes. And the start of a dimple in his right cheek that lends a slight adorableness to his overall charm.

“You were right,” he says finally, rubbing a hand down his thigh.

I try not to follow the movement and stay focused on language. “About what?”

“Every time I look at you or think about you I’m wondering why you had a sex therapy card in your purse.”

“Branch . . .” It’s more of a whine than I care to acknowledge, but a whine nonetheless.

For a split second, I wish Poppy and Finn hadn’t gone into Linton for lunch so I could excuse myself to see what they were doing. There’s no way out of this conversation.

I place my computer on the table next to my drink. “Can’t you just forget you saw that?”

“What on earth would a woman like you be doing at a sex therapy class? What even is that? Is it kinky? Should I sign up? Is it like a giant orgy? If you’re into that—”

“No, I’m not into orgies,” I chuckle, rolling my eyes.

“Such a shame.”

“A lot of thought went into that,” I note. “Does this mean you’ve thinking about me, Branch Best?”

“A hell of a lot more than I should be, Layla James Miller.”

A large lump takes residence in my throat as I try to play off his comeback as the trait of a player and not for face value. That would get me in trouble I know better than to get into.

“While we’re on the topic,” he continues, “is James your middle name or some kind of holdover from a previous marriage?”

“Holdover. I was married when I was eighteen to this world-renowned rock star that visited Chicago. When we divorced, right after he left me with our triplets, I decided to keep his last name as a middle name.”

His jaw drops.

“Of course it’s a middle name,” I laugh. “It was my mom’s maiden name.”

“I was wracking my brain for rock stars with the last name James,” he teases. “Okay. We can move on now.”

“No, no way. Now I want to know why your name is Branch. There must be story behind that.”

He shrugs. “Not really. My great-grandfather was a Baptist minister. When his wife had my grandfather, they named him Branch because he was a ‘branch,’” he says, using air quotes, “that would spread the word of God to the rest of the world.”

“That’s . . . fun,” I offer.

“Sure it is. I’m sure they’re super proud of their great-grandson who has only spread the word ‘God’ mid-orgasm.”

Bursting into laughter, I lean my head back to the perfectly clear sky. “You could always trade in your pads for one of those black outfits with the white collar,” I say, wiping tears away from my eyes. “I can only imagine those sermons.”

“I bet every seat would be taken.”

“Oh, I bet you’re right,” I agree. “I’d fight someone for a seat.”

“As long as I have a face, you have a seat.”

Oh.

My.

God.

His smile straddles the line between mischief and debauchery the way my legs want to be straddled over his face. It’s a wicked, taunting kind of gesture that puddles me.

“What has gotten into you today?” I ask.

“Sometimes I wake up a little spirited.”

“Spirited. Got it,” I say, settling into my chair.

“Sex therapy. Go,” he commands.

“I haven’t gone,” I say, unable to look away from him. “Poppy has a friend that goes because her husband had an affair and she wanted to feel sexy again.”

“So why did she give *you* the card?”

My cheeks burn, the sweat breaking out along the top of my breasts more from Branch’s scrutiny than the summer sun. “A joke?”

“Why did she give *you* the card?” he asks again, not buying my excuse.

When I don’t answer, his legs swing towards me and he sits upright. Elbows on knees, strong shoulders angled slightly my way, his brows tug together as he awaits my response.

I know he asked me a question, but I can’t remember what it is. There are too many stimuli to process to think of such trivial things. The way his body wash floats on the warm summer breeze, the way little beads of sweat form against his smooth, tanned skin. The way his teeth are so straight and white and his nose angled and that damn dimple that dips into his cheek as he watches my irises widen when he lays his palm on my bare thigh.

My body clenches at the contact, something I know he notices because his fingers lightly press into my skin a little harder. My lips fall apart as I drag oxygen into my lungs to help clear the fog.

“There’s no way you need a sex therapist. No way in hell.”

“Maybe I do. You don’t know me.”

“I know you’re sexy as *fuck*,” he says, the last syllable so enunciated that it feels like it bounces off me. “I also know you’re well-spoken and intelligent and you make me laugh every time I’m with you.”

“Which has been like four times in our lives, so it’s not like I’m setting records here.”

He smiles, but I think the fact that he does annoys him.

“You are seriously bothered by this, aren’t you?” I kid. “You aren’t going to let this go.”

Like a petulant child, he fires back immediately. “No, I’m not.”

“Tell me why it bothers you first and then I’ll tell you why I have it.”

“It bothers me,” he says, not missing a beat, “because I can’t imagine a woman like you not having complete confidence in herself. And if it was a man that you were talking to, it also makes me think I went into the wrong profession.”

“Oh, like you don’t have enough women to talk about sex with.”

“I don’t want to talk about sex,” he clarifies. “I want *you* to tell me all your sexual secrets.”

Despite the heat, a chill rips across my body. I actually shiver. His eyes train on my lips as my tongue brushes against them in an attempt to bring some moisture back to my mouth.

“Tell me something, Sunshine.”

“You think you can call me some cute nickname and have me open up with all my dirty

secrets? Does this work with other women?" I ask, cocking my head to the side.

"I haven't tried it with other women."

"Why?"

"Quite frankly, I don't have to. Now, back to the dirty secrets you were getting ready to tell me."

Emboldened by the ease of our banter, I lift my legs off the side of the chair and face him. Leaning forward, I whisper, "I wasn't about to tell you anything."

His nostrils flair at the proximity of our bodies, his legs capturing mine between them and holding them in place like a clamp. "Would you rather show me?"

"You aren't a sex therapist."

"Trust me—there are plenty of testimonials I could gather that would say sex with me is wholly therapeutic."

Laughing, I try to sit back but his legs lock me in place. "I'm sorry to disappoint, but I honestly have no dirty secrets. I was going to see the doctor on the card for some confidence boosting, if you must know. That's the shameful reason. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

"No."

"No?"

"I'm not excusing you," he says. "If you get up and walk away, I'll feel sad." He sticks his bottom lip out.

Looking at the unmistakable bump in the crotch of his shorts, I lift a brow. "I think the word you're after is *blue*."

"Well played." He widens his stance so I can get up if I choose, but he doesn't get out of my way. Not in the slightest. "If you don't feel self-assured sexually, then you've never had great sex."

"I've had plenty of great sex," I counter. "I just feel a little . . . unsure about myself. That happens sometimes to regular people that don't have the entire population throwing themselves at your feet."

"If you've been having great sex, you wouldn't be unsure about yourself," he contends. "Great sex makes you feel good about yourself. It gives you way more than an orgasm. It gives you . . . pride. Confidence. It builds you up mentally as much as physically."

"This is getting deep," I laugh.

He rests his head against the cushion and looks at me. "You can't have mind-blowing sex without involving the mind. It seems whoever you've been fucking doesn't know the first thing about that."

"I haven't been fucking anyone."

"Since Callum?"

"Since Callum," I confirm.

"How long ago was that?"

"Why do you care?"

"Just making conversation."

"Seems like you're prying, Mr. Best."

* * * *

Branch

I am prying. I'm prying so damn hard it hurts.

Tugging my bottom lip between my teeth, I grab onto the slice of self-control I have left. It's waning, dangling on a spinning string that gets more difficult to hold on to with every flutter of her long eyelashes.

"What's wrong with a little getting-to-know-you?" I ask.

"Nothing . . . if you ask the right questions."

It's not the answer she gives, but the way she gives it that makes me want to scoop her up and carry her inside and lock ourselves in a bedroom for the rest of the afternoon. She's sweet as honey and as sinful as the day is long.

Narrowing my eyes, I drag a fingertip across the top of her thigh. "Are you turned on right now?"

"I'm not answering that," she breathes.

"You don't have to. I already know the answer."

"Oh, you do, do you?"

"It seems," I say, trailing my finger up her torso, across her pebbled nipple, and up the side of her throat, "that your body is a little more honest than you are."

"I didn't say yes or no. I said I wasn't answering."

"Okay, you want to do a visual representation. I can do that. It's like instead of discussing the formation of the play, we're going to do a walk-through."

She laughs, but lets me take her hand and pull her to her feet. We stand inches from one another, her head coming up right beneath my chin, as she looks up at me with her bright golden eyes sparkling.

"The question was," I say, letting my hands go to her hips, "are you turned on right now?"

"I thought you already knew the answer?" She does that eyelash flutter thing again and I feel like I'm going to explode. "My turn."

"For what?" I say as I lift the edges of her shirt up just enough so my hands can wrap around her waist. Her body is soft, her skin warm, and the way she moves under my touch has me breathing much harder than necessary.

"For me to ask the questions."

The little vixen wrapped in an angel's façade takes her hand and touches the side of my face. The back of her hand runs down my jawline, the scraping sound from my unshaven face zipping through the air.

Her eyes don't leave mine as she traces a line down my throat, over my shoulder, and across my pecs before dropping down the ridges of my abs.

"Are *you* turned on?" she asks.

"I've been turned on since you stepped out of the car yesterday."

She grins as I run my hands up her sides, feeling the soft, round curve of her body.

"What do you propose we do about this state we're in?" she asks.

"I think we have a couple of options. One, we can take ten giant steps back and then you go inside and I'll go down by the lake and we stay apart until your brother gets home."

"I don't think that'll work," she says. "I'll just watch you from my window while I touch myself and I—"

My mouth captures hers before she can finish her sentence. Her lips part, her hands go to my hair, not at all fazed by my sudden ferocity. I can't take it. There's no way I can handle tiptoeing around this woman that makes me crazy any longer.

I cup her face in both hands, holding her face still so I can kiss the hell out of her. She tastes of tea and summertime, of heat and arousal, and the longer our mouths move against each other,

the more I want—of her kisses, of her body, of her.

Fuck. Me.

Stroking her cheeks with the pads of my thumbs, I plant my lips in the center of hers and then pull away.

Holding my breath, unsure of what I'm going to see in her eyes, I relax when she smiles.

"Now that," she says, a little breathless, "is a little more what I expected you to be like."

"Is that so?"

"I mean, not one hundred percent, but closer."

Taking her hand, I pull her to the foot of the chaise lounge. Positioning her so she's facing me, I lift the hem of her shirt and drag the cotton material off her body. She's braless, her tear-drop breasts, heavy with the weight of the C-cups, hanging perfectly off her frame.

"I'm about to get you nine inches closer if you don't tell me no," I growl.

"Let me think about it," she says, tapping her pursed lips.

"Can you think about it while we get you out of these shorts?" I hook my thumbs in the elastic waistband and drag them down her toned legs. She shivers as my palms hit the back of her thighs, skimming her smooth skin as I reach her ankles.

Stepping out of the shorts, she looks up at me and grins. "My turn."

With a sway of her hips, she reaches for me. I don't have to be told twice. I cut the distance between us with a step and hold my breath as her hands dip below the top of my shorts. Instead of just yanking them down, she runs her hands from the front around to the side, letting the backs of her hands run along my skin.

My blood sings in my veins, my cock throbbing so damn hard I think I might pass out. As she finally drops my shorts, the mesh fabric not needing any direction once it's over my hips, she steps back and stares at just how much I want her.

"Damn," she mutters, her eyes widening.

Although her reaction is something I'd love to watch over and over again, my need for physical action is much stronger.

I reach for her and she surprises me by taking my hand and allowing me to pull her naked body against mine. Her tits smash against my chest, her back arching as I place a hand in the curve just above her bubbled ass. The other cradles the back of her head as I move my mouth to the shell of her ear. "You. Are. Gorgeous."

Crashing my lips to hers again, I draw the hand twisted in her hair down her back and around her side. As my tongue enters her mouth and she moans into mine, my palm cups her breast and savors the weight and the feel of her in my hand.

Her head falls back and I guide her body closer to mine again. My senses are filled with everything Layla and the more I get, the more I want. Need. *Crave*.

An urge overtakes me, one I haven't felt in a long damn time. It's a desire to not just get off, something that usually finds me about now when I'm with a woman, but a wish to *enjoy it*.

Twisting a beaded nipple in between two fingers, I roll it around and feel her muscles loosen against me. She pants against my mouth, pressing her pussy against my thick, more-than-ready cock. The friction is almost too much to bear.

In a move she's not expecting—and without breaking our kiss—I sweep her up in my arms and lay her on the chaise lounge a few steps away. Her eyes are open, watching me, teasing me, in a way, as I straddle her in the chair.

Pulling away, we're both breathless, panting in a desperate attempt to get precious oxygen into our bodies. She grips my shoulders, her dainty hands not close to covering the width of my

arms.

“I want you, Best. Now.”

“It’s a good thing I’m ready to give it to you. Now.”

Moving so my body is on one side of the chair, I dip my head and draw in her peaked nipple. She lifts off the chair, her head pressed into the cushion, as I lick and suck the globes of her breasts.

Reaching down between her legs, I glide two fingers between her legs. Her slit is so wet, so hot, I think my cock is going to go off from the imagery alone.

She bends her knees and lets them splay to the sides, giving me more access to her pussy. I take what’s offered.

Moving around to the bottom of the chair, I nestle against the cushions between her legs. Looking at her from this vantage point—eyes wild, hair mussed, lips parted and swollen from my kisses—I grin. Keeping my eyes on hers, I insert one finger, then two, feeling her muscles tighten around me as I work them slowly back and forth.

“Branch,” she moans, reaching for me.

Dipping my head, I use the pad of my tongue to lick a long, thick streak up her pussy. She pulls her legs back farther, burying her hands in my hair, shoving my face farther into her body.

She bucks against my fingers, working herself against what I’m willing to give her at the moment. Her lashes, the ones she bats my way, are lying flat against her rosy cheeks as I swirl my tongue around her swollen bud.

My body aches, every sound she makes pulling my libido another rung higher. I suck her flesh, lap up the juices she’s releasing for me, feeling her flex and push against me.

It’s goddamn heaven.

I press a kiss to her clit before pulling back. Stretching her tight hole open with three fingers, I bury them inside her before removing them altogether, a move that gets me a dirty look. I laugh.

“What’s that look for?” I say, wiping my face with the back of my hand. I shuffle my body so I’m hovered over her, the tip of my cock sitting at the opening of her body. “You look pissed.”

Her hands find my ass and press down, urging me to fill her. “Stop playing, Branch.”

“And you weren’t sure you were turned on.”

“No, I was sure,” she says through gritted teeth. “I wasn’t sure if you were.”

“Oh, right,” I chuckle.

Swirling my hips so my head teases her opening, I press barely—just barely—so the tip begins to part her. She gasps, locking her heels around my waist, her thighs tensing as she waits for me to move.

Eyes locked on hers, I slip against her. She’s so slick, so warm, I groan like a teenage boy ready to fire the entire fucking thing because I have no control.

Her hips tilt, and whether I mean to or not, I slide so easily into her tight channel, and with every inch I go, I want to go another. And another. And another until I’m hitting the back of her pussy and watching her eyes roll to the back of her head. She sucks in a breath at the same time I do, my cock throbbing against the tensing muscles of her vagina.

I still as her eyes fly open and we both realize our error.

“I need to get a condom,” I whisper.

“Ugh,” she whines, her legs dropping to the side. “I mean, yeah, you do, but . . .” She lifts her hips with me still buried balls-deep inside her. “But this feels too good.”

“I have one in the pocket of my shorts,” I say, summoning every bit of adult I can find to do the right thing. The only thing. “It’ll take ten seconds.”

“Which is nine too long.”

“I think you’ll like nine just fine.”

“Asshole,” she laughs. “You seriously have one in your pocket? Were you that sure of yourself?”

“No,” I say, pushing away before I say fuck it. “But a man can hope, can’t he?”

My length glistens, coated with her wetness, a pool of pre-cum dotting the tip. I find my shorts, rip open the condom, and roll it down my shaft in record time.

I hover over her in a half push-up and feel her fingers lightly draw a line across my clavicle. “There are boaters on the lake,” she whispers. “Think they can see us?”

“Maybe.”

“Should we go in?”

Knowing she’s already ready for me, I rest the head of my cock against her and thrust until I’m fully seated inside her body. She moans my name, her nails digging into my shoulder blades.

“You want to stop and go in?” I ask, retracting until I’m almost out before laying it to her again.

“Branch!” she calls, sweat glazing her skin as she gives her entire body to me.

“Was that a stop?”

“No,” she whimpers, skimming her hands to my hips. “Don’t you dare fucking stop.”

Watching her full tits bounce with every slam of my body against hers, I chuckle. “If you say so.”

Chapter 10

Layla

“Come in.” I watch the doorway to see who is on the other side. My heart starts to race as I hope it might be Branch coming in for round three.

Round one, on the patio, was the most voyeuristic sexcapade I’ve ever had. Round two, almost an hour later, was a quickie with my hands against the refrigerator door. It was an impromptu bang session that resulted from him coming down in a pair of boxers and me bent over picking up a piece of ice off the floor.

Although my body aches, and my neck apparently kinked at some point and is beginning to scream in discomfort much the same way I was screaming his name just a little while ago, I would totally, absolutely, with no hesitation say yes to round three. And four. And five.

The thought of Branch’s hands touching my skin makes me shiver as I await the opening of the door. I love the way they feel rough, almost like a fine sandpaper, against me and the way his stubble scratches along my skin.

Poppy trounces in, a wide, jovial smile parting her pinked cheeks, ruining my daydream.

“There you are!” she says, almost skipping to the side of the bed where I sit. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Did you guys just get back?” I ask, glancing at the clock. “You were gone forever.”

“I didn’t think you’d mind. Besides, you can get lost on backroads, you know.”

Even if she wasn’t my best friend, I’d know that look in her eye. “Don’t even tell me. He’s my brother,” I gag.

“Who else am I supposed to talk about it with? You’re my bestie.”

“You’re out of luck on this one. There’s not a detail in the world I want to know about Finn,” I flinch. “Just the thought makes me ill.”

“If he weren’t your brother, the things I’d—”

“But. He. Is.”

She giggles, her happiness contagious, as she sits on the bed beside me. “Tell me what you were doing while we were off back-roading.”

“I got some work done. Made a few calls . . .”

“Got in a fight with a cat and it clawed the top of your boobs . . .”

“What?” I look down to see red marks from Branch’s fingers and lips marking my chest. “Shit.”

“And, just like that, the Illinois Legends lose a wide receiver at the hands of a very tight end.”

“Shut up,” I laugh. “I’ll just put on another shirt. Finn will never know.”

“He will never know what, exactly?” she asks, tapping her chin with a fingernail.

“That Branch just made me come five times in the span of less than two hours while telling me how beautiful I am and how much he loves my body and . . .” My face heats and I look away. “Best afternoon of my life, pun intended.”

In a very un-Poppy-like way, she says nothing. After a long pause, I turn to look at her. She’s watching me agape.

“What?” I ask.

“Five times? Are you fucking serious?”

“Oh, the fucking was serious all right, and yes, five times. I mean, a couple of them sort of ran together so that’s not a scientific number or anything.”

“But *five times*. Damn.”

“I was hoping you were him,” I sigh.

“I have never been happier that I let you talk me into something I didn’t want to do before. Coming up here was the best decision we ever made.”

Our laughter blends together as I stand and change out my shirt.

“So, you and Branch are actively fucking now?” she asks.

“No. I don’t think so. I mean . . . No. We’re not.”

She wrinkles her nose.

“Maybe for the weekend, but that’s it,” I say, dropping back on the bed. “He’s this crazy confusion of dangerous and wonderful. I’ve never laughed so much with a man, Pop. He’s terribly funny and has the stupidest sense of humor. And buried under all that brawn is a nice guy, I think.”

Remembering back to his stories about his Grandma and the way he gives me room to breathe when he senses I’m a little overwhelmed, a softness eases through me.

“He can be sweet. Then he’s so filthy I get whiplash.” Wrapping my hand around the back of my neck, I work it back and forth. “Literally.”

“So? This seems like a good thing.”

“It’s not,” I sigh. “I tried to trust my gut with this one, but now I’m thinking maybe it was more my vagina than my stomach. It’s tricky.”

“Seems pretty cut and dried to me. You came five times. What’s there to overthink?”

“That it’s me, not you, Pop. I don’t keep doing the same thing over and over and over again.”

“I do if it’s worth it,” she laughs.

Standing, I walk to the desk my dad bought at a flea market when I was twelve. It’s inexpensive and we painted it white one summer and left it in the sun to dry. It ended up raining that night and the paint was technically ruined, but I loved the splatter marks, the little indentions in the surface and begged them to let me keep it as-is. They did.

Running my finger over the bumps, I listen to Finn and Branch’s voices trickling up from downstairs.

“It’s not worth it to me,” I admit. “I think the sex was so good because we both know where we stand. This is a weekend fluke, a romp in the final days of summer before we go back to reality and assume our real lives.”

“You don’t think you’ll see him once this weekend is over?”

I look at her. “I don’t want to see him once this weekend is over.” Dropping my hand from the desk, I shrug. “I want to get serious about things. I’ve done enough gambling with my happiness over the last few years to know I don’t win. Dating athletes is the biggest blackjack hand ever and the House doesn’t lose.”

“I can’t handle all this philosophy stuff,” she says, scrambling to her feet. “Subject change: Peck said to tell you he’s happy to get even but you have to show up.”

Poppy leads me downstairs, telling me about how much she loved Machlan and Crave and the backroads of Linton County.

I listen to her stories, even admire the way she seems to have taken up with my friends, but in reality, I’m tuning her out. Searching for the sound of Branch’s voice is almost impossible

over the roar of white noise through my ears coupled with her rambling.

My hand trembles as it glides down the banister as we descend the staircase.

I haven't seen him since he pinned me to the refrigerator and fucked me so hard it knocked the little basket off the top my mom keeps receipts in and I'm nervous to see him now with Poppy and Finn around. It reminds me of being a teenager and having a major crush on a boy and having to interact with him in front of your friends. You know one little slip can make you the laughingstock of the school.

As we round the corner and my sight lands on him sitting at the island, his easy smile melts away any apprehension I had.

"I got burgers to go from Crave," Finn says as the microwave beeps behind him. "I had to heat them up."

"Really? From what I heard, the entire car was pretty hot on the way home," I say, trying not to smile.

Branch, however, doesn't bother stifling his as he stops the microwave and takes out a burger. "Poppy, you little rascal."

"You—" she starts, then realizes her misstep and stops. With a quick glance at me, she starts again. "*You* are an asshole."

Branch hands me a burger, his fingers brushing mine as I accept the sandwich. We sit at the table, on opposite ends, and start to eat before I realize my brother and Poppy aren't.

"Aren't you guys eating?" I ask.

"I already ate," Finn smirks. "No, really, Machlan is having a party at the lake tonight. He invited us to come out."

Not wanting to be the first to respond, I look at Branch over my burger. He searches my eyes before turning his attention to Finn.

"You two wanting to go?"

"Yes," Poppy giggles. "Those people are crazy. Seriously, who knew rednecks could be so much fun?"

"I love the Gibson boys," I say, ignoring a strange look from Branch. "But I don't really feel like one of their parties tonight. It gets loud and the last time we were there, Peck let out the neighbor's cows and we spent all night trying to herd them back into the pen without the owner knowing it."

"I'll stay with her," Branch says, his offer sounding amazingly innocent. Still, Finn raises his brow. "My agent sent me some contracts for endorsements that I've had for a couple of days. I'm happy to stay and get that shit done."

"That's all you're getting done, right?" Finn asks.

"I don't know what you're referring to." Branch winks, tossing his paper plate in the trash, and carries his burger with him as he disappears out of the kitchen.

Poppy follows him. "I'm going to grab a sweatshirt in case it gets chilly tonight. Be right back."

I almost feel guilty that Branch wasn't warned that Poppy's behind him. She's not going for a sweatshirt. She's going up there to interrogate him in a way only she can.

Maybe it'll be good for him. There's no doubt no one has ever put him in his place like Poppy Quinn is about to.

I'm chuckling under my breath when I look at Finn. "What?" I ask, taking in his puzzled face.

"Heard from Callum?"

“No. Why? Should I have?”

He shrugs. “Not really. You just seem really chipper this afternoon.”

“Can’t a girl just be happy?”

“Sure. Just wondering why.”

“Because my big brother is such a respectful, loving guy that stays out of my business,” I say, standing up and walking around the island. I kiss him on the cheek. “Now go play with Poppy and be happy yourself.”

He stills, his eyes turning a deep shade of emerald like our father’s. “I’m not kidding, Lay. Don’t fuck with Branch.”

“He’s nice.”

“Yeah. He’s nice. But his people skills aren’t what I’m worried about.”

“Finn, seriously, stop it.”

“I work with these guys. I’m Branch’s friend. I see things you don’t see, know things you don’t know. I’m sick and tired of watching you hook up with guys like this and then get your heart broken.”

“My heart is not broken, thank you very much,” I glower, placing my hands on my hips. “My heart was a little tender for a minute because that’s a normal thing in a break up with anyone except heartless assholes that just jump from one bed to another.”

He shoots me a warning, but I ignore it. “I love you, Finn. I do. And I appreciate your looking out for me. I have no plans to get tied up with Branch in any way. I’m not an idiot, okay?”

He pulls me into a quick hug and smiles. “Good. That makes me feel better.”

“What does?” Branch asks, walking back in the room.

“Nothing. See you two later.” Finn tosses me a final look before nodding to Branch as he walks out. The front door opens and closes, and immediately, the air shifts and pulls.

Branch sits back down at the table, having changed into a pair of soft, faded jeans and a plain white t-shirt. “So, what’s the plan tonight?”

“Don’t you have contracts?” I ask, sitting down and pulling the newspaper up in front of me.

“No. I just told him that so he would leave. I got them done days ago, before I ever came up here.” He flicks the paper, making it pop. “They still have printed papers up here?”

“Yes. Isn’t it sweet? A man brings it to the end of the driveway every afternoon. Finn must’ve brought it up.”

I scan the front page, the headlines all centering around the Linton County Water Festival. Pictures of carnival rides, horseshoes, food trucks, and bands performing on the bed of a semi-truck span the entire first three pages.

Suddenly, I get an idea.

Setting the paper down, I look at Branch. “When was the last time you went to a carnival?”

“A what?”

“You know, with rides and elephant ears and lemon shake-ups?”

“High school?” he guesses. “Maybe? Maybe middle school. I don’t know. Why?”

I scoot my chair back and grin. “Get ready. We’re going to the Linton County Water Festival.”

“We are not.”

“Yes, we are,” I giggle.

“Why?” he groans. “Those things are for kids, not adults.”

“Okay,” I tease. “When did you become an adult?”

He dips his chin and looks at me through his lashes. "Really, Sunshine?"

"Oh, come on. Stop being difficult," I say, taking his hand and pulling him to his feet. "Go get a hat and whatever else you need and let's go."

He tries to have a standoff with me, but it doesn't last long. Before I'm even close to giving up, he stomps up the stairs. "God, you're infuriating."

"Just get your stuff and get back down here and no one will get hurt."

* * * *

Branch

"You have that all over your face." I brush a spattering of cinnamon and sugar off her chin. "If we weren't in public, I'd just lick this off you."

"Good thing we're in public then," she says, bringing the plate to her lips. She tears off a huge piece of cooked dough and shoves it into her mouth. "You're good, but not this good."

"If you weren't so pretty, watching you would be disgusting," I laugh.

She shrugs, not giving a fuck what I think.

We stroll through the park, where the Water Festival is in full-force. White Christmas lights are strung over the street that's been shut down for the occasion. Vendors hawking trinkets line the right side, food stands fill the left. On ahead is a bank of games and carnival rides and one very loud cover band that's doing a shitty job of covering classic country. It's kind of amazing.

The air smells of fried food and is filled with laughter and music. It reminds me of being a kid and the music festivals in Tennessee. I'd start begging to go right after school, and if I was lucky, we'd trek down there on Friday night for a few hours of running amok.

Layla takes a few steps off the road and dumps the remaining elephant ear into the trash can. She pauses to help a little boy get a red balloon out of a tree, the string a touch too high for the kid to retrieve. She stands on her tip-toes, halfway hopping into the air until she comes down with the end and holds it triumphantly out to the boy.

Watching her interact so easily with the child, just as easily as she did with the veteran that welcomed us into the festival, is a sight to behold. She talks to them like they're old friends, and by the time they're through, they probably are.

She saunters back my way, dressed in a pale purple summer dress that hits just above her knee. She could fit right into this little town as another PTA member or woman working the table for the local church. She could fit right in, but she'd stick out. She's the most beautiful woman here.

Before I can really do much damage with my imagination, she reaches me. "You having fun yet?"

"Oh, I'm having a ball," I sigh.

"You love it. You know you do."

"Yeah, maybe I don't hate it." Glancing down, she's looking up at me with a knowing smirk. "Fine. It's fun. All right? You happy?"

"Yup."

"Good because—"

"Lemon shake-ups," she breathes, her eyes twinkling. "Come on, Branch. I need one."

"You do not. You just ate a pound of dough smothered in sugar. If you have any more, you'll go into diabetic shock."

She stops in her tracks and very carefully lifts her chin. "Tell me again I don't need one."

The lights dangling overhead appear to make her glow. Her blonde hair shines like a halo . . . then you get to the look on her face. That's different. That begs you to push her because she's willing to throw back.

Not many girls are like this. Most would ask to go to a fancy restaurant or to have box seats at a concert. Lots of the women I know would have on killer heels and a face full of make-up and do whatever I said and half of what I didn't. Not this one. I'm not one hundred percent sure she brushed her hair today. She's an enigma, one I can't wrap my head around quite yet.

"Get me one too," I say finally.

"That's what I thought." Winking, she trots off to the stand. I stay back, hovering near a telephone pole, and watch her order two drinks. The man shaking the white plastic cups is obviously enchanted with her. He smiles too wide, leans in too close, and I'm not even sure he takes her money. But by the time she's back to me, all I can think about is the grin she's wearing and the way her eyes are lit up like a carnival ride.

"Here," she says, thrusting a cup at me. "These are amazing."

The cold, sweet, and slightly bitter drink hits my taste buds. "Wow. This takes me back."

"This is my 'must get' thing at festivals," she admits, leading me down the street. "My mom got me hooked on these as a kid. She always made my dad buy her one, even if the line took forever."

"That was me with candy apples. I used to love the shit out of those."

"We're going to get you one."

"No, we aren't," I laugh. "The season is getting ready to start. I can't be eating total crap."

As if I haven't said a damn word, she sidles up to another stand with a green awning. "One candy apple please."

"Sure thing, madam."

We watch the guy pluck a cherry red apple from a tray and wrap it in plastic wrap. He hands it to Layla while I pay. She gives it to me as we walk away.

"You'll thank me later," she promises.

"The way your legs look in that dress, I hope so."

"Ha. Ha. Ha."

We walk slowly through the streets, stopping for a brief minute to listen to the band and watch couples dance to the music. Everyone from little kids to old people in wheelchairs are clapping their hands, some are whistling, others are talking with the people around them.

I stand next to her and take it all in. There's something so pure and relaxed about this that I can't quite make it out. People don't act this way anymore. Places don't have this feeling of camaraderie. It's amazing this even exists.

Then I look at her, dancing with an old man in a pair of bib overalls to an old Waylon Jennings song. She's chatting him up as he does his best to lead her in a little circle. There's no doubt he's having the time of his life.

The band plays the final few notes and Layla kisses her partner on the cheek. Catching me watching, her cheeks turn the faintest shade of pink.

"Sorry," she says. "That's Peck's uncle. He's like a million years old and the sweetest old thing in the world."

"Don't be sorry. That was nice of you."

"I love it here," she sighs, looking around. "Doesn't being here just make you feel nice?"

"That's the sugar talking," I joke as we start towards the games.

"It is not."

“No, you’re right. It is nice here. I’m actually having a good time.” I bump her with my shoulder. “Thanks for bringing me.”

She looks at me out of the corner of her eye. “Thanks for coming.”

“Like you gave me a choice.”

“True, I didn’t. But I had a suspicion you’d like this.”

“Really? Do I come across as the guy who likes kiddie rides?” I whistle through my teeth. “I need to work on my reputation.”

It’s her that bumps me this time. “No, asshole. But you do come across as a guy who needs to be reminded every now and then that it’s okay to just chill out.”

“I chill out all the time.”

“I think you misunderstand the term ‘chill out,’” she says.

“It’s an easily understood term. I don’t think you can misunderstand it.”

She side-eyes me. “It doesn’t just mean relax or not work out for a day. It means to have fun, take it easy, you know? To kick back and enjoy yourself.”

“Well, I ‘chilled out’ a lot lately then,” I grin. “I’d like to ‘chill out’ like that again.”

“I bet you would . . .”

Stopping in the middle of the street, I shake my head. “And?”

“And what?” she giggles, turning to face me.

“And you wouldn’t?”

“I didn’t say that. I just didn’t reply.”

“And . . .”

“And, yes, Branch. Once you play me in a game of Skee Ball, I’d love nothing more than to ‘chill out’ with you.”

“Skee Ball? Are you fucking serious?”

“Dude,” she says, pointing a few yards over. “It’s the best game of all time. Except maybe Plinko. But I’ve never actually gotten to play that.”

She takes off without me and I just follow along, shaking my head.

“Where in the hell do you get this stuff?” I ask, wrapping an arm around her neck and pulling her close to me. “Plinko?”

“I watched *The Price is Right* every day growing up. My mom would record it on our VCR because it was on right before her soap operas. I wanted to put that chip down the ramp and watch it bounce.”

“Sounds kinky,” I shrug.

“You can put your chip down my ramp and watch me bounce when we get home.”

“Damn it, woman. I’m going to be Skee Balling with a hard-on now,” I say, letting her go.

She laughs, her voice catching the attention of the game attendant. He takes my money and gives us tickets and we find two booths side-by-side.

“This is serious,” she says, rubbing her hands together. “No talking. No bumping. No interfering with the other person’s game whatsoever or you’re disqualified and your chip remains in its slot the rest of the night. Got it?”

It’s my turn to laugh as my balls come crashing down the ramp. “You’re a woman after my own heart.”

“No, I’m a woman who wants no part of your heart,” she deadpans. “I want your blood right now and your cock later. Keep your heart.”

“I think I just fell in love.”

She rolls her eyes and counts us down and we begin the most epic game of Skee Ball Linton

has ever seen.

Chapter 11

Layla

Poppy's giggle from the room next door filters through the thin walls of my bedroom. Watching Branch do pull-ups from a low-hanging limb off a tree in the yard, I have half a notion to get dressed and go down there with him.

Last night at the festival turned out to be more than I even expected. It took Branch a while to really loosen up and let his guard down, something that I don't think he really does all that much. But when he dropped it, he really dropped it. So much so, in fact, that I waited for almost an hour while he showed a group of high school boys how to throw a football and catch a pass on the tennis courts.

I've never seen him quite like that. Invigorated. Energized. Talking a mile-a-minute and jumping from one thing to another. I think that little side track was his favorite part of the night, although he insists it was his victory over me in Skee Ball.

My bed still smells like him, sticky, red candy smeared on my sheets from our romp when we got back. I showered after and again now when I woke up and still feel the tackiness on my thighs and breasts. So worth it.

He catches me watching him and drops to the ground and busts out a number of push-ups, all the while maintaining eye contact. I laugh, give him a thumbs up, and then walk away from the window.

I have to. He's a glorious sight all shirtless and golden from the afternoon sun, but this little fest will come to an end when we go home tomorrow and I need to start applying the brakes now.

By the time I get dressed and stretch out a little, my muscles aching, Poppy and Finn are already in the kitchen. They're whispering back and forth as I enter.

"Secrets are lies," I say, plucking a strawberry out of a bowl.

Poppy turns around and smirks. "No, I know what a lie is and it's not a secret. Or, maybe it is. Is it?"

I toss her a look and mouth, "Stop it" while Finn's back is to me. "How was the party at Machlan's?"

"Those boys are nuts," Poppy giggles. "I kind of love them."

"What happened?" I ask, looking at Finn.

"Just the normal shit. Peck had bottle rockets so I'll let you determine how that fared."

"Oh no," I laugh.

"Pretty much. What did you do last night?" he asks.

"Branch and I went to the Water Festival, actually. I ate way too much."

"She did." His voice slides into the room from the doorway.

Looking over my shoulder, I see him standing there, leaning against the frame. His eyes are on me, but they're filled with something I haven't seen in them before and can't even begin to figure out.

"You can't take Layla to a festival and not drop one hundred dollars on food," Finn laughs. "Let me guess: lemon shake-ups."

"And elephant ears," Branch adds. "And candy apples."

“That explains that,” Poppy says, her eyes twinkling.

“That explains what?” Finn asks.

“Um, the stick on the counter this morning,” she fumbles. “I was like, ‘Damn, that looks like a candy apple stick.’ Guess it was.”

My head goes to my hands as she continues with her makeshift story. She can’t tell him she asked me about the red smears on my sheets earlier. Finn would go crazy.

“I’m going to take my strawberries,” I say, grabbing the bowl as I stand, “and go sit on the porch.”

“We’ll be right out,” Poppy says, turning back to Finn.

I brush past Branch on my way. He slides his hand to the side and lets his fingertips dance along my thigh. It’s such a simple touch that I can’t look at him. I just keep walking.

My skin tickles where he touched me for minutes after. As I get situated on the wicker love seat and think about him in the other room, I smile like a loon. I know it. I can’t help it.

Even on my best days with Callum, it was work—work I thought would pay off in the end. I wrote off the stress between us as spillover from practice or the last game or decided his irritability must be from the things he took to stay fit. With Branch, there’s none of that. It’s so *easy*.

Their laughter comes around the corner before I see them and I watch the doorway for Branch. His eyes find mine right away, softness mixed with mischief in those blues.

Everyone grabs a seat like we’ve done this a hundred times. We eat fresh fruit and coffee that Poppy made and laugh and talk about our jobs and tell stories from summers past. They let me snap some pictures of their plates for my blog and I mentally put together the post as Poppy takes our dishes to the kitchen.

A wind chime tinkles in the corner, the warm afternoon breeze gently nudging it back and forth as we sit, stomachs full, and relax. Branch sits across from me, his feet up on the table again, his hands on his belly and eyes closed. Finn stretches out on a chaise beside him, a binder of football-related stuff on his lap. Poppy comes back from the kitchen and sits next to me.

A contented sigh passes my lips as I feel my body, although sore from my romps with Branch, give in. It’s one of those moments I’ve experienced only a few times in my life. It’s a calm in the center of my core, a contentedness that I wish I could channel every day.

My computer sits beside me where I left it at some point. As Poppy checks her email on her phone, I attach my phone to my laptop and download the pictures I just took for the blog. Wanting to get the vision I have for the Summer Fun post I can see so clearly, I click open my browser. There are tabs lining the top and I start to click on each one and close them.

Then I stop.

My eyes dart from the screen, over the rim of the computer to Branch, and back to the screen again.

I gulp.

I hit refresh.

Expose’s website is front and center, a tab open from when I was checking on Callum when we first got here.

Now, on the main page, is a picture of *Branch* in Crave. He’s wearing the same shirt he came in that night smelling like the bar. The letters hanging above his head, in all bold caps, reads: “Best Having the Best Time.”

A lump sits in my throat, my cheeks hot like I’m going to get caught doing something wrong. When I glance up at Branch, he hasn’t moved.

I don't need to peruse the article to know what it's going to say. The picture of the girl in shorts so short you can almost see her hoohah sitting on Branch's lap is pretty much a spoiler. Still, I'm a glutton for punishment, so I read on.

*

Exposé Alert: Best Having the Best Time

Seems like our favorite bromance hit up local favorite, Crave, in tiny Linton, Illinois this week. Our sources tell us Miller was seen buying shots and playing pool while our honey-haired honey Best went missing in action with the "lucky" lady on his lap.

These two are in town on a quick retreat before the pre-season starts and should be reporting for training in just a few short days. Anyone else awaiting those pictures and stories? Just us? Didn't think so.

PS: Lucky Lady—we're so jealous.

*

Forcing a swallow and trying to manage the feelings screeching through my head, I close the computer and stand. Poppy looks at me with a quirked brow.

"Gotta pee," I mumble and make a quick exit from the porch.

Taking the steps two at a time, I'm in my bedroom in ten seconds flat. My computer goes skidding across the comforter.

I don't sit. I pace. Back and forth I go in front of the window that overlooks the lake. The pale pink curtains that have hung in this room since I picked them out when I was seven years old flutter in the wind from the open window.

Before I can make sense of anything, the door flies open. I whirl around to see Poppy standing in the doorway.

"You did *not* have to pee," she says flatly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong."

"What did you see? Don't tell me you were looking up Callum's vacation," she sighs.

"Damn it, Layla."

"I wasn't looking up Callum or his fucking vacation. Here," I say, thrusting the computer at her. "Open it. Passcode is 'milkshake' with a one instead of the i."

"Chocolate or vanilla?"

"Just look," I sigh, rolling my eyes.

The exact moment she gets to the "honey-haired" piece is obvious because her eyes bug out. "Ooohhh . . ."

"I'm not mad," I say, more to myself than to her. "It's not that at all. It's expected. It's the natural order of things. I just stupidly forgot that and thought he was all about me this weekend, which, I guess, is a part of his charm and I'm totally capable of understand that because I'm an adult," I say, throwing my hand through the air and knocking a candle off my dresser. It shatters on the floor and breaks into a handful of pieces. "Starting now."

Poppy puts the computer carefully on the bed. "You can be mad."

"I'm not mad!"

"You're not mad," she says, trying to not show her amusement. "You're . . . irritated."

"I'm not irritated either. I'm . . . I'm . . . I'm going home."

Now she laughs. "Because we're adults, right?"

"Yes," I say, stomping to the closet and pulling out the few things I bothered to hang up.

"I'm an adult and I can go home so I don't have to look at his smug face for the next couple of days."

“Maybe he’s not smug.”

“Maybe not,” I say simply, shoving my things into my suitcase. “But if you want the truth, I’m a little embarrassed.”

“At what?”

I fall onto the bed, the adrenaline from the last few minutes catching up with me. Looking at my best friend, I feel the fight wane. “I’m embarrassed at myself.”

My friend sits beside me. “Why would you be? It got you to stop thinking about Dickface and got you off—how many times? Five?”

“Five that time. I haven’t told you the rest,” I sigh. “But that’s not the point.”

“No, the point is there’s nothing for you to be embarrassed about.”

“I know that. *I do*. I’m a grown woman and he’s most definitely a man,” I whimper. “But maybe it would’ve been nice to think about this two weeks from now and not wonder who came before me and who came after.”

“You mean that figuratively, right?”

“Shut up,” I whine. “Was that girl texting him while we were at the Festival? Did he see her there? Will he see her when we leave?”

“So what if he does?”

Reality settles in atop the embarrassment and twinge of self-pity. He will see other women. I’ll see other men. But still.

“Maybe it would’ve been nice not to feel like I was a point on the scoreboard,” I sigh.

“You don’t know that’s what it is.”

“Oh, I do. At least number two.” My head hangs, my chin almost touching my chest. The position makes my neck pain rear its ugly head again, the twinge making me grimace. “I just don’t want to look at him, Pop. I don’t want to look at him and know I was ‘Saturday and Sunday,’ you know? I need a little dignity.”

She pulls me into a quick hug and then stands. “We go home.” Marching to the door, she stops before she pulls it open. “And I know you don’t want details, but your brother promised to take me on the boat tonight and do very, very wicked things to me. You are the only person I’d leave that invitation for, but I might never forgive you. Just so you know.”

“I owe you.”

“Ha,” she says, pulling the door open. “You owe me twenty.”

* * * *

Branch

Settled.

What a terrifying fucking word.

It’s not a bad feeling, though, as I stretch out. My muscles are relaxed, my cock satisfied, which is a miracle in and of itself.

I haven’t ever felt this relaxed—not even on vacation in the Dominican Republic last year with a model whose name started with an L.

There’s something about this place that just digs into your bones and takes over everything . . . and there’s something about that girl that has taken over my brain.

I don’t know what it is, exactly. Sure, she’s beautiful. Her sense of humor is spot on. She’s intelligent and classy and has a mouth that I would love to discipline with my tongue every time she breaks from sophistication and says something dirty. She’s a conundrum, a riddle, a

seemingly hot ass chick that has something underneath that I want to explore and I plan on doing just that tonight if I can figure out a way to get Poppy to get Finn out of here.

Everything inside me yells to be careful, tread lightly, because this one is a hazard. Layla isn't dangerous like most women with their plots and plans. She's a risk because she doesn't have either. There's something incredibly sweet and attractive about that. My only saving grace is that she's Finn's sister and the weekend will be ending soon enough. We should be safe and enjoy this while it lasts.

A vision of her legs around my neck, the pink of her pussy bared just for me has my cock going rock hard and my brain working overtime on how to take care of that as quickly as possible.

"What?" Finn asks, making me jump.

"What, what?"

"What are you thinking about?" he laughs. "You just had the weirdest look on your face."

"Ah, nothing."

"No, it was something . . ."

"How are the new plays?" I ask, motioning to the playbook in hopes he'll be easily redirected. "Anything too crazy?"

"Just variations on what we ran last year. We'll see how Chauncey does in the other slot. Some of this shit is going to make him or break him."

"I—" I stop talking at the sound of something banging behind us. Finn flashes me a curious look as we get to our feet and head into the greater part of the house.

Layla and Poppy are coming down the stairs, dragging their suitcases behind them. Everything I've heard Layla say about leaving replays in my mind and nothing I can find makes me think her plan was to leave today.

My gaze sears into her and she feels it. I can tell by the way she refuses to look my way. My jaw sets, my arms crossing over with I know is a tell-tale sign I'm irritated, but I can't make myself uncross them either.

"What the fuck?" Finn looks at the girls. Only Poppy will look at him back. "Where are you going?"

"We're heading out," Poppy says too happily.

"I didn't think you had to leave until tomorrow," Finn bounces back, clearly as irritated as I am that they're leaving. "We had plans, remember?"

Layla gets to the bottom of the stairs and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "I have some work to do and I just can't work here," she lies. "I've gotten crap done since we arrived and you know me and my work ethic."

"You seem to have been pretty productive to me," I point out, goading her into looking my way. She doesn't.

"Did Branch piss you off?" Finn asks. "I knew I shouldn't have left you alone with him."

If he only knew.

"No, Finn," she says, forcing a swallow. The motion causes a little gold chain to move against the hollow of her throat. "Nothing like that. I just really need to get back. There are a couple of promotion contracts on my desk and I need to unpack. I had no business coming up here this weekend. Work, then play, and Lord knows I've not earned the play part yet."

"Fine. Let us help you with your bags," Finn says, reaching for Poppy's floral piece when his phone rings in his pocket. He pulls it out and looks at the screen. "Hey, I need to get this. It's Machlan. Can you wait a second?"

“Sure.”

“Hey, Machlan,” Finn says, disappearing into the kitchen.

The awkwardness is tangible as the three of us stand in the foyer. Poppy clears her throat and touches Layla gently on the shoulder. “I’m going to take my things outside.”

Layla nods, gripping her necklace, and watches Poppy cart her bag out the door.

“What’s going on?” I ask before the door even shuts.

“Nothing. Why?”

“I didn’t know you were planning on leaving today.”

“Plans change,” she shrugs.

Nodding, I try to stay loose. “They do. But that was quick. I had your pussy in my mouth—”

“Branch!”

“What? It’s the truth.”

“And it’s also not public information,” she hisses, looking towards the kitchen. “Look, if you don’t mind keeping this our little secret, I’d appreciate it.”

My brows pull together. “I get you don’t want Finn to know. But why are you acting all weird about it?”

“I’m not,” she says, tucking another strand of hair out of her face. “I just, you know, am more of a private person than a lot of people and I’d rather not land on a magazine.”

She gulps, like she misspoke, and I can’t help but lift a brow. She looks away and plays it off.

“For what it’s worth, it was a fun weekend,” she says.

“I agree. The best one in a long time.”

We share a smile, one that stings my chest. Making a move to help her with her bag, I’m stopped when she stops.

“I got this, Branch.”

“Let me be a gentleman and help.”

She laughs, the sound pulling my lips up too. “You erased any gentlemanly behavior already today.”

A hundred things race to my lips, a host of things I want to say are on the tip of my tongue, but I don’t. Something in her eye stops me.

“Good luck this season, Branch,” she says quietly.

“Thanks.” I dig for pockets to stick my hands into, but my shorts don’t have any. “Maybe we’ll run into each other sometime.”

“I don’t think that would be good for either of us.” She re-grips the handle of her luggage. “Fantasy Land is over and we’re back to reality.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means . . .” She looks around the room before settling her eyes on me. “It means this weekend was great. See ya.”

I can’t even form a response to that. I stand in the doorway like a chump and watch her walk to her car. A part of me wants to chase her and ask her to stay and another part of me remembers why I don’t chase women. Even her. Finn’s footsteps are what finally breaks my haze.

“Hey,” I say. “They went on out. I’m gonna get a drink.”

Blowing by him, he tosses me a curious glance but doesn’t say a word. I pour a glass of lemonade, smiling at the remnants of the candy apple in the trashcan beside the refrigerator.

She felt so good wrapped around me. The way she teased me, taunted me, slightly mocked me and had me laughing was something I haven’t really experienced before. Sex is usually one

of a few things: a power struggle, an interview, the means to an end, a physical need. With Layla this weekend, it was . . . different.

The door shutting rings through the open-aired house and Finn's shoes squeak against the wood floors. He comes in, scratching his head. "That fucked up my plans for the night."

Mine, too.

"You think Layla really had to work?" I ask.

"Hell, no. That was a lie."

"Why would she lie?" I take a drink to keep from making any sort of face that would give Finn a clue as to why I'm so curious.

"I don't know," he says, grabbing a beer from the fridge. "My guess is it's something to do with Callum."

"That motherfucker," I grumble.

He shakes his head. "He might've called her or texted her or some shit and she just didn't say anything. I didn't tell her this, but he called me a couple of nights ago too."

"For what?"

"Manipulation." He twists the top off his beer and tosses it into the trash. "Told me how worried he is about her, how she's not taking the break-up very well and he hopes I'll keep an eye on her. What he means is he's afraid she'll move on and wants me to keep her busy so she doesn't meet anyone else."

"Piece of fucking shit."

Finn downs most of his beer in one gulp as I try to sort this out in my head. He twists the bottle between two fingers.

"Machlan said to apologize to you," Finn says.

"For what?"

"Apparently there is a story running on *Exposé* today about you and some chick from Crave."

The glass slips from my hand and hits the floor with a loud, ominous crack. "Shit," I mutter, scooping up the large shards with my bare hands.

"He said he knows who yapped to the magazine and he's banned them from the bar. Some new girl in town but not the one you fucked that night."

I look at him with a seriousness I rarely do. "I didn't fuck anyone that night."

"Sure you didn't," he laughs. "Anyway, he said to tell you he's sorry and he hopes you'll come back in sometime. Now I'm gonna grab a shower and figure out what the hell to do tonight."

He walks out and I stand in the center of the kitchen, broken glass in my hand, but with a newfound clarity. Dumping the pieces in the trash, I bust ass to the screened in porch to see a vacant spot next to my car.

I'm tempted to figure out her phone number, even if it means stealing Finn's phone, and call her to tell her I didn't fuck anyone . . . then logic sets in.

It doesn't matter.

It doesn't fucking matter.

Chapter 12

Layla

Exposé Top Story: Branching out?

Branch Best and Finn Miller were spotted out and about this weekend at a grand opening for new hotspot Grandiose on Osborne. Owner Selma Puress looked quite cozy nestled between the two, but don't think we haven't zoomed in on the location of her right hand a time or sixteen million.

Thanks to songstress GiGi last summer (and her sneaky camera skills), we know Branch is seriously packing. Did he "pack" Selma on Saturday? If so, she's not telling. Yet. They always do, and we'll keep you posted when it happens.

*

Getting into "the flow," the state of being so engulfed in something you block out everything else, is easy when you have something to avoid. That "something" toys with my daydreams and heats up my nights. Knowing, for my own good, I can't focus on his cocky smirk, heated gaze, or those sweet, simple touches he did in an almost absentminded way—like it was natural—I've poured myself into work since arriving back home.

What's most bothersome about the whole thing is it's just as much the non-sexual moments that resurface as the sexy ones. If it was just the fucking that I couldn't forget, I could just grab a vibrator and get rid of that urge. But it's not.

I find myself thinking just as much about the joy in his face when he was playing catch with the kids at the fair. The levity in his laugh when he beat me at Skee Ball. The way his fingers pressed against the small of my back as we walked along the beach and the feel of his breath against my cheek when he told me I was beautiful under the moon.

It's those things that I fight to ignore, those little moments that make me wonder "what if?" It's Callum and his texts over the last three weeks since I've been home that remind me of what the other side of 'what if' looks like. The headlines Branch has been making help that vision be a little clearer too.

Seeing him with Selma Puress was a little harder than I thought. I've analyzed that image more times than I should've and ended up more confused than anything.

Is that smile real? It doesn't quite seem to be, yet his hand rests against her skinny waist like she's more than an old friend.

Rolling my desk chair back, I stand and stretch. The knot that started at the base of my neck has expanded down the middle of my back. It's a contributing factor to my extreme efficiency since I can't sleep. It hurts too bad.

The traffic below my apartment on Gilmore Avenue is bustling in the early afternoon. It usually doesn't get too bad until the lunch rush, but the horns from frustrated motorists drift up the twenty-six stories to my ears.

The colorful paintings bring splashes of life to the whitewashed walls that were here when I moved in a few months ago. I envision the living room a dove grey but haven't had time to do it, and I've always wanted a strawberry red wall in my kitchen but Callum thought it was ridiculous.

"Hey," Poppy's voice sings from the doorway, dangling a key in her hand. "You're going to

be sorry you gave me this.”

“Just be glad you aren’t ten minutes later or I’d be naked.”

“Hey, if I swung that way . . .”

“Shut up,” I laugh, carrying my coffee cup to the sink. “What are you doing?”

“Not much. On lunch break now but I’m thinking of calling off the rest of the afternoon.”

“Why?”

“Because . . .” she says, snarling. “It’s work. There’s nothing to do there. I mean, there’s stuff to do,” she corrects, “but nothing I *want* to do. What are you doing today?”

Yawning, I lean against the cabinets. “I’ve worked all morning. I’m so far ahead I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

“Wanna get some lunch?”

“If we can go get a hot ham and cheese from Yusi’s.”

“Random.”

“I saw a commercial for them last night and I need a hot ham and cheese. *Need*, Poppy. I can’t stop thinking about it.”

She presses her lips together. “What else have you been thinking about?”

“No,” I sigh. “Branch hasn’t called. He won’t, and despite what you think, I don’t want him to.”

“I’m calling bullshit.”

“He’s on *Exposé* again this morning,” I tell her, using the headline to make my point. “With Finn. Did you see it?”

“Yeah, I saw it. Finn told me he was going, so I’m not worried about it. We aren’t exclusive, anyway.”

“I think my brother could be exclusive. Branch? Not so much. And that’s exactly why I don’t want him to call. I can’t deal with this. I can barely deal with it and it’s not even my problem. The only thing I need right now is a ham and cheese sandwich.”

“I’m not taking you anywhere looking like that.”

Heading down the hall, I enter my bedroom. I leave the door open so I can talk to my friend. “What’d you do this week? Anything fun?”

“Oh, I’ve had fun this week, but not the kind you wanna know about.”

“Are you still messing with my brother?”

“Putting it lightly.”

Throwing on a pair of black yoga pants and a white and black striped top, I look in the mirror. The top is wrinkled and makes my frame look wide, so I jerk it off and replace it with a pretty teal-colored t-shirt. My hair in a bun, flats on my feet, I’m back in the living room as Poppy’s wraps up the PG-version of her latest tryst with Finn.

“You didn’t hear any of that, did you?” she laughs as I grab my purse.

“I tried not to.”

She squares her shoulders to me, her purple-y lipstick shining as she presses her lips together. “Branch asked me about you a couple of days ago.”

My heart flutters in my chest, even though I try to mentally shoot it down. “Where did you see him?”

“At Finn’s. He was really cute about it, Layla. He asked how you were and if you got your work done. And for what it’s worth, he knows you didn’t need to get any work done.”

“Fuck him.”

“You already did that.”

Sighing, I drop my purse back on the sofa. “It was amazing. I won’t lie. But I mean it too when I say I wish I hadn’t done it.”

“Spreader’s remorse?”

“What the hell is that?” I laugh.

“You have remorse you spread your legs. It is what it sounds like,” she says matter-of-factly. “Granted, most women have it because they wake up and the guy is married or not nearly as good-looking as he was with a couple of shots in ya, not because he’s the catch every woman wants to make.”

“He’s the catch you make right before you get blindsided.”

“Nice football analogy!”

“Whatever,” I sigh. “Call it whatever lame term you want, but I do wish I hadn’t done it.” I walk to the window and look down at the traffic. My emotions are still a little bruised and hearing him ask about me only feels like another knock right where it hurts. “I think it was too soon after Callum.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve had one-night stands before. You know that.”

“Remember the singer from the karaoke bar on the south side?” she giggles.

“Worst one-night stand ever,” we say in unison before falling into a fit of giggles at the guy who asked me to fetch him a toothbrush the next morning.

“I have no problem with detachment,” I point out. “I can get on for the sake of getting off, but I have such a weak spot for athletes and Branch is . . .”

“The best of the best?” she snickers.

“So cheesy,” I laugh. “But, yes, more or less. He’s off hanging out with models and I’m in my pajamas until noon eating Nutella off a spoon. It makes me feel sad and I want my girl power back.”

“I hear you. Your feels are fair.”

“Ooohhh,” I tease. “Are you validating my stupid feelings?”

“I suppose I am,” she grins. “But I’m still standing firm on wide receivers and tight ends being okay for future reference.”

“Nope.”

She looks scared to ask why I responded so quickly, so firmly to her stance. Taking a couple of steps back, doing this back-and-forth thing with her torso, she smacks her lips together.

“Nope,” she reiterates.

“I’m done with football players. You and Finn are right,” I say, feeling the bitterness of the words as they launch into the world. “It’s an ugly, predictable cycle and I’m a moron for signing up for this self-inflicted abuse. I need to find a cute accountant and an aloe vera plant and some cooking magazines and start over again fresh.”

“I veto the accountant and think you should go more blue-collar because they’re good with their hands, but I’ll buy you your first aloe vera plant. Speaking of gifts, are you going to Tiffany’s party?”

A vague memory of being asked to attend a friend’s dirty thirty party tickles my brain. “Do I have to?”

“No, but you should,” she says. “It’ll be fun. It’s Tiffany, for crying out loud. God knows what she’s set up.”

“Fine,” I huff. “They’ll probably have good appetizers there.”

“What is it with you and food?” she laughs.

"I'm starving from doing posts about picnics and romantic getaways and sensual foods. You'll never believe what I read that you can do with grapes."

"I don't even want to know."

"Oh, but you do, but you have to read it yourself. Look it up sometime."

Lifting my purse back on my shoulder, I wince. One hand shoots to the back of my neck as I hold pressure on the spot that aches so bad it throbs.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Spreader's remorse."

"Did that sexy bastard give you a sex injury?"

"It was a parting present. Get it?" I joke, wincing again as another shot of pain shoots down my back. "Damn it. It hurts."

She watches me, gauging how much discomfort I must really be in. "I have an appointment tomorrow with my acupuncturist. Want to take it?"

"No."

"She's really good. I've seen her for years and she's terrible to get into. Just take my appointment. You can't keep living with the pain and I know you aren't seeing a doctor."

Shrugging, I dig through my purse for my over-the-counter pain medicine as Poppy's fingers start flying across her phone.

"There," she says. "I told Bai you'd be there instead of me."

"Thanks." I pop two pills without a drink. "Now can we go get a hot ham and cheese?"

"Lead the way," she laughs, following me out the door.

* * * *

Branch

Sweat drips into my eyes causing my vision to blur as I hunch over, hands on my knees, and pant.

"I hate fucking shuttle runs," Finn gasps beside me. He's in the same position, struggling to catch his breath.

We make our way to the sidelines of the high school field we've been allowed to use until spring camp starts. Digging into my bag, I find a towel and douse it with water from a chilled water bottle in a cooler. Wiping my face sends a ripple of coolness through my body, and once I can see again, I lay it along the back of my neck.

"You ready to start work?" Finn asks, his face still beet red. "I'm itching to get back on the field with the boys."

"It's what we live for."

"Yeah." He sucks down a bottle of water in one gulp. "I have been enjoying the offseason though."

"You mean you've enjoyed Poppy's pussy." The sound of the words out loud makes me laugh. "It sounds like a porno. Poppy's Pussy."

"I like to pop that pussy," Finn laughs. "But seriously, man. I like her. Like, I might *like her* like her."

"Don't do it, Finn."

"Do what?"

"Start taking this shit seriously."

"We've had our fun," Finn says. "A lot of it. But I just feel different right now, you know?"

Like maybe the hoes and blows is just too much work.”

I look at him like he’s crazy. “Have you lost your goddamn mind? They aren’t too much work. They’re easy. That’s the point.”

“Maybe it’s like ball. Maybe if it’s easy, you’ll never win the championship. If it’s hard—if you’re training your ass off and making sacrifices and choosing the work over the weed, you can win. Maybe it’s the same.”

“I feel like I don’t even know you right now,” I balk. “You can’t be serious.”

“Think about it. It might be nice having someone you know will be there when you come home at the end of the day. Someone to talk to. Someone you can wine and dine.”

“You can’t wine and dine groupies, Finn. It confuses them.”

“*Exactly*,” he says like I just made his point for him. “Maybe taking a beautiful girl out to dinner wouldn’t be a bad thing. It might feel good to rent a houseboat on Lake Powell and instead of entertaining a bunch of jackasses that don’t give a fuck about you, just about your bank account, and spend some time just relaxing and enjoying life.”

“Sorry,” I say, shoving my things back into my bag. “Enjoying life means women, weed, and work. The only singular thing in that sentence is work.”

Finn laughs, but I think it’s more *at* me than *with* me. He gets his things together and we start the walk from the fifty-yard line to the gate that leads to the parking lot.

“What are you doing this weekend? Heading up to the cabin?” I ask, hoping he doesn’t hear the hope in my voice.

He hasn’t mentioned Layla at all in the weeks we’ve been home. I’ve brought her up a couple of times as sneakily as I could, but he answered in the fewest number of words he could manage. I did get some insight from Poppy, but her team flag was flying and it didn’t have my name on it.

“Nah,” he says. “I have a party this weekend.”

“Are you supposed to be partying, Mr. Monogamous?”

“Poppy is coming.”

“Yup. Don’t even know you.”

But what I do know without him saying is that if he’s going and Poppy’s going, odds are pretty fucking spectacular that Layla will be going too.

I don’t know what to say to her, especially knowing she has a pretty good idea what went down at Crave. I have no clue how to approach her or if she’ll even want to entertain the idea of talking to me. Still, I really, really want to just let her know I didn’t fuck that girl at the bar. I don’t know what it matters, but it does.

Thankfully, Finn helps me out.

“What are you up to this weekend?” he asks, shoving the metal gates open so we can pass through.

“Not much. Just hanging out, I guess. I do have an interview sometime Saturday. Want to do something after?”

“I have the party, remember.”

“Oh.”

He side-eyes me. “Wanna go?”

Yes.

“Is it going to be any good?” I say to deflect from the little boy jumping up and down inside me.

“Do I ever go to bad parties?”

“Debatable.”

He laughs. “It’s at the Standen on Saturday. I’m sure Tiffany Standen will love it if you come.”

“Count me in.”

Touchdown.

Chapter 13

Layla

“Right this way.”

A tall, thin woman with beautiful jet-black hair leads me down a hall. The walls are adorned with red and black paintings that have flecks of gold glitter on them in what appears to be a random fashion. Something tells me it’s not random at all.

I’m taken into a cozy room with seafoam green walls with buttery yellow accents. A grey pillow lays on the end of a long table covered with a fitted white sheet. There are two pictures hanging on the walls of the human body, one from the front and the other from the back.

“Please have a seat on the table and Bai will be in to see you shortly.”

“Um,” I stammer. “Do I leave my clothes on?”

“Yes,” she says sweetly. “For now, Bai will determine your diagnosis. She may treat you today, but often times she gets to know you first.”

“Okay.”

Once I’m alone, I peek around the room. It’s set up to feel relaxing and soothing, but I can’t help but feel I’m at some kind of gyno appointment.

My heart is racing, my palms sweaty, when a soft knock raps against the door and a short woman with the shiniest hair I’ve ever seen walks in. She has a sweet, simple smile and a notepad in her hand.

“You are Ms. Miller?” she asks, extending a hand. “I’m Bai. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nice to meet you. Poppy Quinn made the appointment for me.”

“Oh, Poppy. She’s one of my favorites. I’ve worked with her for a couple of years now.”

“She speaks very highly of you,” I tell her, my nerves quieting just a bit.

“I hope she doesn’t use that crude language of hers when she does so. That girl needs a bar of soap.”

“That she does.”

Bai gets settled at the little desk and grabs an ink pen. “Tell me why you’re here.”

“I have a little kink in my neck. There’s a knot,” I say, rubbing the top of my spine. “The pain has started to spread down my back and even around into my stomach some today.”

“Okay. Got it. Do you know how you arrived at this condition?”

Yes. My head was rammed into a stainless steel refrigerator while a stallion of a man buried himself in me from behind.

“No.”

“Okay. Very good.” She looks up from her scribbles. “The first thing we will do every appointment is check your pulse and your tongue. In Chinese medicine, we learn so much about your health from these two points. I’m just telling you this beforehand because sometimes it makes people think I’ve lost my mind.”

Laughing, I nod. “I understand.”

“Let’s start with the tongue. Can you stick it out for me?”

Following her instructions, I watch as she stands and gets closer with a little light. “I’m not telling you what I’m looking for because it would be really confusing, but it looks good. You can close your mouth now.”

She jots a few notes on the pad and then comes back to me. “Now your pulse.”

She touches me above the left wrist, then on one of my fingers. Her face is passive and I can’t tell a thing about what she’s feeling. She moves to the right side and does the same series of touches down my arm to my fingers.

Clearing her throat, she sits down again and scratches on the pad. “Okay. I think I have enough here. We can get started today, if you’d like, or we can wait and start next time.”

“I’d like to start today, please,” I insist. “This hurts.”

She smiles. “That’s fine. I will need you to disrobe in a moment and lay flat on the table. I do need to be clear that I cannot do certain methods due to your condition.”

“My what?”

“Your condition. Acupuncture is one hundred percent safe during pregnancy, but to be cautious, I—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I say, leaping off the table. “Back up. You’ve mixed up my file with someone else’s,” I laugh. “I’m not pregnant.”

She looks at me like I’m crazy.

“I’m really not,” I insist. “I don’t even have a boyfriend.”

“You should have a physician check to be sure, of course, but the pulse is a very strong indicator in Chinese medicine. I’m sorry you didn’t know.”

“I can’t be pregnant, Bai,” I tell her, like I can change her mind and wipe this conversation from ever happening.

I can hear the blood rushing over my ears as I try to calm myself back down.

“If you say so, Ms. Miller. Only you know what can and can’t be true. But until I know, I must err on the side of caution.”

“You know what?” I say, gathering my purse off the floor. “Let’s start this next time. I need to take care of a few things today.”

“Good luck,” she says softly. “Please check out at the front with Ada and she can set up your next appointment.”

“Thank you.”

I fling the door open and nearly stomp down the quiet hall. It takes longer than I care to wait for Ada to give me my insurance card back and hand me a receipt. Declining another appointment, I storm out of the office into the hot afternoon air.

Whipping out my phone, I pound my finger into Poppy’s name. It rings four times before she picks up. I don’t bother letting her greet me.

“That doctor of yours is a quack!”

“What?” she laughs. “What’s going on?”

“She’s a quack. Bai doesn’t know shit about shit.”

I rattle on about how acupuncture is fake medicine and how I will never go there again and I might even do a blog post about the dangers of people that pretend to know how things work when really they don’t know anything at all. I jabber on and on, all the while trying to force out a little niggle in my brain that asks, “What if?”

My stomach drops as I round the corner. “She’s nuts.”

“She’s not nuts,” Poppy whispers. “Hang on.” I hear her heels clicking against the floor and the sound of chimes. “I had to come outside you were talking so damn loud. What the hell is going on?”

“You know what she said?”

“Quack, quack?”

“Very funny. No. She *is* a quack. She didn’t *say* quack. Ugh,” I groan. “Don’t distract me.”

“Fine. What did she say?”

“She had the audacity to say I’m pregnant, Pop. Can you believe that shit?”

The line goes quiet. My exuberant, chatty friend doesn’t say a word.

“Poppy?”

“Are you?”

“No, I’m not pregnant!” A flock of birds launch into a tree above me and I look around to see a group of people staring at me. Rolling my eyes, I storm by them too. “No, I’m not,” I say, quieter this time. “Why do I keep explaining this to everyone? You have to have sperm to have a baby.”

“Have you slept with anyone?”

“No. Not since Branch.”

“Layla . . .”

A full-on shiver that starts at my shoulders and rolls through my body like a Garth Brooks song hits me hard. I stand at the corner of Plane and Veroca and stare off into space.

“Did he use a condom?” she asks.

“Yeah. He did,” I say, shaking out of my trance. “So explain that *and* I’m on the pill.”

“Weirder things have happened.”

“To weird people, maybe. I’m not a weird person.”

“You were sick before the cabin, weren’t you? Were you taking antibiotics?”

I try to swallow, but my throat constricts at the same time. Bent over, halfway choking and the other half gagging, I nearly drop my phone as I try not to die.

“Layla! Layla, are you okay?”

“Yes,” I say past the burn. “Give me a second.” It takes longer than a second to get myself upright and fully oxygenated. “I’m here,” I croak.

“Dude, you scared me.”

“Don’t make this about you,” I laugh, my voice still hoarse from the coughing fit. Once my laughter has faded and the line is quiet again, I feel the heavy burden of being alone. Despite the sea of people racing by me on the corner of this street in downtown Chicago, I’m *alone*. “I can’t be pregnant, can I?”

“I don’t know. I tell you what—let me wrap up a project I have open. It might take an hour. Then I’ll meet you at your apartment. I’ll bring chocolate and tissues and a pregnancy test, then a bottle of champagne for after when it’s false.”

Despite my need to vomit all over the sidewalk, I smile. “Thanks, Poppy.”

“You’re welcome.”

Chapter 14

Layla

Lifting a spoon of vanilla icing to my mouth, I watch Poppy enter the kitchen. Her phone is to her ear, a plastic grocery bag in one of her hands. She looks at me with brows tugged together, her lips forming a sympathetic curve.

"I'm at Layla's," she says into the phone. "Oh, no. We're just doing girl stuff."

She sits the bag on the counter and drops her keys next to it. "Layla, Finn and Branch say hello."

"Fuck him," I groan.

"That's what got you in this mess," she growls, narrowing her eyes. "Oh, no, Finn. I was talking to your sister. Her, um, her kitchen is a mess. Something she was testing out just turned into a shit storm really quick. That's why I'm here. To help figure out how to clean it up."

"Nice double entendre, asshole," I tell her, not bothering to lower my voice.

"Yes, Finn. I will. I'll call you when I'm done here. Bye." She swipes the phone off and lets it go sailing across the counter. "You ready for the big reveal?"

"This is not a game."

"We should make it fun," she shrugs. "Want to take bets?"

"No, I don't want to *take bets*, you lunatic."

She takes a step back and looks me up and down. "This baby is going to be gorgeous. I mean just beautiful."

"There is no baby!" I shout, even stomping my feet a little for effect. The slight hold I have on my sanity is fraying at an alarming rate and I am almost unable to find any strands left to hold on to. "I'm *not* having a baby."

"Let's take a test and be sure. And then, when you're not, we'll drink the champagne I just paid way too much for at the corner store and celebrate."

"Deal."

She rustles through the bag and pulls out a test that promises to be simple and to provide accurate results sooner than any other brand. She hands it over.

"I can't believe I'm doing this." I march down the hall and into my bathroom and close the door. "I was on the pill," I yell through the wall, ripping open the package. Laying the back of the box on the counter so I know which marking means what, I yank down my pants and sit down.

"Antibiotics!" she shouts back.

"And he wore a condom!"

"Maybe it had a rip?"

"Can I sue them for that?"

"No," she giggles.

Taking one deep, heavy breath that feels like my last as a free, sane woman, I jab the stick between my legs and do my business. With each tinkle, I squeeze my eyes harder, like each second of urine stream is another step closer to a life I don't want. That I can't imagine. That I hope beyond all hope isn't really happening to me.

Branch's handsome face flickers through my mind, and for some unknown reason, I want to

kiss him as hard as I want to deck him right in his nine-inch cock.

I clean up, lay the stick on a hand towel, and open the door. Poppy is leaning against the wall.

“Come watch with me. It’ll be like the solar eclipse,” I tell her. “This will happen once in a lifetime. After this experience, I never want to have a baby.”

“I think the eclipse happens more than once,” she points out. “And it looks like this won’t have to happen again because . . . you’re pregnant, Layla.”

The end of that is a whisper, but that’s not why I don’t hear it. I don’t hear the words because I can see it on her face—the way her eyes grow, the corners of her lips softening, the ever-so-slight drop in her shoulders.

“Pop . . .” I fall against the wall, my knees threatening to betray my weight. They shake like I’m ready to come, wobble like I’ve just run five miles which I’ve never done, but this is what I think would happen if I did.

I can barely stand. I can’t think. I can barely even see straight as Poppy lays a hand on my shoulder. Her lips move but I don’t hear her. I’m lost in the last words she said to me.

Focusing on her face is harder than it should be and I pick the little freckle just under her left eye and try to see its shape and color. It’s a blur. Everything is a blur.

A hand goes to my stomach. I try to imagine what’s happening beneath my skin.

I’m pregnant.

I jerk my hand away. Looking at Poppy’s face, I feel the tears before I even realize they’re falling.

“I can’t be pregnant,” I whisper, not even sounding like my voice.

“I’m only asking this because I’m your friend, okay? It’s Branch’s baby, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“There are absolutely no other options. You didn’t sleep with Callum and not tell me or drink some wine and just fool around with your neighbor?”

“No. I haven’t slept with Callum in, what, four months? Branch is the absolute only person.”

She nods, obviously coming to terms with the situation too. “How do you want to proceed? I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Rewind to that weekend and don’t let me go to Linton.”

She grins. “I can’t do that.”

“You said you’d do anything,” I sniffle. “What am I going to do?”

My back drags down the wall until I’m sitting on the cool bathroom floor. Poppy plops down beside me sitting crisscross-applesauce and waiting for me to guide the conversation.

“I don’t even know him,” I lament. “How can I be having a baby by a man I barely even know?”

The tears fall harder, the salty streaks reaching my lips and dripping onto the floor.

“It’s going to be all right, Layla.”

“I know it’s going to be all right. I don’t have a choice but for it to be anything but all right,” I say, taking the piece of toilet tissue she hands me. “But . . .”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“I’m the girl I never wanted to be,” I say. “Single. Pregnant. Unprepared. So fucking unprepared.”

My head falls into my hands, my stomach churning. Just a few days ago—hell, a few hours ago—my biggest problem was Callum texting me. That seems so much more manageable now.

“You aren’t any kind of girl unless you’re talking about a fun, sexy, best person kind of

girl,” she says, scooting closer and pulling me into a hug. The contact does it. The river breaks and I sob on her shoulder.

After a long while, when I’m cried out for the time being, she finally pulls away. I mop up my face with the tissue.

“You don’t have to make any decisions now,” she soothes.

“That’s good because I don’t have any idea where to start trying to unravel this fucking mess.”

“Do you want to tell Finn?”

“Uh, no. Let’s not tell Finn. I’d rather him not get involved and kill us all.”

Staring at the wall, I feel completely detached from my body. It’s almost as if I’ve been usurped in a coup and now I wait to see where I’ve been banished.

I drag in a breath, my body shaking as it settles. “This is going to be okay,” I tell myself. “This is going to be okay.”

“Yes, it is. Let’s take it one day at a time and don’t get overwhelmed.” She twists her lips. “Can I still drink the champagne?”

As I fight not to laugh, she stands and pulls me to my feet.

“I know this is about you,” she insists, “but can I be the Godmother? I’ve always wanted to be a Godmother.”

“Oh my God, stop.”

She pulls me down the hallway, babbling away about baby names and does what best friends do—lets me lean on her.

Chapter 15

Layla

"I'm going to be the lamest party-goer of all time," I lament, holding up two outfits. One is a coral-colored dress that I purchased as soon as I broke up with Callum. It's sexy and fun and flirty . . . and so not becoming of a woman with child.

"You are not." Poppy catches the dress as I toss it to her. "I love this. Are you not wearing it?"

Holding up a semi-fitted blue top that reminds me of the water surrounding a tropical island, I shake my head. "I can't wear that. I bought it to pick up guys. It seems . . . immoral, considering the circumstances."

"You're having a baby, not joining a nunnery."

"This whole thing is so confusing," I sigh. Plopping down on the bed, my freshly curled hair bounces on my shoulders. "The doctor's office gave me an appointment and a link to a website with information overload. It just . . . it still doesn't feel real. How can a baby be inside me?"

"I have such a smartass response to that, but I'll withhold because I see you're stressing." Brushing a lock of hair out of her face, she blows out a breath. "I'm not going to lie and say I get what you're feeling because I don't, thank God. I have no idea what this must be like."

"It's scary."

She wraps an arm around my shoulder and leans her head against mine. We sit on the bed like this for a couple of minutes, my friend just being that—my friend. Sometimes you don't need advice and you don't need promises that it will all be okay. You just need someone beside you saying, "I'm here."

"You know what the scariest part about this is?" I ask.

"No."

"That website has all of these women smiling and glowing and skipping through fields of lavender."

"Really?" she asks, lifting a brow.

"No, but you get the idea," I sigh. "I'm just . . . not. I don't feel like this swamp of love and excitement has hit me yet, and I'm worried it won't."

"Of course you will, but you gotta give yourself some time, Lay. You've only known this for a couple of days."

"But I already feel like a mom failure."

She laughs and stands, jerking the blouse out of my hands and shoving the dress back in them. "You are not a mom failure and you are not wearing . . . this," she snarls, tossing the shirt in the bottom of my closet. "You're wearing the dress and you're gonna be hot and we're gonna go party at Tiffany's and have some fun."

"I don't know . . ."

"I do. Get up, get dressed, and let's get out of here."

After saluting me, which makes me laugh, she leaves me alone to finish getting ready. I wear the dress and a pair of nude heels and even throw on a long necklace with a large, fake blue stone at the end. The color vaguely reminds me of Branch's eyes. Standing still, I handle the stone and wonder what color eyes our baby will have.

“No,” I say, when the tears start to come again. “These are tears of fear. You won’t cry. You will handle this like the boss you are.”

Skipping the smoky eye in case I feel less like a boss later want to avoid a charcoal river down my face, I put on minimal makeup and take myself in when complete. It’s not too bad. I can tell I’ve been crying, but I know me. I don’t think anyone else, besides Poppy and maybe Finn, will.

“Don’t you look pretty,” Poppy says, coming in the room. “I love that dress on you. So much better than the interview blouse.”

“I actually did buy that for an interview.”

“Yeah. I could tell.”

Before I can think twice, I whirl around on my heel. “Have you seen Branch?”

“Yes.”

I nod, not sure where to go with this now. I’m not even sure what I want to know or hope to hear, and she doesn’t volunteer anything, which provides both comfort and distress.

“He asked about you again,” she says quietly. “Nothing much, just if I had seen you.”

“What did you say?”

“I said you got a brand new project that has your hands full for the next nine months or so.”

“You did not,” I gasp.

“I did. But he’s so . . . Branch . . . he didn’t get it,” she laughs. “It’s funny! Come on!”

Glaring at her, I cross my arms over my chest. “It’s not funny. I wish you’d stop seeing the humor in it.”

“You do not,” she groans. “You keep me around for my humor. So, you want to know what else he said?”

Biting my lip, I lift my shoulders up and down like there’s a boulder sitting on them.

“You do. The answer is, ‘I do, Poppy.’ So, he asked if you would be up for having dinner with him if he called you.”

My lip pops free as my traitorous heart leaps like a greeting card commercial. “He did?”

“No, I’m making it up.”

“I’m gonna kill you.”

“Yes, he did. He asked me that. I told him maybe he should wait a few days, that you were a little preoccupied and needed a little space. But maybe this is a good sign?”

Staring at the wall, I wonder if he means it. I was certain he’d have moved on by now. No, I’m certain he has. But a dinner is one thing, and being told you’re going to be a father is much, much different.

He’s the father of my child.

I knew this before, but this is the moment that realization hits me. Hard. I must look worse for wear because Poppy grabs my elbow and bends down to eye-level.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Nope.”

“Want to sit down? Need water? My instinct is to offer you vodka, but that’s not on the menu anymore.”

“Branch is the father of my baby, Poppy.”

“Yes . . .” she says, dropping my elbow.

“How am I going to tell him? I mean, if I could not tell him it would be so much easier, but I can’t not tell him, right? I mean, I could not tell him but that’s not the right—”

“Breathe,” she giggles. “That was like one giant sentence. And, yes, you have to tell him.”

Not today. Not tomorrow. But you do have to tell him.”

My lashes close, blocking out her concerned face and the light that’s threatening to give me a headache. “How do you think he’ll take it?”

“I’ve never told a guy I’m having his kid, so I have no idea.”

“Do you think he’ll think I did it on purpose?”

“Oh, I think the look on your face proves you didn’t do this on purpose,” she shrugs. “He may not be happy about it, but I’m not sure you are either. And I think you have to stop cursing now,” she says, tapping her lips with the tip of her finger. “I think the baby can hear you.”

Rolling my eyes, I grab my purse and head to the door. “Well, as long as I’m friends with you, it’s going to hear profane language. I may as well keep it consistent.”

Poppy’s laughter follows me into the hallway. She starts jabbering on about the party and how excited Tiffany is that we’re coming. I tune her out.

This might be the last time I get to go out and do fun things for the rest of my life. Dramatic, maybe. But it’s also true.

“Pop?”

“Yeah?” she says as we await the elevator.

“Let’s have fun tonight, okay?”

She grins. “Yes. Let’s.”

Chapter16

Branch

“Tiffany, this is Branch Best.” Finn makes the introduction, his arm around Poppy. “Branch, Tiffany Standen.”

Tiffany, the woman of the hour, makes no secret of checking me out. She scoops her eyes down my body, licking her lips on the return trip. Her own body is smashed into a skin-tight white dress and a little tiara with white and pink feathers sits atop her reddish locks.

“Branch Best, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Happy Birthday,” I say, looking over her shoulder as discreetly as I can. A group of women walk in and I scan them quickly and then return to Tiffany when none of them are Layla.

“You could make sure it’s a *very* happy one,” she breathes.

Finn cackles beside me while I feel Poppy’s gaze settling on my features, waiting on my response.

Smiling awkwardly, I take a deep breath. “I think that lady over there is trying to get your attention.”

Turning to see a thin woman in a red dress in the corner, she gives her a little wave. “I have to talk to my party planner really quick. I hope we can catch up later.”

There’s no promise offered of a hook up later from my end. She’s fine to look at and I halfway think I’ve fucked her before, but surely one of us would remember that.

“See ya,” she says, waving at me over her shoulder.

She teeters away on heels so tall I wonder how long it’ll take her to wind up on that very round ass before the night is over. My guess is broken up when Poppy speaks beside me.

“Finn,” she says. “Will you get me a drink? Please.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Nothing too hard. It’s too early for that.”

He smirks. “First time I’ve ever heard you say that.”

She laughs, her hair brushing against her back as she shoos Finn away. Then she turns to me, her face sobering. “I didn’t know you knew Tiffany.”

“I didn’t.”

“Then why are you here?”

She knows the fucking answer. She knows I’m trying to run into her *randomly*. But that doesn’t matter. What *does* matter is the tone she used to ask the question.

There was no eagerness to it. No excitement. No hint this could be awesome. Nope, none of that. Instead, her eyes are narrow with a touch of something else that leads me to believe this encounter, should it happen, will be anything but awesome.

“Is Layla here with someone else?” I ask.

She takes a second, one too many, to consider this. “Not exactly.”

My jaw clenches, my teeth grinding together, as I try to prepare myself to see the girl I can’t stop thinking about waltzing in here with another guy. Surely Poppy would’ve just told me if she was seeing someone else.

“It’s not Worthington, is it?”

“No,” she huffs. “It’s not Callum. It’s no one, really. She’s . . . Fine. She’s alone, Branch.”

“Then why say that? You just about got someone hurt.”

“Forget it. It was a joke gone bad. Just . . .” She looks at the chandelier hanging above us in the penthouse of the Standen Hotel. “You need to give her some space tonight, okay? She doesn’t know you’re here and she just needs some . . . space.”

“Did I do something to offend her?” I ask, an odd sensation coming over me. “Did I hurt her or say something really stupid?”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Then why are you acting like I should stay away from her, Poppy?”

Very slowly, her chin drops until we’re face-to-face. There’s no joke on the tip of her tongue, no silly comeback that she always has ready to fire. In the vacancy lies a seriousness that has me forcing a swallow.

She considers her words. “She has some things going on, Branch. I’m sure she’ll talk to you, but just be gentle if you see her, please.”

Be gentle?

“Just between you and me,” I say, “she doesn’t like it gentle.”

“Branch!”

“Fine. I hear you. Be easy with her. Got it.”

Her arms plant firmly across her chest. “You are so not going to heed any of what I said, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Damn you.”

“I’ll be gentle, even though I think that’s the pussiest word I’ve ever heard,” I admit. “But if I see her, I’m going to talk to her. If she tells me to go fuck myself for some reason, I’ll probably do just that because I’ve been doing that for the last few weeks every time I think of her.”

“Nice visual.”

“I have it down to a science. I use the left hand for foreplay and the right to bring it home.”

“Oh my God,” she laughs, shaking her head.

“You rang?” Finn pops between us and pulls Poppy into his side and hands her a drink.

“What are you thinking, Best? See anyone you know?”

“Not yet, but you know me. I make friends everywhere I go.”

Finn chuckles. “If that’s what you want to call them.”

“Speaking of, I’m going to mingle. You two kids behave.”

Poppy tries to shoot me a warning glance, but I avoid receiving it. Instead, I spin on my heel and wander about the penthouse that’s the stage for the birthday bash.

There are crystals everywhere, dangling off light fixtures and filling vases with big, drippy candles. Music plays through the sound-system, broken up by someone on a mic saying a deejay will be starting soon. I lift a mini-burger off a tray carried around by a man in a white jacket and look for Layla.

People begin to show up in thicker droves, yet the party is much more controlled than I anticipated. I meander through the throngs of people with the burger in my hand, saying hello to various people as I go.

Her giggle stops me dead in my tracks, my eyes glued to an oversized golden mirror on the wall ahead. I listen, my senses on high alert, waiting for the sound to come again.

Watching the reflection, bodies move behind me. The deejay is firing up an early-two-thousands hit when I see her.

A pinkish-orange dress hugs her curves, her hair hanging soft around her shoulders. She

looks beautiful with her rosy cheeks and bright eyes. She radiates a simple elegance that I can't look away from.

She catches me watching her, one hand flying to the base of her throat. Her eyes go wide and cause the lady she's speaking with to ask her if she's all right. I see her nod, telling them she's okay, then excusing herself into a crowd to her left. It takes me a whole half a second to follow her, dumping the uneaten burger on a table.

Thanks to her heels and my athletic ability, I catch up with her right as she's heading onto a balcony off a bedroom. The air is warm, thick with the scents of the city with twinkling lights sparkling on the river below.

"Hey," I say, pulling the sliding glass door closed behind me. She stands at the railing, her back to me, and doesn't respond to my greeting. "Are you okay, Layla?"

"I'm fine, Branch. How are you?"

"A little confused."

She nods but still doesn't face me. "The city is so beautiful from here. So peaceful."

I stand next to her so close the fabric of our clothes touch, but our bodies beneath don't. She sucks in a breath as I place one hand beside hers on the black iron rail. "It's quiet," I admit. "It's hard to believe it's Chicago. It reminds me of home."

"What's it like where you're from?"

"Memphis is a city that feels like a town," I tell her softly. "It's nice and quiet for the most part and has that Southern hospitality thing going for it."

"Sounds nice."

"It is."

"Does your family live there?"

Turning my head, I take her in. The breeze rustles her hair, her perfume filling the air making me want to wrap her up and kiss the ever-loving fuck out of her. It's a wild, strange phenomenon to want to simply *kiss* her.

"My family does live there. My parents live in the same house I grew up in," I tell her, not sure why the questions all of a sudden. "I tried to buy them a new one when I signed the first contract, but they're stubborn."

"And proud, I bet."

"My dad has an entire room devoted to me in the house. It's like a shrine or something. It's pretty awkward."

She glances at me and we share a small, simple laugh.

"I imagine your dad is like a grown-up version of you," she says. "Not as bulky, but more handsome in a Sam Elliott kind of way."

"My mom would love that analogy. She has a major crush on him."

"Every girl does, Branch," she giggles. "He's the epitome of getting sexier with age."

"I'll try to remember that," I say, making a face that causes some of the tension in her shoulders to melt away. The faint circles under her eyes grab my attention and a curiosity seats itself in the bottom of my gut. "How have you been?"

And that does it. Her face turns back to the city and I'm met with silence.

It's an automatic response to place my hand over hers, just like it appears to be a reflex of hers to jump when we touch. Her head whips to the side where I'm just waiting to catch her eyes.

"Layla, did I do something to you?"

Her laugh is loud and full-bellied and filled with an anxious edge that has me withdrawing my hand from hers. She's wiping tears from the reaction and catches her breath before even

trying to talk.

My stomach flip-flops as I process this response, one I didn't see coming and I don't know how to categorize. Sorting through the memories from the cabin for the millionth time, I can't put my finger on anything I could've said or done that would have been offensive or more stupid than usual.

"I'm glad you find me so funny," I mutter, my gut twisted in a tight knot the same way it is when I'm standing at the line face-to-face with a cornerback.

"It's really not funny." She sucks in a hasty breath. "It's not funny at all."

"You know what," I say, defense mechanisms kicking in, "I apologize for whatever it is. I'll leave you alone. Have a good night, Layla."

I head for the door, not bothering to give her a second to change her mind. I don't even look at her over my shoulder. This is another girl playing games, a girl I just happen to let get under my skin in a moment of weakness.

My hand is on the pull when my name whispers through the air behind me. I freeze, processing the way it sounds like it was uttered on a whim, a last-second decision to call my name even though it's clearly filled with a hesitancy to do it.

"Yeah?" I stay facing the glass, barely able to make out her reflection due to the brightness inside.

I wait, hand still primed to yank open the slider. My annoyance level is far too high, the irritation at myself slipping into anger. My mind is chastising me for even being here, for chasing down this girl who doesn't want to see me, because if she did, she would've reached out. She could've planted a little seed with Poppy. My dumb ass can't take a fucking clue.

The roll of the door just starts to rumble when she finally speaks again. "Wait."

"Layla, we don't have to do this," I sigh, snapping the door shut. "I didn't mean to bother you or put you in some weird position. I just wanted to say hi."

Turning, I take her in. Her posture is defiant, her chin lifted towards the inky black sky.

"Trust me when I say I don't want to do this." Her confidence wobbles. "I need to sit down." She moves quickly across the balcony and slides into a chair next to a small glass table. "You probably should sit down too."

My stomach bottoms out, dropping to my feet, as I drag myself to the chair opposite her. My skin is coated with a cold sweat, every nightmare I've ever contemplated rolling through me like it's three in the morning and I'm lonely.

"What the hell is going on?" I drop into the seat, wiping the sweat off my palms.

"I'm pregnant, Branch."

Falling back into the chair, I blow out a sigh of relief that it wasn't some STD talk. I hate those. The last time that happened a girl tried to extort me for ten thousand dollars until I volunteered to show her my regular screening and that I've never had any sort of venereal disease. Ever.

"What did he say?" I ask.

"Who?"

"Callum."

She slow-blinks. "Callum?"

"You haven't told him yet?" I ask, watching her work through a battery of emotions. My own are a little whirled as I realize my lusting over this woman has probably just had to come to a screeching halt. She has bigger fish to fry than my cock . . . and that's pretty fucking big.

"It'll be all right," I say, as encouraging as I can while setting aside the fact that this is not

how I'd hoped this conversation was going to go. "He'll come around. But do you want some advice?"

She slow-blinks again, this time with her mouth hanging open. I take that as a yes.

"Take charge right away. Don't let him start calling the shots or thinking he gets to say shit about your life."

"Branch . . ."

We sit across the table, the moon shining just enough to illuminate her pretty features and I resent the fact that Callum is the one that spent that kind of intimate time with her. Fucker didn't even appreciate it.

A wash of fear trickles across her face. My heart clenches, the do-gooder that's buried so far below the surface I don't see it much chooses this moment to come forward.

"You need help telling Finn? He's gonna be pissed, Layla."

"I know," she squeaks.

"No, I don't think you do," I laugh, just imagining my best friend's response to this little piece of news. "He might drive to Columbus tonight and kick the shit out of him."

"Branch . . ."

"I'll make sure he gets bailed out."

"Branch." This time it's a command, a warning to stop talking and listen. "I need to talk to you."

"We're talking, Sunshine."

Her throat moves with a hard swallow. She leans back in her chair, combing a hand through the side of her hair. "Um, so . . ." She releases a breath. "The baby. Um . . . Branch, the baby isn't Callum's."

"Then whose is it?" I watch her face and realize . . . I'm better off not knowing. With a need to get off of the balcony and into the comfort of a mass of drunk bodies, I start to stand. "You know what, I don't want to know."

"The baby is yours." She blurts the words like it's a burden under the weight of which she's being crushed. That if she just chucks it into the world, gets the offending words out of her mouth, she can breathe.

I stop dead in my tracks.

Replaying the statement, it makes no more sense than it did the first time.

She looks at me like she's watching a man learn his fate after being tried for the most heinous of crimes. It's a mixture of fear at the reaction, but also an acute curiosity.

"What did you just say?" I ask.

"The baby is yours, Branch."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I scoff, my chair going sailing back and smashing against the glass. "The baby is mine? Your baby is mine? No way."

"I'm pregnant and the only person I've slept with is you."

I laugh because that's all I can do short of exploding everything within reach.

This has to be some kind of sick joke or game or attempt to piss me off for not calling her. That's happened before, but not to this extent. Still, it's possible.

"Layla, really," I say, taking a deep breath and trying to calm down. "If you're pregnant—congratulations, but the baby cannot be mine."

"I know it's hard to believe—"

"Hard to believe? You know what's hard to believe? That it's *you* pulling this shit. I've had a lot of things pinned on me, but, believe it or not, never a kid. I never dreamed it would be you."

The sky looks so dark, so foreboding as I look into it, wondering how the fuck I got here. How did I give this woman enough of a comfort level around me to claim she's pregnant?

As her chair goes skidding against the rails, clamoring as it falls to the tile, I know—this is how it happened. She has that thing about her that's just relatable enough to think she's not like the rest of them. That she sees more than dollar bills and contract numbers. I believed that, and that is what is killing me most right now—I trusted her even when I knew better.

Her golden eyes dance with rage. "You think I'm making this up?"

"I don't doubt you're pregnant, but I have serious doubts it's mine. I used a rubber," I point out, thanking God for that little tidbit. "You're on the pill. Explain to me how the universe pulled off me knocking you up under those circumstances. Hell, if it's even a possibility, do you know how many kids I could have running around out there?"

"I have no idea how many potential offspring you have, Branch, and the fact that I know so little about you worries me too."

"Didn't worry you when you were coming all over my cock."

"And it didn't worry you when you stuck said cock in my vagina and told me how tight I felt wrapped around you before you went and got a condom," she says flatly.

"*Ohhh*. That's where you're saying this happened. In that span of ten seconds I was in you raw?"

She glares at me. "I'm not saying I know when it happened. I'm just saying I know it did."

"This is fucking bullshit."

"You know what's fucking bullshit?" Her arms drop to her side as her tone starts to shift. "That I decided to tell you this because it was the right thing to do, and I almost had myself convinced that we could figure a way to work it out. You know, as I've been sitting around trying not to vomit, crying myself to sleep over not knowing what's going to happen, and how I'm going to handle it all and how you're going to handle it all and what's the best way to tell you and to . . ." She sucks in a breath, her cheeks as flamed as her dress. "Forget I said it. I wish I hadn't."

"Forget you said it?" I laugh angrily. "You just said I knocked you up."

"And that's what it was, wasn't it? You knocked me up. We fucked and now this. That sounds so pretty, doesn't it?" Her features sour. "You think I'm any happier about this than you are? You think I wanted to have a baby by *you*?"

Those words sear into my psyche, the emphasis powering into me. I may as well have taken a hit from the best lineman in the league because my stomach has been walloped hard.

By me? What's that supposed to mean?

"You know what? You can do whatever you want with this information," she says, walking a wide loop around me. "You have my word I'm not saying anything to anyone and I never will. If you don't want to claim this kid, I'll put on the birth certificate that I'm a whore and don't know whose kid it is."

"Layla . . ."

She shoots me the dirtiest look I've ever had someone give me. "If you want to see the baby after it's born, I'd never keep it from you. *I* have a bit of class," she glares, grabbing the door handle. "After a paternity test, *of course*."

With the chilliest final glance she can muster, she yanks open the lever and walks out, leaving me standing in the warm summer night feeling as though I just stepped onto an iceberg.

Fuck.

My.

Life.

Chapter 17

Layla

“Excuse me,” I say, pasting a fake smile on my lips as I bump into a partygoer. My teeth press so hard into one another I can feel the tension in my temples, my jawbones aching from the pressure.

Fighting tears, I scan the penthouse full of people with nothing more on their minds than how much to drink. Jealousy is not something I wrestle with most days, but standing in my too-tight dress in too-high heels and with too much uncertainty wracking my emotions, I’m insanely envious of them all.

The crowds part just enough for me to spot my brother, a good head taller than ninety percent of the attendees, on the far side of the room next to the bar. Again, I go sorting through the faces and will myself to calm down before Finn starts asking questions.

“Hey,” he says, stalling his beer bottle mid-air when he sees me coming. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m not feeling well.” I flip my gaze to Poppy as her eyes grow wide. “I need to go home.”

“I’ll go with you,” she says instantly.

“Stay here and have fun. I’m fine.”

“What’s wrong, Layla?” my brother asks, the bottle now at his side. “What happened?”

I brush a hand through the air and lie my ass off. “Nothing. I ate a ham sandwich from Yusi’s for lunch. Now that I think about it, I think I saw somewhere they had a health code violation last month. I’m probably just having a little food poisoning.”

“Which is why I should go with you,” Poppy says. “You shouldn’t be poisoned alone. You might want someone to call Yusi’s and rip them a new asshole and I’m just the person to do it.”

“I eat there all the time. I haven’t heard that,” Finn says.

“Yusi needs his cock removed from his body and shoved down his throat.” Maybe it’s said with too much gusto, but I’ve never said something that I mean more.

“Wow. That’s harsh,” Finn laughs. “Okay. You guys go but take it easy on Yusi. He probably didn’t even make the sandwich.”

“Oh, he made it . . .” I start, then stop with Finn’s brow crooks. “Goodnight, Finn.”

Poppy kisses my brother and takes my elbow. She lead-blocks and we make it through the crowd without seeing Branch.

The elevator ride is long and hot and the walk to the parking garage even longer. Each step is like another rung on a ladder with the seat of my car being the top tier. I slide into the passenger’s seat and it’s instant. The tears come.

Poppy leans over the console and wraps me in her arms, holding me tight. “What did that fucker say to you?”

“Oh, that I’m a whore.”

She pulls back, a look of ferocity in her eyes, and grabs the door handle. “I’ll be right back.”

“No! Pop, stay,” I say, jerking on her arm. “He didn’t say that. Not outright. Just insinuated that it couldn’t be his. That I was either lying or pinning a bastard child on him.”

Digging through the glove compartment, I find a handful of napkins and start wiping away the smeared mascara from my cheeks.

“I have to say I’m surprised.” Poppy shakes her head. “I thought he’d be more of a man than

this.”

“I knew he’d be in shock. I mean, look at what I’m dropping on his lap. But he was just so . . . dismissive. Fuck him.”

“No. No more fucking him,” she cracks. “You’ve already sucked more from that man than you wanted.”

“Really, Poppy?”

“Too soon?”

“Much, much too soon.” I toss the napkins on the floorboard, my tears dried up with the anger that’s taking the lead. “Will you take me to the store for ice cream before we go home?”

She lifts my purse and grabs the keys and sticks one in the ignition. Moving the car into reverse, she stops and turns to me before letting off the brake.

“Regardless of what he chooses to do about this,” she says, “this is an amazing time of your life. I know you didn’t expect it now or even want it now, but you’re having a baby,” she whispers. A slow smile spreads across her thin cheeks. “We’re going to give you a few days to let this settle and then we’re celebrating you and my little niece or nephew. If Branch opts out of that, his loss.”

My head falls to the seatback as I watch her pilot my car through the parking garage. Her words soothe me, and by the time we get out onto the street, I’m drifting off to sleep.

* * * *

Branch

“Sorry. Sorry.” My sight is blurry as I look at the face in front of me. “I didn’t get you wet, did I?”

My arm is extended in front of me, trying to balance the drink that just splashed into the air when I tripped. It continues to slosh, the cool, amber liquid running over my hand.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Finn comes out of nowhere, despite my best attempt to avoid him.

Truth be told, I should’ve fucking left. I should’ve gotten in my car and driven my ass home and gotten away from all this. Despite my inebriated state, this I know. This I regret. But I didn’t want to go home alone with too much quiet to think about what Layla said. And the look in her eye. And the words she said after I said my piece. And the way she stormed off.

Bringing the cup to my mouth, I start to suck the rest of it down before Finn snatches it up.

“Hey,” I protest, grabbing wildly at the glass. “I wasn’t done.”

“You were done three drinks ago, buddy.”

“Funny. I need three more.”

“Let’s go.”

His palm cupping my shoulder, he guides me towards the door. Women pull on my hand, lure me towards them as we pass, but Finn isn’t having it. He just thrusts me on.

“Maybe I want to stay,” I say.

“Maybe you need to go to bed before you start looking a lot less like the Branch Best you want the world to remember.”

The alcohol finally reaches critical mass and everything goes fuzzy. Warmth hits my toes, the top of my head feeling like it’s missing in a great way, and before I know it, I’m in the passenger’s seat of Finn’s car. As we pull out of the garage, I see Poppy’s purse on the floorboard.

“Finn!” I shout.

“What?” He jumps, hitting the brake.

“You forgot Poppy.”

“Asshole,” he chuckles, accelerating again. “You scared the fuck out of me. I thought I was ready to hit a kid or something.”

“Is she in here?” I crane my neck to check the backseat.

“She took Layla home a few hours ago. Something is up with my sister.”

Slinking back into the seat, I close my eyes. “Is that right?”

“My guess is Callum, but I don’t know. She was ready to cry, all agitated and shit. If that fucker is bothering her, we’re taking a road trip and I’m going to dismantle that cocksucker.”

I sink further into the leather.

“Layla is too nice for her own good,” he continues. “I told her not to trust him, told her guys in this league aren’t really marriage material. You know what goes on during away games and hotel nights and at the parties. Shit, remember our first team party night?” he chuckles. “Those guys getting hotel rooms at our hotel for their side pieces and you and I were like, ‘What the fuck?’ having just met their actual wives the week before.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re professional athletes, man. These guys are used to getting whatever the fuck they want whenever they want. And Callum, he’s the worst.”

“The Quarterback Effect,” I say. “They love calling the shots, the attention, and the glory.”

“I’ll show him fucking glory,” Finn growls, taking a hard right through the streets of downtown.

My breathing is shallow as I imagine how fast it would take for his fist to hit my face if I told him exactly why his sister was upset tonight. I’m guessing three seconds, giving him two for time to process.

My life is so beyond fucked up right now and I don’t see a way out. The acid of anxiety hits my liquored-up stomach and I start heaving.

“Don’t puke in my car,” Finn says, sliding the car over two lanes and into the parking lot of a grocery store with a half-lit sign.

I press open the door and expel my guts, the alcohol burning almost as much as my head. Everything parades through my mind like the clouds on a bright day that zoom by. It’s like each thought—Layla, the baby, Finn’s reaction, Callum—shoot by, taunting me with their state of undoneness.

Finn hands me a warm water bottle and I don’t question it. I just fill my mouth, swish it around, and spit onto the gum-riddled pavement.

“You okay?” he asks as I shut the door.

“No.”

He shoots me a curious glance and pulls back out on the road in silence, which is good, because anything I have to say would test out that three-second theory.

Chapter 18

Layla

Exposé Top Story: Best Shocker!

We see a lot of Branch Best. (Granted, most of our female readership would argue we don't see quite enough.) Despite the compromising positions we find Number Eleven in, this isn't usually one of them.

Best was seen coming out of the Standen Hotel late last night with Finn Miller. Eye witnesses say Miller was actually holding up his friend and helping him into his SUV.

We can't say there's much Best could do to shock us, but this is very abnormal for him. We've seen him in the throes of a bender and it still didn't look this bad. Not able to stand? There's gossip there and we'll let you know when we figure it out. Stay tuned.

*

"Who's making breakfast?" Poppy turns her head to look at me. "You? You're gonna be a mommy. I feel like it would be good training."

"Sometimes I hate you," I laugh, stretching.

"Hate me all you want but I'll take French toast and bacon."

"I'm not making you breakfast."

We lie in my bed, the sun coming through the light blue curtains and filling the room. My body feels like it's been through the wringer and I'm afraid to move.

Morning sickness has been hit or miss, but that's not really my worry. I'm worried how I'll feel mentally once I let the sleep fog roll out and reality fill the void.

Every morning since finding out I was pregnant has been a little rough. Again, not from the nausea, but more from the unknown.

My heart pings with the memory from last night. Remembering his face and the way he looked at me like I was some kind of groupie playing a game is something that might haunt me forever. I'm not sure what I really expected, but I didn't expect to feel like a piece of trash.

"You're going to be fine," Poppy says softly.

I swing my legs off the side of the bed and sit up, feeling my stomach settle. Giving myself a few seconds to gather my thoughts, I'm relieved that I don't feel sad.

I'm pissed.

"I'm going to be better than fine," I say, getting to my feet. "This was unexpected, but, like you said, it's a baby. I'm having a baby." Letting those words wash over my tongue and linger in the air, I absorb them. "I just need a little while to come up with a plan and figure out how I'm going to do this."

"Have you told your parents?"

"Uh, no," I laugh. "I want to have answers to the questions they're going to have before I go in there announcing they're going to be grandparents."

"Do you think they'll be happy?"

"Yes. I'm sure, on some level, they will. But irritated that it's happening this way." The doorbell chimes and I glance at the clock. "Who could that be?"

"Maybe the universe heard my plea and brought me French toast," Poppy says, climbing out of bed. "I'll get the door in case it's Branch. He has an appointment with my right hand."

Laughing, although I'm sure she's not entirely kidding, I change out of my oversized t-shirt and into a pair of shorts and a cami. By the time I walk into the living room, I spy my brother sitting on the sofa.

"What are you doing here?" I ask as I walk by towards the kitchen. "I figured you'd be hungover."

"I didn't drink much," he admits. "Someone had to babysit Branch."

My footsteps falter. "Oh, really?"

"He got shitfaced as hell. He parties as hard as the next guy, but last night was a little overboard." Finn looks at me with a lifted brow. "Did you see him last night?"

"Briefly."

Ignoring further interrogation, I head into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of milk. I'm squeezing in a healthy dose of chocolate syrup when Finn comes in. I see Poppy through the doorway, sitting on the couch and looking nervous.

"What's going on with you?" Finn asks, sitting at the bar.

"Nothing." I take in a long, measured sip of the milk and wait for him to change the subject. He doesn't. "Why do you keep asking me that?"

"Because I'm your brother. Because I know the sound of your voice when you lie."

"I'm not lying."

He's not deterred. Instead, he narrows his eyes. "I'm worried, Lay. Has Callum been bothering you?"

There's so much concern, so much love, shining in his eyes that it breaks the wall I've so carefully erected. It's what I need right now. It's a look of protection, of consideration, of compassion that I didn't get from Branch in any way whatsoever.

My hand shakes as I set the glass down. "I have something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Before I tell you, you have to promise me you won't go crazy."

"I'm doing no such thing."

Rolling my eyes, I sigh. "Then I'm not telling you."

"I promise I will react proportionately to whatever you say."

"No deal."

"Layla . . ."

Knowing I'm not going to get out of this and hoping beyond hope he takes it well and that maybe that will help my anxiety, I take a deep breath. "Finn, I'm pregnant."

His eyes nearly fall out of his head. "You're what?"

"I'm having a baby in the spring."

He watches me, twisting his lips together. "I'm not going to kill Callum."

"That's good."

"I am going to decimate him."

Avoiding eye contact and scooting to the furthest edge of the bar, I connect the golden sparkles in the granite with my finger. "What if I told you it wasn't Callum's?"

The energy radiating off him changes. Instead of lightening, like I hope, it turns darker. Heavier. More foreboding.

"That would be interesting," he says calmly. Too, too calmly.

"Yeah."

"Whose is it, Layla?"

The lines I'm drawing on the counter start to incorporate the chocolate-colored flecks, the

butterscotch, and the cream. I loop more and more of them together knowing damn good and well that within the next few minutes, he's going to have a coronary.

"Lay?"

"Branch's."

I don't even get both syllables out before his fists slam on the counter. "What the fuck did you say?"

"Finn . . ."

"No," he rumbles, glaring at me. "You didn't say my name. Whose baby are you pregnant with, Layla?"

"Branch's."

"That motherfucker."

"Listen," I say, hearing the plea in my tone, "stop. There's nothing that being mad is going to fix."

"Good thing I'm not mad then, isn't it?" he says, his jaw flexing. "I'm so, so far beyond mad. I'm livid."

With movements so calculated it sends chills down my spine, I watch him get to his feet. My palm rests flat against the cool stone as I watch my brother watch me.

"Have you told him?" he asks.

"Yes."

He nods, like his own little lines are connecting. Still, he is not amused. "What did he say?"

I'm not prepared for this question and the extra pause I take is all Finn needs to turn red. He stares me down, pressures me to talk when I don't know the best thing to say.

"He was surprised," I shrug as casually as I can. "I don't need him, Finn. I can raise a baby on my own."

"First, you'll never have to raise a baby on your own. You know that. You have me. Mom. Dad. Poppy. Second, if that son of a bitch doesn't support you, I'll ensure he never has more kids. I'll rip his balls right off his body and feed them to him."

"I don't want that," I sigh. "I don't. I'd rather him just ignore it altogether if he doesn't want a part of it."

"You can't opt out of being a part of your kid's life!"

"He didn't ask for this."

"And you did? And you're defending him?" he scoffs. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

Considering this question, I don't know the answer. What I do know is the little ball of peace that's settled in my soul is welcome to stick around. I also know I mean what I'm saying.

"I'm not defending him, Finn. Not at all. But will you look at me? I'm capable of raising a child on my own if I have to, and I'd rather do that than have someone not want it or make my life hell. It's done. I'm pregnant. Now I have to make the best of it for my child, not for me, and damn it if that doesn't sound like the weirdest thing I've ever said."

Sucking in a breath, I pour over the words that just tumbled from my lips.

"I hate this," he says, his edge missing from his tone.

"Hate what?"

"I hate that he's made you feel like you're on your own."

"I rolled the dice and I came up short. I'm prepared to deal with that."

"Me too." He turns away from the bar and marches into the living room. Pausing at the couch, he bends and has a quiet discussion with Poppy.

I lean against the doorframe and watch them interact. The way she touches his face, the way

he smiles softly at her, makes my heart tighten. I can't help but wonder if I'll ever have that.

Finn stands and turns to me. "What's your immediate plan?"

"I'm going to head to the cabin this afternoon. I need some quiet to sort this all out. I can work from there and just . . . breathe."

"I'll call Machlan and have him check on you."

"I'll be fine, Finn."

"I'll make sure of it. Call me when you make it."

"All right."

He kisses Poppy on the cheek and heads to the door.

"Where are you going?" I call out.

"I have some training to do. Call me when you get to the cabin."

And just like that, he's gone.

* * * *

Branch

I've looked better.

My eyes are swollen, the locks of my hair stuck together from sweat, day-old hair gel, and wrestling with my pillow all night. I shouldn't have drunk anything, let alone as much as I did. But I'll cut myself some slack and realize I was a little overwhelmed.

Brushing my teeth, I spit out the toothpaste and rinse it down the drain. My mouth still tastes like puke. And regret.

I fucking hate this.

I'm a great wide receiver, which means I can make decisions on the fly. I have to be able to move with the ever-changing field conditions from play to play. Thinking ahead, anticipating calls and defenses are things I specialize at. How I've managed to take all those skills and *not* use them in my real life is astounding.

Looking in the mirror, I don't like what I see, and it has nothing to do with the eyes or hair or the line running down my cheek from the seam on the couch cushion where I ended the night. It has everything to do with what's beyond that and the panic that's sitting there, mocking me, threatening to bust loose.

The doorbell rings. Maybe it's my hangover, but it sure as hell sounds like it's not just ringing, but blaring. I head down the hall and wince as it rings again. Then a third time.

"I'm fucking coming," I shout, grabbing the deadbolt and snapping it . . . just before I look out the peephole. Finn must hear it click because he shoves the door open, almost knocking me into the wall.

I don't ask why he's here. He doesn't bother to say hello. There's no need for formalities.

I'm not scared of many men. Besides my father, I can't really think of anyone. But Finn has me taking a step or two back and wondering how in the hell I'm going to diffuse this situation.

Then I realize I'm not.

I'm fucked.

"How long have you known?" he growls, his nostrils flaring as he looks down at me.

"Finn—"

"Answer me!" he bellows.

"She told me last night."

He paces a circle, clenching his fists, trying to calm himself down. I've seen him do this in games and in the locker room and even at a party once where a guy threatened the girl he was seeing. I can never remember him doing it quite like *this* though.

My quick-thinking skills are gone and I'm left scrambling to figure out how to put this. I force a swallow. "Finn, honestly, I'm sorry—"

The words are ripped from my mouth by a crisp right hand, whipping across my face—fist closed—and rocking my head back. My face moves out of sync, my jaw working to catch up with the rest of me. I see the left coming and roll underneath it and pop up a few feet to his left and out of punching distance.

Wiping some blood off my chin, I glare at him. "Feel better now?"

"No."

"Go on. Do it again."

He doesn't flinch.

"Do it again. See if it helps. Come on, motherfucker." I stick my chin out, goading him to hit me. My face throbs, already swelling, but I don't give a fuck. I need this. I *want* this. I *want* this pain. "Hit me, Finn."

"Fuck you," he snarls.

I don't see the fist coming. The contact rings me awake, knocks the hangover right out of me. Savagery steels across his face, sinking into my psyche and reminding me of every way I've messed up.

"What were you thinking?" he hisses, his eyes narrowed to tiny little slits. "I ask nothing of you but to stay away from my sister and you can't just stay away from her, you get her pregnant?"

He lurches forward again, but I have my wits about me now and jump out of the way. He crashes into a table with some books and a vase filled with sand from the Wabash River.

Everything crashes to the floor and Finn lies in the middle of it. He falls back to the floor, eyes closed, and doesn't move.

Tugging at my hair, I look to the ceiling and wish I could just make this go away.

"I know you know I didn't mean for this to happen," I say as pacifyingly as possible. "I'd never do this to you . . . or to her."

His eyelids pop open and he looks at me.

"I just . . . We just thought we'd have some fun, you know? I still don't know how this happened."

"Need a biology lesson?" He gets to his feet, brushing dust off his pants. "For fuck's sake, Branch. Did you do this just to spite me?"

"Of course not."

"I took you to my family's home because we were friends. I trusted you," he says, the anger giving way slightly to a look of disappointment. "I thought you were my guy, my buddy, the one I could trust to bring into my world." He considers me again. "You've disrespected my sister and you've betrayed me."

My spirits fall, spiraling from what little height they had left into an abyss I'm not sure I'll ever recover them from. The way he looks at me reminds me of the way Layla looked at me last night, and my stomach builds pressure, threatening to be sick again.

Clearing the bile from my throat, I get my bearings. "Layla is a—"

"—an amazing woman," he cuts me off, "that's so far beyond your league you shouldn't even get to fucking look at her, and I'll blame myself for the rest of my life for introducing the

two of you and giving you access to her.”

“Damn it, Finn. This isn’t your fault.”

“No, it’s your fault, asshole. This is all your doing with your hedonistic bullshit and greater-than-thou attitude.”

“Come on . . .”

He glares at me again, the friend I once knew all but gone from his eyes. “I hope she tells you to fuck off but clearly neither of you listens to me. But I want you to know this: if you’re not going to take full responsibility for this baby, get the hell out of her life. Hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“I mean it, Branch. She still has a shot at leading a good, normal life but only if you stay the fuck out of it. You can’t be half in, half out with your bullshit. You can’t be fucking everything that walks and paying lip service to my sister on the side. You hear me?”

“I said I hear you.”

He smiles hatefully. “Consider this your last warning. If I ever show up here again, call the police because I’m here to rip you apart.”

The door jerks open and he slams it behind him. Pictures on the wall rattle as I bend down and pick up a piece of the shattered vase.

Holding it in my hands, the edges of the rough glass prickling at my skin, I feel the weight of the world sitting square on my shoulders. And as broad as they are, they threaten to collapse.

Chapter 19

Layla

Only a few weeks ago, I lay here face down, bare ass up in the air with Branch smacking my cheeks and thrusting his cock inside me. This afternoon, I sit upright, my sanity up in the air and Branch's words ricocheting through me.

The irony is not lost on me.

Although I've only been at the cabin for a few hours, driving up here as soon as Finn left, already I feel the peace settling in my soul. The water laps against the shoreline, the birds singing from the trees smoothes out some of the franticness that was starting to build up.

The ride here gave me a few hours to think without the distraction of life. There's nothing to do in a car but think, and by the time my car slipped through the gates, I didn't have a ton of answers, but I had options.

I take a bite of a peanut butter cookie and it breaks in half, the bottom part falling onto my tummy. Brushing it off, my hand flutters against my body and an awareness strikes me for what might actually be the first real time.

Cautiously, like my stomach may not be my own, I place my palm against my belly button. It rises and falls as I breathe. Closing my eyes, I try to imagine a tiny baby just inches inside.

Resting my other hand above the first, a warm, tender feeling trickles over me. Nothing else is front and center in my mind, no distractions picking at me from the outside—just me and the sudden feeling of fullness in a way I haven't had before.

"Hey." I say the word aloud and then grin. "I'm not sure if I should talk to you or if you can hear me or anything like that, but if you can . . . I'm your mommy."

A hiccupped breath leaves my lungs as the taste of the word lingers on my lips. It sounds funny and comical but also . . . nice.

"I haven't really made a lot of terrific choices for you so far and I'm sorry for that. I'm just getting the hang of this, you know?"

Opening my eyes, I watch a boat come around the tree-line and remember when Finn and I used to beg our dad to take us out there for hours on end.

"I promise I'll get this mom thing down before you get here. At some point, I'll stop being a chicken and tell your grandmother about this and she'll help." Rubbing a small circle, I wonder how big the baby is. "You're still growing in there and I'm still growing out here. By the time you get here, I'll be ready. I promise."

I get to my feet as the boat turns towards our dock and I see an older woman that lives across the lake waving from the bow. She pulls in and gets her boat situated and heads up the walkway towards me.

"Hey, sweetheart," she says, climbing the stairs to the patio. She pulls me into a hug. "How are you, Layla?"

"I'm good, Janet. Want to have a seat?"

We sit down and I offer her a drink but she passes. "I'll be honest. Finn called and asked me to check on you."

"Ugh," I groan, resting my head against the cushion.

"Don't be upset," she says, patting my arm. "I miss having someone care about me like that."

Peter's been gone three years now and I miss having someone worry about me. Of course, I have my sister, Kate, but it's not the same."

"You can have Finn," I offer, making her laugh. My hand gingerly rests on my stomach again as I look at Janet. Her face has some age spots since I last saw her, her hair showing a bit of silver now too. "Mrs. Brasher, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, honey."

"Do you ever regret not having children?"

She smiles sweetly, a simple understanding crossing her face. "Not really. Peter was much older than I when we met, and as you know, he didn't want children. It was something I agreed to before we married. Now, do I wonder what it would be like to have a couple of girls or boys to come visit me? Sure. But do I regret not having that? I can't say I do. Why do you ask?"

"No reason, really," I say, looking at the water. "Just having boy problems, that's all."

"Oh, dear, you'll always have boy problems. I had them until the week Peter died," she laughs. "He was always telling me he'd do something and not do it or not drinking his vitamin drink or leaving candy wrappers on the floor beside his chair. He could be infuriating."

"I think mine are a little more complicated than that."

"Can I give you some unsolicited advice?"

"I wish you would."

She thinks for a long moment, touching the side of her face as she measures her words. "Everything in life is on some unseen, coordinated timing mechanism. Think about it. Everything is circling, staying in perfect harmony every day despite what humankind wants or needs or thinks. The Earth circles the Sun, the Moon circles the Earth, even our heartbeats are timed. Correct?"

"Correct."

"As you go through your life, Layla, remember that. Nothing is random and nothing is coincidence. Everything is running on a schedule, a pattern that we don't see or control. When Peter passed away, I remember wishing he'd have made it to see spring. It was his favorite time of year with the flowers blooming and the waters warming. But spring that year came with the death of many of our friends, the closing of two of his favorite businesses in town, and such horrible politics. I realized then why he was taken from me early. He would've hated that spring."

"I'm sorry he's gone, Mrs. Brasher. He was such a lovely man. I can't see a pink carnation and not think of the bushes that line your driveway."

She smiles with pride. "Thank you. It means a lot that he's remembered fondly." She looks back to the water. "I brought you some dinner. Finn said to make sure you're eating so I made some Salisbury steak and mashed potatoes. Are you hungry?"

My stomach rumbles, my mouth watering at the thought. "I'm starving, actually. I didn't bring groceries or call Henry to fill the fridge before I came," I say, referring to the handyman that keeps up the cabin while we aren't here.

"Follow me to the boat, if you don't mind, and collect your dinner, sweet girl. I need to get back home to let Mitsy out. She's been so good about not going potty in the house, but I don't want to keep her too long."

We rise and I follow her down the long, narrow path to the water. She hands me a picnic basket and a jug of tea. "Here you go. If you need anything, you call me."

"I'll be fine, Mrs. Brasher. Thank you for this. Honestly."

She pats my hand before untying her boat. "Remember what I said about timing, Layla

James. Life is timed to a watch we don't control. Things happen today to set up things later that we can't predict or see or imagine. Don't fight it. Embrace it."

With a little wave, the boat drifts away from the dock. I trek back to the house with my dinner and a little food for thought too.

Chapter 20

Layla

I scrape the rest of the food off my plate and give it a quick rinse. Sticking it in the dishwasher, I pause to look out the window. The sky is a beautiful cascade of purples and oranges as the sun starts to dip on the other side of the lake. It's beautiful and I give a long thought about raising the baby here.

The baby. The words aren't quite as overwhelming as they were a few days ago. I'm still not sure how this is going to work out or how I'll learn to be a mother, but it seems more manageable. Maybe.

"Do you like it here?" I ask aloud, splaying my fingers on my abdomen. "It's quiet. You could play outside with no one to bother you and Mommy could work from the porch and make you lunch like my mommy used to do for me."

There's a serenity about this, so much so that I begin to wonder if it's actually possible. Up until now, raising a baby seemed more like a "Can I do this?" Now it's a "How do I do this?" and that's a totally different thing.

I glance at the refrigerator and think back to Branch. A grin touches my lips immediately, the good memories coming back around, even if they were just for a short time. Our future is going to be tangled, and I find myself hoping we can just get along a fraction as well as we did then.

I go back to the table and sit next to a yellow legal pad and black pen. A few notes are scratched into lists, things I need to work out and prepare and notes from a baby book Poppy brought me.

Looking up as a set of headlights shines through the windows, I stand as they flick off. I walk to the glass and watch Branch trudge towards the door.

A lump materializes in my throat, making it impossible to swallow and just as hard to even breathe. His head is down, his hands tucked into the pockets of his worn jeans as he hits the landing of the stairs. He doesn't look up until he's at the door.

The sound of the knock makes me jump even though I expect it and I stand and stare at the chunk of wood separating him and I. The barrier feels good between us. Like if I can stay inside and keep him out, I can hide in my little cocoon.

Then he knocks again.

I touch the handle like it might burn me, placing one finger on top of the metal knob.

He knocks again. "Layla, open the door."

The command part of that irritates me, but there's a quake in the tone that pulls at a heartstring. One. One heartstring because the rest of them still want to deck him in his handsome face.

"Layla, *please* open the door." There's a long pause. "I know you can hear me and I'm not going anywhere until we talk. So just do us both a favor and open up."

Flinging the door open, I catch sight of his face. His right eye has a purplish-blue circle around it, the underside swollen to the point I'm not sure how well he can even see out of it. The right side of his lip is busted, and it, too, is swollen. He looks at me, his eyes without the cocky glimmer I'm used to seeing in them.

“I didn’t open this as a favor to either of us,” I tell him. “I opened it to tell you that you need to leave.”

“Layla . . .”

“I’m just full of things you don’t want to hear, aren’t I?” I spew bitterly.

“Will you stop it?”

“Get. Off. My. Porch.”

“We need to talk.”

Snorting, I go to close the door in his face but his hand stops it mid-push. He doesn’t cross the threshold with his feet, but he certainly traipses right over that line with the look he’s shooting me.

“I gave you a chance to talk,” I say. “And talk you did. I have every word you tossed my way burned into my memory.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t care.”

His shoulders fall forward as one arm reaches for the side of his jaw and works it back and forth. He focuses on something on the ground and it reminds me of a little boy that just got in trouble at school.

Like the universe decided to let me get a glimpse into the future, a series of feelings, more than pictures, floods my senses. A little boy’s laugh rattles through my ears, the smell of baby soap so real I actually flinch. My heart twists as I can almost see a spray of blond hair and the sweetest little blue eyes—eyes that remind me a lot of the ones looking back at me.

At some point, Branch has lifted his gaze to mine and something passes between us. It’s a feeling of confusion, of fear, maybe, mixed with some kind of resolution to have our way, whatever that is.

I chalk it up to the hurricane of emotions swirling inside and the mothering vibe I’ve been trying to harness and step to the side. Without giving up any of the hostility I have for him, I let him in.

As he passes, he bows his head, and I let out a little huff for good measure. The door pops as it closes and Branch turns to face me.

“What happened to you?” I ask, motioning towards the swelling.

“I ran into something.”

“Okay,” I say, not giving him the satisfaction of pressing for details. “What do you want? You have five minutes.”

“I think we both know this is going to take more than five minutes.”

“Then you better get talking and fit in as much as you can.”

His cracked lip sticks out a little. “I would start if I knew where to begin.”

“This is my point,” I say, exhaling sharply. “You don’t even have a clue what to say, and I don’t have the time or energy to listen to you figure it out. God knows I’ve had to figure it out on my own.”

When he doesn’t respond, I give up. I walk away and into the kitchen and hope that when I turn around, he’ll be gone. Yet, when I do, he’s standing in the doorway.

“Um, how do you feel?” he asks carefully.

“Fine.”

He nods, like he’s unsure as to whether he has the authority to even ask such questions. “So, you’re doing okay?”

“Do you even care?”

"Of course I care," he draws, his brows pulling together. "I'm not a complete asshole, Layla."

I give him a look, one that questions that statement, and he absorbs it completely. His shoulder leans against the wall and he scoops up a deep, weighted breath. "I'm trying to do what's right here."

"I don't want you to do *what's right*. I don't want you coming all the way down here, which, by the way, was totally unnecessary, and asking me how I am like I'm some kind of rabid monkey. I'm a grown woman, Branch. I'm intelligent. I'm capable. I can handle all of this and I *will* handle all of this. If it's too much for you to deal with, I get it. I'm not asking you to."

I fight the wetness welling up in my eyes, determined to not let him see me cry. He sees the break and starts to move off the doorframe but stops when I take a step back.

"This whole thing just threw me for a loop," he says. "I just, uh, I need you to have a little patience."

"Oh, because this is about you, right?" I scoff, turning my back to him.

The need for a hug overwhelms me, the need for someone to tell me this is going to be okay. I don't even try to dismiss the part of my brain that screams for him to come to me and just be here, tell me he'll be here, because it's too loud to ignore.

As the tears I've been struggling to keep at bay begin their journey down my cheeks, I let myself just feel the emotions as they come my way. My back vibrates as the tears fall harder and despite knowing he's in the same room as me, I still feel so alone.

"Can I get you something?" he asks quietly. "A drink or a towel or something?"

"No," I sniffle, sucking up snot that's dripped to my lip.

"Look, Layla, I'm trying to figure out what to do. I'm not . . . this kind of a guy."

I spin around to face him with my puppy eyes and dark circles and tear-stained cheeks. If I weren't going to get as big as a house in the next nine months and have chipmunk cheeks and an even rounder ass, I'd be embarrassed for him to see me like this. But now? It's the least of my worries.

"Bet you're regretting all of this, huh?" I ask, sniffing again.

He looks at the ceiling and sighs. "I had one of the best weekends of my life. It's almost comical how many times I've thought about how easy it was to be with you and how much we laughed and how . . . how I could just put my guard down. Guess I put it down a little too far, huh?"

"Well, you know I was just waiting for it to drop far enough so I could trick you into having a baby." I stop myself. "I mean, it might not even be yours, so we should really watch how we say this, huh?"

"Layla . . ."

His words from last night, the disdain on his face when I told him the news, propel into me. When I look at him again, I don't see the handsome, sexy guy I hoped to see again. I see the guy who thinks the worst of me.

"Your five minutes are up," I say, willing my bottom lip not to tremble.

"We haven't worked anything out."

"You can have your attorney send me a—"

"Layla. Stop," he pleads.

"I want you to leave. I need to be alone," I lie, needing the opposite so much more. "I have a lot to figure out, and I came up here to do that, and I can't do it with you looking at me accusingly."

“I need you to cut me some slack.”

“Cut *you* some slack?” I almost shout. “You act like I’m repulsive for having the nerve to get pregnant by you. You do realize I didn’t choose this, right? You do realize this wouldn’t *be* my choice, right? Because as amazing as you think you are and as good of a time as we had together, if I had known this is the man you really are, I wouldn’t have gotten anywhere near you.”

I breeze by him and tug the door open. The fire in my eyes must shock him because he steps slowly to the front door. “Get out, Branch.”

He stops inches away from me and squares his broad, thick shoulders to mine. There’s a defiance in his narrowed gaze. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve said that a couple of times.”

“I mean it.”

I put my hand on my hip and smile. “What are you sorry for?”

There’s no response, just a look that probably gets him out of most things he doesn’t want to say or do in his life.

I pull the door until it can’t get any more open. “And that’s why you’re leaving. Now.”

He storms by me, his shoes hitting the porch. The door bangs shut, putting that precious barrier between us once again. Although, this time, I hate it.

Chapter 21

Branch

The sky is dark, the stars not even that bright as I stand and look over the lawn and into the water. I've dreamed of this place and replayed the things we did here—me, Finn, Poppy, and Layla James—over and over. Standing here again, the magic isn't as palpable.

With no energy to walk all the way to my car, I slump into a patio chair. If she sees me and wants to come out and yell at me some more, she can. Hell, I might even like it. God knows I deserve it.

The little seed of regret that I woke up with this morning was originally about being careless. I kept thinking of how I really messed up and what this meant for my life and how I wasn't built for this kind of thing . . . and don't want it. But now? It's so much more than that.

I touch the pout of my lip and can feel the crack across the middle. There's some flaked up blood that comes off on my finger and I flick it into the darkness.

My body aches, my mind is dead, and it's worse than it is even after a game. Fucking Finn. "Oh, God," I groan, filling my lungs with oxygen as I realize I can't do what I was going to do—call him for advice.

This emptiness, a complete feeling of having no rudder in this storm, is the most unsettling thing I've ever encountered. There's no one to turn to, no one that I care about that will tell me I didn't completely fuck up this situation because . . . I have. I so absolutely have.

A light upstairs sends a glow across the patio, but my chair is in the shadows. It's on for a few minutes and I wonder what she's doing.

I imagine her washing her pretty face and pulling back her hair and putting on the little jumpsuit she wore when I was here before. She's probably crawling into bed with a magazine of some sort. Then the light goes off.

The darkness feels isolating and I start to feel sorry for myself. How am I, Branch "Lucky" Best, sitting on a fucking porch in the middle of nowhere with a woman inside who hates my guts?

Resting my head against the cushion, I let my muscles relax. It's only then, when I quiet my head, that I hear it.

My eyes shoot open and I sit up straight, craning my neck from side to side to figure out what it is.

My stomach drops, crashing spectacularly into hell, when I hear her muffled sobs coming from above me. Leaping to my feet, I turn to the windows, but they're dark. The closer I get to the house, her cries get just a touch louder.

Choking back a lump the size of Texas, I listen to her. Her tears wash away so much bullshit and my own fucked up ego and the situation looks so much different than it did a few minutes ago.

Here I sit, bitching and moaning about how awful this is for me, when it's her that must be terrified. I could ignore the whole thing, cut her a check at the end of the month, and be done with it if I wanted. She has to live with this. Have her body changed, her life altered, because she's a damn good person.

Despite the crazy things I've done, I've never really felt bad for any of it. Women know

what they're getting into with me.

She didn't do anything. She didn't ask for this. And she doesn't deserve it either.

I head to the front door and try the handle, but it's locked. Each window on the ground floor is latched tight too. I spring over the railing and jog to the back, to a little door that leads into a mudroom from the lake. Flicking the lever, it's locked.

"Shit."

Looking up, I see a little balcony off a room that I think is Finn's. There are four wooden posts that hold it in the air and I grab one and give it a good shake. It's solid.

"Here goes nothing."

I grip the wood with both hands and ascend the pole in the same way we do a rope in training. The rough material digs into my hands as I try to keep my sweaty palms from slipping and dropping me on my ass.

The dark night doesn't help, and I have a hard time seeing what's ahead of me, but I reach the floor above a little quicker than I anticipate.

Working my hands to grab the edge of the balcony, I pull my weight up, groaning so hard I swear I bust a blood vessel in my face, then I collapse over the handrail and onto the planks.

Sucking in breath after breath, I lay on my back for a second to make sure I'm not dead. I bring one hand inches from my face and feel the warmth of blood trickling down my palm.

"Great," I groan, getting to my feet. With a press of the lever on the door, I sigh in relief as it swings free.

The room is dark, but I can see through to the hallway. A little light is plugged in out there and I feel my way through until I'm in the hall. The room I stayed in is two doors on my left and Layla's is three on my right.

My heart thunders as I realize she could shoot me or scream bloody murder and I don't know what to do to not completely freak her out over my breaking and entering. But when I hear her sobs coming from her room, I forget about all that and knock gently on the door.

"Layla, it's me."

I hear a rustle of blankets and the cries stop.

"It's Branch. I'm going to open the door, okay? Don't shoot me."

I give her a moment to tell me no, but she doesn't. Carefully, slowly, I move the door into her room. My hand drops to my side when I see her thanks to the glow of a candle from a desk a few feet away.

She's lying on her bed, blankets pulled tight around her. Tears trickle down her cheeks as she watches me come into her room.

She looks so small in the bed, so frightened like a storm is coming that might take her life. Only . . . I am the storm in her opinion and that pummels me.

There are so many things I want to say—things I didn't even come up here *to* say. Things I didn't even realize I felt. Things that feel absolutely necessary to get out at this moment, yet I can't. The look of misery on her face stops me and all that matters right now is *her*.

The girl from that weekend, the one I couldn't stop thinking about, the one whose laugh made me feel alive and spontaneous fed something that was dormant inside me for a long time, is hurt because of me. Because I'm an asshole.

I wait for her to tell me to fuck off as I pad across the carpeted floor of her bedroom and expect her to slap me across the face as I kneel at the side of her bed. Assuming she's going to rip into me, I lay my left arm around her narrow hips and slide her to the edge with a frazzled breath. There's no way I don't believe she won't tell me what a dickhead I am as I pull her into

my chest.

But none of that happens.

Her cries are hushed against the fabric of my shirt, the same fabric she knots up in her hands. She shakes as she empties her soul into the cotton blend and presses her knuckles firmly into my chest, biting at my skin.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I hold her tight. Saying anything seems wrong and probably would be wrong because this is all new to me. This is territory I'd have to ask Finn about, and he won't speak to me.

Little by little, her hands ease on my shirt and her stifled sounds become quieter until she's completely still and quiet in my arms.

I scoot her back from the edge and tuck the blankets around her once more. She snuggles into the sheets. Rocking back on my heels, she lies motionless before me. She's so goddamn sweet, so simply perfect that I remember just a few days ago I was angling every which way just to see her again.

"You are a fool," I whisper to myself as I get to my feet.

Knowing I shouldn't, but being the rule breaker that I am, I bend forward and plant a single kiss to her cheek. "I *am* sorry," I whisper against her skin. "We'll figure this out. I promise."

With a final look at her tucked in bed, I leave her room and let myself out the front door into the night.

Chapter 22

Layla

Squinting at the brightness of the sun, I yawn and then rub my eyes to try to wake up. My face feels puffy and I pause, remembering Branch getting inside somehow last night.

The softness of his touch, the tenderness in his arms as he held me against his sturdy chest, is so fresh in my mind. He didn't have to do that . . . but he did.

After a quick scan of my room, the only thing I see is that I'm alone and the only thing I hear is the outright pounding of my heart.

It almost feels like I dreamed it, like I needed comfort so much I made it up in my mind, but I smell his cologne on my hands and I know he was here.

Maybe he still is.

Yanking back the blankets, I climb out and head to the window. His car is parked next to mine, lined up in a row like it's supposed to be there.

"Fuck," I mutter, not sure how I feel about that or what it means or where he is or what *that* means. "Why does this have to be so complicated?"

Switching from my long nightshirt into a cute and easy denim romper, I race to the bathroom and wash up and get my hair into some semblance of tidiness.

I peek into the room he stayed in before and it's undisturbed. Door to door, I glance into each bedroom, bathroom, and even closet to find them all empty of life.

The energy coursing through my veins has my head buzzing. I sweep the living room as I go by but it's empty. So is the kitchen. There are no traces of Branch in the entire house.

The front door is unlocked when I try the handle and I tug it open. Stepping onto the patio, I freeze in my tracks.

My heart pulls in my chest, a smile breaking across my cheeks as I spy him.

Branch is sitting on a chaise lounge up against the house, an Illinois Legends hat sitting over his face. His big, bulky arms are folded across his chest and one sneaker-clad foot is crossed over the other.

I want to pretend he stayed for me and that he didn't just sit down and pass out from the stress of the last couple of days plus the trip up here. But dashed hopes are a hateful thing that I try to avoid if I can and how do I have any grounds to hope he cares at all about me? It will be easier if he doesn't anyway.

Even so, I can't deny the relief that he didn't just walk away last night like he could've so easily done and that he did even more by coming into my room and just being *present*. That means a lot. If I'm going to roast him for all of his mistakes, I need to give him a little teeny-tiny bit of credit for the good moves too.

Scooting his legs over to make room for my bottom, I take him in one last time before I lift his hat off his face. He makes a sour grimace, groaning as the morning sun shines in his eyes. Once he gets them open enough to see me, he's awake.

"Good morning," I say, each word calculated.

"Good morning." His voice is gravelly, rougher than I've ever heard it. He clears his throat. "You mad?"

"At you?"

“Of course at me.”

His face tells the tale of a long, hard night. I know the look. I wear it often these days too. The judgmental glare, the lines of anger that have been around his mouth are gone, and in their place is an aura of concern.

“What happened to your face? For real?” I ask, reaching out and touching the corner of his eye.

He flinches. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You have blood caked in your lashes. It must’ve bled while you slept.” He looks up at me through those very same lashes like he’s not sure what to make of me.

I sigh, frustrated at what I’m about to say. “Come on.”

I stand and wait on him to follow. He doesn’t. He just sits in the chair with a bewildered look on his face.

“What?” I ask. “You need a hot shower and I need coffee. Decaf. God, I hate decaf.”

“Why are you drinking decaf if you hate it?”

“Because caffeine in the amounts I need to feel decent aren’t good for my baby.”

As soon as I say it, I realize it’s his baby too. I also realize he picks up on my word choice, but chooses not to say anything about it. Instead, he cocks his head to the side.

“Are you mad at me?” he asks.

“Will you stop acting like a child?” I ask.

He stands, pulling his hat over his head to cover the messy blond locks sticking up every which way. “Fine. Lead the way.”

I head to the house and hear his footsteps behind me. He shuts the door, the sound echoing through the house, as I enter the kitchen and rummage around in the refrigerator.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

“Never ask a pregnant woman that.”

“Okayyyy. So . . . what are you hungry for?”

“A hot ham and cheese, if it matters, and I don’t have either thing.”

The doorbell rings and Branch and I look at each other. Without saying a word, I walk by him and see Henry on the other side carrying a large cardboard box.

“Well, good morning,” I say, taking the proffered carton. “How’d you know I was here?”

“Mrs. Brasher called from down the road. Said you came up alone and could probably use some groceries.”

“Oh, Henry,” I say, leaning on my tiptoes and kissing his cheeks. “You’re so sweet. Rachel is a lucky woman.”

“I’ll tell her you said so,” he chuckles. “If you need anything else, you call me. My number is pinned on the corkboard in the laundry room.”

“I will. Thanks again, Henry.”

“Is everything all right, Layla girl? I saw another car out front and Mrs. Brasher said you were alone . . .”

“I’m fine,” I assure him. “If I need anything, you’ll get a call.”

“I’d better. Have a good day, darlin’.”

Heading back to the kitchen, I plop the box on the counter. Pulling the items out one-by-one, I look up at Branch. “Guess we have things for breakfast.”

He smiles at the implied offer and I kick myself for saying it so easily. “You have food delivery out here?”

“No. That was Henry.”

“Who’s Henry?”

“He takes care of the cabin when we aren’t here. Mows the grass, maintains our dock, does little fix-it projects here and there. Basic stuff.”

“I see.” He leans against the chair, watching me unpack the box. “Can I help you with something? I can’t cook worth shit, but I can pour juice like a champ.”

“Why don’t you get a shower?” I offer. “I’ll put something together while you’re gone.”

“I can help you. You don’t have to cook for me.”

“I know. It’s really just a way to get you out of here faster.”

He doesn’t seem to believe me and heads up the stairs with a smug grin on his face. I flip him off as soon as he’s out of sight, the little bout of immature rebellion cathartic.

Scrambling a pan of eggs and cooking sausage patties keeps me busy for the next twenty minutes. The rafters above me squeal as Branch gets in and out of the shower, a little reminder that a conversation is still going to be had and just thinking about it makes me almost drop the patties onto the floor.

“That smells good,” he says, coming around the corner.

I look up from the table and almost drop the glass of juice in my hand. He’s shirtless, a pair of Finn’s black joggers on his legs, and a white towel running over his hair.

“Have a seat,” I say, turning away to keep myself focused. I busy myself grabbing my vitamins from my purse before heading back to the table and taking a seat at the opposite end.

He smells crisp and clean, and despite the black eye, he looks divine.

“Did you sleep okay?” he asks, picking up his fork.

“Yes. Did you?”

“I slept like shit. That chair isn’t made for a night’s sleep.”

“Could’ve gone home,” I shrug.

His fork clamors against the table, the sound making me jump. He holds my gaze hostage, a plethora of emotions warring in his eyes. As he swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing, he seems to have made a decision and that scares me.

I hold my breath, anticipating his words.

“Look, Layla, I want to apologize.”

“You already have.”

He rolls his eyes and leans back in his chair, clearly perturbed. “No, I haven’t.”

“This will be easier for both of us if we find a middle ground to be friendly,” I say. “It’ll be good to have a rapport, but our chilling out has made this a little awkward.”

“No, me being an asshole did. I’ve given you a bunch of half-assed apologies that haven’t meant jack shit. You know it and I know it.”

This is not what I was expecting. I drop my utensil too and place my hands in my lap. Something tells me this one is different, but I want him to have to say it.

“What are you sorry for, Branch? Why is this half-assed apology any different than the others you’ve half-assed?”

Although my questions are legitimate and I don’t feel sorry for asking, I do have a kink in my throat at the look of sorrow etched on his face.

I hate it. I’d give anything in the world to have him sitting across from me laughing, telling me some cocky story or some filthy thing he wants to do to me. Hell, I’d even take teasing about the sex therapy card.

“I’m sorry for a lot of things,” he says, his tone clear. “I’m sorry for not being more careful. I’m sorry for betraying your brother. I’m sorry for being such a fuck-up in the first place that

Finn would rather kill me than see you end up tied to me.”

My mouth opens, words primed on my lips, but he stops me with a single look.

“This black eye came from Finn,” he says. “And I’m lucky he didn’t pop the other one too.”

“Finn did that?”

“Yeah. He did. And I can’t blame him. If you were my sister, I’d hate to think you were fucking around with me.”

“He shouldn’t have done that. It’s not going to help anything,” I gulp. “I’m sorry, Branch.”

His laugh catches me off-guard. “Would it be weird to say that it felt good?”

“Um, yeah. That would be very weird.”

“Well, it did. It kind of snapped me back to reality a little. Or a lot,” he says, looking around the room. “I did pull a complete dick move on him.”

“No, you pulled the dick on me and then turned into one.”

He half-grins. “That’s what caused this situation.”

“That you turned into a dick? Or that you fucked me? Either way, and regardless how complicit I was in the second fucking, I’m still blaming it on you.”

“I wasn’t referring to either, actually,” he chuckles. “I was referring to your sense of humor.”

Searching for a comeback, I find nothing.

“That’s a lie. I think it was your ass first, then the sense of humor,” he cracks.

“Branch, shut up,” I say, not able to hide a laugh of my own.

“You know what I’m really sorry for?” he asks, undeterred. “I’m sorry for acting like a bitch.”

There’s no chance I have a response for that, and I’m not sure he expects one. Over our plates of sausage and eggs that are growing colder by the minute, the chill that settled between us since I told him I was pregnant begins to warm.

“I can’t blame you if you want me to hit the road and just send child support payments, Layla. I don’t know how to be a dad or even be responsible for myself sometimes. I just keep seeing you hating me down the line and this situation turning ugly.” His eyes darken, his lips forming a thin line. “Listening to you cry last night made me feel like a complete and utter piece of shit.”

My breathing halts, my body unable to process functions necessary for life and Branch’s words at the same time. A bubble swells in my stomach, the one that usually predicates tears or a nervous giggle or some other reaction to whatever stimuli is in front of me.

“Branch, you aren’t a piece of shit,” I gulp, relieved that I actually believe that.

“I am. I was. And for *that*, I’m sorry. You deserve better than what I’ve been.”

“You’re right,” I say, my voice low. “I do deserve better than what you’ve been. I have all of these monumental things to think about and I was scared to even tell you and then you said the things you did and . . . that’s hard to forget.”

He hangs his head.

“I don’t blame you for feeling the way you do, but I do hate that you reacted the way you did and made me feel like this was some big plot to take over your life or something.”

“Layla—”

“But,” I say, cutting him off, “I know this is a shock. It’s nothing you wanted, especially from me, a girl you slept with once. I can’t blame you for not being excited or even neutral about it and maybe *I’m* wrong and should apologize for putting expectations on you.”

His head shakes back-and-forth as he lifts his chin. “For what it matters, I didn’t want this.

But it's not fair to say I didn't want this *especially with you*. I just didn't have this on my five-year plan. Hell, maybe not my ten-year."

"I didn't either."

I pick up my fork and push the eggs around my plate.

"I play professional ball, Layla. Nothing in my life is predictable or even solid. My contract could get traded and I could be on a plane across the country on a whim. That's part of the reason why I haven't wanted to start a family or settle down. Why would I? Why would I just add another thing on my plate that I can't control?"

"I understand," I whisper.

He tugs at his hair, clearly stressed and that stresses me.

"It's more than that," he groans. "I see this eat people up and spit them out. My instincts scream to keep you far, far away from this madness."

"I can take care of myself, Branch."

"This isn't casual fucking anymore," he points out. "You can't just decide you can't take it and walk. You're tied to me now. You've just bought into this world that you shouldn't be in and now I'm responsible for it."

We sit across from each other, the air in the room heavy. My shoulders sag with the weight of his words. He looks at me after a long while, studying my face. The somberness drifts from his eyes and is replaced with the tenderness that makes me weak.

"For what it's worth," he says quietly, "if this was going to happen, I'm happy it was with you. At least we kind of like each other, right?"

"Yeah, my ass and my sense of humor," I deadpan. "I'm sorry to say both of those are going to get worse as the days go on."

"That shouldn't be something I laugh at . . ." His voice trails off, replaced by a chuckle.

I narrow my eyes. "You're right. You shouldn't. Because you know what they say?"

"No, what do they say?"

"The daddy's gain weight too."

It's like a fireman's hose douses us with bone-chilling cold water. All levity is gone, whatever easiness we've managed to sneak into this conversation is out the window.

"I'm going to be a dad," he says, more to himself than anything. "That sounds so . . . Wow." Blowing out a breath, he leans back in his chair. "This is kind of terrifying."

"I don't expect anything from you. I want you to know that."

"That makes me feel like a complete loser."

"I don't mean it like that," I say, sitting back in my own chair. "I don't mean I don't *need* anything from you . . ."

He lifts a brow. "What do you want from me?"

Glancing around the room—at anything but him—I try to form a response. It's such a loaded question, one that I can't seem to take the bullets out of.

In a perfect world, I'd want so much from Branch. I'd dream of those things. This world is so far from perfect that I can't even go out on that limb. The entire tree might break.

"What do you want from me, Layla?"

"I don't need anything from you," I say, forcing a swallow.

"That's fine. But what do you *want*?"

Confused as to why he just won't let this go, my emotions build higher and higher and I shove my plate away. "I can't want anything from you."

He pushes back from the table and licks his lips. Taking a deep breath, he blows it out

slowly. “What can I do to make this easier for you? What’s my job, my role? Give me directions and be clear so I don’t fuck it up.”

“Be nice,” I say, shrugging my shoulders. “That’s the main thing.”

“I can be nice, but as far as the rest . . . I’m not gonna lie—it feels like I was forced into a game with no playbook.”

“I think that’s pretty normal,” I laugh. “If not, I’m as screwed as you.”

My hand falls on my belly, a new habit of mine, and Branch’s gaze follows the movement. When he looks back at my face, his expression is totally different.

“Come on,” he says, standing.

“Where to?”

“You told me to be nice and you also told me you wanted a ham and cheese.”

“But I made breakfast.”

“And now it’s cold because some asshole had to spend fifteen minutes rambling apologies.” With his bottom lip between his teeth, he carefully extends a hand. “Let’s go get you a sandwich.”

Chapter 23

Layla

“Hi, Layla!” Ruby, the little old lady that works in Linton’s miniscule library waves at me from the top step. “How have you been?”

“Good, thank you. How about you?”

She rambles on about her arthritis and the turnout for the preschool arts and crafts program and how it’s been low and she wants to turn it around. She goes on and on. I try to nod as best I can and seem interested and not like I’m listening to Branch standing behind me whispering that she looks like the old lady from some cartoon he used to watch as a child.

“I’m glad to hear it,” I say when I can find a moment to cut in. “We need to get going, Ruby. Take care.”

“You too. Good to see ya.” And with a wave, she disappears inside the library.

Branch and I turn the corner and start up Main Street. On each corner is a big pot fashioned to look like a basket filled with flowers. There’s a little plaque on the front of each one with the name of the citizen that volunteers their time maintaining that particular arrangement.

American flags hang off the streetlights, fluttering in the warm afternoon sun over the street. Mix in the smells of Carlson’s Bakery and the sounds of the children two streets over at the town pool and it’s the perfect summer day.

“What’s that smell?” Branch asks, wrinkling his nose. “It smells like heaven.”

“That’s the coffee cake at Carlson’s. They use butterscotch pudding in the cake and it’s seriously divine.”

“Want to get some?”

“I just had a hot ham and cheese sandwich, a pickle spear, and a side of home fries. Do you think I need coffee cake?”

He considers this as we walk along. “Will it make you happy?”

“Yeah, but I don’t need it.”

“My job isn’t to decide what you need. It’s to make you happy.”

Blushing, I kick a pebble and watch it roll into the gutter. “I think I said it’s for you to be nice.”

“Doesn’t me being nice make you happy?” he asks.

“Yes. Mostly. But it also makes it harder,” I admit, looking at him out of the corner of my eye. “Could you be likeable yet irritating? Can you find that balance?”

He laughs, leading me to Beecher Street. It’s a little side street that houses a few businesses and lots of little homes built in the early nineteen hundreds. The houses have hanging ferns dangling from porches and yapping dogs in the yards. It’s adorable.

Beecher Street rises as we reach the middle and sitting on top of the crest is a railroad track. On the other side is the only doctor’s office in town, the post office, and Crave.

As we near the bar, Branch shoves his hands in his pockets. “I want to tell you something.”

“Okay.”

“I guess it’s half tell you, half ask you.”

“Okay,” I laugh.

“When you left the cabin that weekend,” he starts slowly, “you saw something online about

me, didn't you?"

The image of him with that girl on his lap, one I'd mostly forgotten since the appointment with Bai, pops in my brain. My stomach churns.

"I thought so," he mumbles.

"It doesn't matter," I point out. "You and I were nothing then. We're nothing now," I add for good measure.

"Then why did you leave?"

"Let me ask *you* a question."

He doesn't answer, but gives me a look like he's not sure he wants to go this route. I go on anyway.

"What if the night you and Finn went to Crave, Poppy and I had gone out and I had slept with someone? And then you and I still hooked up the next day like we did. How would you feel about that the next morning?"

"Well," he draws out. "I've actually been in that position more times than I care to admit."

Curling my lip, I try not to show my total disgust.

"I'll be honest, it didn't generally bother me because I didn't expect to see that girl again anyway," he admits.

"Well, all right then."

"What do you think happens on road trips, Layla? Hell, there are guys on my team that have little set-ups for each city in our league. There's a girl in every zip code we routinely go to just waiting for that direct message."

"That. Is. Disgusting."

He laughs. "That. Is. Life. On. The. Road. Sure, there are guys out there who avoid it. There are a few—very few—that have something at home strong enough to keep their dick dry. The rest just do what they can to not give their wife enough ammo to void the pre-nup."

I shiver before I realize it, imagining living a life like that. Constantly worried. Constantly second-guessing. Constantly having your self-esteem whittled away. Just thinking about a life marred with insecurity and self-doubt makes me anxious.

"Callum didn't make it out to be that bad," I admit. "Lord, now I only imagine how dry his dick was *not* while we were together."

Branch laughs. "I'm sure it wasn't. But now you know why the league divorce rate is over eighty percent."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Afraid not. Doesn't seem fair, does it? To anyone. It's fucked up on so many levels."

We stop in front of a little bench at the end of a dead end street that faces the water's edge. Branch sits and I follow suit.

"That's why I won't get married. Not at least until I retire." He looks at me out of the corner of his eye, gauging my response. "I don't want that on my conscience, and I don't feel like it's a good thing to do to someone, especially if you think you like them enough to consider such a thing."

He strokes his chin. "There's this guy on the team. He was married, had the cutest little boy, right? They used to have me over for barbecues and whatever. He had a great set-up. Then he got swept away in all the press when we won the championship. Next thing I know, he's got his side piece an apartment close to mine and she's picked up dick because he's not paying attention to home. They're both ruined. It's awful."

"I don't even know what to say to that."

"It seems ridiculous with my reputation, I know, but it *is* responsible to not be responsible. I make no promises, no commitments, and no one gets seriously hurt because it's not serious."

I don't give him a lot to go on. I just watch him blankly, processing everything he's told me and well aware that he didn't answer my original question. Like he reads my mind, he grins.

"Your original proposed situation had you and Poppy going out and *you* fucking around with someone, not a random girl doing it," he says softly. "When I think about it in that light . . . I'd have been pissed."

"Why?"

He considers this. "A competition thing, I guess. It would've bothered me to think someone else had you and you were comparing us or maybe you were thinking of him and not me."

"Exactly," I say, giving him a shy smile. "But I wouldn't say I was pissed."

"What were you then?"

"I was embarrassed, I think."

"By what?" he blurts, a laugh in his voice. "What could you possibly have been embarrassed about?"

"That I was a number," I say, slipping a laugh in my voice too. "Same reason as you, I guess, I'm just a little less confident about it."

"For what it's worth and it may be worth nothing, but I didn't fuck that girl that night."

I don't want to be relieved, but there's no denying the sigh that escapes my lips. "So you didn't do anything with her?"

"I didn't say that, but I didn't sleep with her. I'm not going to lie to you, even if it's not what you want to hear. I also didn't sleep with Selma Puress. Just throwing that out there in case you saw a picture online."

Looking straight ahead, I just nod.

"I know what that sounds like, but I didn't realize I'd be explaining myself later."

"Why are you?" I look at him, my brows pulled together. "Why are you telling me this, Branch?"

He shrugs and looks at the water. "I don't know. Maybe it felt like it mattered."

"Do you think I want to hear that? I mean, I can't get mad at you and you certainly weren't wrong, but that doesn't mean I want to hear some girl had her lips around your cock hours before you stuck it in me."

"Gee, just put it out there bluntly, why don't you?" he grins.

"Why mince words?"

He looks at the sky, a softness on his rugged features. "Maybe," he breathes, "maybe it bothered me to consider you thought I just wrote you off like another girl."

"But didn't you?"

"Depends how you look at it. Did I think I'd be back here? Hell, no. But I knew from the moment you got out of that car and shook my hand that I was going to have a hard time putting you in a box, you know?"

"I hate boxes, if you'll remember," I say, referring back to our unpacking conversation.

He laughs. "This is what I mean. The more time I spent with you, the more I wanted to spend even more. Even that first night, the night we went to Crave, if I could've gotten Finn to let me stay behind with you, I would've."

His words are sweet and maybe even what I want to hear. Still, it's just another one of those things that will make it even more painful when I'm home with the baby and he's sleeping with half of Detroit or wherever they are.

“This conversation seems a little too deep for late morning,” I say, getting up and starting down the sidewalk. He follows a step behind, giving me the space he can tell I need.

His words at any other point in my life would’ve left a huge grin on my face and maybe even had me riding his cock if the timing was right. But with it following up the words that he’ll never be serious, never settle down, until he’s out of the league? That makes it a little less sweet being that I’m pregnant with his child.

Whatever I had vaguely hoped in the back of my mind is now erased and the stark reality of the world I live in is blindingly bright. All I can hope for is for Branch to love his child and for us to co-parent to some extent.

We reach his car and he opens my door. “Want to get some coffee cake?” he asks.

“Is this your plan? Feed me to keep me happy?”

I sink into the plush leather seats that he helped adjust until it was at the perfect position for me before we left.

“I’ve noticed that you’re more manageable with a plate of food in front of you,” he winks.

“Branch?”

“Yeah, Sunshine?”

I take in the way the sun reflects on his hair and the way his eyes look even bluer than normal when he’s wearing a white shirt.

“I’m going to need two slices—one for now and one for the middle of the night.”

His laughter trickles through the car as he shuts the door.

Chapter 24

Branch

The television glows on the wall in front of us, hanging on a stone fireplace. Below it is a mantle with pictures from the Miller family at various stages of their lives. Pictures of Finn and Layla on boats as babies, then on the sand as toddlers, even at past Water Festivals. It's a restful ambiance that I could appreciate if I could stop looking at her.

Layla sits on a sofa a few feet away, a book in her lap.

After our early lunch in town and walk through the streets, we stopped at the lake on our way back to the cabin and sat on the sand. We didn't talk much, but sort of each processed what had already been said.

Just sitting next to her, being in her air space, makes me feel . . . well, it makes me feel like I want to stay here. I find myself waiting to hear her laugh or for her to say something I can play off and start a conversation. It's weird. I'm not the converse-with-women type of guy unless it means their tongue is against my cock while I tell them how hard to suck it.

Not with her though. That confuses me.

"Did you see that?" she giggles.

Shaking out of my daze, I look up. "I didn't. What happened?"

She sighs. "You've been somewhere else mentally a lot tonight."

"Yeah, well, I guess I have a lot on my mind."

She nods, like she's reminded that the weight of the world is on her shoulders. Picking up her book, her grin is gone.

"Hey," I say, waiting until she looks at me again. When she finally does, I realize I have no follow-up. "Um, what are you reading?" I stammer.

"A book about pregnancy." She holds the paperback up and shows me the cover. It's a patchwork of pastel colors with rattles and bottles and these pins with little pink bows on top. "This is my first rodeo, you know."

"What are you learning?"

"To not watch labor and delivery images and not to read the stories," she laughs. "If they showed you this before you had sex, it would effective birth control."

"Guess we're a little too late for that, huh?"

"I guess so." Something washes across her face as she sets the book beside her. "I haven't said this yet, but thank you for coming up here. I didn't expect you to and—"

"Stop."

She squirms in her seat as I grab the remote and flip the television off.

"Don't thank me for doing the right thing," I say.

"I just want you to know I appreciate it."

"I appreciate you not punching me in my good eye," I chuckle. "As unexpected as it is, we're having a baby. That means we are going to be on the same team for a while. And if you want to sit in the stands with me to cheer him on when he takes over the ol' eleven jersey for the Legends, it'll be a few years longer."

"It's a girl," she says off-handedly, turning her nose a little into the air.

"It's a boy," I tell her.

“How would you know? You don’t know anything about this.”

“Maybe not, but I can predict the future.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yup. He’s going to have blond hair like me and golden eyes like you. He’ll have your wit and my athletic ability.”

“Hey, now,” she says, wagging a finger my way. “My brother is Finn Miller. I have some damn good athletic genes too.”

“Meh.”

She throws a pillow at me. I catch it mid-air and toss it back at her. Because she had turned away, it hits the side of her face.

Her laughter fills the air, the worry lines on her face from today all but gone. That is, until she moves her neck to the side and flinches.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“Oh, nothing. I hurt my neck a few weeks ago and it’s hurt ever since.”

“What did you do to it?”

“I don’t know.”

I catch the blush of her cheeks and her hesitation to look me straight in the eye. “Layla . . .”

“Stop, Branch.”

“What happened?” I say in a sing-song voice. “Sounds like a good story.”

Her lips quiver as she finds her resolve. When she faces me, the little vixen I’ve seen before is back. “Well,” she says, “I was with this guy, right? And he had me up on all fours on this patio chair at our lake house and—”

“Better stop there.”

“But I was just getting to the good part.”

“Oh, Sunshine. I remember the good part.”

We exchange a knowing smile before she moves her head and winces again.

“Turn around,” I tell her, moving off the chair and onto the sofa beside her.

“Why?”

“Just turn around,” I chuckle. “Don’t you trust me?”

“Um . . .”

Shaking my head, I lay a hand on her shoulder and gently encourage her to turn away from me. Finally, she gives in, shifting until she’s sitting facing the wall.

My heart beats in my throat, a steady strum as I lean in and breathe in a scent that’s pure Layla—a sweet smell of pineapples and the warmth of vanilla. I think I could get high on it if I breathed it in for long. It’s a risk I’d be willing to take.

Bundling her hair in one hand, I try to figure out what to do with it. She reaches back, a brown elastic in her hand.

“Let me pull it up,” she says.

Instead, I remove the tie from her fingers. She stills as I work the bunched strands up higher on her head and then twist the elastic around it a few times until it stays.

I’ve done a lot things with women. A lot of things so crazy I wouldn’t admit to them, a lot of things done both publicly and privately. But this simple exchange feels the most intimate out of all of them and I’m not even touching her.

She sits patiently, waiting for me to do whatever it is I’m going to do. Her profile is perfect with her long, thick lashes, button nose, and soft, smooth lines.

For the first time in a few days, she’s just Layla. She’s the same woman I met a while back

and enjoyed the hell out of in so many ways. She's the smart and gorgeous and easygoing girl that doesn't give a shit I'm a wide-out on the Legends or on the cover of three magazines this month. She's . . . her.

My hands lay softly on her shoulders. Under my palms, they sink instead of tensing as I feared, her head falling to the side. My thumbs press against the back of her neck, her skin warm and supple against my own.

"Where does it hurt?" I say gently, working her dainty shoulders in my hands.

"Mostly in the back and on this side." She motions to her left, her fingertips brushing mine. Instead of pulling them away, she leaves them touching for a long moment.

I work on the spot she indicated, spending time on areas that she signals feels good. As I watch her reaction to me and feel my pulse find a steady rhythm, my anxiety starts to wane, a hint of a smile tickling my lips.

"I went to that birthday party just to see you," I say, pressing my thumbs against an area just below her neck.

"You did?"

"Yeah. I wanted to call you before that, but didn't really know how to work around your brother, and Poppy kept saying you were really busy."

She bends her neck farther, giving me more access. "Well, I didn't really want to see you. It seemed pointless. And then I was scared to see you."

Her admission, although understandable, twists something deep inside my chest. Imagining her so vulnerable and alone because of some reaction I might have, and did have, makes me want to kick myself.

"I wanted to spend more time with you," I admit, ignoring everything else. "I just wanted to toss a football around with you or eat some candy and tell stories."

She blows out a breath, grimacing a little as I rub out a knot. "I think we could've had fun together if so many things were different."

With a final press, I drop my hands. "If I would've called, you would've answered?"

Her chin dips just a touch. "Even though I knew it was a terrible idea for every practical reason, I would've. I don't think I could've refused."

"What do you think it would've been like?"

"Everything it can't be now."

"Why?"

I know the answer, I just want her to remind me. Maybe I even need her to remind me because being with her makes all those reasons get blurry.

"Now it can't be the easy, fun, sexy time it would've been before. Our relationship now is built on a baby, not orgasms."

"I'd say it was built on the orgasms, but maybe built up by the baby."

"However you want to look at it," she says, cracking a smile. "We're at a point that most people reach when they're in love and we aren't. That dooms us, I think. When things get hard or confusing or we're totally sleep-deprived, we don't have that connection to keep us working together and liking each other. Our foundation is as shaky as the orgasms that brought us together."

"Great, yet terrible, analogy."

She sighs. "Our only hope is to try to build a friendship over these next few months and figure out a good system to co-parent. That's the responsible thing, right?"

"Definitely."

Maybe.

* * * *

Layla

The silverware jingles in the drawer as I rummage for a fork. With only the stove light on, it's a little dim to be milling about. I could totally turn the chandelier on, but I like the ambiance of the low light in the middle of the night when I'm foraging for a snack.

Settling on a utensil, I open the container from the bakery. The kitchen fills with the smell of sweet cinnamon and as I dig into it, a sound filters in from the staircase. In a minute's time, Branch pads into the room, his hair sticking up, yawning.

"What time is it?" he asks.

"Two a.m.," I say, sticking a forkful of coffeecake into my mouth. "Why?"

"Just wondering."

I'm stopped when he takes the fork and shovels more cake in my mouth. Laughing, I chew it up and swallow.

"That wasn't very nice," I point out.

"You talk too much." He takes his own bite of the cake. "Damn. This is good."

"Told you. You should've bought your own slice." I take the fork out of his hand and scoop up another piece. "Why are you up?"

"I don't know. It's so quiet here. So dark. I love falling asleep to it like this, but if I wake up, I have a hard time going back to sleep. Is that weird?"

"Probably."

"I saw this show once where this guy would sneak in houses and, while people were asleep, he'd—"

"Stop!" I giggle, shoving him backward.

We still, our eyes locking, as my hand touches his chest. I force a swallow, my entire body tingling from the contact.

He shakes his head as he gets two glasses out of the cabinet. "Want a glass of milk?"

"Sure."

I watch as he pours us both a drink, his back muscles rippling even under the not-so-bright light. I imagine him waking up in the middle of the night to change a diaper or feed a baby and my heart swells, then falls because I won't see that.

"What are you thinking?" he asks with a quirked brow, handing me a glass.

"Nothing."

"Bullshit. You have this weird look on your face."

"I was watching you pour the milk and realized we'll be making lots of milk runs coming up in the middle of the night. We'll have to trade notes," I say, choking back a lump, "so we make sure we stay on the same schedule and stuff."

His lips twist together. "I might have to get a nanny. I've been thinking about it. I have to be at the complex at five in the morning. I'm gone all weekend every weekend through the season."

"I can keep the baby. I mean, you could come see it when you can."

"I don't want to be that guy," he sighs. "I don't want to be the dad who sees his kid twice a week."

I try to force a smile, but fail. "I've been thinking about moving up here."

“Here? It’s three hours from Chicago.”

“Hey, you told me not to let Callum start calling the shots,” I point out.

“I’m not Callum.”

I can’t help but laugh. “I know. I’m just thinking about it, mostly to take my mind off Finn calling tonight. I told him you were here, and I don’t really know how well that went over.”

“He thinks I’m the worst choice you could’ve made.”

“Except I really didn’t choose you.”

“You didn’t, probably because you were smart enough not to. I hate that I’m the one in between you. You have this awesome dynamic and then I come in and fuck it up. I can’t just mess up your life, I have to do his too.” He shakes his head. “I’m on a roll.”

“We’ll get it figured out before the baby comes.”

“What if I’m a shitty Dad?”

“What if I don’t know how to be a mom? What if we disagree on everything and you do one thing at your house and I do another at mine and the kid is all screwed up?”

He laughs, almost reaching for me, but he stops himself short. “As long as we agree on what’s important, we’ll do fine.”

“So, like, religion and non-GMO’s?”

He makes a face. “I was thinking like the Legends, the Tennessee Arrows baseball team, and Beau McCrae’s music.”

“Oh, Beau McCrae,” I say, fanning my face.

“Second thought—no McCrae.”

“I’m going to have to disagree on the Arrows too,” I say, loving the easy smile on his face.

“Ha. No. There’s no compromise there.”

“I used to love them until Lincoln Landry retired. Now I pull for the Lions.”

“No way. My son will *not* be a Lions fan.”

“Your *daughter* will do what her mother says.”

“You’re right about that,” he says, leaning against the cabinet. “My child, regardless of sex, will do what their mother says.”

My heart tugs at the look of sincerity in his eye. His lips upturn, an easy, sleep smile that I find myself hoping to see one day with a baby in his arms.

Shaking my head, I refocus. “I don’t know what to do about Finn.”

He lingers against the cabinet, quirking a brow. “I have to head back to the city tomorrow. I have an interview and a few appointments I have to get out of the way before the pre-season starts. Will you be okay here?”

“I’m leaving too, I think.” I toss the fork in the sink. “I have to get back into the real world and start making some plans.”

“Like what?”

“A lot of things . . .”

Not bothering to explain, I brush past him and head to my room. I hear him behind me, but he doesn’t say anything.

Pausing at my door, I feel him behind me.

“Night, Branch.”

“Night, Sunshine.”

Chapter 25

Branch

I pull my car into the driveway and kill the ignition. The last few hours have given me time to consider how to approach this subject and how to try to mend the fence that might just be irreparably broken.

A sprinkler kicks on as I make my way up the walkway, and I make a dash to the porch before getting doused. With a deep breath, I push the doorbell.

The little *pop, pop, pop* of the sprinkler head as it mists the entire yard frays my nerves. As footsteps become apparent on the other side of the dark wood decked out with a stained glass window, I steel myself.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Finn glares at me from the other side of the threshold.

“I want to talk to you.”

“Didn’t I tell you if you showed up here I’d call the police?”

“No,” I correct him. “You told me if you showed up to my house that I should call the police. You said nothing about me coming here.”

“Go home.”

“Finn, who is it?” Poppy appears at his side, her arm going to his bicep. She looks at me with a much warmer level of acceptance than her boyfriend. “Hey, Branch.”

“Hi, Pop.”

Finn isn’t amused by her cordiality or my willingness to act comfortable on his porch after being ordered to leave. His knuckles turn white as he grips the door and starts to swing it shut.

“Oh, is this how it is?” I ask, knowing I’m playing with fire. “You just write everyone off because you don’t like our choices. Good call, Finn.”

The door shoves away and he stands in the middle of the doorway. Poppy shifts to see around him.

“You want to know how it is?” he asks carefully. “This is how it is: you are not my friend. You have no idea what loyalty is or the respect that goes with a friendship. You took your little motto of doing whatever you damn well please and elbowed your way into my personal space. My sister’s fucking womb, you asshole.”

He takes a step back and narrows his eyes.

“If anyone in this world knows me, it’s you,” I tell him. “You’ve been at my side for the good, bad, and even the ugly ones.”

He almost smiles. Almost.

“But because you know me, you should know this: I fuck up. I make mistakes that are sometimes bigger than anyone thought possible. It’s my trademark. But so is my ability to make good on promises.”

“What are you getting at?”

“What I’m saying is I’ll take responsibility for that.”

“Um, I think Layla was more than gung-ho,” Poppy chimes in, a move that gets her a glare from Finn too. She just shrugs.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, looking at her. “I am Finn’s friend. I’m the one that should’ve seen the boundary and not crossed it. But I didn’t and that’s on me. I want you to know,” I say,

my gaze crossing back to Finn, “that I’ll do whatever I can to make sure I’m there for her.”

“What?” he snorts. “What’s that even mean?”

“I’ll let her take the lead and tell me what she needs and then make sure I do that. I don’t know what else to do.”

“I think that’s a great plan,” Poppy admits.

“You think that’s a great plan?” Finn snorts, looking down at her. “That Layla gets to figure it all out while he sits back with a checkbook? That she has to go through a pregnancy and have a baby she’s responsible for twenty-four seven while he’s out fucking a whore in every city on our schedule?”

Poppy raises a brow, a hand going to her hip. “I think I don’t like the tone you’re using with me.”

“Oh, you wanna fight now?” he asks her.

“No, I don’t wanna fight with you, but I sure as hell am not going to be talked to like I’m an idiot. I have faith that Lay and Branch can figure this out between themselves.”

“So you’re taking his side?”

“No. I’m taking Layla’s side.” Poppy strides through the living room and grabs her purse. She shoves her way past us and heads to her car. “You both need to have a little faith in our girl. And until you,” she says, glaring at Finn, “can get your head out of your ass, don’t come for mine.”

Her tires squeal as she takes off down the road. When I turn back to Finn, he’s still looking at the street.

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I came over here to apologize. You’re a great guy, a good friend, and a hell of a brother. I don’t want to get between the two of you.”

“You already did that.”

“I’m trying to fix that. I’m trying to make things better for her. I can’t do that and not be a part of her life, not talk to her at all. Don’t you see the position you’re putting me in?”

“Nah, you put yourself in this position,” he says, grabbing the door. “Go home, Branch. We’re done here.”

The door shuts, the Legends flag on the door bouncing, as I turn and head back to my car.

* * * *

Layla

“So you aren’t even knocking now?” I laugh as Poppy waltzes into my kitchen unannounced.

“I have a key. Why knock?” She sets her purse on a barstool then heads to the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of wine. “You can’t drink this anymore, so you don’t mind if do, right?”

“Sure . . .” I watch her remove the cork and lift the bottle straight to her lips. “Bad day?”

There’s no rush as she takes a few long, lingering drinks of the white wine. All I get as an answer is a slight nod of her head as she chugs the alcohol.

“Oh, I can’t wait to hear this,” I giggle.

Making a face and wiping her lips with the pretty kitchen towel on the stove—the one not meant for actual use—she sighs. “Finn and Branch just had a standoff.”

“Oh, God,” I groan. “What happened?”

“I was at Finn’s, sitting on his pool table while he . . . never mind,” she blushes. “And the

doorbell rang. So he . . . stops doing what he was doing and goes to answer it. It was Branch.”

She sets the bottle down and burps.

“Poppy. Really?”

“Don’t judge.”

“I withhold the right to bring this back up later,” I say, arching a brow. “But I’m too curious about what happened.”

“Right, so, Branch is at the door looking as suave as usual. Seriously, girl. Whew!”

I look at the ceiling and pray for patience.

“Anyway, he’s standing there, doing his best to ignore Finn’s hatefulness and Finn is just letting him know what a fuck-up he is.”

My head tips back farther.

“Finn’s going on and on, telling Branch to leave, that he doesn’t know anything about friendship while Branch is letting him have his say but telling him he’s going to prove that he’s a good guy and just made a mistake.”

“So I’m just a mistake now,” I say, feeling my spirits sink.

“See,” she says, climbing onto a stool beside me, “I don’t think that’s what he meant. I think he meant sort of messing with you under Finn’s nose was a mistake, but not that he was all that sorry for actually, you know, messing with you.”

I rest my head against her shoulder and she leans her head on mine. We sit in the quiet for a minute.

“I think you spilled wine on your shirt,” I say without bothering to look.

“I did, but just a drop.”

“My senses, especially smell, are on overdrive right now. It’s so weird.”

Sighing, I sit up and look at my friend. “How did it end with the two of them?”

“I don’t know. I left.”

“To give them space?”

“Nope. Because I pointed out to Finn that what Branch was saying made sense and he needed to give the two of you some room to figure it out. And Finn, being the dumbass he can be, got an attitude. So I left.”

Grinning as I imagine her laying into my brother, I laugh. “I bet that was something to see.”

“I’m always something to see. Anyway, enough of the bromance chronicles. Tell me about what happened in Linton with Branch.”

I go into a quick version of the important details, not wanting to get into it. It feels too intimate to share with anyone, even my best friend.

Poppy watches me tell the story and, in a very un-Pop like way, doesn’t rush me. She sits in her chair, her arms at her sides, and lets me talk for a good ten minutes.

When I’m finished, she leans on the counter. “Sounds like a good time.”

“It wasn’t bad. We ended up getting along and working a few things out,” I admit. “And I kind of hate that it wasn’t a mess.”

“Why would you hate that?”

I shrug. “I appreciate that we can get along, but it hurts to be in this situation. It’s like the more good memories, the more it stings.”

“Maybe it will develop into something,” she offers. “He was pretty clear to Finn that he wants to be there for you and the baby.”

“I know he will. I believe that. But . . . damn it. Why couldn’t I be having a baby with someone that I could build something with for me too?”

“You never know.”

“No, I do know,” I say, scooting off the stool and feeling my heart drop right with my feet. “He made it clear he wants to be there for the baby and for me as its mother. Done. He even went so far as to tell me what the road was like and how many girls are at their disposal and how that’s not fair to the women who marry the players in their league.”

She stands and leans against the cabinet. “That tells me he’s aware.”

“Aware of what?”

“Of life. Of reality. That’s a good thing, Lay.” She laces her fingers together. “He doesn’t want to hurt you. Obviously. Wouldn’t you rather him be honest like this than just go through the motions and then ‘go through the motions’ with road bitches?”

“I guess.”

“You don’t guess,” she scoffs. “You know. This means he’s more mature than I think any of us thought. He’s pondered these things. That’s more than most guys do until it’s too late.”

“True. But you know what? We’re missing the point.”

“Which is . . .”

“Which is,” I say, grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge, “that I don’t even want that life. I don’t want to be with a guy I can’t trust. I don’t want to worry about what he’s doing and who he’s doing and what will be said in the rag mags. I want to be cuddled up on the sofa next to him, our baby on our laps, watching the news and eating ice cream.”

She sighs. “Can you imagine him with a baby? God, my ovaries.”

“He was standing in the kitchen last night, pouring us a glass of milk. All I could think about was how sexy he would look making a bottle, you know? Then it occurred to me I’d probably never see that.” I rest my forehead on the cool counter. “This is so confusing.”

Her hand finds the back of my head. “You just relax and take care of my little goddaughter. I’m going to get us some sandwiches and we are going to eat and watch television and forget about boys.”

“This is why I love ya, Poppy.”

“I know.”

Chapter 26

Layla

Ring!

My head shoots off the island counter, the bar stool wobbling beneath me so hard I think I'm going to fall. I clamor down, rubbing my eyes, trying to figure out where I am.

The phone continues to ring as I get my bearings, the sky outside the kitchen window dark. Glancing at the clock, it's just past ten. The last I knew it was eight-thirty when I sat down to work on an advertising contract.

Ring!

"Shit," I grumble, grabbing my lit-up phone and pulling it to my ear. "Hello?"

"Hey." His voice is quiet, warm like a fleece blanket on a cold winter night. "Were you asleep?"

"Yeah. I fell asleep in the kitchen. Must've been tired."

"Are you getting enough sleep? Eating enough?" he chuckles. "We know you're eating enough."

"Go to hell," I laugh, yawning. "I was up late last night. Guess I can't be doing that anymore."

"What were you doing?"

"A little of this, a little of that."

"Huh." He takes a deep breath, blowing out slowly. "I just wanted to check on you. See how you were doing. I haven't talked to you since yesterday afternoon."

His sincerity is on the surface, not at all hidden. The tenor of his voice gentler than I have heard. There's an intimacy to it that causes me to fall back into the cabinet.

"I'm good. Hanging in there, you know?" I say. "How are you?"

"Just finished a workout and dinner."

"What did you have?"

"I threw some chicken breasts in the oven. Nothing fancy."

"I'm impressed. I don't even bake chicken breasts. I just buy them in the deli," I laugh.

"You need to eat red meat more than chicken. The iron is good for you and the baby."

My jaw drops. "What?"

"I . . . um . . . I was asking the nutritionist today that we work with at the Legends facility. She said to make sure you're eating lots of iron and folate and calcium. There's a delivery service where you can order plans especially for pregnant women and—"

"Branch. I'm good," I say softly. "I know what to do."

"I just want to help."

His words hit my heart, but it's the way he says it that slays me. Tears flicker in my eyes, making the lights look like kaleidoscopes. "I really appreciate that."

"I hope you don't get mad," he says, a hitch in his voice, "but I ordered you five boxes a week. They'll be delivered. If you don't like what they send, you can go online and customize them. But I thought, you know, maybe it would make things a little easier for you."

"That's super sweet," I whisper.

There's a pause in the conversation, not exactly an awkward moment, but one we haven't

traversed yet. It's born more out of respect and consideration than a failure to know what to say.

"I go to the doctor the day after tomorrow," I tell him. "If you want to go, you can, but you totally don't have to. I'll let you know whatever they say."

"What time is it?"

"Four."

"I'd like to go, if you don't mind."

My cheeks break into a grin. Heading down the hallway, I flop onto my bed, one hand on my stomach. "Want to meet me there?"

"Could I pick you up?" he asks. "Maybe we could grab dinner or something? I don't know. It just feels like something we should do together, right? Or am I wrong?"

"I'd like that."

"Good." He clears his throat. "So, did you ever get your boxes unpacked?"

Looking around my room, I see the stacks of cardboard. Some are empty, some are full, and I have no energy to care. "No. They're still looking at me. Some of them, anyway. I've decided you might be right and I'll just trash them."

He laughs. "We can have a bonfire together. Just burn it all to the ground."

"Sounds better than unpacking at the moment," I yawn. "A lot of it is just extra stuff for the guest room—baby's room, I guess, now—and things that I have nowhere to put."

"I'm going to have to get one of these rooms ready for a baby. How do I do that?"

"I don't know," I admit. "A crib. A changing table, maybe, if you'll use it. I don't think a baby really needs that much. A lot of people just get excited and want to buy it all."

"What camp do you fall in—buy it or don't buy it?"

"My heart says buy it but my budget says don't," I admit. "I figure between the two of us, we'll have a good balance. I'll keep the baby frugal and you can spoil it."

"A guy in the locker room today was showing this video of his kid in one of those cars that look like real cars, right? They're battery operated and they really drive them around. Have you seen these things?"

"Yes," I say, grinning at his excitement.

"Our kid is going to have a fucking fleet of those things."

We laugh, Branch's a little self-conscious and that makes my heart swell.

"Just try to save it for a birthday or Christmas," I suggest. "Don't just get things because it's a Tuesday."

"I'll try. No promises." He takes a deep breath. "I've been thinking about what it will be like when the baby comes. There's so much you don't think about until you think about it."

I lay the back of my hand across my forehead as I listen to him speak.

"You'll be a great mom, Sunshine."

"Thanks," I say around the lump in my throat. "Our baby will be lucky to have you as her dad."

There's a giant pause. "Thank you," he whispers.

"For what?"

"I don't know. For believing that I can do this. For not writing me off from day one or sticking it to me when I was a dick when you told me. You've definitely proved you're the better person, but it's not like we didn't know that already." He blows out a breath. "I need to go so you can go to sleep. But I just want to say one more thing."

"What?"

"I don't want you to be scared to call me."

The lump grows bigger, merging with the swelling of my heart, and I can't speak.

"I have a lot going on," he says slowly, "and as the season gets started, it's gonna get crazy. I don't want you to hesitate to tell me if you need something or think I'd want to know something, okay?"

"I'll be fine."

"The other players' wives don't tell them shit until the season is over. They only want to focus on football from August to February. I wanna know if something is wrong or you go to the doctor. I might not be able to go and you might have to leave a message, but it . . . it matters to me, Sunshine."

"Thanks," I croak.

"Go to sleep," he orders. "You'll get your first food box tomorrow."

"Branch?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"No problem."

He's gone before I can say anything else, but it's just as well. The tears that come, this time from a good place, fall fast and hard. Curling up on my blanket with no energy to even get beneath, I fall quickly into a deep, peaceful sleep.

Chapter 27

Branch

I slam my locker shut, the sound barely heard over my teammates catching up after practice. It's so loud I've considered bringing noise-cancelling headphones with me just so I can hear myself think.

Despite my workout efforts over the summer, my body still aches like a motherfucker. Every part of me contests every movement I make, each muscle fiber begging me to stop. Although we've practiced every day for the last week, the soreness just gets worse.

I kind of love it.

It reminds me that I'm alive, that I'm doing what I love, that my body, while not a young stud anymore, is still capable of competing with them. Six years in the league is long enough to take a beating that makes every penny I make fully earned.

"What'd you do this offseason, Best?" Chauncey slips on his shirt and grins. "You always have the craziest stories, man."

"I just played it cool, you know? Did a little of this, a little of that . . ." *Knocked up Finn's sister . . .*

"Look at you being all discreet," he says, closing his locker. "Nah, I got you. You're keeping a low profile."

"You could say that. What were you up to?"

"Hangin' around the house, painting the baby's bedroom, doing some fishin'. Just basic shit, ya know?"

"Life with a wife," I kid.

"Hell, no," he says, bursting out laughing. "My girlfriend had me painting. My wife don't give a shit about paint. She'd just hire someone to come in and do it. Ain't her money, you know?"

I try to smile, to come up with a joke like I'd usually do, about his girlfriend and his wife taking all his damn money if he doesn't watch it, but I come up empty. There just doesn't seem to be a lot funny about it.

I instantly think of Layla and what color she'd choose for our baby's room and if this is something she's even thought about.

"You okay, Lucky?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." I grab my bag and heave it up on my shoulder as we head towards the door.

"What do you think Coach's surprise is on Monday? 'Bring your best selves,'" Chauncey says, mimicking Coach. "If he fucking brings out that Godzilla drill, I might feign a pulled hamstring and sit it out."

"I bet it is. That or Hammer Time. He hasn't killed us with that yet."

"Don't even talk about that," he laughs. "I hate that thing. Fucking Miller beat everyone last year. Remember that?" He looks around the locker room. "Speaking of, where's Finn?"

"I don't know."

"I wanted to say hey, get back into the flow of things, but he disappears every day as soon as the reporters leave." We stand at the bank of elevators, Chauncey needing to take the right one,

me the left. "Tell Miller to find me tomorrow."

"I will."

The ding is my opening and I nod to my teammate. Getting into the elevator, I hit the "close" button before anyone can join me.

The ride down to the parking garage is quick, and I'm in my car before I have to talk to anyone else. Practice was good, but the high is over and I feel antsy.

Sitting at the gate, waiting for security to let me through, I play a game of chicken with myself.

I can go home and call Layla, or I can do what I really want to do: see her.

She sounds so tired on the phone, I wonder if she's getting any rest. I was checking out a few web articles about pregnancy and some women want to sleep half the day or more. How can she do that if she's working and living alone?

Not only that, I miss her. I've told myself I don't, but I do. The Branch that's with her is different from the Branch on the field or the Branch in public. He's calmer. Happier. The Branch from before I got into the league. I kinda like him.

I kinda like her.

Glancing at the passenger's seat, the coffee cake I picked up this morning at the bakery still sitting there, I make up my mind.

The guard releases the gate and I make a last-second decision. I go right when I should probably go left.

* * * *

I press the doorbell, clutching the coffee cake, and wait. The hallway is small, more confined than comfortable, with cheap brown carpeting and cold white walls etched with deep, random scratches.

Her laugh sounds through the door, followed by a deep male voice, before she undoes the lock. Her eyes go wide when she sees me. "Branch," she breathes, gulping.

"Am I interrupting something?" I grind my teeth together, looking over her shoulder. A tall, dark-haired man stands near the sofa, smiling brightly at me. "Who the fuck is that?"

She opens the door and I walk in, squeezing the plastic tin so hard it crackles.

"Branch, this is Max Quinn," Layla says. "Max, this is Branch."

"Nice to meet ya." Max sticks his hand out, his Southern drawl deeper than mine. "I've heard a lot about ya. Congratulations on the baby."

Tossing a glance at Layla out of the corner of my eye, I shake Max's hand. "Thanks. And who are you?"

"I'm Poppy's cousin. My buddy, Cane, and I are up here with our wives for a wedding. Poppy left her sunglasses over here and I was in this part of town, so I offered to grab 'em."

I attempt to control the exhale of breath, but Max notices and grins.

"You're gonna be fine," he almost whispers. "Just relax a little. And ease up on the cake, son, or you're gonna have a mess on your hands."

He grips my shoulder as he walks by me, telling Layla goodbye. I don't get involved with them, just work on settling the adrenaline that had me ready to come to blows with Max.

As I listen to her giggle and tell him to come back and visit, it dawns on me this is a real thing. Probably not a one-time deal. How many times will I walk into her home to get the baby and another man will be in there?

The plastic pops again.

What if it's her husband and he tells me I can't see my kid? Or didn't give him a Popsicle and made him cry?

Fuck that guy. I'm gonna kill him and he doesn't even exist.

I'm losing my damn mind.

"Here," she says, taking the coffee cake from me. "There's no sense in abusing a poor dessert."

Releasing the container, it's dented and the cream cheese icing is stuck to the top. "Sorry," I offer sheepishly.

"What's wrong?" she asks, carrying the cake to the kitchen.

"Why do you think something is wrong?"

"Well, you're here, for one. And for two, you look like you're ready to brawl."

I shrug because I'm not completely sure. Instead of answering, I watch her grab a plate and fork.

Her legs look toned in a pair of white shorts, her yellow top tight against her chest. Her hair is messy in a half-up, half-down thing and her eyes shine even more golden next to her shirt.

Watching her, I can't help but acknowledge the tightness in my chest. She's beautiful and sexy and sweet and sincere. But it's how she makes me feel that's crazy.

I don't want to just undress her and lick every part of her body. I want to kiss her, take my time and adore her. I want to take her to a stupid movie or get her coffee cake in the middle of the night.

But why? What's the point?

"You gonna offer me a piece?" I ask.

"Maybe." She shoves a forkful in her mouth. "God, this is so good."

"I love hearing you say that."

She rolls her eyes, but cuts me a piece anyway. "Here. That's all you get."

"Stingy."

She smiles and goes back to her cake. I take a bite and look around.

Her apartment is small with white walls and muted, feminine touches. The couch is a simple grey with so many pillows I don't know how she even sits on it. There are images of beaches and skylines and simple artistic drawings adorning the walls, helping to make them not look so dull.

It's a one-eighty from my house with its large, barren rooms and black and white canvas. I thought modern and sparse was my jam, but I'm not entirely sure now.

"What do you think?" she asks. "I loved the light in here. That's why I chose this apartment."

"It's nice. It's what I thought your apartment would look like, actually. Pretty. Tasteful."

"I hope you thought it would be cleaner," she laughs. "I hate cleaning. Hate it. I'm not good at domestic crap. Callum used to say . . ." She stops when she sees my reaction. "It doesn't matter what he used to say."

"No, it doesn't."

"So," she says in an attempt to change the subject, "want a drink? Pop? Tea? Decaf?"

"Water?" I ask.

"I've drank my weight in water today," she says, swiping a bottle from the refrigerator. "I read that drinking more water keeps swelling down. Does that make any sense to you?"

"The therapist we use at work says the same thing. It seems counterintuitive, but the owner only hires the best, so I'm assuming she knows her shit."

I take a long, cool drink and use the time to try to settle my nerves. Being in her home feels different than I thought it would. The cabin felt more like neutral ground. This is completely her domain and I wonder what she would look like in my kitchen.

“How was your first week back?” she asks, getting an orange out of the basket beneath the microwave. “Did it feel like home?”

“Yeah, it did. It was good to get out there with the guys.” She tosses me the fruit. “What’s this for?”

“You should eat it. It’s good for muscle fatigue.”

Layla walks by me and heads back into the living room. I follow, unsure if I’m supposed to bring the water and fruit with me or not. I set them on the counter to be safe.

I hate that I don’t know the rules here, that I don’t know all her little idiosyncrasies. As we sit on the sofa, I look around.

“What color do you want to paint the baby’s room?” I ask, thinking back to the conversation I had with Chauncey.

“What a random question.”

“I know,” I say, feeling a little silly. “I was just curious, that’s all.”

“Well, I thought a pretty light grey would be nice, if the room is bright. If it’s not, then maybe a pale yellow to make it a little cheerier. Both are pretty neutral colors.”

“If the room is bright? You don’t know which you’ll use as the nursery?”

She bites the inside of her cheek and shakes her head. “I’ll be moving before she arrives, so I’ll wait and see.”

My stomach bottoms out, hits the floor, before lodging itself in my throat. “You’re still thinking about moving?”

“I have to, I think. I’ll stay around Chicago,” she says softly. “I just can’t afford the rent here with a baby.”

This time, it’s my heart that hits me over the head. I follow her gaze to the floor, feeling like a complete dipshit for not considering that. Babies are expensive, or so everyone says. She’s a fucking blogger. She can’t make much.

As I look back up at her, my chest tightens and I realize I don’t want her to be too far from me. The thought of not being able to drop by like I did tonight after work or have dinner delivered to her when she says she’s tired like I did on Wednesday really bothers me. *Really* bothers me.

“It’s fine,” she says, shifting on the sofa. “Really. I wanted to move anyway.”

“I thought you loved it here? You were just telling me how you like to look out the window and watch the people.”

“I do, but not that much. It won’t be that big of a deal. Besides, I might move in with Poppy since she and Finn are still on the outs.”

“They still aren’t talking?”

“Nope. She refuses until he apologizes to her,” she laughs. “She’s so stubborn. Finn met his match with her.”

Warring over what to do, what to offer, what to say, I fiddle with the hem of my shorts. “You know I’ll help you with rent—”

“No.”

My gaze flips to hers. “I can give you what I make a year if you want to make an estimate about child support. You know I’m Branch Best, right?”

“I don’t give a fuck who you are.”

Her words are cast off with an angry tone, intended to cut a little with the sharp edges. Instead, a light has been switched on inside me and I can't help but laugh.

"I'm not kidding," she warns.

"I know you're not."

She bends her neck and grimaces.

"Your neck still hurt?"

"A little. Not as bad."

"Face the wall," I say, guiding her around with my hands. She does as I instruct and moans as I start to work the tense muscles in her shoulders. "How does that feel?"

"Amazing."

She moves her body so I can get a better angle. I push and pull, kneading and pressing, working her little shoulders around in my hands. Every now and then she sighs or moves in a way that throws a scent of pineapples my way.

It takes everything I have to stay focused on the task at hand and not the task between my legs, as I touch her gorgeous body.

Her back arches as she stretches over her head, her ass scooting back against the couch towards me just enough to catch the spark that's always ready to go off around her into full blaze. The burn is slow, the embers starting to smolder, as she sits upright again.

"Thank you," she says, her voice breathless.

"Any time."

She looks at me over her shoulder, her eyes radiating the same heat that's coursing through my body. There's a hunger there, a desire that's unmistakable.

"Layla?"

She sucks in a breath of the air that's changing between us more every second. Her lashes flutter, her lips part. Without thinking, my fingertips fall down her spine.

"I'm not sure," I say, "if I'm not supposed to say this now, but goddamn it if you aren't fucking beautiful."

I lift the hem of her shirt just enough to touch the small of her back. She sucks in another breath at the same time as I do, her body flexing against my hand. Both hands grip her waist, the curve of her hip causing me to almost lose my mind.

"Careful, Branch," she warns breathlessly.

My hands shake, fingers tremble, as I fight with myself about what to do. I want her. Maybe I even need her. But if I do this, it's gonna blur the fuck out of even more lines that I'm having a hard time seeing as it is.

"If you tell me to stop, I'll stop," I say, letting my finger dip into her soft skin.

"I didn't say stop. I said—"

Leaning up, I capture her mouth with mine. It's like an explosion on Independence Day, every firework going off in quick succession.

She moans into my mouth, the sweet taste of her breath causing me to shudder. I bite her lower hip, holding it between my teeth, as I work her shorts down her delectable body.

Arms are flailing, legs moving, as she gets rid of the fabric separating her from me. Off goes her bra and her panties, her mouth moving ferociously against mine.

"Damn it," I groan. She sucks my tongue into her mouth, nipping at it with her teeth in a way that makes my cock ready to blow.

My pants fall to the floor along with my boxers and my t-shirt goes sailing, landing on the shade of a lamp. The light rattles around on the table. She giggles, never breaking the kiss.

I roam her body with my hands, cupping the globes of her ass, running up the arch of her sides, until her breasts are sitting in my hands. The weight of them, the gentle weight of each, causes a groan to rumble from the depth of my desire to be buried inside this gorgeous woman.

Leaning back on the sofa, I wrap my arms around her and pull her down with me. As her rounded body lies on top of mine, my palm resting against the back of her head, she kisses me like there's nothing else to do.

The tempo slows, the licks of her tongue coming in longer, thicker strokes. Our lips burn from the onslaught, but not enough to make either of us stop.

As she moves her knees up along my sides, the heat from her pussy hovers over my thickened length. Her wetness leaves a trail down my shaft as she slips her body up.

Gripping both sides of her face, I press my lips against hers in the hardest, most forceful way I can—in a way that causes my chest to pull.

Both palms plant on my chest, she pushes away and sits upright. Her nipples are peaked, her hair spilling around her shoulders. Then she gives me my favorite thing of all: her smile.

* * * *

Layla

"I think a condom is pointless, don't you?" I move my hips against him, watching him grit his teeth. "I mean, I was tested again at the doctor. You?"

He squeezes my hips and his eyes close. "I'm clean."

Planting my hands on either side of his head, I grip the armrest. Tilting my hips until the head of his cock is positioned at my opening, I toy with him for a minute. "You are so hard, Branch."

"If you don't sit down on me soon, I'm going to hold you down and pound the shit out of you."

My laugh makes him open his eyes. He shoots me a slow, sly smile. "God, I love that."

"What?" I say, still hovered over him. Every few seconds, he raises his hips, but I pull back far enough so he doesn't part me.

"Your laugh. It's so untainted by anything. You're laughing because you're laughing, not because you think something I said was funny or drawing attention to yourself."

"I think I have your attention without laughing, handsome."

"That you do." He rises up from his waist and sucks one nipple into his mouth. Propping himself up with one hand, he uses the other to squeeze my breast as he works the beaded nub with his tongue.

"Ah," I moan, my head falling back.

He scoots us closer to the arm rest so that he's braced by the sofa. One of my knees digs between the seat and the back, the other leg dangles off the side of the couch. He's hard, so worked up that his temple is throbbing.

Digging my hands into his thick hair, I press his face harder to my chest. He switches breasts, his hand taking the place of his mouth on the first, kneading it so carefully that I think I'm going to come.

I lift off of him just enough that I can palm his length under me. My body positioned just over the tip, I let my weight fall, crashing down on his shaft.

"God," I moan, sucking in a hard breath. He bites down on my nipple, tugging it as he

groans. We still for a moment, giving me a second to adjust to his size.

My body feels completely full, stretched to an almost painful point, but as he begins to move, I know I haven't even taken it all.

One hand on each of his shoulders, I rock. With each motion, each subtle flick of his hips below me, a shot of fire scorches me from the inside out.

"You feel amazing," he says, giving my tits a final squeeze and running his hands down to my hips again. "Your body is perfect."

I close my eyes and soak up the sensations rioting through me. It's a wonderful, chaotic feeling to have every nerve ending firing at the same time.

His cock hits the wall of my pussy as I lift and drop onto him in deliberate strokes. As if he knows what I need, he splays a hand just below my belly button and when his thumb presses on my clit, I bite down on my lip.

"Branch," I warn through gritted teeth. "I need to stop or I'm going to come all over your cock."

I open my eyes to see a wickedness in his that does nothing but propel me towards an orgasm. He looks at me like he could devour me, his bright blue eyes gleaming with lust.

"Just hearing you say that has me dripping inside you." He holds the bottom of my ass and raises me up and down, urging me to take quicker strokes. "Are you ready to come, baby?"

Each movement hits the target, the need to climax so strong I can't even hold my eyes open. I feel his gaze on me, watching my breasts bounce in his face, watching my mouth slack open as I draw closer and closer to the end. Any sense of self-awareness has long left the building as the sound of our bodies, slick with desire, rings through the living room.

"Branch!" I call out, letting him press deeper, farther into my body. "Oh God."

My jaw aches as I bite down, the eruption starting at the base of my stomach and flowing out until every bit of my body is engulfed in the bliss of climax. A flurry of colors sparkles through my vision, and I'm only faintly aware that he's calling my name. I only barely hear the groan of his warning, the feel of his hands biting into my skin, the thrust of his hips, or the heat of his body expelling into mine.

Any ability I had to keep moving is long gone, and I sit on top of him as he rides out his own orgasm.

We sit, both panting, our bodies glistening with sweat. At the same moment, we open our eyes. It takes a second for us to smile, for him to reach up and wipe the hair stuck to the side of my face away.

"I know you're not supposed to say a woman is wrong," he teases, "but I think I did just prove you wrong."

"How do you figure?"

"This proves, despite whatever else, we can still have fun together."

I smack him on the chest and climb off, making a beeline for the bathroom. "I've never said we couldn't have fun. I just said we need to be careful."

"That wasn't fun for you?" he shouts after me, a laugh in his voice.

"No. It was awful," I yell back. Before I can reach the bathroom, I hear his steps coming behind me and squeal as he picks me up and cradles me in his arms.

Looking up at his face, I see something besides the lust. Besides the need. Besides the physical attraction we have to one another. I see something else entirely and it's that look, that feeling, that worries me.

"If that wasn't fun, it's only fair you give me another try," he says, carrying me down the

hallway.

“What do you propose? Blackjack? Rummy? Maybe chess?” I tease.

He kicks open my bedroom door and lays me on the bed. Standing over me, he grins.

“Something more like Twister, but you can call it what you want.”

My knees fall to the side as he climbs on top of me. He surprises me by lying next to me.

“I’ve always liked Twister,” I say.

“Seems fitting,” he says, bringing his lips closer. “You know how to twist a man up.”

Before I can ask for an explanation, he kisses me again and I lose myself to him.

Chapter 28

Branch

"The doctor will be right in." The nurse picks up the file and gives me a sultry look as she walks out the door.

"I like her," Layla says, folding her hands on her lap.

"Don't."

"Why?"

"She'd fuck me in a second if I told her to."

She makes a face. "How do you know?"

"Trust me."

She picks at the white paper covering her bottom half. "This is so awkward."

"Do you want me to leave?" I ask. "I can go out to the waiting room, if you'd like."

Her head rolls to the side as she lies on the table and looks at me. She seems to be caught up in whatever she's warring with in her pretty little head.

She's done that a lot since last night. I guess I have too. We had sex three times before we finally had our fill of each other. It's so easy being with her, so natural. Unlike with most women, being with her is not a show of what I can do or watching a woman perform for me. I want to make her feel good, hope she knows how beautiful she is, and relish the fact that this woman wants to be with me.

Glancing around the room, I'm shocked at how calm I am. This place should freak me the fuck out, but it doesn't. It's almost exciting being *here* with *her*.

"I want you to stay," she says finally. "It's your baby too."

We wait in the quiet for the doctor to arrive. I pick up a magazine and leaf through it, not paying much attention to the words, only to Layla out of the corner of my eye. A few minutes later, the door presses open slowly and a man comes in. He's older, in his sixties, with white hair and a kind smile. He shakes my hand. "You must be Mr. Miller?"

"No," I say, standing. "I'm Branch Best."

He quirks a brow. "The Branch Best?"

"The one and only. This," I say, clearing my throat, "is Layla Miller."

The doctor introduces himself to her and takes a seat on a little wheeled stool. They go through basic medical information, family history, and a list of health questions that Layla answers without hesitation. I listen, realizing how much I don't know about this woman.

"You are the father, is that correct?" Dr. Howard looks at me.

"Yes."

He scribbles again and then stands. Pulling up Layla's shirt, he places a stethoscope to her abdomen. Her eyes pull away from his hands and over to me, holding my gaze.

"You okay?" I ask quietly.

She nods, turning back to the doctor as he speaks.

"Do you want to hear the heartbeat?" he asks.

Layla nods, her eyes wide, as he puts a little machine up to her belly. I reach for her hand, holding it in mine. A little tear dots the corner of her eye.

Holding my breath, I listen to the crackle of the machine as the doctor moves it around. And,

finally, there it is. The steady beat of a heart.

It's unmistakable—*woosh-woosh-woosh*—that sounds through the room is a heartbeat. Our baby's heartbeat.

Tears stream down Layla's face as she clutches my hand. I lock them together, entwining our fingers and squeezing hers back. We watch each other as the sound gently strums through the room like a lullaby.

With each beat, something rustles deep inside me. An overwhelming sense of responsibility, a fierce need to protect the little boy nestled inside her.

She blinks, the tears falling faster, and I realize it's not just the baby I want to protect. It's her too.

I watch her grin, then laugh, then look at me in amazement.

"Do you hear that?" she asks, sniffing. "It's so loud."

"He's going to be a wide receiver," I manage to say. "Listen to that. He's a beast already."

The doctor laughs, wiping the gel off the machine and from Layla's stomach. "It sounds good and healthy. You can sit up now."

I jump to my feet, helping her get situated. My efforts are rewarded with a smile.

"Everything looks and sounds good," he says, picking up her chart. "Congratulations. You two are very lucky."

I slide my gaze to the woman still holding my hand.

Maybe I am. Maybe I really am.

* * * *

Layla

The keys clang against the table. My purse hits the floor, my shoes slide off my feet, and I hit the couch with a thud.

"You okay?" Branch laughs, sitting at the end of the sofa. He pulls my feet into his hands and rubs them. "Doctor's office and drive-thru is all you can handle in one day, huh?"

"I'm so sleepy," I say, my eyelids drooping closed. "I feel like a toddler that's missed my nap."

His hands swamp my feet, easily bending them at his will. It feels so good as he presses his thumb into the arch and releases all the stress that's held there.

"Thank you for going with me today," I say. "I appreciate it."

"Thanks for letting me." He works my feet back and forth, his leg starting to tap beneath me. "Can I talk to you about something, Sunshine?"

"Of course."

Holding my breath, I feel his hands slow down until they're eventually resting on top of my feet. I have no idea what he's going to say and it makes me want to vomit.

Hearing the baby's heartbeat was the most amazing thing I've ever done. It was a connection to the inside of me I had to go to the outside to get. Having Branch there, watching his reaction, was the sweetest part of all.

His eyes lit up like he was mesmerized, his hand clenching mine for all it was worth. I couldn't tell if he was scared or shocked or overjoyed, and he didn't mention it on the way home. He didn't speak much at all. I pretended to sleep and he just drove, and with every mile that went by, I felt a little more unnerved.

He takes a deep breath. "What if . . . what if we were wrong?"

My heart skips two beats. "If you were wrong about anything, I wouldn't be surprised. But me? I'm never wrong," I joke, hoping to calm my nerves. It doesn't work.

"I think you were this time."

I open my eyes to see him watching me closely. It's my favorite look on him, the one that's as soft as it is tough. There's a glimmer in his eye. The way he licks his lips makes me wonder if he's nervous too.

"What's wrong, Branch?"

"What if . . ." he shuffles in his seat. "We keep talking about things like it's me and you. What if it isn't me and you? What if there's no me and you?"

Trying to sit up, I'm stopped by him clamping down on my feet. My heart stills as I look at him.

"What if it isn't me and you, Sunshine?"

"I don't understand," I gulp, a hand falling to my stomach. He watches it rest against my navel before he looks back at me.

"What if it's . . . *us*?" he whispers.

"Branch . . ."

I'm glad he doesn't speak because I couldn't hear him over the roar in my ears anyway. My heart is beating so damn hard I'm lightheaded.

Wetness pricks my eyes but it doesn't fall. Shock prevents that. I just look at him and try to gather what he really means from his face, but the look of sincerity doesn't change.

His hand comes down gently on top of mine, applying a small dose of pressure to my stomach. My heart nearly bursts in my chest, the lump in my throat refusing to allow any words by. Instead, I just take in the worry lines on his forehead and the clear blue in his eyes.

"I've been thinking it for a while now about you and me and what we might've been and what we could be," he says. "Then I heard the baby today. God, wasn't that amazing?"

All I can do is nod and hold my breath, waiting for him to continue.

He reaches out and tips my chin towards him so I have no other choice but to look him in the eye. "I have reservations about whether I should do this or not, but looking at you lying by me, thinking about that motherfucker in here . . ."

"Max?"

"Whatever his name was," he sighs. "This thing with you isn't going to go away. As a matter of fact, it's getting worse."

"This thing with me?" I say, my voice crackling.

"It started the day I saw you. It got worse when I saw the sex therapy card, almost fell out of control at the festival, and spun so far past me when we were together that night that I knew there was no turning back. I just didn't want to fuck you all up, but I already had, in another way."

I try to speak, but only a whimper comes out as salty liquid streams down my face. He pulls me into a hug, laying me across his lap, and holding me so hard I can barely breathe.

Wrapping my hands in his shirt, I press my cheek against his heart. It's beating loud and strong, just like our baby's was just a little while ago. The thought makes me smile through the tears.

"I don't know what this means," he admits. "I know there are still things we have to work out and I can't figure out how to protect you from my life. I just know I want to be here every day to check on you, for you to know I have your back, to make sure our baby gets Popsicles."

"What?" I laugh, wiping away tears.

“Nothing.”

Pulling away, I look into his sweet, blue eyes. “We had very real reasons to not be together and those aren’t going to go away.”

He pulls me all the way into his lap so I’m facing him. “I know that and we’d be stupid to pretend they aren’t real. But . . . I think we’re stupid to also pretend that you and I are strangers. When I look at you, I don’t see a random girl. I see a girl I want to get to know and see what happens.”

“Doesn’t this set it up to end even worse?”

“Maybe,” he shrugs. “But until I know you and I aren’t doomed one hundred percent, I’m probably going to kill anyone that comes around. I almost ended Max.”

“Max is no chump,” I giggle.

“I’d have pieced him out,” he teases. “But stop changing the subject. Let’s give this one try. One good, solid effort, and if I think I’m fucking it up or if you think I am or if it becomes too much, we stop right then. Done. No more.”

“Okay,” I whisper, grinning like a loon.

He digs under the neckline of his t-shirt and removes the necklace his grandmother gave him. He holds it in his hand and looks at it for a long moment before placing it around my neck.

“I want you to wear this,” he says softly, positioning it carefully so the cross sits in the center of my chest. “There’s no reason why and it’s really dumb but I want to know it’s there.”

“It’s not dumb,” I say, placing my hand over his and pressing it against my body. “It’s sweet.”

He smirks. “Who knew I could be sweet?”

“I had an inkling,” I shrug.

“Did you really?”

“Mhmm. You come in with this cocky swagger, but I could see through you.”

“That’s impressive,” he says, moving so that I’m lying on my back. He hovers over me, his smirk growing wider.

Reaching between his legs, I cup his hardening length. “That’s impressive too.”

“You know what’s double impressive?” He lays kisses along my neck, to the base of my ear, and over to my mouth.

“What’s that?”

“Showing you how impressively sweet I can be with my impressive cock.”

I giggle, but the sounds are swept up by his kisses. When he pulls away and rests his forehead against mine, I grin. “I’m willing to give you an opportunity to put your money where your mouth is.”

“Don’t you mean my mouth where the honey is?”

“Oh my God,” I laugh, my body shaking. “That was awful.”

Before I know what’s happening, my dress is bunched at my waist and he’s between my legs. A wicked look in his eye, he stares at me through his lashes. “This, Sunshine, will be good. I promise.”

His head dips between my legs and I’m reminded just how good he can be.

Chapter 29

Branch

“What the fuck are they doing here?” I ask.

Chauncey and I watch as the Columbus Tigers come onto the field. The offense takes over the opposing end zone and starts to run basic plays while we watch.

“Is this Coach’s surprise?” Chauncey looks at me. “He’s a sadist.”

Finding number seven, Callum throws a pass that spirals perfectly into the hands of a receiver. Callum raises a hand in the air before turning and finding *me*. He stares at me for a long minute, going so far as to take off his helmet to make it clear who he’s looking at.

I wave.

My entire body shivers as a shot of testosterone mixed with adrenaline shoots through me. “It’s gonna be a long day, Chauncey,” I say, heading back to our huddle.

Coach is in the center of our offense with a clipboard. “Okay, boys. We’re trying something different today. This will demonstrate how necessary it is for you to be willing to change it up and go with the flow, all right? I want all backs and receivers to join the Tigers’ offense. All linemen and Frutter,” he says, nodding to our quarterback, “down with the Tigers’ defense.”

Finn is across from me. Our eyes meet for a split second before he looks away.

Coach ends the huddle and we all start off to our assigned positions. I hang back a little and step in time with Finn.

“Hey,” I say, looking up at him.

“What?”

“How are you?”

“Good.”

“Great. That’s great,” I say, sarcasm thick in my voice. “When are you going to stop this?”

“Never.”

Blowing out a breath, I take my assignment from the Tigers coach and line up on the outside. Finn lines up on the far side of the field. I’m too irritated with him to listen to the play Callum calls.

The play starts, the defense rushing. I break around the side only to turn around and have the ball smashing against the side of my helmet about a good four steps too early.

The ball falls to the grass, the play stopped, as I look up at the sound of my name.

“Gotta keep your head up, Best, if you want to catch it,” Callum taunts, glaring at me through his facemask.

“Get the ball where it’s supposed to be and I will.”

We line up again. The play starts, and this time I don’t even get a step off the line before the ball pelts me in the side.

This is something I could normally laugh off because he obviously looks like the idiot. But it’s Callum. He’s calling me out, and I’m not about to back down.

Unlatching my chin strap, I yank off my helmet. My cleats dig into the field as I march my way through the linemen and to Callum.

His helmet is off by the time I reach him, his pupils narrow.

“What the fuck?” I shout, the vein in my temple pulsing. “You got a problem,

Worthington?"

"Just a receiver that can't catch a ball."

I grin, one I know he'll read into. "Oh, I can catch. I think you can't keep it within reach."

We're nose-to-nose, sweat dripping down our faces. Neither of us will look away. I barely register Finn's hand on my chest guiding me backwards. I swat it down.

"You got something you wanna say?" I ask the quarterback. "Say it, motherfucker."

"Easy, Best," the Tigers' coach says, but I ignore him.

"How do my seconds taste?" Callum grins. "God, she's good, isn't she—"

My hand connects to his face, right against the cheekbone. He drops his helmet with a thud. Recoiling, he rears back, but my fist smashes him again, this time in the mouth.

Every cell in my body wants to rip him apart. I lunge forward, seeing red, but feel hands on me, pushing me back. Callum gets farther away as a body physically comes between us.

"I'll fucking kill you!" I yell over top of the Tigers' coach separating us. "You hear me, cocksucker? I'll kill you."

Callum laughs, his eyes slits in his face. "Go home and fuck that little whore. Tell her I said 'hi.'"

In slow motion, Finn's hand comes over top of the coach and rocks Callum. Callum trips over his own feet, crashing into the grass.

All hell breaks loose and I try to break free and get to him again, but am pulled backwards. Our team lines up in front of me and Finn so we can't even see Callum anymore.

We're sucking in air, adrenaline still high and strong. I angle to see Worthington, but it's no use.

"What the fuck are you two thinking?" Coach is in our face out of nowhere, ready to blow a gasket. "What could have possibly happened in two fucking plays to cause that? Huh?"

"He deserved it, Coach," I say, still seething. "But if you put me back out there, I'll kill him. Just letting you know."

"You're out of here today. You too, Miller." He turns his attention, and disappointment, to Finn. "I almost expect this out of Best, but you? Pick your friends more carefully."

"Best is a fuck-up, sir, but he was right this time." Finn takes off his helmet, his hands pulling at the face guard.

"Gee, thanks," I say, shaking my head. "Can you cut me some fucking slack?"

"You impregnated my sister," Finn growls. "You want to do this here, Branch?"

"I don't want to do this anywhere. I want you to stop being a dick."

"Both of you!" Coach booms. "To the locker room and get off team property until tomorrow morning. You better come back with a better attitude, got it?"

"Yes, sir," I mutter, bumping Finn in the shoulder as I walk by.

I watch for Callum all the way to the locker room, but don't see him. My helmet goes sailing across the room, hitting a folding chair. The sound blasts against the lockers.

Falling onto the chair with my name on it in front of my locker, I put my head in my hands. My head pounds, my jaws aching from clenching my teeth so long.

Finn comes in, shoving his shit on the ground and dropping into his chair. He's across the room from me.

It's perfectly quiet, only the sound of our breathing breaking the peace. Once I've caught my breath and my blood pressure is somewhat stabilized, I look up. Finn does at the same time.

He tries to glare at me, but he fails miserably. At the same time, we start laughing. It begins as a slow chuckle and ends up with an all-out cackle.

“God, I want to kill him,” Finn laughs, catching his breath. “That was a decent right hand you had there.”

“Fuck him. Fuck that motherfucker.”

“What did he say to you?”

“Want to go to jail?” I ask him, raising a brow. “Because if I tell you, you will. I’m the one getting that pleasure and when I do, someone needs to bail my ass out.”

This silences my friend. He hangs his head. “I’m not sorry I hit you,” Finn says. “But I’m sorry I did it as hard as I did.”

“Nah,” I say, standing up and taking off my shoulder pads. “If you hadn’t given it all you had, I’d have called you a pussy.”

“That wasn’t all I had.”

“The hell it wasn’t,” I taunt, grabbing my stuff for the showers. “But I get it. And I respect it.”

He takes a deep breath and walks across the room, stopping a few feet in front of me. Extending a hand, I take it and we shake.

“Layla said you went with her to the doctor,” he says.

“I did. It was amazing. I know what that sounds like, but I don’t have any other way to explain it,” I shrug. “I did that, you know? It’s . . . incredible.”

“I think it’s nice you think it’s incredible and I’m really glad you went with her.”

“I told you I was going to be there for her.” I force a swallow. “In all honesty, when I said that originally, I really meant the baby more than her. But now . . . I mean it. I want to be there for her, Finn. And I hope you understand what I mean by that.”

He returns my smile. “Just be good to her, okay? Because if you don’t, I’ll show you just how much power I have in both hands.”

Laughing, I head to the showers. “You aren’t doing this just to get Poppy’s pussy back, are you?”

“Not totally . . .”

We laugh again and there isn’t any more to say. Things are getting back on track, even if my hand might be broken.

* * * *

“Lucky! We have a couple of questions.”

A reporter for *Exposé* is waiting by my car. I wonder vaguely how she got in the facility as security is pretty good at weeding out the media except in designated areas.

“I’m not really in the chatting mood,” I say, hitting the unlock button.

“We were sure you’d want to set the record straight.” The woman looks at me with a smug grin. “But if not . . .”

My blood cools in my veins, the hair on the back of my neck standing up. “Set it straight about what?”

“We know about your fight with Worthington, and Miller, for that matter—”

“Already?” I ask, opening the back door and tossing my bag in. “How does that shit get out so fast?”

“We have our ways.”

“I guess.” Closing the door, I lean against it. “So what am I commenting on?”

She’s too excited to talk about this. I’ve been around enough to know if a reporter is giddy,

that spells bad news for me.

"I really need to get going. I have something I need to do." Turning, my hand is on the handle when she speaks.

"We hope you work everything out. You've always been so good about talking to us, so to see someone do this to you . . ."

She wins.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"We were just told that Miller's sister is pinning a baby on you."

"What?" I bark. "Who the fuck told you that?"

"So it's not true?"

"No, it's not fucking true. No one is *pinning a baby* on me." Annoyed, I jerk open the driver's door.

"Callum said that's what the fight was about on the field," she says sweetly. "That she's pinning the baby on both of you, not sure whose it is, and that's what caused tempers to boil on the field today."

I watch her click the recorder in her hand through the reflection in the glass as my breathing gets shallow, my pulse strumming. I'm too shocked to even respond. My brain simply won't compute this.

All I can see is Layla's face and wonder what this will do to her. It's not true. There's no fucking doubt about that. But she's going to be humiliated to think people—Callum—are saying this.

"It has to be hard for Miller to be in the middle of this," she says. "I mean, you were his best friend. That has to be difficult, right?"

"What did Callum actually say?" I ask. "What were his exact words?"

She whips out her phone and logs onto the *Exposé* website. Front and center is a video with Callum front and center.

She presses play.

"It was really no big deal," Callum says, wiping his brow. "Just a little heated personalities over a girl in common." He listens to someone off camera and shrugs. "Yeah, I mean I was with her for a long time, up until a month or two ago. We were having a break, working things out, and then she apparently sleeps with Best. I had no idea, obviously, until today. I thought the baby was mine—at least, that's what she told me. I guess we'll wait and see."

"That's bullshit," I say, shoving her phone out of my face as I clamor to get to Layla.

"Is that your statement?"

Scowling, I climb in my car and stick the key in the ignition. "Yeah. That's my statement." Barely getting the door closed, I peel out of the parking spot.

Chapter 30

Layla

“Hey,” I say, immediately stepping to the side. My nerves shoot to high alert as I take in the stress lines on Branch’s face.

He marches by me, his forehead marred in an alarming way. His lips form a thin, angry line as he turns to face me.

“Branch, what’s wrong?”

“Have you seen *Exposé*?”

“No,” I gulp. “Why?”

I need to grab on to something to steady myself, but I’m too scared to even move. Frozen in place, I watch him slide his phone out of his pocket and cue something. He hands it to me.

My lungs fail to operate as I see not Branch, but Callum, on the screen. With a shaky finger, I press the triangle to play the video.

With every laugh, every line spoken, my emotions grow deeper. More confused. More infected with the poison of his actions.

I should deny this, I should be outraged, I should look at Branch and see what he’s thinking. But I can’t. I’m stuck in this state of disbelief that I can’t even look up from the phone.

My mind keeps reeling that Callum is purposefully painting this picture of me. To the world. To everyone. To Branch.

Tearing my eyes away from the phone as the next video begins to play, I look into his handsome face.

“Branch . . .”

Some of the fury in his face is gone, but in its place is nothing better. There’s a distance there, a wall similar to the one I saw the day I met him.

“This isn’t true,” I insist. “You surely don’t believe this.”

His response takes too long. It gives just enough time for all of my fears to break the shock of what just happened and send me into a nearly full-blown panic.

“This is bullshit,” I say, my hands trembling. “This is complete bullshit.”

“That’s what I said.”

That quells a touch of my anxiety, but not nearly enough. “You don’t believe this, do you?”

Images I’d allowed myself to consider—holidays at the cabin, sitting in the stands and watching him play with our child, him holding the baby on his lap while they’re both asleep—trickle through my brain, teasing me with the future.

Even if those things could be my reality, so would *this*. Headlines. Gossip. Me and my child being fair game.

“No, I don’t believe it,” he says. Blowing out a breath, he sticks his hands in his pockets. “I’m right not to believe it, right?”

“What? Are you seriously asking me that?”

He looks to the ceiling.

“If there’s any part of you at all that believes that asshole, then I wouldn’t want you anyway.”

His head drops slowly, his gaze landing on mine. The Branch I know, the one I might even

love, looks back at me.

“You know I don’t believe any of this shit. It’s not a question. I know you and you shouldn’t want me.” He laughs to himself, hanging his head.

“It’s not you I don’t want. It’s *this*. I don’t want this.”

“I don’t want to give you this, and I’m not just talking this ridiculous gossip,” he says. “I see it in your eyes. It’s the start of the hatred, the ruination of your world. You were right. You deserve so much better than this.”

“Branch . . .” I say, tears rolling off my lips.

“You don’t think things like this are going to keep happening? They’re saying you’re a whore, Sunshine. That you don’t know whose baby this is.”

The vein in the side of his temple pulses like he’s ready to blow a gasket.

“What will it be next?” he asks. “What will they have me doing next? What situation will I be next to in a hotel in some other city and all of a sudden, because of the life I’ve led, I’m lumped in with those things? What will you think then?”

I don’t answer because I don’t know how. He’s right. As much as it feels like a punch in the gut, he’s right.

“Maybe this is a warning shot for you to not fuck up your life with me,” he says quietly.

“My life is a weapon half-cocked. It’s a game of Russian Roulette with me.”

“Do you really think that?”

“It was you that thought it. Now I see it. I can’t control anything in my life and you want to control it all. You want a plan, to know what’s happening when, and I have a life that changes by the minute sometimes. And I can’t really keep you separate from that because . . . eighty percent.”

His face is blurred through the tears filling my eyes. My hand goes to the little cross at the end of his necklace that’s tucked under my shirt. Even if I could find the words to argue with him, there’s no point. You can’t argue the truth.

“I can’t do this to you,” he says, brushing his thumb along my jaw. I lean against his hand, feeling the warmth touch my cheek. “Especially when this is the one thing you don’t want and the one thing that should never happen to a girl like you.”

“So, what are you going to do?” I ask meekly through the tears, shocked that I’m holding it together this well. That works just fine until I see the blues of his eyes cloud too. That does it. The dam breaks and my cheeks are soaked.

In one swift move, he pulls me into his chest. Smelling like soap and cedar, he presses my face so hard into him that I couldn’t pull away if I wanted to. I wrap my arms around his waist, feeling him against me.

“I will always be here for you. And,” he gulps, his voice wobbling slightly, “I’m proud to have a baby with you. But I can’t do this to you, force you to live this life I chose. You and our child deserve way better than this fucked up life.”

Despite the tenor of our conversation, even with the splintering of my heart, I’ve never felt more safe in my life. I’ve never felt more considered. More *loved*.

Callum would’ve never walked away from me for my own good. Everything in his world centers around him, even if it means trying to ruin my life for fun.

“I’m sorry they’re making you out to look like an idiot,” I whisper, feeling the warmth of his skin under my palms.

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“But they’re saying—”

"I don't care." He pulls away and looks me in the eye. "I know you. I know this baby is mine. I just can't do this to you, Sunshine."

"You aren't. *He* is," I assert.

"This time. Next time, God knows what it will be. But I guarantee you there will be a next time in the tabloids, of nasty things said because I'm *Branch Best*."

He says it like it's a bad thing, almost spitting the words out like they're poison.

Brushing a strand of hair out of my face, he places a kiss to the center of my lips. "I'm a call away. Always."

His hand drops to my stomach and it sits there for a long moment. As his eyes blur again, he looks down and walks out.

* * * *

"Where the hell are youuu . . ." Poppy's voice falls as she finds me on my bed. "Layla! What's wrong?"

Bags drop to the floor, the plastic rustling as it lands just before my mattress sinks as she lands near me. She shoves me over and hovers over my face. "Are you okay?"

The light is too bright. Her voice too loud. The smell of the garlic she had for lunch too strong.

"I'm gonna puke," I groan, trying to sit up.

Everything hurts, from my heart to my head, as I work my way against the pillows. The sky is almost dark outside the windows and I wonder how long I've been lying here.

As I try to do the math, all I can see is Branch's sweet face and the tears come again. This round, they feel like little knives in the side of my temple, stabbing me over and over again.

"Layla. Talk to me." Poppy takes my hands and holds them on my lap. "What happened? You wouldn't answer the phone so I came by to check . . ."

"Have you seen *Exposé*?" I croak, my throat so damn dry due to all the moisture in my body leaving via tears.

She flashes me a look. Swiping my phone off the nightstand, she types in the passcode and brings up the website. I give her a few seconds to make it all the way through. I know when she's done because the phone drops to the bed.

"Oh my God," she says, her mouth wide. "Layla."

"I know." Grabbing a pillow, I smudge it around my face in hopes that some of the wetness will stop. "It's a mess."

"Branch doesn't believe this, right?"

"No."

"Thank God," she says, falling back on the bed. "I knew he was smart."

"So smart he left me."

The words are hiccupped, tears filling each opening, and my heart starts the process of breaking again.

"I don't know why I'm so upset. I knew this would happen eventually. But," I shrug, "it's what I get for going against my gut."

"What did he say?"

"He said he won't put the baby and I through this shit. He was so sweet . . ." Pressing my face against the pillow, I cry until I can't cry anymore. My chest burns, my face twinges with the strains from crying all evening. "Why? Why couldn't he be a dick?"

My phone glows, the ringer turned off, and Poppy picks it up. The fire in her eyes when she looks at me has me plucking it from her hand before she can do any damage.

I see the name on the screen. "You have the audacity to call me?" I almost shout into the phone. "How dare you, you sick fuck?"

Callum's laugh belts through the line. "I'm good, thank you. How are you?"

"I'm much better than you because I'm not a miserable, disgusting human being."

"So you aren't that upset? I mean, thank fuck it's not my kid, but I thought Best deserved it after that little stunt he pulled, answering your fucking phone."

"How did you even know I was pregnant?" I seethe, my hands shaking with the anger rolling through me.

"Someone snapped your picture coming out of the doctor's office. It's online, sweetheart."

"Don't call me that," I snap. "*I hate you.*"

"I bet you do. I bet your boy does too." He laughs again, an unaffected, carefree laugh. "I'll remember that when you come back to me with his bastard child, wanting me to take you back."

"I wouldn't take you back if someone gave me the entire world to do it."

Like it's in slow motion, Branch's face spirals through my mind. A need seated deep inside me to hold him, hug him, *love him* burns as hot as a wildfire.

"As a matter of fact," I swallow, "someone practically gave me the entire world not to."

"Ah, isn't that sweet? I love how you just pretend you don't love me."

The smile that touches my lips is genuine. "I didn't love you," I say simply. "I didn't know what love was when I was with you."

Poppy's eyes grow wide, her hand resting on my leg. She gives me a thumbs-up.

"Callum, go to hell."

My phone goes sailing across the bed and I fall back into the pillows again.

"What now?" Poppy asks. "I mean, I have a plan if you want it because I looked those grapes up and—"

"Stop." I flash her a look and try not to grin. "There's no plan to be made."

"What do you mean? You want him. You just said you loved him without saying it. Of course there's a plan to be made!"

I shake my head. "This doesn't change anything, Pop. Now he just knows what I already knew: our lives are not compatible."

Tears well up again. "I had hoped maybe . . . Um, maybe we could figure a way around it and we . . ."

She leans forward and hugs me, letting me cry on her shoulder.

"I love him, Poppy. I think I actually fell in love with Branch Best and now it's too late."

Chapter 31

Branch

“This is what I get.” I say the words aloud, as if somehow hearing them will make me accept them. “You’ve gone your whole adult life knowing this would happen, yet you still got caught up.”

My legs dangle off the countertop as I sit in the kitchen, smack dab in the middle of the island. Every now and then, the soles of my feet kick against the wooden cabinets and remind me I’m *still* sitting here. In the same place. For a couple of hours now. My ass is starting to hurt.

I’ve never sat and watched the sun move across the sky until tonight. It’s pretty cool. The colors change from blue to purple and pink and even a fiery orange for a moment. Shadows change, birds stop flying—it’s pretty incredible. You can also get kind of philosophical watching that shit.

Pondering where my life would sit if I were comparing it to a setting sun, I have to go with the tail end of the colored phase. Layla is, without a doubt, the brightest, most organic thing that’s ever happened to me. She’s lit my life with the most basic things, the most ordinary things, just like the colors a few moments ago reflecting off the kitchen windows. It’s things like candy apples and stupid jokes and private grins that I’ve never found anywhere else and can’t imagine ever sharing with anyone else either.

I’ve always thought if I ever found love, it would come in some big lightning strike. That some massive crack of thunder would happen and light would shine down from the heavens with a little arrow saying, “This is the one for you.”

Now I know, it doesn’t work that way.

Finding love happens at Water Festivals with sugar rushes. It happens in little deli shops over ham and cheese sandwiches. It happens on beaches with stories about grandmas and really listening to each other and making an attempt to understand the other person.

It’s choosing to be together because you don’t have to be. It’s walking away when you can’t be together for their own good, no matter how much it kills you.

This is heartache. This is the thing those Beau McCrae songs are talking about, the ones I love the beats to and got stuck in my head but had no way of identifying with the lyrics.

I get it. I get it all, and it hurts like a motherfucker.

A knock pounds on the door as I lift a bottle of Jameson to my lips. “Come in,” I shout, taking a long swallow of the liquor.

The door opens and shuts, and I don’t even bother to turn around to see who it is.

“You aren’t even locking your doors now? What the hell happened while I was pissed at you?” Finn’s voice rings through the room. His footsteps grow closer as I take another drink.

“I figured I’d leave it unlocked. Maybe someone will make my day.”

“That sounds like a Clint Eastwood reference.”

I shrug.

He strolls into the kitchen. His posture is tight, his eyes curious as he takes me in. “What the fuck happened to you?”

“Just life, man. Just life.”

“I saw the *Exposé* thing, if that’s what you’re talking about. Callum is a dead motherfucker.”

"I was sitting here plotting his demise."

A smile begins to form on his lips, but doesn't quite stretch. "How'd Layla take it? She won't answer my calls."

"She won't take mine either." I take another swig, the burn a nice distraction from the rest of the pain.

He leans against the sink, arms crossed in front of him. "You don't believe that, right?"

"Nope."

"Then what's the problem?"

The door opens again, and this time, I look back. Poppy storms in, taking in Finn and I. "Hey, it was open. You don't want me coming in, close the damn door."

"Pop—" Finn starts, standing straight up.

"And you," she says, pointing a finger at him, "can shut the fuck up."

"You two *still* aren't talking?" I say, looking from one to the other.

"He hasn't apologized."

"Poppy . . ." Finn all but whines. He's desperate, and if he's fighting it, it's a sad, sad attempt. "Let's talk."

"I'm here to talk to Branch."

"Can we talk after?"

"That is totally up to whether you want to be a man or not," she shrugs, blowing him off. She turns to me. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I just left Layla's," she says, a hand on her hip. "And she said you left her."

"You did fucking what?" Finn booms.

"Here we go again." Poppy blows out a breath. "I'm going to give you a field goal for being hugely gentlemanly about this, something Finn could take a lesson from. But I'm taking away a touchdown because you're *stupid*."

"You left my sister?" Finn asks again, trying to catch up. "I'm not following along."

"Then stop interrupting and listen," Poppy advises.

"I was here first. You technically interrupted me," he fires back.

"Both of you," I say, slamming the Jameson on the counter. "Stop it. Fuck it out later, but I can't listen to it."

My head falls into my hands. Poppy rests her palm against my back, a gesture that's well-meaning but feels wrong.

"I can't do this to her," I say, my words muffled. "We've talked about this before, Finn. This is why you and I fucked around. This is why we didn't try to go the normal route with life because it's not possible in this industry. Damn it."

"I think you're wrong," Poppy offers. "I think you're using an excuse because you're afraid."

"Afraid?" I laugh. "I'm afraid I'll never find someone like her again. I'm terrified I'll mess this up with her and it'll hurt our child. But afraid of loving her? As wild as it sounds, I'm not."

"Then go for it," she insists. "Stop being a baby."

"And soil her life with mine? Look at what's happened. The kid isn't even born yet and the media has presented it to be a bastard child," I say, gritting my teeth. "It'll be the same shit, different day tomorrow."

Looking up, I see Finn watching Poppy. There's a quiet confusion in his features. "Maybe you have to take some risks."

He's talking about me, but not to me. Those words were aimed right over my head to the little raven-haired sass that's removing her hand from my back.

"Maybe things wouldn't have worked out before," Finn continues. "Sometimes we have to sort of get to the right spot, with the right person, to see the alternate routes that we couldn't see before."

Finn cocks his head to the side. "You left her because you wanted to protect her?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'm taking away a touchdown and a safety for being a pussy."

"What?" I say, scooting off the counter. "This will ruin her."

"No, you not being with her will ruin her. All this shit? Did you forget how strong she is?" He looks at Poppy again. "I forgot, until someone reminded me."

"That's super sweet," Poppy teases, "but I'm gonna need an apology."

"I'm sorry, baby."

She squeals, running towards him and wrapping her legs around his waist. "That took you long enough."

"You're so damn hard-headed."

"Hey!" I say, shaking my head. "Can this be about me for like ten seconds? I don't know what to do."

"Strong women create new challenges and we're gonna have to draw some new plays, Branch," Finn says.

"That's your plan? That's all you got? This is your sister, one you've already punched me in the face—twice—over and you tell me to draw new plays? Can you at least, like, tell me to leave her alone or something?"

Finn kisses Poppy, and then, only reluctantly, does he pull his gaze away to me. "I always do what's best for Layla."

"I know."

He grins. "So go get her, asshole."

"But . . ."

"If you'd walk away from her to make her happy, that tells me you'd literally do anything to keep a smile on her face. So you go and do that while I use your guest bedroom to get reacquainted with my girl."

As they walk out of the room, Poppy throws her head back and looks at me upside-down. "Make it good. Go get her and don't give her another option but to say yes."

To say yes . . .

I grab my keys and head to my car. The key in the ignition, I head out of my subdivision and onto the highway. Nowhere to go, no one to see, I just need space and fresh air before I do something really stupid.

Like the universe is playing some kind of game, everywhere I look, I see happy couples. Couples with children. Families skipping down the sidewalk. They're everywhere, like it's some kind of family day out.

As I stop at a light, I notice a little girl. She's holding her father's hand. Hair as blonde as the sun is pulled into two little pigtails with pink ribbons on each side. She looks up and smiles like she knows me, like she's trying to tell me something. It's eerie as hell.

The light changes to green and I hit the accelerator hard, my heart strumming wildly in my chest.

Part of my predicament is clear: I can't half-ass it with Layla. It's all or nothing, one way or

the other. It needs to be nothing because that makes sense. It's logical. It's safe. But as I turn the corner, my tires screeching against asphalt in a totally not-safe fashion, I realize my mistake.

Sometimes that play that wins the game isn't the safe one. It's not the pass over the middle that will definitely get you ten yards. It's the Hail Mary at the end that you toss up with nothing but a prayer.

Chapter 32

Layla

Exposé Sexy Dad Alert: Best a Baby Daddy?

We caught up with embattled Branch Best last night at the Hopetown Mall. The charismatic (and sexy as hell) wide receiver had a little something to say about recent headlines surrounding him.

Turns out Branch is going to be a father with Finn Miller's sister, Layla James. According to Branch, Callum's statement was nothing more than an attempt to make Layla look bad in a bout of jealousy. Branch insists this is a non-issue.

When asked if this means he's off the market, our favorite hottie said, and we quote, "I'm going to be the best father I can be in every way."

We don't know what that means, exactly, but we can't wait for our ovaries to explode with pictures of him with a baby.

*

Toying with the necklace around my neck, I peer into the refrigerator. There's nothing in there that looks good. Of course, the box of food delivered earlier today from Branch's delivery service is in there, but I moved it to the back and created a wall with milk, juice, bacon, and a very creatively positioned tub of Greek yogurt so I don't have to see it.

Sure, it would've been easier to throw it away. But I can't do that either. I like having it in there. I'll probably even eat it later. But every time I see it right now it makes me sad.

I've been sad for two days now, ever since he left. He's called a few times and I've sent them to voicemail because there's nothing to say. Anything he does say will make me cry and I'm not going to cry. I'm going to find Layla James, the one pre-Branch, pre-baby, pre- . . . love. I'm going to stop with this weak girl nonsense.

The necklace twirls in my fingers as I look at the Exposé article again. He looks so calm in the photo, wearing a light blue shirt that makes his eyes look unreal. Still, there's something missing in them. The light, the sparkle, the mischief is gone, and it kills me.

I miss him. I miss him and his jokes, touches, and caring glances so much it physically hurts. It's only not having him around that makes me realize how much having him around means to me. How wonderful it makes me feel. How awful it is right now.

Grabbing my purse off the sofa, I head to the front door. I have to eat and I need fresh air, so I take out my phone to call Poppy to meet me for lunch. I pull open the door and almost run into someone.

"Oh!" I say, taking a step back. "I'm sorry."

She's tall, with long, red hair that's pulled back into a chic chignon. Her dress is black and long with two gold necklaces hanging fashionably between her breasts. "No worries. Probably my fault. I'm standing on your doorstep, right?" she laughs.

"Um, sure. Can I help you?"

"Forgive me," she gushes, moving a clipboard to her left hand. "I'm Daisy Markus. Are you Layla Miller?"

"I am."

"Oh, good," she says. "I've been trying to get ahold of you since yesterday. Do you mind if I

come in? I really need to talk to you.”

With a puzzled laugh, I block the door. “I apologize, but I have no idea who you are or why you’d be trying to get ahold of me.”

“Oh, I assumed you knew.” She takes a piece of paper from the clipboard with a flourish and hands it to me. “You’ve been listed as the main point of contact for the Best project.”

“The what?”

Skimming the paper, I step back into the apartment and Daisy follows with a wide smile.

My name is there, right where she said it would be, with Branch’s above it. There are measurements and dollar amounts and paint chips in both grey and yellow paper clipped to the top.

The paper rattles as I drop it to my side and look at her.

My mouth is lined with cotton, my breathing shallow. I pull the paper up and look at it again.

“We have a four-month window to get this complete,” she says, “and with the extensive updates, we need to get started.”

“I’m sorry,” I laugh, trying to make sense of all this. “What’s going on?”

“Mr. Best hired my firm to redesign his home. He said everything would be changed to your specifications and billed to him. He’s given you complete creative control with every avenue except one.”

“What’s that?” I ask, choking back tears.

“The nursery.” Her voice softens as she hands me a tissue. “He asked that he gets to pick between the grey and the yellow. I think that’s so sweet.”

My legs give out and I fall to the sofa, and despite the terrible manners, I cry in front of this woman. I don’t even offer her a seat, but I figure she gets the point because she sits across from me anyway.

“He also asked, strangely, for candy-apple red sheets in the master,” she notes.

My head snaps to hers, and instantly, I laugh. It’s a full-bellied, this-isn’t-as-funny-as-I’m-making-it-out-to-be-but-it-feels-so-damn-good kind of laugh.

She must think I’m a lunatic because she laughs too, more of a what-the-hell-have-I-gotten-myself-into kind of chuckle.

Why would he do this? Why would he put me in charge of something like this? I feel like I can’t breathe, like things are coming at me too fast and I can’t keep up.

I press his number on my phone, but it goes straight to voicemail. Just hearing his voice on the message makes me smile.

“I have no idea what’s happening,” I say. “I can’t accept this task without talking to someone first.”

She stands, a sweet grin on her face. “There’s an incredibly handsome man standing outside your door.”

“What?”

“Branch is in the hall. He said he wasn’t sure if you’d throw me out, but he really hoped you’d want to see him.”

She’s still talking as I fly by her and jerk open the door. Sure enough, he’s leaning against the wall, one foot crossed over the other.

“You let her in. That has to be a good sign, right?” he winces.

“What is all this?” I ask, forcing my legs not to move my body to him. I want to touch him, kiss him, breathe him in, but I can’t. Not yet.

He tries to explain, but all I can do is look at him and hear my thousand questions in my own head.

“Did you hear any of that?” he laughs, pressing off the wall.

“No.”

He chuckles, reaching for my hand. “Daisy, if all goes right, she’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Give her my number, please.” She turns her attention to me. “It was nice meeting you, Layla.”

“You too.”

“And whatever he’s done, give him another chance. He’s so cute,” she winks.

We step inside and Branch locks the doors. “Your brother and Poppy have this new thing where they just walk into people’s houses. It’s really uncomfortable.”

I watch him fiddle with the lock. It broke last week and it’s hard to snap. When he finally gets it, he turns to me. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

“I’m not doing this again,” he tells me, walking into the place like he owns it. He goes to the fridge and does an inventory. “Have you been eating?”

I stand in the same spot, brows pulled together. “What?”

“Have. You. Been. Eating?” He casts me an annoyed glance before going back to moving things around in my fridge. “What did you have for breakfast today?”

“I haven’t.”

The door snaps closed. “Really, Layla?”

“I’m sad.”

“Get your shit.”

“What?” I ask again, a hand on my hip. “You’re coming in my house and ordering me around after you just left me days ago? Slow down there, buddy.”

He grumbles, but must sense how serious I am and doesn’t object. Instead, he marches to the couch and sits. “Fine. Fire away. Let’s get this ironed out so we’re both clear as to where we stand.”

“I think we’re clear now.”

“I think we’re clear, just one of us is still fighting it. And that one of us isn’t me,” he grins.

My hand trembles as I reach for the armrest of the chair by the island. Sinking into it, I try to keep my voice even. “We were on the same page a couple of days ago.”

“Then I wised up.” He laces his fingers together and looks patiently at me. “Go. What do you want to hash out? Let’s hear it.”

“Why are you here?”

“To get you to move in with me.”

Thankfully, I’m already sitting or I think I’d have fallen over. “Move in with you? Branch. Really?”

“This thing between us has always been there and will always be there. I think I realized it when I heard the baby’s heartbeat,” he says softly. “But I knew it so strongly when Callum said that shit that I got scared. It was the first time I’ve ever felt that kind of loyalty to a woman. I knew that wasn’t true. I didn’t even think twice and that was a little unnerving.”

“I can imagine. You’ve been quite the player.”

“I have been. No doubt. I’ve been the best, actually.”

Rolling my eyes, I sigh. “Only you would take pride in that.”

“Now,” he insists, “I’m taking pride in being your man. If you’ll have me.”

My eyes fill with tears as I watch his face wash with sincerity. “What about away games? And the media?”

“Fine. Let’s say we stay apart from each other because of the fucking media. Is that the golden ticket? Is that going to get them to stop printing ridiculous stories and listening to assholes spewing garbage?”

I just look at him.

“We’re together, whether you want to realize that or not. Our lives will always be entwined, our stories overlapping in one way or the other. What I do will affect you and what you do will affect me.”

He shrugs. “Staying apart isn’t going to fix anything. You’re still going to wonder about road trips and I’m still going to want to break what’s-his-face for being here.”

“Max?” I giggle.

“Yeah. Max. I hate him.” He steps back and grumbles. “Our problems aren’t going away and neither are our fears. But I’d much rather deal with them together, where we can communicate and know what’s happening and have each other, than not.”

“What about the eighty percent?”

“There’s still twenty percent who make it. The smart twenty, the twenty who have something so good at home they don’t want to risk it. And you, Sunshine, are so worth it.”

I feel my walls giving in, his charm wearing me down. My brain says to be careful. My heart says to jump in head first. My gut, though, has a different reaction.

It’s my gut that says to give it a try, that it might not work but it’s worth seeing.

He’s always been honest with me, even when it was hard. When he’s been wrong, he’s apologized. And when he faced ridicule in the media about the baby, he trusted me.

As I look at his handsome face and the way his foot taps against the floor and he chews his bottom lip, I listen to my gut. Because my gut’s always right.

“What if it doesn’t work?” I ask.

“Then we can say we tried. I don’t know how to manage it all, but I want a family with you,” he whispers. “A real one. The holidays at the cabin and Christmas cards and a dog named Snickers.”

“Snickers?”

“Or Caramello. Whatever,” he whispers, reaching for my hand.

I place my palm in his and he pulls me to my feet.

“I want us in the same house,” he says, walking towards me, “figuring everything out together, eating coffee cake at midnight.”

“Promise?”

“I promise to love you and the baby and do everything I can for you.”

“No, I meant about the coffee cake.”

He picks me up, making me laugh, as he swings my legs over his arms. “You are going to be the death of me.”

Epilogue

Layla

Nine months later

The floor creaks as I tiptoe down the staircase. Sunny has been asleep for a half an hour and there's no way in hell I'm waking her up.

She's a beautiful little girl with blonde hair like me and the bluest eyes like her daddy. She came into the world as calm as a dove. The nurses tickled her feet to make her cry so her lungs would dry out after the C-Section.

Her biggest issue so far, besides her refusal to breast feed, is her daddy. He holds her nearly every moment she's awake when he's home. He sanitizes every bottle and nipple she might come into contact with and she already has two battery-operated vehicles waiting for her in the garage that she can use when she masters things like sitting up and walking.

It's the sweetest thing I've ever witnessed. As good as he is to her, he's just as good to me.

Things with him are easy. Yes, they require work, but it's not hard to love Branch Best. He's kind and thoughtful and brings me flowers and ice cream and leaves me notes on the dry erase board on the fridge when he leaves for work every morning.

He's everything I never dreamed he'd be. Plus more.

After getting Sunny back to sleep, I laid her in her bed and took a bath. Branch has to work in the morning, so he'll be up in just a few hours. I want to make sure his juices are restocked in the fridge so he has a cold one to drink before he leaves.

Turning the corner, I stop.

My first instinct is to be annoyed, but that drifts away at the pure love before me.

Branch stands in the kitchen with just his boxers on, Sunny nestled in the crook of his arm, as he heats up a bottle. He's whispering something to her, the soft tone of his voice making me melt. He has a way of doing that. A lot.

"Hey," I say, padding into the room. "I hate to interrupt this love fest, but why isn't she in bed?"

"She wanted to get up with Daddy."

"Oh, she did, did she? Doesn't she know Daddy needs some rest before practice tomorrow?" I say, leaning in for a kiss.

"She does. But she wanted to be awake when Mommy came down for coffee cake."

Laughing, my cheeks pink. "How did she know Mommy would do that?"

"Because Daddy told her." He leans in, pulling Sunny away. "I didn't tell her what's going to happen to Mommy when she goes back to bed though."

He touches my lips with his, the softness of his mouth making me moan. That just encourages him. His tongue parts my lips and slips through my mouth with a laziness that has my thighs clenching together.

"Is that a hint of what's to come?" I ask, catching my breath.

"Yes, my lady. You're going to come."

With a grin that's a permanent fixture lately, I grab a fork. Under his smirk, I lift the lid to the coffee cake.

"You were right," I sigh, pulling it in front of me. "I'm so going to—OMG. Branch?"

The fork hits the floor, the little ping startling Sunny. Branch ignores me and soothes her until she settles against him once more.

My heart is racing, my gaze going from the dessert and back to him again. Surely, I'm seeing this wrong. I have to be.

"Branch?" I gulp. "What is this?"

His eyes glued to mine, he reaches in the middle of the cream cheese icing and plucks the diamond ring out.

"I wasn't sure how to do this," he says, an edge of anxiety in his tone. "I didn't know where to put it so I'd be sure you found it and I didn't have time with my schedule to take you anywhere. Plus, Sunny really wanted to be around for this."

"Did she?" I say, blinking back tears.

"She did." He kisses her forehead while watching me. "You've given me everything in life that means anything. I don't just mean Sunny, but of course she's the main thing. You've given me a reason to get up, a reason to go to bed, a reason to come home."

He takes my finger and slips the ring over it, the icing smearing down my hand.

"I can't control where I play or how long I play, but that's okay. I can control what's important . . . and that's this team right here." He gets down on one knee, our daughter still cuddled against his wide chest. "I promise to love you and cherish you and to try to get hotter as I get older like Sam Elliott."

I laugh through the tears that well in my eyes.

"Layla James, will you make me the luckiest man in the world and be my wife?"

There's no nerves, no wobble, no panic. There's nothing but complete and absolute certainty that this is what I want and where I need to be.

I take his face in my hands, feeling the coarseness from his stubble against my hands. "Yes. You know I will."

He stands, pulling me into his other side. He kisses my cheek, fixing little pecks reverently until he hits my mouth.

The fire, the passion, that initially brought us together, is hotter than ever. He pulls away, resting his forehead against mine.

"I promise to be patient," I tell him, "and to try not to worry about everything. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and be the best damn cheerleader you've ever seen."

"I know you will." He kisses me again, lacing our fingers together. "I'm putting love bug to bed and then I'm making love to you in ours. Deal?"

I nod, watching him head out of the kitchen.

"Hey, Branch?" I say.

"Yeah?"

"I didn't think you believed in luck?"

He gives me a little grin. "I don't deserve this and there's no way I worked for it. So, I don't know. Maybe I do."

Exposé Alert: We're not crying. You're crying.

Our favorite couple, Branch Best and Layla Miller, tied the knot this past weekend in tiny Linton, Illinois. Sources say Layla carried their daughter, Sunny, down the aisle at her family's lake house.

Finn Miller was the best man and sources say he may or may not have swam nude in the lake afterwards. We're still waiting on pictures. (God, let there be pictures.)

We would like to wish Mr. and Mrs. Best a big, heartfelt congratulations. May this be your lucky ever after.

THE END

Want more Finn and Poppy? Twelve Days Until Sunday will be releasing in the fall of 2018. Add it to your Goodreads TBR.

Meet the Gibson Boys

Want to know a little more about the boys from Crave? Read on ...

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Crank

Chapter 1

Walker

“I’m not taking you to the hospital.”

Peck teeters on the edge of one of Crave’s billiard tables. He sways back and forth, his sneakers squeaking against the cheap wood over the chatter of the patrons of the bar. “You don’t think I can land a back flip off here?”

The truth is, I’m pretty sure he could. My cousin has the reflexes of a cat. The problem is he also has nine lives and I’m sure he’s used up eight of them already.

“The question isn’t if you can land it. It’s how bloody the end result would be,” I say, taking a sip of beer. “And I’m not trying to splint a head wound. Can you even do that?”

“*You* could. Look at my arm.” He holds his left forearm in front of him, his watch catching the light from the new fixtures above. “This is some of your best work.”

Memories of splinting Peck’s arm with nothing but a belt, a bar towel, and a Playboy rush through my mind, as does loading him into the back of my truck for a quick trip to the emergency room.

“I really think I can do this,” Peck insists, working his shoulders back and forth.

Downing another drink, hoping I’m good and hammered before Peck attempts this disaster, I look across the table. My older brother, Lance, is watching me as he brings an Old-Fashioned to his lips. We exchange a look, both of us waiting for Machlan to catch wind of Peck’s antics and throw him out of Crave. Again.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Peck asks. “Another broken arm? I mean, I think I can get the rotation fast enough to not land on my head.”

“I think it’s your turn to take him to the hospital,” I tell Lance.

He coughs, choking on his drink. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Remember how hot that nurse was last time?” Peck asks, wiggling his brows. “Actually, that kind of makes me want to go for it now just in case she’s on duty.”

“She’s not,” Lance chimes in. “I think she was fired after the Hospital Administrator found her fuck-foundered in triage three the night of your broken arm.”

“Peck! Get your fucking ass down.” Machlan’s voice rips through the bar, booming over the crowd.

Everyone quiets a few notches, not quite scared of my younger brother, but not willing to test his boundaries either. His reputation as a man you don’t want to tangle with without a small army definitely helps his cause when it comes to managing his bar. Peck, on the other hand, just rolls his eyes.

“Just one jump, Mach! One. Uno. I got this.” Peck gives Machlan his best shit-eating grin before looking at me and Lance. “If he throws me out, I’ll be back in a couple days. Hell, he threw me out on Tuesday and I was back on Thursday for corn hole.”

“I think that just means you’re in here too much,” Lance offers.

Peck starts to respond but his attention is redirected as Molly McCarter saunters by. The dim lighting does nothing to hide the exaggerated sway of her hips or the way she licks her lips as her

sight sets on *me*.

Bracing for what may come out of her mouth, I fill mine with alcohol.

“Hey, Walker,” she says, stopping at my chair. Her hands rest along the top rung, her fingertips sliding across the back of my neck. “Hey, Lance.”

Lance tips his glass her way.

“I was thinking,” she purrs, “my car is way overdue for an oil change. Maybe I could bring it to Crank sometime this week, Walker? Do you think you could *fit it in*?”

“I’m pretty full this week,” I lie, ignoring her thinly veiled offer. “See what Peck has available.”

A huff whispers through the air and she pivots on her heel. “Thanks anyway.”

“I can get you in ...” Peck’s voice drowns into the Crave chaos as he follows her towards the bar.

He tails after her, all but drooling, as she slides onto a bar stool. Her gaze flicks to mine, her knees spread just a little farther apart than a lady ever should. Then again, no one has ever called Molly a lady.

“Ever fuck her?” Lance asks, downing the rest of his drink as he turns back to me. “I’ve been tempted to a couple of times and did get a decent blow job one Halloween when she was dressed up in this nurse outfit.”

“What is it with you and nurses?”

“Think about it: they’re smart, make good money, work a lot so you have free time, and they’re used to getting dirty,” he smirks. “It’s like a straight shot to my dick.”

“And they’re good with needles, have access to medicines that can make you lose your mind, and I’ve never met one that didn’t have a warped sense of humor,” I counter. “They set off my crazy radar.”

Lance laughs. “Did that radar just start working? Because I distinctly remember you getting balls deep with some psychologically challenged women. One in particular.”

“Are you feeling froggy tonight? Because if you keep that mouth runnin’ like that, I’m about to knock those glasses off your face.”

I’m kidding. More or less. The problem is Lance knows it.

“Oh, go to hell,” he laughs.

“Already there, brother. Already there.”

He takes his glasses off his face and places them on the table. “I usually look at your life and think I’d hate to have it. But after the day I had today, I’d trade you places.”

“What? Did the high school kids refuse to learn about the American Revolution?” I laugh. “You have such a cush job.”

“I’m a professional.”

“A professional bullshitter, maybe.”

He makes a comeback, but it’s swallowed in the roar of the crowd as a popular song blares through the overhead speakers.

Crave, an old brick building along Beecher Street, is longer than it is wide, and pulses with the noise of the crowd and music. Alcohol ads, high school sports schedules, and a giant cork board adorn the walls. The latter is a good read and filled with letters and notes from one townspeople to the next. Affairs have been called out, coon dogs found, marriage proposals made, and entire conversations about who is working what shift at the factory have taken place on that thing. It’s been a mainstay of the bar since our uncle founded it almost fifty years ago. When our younger brother, Machlan, took over Crave thanks to Uncle George’s failing liver, he

extended the wall of corkboards all the way to the door.

“That’s new,” Lance says, moving over one seat closer to me. Motioning to the phallic design made up of yellow rubber duck Christmas lights on the wall between the pool tables, he laughs. “Let me guess: that’s Peck’s handiwork.”

“Naturally. Machlan wasn’t thrilled, but Peck rallied the masses and they convinced him to keep it.”

“It is nicely done,” Lance says, chewing on the end of his glasses. “I can see the art in it.”

“Fuck. I should’ve been an artist if that counts as art.”

“Apparently things didn’t go well with Molly,” Lance says, twisting in his chair.

“She’s never gonna give Peck a chance.”

At the sound of his name, Peck walks through the front door. He stops just inside, the glow from the exit sign giving his mop of blond hair a pinkish hue.

Peck makes a beeline for our table and I can read the look etched in the lines on his face. After growing up with him and then working with him for the last few years, I can read him like a book. Something is wrong.

“What’s going on?” I ask, scrambling to my feet as he gets closer.

“Walker, man, you need to get outside,” Peck says. “Someone just bashed the front of your truck.”

“What?” I hiss, sure I misheard him. “Someone did fucking what?”

“Yeah, man. You need to get out there.”

Blood ripping through my veins, I plow my way through the bar. Machlan lifts his chin, sensing something is off, but I shake my head as we pass. I know he loves a good fight, but this one is mine.

Lance is on my heels as we make our way through the crowd. “Who did you piss off now?”

“Someone that wants to die, apparently.” My fingers flex against the wood of the door, the warm summer air slamming my face as I hit the sidewalk. “You sure you don’t want to stay inside? I think getting into a street fight is against your teacher code of conduct.”

“Fuck off,” Lance chuckles. “I’ll have Peck hold my glasses and I’m in.”

“You, my brother, are an intelligent heathen.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I think.”

The top of my black pickup truck comes into view, sitting beneath one of the few lamps lining Beecher Street. There are two people standing on the sidewalk next to my truck.

“Do we know them?” I ask Peck through gritted teeth.

“I promise you we’ve never seen them before.”

“So it’s not ...” Lance doesn’t finish his sentence. “*Holy shit.*”

The two women turn to face us and I think all of our jaws drop. The first is tall with jet black hair and a strong, athletic build. It’s the second one has me struggling to remember why we’re out here.

Long, blonde hair with faint streaks of purple and the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen, she assesses me in the hazy streetlight. She doesn’t make a show of looking me over like most women do, batting their eyelashes like some damsel in distress. There’s something different about her, a quiet confidence that makes her almost unapproachable.

Unapproachable, but still hot as fucking hell.

My gaze drifts down her ample chest, over the white lace fabric of the top that hugs the bends of her body. Cutoff denim jeans cap long, lean legs that only look longer next to the Louisville Slugger half-hidden behind her.

It takes a ton of effort, but my eyes finally tear from her body and to the body of my truck. Sure enough, there's a rip across the grill and a broken headlight that looks an awful lot like a slam from a baseball bat. It's nothing that can't be fixed in my shop, but that's not the point. The point is the disrespect.

"Either of you know what happened?" I ask, leaning against the hood. They remain silent. The only response is a dashed look between themselves.

Settling my scrutiny on each one individually, watching them squirm, I save the blonde for last.

"Did you see anything?" I ask, turning back to the tall one.

Her weight shifts from one foot to the other as she runs a hand through her shiny hair like we're talking about coffee or having a beer later. "Me? No. I didn't see a thing."

"Really? You were standing out here just now and you didn't see anything?"

"No," she smiles sweetly. "Nothing at all."

Peck steps between us and inspects the damage. When he turns around, he bites the inside of his cheek. "If I were a betting man, Walker, I'd say it looks like someone walloped Daisy with a baseball bat."

The blonde lifts a brow, something on the tip of her tongue that she holds back.

"You got something to say?" I prod.

"You named your truck 'Daisy'?"

Her eyes narrow, almost as if she's taunting me. That she has the guts to challenge me combined with those fucking blue eyes throws me off my game. "I did. Got a problem with that?"

"No. No problem," she says, twisting her lips into an incredibly sexy pout that I want to kiss off her goddamn face. "Just never met a man that named their truck after a flower."

"Me either. Now, before I go calling the Sheriff about this, I'm gonna give you two a moment to consider telling me what happened. And," I say, cutting off the blonde, "I'll give you a piece of information before you decide what to say. Doc Burns' office has cameras installed that will show everything. Just let that sink in a second."

Their eyes go wide as they instinctively move together into a protective huddle. The tall girl points to the blonde who responds with a frantic whisper. She's guilty as hell.

On one hand, I want to break her down and get inside her in ways she's never dreamed. On the other, I can hear my brain issuing an alert to back away slowly.

The longer they confer, the more time I have to watch. The blonde controls the conversation, the other deferring to her as they talk amongst themselves. It's hot as hell.

The light bounces off the wounded plastic of the headlight and draws my attention back to the fact that Daisy is damaged, and in all likelihood, one of these two did it.

"You really calling Kip?" Peck whispers. "He's not gonna do shit about this, you know."

"He might throw them in the back of his cop car and fuck their brains out. Especially the blonde," Lance whistles. "Can you imagine her in handcuffs? *Shit.*"

The thought shoots a flame through my veins that catches me off guard. The vision of her bound up with one of these assholes at the helm irks me. Bad. "You two stay out of this. Let me handle it."

The sound of metal pinging against the ground rings through the air. The girls jump, the blonde leaping away from the aluminum bat as it rolls across the sidewalk and lands in the gutter with a flourish. Her eyes snap to mine, guilt etched across her gorgeous face. "It was an accident."

"How, exactly, does a baseball bat accidentally strike the front of my truck?" I ask. "Did it just hop over there and smash itself into my headlight?"

"Well," she gulps. "I ..."

"She was imitating her brother," the dark-headed one says. "So we stop using pronouns, I'm Delaney. This is Sienna."

"I'm Walker. That's Peck and Lance." I rest my attention on Sienna. She's leaned against the grey car, her arms crossed over her chest. "So?"

"I was swinging the bat," she says, "while Delaney puked over there and it slipped out of my hands."

"I think we're gonna have to see your swing," Peck chuckles.

Sienna rolls her eyes. "You do *not* need to see my swing."

Imagining her ass popped out, her body moving for our benefit, seems like a fair trade for the hassle of dealing with this tonight.

"How else do we know it was you? It could've been Delaney and you're just covering for her," I explain, loving the frustration on her beautiful face. "Gonna need to see the swing."

"No."

"Lance, call Sheriff Kooch."

"Wait," Sienna sighs. "It *was* an accident. I can cut you a check for the repairs but please don't call the police. I ... I can't have a record. You don't understand."

Looking away, it takes everything I have not to laugh. The plea in her voice is so damn adorable it almost makes me give in. Yet, she hasn't shown any remorse and that's something I can't get to sit right.

Swiping the bat out of the gutter, I extend it to her. The air between us heats, our fingers brushing against one another in the exchange. The contact is enough to have her eyes flicking to mine. The light above may be dim, but it's bright enough to see the way her lids hood, her lips part just barely as she pulls her skin from mine.

A zip of energy tumbles through my veins and I remind myself I can't tug on the bat and pull her into me. There's no way I can cover her lips with my own, sliding my tongue across hers, making her attempt at resistance to this proposed swing futile.

Instead, I step back.

"Batter up." Peck motions for her to go. "Let's see it."

"Are you really going to make me do this?"

"Did you really just smash the front of my truck?" I ask. "The answer is the same to both questions, Slugger."

Her eyes narrow, but there's a fire in them that turns me the hell on. She steps away from her friend, zapping all the power I held just a few seconds ago with the flick of her tongue. It darts out, rolling across her bottom lip as the bat comes over her head. Sticking her ass out, bending her knees, her eyes still locked on mine, she slices the bat through the air ... and stops it at the last possible second before impact.

It's everything I thought it would be.

"Any questions, fellas?" she asks, propping it up on one shoulder.

"I have one," I say, forcing a swallow, trying to redirect my thoughts. "If you could stop it that fast, then why the fuck didn't you do that the first time?"

"Very funny." She tosses the bat in the back seat of the car and crosses her arms in front of her again.

"Can I ask why you have a baseball bat to begin with?" Lance asks. "Do you belong to some

softball league or something? If so, I just took a huge interest in women's softball."

Sienna laughs as Delaney's face turns red. "Delaney's car is like a scavenger hunt. You can find anything in there. So while she got sick, I just rummaged around in the trunk, found the bat, and fooled around." She looks at me, her eyes softening. "Are you going to be here for a while? I'll go home and get the money. I didn't bring my ATM card with me tonight."

It'll cost fifty bucks to fix the damage and about an hour's time. Definitely not worth her going out of her way tonight. But it *is* worth making her come around again and say she's sorry. It might do her some good.

Might not hurt me either.

She clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, the motion driving me crazy.

"Come see me Monday morning at Crank. It's two streets over," I say, gesturing to the north, before I can talk sense to myself.

"Smart," Peck whispers behind me, getting an elbow to the side from Lance.

Her jaw sets, a glimmer of resistance clouding her baby blue eyes. "I have plans Monday. I can try on Tuesday."

The nonchalant attitude cuts through me, like her fuckup is no big deal. I wasn't set on Monday morning, but I am now. "Monday or I call the Sheriff. Your decision, but make it quick. I got shit to do."

"Fine," she huffs. "Monday."

"Fine," I mock. "See you Monday morning."

We start back down the sidewalk, her gaze heavy on my back. I pause at the bumper of their car. "Peck got your license plate number, so don't think about not showing."

"I did not," Peck hisses, catching another elbow from Lance as their car doors open and slam shut.

"What the hell are you going to do with that?" Lance asks once we're out of earshot.

"Because I have a list of suggestions if you need them."

As we get farther away, the air clearing of Sienna's perfume, I realize it's not suggestions I need. It's a heavy dose of self-control.

About Adriana Locke

USA Today and Amazon Top 10 Bestselling author Adriana Locke lives and breathes books. After years of slightly obsessive relationships with the flawed bad boys created by other authors, Adriana has created her own.

She resides in the Midwest with her husband, sons, and two dogs. She spends a large amount of time playing with her kids, drinking coffee, and cooking. You can find her outside if the weather's nice and there's always a piece of candy in her pocket.

Contact Adriana

Adriana can be found on all social media platforms. Look for her on the ones you frequent most!

Her website is the place to go for up-to-date information, deleted scenes, and more. Check it out at www.adrianalocke.com. Don't forget to sign up for her newsletter, sent monthly, filled with news, pictures, fun and giveaways.

If you use Facebook or Goodreads, there's good news! Adriana has reader groups in both places. Join Books by Adriana Locke (Facebook) and All Locked Up (Goodreads) and chat with the author daily about all things bookish.

Dear Reader,

I hope you've enjoy LUCKY NUMBER ELEVEN. It's been a labor of love—football and books. Two of my favorite things!

If you would, please consider leaving a short review when finished. It would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you very much for reading through to The End. I appreciate you.

~Adriana

Other Books by Adriana Locke

The Exception Series

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[*The Perception*](#)

[*The Exception Series Box Set*](#)

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[*Battle of the Sexes*](#)

[*Lucky Number Eleven*](#)

Twelve Days Until Sunday—coming fall 2018

FIGHTING FOR FLIGHT

J.B. Salisbury



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--JB

Prologue

I have a brief moment to catch my breath before it's time to push again. My head lolls to the side, eyes fixing on the shape of a man. It's hard to tell through the blur of tears and sweat clouding my vision. The bright light illuminating my body is no help. Everything outside of its glow is darkness. But, even in the dark, I know who it is.

How long has he been here? In my labor-induced dementia I didn't see him come in. My skin crawls, each tiny hair standing on end. I squirm under the weight of his foreboding presence.

The vise grip on my midsection begins its violent compression. I lock eyes with the doctor between my legs.

"One more push, Milena. Take a deep breath." He wipes his brow with the dirty sleeve of his shirt. The smell of cigar smoke and liquor wafts from his body in nauseating waves. My stomach roils as my body tightens with a contraction.

"Good. Now, push!" I barely hear the doctor count to ten over my groaning.

My torso folds in half as the force of the contraction racks my body. I bite my lip and taste blood, refusing to give voice to my agony. Sweat beads on my skin. I grip the sheets against the unbearable pain. I want to give up, just lie back and sleep, but my womb is intent on purging this baby. A guttural sound rumbles in my throat. Searing pain. Intense pressure. I'm being ripped into two.

"Baby's out." The doctor announces to the room.

It's over. I fall back onto the bed.

The room is quiet except for my heaving breath and the clicking of the doctor's tools. I study the ceiling, not ready to face what I know is coming.

Exhaustion sets in and my eyelids slide shut, only to fly back open with the shrill cry of new life. Its stuttered vibrato pulls at something deep in my chest. My heart races.

The infant's scream calls to me on a primal level, begging for comfort only its mother can provide. My arms ache to cradle the baby to my breast. *It's okay, mommy's here.* The words coo in my head, but freeze at my lips. I can't get attached, not when his plan is to take it away to use it for his own purposes, like a bred work mule.

What kind of work will await this baby when it becomes an adult all depends on one thing. The nagging question picks at my mind.

Sitting up, I rub my eyes to clear my vision. He stands at the foot of the bed, no longer shrouded in the dark. Holding the baby in one arm, he hands the doctor a large wad of cash then flicks his fingers for the man to leave. The doctor scurries out the door like a mouse that just stole from the dinner table, and slams it behind him.

A devious glare catches my eye. "Well done, darling. She's perfect." His voice is a the smooth purr that haunts my dreams.

She.

Oh, God. No!

"Dominick, please, I beg you." I try to put authority behind my voice, but only manage a whisper. "Just give her up for adoption. She's an innocent—"

"Quiet!" His booming command echoes in the tiny room, making me flinch then cower. "She's mine. I'll do with her whatever I please." The fierce words cut through the newborn's

cries and straight to my heart.

He runs his palm over the baby's head with the gentle grace of a jellyfish. Serene and lethal. "She has your dark hair, darling. I'll name her Raven." He steps to my bedside. "Would you like to hold her?"

My whimpered reply has him smiling. He knows what I've just done. Like laying out my cards in a high stakes game of poker, I've just shown him my weakness.

No, I can't hold her. If I do, I'll never let her go.

"I see." He keeps her in his arms and strolls to the single window. "You may raise her." His gaze slides back to mine. "But make no mistake, Milena, if you do anything to interfere with my plan, I will kill her. Then, you and I will start from scratch, and I'll not make it pleasant for you. Do you understand?" As if he can see into my soul and feel my fear, he smirks.

Revulsion courses through my veins like venom, making it impossible to speak. I close my eyes and nod, trying to force dry the tears that stream down my face.

If I could only take it back. The day everything had spun out of control. The moment Dominick Morretti ruined my life. Leaning against his car with his blond hair and those beautiful blue-green eyes, he looked like an angel. He spoke tenderly with sincere reverence and offered me a life I could only dream about. My heart wanted so badly to believe he was my savior: a heavenly messenger sent to wrap me in his embrace and whisk me off to my happily ever after. But he was no savior. He was my undertaker.

Realization hits: a heavy flood, drowning me in regret. Painful guilt eats away at my heart, slowly consuming what's left of my humanity. Dominick is nothing if not a man of his word. He's going to get his way, and there is not a thing I can do about it.

Hatred boils in my stomach. I want to lash out, attack the man who has taken my future from me. But I know better than to face off with him. I've seen what he does to girls who don't obey. They spend the rest of their days shaking, walking the thin line of their addiction, solely dependent on him, so desperate for their next fix that they beg for the gift of a quick death. Right where he wants them.

"Milena." His firm tone gets my attention.

Back at my bedside, he holds the bundle of blankets and baby for me to take. Raven. My daughter. *No. Not mine.*

Don't show him my weakness. Suffering in silence is torture. But he can't touch what I don't give him.

I wrap my arms tightly around my body, locking them in place. With the last pieces of my resolve, I shove the mother in me to the back corner of my soul and lock her there.

"Take her, darling." His words carry a heavy warning.

I shake my head.

He stands straight and studies me with narrowed eyes. "Very well." He turns and heads to the door. "I'll give you a few hours to come to terms with this. In the meantime," he looks at the rumpled bed and the floor, both riddled with the gore of childbirth, "clean this mess up."

Then he's gone, taking Raven with him.

I scan my surroundings, taking in the carnage: The product of the last twenty-four hours of labor; the bloodied result of an unsanitary home birth. Something deep down registers that mine are not the only horrors that haunt this room. I can almost hear the screams of the women who have been here before me.

My hand absently rubs my now soft belly. Once full of life and promise, and now, completely void. And through all this, I feel . . . nothing.

One

20 years later . . .

Jonah

Well, shit. I didn't think the headache to fuck all headaches could possibly get worse. Between the strobe lights and the crappy music, my brain feels like it's twenty-four hours off a three-day bender. The stench of stale beer, sweat, and perfume swirl in the air, topping off my list of cranial irritants.

And add to that the gang of silverback gorillas at the table behind me. They grunt and holler at the stage, likely beating their chests for attention. *Amateurs*. I turn and give the frat-boy pussies a look that has them all sitting with their mouths sealed shut.

My head is going to explode, and it's putting me in a fucked-up mood. The only reason I agreed to come to the strip club was the hope that pounding a few beers might take the edge off the pile-driver in my head. So far, not so good.

With one long pull from the bottle, I check out the half-naked girl on stage in front of me. She's a typical Vegas stripper: bleach blond hair, dark tanned skin, and huge fake tits. There's an identical one for every slot machine on the strip.

"That chick's been eyeball-fucking you all night." Blake yells to be heard over the music. "You gonna hit that?"

I glare at my training partner. After all, it's his dumb ass that talked me into coming here tonight.

"May as well." Getting rid of this headache is my first priority. Since the booze isn't helping, maybe some female intervention will. "But only if she's off soon. I've got to get out of here. This place is killing my head." I attempt to rub the pain away with my fingertips.

Blake raises an eyebrow along with one side of his mouth. "I better get going too. I need my beauty sleep if I'm going to keep kicking your ass."

I give him the backside of my middle finger.

His knee connecting to my temple in training today is what got me in this brain-thumping predicament. I make a mental note to pay him back with a solid ball shot next time we're in the octagon.

"Right. You kicked *my* ass." I tilt my head, indicating his fresh black eye and bloodied lip.

Maybe I should feel worse about flipping the switch on him as I did. But he of all people should know better. He's seen what happens when I let the monster out. If I get hit hard enough, my brain goes into protection mode. I go feral. I can't help it.

I've learned to control it during training, for the most part. But Blake's knee hit hard out of nowhere and set me off. Luckily, I was able to rein it in before I really hurt the bastard.

"Hey, sexy," a seductive voice purrs in my ear.

Feminine hands run from my biceps, down my chest, and still on my abdomen. I turn to see the blond stripper from the stage resting her chin on my shoulder, biting on her cherry-red bottom lip. She slides her hands back up, skirting around to my front. Her long, naked legs straddle my thighs and she leans in close, placing her assets at eye level.

"I think I know you." Her hips undulate in front of me to the beat of the music.

I yawn. "Is that right? And where is it you think you know me from?"

I study her face, trying to pull up something familiar from my memory and coming up empty. There's no way I've had sex with her before. I would have remembered. And if I had, that would have a direct effect on how this night will end. I do not hit the same honey pot twice.

She allows her weight to drop so that she's sitting straddled on my lap. I feel the familiar stir of arousal as my body responds to the heat and friction, but nothing else. I know her type. They're all the same: fake—from their practiced, ditzy voices to their ass implants. These women are good for one thing, and she seems more than ready to go. *Perfect.*

"I've seen you on all the billboards."

My eyes roll to the ceiling then squeeze shut at the throbbing in my still-aching head. I don't have time for small talk. "You want to get out of here?"

Her face lights up and her eyes sparkle. "Sure."

What a surprise.

"Can we go to your place?" She's practically bouncing with excitement.

I can almost see the dollar signs flash in her eyes, she's so transparent. This chick is all about status, the money, and the right to brag that she bagged a fighter. She's looking to snag someone with cash that she can lead around by his dick. Her porn-star looks and willing sexual prowess turned on so bright, she's hoping to blind me so I'll *think* I'm in love. So fucking predictable.

"No. Yours."

I'd never take a woman to my place. Seems to me if a guy brings a woman home she suddenly feels like she can set up house. Before he knows it, she's making breakfast and stuffing his bathroom drawers with tampons. Poor shmuck looking for a one-night stand finds himself with a live-in wife. When she finally does leave, the guy's fucked because she knows where he lives. He never calls, but she doesn't care. She'll just show up at his house or, even worse, drive by or park across the street and stalk him.

No thanks.

"Fine." Her reply sounds deflated. The excitement tarnished, but I can tell, this chick doesn't give up. "I'll meet you out front. Give me five minutes?" She perks up, her thin eyebrows high on her forehead, anticipating my answer.

I nod.

With a long, firm grind of her pelvis on my crotch, she disappears into the crowd. Blake has his tongue down the throat of a busty redhead.

"Hey, bro. I'm gonna bounce." I say it loud enough for him to hear.

He doesn't break his lip-lock, but waves me off with one hand while skillfully sliding a fifty-dollar bill into the girl's g string. And they say they aren't prostitutes.

I down the dregs of my beer, throw some cash on the table, and head for the door. The club is busy for a Tuesday night, and the bar is three-deep, standing room only. People move out of my way a little quicker than usual, probably due to the don't-fuck-with-me look this headache is giving my face.

Shoving through the club's front door, I'm hit with desert air and cigarette smoke. The flashing neon sign makes everyone's skin look pink. I scan the parking lot and consider bolting. Maybe a hot shower and good night's sleep are all I need.

Just then, a small hand grabs my elbow. Too late. The stripper looks up at me from under her eyelashes. She licks her lips and presses her tits against my arm. She slides her hand into my palm and laces her fingers with mine. "I hope you're ready for some fun. One night with me and you'll be begging—"

I pull my hand from hers. "Where's your car? I'll follow you."

Her eyes flash with something that looks like disappointment.

Chicks and their inflated ideas about romance. This isn't a date. This isn't an all-night sexual rendezvous. This is simple: Itch. Scratch.

She nods her head in the direction of her car. Feeling a little bad for my brush off, I walk her to it. *I'm not a complete asshole.*

She settles in and turns the ignition. I take off to my truck, telling myself that going home with . . . *Ah hell*, I don't even know her name.

Oh well. Won't be the first time I bang a nameless face.

It's a short drive to her apartment. I back my truck into a spot in the visitor's section to ensure a quick departure. She waits for me at the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm right up here." She runs her hand down my chest hooking my jeans with her fingertips.

"Don't." I remove her hand.

Her eyes narrow before they soften into something more sexual. It's as if she wants to be pissed at me, but doesn't want to lose the prize.

"If control is your thing, sexy, just say the word." She spins around and I follow her up to her place.

Once inside, she throws her bag on the couch and walks back to what I assume is her bedroom. I head towards the glowing clock in her kitchen. It's almost midnight. Pulling a condom from my wallet, I vow to be home and in bed by one.

I walk down the short hallway to the room with the light on. She's lying on the bed, naked. The visual alone has my body charged and ready.

"You want to hit the light?" I work the button fly of my jeans.

Her face twists in anger. "What is it with you?" She props herself up on her elbows. "No touching. No foreplay. No lights! What do you think this is? Some quickie with the stripper?"

My hands freeze at my fly. Is she kidding? Of course that's what this is. I shrug. No use in leading the girl on. "Yeah."

Her eyes sweep my body from head to toe then back again. "Whatever." She rolls to the side and clicks the light, plunging us in darkness.

Much better.

I focus on the task before me: Meeting a need, no connection, no feeling anywhere above my waist. A goal set before me, a finish line that I'm racing to breach so I can go home and get some sleep.

She moves for a kiss, and I turn away. She tries to engage me in dirty talk. It's easy to ignore. Finally, she gives up, allowing our bodies to take what they want.

Still completely clothed, except for the fly of my jeans, I stand from her bed to leave. This girl probably has something more to offer a guy. But that guy ain't me.

Just the thought of having some needy chick hanging on my arm, making me buy her crap, taking up my time with her petty issues about girl shit makes me shiver. I need to get the hell out of here.

"Will you call me, you know, if you ever want to hang out again?" Her small voice reaches my now-sated brain.

Fuck. This is uncomfortable.

I grab my phone and press a few buttons. "What's your number?" *And your name.* She rattles off seven digits, and I pretend to program them into my phone.

"Right, I got it. Go to sleep."

I have a Jiminy Cricket moment with my conscience. “Thanks for . . . that.”
She mumbles something I can’t quite make out and I slip from her room.

~*~

Raven

“Holy crud.” Shooting straight up in bed, I cover my ears. “Stupid thing.” I pound quiet my obnoxious alarm.

Usually waking on my own, I forget how that thing buzzes like a swarm of bees with megaphones glued to their butts. Next paycheck I’m clock radio shopping.

The heels of my hands dig into my eye sockets to rub away my sleepy haze. *Why did I stay up so late?* I swing my legs over the side of the bed and push up with a big, feline stretch.

Coffee. That’s what I need. I step in the direction of my kitchenette and kick the large wooden box on the floor.

“Ouchie, ouchie, ouchie.” Cradling my injured foot, I give the darn box my most evil glare, the evidence of what kept me up so late, punishing me still.

The box is full of every *Car and Driver* magazine I own. I got sucked into some old issues last night and couldn’t put them down until I kept falling asleep and face planting into the pages.

I shove the box under my bed and stir together my morning pick me up. A few teaspoons of freeze dried granules, cream, and sugar. *Voila.* A perfectly crappy cup of coffee.

I plop on the edge of my bed and gaze around my small but cozy home: four walls, one window, and one door. The doors to my bathroom and closet are nothing more than shower curtains on rods. Not my first choice, but the rent is cheap, and it’s close to work—like right above it.

Work. I check the time.

“Twenty minutes? Plenty of time.”

After sipping my coffee, I strip out of my PJ’s and jump in the shower. The heat from the shower combined with the caffeine help to chase away the last of my drowsiness.

Wrapped in a towel, I open the top drawer of my dresser and gaze at my bra and panty collection. “Good morning, my pretties.”

It’s my little addiction. Over fifty percent of my paycheck goes toward my balance at Victoria’s Secret. Vivid memories of my mom folding her laundry flicker before my eyes. Yes, her lingerie was appealing, but the reason why she—no. I shake the memories loose. Not going there.

My eyes scan each perfectly matching set. What color do I feel like today?

“How about you?” I grab the purple satin and lace duo and slide them on. Something about wearing beautifully sexy stuff under my uniform always brings a smile to my face.

With a quick dry of my hair, I pile it on top of my head. Throwing on a tank top, I slide my blue uniform coveralls up over my hips, tying the long sleeves around my waist. A swipe of mascara and a couple passes of cherry Chapstick and my look is complete.

Keys in hand, along with a small can of cat food, I’m out the door. Hopping down the stairs to the alley, I scrunch up my nose at the smell of rot and debris from the dumpsters.

“Good morning, Dog.” In a crouch, I pet the black alley cat that showed up at my door months ago.

“You hungry?” I pop the lid and place the can of food on the bottom stair, smiling at his

answering meow. Dog scarfs it down, as he does every morning, and I rub behind his ears.

"I still can't believe you like it out here." I won't try to take him inside. Last time he clawed my arms until they were bloody. Whatever terrible thing happened to him ruined him for others. I can relate.

"I've got to go to work. I'll see you tonight."

Leaving Dog to his breakfast, I round the corner of the building to face the garage front by the bay doors. Through the window, I see Guy sitting at his desk with a grim look on his face. Not unusual for him.

I throw open the door, hearing the bell jingle above head and getting Guy's attention.

"Mornin', Ray."

"Good morning, Guy. How was your night?"

"Shit! Got sucked into some stupid show about a bachelor and some bimbos who were all trying to get his rose. Those girls were pathetic. And drunk!"

I giggle at Guy's retelling the episode of *The Bachelor*, one of the few shows I get on my tiny television.

"Watched that stupid show for an hour, and that sorry sack still couldn't make up his mind."

"That's what happens when you give a guy a choice out of twenty-five beautiful women. Why choose one when he could have them all?" I shrug and grab the schedule for today from his desk.

"Them all? Hell, I couldn't stand to listen to just one of them talk for more than five minutes. They're irritatin'."

I didn't have the heart to remind him that he did, in fact, watch the entire hour-long show. How irritating could they have been?

He points to the schedule in my hand. "You got a couple oil changes waiting for you in the bay. You do what you can. I got Leo comin' in to close."

"No Mickey today?"

"Nah, he's got some shit going on at home he needs to deal with."

I throw my backpack into a locker.

"That's too bad. I hope everything's okay."

"Oh, he'll be fine. Little shit always works through stuff. Even when we were kids, our mom always said Mickey could shine his way out of shit storm. Anyway, better for you to work solo since you'll be taking over the place someday." He gives me a wink and goes back to the papers on his desk.

Butterflies dance in my stomach when I think about owning this garage. Guy has no children, and he's the closest thing I have to a father. He and his brother Mickey took over Guy's Garage from Guy senior when he got sick. Mickey's kids have fancy city jobs and want nothing to do with this place, so they've asked me to take it when they retire.

"I'll be in the bay if you need me," I call over my shoulder while heading out.

I take a deep breath, allowing the smell of gasoline and oil to soothe me. The garage has always been my sanctuary. I plug in the boom box and hear Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" fill the silence.

Lost in my work, buried under the hood of a '99 Ford Explorer, the rumble of a powerful engine draws my attention. A deep bass beat accompanies the engine's growl as it pulls up to the bay. I attempt to figure out what kind of car it is just by listening, one of my favorite games. My guess is a large—no, a very large—pickup truck. American made.

I hear rather than see Guy head out to greet the truck's driver. The engine and bass go quiet,

and I faintly make out a deep voice. The low vibration sends a tingle down my body and goose bumps race across my skin. *What in the heck was that?*

I check my forehead. *No fever. Hm.*

“Ray! Ray, get out here!” Guy’s beckoning call yanks me from my thoughts.

I grab a towel to wipe my hands.

“Ray! Now!”

Jeez, he’s impatient.

Walking through the bay doors into the Las Vegas sun, my eyes adjust to the bright light.

A monstrous, black, Ford FX4 pickup looms out front. *Ah-ha! I was right.* It’s a twin turbo, kitted out with thirty-five inch wheels, black rims, and a six-inch lift. The limo-tinted windows and black headlights make it look alive. Whoever drives this beast has a passion I can relate to. My gaze swings to the truck’s owner to commend his choice in automobile.

“Nice Ford—” I’m frozen, feet glued to the asphalt, voice stuck in my throat, and gawking at the Universal Fighting League’s local-celebrity-hot-guy, Jonah Slade. *At my work!*

He’s well over six feet tall, six-five if I had to guess. A jersey-like, sleeveless shirt hangs artfully from his broad shoulders. His well-muscled arms are covered with brilliantly colored tattoos that beckon to be touched. My fingers itch to trace each swirl, to touch him to see if he’s real.

He clears his throat, making me lift my gaze to his face while continuing my appraisal. He’s wearing a black baseball hat backwards with dark, almost black hair peeking out around his ears. His strong, square jaw frames the fullest, most sensual pair of lips I’ve ever seen on a man.

“Ray, this is Jonah Slade.”

Yeah, no kidding.

My head tilts to the side at Guy’s voice, but I’m physically incapable of taking my eyes off the man, no, the god, in front of me. I’ve seen him on posters and billboards all over town, but they don’t compare to the breath-robbing, live version.

“He has an old Chevy he needs help fixing up. I told him you’d be up for the job.”

I hear the smile in Guy’s voice, but still can’t move my eyes to look at him. Car. He said something about fixing up a car.

Pushing through my shock, I reach for my sanity. “What kind of—” My words break on a squeak. This is embarrassing. I clear my throat. “Car? What kind?” That sounds slightly better. I can—*Oh my gosh!*

Jonah Slade is smiling.

Framing his perfect straight teeth and his luscious full lips are two *freakin’* dimples. Sanity gone, fan-girl lust-buckets owning and operating my mind, I bite back an audible swoon.

He crosses his muscular arms across his broad chest, still smiling. “Ray? You’re, Ray?”

He said my name. My cheeks heat.

“Raven. My name is Raven. Guy calls me Ray.” My voice sounds weak and irritatingly pathetic. I try to sound more confident. “I guess it makes him feel better about having a girl working in his garage if he gives her a man’s name.” I study my feet and kick a pebble that isn’t there.

“Raven. Great name.” The compliment is said under his breath, almost to himself. “It’s nice to meet you.”

He’s continues to smile. If he doesn’t stop that soon, I’m never going to be able to concentrate on not making a fool out of myself. *More than I already have.*

His arm extends to shake my hand. I look at it like it’s a live scorpion. Guy nudges me with

his shoulder and motions for me to shake. I wipe my palm on my coveralls, hoping he thinks it's grease I'm removing, rather than my nervous sweat.

His large hand swallows mine in a firm handshake, the simplest gesture communicating strength and reliability. My shoulders relax, and I fall into the safety of the feeling. Static electricity buzzes between us. His thumb moves over my skin in the tiniest caress. *Or did I imagine that?*

I'm captivated. I'm unable to see his eyes behind his dark glasses, but I feel them boring into mine.

Without warning, his smile falls, and his eyebrows lower behind his shades. Oh, no. A simple handshake has now turned into holding hands. He thinks I'm weird. I pull back from his grip.

"You, um, have some grease on your . . ." He motions to his own forehead. "Here, I'll . . ." His hand moves toward my face. I lean back, but keep my feet firmly planted as he swipes his thumb across my forehead: once, twice, three times, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

"Oh, yeah. I shivered earlier and . . ." I wipe my head, deciding not to disclose the fact that his voice made me feverish.

I peek at Guy from the corner of my eye and watch the corners of his mouth twitch. Glad someone thinks my embarrassment is funny.

"Your car . . . er . . . what—"

"Jonah here is restoring a '61 Impala." Guy shows me mercy and saves me from making things more awkward.

"That's great. Old Chevys are my specialty." I could dance with joy at my ability to speak in full sentences. "You want to bring it by?"

"Actually, I . . ." His voice cracks. With a fist, he taps his chest and clears his throat. "Sorry, what I mean is I was hoping you might be able to work on it at my house."

My eyebrows hit my hairline, my jaw loose and swaying in the breeze.

"I have a decent garage that has all the tools you should need." He must've read confusion on my face rather than the earth-shattering shock I'm feeling.

Guy nods with a Cheshire-cat smile.

"The thing is it isn't in running condition yet, and Guy said you get pretty busy around here. I don't live far. Come by and check it out tomorrow. I could really use your trained eye to tell me what parts I need."

My mouth hangs open.

Guy coughs away a laugh. "Sure, she can do that." He looks back and forth between Jonah and me, his lips rolled between his teeth. *What is so freakin' funny?*

"Okay. What time?"

He gives me the address to his house, and we agree to start at nine-thirty tomorrow morning. I'm going to be fixing up a car with Jonah "The Assassin" Slade.

What have I gotten myself into?

Two

Raven

“Jonah freakin’ Slade? Are you shittin’ me, Rave?”

I sip my overpriced cup of coffee to hide my smile. I decided rather than call Eve after work yesterday I’d wait for our coffee date this morning to tell her in person. I’m glad I did. The look on her face reminds me of a balloon that’s inflated past capacity. She’s about to burst.

“You and ‘The Assassin’? Working together at his house? Like, alone?” Eve rattles off her list of questions, her last word ending on a squeal. I keep quiet. If I know Eve, she’s only getting started.

“The tabloids call him The Las Vegas Casanova. He’s a total skirt chaser. Oh my gosh!” She slams both her palms on the table, getting the attention of everyone in the small coffee shop.

“He’s totally going to hit on you. This is so exciting. I’m seriously going to pee my pants.”

“Please don’t.” I try to keep my voice level but lose the battle as Eve’s exuberance brings out my own.

She casually leans back in her chair while a wicked smile cuts into her perfectly made-up face. “Rave, you may be handing over your V-card by the end of the day.” She flips her straight, long blond hair. “I think UFL actually stands for the Universal Fu—”

“Eve!” My eyes dart around the room. I’m hoping no one can hear my very loud, equally tacky friend.

She shrugs her shoulders, a smile splitting her face. “What? I’m just saying . . .” Her eyebrows bounce beneath her perfect bangs.

“Oh, stop it. He’s like my boss or something.”

“Or something,” she mumbles through a chuckle.

Evil butterflies churn in my chest at the thought of being touched by Jonah again. A simple handshake had me drooling like a dog in heat. A kiss would probably send me into a seizure.

“It’s no big deal. He’s just a guy who needs help with a renovation.” Now if I could just get myself to believe that.

My mind has been in a permanent state of shock since Jonah left the garage. I went through the rest of my day on autopilot as I tried to come to terms with what I’d agreed to do. I’m a bunny rabbit who’s stumbled into a bear cave.

“No big deal? No big deal!” I’m in for it now. Her voice gets uncharacteristically serious. “You’re going to be working side by side with Las Vegas’ most eligible bad boy. He’s been linked with every actress, model, and showgirl in town. And you are superduper hot, girl. ‘The Assassin’ is going to take notice of you.”

“But like you said, he has every woman in Vegas at his fingertips.” Jealousy flares in my gut at the thought of Jonah with a woman. “I bet he doesn’t even notice women who aren’t wearing miniskirts and six-inch heels.” Beautiful, glamorous women whom any man would be proud to have on his arm. I take in my current wardrobe: nothing beautiful or glamorous here. Working on cars all day doesn’t exactly call for anything other than denim and cotton.

“Just make sure he pays you.” Eve’s demand takes me from my self-pitying thoughts. “He can certainly afford to. No more working for free.”

“I don’t work for free.” My words are laced with the acid of my envy.

Eve's eyes get soft. She leans across the table. "You know what I'm talking about. What about that guy who couldn't pay you to fix his alternator? Or the lady who couldn't pay you to rotate her tires and change her oil? Hmm?"

I roll my eyes and blow an errant hair from my face. "They didn't pay me money. They traded. The guy gave me my tattoo as payment, and that lady was a single mom." I play with the fraying threads on my jeans. "She gave me that chair in my apartment."

"I swear, Rave, you're good through and through. Not a bit of bad in that sweet ass of yours." She takes a sip of her drink. "Maybe you can pull out a little naughty for 'The Assassin.' Work out some kind of trade for your *services*." She waggles her eyebrows.

I suck in a breath on reflex. I know she's kidding, but the joke hits too close to home. I thought moving out of my mom's house would distance me from her line of work, but, apparently, geographical distance doesn't equal emotional distance. She reads my expression and mouths a quick *sorry*. I wave her off and smile. It's not her fault I'm damaged.

"So what time is 'The Assassin' expecting you? Wouldn't want to leave a hot piece like him waiting." She moans and rolls her eyes back in her head. "He's so sexy."

"Stop calling him 'The Assassin.' It's Jonah or Mr. Slade to you," I tease, kind of, and then slurp down the rest of my coffee. "I better get going. I told him I'd be there at nine-thirty." My stomach flips as my own words sink in.

"You better call me as soon as you're done." She flashes an evil grin and a wink. "And I want details."

~*~

Jonah

"You heard me, Blake. I'm not saying it again." I pinch the bridge of my nose, praying for patience.

"So, let me get this straight. You're cleaning your kitchen because a girl is coming over. Like a real one, over to *your* house. Is that correct?" His Perry Mason tone has me grinding my teeth.

"Yeah, bitch. Except it's not *a girl*. It's a mechanic who happens to be female." Why I'm even wasting my time to explain is beyond me. I remind myself to never answer phone calls from Blake again.

"Potato fucking poe-tah-toe. God, you're testy. Are you on the rag? I tell you what, grab a Midol and a brownie and call me in five to seven days." He's laughing at his own joke.

"Moron." I shut the dishwasher door and hit start.

"I'm just stating the facts. You never have chicks over. It's weird."

"News flash, pickle dick. The person who decorated my house was a girl. My cleaning *lady*, also a girl. This is no different."

"Then why are you cleaning your kitchen?"

Because this is different. And the reason why it's different kept me up all night. Every time I closed my eyes all I could see was her face. I would have brushed it off as a simple case of the I-wanna-screw-yous, but if that were true, I'd be picturing some other part of her anatomy. Not her face. Or the aquamarine color of her eyes, so unique, I had to fight from getting lost in them. Not the way she chewed on her bottom lip when she was thinking. And certainly not the way her cheeks turned pink when I touched her.

"I'm cleaning my kitchen because it's dirty." I wipe down the counters for the second time.

"Did my knee to the head do this to you? You got some kind of brain damage that turns you into a pussy?"

"You're hilarious, you know that?" Sarcasm laces my voice.

"I'm glad you think so."

I shake my head. "I've got to go. See you at training."

"All right. Let me know how your date goes."

"You never quit."

"That's what she said." His laughter sounds through the earpiece and I end the call.

I shove my phone in my back pocket and head to the living room for a last once-over.

This is ridiculous. I haven't gotten all stirred up over a girl since Samantha Salazar in the fourth grade. I did everything to get that girl to like me. Even changed the way I dressed, only to find out later that she was looking for someone to do her math homework. And I did for an entire school year before I figured it out.

That's the thing about women. They know what they want, and they use their pretty faces and hourglass figures to get men googlie-eyed and panting. Then they shred them of their pride, time, and bank accounts. I've seen it happen a million times, and I'll be damned if I allow that to happen to me.

Raven's probably no different. She practically radiates innocence and vulnerability. It's an act, I'm sure. A girl who looks like her can't be all that innocent. Just because she acts like no girl I've ever known before doesn't mean that she's not the worst of them.

Shit. Why did I invite her to my house? That certainly wasn't the plan when I went to the garage. I thought I'd have the Impala towed there and it would sit until Guy got around to it.

Then I saw her: The way she walked out of the garage all rolling hips and sex. Her coveralls tied at her waist, and tight tank top that hugged her delicious curves. I had to cross my arms over my chest to keep from reaching out to trace the dip of her collarbone. A groan rumbles in my chest at the memory. She makes being a car mechanic sexy. Hell, she'd make collecting garbage sexy.

Her silky, dark hair was pulled up to expose her gracefully long neck. Every time she turned to look at Guy, I could see the hint of a black tattoo where her neck flared into her shoulder. The urge to run my tongue along the gentle slope of her throat, to feel her fluttering pulse beneath my lips and taste her olive skin overwhelmed me.

Yeah, this girl's trouble.

I need to work her out of my system, just like all the other girls I've been with. After sex, I'm done. I totally lose interest. I may have to find a new mechanic, but at least I won't lie in bed every night having fantasies about getting to know her better. *Wait, what? Getting to know her better?* I don't think I've ever fantasized about a woman completely clothed before.

Holy shit, Blake was right. I've turned into a pussy.

I'm shoved from my thoughts by the sound of music blaring. Is that . . . Johnny Cash?

I creep to the door and check through the side panel window. A jet-black Chevy Nova with a white ragtop and white-wall tires stops in the circle drive right in front of the door. Sweet ride. *Sweeter driver.* Time for my game face.

Raven sits, gripping her steering wheel. Her mouth hangs open as she stares at my house. One side of my mouth lifts into a smile. She likes my place. A rush of warmth engulfs my chest. *What in the hell is the matter with me?*

Minutes pass before she moves out of her car. She leans into her still-open door. I rake my

eyes over the contours of her perfectly round ass. She's wearing hip hugging, low slung jeans with a rip in the knee and a bright blue tank top. I smirk when my eyes land on her shoes: black, low-top Chucks.

She's sexy in a way that lacks self-awareness, which only makes her sexier. Women in this town are overly aware of themselves. I know there are exceptions. But what are the chances that an exception who looks like a rule is about to push through my walls? *Walls? I mean, house. Dammit.*

She walks toward the door in a fluid way, as if her joints have been oiled. It's the same way girls walk when they know they're being admired. But Raven does it with no one around. Is it possible that she has no agenda? A slight breeze blows her long dark hair, and, at the moment, I feel like the dorky math nerd admiring the high school cheerleader from afar.

With my thoughts on her along with my eyes, I reach for the door. I pull it open. She jumps back with a squeak, her arm raised to knock.

"Wow, sorry about that," I say lamely. "I didn't know you were here. I was just going to check the mail." I make a show of opening the mailbox.

"Oh, no problem." She actually looks embarrassed, which is funny considering the ass I just made of myself.

"Did you find the place okay?" I hold open the door and motion for her to come in.

She lowers her head in an attempt to hide her face with her hair. She doesn't move fast enough, and I see a faint blush kiss her cheeks as she moves past me. The same blush that had me tenting my boxers all night.

"Yes, thank you." Her eyes go wide as we walk into the living room. "Oh, Jonah, your home is beautiful."

My pulse quickens at the breathy way she said my name.

Her head tilts as she peeks around the corner into the kitchen. "Looks like fighting pays well."

Ah-ha! There it is.

"You know who I am." Not a question.

"Of course, I do." Her eyes roll to the ceiling then fix on mine. "You're 'The Assassin'." She says my fighting name in an exaggerated announcer's voice.

Girls don't usually tease me. And they hardly ever look me in the eye. I try hard not to smile, but her easygoing nature is infectious.

"You're a local hero."

My nose wrinkles at her overestimation of my status. "I don't know about hero." My lips turn up in a half smile. "Wouldn't I need a cape for that?"

A *cape*? Smooth. This girl makes me feel like a love-sick schoolboy without even trying.

She quirks her lips and narrows her eyes in a way most women reserve for the bedroom. "Well, this is Las Vegas, Jonah."

God, my name sounds good on her lips.

"In the City of Sin, we can use all the good guys we can get, cape or not."

She obviously doesn't know my reputation. Many names have shadowed Jonah Slade, but good guy isn't one of them. Usually I would think she was just trying to flatter me, but there's a sincerity in her eyes that steals my breath.

I stare into their blue-green depths. Her thick dark lashes flutter before her gaze drops to my lips. I swallow hard, resisting the urge to show her exactly what I could do to her with my mouth. Blood races in my veins, shooting south with a vengeance.

“Is everything okay?”

No, everything is absolutely not okay.

“Yeah, of course.” I force myself to turn away from her piercing gaze. One more second locked in those eyes would have me worshipping at her feet, begging for just the tiniest taste of her perfect mouth.

I need to pull my shit together, and fast.

As much as my body craves her, I can’t seduce this girl. Sleeping with her will no doubt work her out of my system. But she’ll most likely get clingy and annoying like all the others. Something deep down whispers that wouldn’t be such a bad thing. Having a girl like this begging at my door might be fun. I shake off the visual of Raven’s begging on her knees . . .

The resulting groan has Raven’s narrowed eyes on mine. No, I can do this. She’s here to help me restore my car. Surely I can handle being around her without throwing her to the floor and ravishing every inch of her beautiful body. Or at least, that’s what I tell myself.

~*~

Raven

“How about a tour?”

Yes, please. Anything to distract me from his eyes. They’re hazel, but not like any hazel I’ve ever seen. The brown is so light I can make out shards of deep green toward the pupils. The dramatic contrast makes it hard not to stare. “That’d be great.”

It’s taking everything I’ve got to keep my voice level and my hands from shaking. Even my grin feels off. My only hope is that he’s used to people being nervous around him and doesn’t notice that I’m about to jump out of my skin.

While he gives me a guided tour of his home, I take an unguided tour of his body. As extraordinary as his house is, my gaze is repeatedly drawn back to him. His towering frame is even taller than I remember. His thick arms are round in all the right places: t-shirt sleeves pulled taut around his biceps. As if it were sculpted from marble, his body is all muscle cuts and hard edges. His smooth sun-tanned skin is without blemish, except for the glorious bursts of colors that coat his arms from his wrists to beneath his shirt. I wonder how far they go? Over the bulk of his shoulders to his corded back to—

“Raven?” The sound of my name pulls my attention.

“Hmm?”

He’s standing at a huge sliding glass door, smiling as if he’s in on a joke I missed. “I lost you for a minute. Am I that boring?” His rugged physique is all man, but his boyish dimples and bright smile make my head swim.

“What? Oh, no, it’s just I’ve never been in a house this big before.” I make a show of casting my eyes to the rafters. *Wow, this place is huge.* I should have paid more attention. “It’s a lot to take in.”

A tiny grimace touches his face for a moment before it disappears. What did I say? I’m grateful to see his easy grin return.

“Oh, well then, let’s get to the best part.” He holds his hand out for me to take. “Shall we?”

I stare at it before my own lifts from my side. And like the bug that flies helplessly, drawn by the bright blue light that is Jonah Slade, I place my hand into his.

Not giving me a moment to soak in the contact, he turns and walks out the door. I’m not

used to being touched, especially by someone like him, and it takes me a second to find my legs. I stumble once, thankful to catch myself before he notices.

We pass through his huge backyard. I see a pool in my peripheral vision. I would look directly at it, but I'm unable to drag my eyes away from our clasped hands. His hand is huge. Mine seems so small in comparison. His touch is strong and gentle at the same time. He could crush my bones with a flex of his fingers, but there's a security in his hold that feels safe. I'm smiling like an idiot. *Great.*

We stop at a large building off to the side of his house.

"Here we are." He swings open the door and leads me in.

There's no light, but the smell has my eyes roaming the dark. He drops my hand. I pout at the loss of his touch until he flicks on the lights.

I suck air on a quick gasp. "Oh my goodness, Jonah."

Three

Raven

My mouth hangs open. I breathe in deep. The familiar smells of gasoline, oil, and rubber calm my nervous stomach. I'm in my sanctuary.

Jonah's garage looks like something out of *Car and Driver* magazine: The diamond-plated chrome and black metal cabinetry polished to a shine. Rows upon rows of drawers in different widths probably hold every tool imaginable. The floors are covered in a slick, gray coating that is so clean I could eat off it. He wasn't kidding when he said I'd have all the tools I need. There's even a BendPak hydraulic car lift.

"This is amazing," I whisper to myself, feeling completely relaxed and at ease. "Why do you have all this stuff?" My eyes continue to take in the surroundings.

"Hobby. I like fast cars, like to fuck around in here. Problem is I don't have time to learn the ins and outs."

"I could teach you." The words fly on a knee-jerk reaction. I scrunch up my face and sink into my shoulders, fighting my chagrin. I glance over my shoulder and find him staring at me.

His answering grin sends my gaze across the garage. I can't look at him when he's smiling at me like that.

It's then that I notice the truck he drove to the shop yesterday. I take a closer look. Walking around it, I study each component from the Pro Comp forty-inch tires to the RBP custom grille. I swear the thing looks like it'll growl.

Stepping deeper into what's at least a ten car garage, I see a gunmetal gray beast that makes my heart rate kick double time.

"That's a '68 Camaro." I tell the car. Jonah steps to my side from behind me.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he nods. "I didn't fix her up. Bought her from a guy in Arizona."

I walk around, trailing my finger along her flawless gray paint. "What's she running?"

He doesn't answer right away, and his eyes are dark in a way that I feel deep in my belly. "572 big block."

I whistle low. "That's freaking spectacular." I'd do almost anything to get under the hood and fire this baby up. I bet she roars like—

Something sinister demands my attention. My arm shoots towards it, my finger pointing in accusation. "Harley Blackline!" My voice echoes through the space, allowing me to hear the embarrassing high pitch of my outburst. I'd care if I weren't so utterly beside myself with Jonah's collection.

"You into bikes too?"

"I'm into Harleys. I don't know how to ride them, but the power behind these babies deserves anyone's admiration."

He chuckles and shoves his hands in his pockets. "I'll take you for a ride sometime."

Go for a ride on the back of a Harley with Jonah Slade? His magnificent body between my knees, hands resting against his six-pack abs?

Yes, please. "Okay."

He hits me with his megawatt smile that has me fighting to breathe. "Come on. The Impala's

over here.”

I follow behind Jonah, my eyes firmly planted on the way his jeans move with every stride of his long legs as he leads me to the back of the garage. He stops and I almost slam into his back.

I step around him and there she is: the '61 Impala. Her classic blue paint still shimmers in places, like an old woman who insists on wearing her red lipstick. This old girl isn't going down without a fight. I study every inch of her frame, and assess how much work needs to be done. There's surprisingly very little bodywork outside of a couple rust spots and a dent.

“Oh, Jonah, she's beautiful.” I check out the wheel wells, notice the window rubbers all need to be replaced, and make a note to order new taillight covers.

I pop the hood and lean in to take a peek. The engine needs new motor mounts, all new belts, and a good cleaning. It could be replaced with something bigger, but this isn't a muscle car. This car is for cruising. I need to take it apart piece by piece to see what can be salvaged and rebuilt. A moan from behind me cuts through my thoughts.

With a twist, I squint over my shoulder at Jonah standing a few feet from my back. My position, bent beneath the hood and reaching into the back, has my bottom out and up and right in Jonah's line of sight. His eyes are firmly planted and my face ignites.

With a speed I didn't know I was capable of, I straighten up and look to the floor, hoping to hide my embarrassment. Being in this place, my mind focused on the project, I almost forgot he was there. Almost.

“Sorry, I um . . .” I have no words. The heat from my cheeks crawls down my neck.

“Do you like rap?” He turns to nearby countertop.

“Huh?”

“Music.” Jonah plugs his iPod to a space-age-looking dock and hip-hop beats fill the room.

I nod to his back. I'm not a rap music fan, but, at this point, I'd agree to anything that takes the focus off of me.

“Come over here and I'll show you where everything's at.”

I exhale a breath. Thank goodness he didn't make that more awkward than it was.

After a short guide to his available tools, we get to work. I get into a zone and concentrate on the build. He asks questions, eager to learn the process. We talk about our jobs and friends, falling into comfortable conversation.

A few hours into breaking down the engine, we take a break. Jonah grabs a bottled water for me from the mini fridge. Its diamond-plated chrome covering matches the cabinetry. Fanciest garage I've ever been in, no doubt.

I work to unscrew the cap from my water. “So let me get this straight. You've been working out every day, letting your friends kick your butt, and taking any fight you can get, all for a big ugly belt?” I attempt to summarize the UFL 101 lesson Jonah gave me.

His eyes go wide and his mouth drops open. “They don't kick my butt.”

Laughing at his defense, I struggle with the welded-shut water bottle.

He motions for me to hand him my water. “Here, let me.”

Unscrewing the stubborn thing with ease, he hands it back.

“I loosened it for you.” I drink deeply, hoping the cool water will quell my pounding pulse.

“Of course, you did.”

“Okay, but really, the belt is ugly. What do you do with it once you get it? Do you, I don't know, wear it out to dinner or around the house? Do you, like, model it for your billboard ads?” Judging by the faint pink coloring Jonah's face at the mention of his ads, I bet he gets teased

often.

“Maybe a black and white layout of you and your belt on a sandy beach for, say, a protein shake billboard?” Sucking both my lips between my teeth to hide my smile, I watch in fascination a shy Jonah. He recovers quickly and narrows his eyes on me. I’d worry that I’d offended him if it weren’t for the humor lighting his face.

“Ha, ha, ha. Very funny,” he drawls.

“What? You do *model*, don’t you?” I tease doing my best Derek Zoolander face.

Exhaling, he throws his hand in his hair and drops his chin. Bringing his head back up, his eyes lock with mine. “Yes. I have sponsors that I’ve *modeled* for. Happy?”

I’m still smiling.

“You think that’s funny, huh?”

“Well, yeah, I do. Don’t get me wrong. It’s not the modeling I think is funny. It’s the look on your face when I talk about you modeling that’s funny.”

Tilting his head, I see something working behind his eyes. Then, to my surprise, he dips his finger in black grease and swipes my cheek. “There. You think that’s funny?”

I stare silently, glaring in his direction. I snag the tin of grease, dip four fingers into it, and hold them up. “You’re going down, Slade”

I lunge at him and make a swipe on his neck. My instincts tell me to be careful, reminding me that this is a trained fighter and that I’m a lanky, twenty-year-old girl. But a comfort that defies explanation has me trusting him.

Dipping both sets of fingers into the grease, he gives me a look that says I better run or else. I turn to bolt just as I feel two strong hands wrap around my biceps from behind. With a girlish squeal, I’m pulled, my back forced to the firm heat of his chest. I swallow a moan that almost escapes my lips at the feeling of his hard body pressed to the length of mine. His strong hands grasp my arms, rubbing the oil with one long stroke from elbow to shoulder, and igniting the blood beneath my skin.

“You’re going to have to tap out. No way you’re going to win this one.” His words are spoken into my ear, making me shiver and practically sag in his arms.

“Oh yeah?” My question sounds weak in my own ears. *Darn it.*

“Mmm-hmm.” The vibration of his low voice rumbles against my back.

If I don’t get out of this hold soon, I may end up doing something stupid like rub up against him and purr.

I twist hard and he releases me. Darting around the Impala, back to the grease tin, I lather my hands up with ammo and slink towards him, hands held forward in warning.

He crooks his finger at me and lifts an eyebrow. I lunge again.

We chase and dodge, while laughing and throwing threats at each other, until we’re out of grease and forced to call a truce. Our clothes and skin are covered in the oily evidence of our horseplay. Against a wall, I slide down to sit and catch my breath. He tosses me a stack of shop towels and goes to work cleaning off his neck and face.

“Okay, all fun aside, whose booty do you have to kick to get this belt?” I wipe grease from my shoulder.

He sits next to me, cleaning the muck from his fingers. “Victor Del Toro. He’s the current heavyweight champion. No one’s been able to knock him off the throne—until now, of course.” The confidence in his voice makes it a statement of fact rather than a prediction.

“Hm. Well, good luck.” A quick glance has me locked in his stare, fiery hazel pulling me in. “Not that you’ll need it.”

His eyes roam my face and neck. My defenses try to push my gaze to the floor, but I'm captivated by his allure. Awareness, like a silent confession, passes between us igniting my blood. I suck in air and roll my bottom lip between my teeth to avoid saying something I'll regret like *kiss me*.

A slow grin pulls at his mouth, his eyes sparkling. "You should come to the fight."

The way he's looking at me wakes the butterflies in my stomach. Come to the fight? I'd say yes to anything he asks. "Sure, yeah."

He's still staring, but his smile grows, his dimples forming bookends to his radiant smile. "It's September fourteenth at—"

"Shut. Up." My powerful response surprises even me.

"What? Why?" He's genuinely confused which only endears me to him more.

"Oh, no, I just mean . . . shut up . . . like . . . no way . . . My twenty-first birthday is September fifteenth."

"Wow, twenty-first. That's a big one. I remember my twenty-first." His eyes search the rafters, concentrating. "Actually, I don't." Shrugging one shoulder, he smirks. "I heard it was great though." He runs a hand through his hair with a shy grimace that I find completely sexy.

I fold the greasy shop towel. "How long ago was your twenty-first?"

His eyes narrow on mine. "Raven, are you trying to ask me how old I am?"

Heat warms my neck, rising up to color my cheeks.

"Five years ago. I'm twenty-six." Comfortable silence fills the air. "Anyway, you should come to the fight. I'll get you a ticket. Call it an early birthday present."

"I'd love that. Thanks."

~*~

Jonah

Thirty minutes with the heavy bag didn't make a dent in my attempt to exorcise Raven from my head. I thought for sure that spending time with her this morning would work in my favor. Figured if I got to know her better, I'd realize she's just like other girls. I was wrong.

From the moment she walked into my house to the moment she walked out, she held my rapt attention. Usually when women start talking I zone out, but this girl said things I wanted to hear. She talked about cars like they were family. It was captivating. If that weren't enough, working together was a breeze. We fell into easy conversation and comfortable silences, as if she were one of the guys—well, one of the guys in a supermodel package. *Damn*. What a package. Even the garage, with its twenty-foot ceilings, felt small with her in it. No matter how far away I would move, her perfect body seemed too close. Thank God I had to get to training or I'd probably fallen to my knees and begged her to have dinner with me.

This isn't good. With the title fight coming up, I can't afford any distractions. Maybe I should put the restoration on hold until after the fight. That should give me time to forget about her. Or maybe I should pull my shit together and stop acting like some teenager with perma-wood.

I can't blow her off now. I promised her tickets to my fight, and I can't go back on a promise. Comfort washes over me at the thought of looking out from the octagon on the biggest fight of my life and seeing Raven standing in my corner. This shit is not cool. I'll get one of the guys to give me a thorough ass kicking before I leave for being such a pansy.

But pansy or not, I'm drawn to her by some unseen force. Everything from my thoughts to my dick gravitates in her direction. Like getting caught in a rip tide, one minute I'm swimming, free to go in any direction, and then I feel a tug. I'm kicking and flailing my arms and legs toward shore while the invisible pull takes me in the opposite direction. No matter how hard I swim, I keep going further and further out to sea.

Yeah, that's how it is with Raven. One minute I'm free, navigating the waters of my life, and, now, I feel a tug.

"What's up, man? Where is everyone?" Rex calls as he makes his way to the mats to warm up.

"They should be here." I answer absently, still trying to pull my head out of my ass. "Yo, T-Rex. You missed a couple." I motion to my eyebrow and lip.

"Shit, man. Thanks." Rex removes the small barbell from his eyebrow and ring from his lip and places them on the bench.

I stretch my arms and roll my neck. "Where's Caleb?"

"He's here, just wrapping his ankle in the locker room." Rex motions over his shoulder where I see Caleb making his way to the mats.

"Y'all talkin' about me?" Caleb's telltale, country-boy accent echoes off the walls. Owen sneaks up behind him, and smacks the back of his head. "Ow, dick!"

Owen ignores Caleb's pained remark. "You done wrapping your ankle, sweetheart?"

Caleb rubs the back of his head.

"You guys get warmed up, and we'll break into teams for grappling." Owen's order is all business. He's one of the best coaches in MMA, and when he gets down to it, he doesn't fuck around.

"You bitches ready to get your asses handed to you?" Blake strolls toward the mats. Late.

The group grumbles and throws back a number of different taunts and insults before we pair off and take our places. This title fight is an accumulation of everything I've been working for since I started fighting. It's the single biggest accomplishment of my life. And I'll be damned if a girl is going to rob me of my goal. Never.

A few hours into training and I'm breathing deep. Sweat coats my skin, proving without question that I worked hard. I welcome the burn of my muscles and the flood of endorphins that blur the thoughts of a certain female.

Owen calls time. "Take five and we'll hit the bags."

We all grab our waters and stretch on the floor.

Caleb flops down next to me lying flat on his back. "Where are we watching the game this weekend?"

"Not my place." I swig from my water bottle.

"Jonah's it is." Owen decides for the group.

I scowl at him and contemplate sweeping his legs. "The fuck you say?"

He shrugs in my direction.

Blake's standing, grabbing his ankle to stretch his quad. "Sweet. I'll bring the pizza."

"I'll get the beer." Rex's voice calls out from behind me.

"Shit, no. I said *not* at my place."

Caleb nods to Rex. "Game starts at three so we should be there by two."

"Fucking assholes." It's like I'm not even here.

Rex's dumb ass looks right past me. "Don't forget, I have a show that night. Sound check's at seven. Ghost Bar. We can all head over to the club after the game."

“You guys want me to bring the Wii?” Caleb puts on his gloves, his eyes darting from dickhead to dickhead, overlooking me.

“No. No fucking Wii.” What started as watching a game at my house has turned into a party, and knowing these guys, they’ll stay all weekend.

“Oh come on, *Vajonah*.” Blake’s cocky smile makes me clench my fist. “You worried we might dirty your kitchen?” He lifts one eyebrow.

I spear him with a glare. As if one douche bag giving me shit isn’t enough, I don’t need the group giving me a hard time.

“All right, fine. But no pizza. I’ll throw something on the grill. I can’t eat that shit this close to the fight.” Defeated and pissed as hell, I strap on my gloves.

“If you’re going to grill, I’ll bring Nikki. She can whip up some healthy shit in the kitchen and sit by the pool.”

Owen’s wife Nikki is a nutritionist and kicks all kinds of ass in the kitchen. That alone makes this worth it.

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll bring some girls so Nik will have chicks to hang out with.” The group goes still, staring at Blake. “What?”

Everyone knows the kind of girls Blake keeps company with. I’m not interested in having a bunch of jock-sniffing groupies around, and Blake travels with a fucking harem.

Owen looks at Blake, a grin pulling at his lips. “This should be interesting.”

Blake glares at Owen. “That was a long time ago, man. You two weren’t married yet.”

“Nah, but Nikki sure didn’t appreciate your bitches rubbing up on my shit.” Owen laughs and shrugs.

“How can you laugh?” Blake throws his arms out to his sides. “Nik broke that chick’s nose.”

Owen’s laughter answers Blake’s question.

I cross my arms at my chest. “I don’t want a house full of your knob polishers.”

“Hey, a player needs lovin’ too.”

“No more than two, Blake. I’m serious,” I warn.

“Yeah, I got it.” He dismisses me with a wave of his hand.

He doesn’t get it.

I tilt my head, feeling the side of my lip curl into a smile. “Say it, Blake. Say, ‘I promise, Jonah, I won’t bring more than two chicks to your barbeque’.”

Blake’s eyes narrow. “Are you fucking serious? I said I got it.”

“Say it.”

“Shit. Fine. I won’t bring more than two chicks to your barbeque.” Blake’s jaw is so tight I’m surprised he doesn’t bust a tooth. This guy is so easy to mess with.

“You forgot, ‘I promise, Jonah’.”

Umpf!

My breath is knocked from my lungs as Blake tries to take me down to the mat . . . unsuccessfully.

Four

Raven

It's day three working on the Impala: seventeen hours and thirty-eight minutes to be exact. I keep track of the hours spent at Jonah's for my time card, not because I mark every minute with him, committing it to memory so that when my work here is done I have something to remind me of our time together.

I've got the engine out and apart. Going through it piece by piece, I set aside the things that can be salvaged while Jonah disassembles the inside. Perched at a workbench, I sort through the motor brackets.

Out of the few restorations I've done over the years, this one is by far the best: high-end tools at my disposal, clean working environment, great company . . . and the view. Like the one I have right now.

Jonah is lying on his back across the front seat of the car, his head underneath the dashboard. His t-shirt slid up, exposing a few inches of his firm stomach. A strip of dark hair trails from his belly button and disappears beneath his saggy jeans. His strong legs are open in a V to brace his weight against the floor.

"Ouch, gosh dang it!" I grab my bloody finger, more worried about bleeding on Jonah's stuff than the extent of my injury.

"You okay?" Jonah rises from his sexy pose and stands across the workbench from me, worry etched on his perfect face.

"Yeah, it's fine. Stupid rusty bracket." I move to stick my finger in my mouth when he grabs my hand.

"No, don't do that. Germs."

Heat rises up my neck and into my face. "Oh, you're right." I rub my forehead, hoping that I can cover my embarrassment with my free hand. "Mouths are dirty."

He lifts his gaze from my wound, but I avoid his eyes. "Not germs from your mouth. Germs from your hand. Who knows what kind of shit is living on that thing." He motions to the offending bracket. I peek up at him and watch a smile tug at his lips. "From what I can tell, you have a very clean mouth." He flashes one dimple, before his gaze drops to my lips.

I roll them together, wetting them with my tongue. My chest rises and falls in erratic bursts and heat floods my body.

"I've got something for that." The deep timbre of his voice draws me closer until I'm leaning toward him over the workbench.

I swear the man could bed any woman with one look. He releases my hand to walk to the nearby cabinets. I slump forward, bolstering myself against the tabletop to keep upright.

I'm no idiot when it comes to lust. I've seen it in men before. But I've never felt it: The burning need pushing against my chest; the building tension that coils in my belly; my blood racing in my veins, flooding my head with visions of his hands on my body. Desire fires my skin, flushing my cheeks. I look around for something to use to fan myself.

"Here ya go." His voice is right at my side, and I push back the urge to rub up against him as Dog does when I'm holding his food.

He lifts my hand sending delicious tingles down my arm. With a quick squeeze of ointment,

he wraps my finger in a Band-Aid. His hands are surprisingly gentle for their size, and I wonder how many women have felt their tenderness in better places than their hands. Thousands would be my guess. My stomach twists with painful jealousy.

“You’re good at this. I guess you’d have to be in your profession.”

“Yeah, I get a lot of practice.” He finishes with my hand and throws out the wrappers.

I want to thank him for taking care of my wound. I’ve been on my own for so long I don’t remember the last time someone took such care with me. The gratitude I feel for his kindness makes me want to throw myself into his arms and kiss him. *Gratitude, yeah right, that’s what I’m feeling.* Instead, I change the subject.

“What got you into fighting? Were you a wrestler in high school?”

He clears his throat. “No, I started street fighting first.”

With his knuckles on the workbench, he drops his head for a moment before bringing his eyes back to mine. For the first time, there’s sadness there.

“My dad died when I was twelve.” The words come out forced, like he’s not used to the feeling of them on his lips. “I became the man of the house way before I was ready. I started getting in fights at school, getting in trouble all the time. My mom,” he pauses to run both hands through his hair, “she was destroyed when my Dad died. I just made things worse.”

His dark eyebrows furrow over his deep-set eyes as he looks past me.

“At fifteen, I got busted while kicking some kid’s ass at a park by my house. The cop pulled me aside and said that if I didn’t get my shit together I’d end up in jail. He told me I could use my anger to better my life.” He shakes his head with a wistful smile. “It didn’t make sense at the time.” His last words are said under his breath.

He’s next to me physically, but his eyes are far away. “He gave me the address of a Boys’ Club, told me they taught karate, jiu-jitsu, boxing—stuff like that. The way I saw it, beating the shit out of people wasn’t doing anything but making my mom cry. May as well take his advice.”

He shrugs and his eyes meet mine, no longer troubled. He studies my face

“I’m sorry about your dad. You must really miss him.” *I know the feeling.* Although, how can I miss what I never had? I banish the thought as soon as it forms.

“Yeah, he was cool. He worked hard, but found time to throw the ball with me or get down on the floor with my sister and play Barbies.” His lips upturn warmly and his eyes go soft. “He was a big guy as you can imagine, so that was no small task.”

My heart swells with appreciation that Jonah was able to experience a good dad, even if only for twelve years. The fact that he has good memories to carry with him is more than I could hope for. “He sounds amazing.”

“He was.”

“How did he die?” The question is airborne before I realize the boldness of my intrusion. I drop my gaze, immediately wanting to take it back.

Silence fills the space between us, sucking the oxygen from my lungs. I shouldn’t have asked such a personal question. Knowing someone for three days hardly constitutes this type of soul exposing confession.

“I’m sorry, it’s none of my—”

“Hit by a drunk driver.”

I meet his gaze and almost stumble backwards at the agony in his eyes. He’s not angry. He’s heart broken. My eyes burn and I swallow hard.

“He was killed instantly. I was so pissed off. It seemed so unfair. I thought if I could beat the shit out of someone, make them hurt as badly as I was hurting, I’d feel better.” Shaking his head,

he takes a deep breath. “Didn’t work.”

My hands itch to soothe him with my touch, even if only to grab his hand and let him know I’m here and that I understand.

According to the local media, he’s a private guy. He never exposes information about his family or personal life. Sharing that with me took a lot of courage. For all he knows, I could run out and sell his story to the papers. But he trusted me. And the best way to pay him back is to trust him in return.

“My mom moved here from Colombia with her parents when she was eight.” I clear my throat. I’m nervous. I’ve only told this story to Eve and Guy. My palms sweat and I busy my hands picking at a shop towel. “I guess they came here for the job opportunities that Las Vegas had to offer. My grandparents were working at the MGM when a fire broke out in one of the restaurants. Back then, there were no sprinklers in that part of the casino. Eighty-five people died, including them.”

“I’ve heard about that fire. They call it the worst disaster in Las Vegas history.”

“Yeah, that’s the one. My mom was fifteen. She had no family here and wasn’t a legal adult so she had to go live in a group home. At eighteen she had to leave and find a job and somewhere to live.” I take a deep breath as I prepare for the final blow.

“That’s when she met...” I’m afraid to say his name. If Jonah knew whose blood runs through my veins, he’d probably never speak to me again. Deep down I know that our working relationship will end someday, but I’m not ready to give it up yet. “She took the first opportunity she could find.”

“Oh, did she get a casino job like—”

“My mom’s a prostitute.” Hearing the words out loud sound so much worse than they did in my head. I drop my gaze to the floor, afraid to look up and see the disappointment—or worse, disgust—in Jonah’s eyes.

Seconds pass. He’s completely silent. So much for not losing his friendship.

~*~

Jonah

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to just throw it out there like that.” She laughs uncomfortably and studies the ends of her hair.

Hearing *those* words come from *this* girl? I’m in shock.

Living in Las Vegas, prostitution is fairly common. It’s illegal outside of a licensed brothel, but that doesn’t stop a few key players from maintaining the business. But to think that this beautiful woman, so innocent and unaffected, was raised in that world.

I shake my head. “I don’t know what to say.”

She waves her hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. I understand. You probably shouldn’t be associating with people like me, what with your big fight coming up.” She turns away from the workbench and grabs her backpack. *Is she leaving?*

My mind scrambles for the right thing to say, but a frantic need to keep her here moves my body first.

She heads for the door and I grab her arm. “No, wait. Don’t go.”

She’s silent, her back to me, head drooping between her shoulders.

“I didn’t mean to make you feel bad or ashamed. I’m just surprised that someone as innocent

and open as you could have been raised—”

“By a hooker.” She tugs against my hold, but I don’t let go. Her head drops even lower. “Just say it, Jonah.”

Pain twists in my chest at the demoralized sound in her voice. She sat and listened to me talk about my family and share my pain, but the second she opens up, I treat her like a leper.

“Look, Raven, I’m not good at this . . . relating to people and sharing. *Fuck.*” I breathe deep and search for the right words to keep her from pushing me away. “I think you’re amazing.” Her muscles tense beneath my hand. “It doesn’t matter how you were raised or who you were raised by. All that matters is who you are now.”

She turns toward me, her eyebrows pinched and her mouth in a flat line.

I release her arm and shove my hands in my pockets to keep from grabbing her and kissing that look off her face. “The woman I see right now, she’s something special.”

Her pinched eyebrows dissolve into wide eyes, and a dazzling smile threatens to send me to my knees.

“Thank you.” Her words are said in that breathy way that I want to feel against my lips.

We stand only a foot apart, lost in the intensity of what we’ve just shared, giving each other a little piece of ourselves. I’m balancing on the edge of something huge. I try to push back, clawing my way to solid ground, when everything in me screams to swan dive off the precipice.

My emotions swirl in a cocktail of confusion, desire warring with self-preservation. But through this, one thing is clear. There is no working this girl out of my system. From the moment she walked out of Guy’s Garage, she burrowed in deep. This whole time I’ve been kicking and fighting against her pull. What if I just let go?

I’ve been avoiding this since the day I left home, not wanting to be responsible for another person’s happiness and wellbeing. But locked into the aquamarine eyes of the woman in front of me, I realize I’d give up everything for the chance to take care of her.

I have a choice to make, and screwing her out of my system isn’t one of them: face my fears and take a shot at a relationship or let her go. She’ll go on living her life until someone worthy of her love comes along.

Oh, hell no!

My teeth clench and possessive fury twists my gut. The thought of her loving some piece of shit with her gorgeous body, some other guy’s hands tangled in her hair as he devours her mouth, brings a growl from my chest.

“Do you have a boyfriend, Raven?”

“What? No!” Her response comes out fast and defensive.

Well, thank fuck for that.

My lips curl so hard my cheeks ache. Decision made.

“What are you doing tomorrow?”

She chews on her lip and looks to the floor. “Um . . . tomorrow is Saturday. I’m off.”

I step closer—so close that I can feel the heat coming off her body. Her breath catches and I detect the unmistakable lust in her eyes. “Jonah?”

The way she says my name saturates my blood with arousal, and I fight to keep my eyes from rolling back in my head.

“Come over tomorrow. I’m having a barbeque. I want you there.” My voice sounds deep and gravelly in my own ears. I’m not taking no for an answer. I can’t. I want her, and now that I’ve stopped fighting it, I can’t get her soon enough.

“Okay.”

I grin at her simple answer to what wasn't a question. I cup her face then slide my hand back to fork my fingers into her hair at her nape. Her eyes flutter closed. Warmth explodes in my chest, flooding my veins and making my heart race. As much as I want to kiss her, I force myself to step back.

"Let's get back to work." I turn back to the Impala.

The tiny whimper from her gives me hope. She's just as wound up as I am. If the sexual tension is already this high, what will the sex be like?

I freeze as dread drops in my stomach, heavy and unwelcome. I've never slept with the same girl more than once. I lose interest seconds after I orgasm. What if I lose interest in Raven?

I turn to look at her over my shoulder. She's at the workbench, sorting through engine parts. Her eyes look up from beneath the canopy of her dark lashes and she gives me a shy smile.

I'm completely fucked.

Five

Raven

“Whoa, Rave, that’s the one. Get that one.” Eve points to the coral-colored string bikini. “That color will compliment your skin and make your eyes totally pop.”

I’m grateful to have Eve with me on this last minute shopping trip. Jonah’s barbeque is today. After his impromptu invite that left me grinning like an idiot, he told me to bring a bathing suit. I thought, and Eve agreed, that the possibility of swimming at a celebrity’s house called for a new suit.

I pay the swanky boutique’s cashier and figure I’ll have to get Dog generic cat food for the next six months to make up for the money I just spent. He lives in a dumpster. He won’t mind the cheap stuff.

We pop into a little coffee shop to grab a latte when my cell phone rings. I check the caller ID. Butterflies stir in my belly.

“Oh my gosh, Eve, it’s him.” I hold my phone out to her, thinking that she might answer it for me.

I’ve been working for Jonah all week, and he’s never called me. *How does he know my number?* He gave me his number the day he came to the garage, and I programmed it in my phone in case I couldn’t find his house. And why am I so nervous? Sweat slicks my palms, making me almost lose the hold on my phone. Or maybe that’s the shaking.

Eve leans away from me, shooing the phone to my ear with a few quick flicks of her wrist. “Uh-uh, girl, we’re not in grade school. Now answer your damn phone.”

I step out of the ordering line and head to a table at the back of the coffee shop. I can’t sit as nervous energy keeps me pacing.

With a finger pressed to my ear to drown out the chatter, I drop my head. “Hello?”

“Raven, what’s up? It’s Jonah.”

“I know . . . I mean I have your number in my phone, you know, from that first day, and it came up on the—”

Eve elbows me in the ribs and shakes her head. And thank God. Who knows how long I would have rambled.

His low chuckle vibrates the phone against my ear, sending goose bumps down that side of my body. He’s even sexy through the telephone. “Right. Where are you?”

“My girlfriend Eve and I are having coffee at . . .” I stare at the coffeehouse sign. My face heats immediately and Eve giggles. “The Bump and Grind.”

He laughs again, just as low and sexy as the first, but louder. “Only in Vegas, huh?”

“Yeah, God forbid there be a Starbucks around.” I roll my eyes, even though he can’t see me.

“I wanted to touch base and make sure you were coming by this afternoon.”

“Of course, four o’clock, right?”

“That’s it. And, Raven?”

“Mm-hm?”

“Bring Eve along.”

My eyes dart to Eve who is standing nearby hanging on my every word. I smile at her.

“Bring Eve? Okay, sure.” Her face splits into a smile, and she fist pumps the air.

“Great. See you in a few.”

The phone disconnects, and Eve and I stare at each other for a few wordless seconds.

“We’re going back to the boutique.” Eve grabs my arm and pulls me out the door. “I need a new suit too if I’m going to meet ‘The Assassin.’”

I stop walking. “Please, whatever you do, do not call him ‘The Assassin’ to his face. That would be so embarrassing.”

She lifts one side of her glossed lips like I just gave her a fantastic idea. *Oh, great.*

“You know, there’ll probably be a few single guys there tonight.” I ask the silent question with my eyes.

Eve is gorgeous, and she gets plenty of attention from guys, but her taste is selective. She only dates complete jerks.

“We’ll see.” She shrugs. “It would take someone pretty special to turn my head at this point.” A sly smile spreads across her face.

Eve has a secret. I look around before pulling her from the sidewalk to a bench.

“Who is he?” Excitement must show in my expression and Eve’s face lights up.

“Oh, Rave! He’s amazing. I met him at work. He came into the restaurant for dinner, and he was so sweet.” She has a dreamy look that I don’t see often on my cynical friend. “He asked me out and I said yes,” she squeals.

“That’s great. When’s the date?”

“Oh, it was two weeks ago.” Guilt laces her voice. “We’ve been hanging out almost every night since.”

My brows drop low. I try to justify why my best friend has been dating a guy for two weeks and this is the first I’ve heard about it. We tell each other everything. Just last week Eve called me at midnight to tell me that Donny Osmond came into her restaurant and told her she had great bone structure. And for two weeks she’s been keeping her mystery boyfriend from me?

This can’t be good. History proves that she attracts the meanest most abusive guys Vegas has to offer: usually verbally, sometimes physically, and always emotionally. I tell myself that she doesn’t know better. Growing up in that environment, she obviously sways toward her idea of normal. But surely she doesn’t want the life her mom had.

I’ve been running in the opposite direction of my mom’s life since I knew she was a prostitute. I’m a mechanic and a virgin. Can’t get more opposite than that.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. He’s really . . . um . . . private. He told me he wasn’t ready for anyone to know about us. Things are getting pretty serious though, so I’m sure you’ll meet him soon.”

“I’m really happy for you, Eve.” The hurt in my voice contradicts my words.

Her smile turns sad. “Hey, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine, really.”

She hops to her feet and grabs my hand. “Come on. Let’s go get me that suit. Just because I’m officially off the market doesn’t mean I’m not going to enjoy the view tonight. These guys work hard for their bodies.” I stand and she links her arm in mine. “I intend on showing my appreciation.”

A couple more hours of shopping and we head back to my house to freshen up. At three forty-five on the dot, we leave for Jonah’s. I toss my backpack into Eve’s car just as Guy calls to me from the open bay doors of the garage.

I pop my head in the car door. “Give me a minute? I’ll go see what he wants.”

I jog to Guy who's standing with Leo and Cane, two other mechanics in the shop. "Hey, guys. What's up?"

Their eyes travel from my neck to my toes and back again. They don't look happy about what they see.

"Where're you going dressed like that, Ray?" Guy motions to my halter dress bathing suit cover up.

"I'm going to a barbeque pool party thing." I hook the string of my bikini top with my thumb and hold it out. I mean, isn't it obvious. And why are they looking at me like I'm wearing raw meat?

"There gonna be dudes at this party?" Leo's protective tone isn't the least bit surprising. He's got three daughters and five granddaughters.

"Yes. There will be guys there."

Cane, the newest mechanic at the shop, laughs hard, making his big belly shake. Guy and Leo aren't laughing.

"Whose party is it? And please, don't tell me it's at one of them titty pools all the casinos are opening," Leo says, sending Cane into another fit of laughter.

"You guys, it's fine. I'm going to Jonah's."

No one is laughing. Not only are they not laughing but they're frozen. Completely still. Oh no, this can't be good.

Guy breaks the silence. "Ray, don't be a dumb shit."

"I'm not." Falling for a guy who will most likely break my heart? Maybe I am. "Er . . . I'll try not to be a dumb . . . um . . . what you said."

The man, who has been like a father to me, must read my face. "You're wearing a dress." He makes a tsking sound and shakes his head. "Known you since you were fourteen. Ain't never seen you in a dress." Guy's probably right about that.

He was my shop teacher in high school, and I never wore dresses to school.

Oh, wait.

"What about graduation?" I put my hands on my hips to force some attitude into my declaration. "I wore a dress to graduation."

"That was a graduation gown."

Darn, that's right.

"Whatever. This isn't a dress anyway, it's a cover up." I smooth the soft fabric over my stomach. "It's new. Now, if you guys will excuse me—"

"You seriously gonna let her go?" Leo's question is directed at Guy.

"She's a grown woman."

"And he's nailed more women in Vegas than Barry Manilow."

"Ray's a smart girl. I trust her not to fuck up." Guy's eyes swing to mine. "Right, Ray?" His question reeks of warning.

I nod.

"You call us if you need anything. Don't drink booze. Say no to drugs. And whatever you do, do not take a drink from a stranger or leave your drink unattended. You gotta piss, you take your cup in the john with you." Leo's instructions are given with a firm point to my face with each one.

"Got it. Can I go now?"

They shake their heads and turn back into the garage grumbling. I practically skip back to the car with a cheek-cramping smile plastered across my face.

~*~

Jonah

I'm antsy as hell. I hit the gym, went for a run, worked on the Impala, and nothing seemed to help. Needing to hear her voice, I finally broke down and called her. She seemed nervous on the phone, which was something I haven't seen from her in a while. In the garage, she works with the cool confidence of a seasoned mechanic, but outside of the garage, she's shy and nervous. And both are hot as hell.

Raven is nothing like the girls I'm used to. She's not arrogant or overly aggressive. She doesn't try to mind-fuck you into submission. With her, you get what you see. No twisted facades or acts of desperation. She doesn't expect anything from me. It's refreshing. And because of that, I'm completely at ease around her.

I've known her for a week, and I'm spilling my guts about my dad like a pigtailed girl at a sleepover. The words I'd been holding in for years just poured out, and rather than making me feel weak for my admission, she gave right back.

I miss her when she's not around. I never miss women. Hell, I go months without seeing my mom and sister. Never bothers me. Raven's been away from me for twenty-four hours, and I'm going nuts, as if something valuable were missing.

When she was here yesterday, I was shocked at how quickly I gave in to the urge to touch her. We stood so close at one point our eyes locked in a lusty stare down. I was ready to explode. Then she had to go and lick her lips. I would have kissed her if I thought I'd be able to stop there. The way I was feeling, I would have taken her on the hood of the car. Mental images assault my brain, eliciting a groan from deep in my chest. She'll be here soon, and here I'm mentally fucking her on my car.

The doorbell rings, shaking me from my fantasy. She's here. I adjust my board shorts before I throw open the door to the object of my obsession. My smile falls.

Owen pushes past me with bags of what I assume is food. "Good to see you too."

"Hey, Nik." I kiss Owen's wife on the cheek.

"Jonah, how are you?" She gives me a quick hug. "Owen baby, just throw that stuff in the kitchen."

Nikki is the resident chef at all our barbecues. She knows her way around my kitchen, so I leave her to it.

Owen drops the bags then walks straight to the backyard bar. He angles his barstool to face the sixty-inch flat screen and turns on *Sportscenter*.

I join him outside, grab a beer, and settle in. Halfway through my first beer, Caleb and Rex show up. The guys argue whether the San Diego Padres will go to the World Series. Owen says it'll be the A's. I'm sure it'll be the Yankees, but I stay out of the conversation. Nikki's voice, along with a couple other female voices, cuts through the conversation.

"Jonah, your guests are here," she calls from the sliding glass door.

Her announcement silences the baseball talk as everyone turns to see who it is.

Holy fucking shit.

It's Raven.

And she's wearing a dress.

Thankful for my sunglasses, I let my eyes roam her body freely. Her dark hair is braided to

the side, the thick chocolate rope lying against the swell of her breast. My gaze lingers on her cleavage, the dress accentuating her already perfect form. The flowing fabric ends well above her knees, exposing her long, toned legs.

I vaguely notice the blonde at her side. That must be Eve.

As they walk toward the bar, I can't take my eyes off Raven. She glides across the yard in that unconsciously sexy way of hers. A deep moan from one of the guys at the bar has me turning my head. They have their greedy fucking eyes locked on my girl and her friend.

My girl?

Possession flares, having me step away from the bar to meet them, effectively cutting the girls off from the ogling, lecherous dicks behind me.

"Is this a joke?"

"Didn't see this coming."

I hear the mumbled comments from the numb-nut gallery, and ball my fists to keep from flipping them off.

"Ladies, glad you could make it." I'm impressed that my voice didn't crack under the pressure.

"Hey, Jonah." Raven tilts her head, motioning to her friend. "This is my friend, Eve. Eve, this is Jonah."

"Hi, Jonah." Eve shakes my hand and peruses the backyard. "Nice digs."

"Thanks. Come on. I'll introduce you to the guys."

I direct the girls to walk ahead of me with the idea that I can place my hand on the small of Raven's back. It's a gentle way of claiming her in front of the guys. It's either that or plunge my tongue down her throat in front of everyone, and something tells me she's not quite ready for that.

She brushes past. Her delicate pear fragrance fills my lungs. I bite my lip and lust saturates my brain. My fingers burn to bury themselves in her hair and pull her to me.

I place my hand where the slope of her spine flows to her ass and nearly stumble over my feet. There, on the backdrop of her perfect olive skin, is the tattoo that has been taunting me for days. A flock of blackbirds serpentine from her shoulder, dipping below the fabric of her dress. From the scale of the tattoo, I'd say the birds start at her hip.

The view evokes images of her laid out naked before me. Running my tongue along my lip, I imagine what it would taste like to kiss her from one end of her tattoo to the other. To feel her skin, warm, soft and sweet against my lips. I'm already hard as a rock, and I haven't even seen her in her bikini yet. I go over baseball stats, trying to ease my raging need.

"This is my friend Owen." Raven rakes her sunglasses up on her head. "The pierced one is Rex, and the one who looks like he just jumped off a tractor in Idaho is Caleb." She nods through the introductions. "Guys, this is Raven and her friend, Eve."

I watch closely as my friends size up the girls. It's not wasted on me that they seem to find the two women attractive. But they linger a little too long on Raven's eyes.

"Damn, girl. You got some wicked peepers." Owen's observation has the rest of the guys agreeing in grumbled affirmations.

A familiar blush lights her cheeks. "Thank you. It's nice to finally meet you guys."

"Finally?" Rex's shit-eating grin tugs at his lip ring. "How long have you and Jonah been hanging out?"

Raven's attention slides to me, her eyes wide. "Oh, we're not hanging out . . . er . . . we work—"

“What would you girls like to drink?” I redirect the conversation and smile at the relief I catch in Raven’s expression. Why does it feel as if we’re hiding some deep, dark secret?

“Water would be great,” Raven answers and Eve nods.

“You girls up for baseball?” Most girls wouldn’t be interested in the game, but, then again, most girls aren’t car mechanics.

“Baseball?” Raven scrunches up her nose and shakes her head. *So damn cute.*

I motion to the loungers set up poolside. “Would you rather get some sun?”

She studies the double lounge and looks at Eve. They both smile big. “Yes, please.”

I set them up with towels and a lounge, placing them close enough so that I can admire Raven, and go back and forth from them to the game easily.

With a fresh beer in hand, I relax against the bar and settle in for the game. So far so good. I have a girl, *a date*, over at my house. The guys are being semi-respectful. The girls are laughing and talking comfortably. What could possibly go wrong?

“Let’s get this party started, motherfuckers!”

Oh, shit. Blake.

Six

Jonah

My glare sharpens toward the sound of his voice, and it takes everything I have not to punch something.

“Fuck me,” I whisper to the floor.

Blake isn’t alone. He has *three* girls with him. Two of them I’ve seen before. One is the red-headed stripper, and the other is the blond stripper I slept with a week ago.

Girls I’ve slept with don’t come over. Ever. What the hell is Blake thinking?

I drop my head into my hand. *Dammit*. Blake doesn’t know I slept with her. He was too busy inspecting the tonsils of that redhead when I left the club.

“Jonah.” Blake saunters up, a girl under each arm. “You remember Selena.” He motions with his chin to the girl with unnaturally bright red hair. “And Candy.” He motions to the blonde.

Her name is Candy. Typical.

“And this lovely lady here is Fiona.” He motions to the dark-haired girl with gigantic breasts shoved into a tiny top. Won’t have to worry about her sinking in the pool.

Candy slides out from under Blake’s arm and steps into my space. Too close. I straighten from my leaning stance at the bar to gain some distance.

“Nice to see you again, Jonah.” Her very white teeth dig into her plump lower lip. She finger walks her hand up my chest to wrap it around the back of my neck. Her other hand lies flat against my stomach.

“Candy, get your hands off me.” I command in a low voice to avoid making a scene in front of Raven.

I’m grateful to see her engaged in conversation with Eve and Nikki who joined them by the pool.

Candy follows my gaze and sneers in Raven’s direction. “Oh, I get it.” She looks back at me and pulls her hand from my neck, making sure to drag her long fingernails against my skin.

“Fresh meat.” She looks back to Raven before spinning on her high heel. Her short, tight skirt looks more like a belt as she swings her ass. “You’ll be back. Can’t live on SPAM forever.”

Her sidekicks squeal with laughter, and I glare at Blake. He shakes his head and throws his hands in the air mouthing, “I didn’t know.”

I’m not familiar with the sick feeling that gnaws at my insides. From the hateful look Candy gave Raven, there’s no way she’ll keep her mouth shut about our night together. My reputation is no secret, but having it confirmed is unsettling.

It shouldn’t matter because I slept with Candy before I knew Raven, but the thought of Raven knowing the intimate details of my sexual history makes me insecure. I want her to see me as worthy. And sleeping around, especially to the daughter of a prostitute, doesn’t say ideal boyfriend material.

Is that what I want? To be her boyfriend?

It’s on this eye-bulging thought that Nikki walks up with Raven and Eve flanking her.

“Blake, I see you’ve brought the entertainment.” Nikki’s smile is the farthest thing from friendly.

“Oh, come on, Nik. Don’t hate the player; hate the game.” Blake laughs and the tension

rippling off Nikki intensifies.

Raven and Eve, eyes wide as saucers, look back and forth between the two.

Owen stands from his barstool and grabs his wife by the hand. "Nik, baby. Inside. Now."

She allows herself to be led away, but maintains a death glare on the strippers until she's out of sight.

Blake's eyes follow Nikki into the house before he sets his sights on Raven and Eve. He pushes past his dates. "And who do we have here?" His cocky-ass smile has the girls giggling.

Fucking Blake.

I give a quick growled introduction.

"It's nice to finally meet you." Raven extends her hand graciously. She motions to me with the hand that Blake is *still* holding. "Jonah mentioned you the other day."

My eyes burn at their connection. I try to figure out a way to get him to let her go without breaking her hand in the process.

"Raven. Why haven't I met you before?" Blake's gaze leaves Raven to narrow on me.

Raven shifts at my side. I spear Blake with a glare. He gets the message and lets her go.

Smart man.

"Raven's helping me with my Impala."

Blake throws his head back, roaring with laughter. Raven stiffens at my side. I drape my arm over her shoulder, and she presses softly into my hold. Her body feels so small and delicate under my arm. The intimacy of her bare shoulder against my shirtless torso has me gathering her deeper into my side. Her mild fruity scent combined with the comfort of her body calms my nerves. I resist the urge to bury my face in her hair.

"Dude, you have a smokin' hot mechanic. What the hell?" He's back to looking at Raven, and as his eyes dance up and down her body, I thank God she's still in her cover up. "Gives a whole new meaning to the term body shop." His eyes settle on her legs. "Nice legs, what time do they open?"

"Watch your fuckin' mouth." My jaw locks down. A warm, familiar buzz stirs in my head. My hand squeezes Raven's shoulder on reflex.

Silence hangs thick in the air as everyone stares between Blake and me. Even the Stripper Sisters have ceased their obnoxious babbling.

Blake focuses on me, his eyebrows low and questioning.

A soft giggle breaks the silence. In unison, all eyes move to Raven.

"Thanks for the compliment, Blake." Raven rolls her lips between her teeth, her face red with withheld laughter.

The buzz in my head retreats.

"Jonah didn't tell me you were so funny." She loses the battle, a burst of laughter escaping her lips. The melodic sound further calms my temper.

Small talk erupts all around me, but I don't hear a word. I'm stuck analyzing what the hell just came over me. I never get possessive over girls. I was half a second away from giving my best friend a beat down.

Raven and Eve go back to the lounge, and I throw Blake a chin lift. He responds in true Blake form, cocky smile and the middle finger salute.

The Stripper Sisters saunter to one of the lounging areas and whisper back and forth to each other. I relax seeing they've decided to sit on the opposite side of the pool from Raven and Eve who are back to their loungers by the bar.

Damn, I need a beer.

I walk behind the bar where the guys are camped out in front of the television.

“What the hell was that about?” Blake shoves a handful of popcorn in his mouth.

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

“You almost flipped the switch on your boy for spewing the kind of shit he says to every girl he meets.” Rex laughs and rubs the back of his neck. “One more word and I’d have been pulling your ass off him.”

I nod and grab a beer. No doubt in my mind I would have beaten Blake for disrespecting Raven.

“Never thought I’d see it.” Owen’s back from settling down his wife and caught up on recent events. “You got it bad, my man.”

Dress removed, I’m staring at a bikini-clad Raven. She’s not covering or sucking in her stomach. No bashful body language that would expose her insecurities. Her olive skin glistens in the sun as she laughs and talks with Nikki and Eve. She looks so natural and at ease in her own skin in my backyard, hanging out with my friends, as if she’s been doing it for years.

“Hey, Jonah.” Owen calls my attention away from the girls. “She’s one fine piece of a—”

A growl rumbles deep in my chest.

The guys explode into laughter.

Owen smacks me on the back. “Yep, you’re hooked, brother.”

~*~

Raven

The murmured voices and rhythmic thumping of rap music lull me into semi consciousness. I close my eyes and relax, soaking up the last warmth from the sun before it drops behind the mountains. Male laughter erupts. I turn and watch Jonah with his friends, his dimples highlighting his bright smile. I slide my sunglasses down my nose for a better look. He’s stopped laughing, but still smiling as he engages Owen.

I track his movements while he walks around the bar to sit on a barstool. His back muscles flex powerfully, as he brings his drink to his mouth. Brightly colored tattoos decorate his arms from his wrists to his shoulders with one flowing over and onto his chest. I want to get a closer look, run my hands along his arms as I study his body art. I wonder if his skin is as soft as it looks. If it tastes like he smells. Citrus and spice.

“This place is sick, Rave.”

I jump at the sound of Eve’s voice. Shoving my sunglasses up my nose, I pat my cheeks to bring down the heat. Eve is on the lounge with me, a gossip magazine resting against her thighs.

“Yeah.” I clear the lusty sound from my throat. “I’m always in the garage. I didn’t know all this was back here.”

I scan my surroundings. The modern outdoor kitchen and bar, flat-screen TV, lagoon-style pool with Jacuzzi, and a fire pit. But the best parts of the backyard are the loungers. They’re made for two, complete with large queen-sized mattresses and outdoor pillows.

“When you guys make it official, you have to have me over . . . like a lot.” Eve looks at me over the tops of her sunglasses with a smile lighting her face.

My eyebrows pull together. “Make it official?”

“Yeah, you know, admit you dig each other.” She shrugs before licking her finger and turning another page.

“Whatever.”

It’s all I can say through the full-on grin I’m sporting. As much as I wish I didn’t, I feel something for him. What girl wouldn’t?

Even the women Blake brought seem to fall into a trance when Jonah’s around—not that I blame them. A swell of nausea threatens at the thought of Jonah with a girl like that. Their huge, clearly medically enhanced, breasts and lips push up and out for anyone’s attention.

“What’s going on over here, baby girl?” Blake plops down at my hip.

There is something about this guy that goes beyond his super-hot, bad-boy, fighter good looks. That alone would make any girl fidgety. His light brown hair is buzzed short, drawing all the attention to his bright green eyes. His looks alone are enough to leave a trail of broken hearts in his wake. But it’s his composure, a slight expression he wears, that makes him dangerous, like his eyes hide a dirty secret he masks with a friendly smile.

“If I flip a coin, what are the chances I’ll get head?”

Eve turns to Blake, her jaw wide open, and closes her magazine with a smack.

“Eww, Blake. That’s gross,” I say through a fit of giggles. “Please tell me that doesn’t actually work on girls.”

“You see how many dates I have at this barbeque. What do you think?” He turns his attention to Eve. “How about you, Barbie? You up for a game of naked leap frog?”

“Ugh! I’m going to get a drink. Rave, you want anything?”

“No thanks.”

Eve gets up, and Blake is not shy about watching her butt until she disappears behind the bar.

“Is it something I said?” His crooked smile tells me he likes making girls uncomfortable.

The fact that he can talk to women like that and still get dates is a testament to how incredibly attractive he is.

I catch Jonah at the bar from the corner of my eye. He’s watching Blake and me, the weight of his stare makes me shift in my seat. I don’t want a repeat of what happened earlier.

“Shouldn’t you be getting back to your dates? I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

Blake looks to the girls, but quickly dismisses my concerns with a wave of his hand. “Nah, they’re cool. And if they’re not, fuck ’em.” Blake rubs his hand back and forth a few times on his buzzed head. Turning his head slightly, he fixes his cocky half smile on me. “You into my boy?” he asks cryptically.

I prop myself up on my elbows. “Huh?”

Leaning forward, he looks me in the eyes. “Jonah tried to take my head off back there. You want to know how often I’ve seen him do that when I put the moves on a girl, even a girl he’s going home with?”

“How many?”

He makes a circle with his finger and thumb. “Zilch. Never.”

I stare at Blake, trying to figure out exactly what he’s telling me and hoping like heck I don’t misunderstand.

“We’re just friends.” Thankfully, I’m wearing sunglasses so he can’t see my eyes betraying my words.

“Just friends, huh?” He rubs his chin then shrugs. “Perfect. I’ll see if a couple of my dates want to hang with Jonah tonight after the barbeque.” He braces his hands on his knees to stand.

No. “Wait.” Reflexes have me grabbing his arm. My heartbeat throbs with panic.

He looks at me. “You got something you wanna say, baby girl?”

I like Jonah.

The words are there, but I can't bring myself to say them. What if he doesn't feel the same way? I won't be able to work with him after suffering that kind of embarrassment. Putting myself out there like . . . No, I need to keep my feelings private. His friendship means too much to me. And really, what kind of chance do I have with a guy like Jonah Slade?

"Yeah, I just wanted to say . . ." I let go of Blake's arm and lean back on my lounge. "Go ahead. Jonah's free to date, er, um, *be* with whoever he wants." *Gosh, that hurt.*

Blake studies me for a second before leaning in. "Jonah's a lot of things." He looks around the pool then back at me before sliding his sunglasses over his eyes. "But from what I've seen tonight, he's not free—at least, not anymore."

He struts away, acting completely unaware of the shock-and-awe devastation he left behind. "Raven, a little later we can play Titanic," he calls over his shoulder. "I'll yell ice burg and you can go down."

A laugh rips from my chest, fueled by giddiness from Blake's admission.

He's not free . . . not anymore.

Could Blake be right? Is it possible that Jonah could be feeling the same thing I'm feeling?

Eve comes back from the bar and sits at the spot Blake just vacated. "Finally, he's gone. He's a sweet piece of eye candy, but the second he opens his mouth . . ." She shakes her head and takes a sip from her water bottle. "Why do you think he's so funny?" She points her grimace in Blake's direction.

"I think he's hilarious."

I lie back, a face-splitting smile aching my cheeks that has nothing to do with Blake.

Seven

Raven

"My woman can cook," Owen bellows from the doorway of the kitchen as he brings in a stack of dirty and very empty plates.

Nikki takes the plates from his hands and kisses him lightly on the cheek. "Thank you, baby. Now get out of here before I put you to work."

These two look like a famous Hollywood couple. Owen has deep mocha skin and short cropped hair. His body is similar to the others: athletic, bulky, and the perfect mix of captivating and terrifying. His rugged masculinity is a contrast to his wife's caramel-colored skin, soft curves, and long, wavy hair. He gives her a playful swat on the bottom, making her squeak and jump, her light brown eyes sparkling.

She drops the plates in the soapy water. "Thanks for helping me clean up, girl. I'm usually the only other female around that does more than stick my tits out." She rolls her eyes at the obvious reference to the women Blake brought with him.

"It's the least I could do. That was one of the best meals I've had in a long time. You're an incredible cook." I rinse out a huge bowl that once held a delicious fruit salad.

"Thanks. I get a lot of practice hanging around this group."

That doesn't surprise me. The guys alone ate enough to feed a small country. I think Jonah grilled an entire cow.

"Nikki, where do you want me to put these?" Eve asks from the doorway, her arms filled with more plates.

Jonah follows behind her, a few bottles of condiments in hand. He walks to the fridge to put them away.

My gaze is soldered to his form, and I nearly slice open my finger with a soapy steak knife. It shouldn't be legal for him to walk around without a shirt on. Reckless endangerment.

"You girls don't have to do this. My cleaning lady comes in the morning."

"Like dealing with your dirty drawers isn't enough, you're going to make that poor woman clean up after the five of you? Uh-uh." Nikki turns Jonah around and shoos him from the room.

"All right, all right, I'll go." He wraps Nikki in a one-arm hug.

She leans in with a grin.

His eyes find mine. "But, Nik, don't work my girl too hard. She needs to take care of those hands. Can't have tools sliding from her grip because you overworked them." He hits me with a wink and walks away.

Nikki chuckles. "Damn, girl. He's sprung."

Eve snickers in the corner, stacking clean dishes to the side.

I can't believe he just called me his girl! And something about the way he talked about tools sliding in my hand. Sure, it sounded like simple shop talk, but the way he held my eyes made me feel like he was as if he were talking about using my hands for something entirely different. First Blake and now Nikki. Could they be right? They've known Jonah a lot longer than I have. Is it possible that he could be feeling something? For me?

I rushed through the rest of the dishes, anxious to get back to Jonah. The kitchen is spotless in record time.

“Well, girls.” Nikki wipes her hands on a dishtowel before hanging it perfectly on the rack. “I think we’ve just earned ourselves a little hot-tub time.”

Minutes later, I’m submerged in liquid heaven. I lean my head back as the warm bubbles caress my body. Everyone around is either in the water or sitting on the edge, dangling in their legs. Conversation hums around me. Relaxing, I allow my eyes to slide shut, a soft moan drifting from my lips.

“. . . then tell her to swallow.” Blake’s punch line has me giggling despite the fact that I didn’t hear the joke.

Eve’s responding snort drags me from my relaxed state and has me laughing harder.

Feeling eyes on me, I turn my head away from Eve and Blake. My laughter dies instantly.

The carnal stare from Jonah’s eyes has me mesmerized. I’m unable to look away from the smoldering hazel. My blood heats and pounds in my ears. A yearning, deep and delicious, stirs in my belly. The intensity making it hard to breath, my chest rises and falls erratically. He tilts his head as his eyes travel from my face to my breasts and back again. I suck my bottom lip into my mouth, and my mind conjures images of him coming at me from across the warm water. I squirm.

“I’ll be right back,” I mumble to whoever’s listening and excuse myself from the hot tub.

I push up and swing a leg over to jump out. A hiss sounds from behind me, like someone sucking air through his teeth. I turn and find Jonah with an expression that looks like pain mixed with something new I can’t name. Whatever it is makes my stomach plummet and land low. Really low. I grab my towel and head for the bathroom.

Locked inside, I flip the toilet seat closed and sit. *What was that?* I fan my flaming cheeks. What that was, was hot. And it had nothing to do with the water temperature. It’s happening more often: our eyes lock on each other, and the world around us fades away. But why? I can’t explain it, only that he must feel some attraction or . . . God, what is wrong with me?

I step to the mirror and let down my hair, running my fingers through the tangles. This is crazy. I have a major crush on a UFL fighter who probably looks at me and sees nothing more than a score: a naïve girl who will fall for his charm and meet some need on a physical level. If that’s true, why hasn’t he made a move? What would I do if he did? My lips curl and my stomach flips.

Fed up with staring at my goofy grin, I wrap my towel around my waist to head back to the party. I duck my chin to my chest as I push through the door, hoping to shake my love-sick-puppy smile before I face Jonah.

“Raven, right?”

I jump at the sound of a female voice. The blond girl who came with Blake is standing just outside the bathroom. Her arms are crossed at her chest as she glares in my direction.

My smile fades. “Yes?”

She looks me up and down as if I’m covered in cockroaches. Her lips peel back in disgust. This feels so much like high school. I curl into myself.

“I’m just trying to figure out what Jonah would want with a little grease monkey like you.” Her icy stare continues to scrutinize me from bare feet to bikini top. “What are you? Eighteen? Do you really think a silly little girl like you could satisfy a man like him?”

I jerk from the truth in her statement.

The words *he’s just a friend* itch at the back of my throat. Something tells me we’re more than that, but uncertainty seals my lips.

But she’s right. I’m inexperienced and young. Men want women who are confident and

know how to please them. My shoulders sink as I consider all the ways I'm not good enough for Jonah. Maybe she's right and I've been misreading things.

"Jonah and I . . . We're just friends. You want him, he's yours." My voice is dull, and my heart sinks like a lead balloon.

I push past her with every intention of getting as far away as I can before I do something stupid, like cry. A firm grip on my elbow halts my getaway. In shock, I lean away from the blonde, who is sneering inches away from my face.

"Want him?" She flashes a heartless smile that tells me she's going to enjoy whatever she's about to say. "I've had him. He fucked my brains out last week."

I turn my face away, trying to escape the vulgarity of her words.

"Yeah, that's right. And he screamed my name, begging me for more." She leans in so close I can smell the liquor on her breath. "He said I had the sweetest pussy he's ever tasted."

My eyes burn, tears threatening to spill.

"Keep your filthy fucking hands off of him. He doesn't want you. You're nothing but a worthless piece of white trash, and he—"

"Who the *fuck* do you think you are?"

An enraged male voice breaks her concentration. In unison, we turn toward the source.

Oh, crud.

"Jonah." His name escapes on a whisper.

His jaw is tense and ticking, his fists balled at his sides. The fierceness in his stare is terrifying, and it's not directed at me.

"Get the hell out of my house," he spits out through clenched teeth while glaring at Candy.

"Jonah, honey, I don't know what you thought you heard." Like a sneaky little viper, she tries to backpedal. "We were just having a little girl talk." She releases her hold on me and brushes my hair over my shoulder.

Jonah's eyes dart to mine then move back to glare at Candy. "Out. Now." His voice trembles with rage.

Candy lifts her head and squares her shoulders. Lithely, she moves past Jonah, stopping to look him in the eye. "You're really going to pass this up?" She looks down at me from over her shoulder. "For *that*?"

Her reference to me being an object rather than a person has me studying the concrete at my feet.

Jonah grumbles a reply I can't make out. Whatever he said makes Candy flinch before she struts away.

My heart is beating out of my chest. I peer at Jonah from behind my hair. His head falls forward, hands resting on his hips. I hear the sound of him breathing deep and blowing air from his mouth as if he were trying to calm down.

He looks up at me, concern etched on his face. "You okay?"

"Yes." I'm unable to control the quiver in my voice.

He steps to me and interlaces his fingers with mine. "Come on."

He leads me into the bathroom and locks the door behind us. Releasing my hand, he leans against the door. My arms wrap protectively around my body in an attempt to hold myself together. His face is more relaxed, but his eyes are still angry.

"Raven, I owe you an apology."

I stumble back a step. An apology? I wasn't expecting that. "No, Jonah you don't owe me—
,,

“I slept with Candy.”

My body stills along with my words. I close my gaping mouth, surprised at his honesty. “Um, I know that.”

He shifts on his feet and rubs the back of his neck. “I slept with her.” He takes a deep breath. “Why is this so hard?” He mumbles to the floor before his eyes meet mine. “I slept with her a week ago.”

This, too, I already knew because of Candy’s less than ladylike admission. “Okay.”

Is that all I can say? Okay?

“I didn’t invite her here. I’m not interested in her.” His eyes study my face for a few silent seconds.

“Jonah, you don’t need to explain—”

“There’s something else.” He takes a step toward me.

I pull in a large breath through my nose and blow out my mouth. Can I handle his something else? I nod.

“I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Yes, I can handle that.

My cheeks hurt as I wrestle against an embarrassing grin. “Okay.”

He takes another step in my direction. “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met.”

My breathing picks up, my heart pounds, and something begins to unfurl and flutter in my chest. “Okay.”

“I want to be with you.”

Is this really freaking happening?

“Okay.”

He closes the final few feet between us. His arms surround my waist and lock at my lower back, forcing my hands to his bare chest. The heat from his skin ignites a fire in my palms that shoots down my spine and awakens my senses. The gentle rise and fall of his breath, the rhythmic beat of his heart, all magnified. My bikini-clad breasts brush against his rib cage. The friction makes me shiver in his arms.

He slides his hands up my back, trailing his fingers across my skin. Goose bumps skate across my flesh. A bright smile lights his face at my response to his touch. His eyes become hooded. His hands rest against either side of my neck, rubbing my jaw with slow swipes of his thumbs. I watch in amazement as his eyes travel from my eyes to my lips before they drop to the side of my neck.

“I’ve wanted to do this since the first day I met you.”

Bending forward, he brings his lips just a breath away from mine. I lean in and close my eyes, expecting to feel the warmth of his mouth. He uses his hold to tip my chin down and kiss my forehead. I sigh and melt into the tenderness of his touch.

Gently, he runs his nose down my hairline to my ear. “Mmm, you smell so good.”

My fingers flex against his firm chest at the husky sound in his voice. A second chill races through my body. Heat floods my system. I welcome every new feeling, every fragile emotion that courses through me.

He makes a fist in my hair and tilts my head. The soft heat of his lips brushes against my earlobe then my neck, trailing kisses to my shoulder. He lingers there, licking and nipping with his teeth. The abrasive stubble of his chin against my collarbone electrifies my body. I press my aching breasts into him as my bones liquefy beneath his touch. His hard, strong body accepts my weight, and a moan tumbles from my throat.

I feel him smile against my skin. "You like that, baby?"

He called me baby! I'm thankful he can't see my eyes as they stare at the ceiling, wide in shock.

The silky moisture from his open-mouth kisses at my neck have my eyelids falling shut. "Sweet, just like I knew you'd be." His breath tickles my skin.

Something coils deep inside, a damn on the verge of collapsing. "Jonah . . ." My mind scrambles with how to communicate everything I want from him right now. His lips on mine, the weight of his body, his hands . . .

He places a final kiss against my neck and pulls his head up. My eyelids, suddenly heavy, fight to stay open. My body trembles with a raw need I've never felt before. And our lips haven't even touched.

"I want to take you inside," he whispers, through a dark, sexy smile.

"Okay."

"Send Eve home. You're staying with me tonight."

His proposition douses the fire raging in my body.

"You want me to spend the night?" Panic creeps in.

His lips curve at the ends. "Yeah, you can borrow something to sleep in."

I try to think of something logical, some reason why I can't spend the night, but with his hands running up and down my back, it's hard to concentrate. How can I say no? Jonah Slade asks for a sleepover, the answer is always yes. It's in the female handbook. She says no, she gets her membership revoked, right? If not, she should.

"Okay."

The corners of his mouth twitch. "Raven, you gotta give me something besides okay."

Here he just confessed to having feelings for me and asked me to spend the night, and he want's something besides okay? My brain is on overload, not to mention the other parts of my body that have just woken up for the first time in . . . well, forever. They may even short circuit if he gets anywhere near them with that skilled mouth of his. I laugh inwardly at the thought of Jonah's vast experience with women compared to my complete lack of experience with men.

Oh, no.

"I can't have sex with you." I blurt out the words, my hand covering my mouth too late.

I'm an idiot.

His eyes light up, dancing with laughter, making my idiocy totally worth it.

"That's all right. I'm not asking you to stay over so I can have sex with you." He lifts one eyebrow and gives me a one-dimpled grin. "Can we make out?"

Heat bursts against my cheeks and floods down my neck. I bury my face against his chest to hide my embarrassment. "Okay."

He throws his head back and laughs while holding me to him. Instantly, his touch calms my nerves and my lungs take in a full breath. His warm skin smells like coconut sunblock mixed with his usual masculine spice. I relax deeper into his hold.

"Jonah?"

"Hmm?"

"I like you too."

He pulls back just enough to see my face, determination flashing in his eyes. He leans down and, knowing what he's after, I lift up on my toes. Our lips touch for the first time in a soft caress. I've wondered what it would be like to kiss Jonah, and even my best fantasies weren't this good.

His full, strong lips mold to mine. A slow sweep of his tongue has me opening to him. What started off teasing turns hot and urgent as he pulls my lower lip with his teeth, coaxing my tongue to explore. His hands grab at my hair and mine wrap around his biceps.

The kiss turns demanding as he possesses my mouth. His muscles flex against my palms. I struggle to keep myself on my toes, his expert mouth making my legs completely useless. I slide back down on flat feet, dragging my breasts down his chest as I go. He releases his hold on my hair and cups my bottom with his hands, pulling me against him.

My gosh, that feels good.

With what seems like great effort, he ends the kiss, gently nibbling and tasting my lower lip. His hands give me a squeeze before sliding up and resting on my lower back. He bends down and presses one last kiss on my neck before looking into my eyes.

Amazing. In this moment, after that kiss, he's no longer Jonah "The Assassin" Slade, celebrity bad-boy. Looking at him now, he's just Jonah.

"Don't worry about tonight." His words are said in a way that makes me feel like I might be more to him than a hook up. "I'd never push you further than you're willing to go."

My stomach twists with anxiety. He has no idea.

Eight

Jonah

After my talk with Raven in the bathroom, I have one objective—get these people out of my house. Pronto. With the taste of her still on my lips, I let the guys know that the party is over.

It's just past ten as I wave off the last of my friends. I watch from the front porch as Raven says goodbye to Eve. The patio light illuminates her face as she laughs hard at something Eve must have said.

Damn, she's gorgeous. I always knew she was beautiful, but getting her alone in that bathroom, her body trembling in my arms, her breathy moans, and flushed cheeks. *Perfect.*

And that kiss. I'm not big on kissing, never have been. But Raven's sweet lips, so tentative at first, only to turn greedy and demanding—a few more minutes of that and I'd probably bust in my shorts like a teenage boy.

She walks toward me, her backpack slung over one shoulder, Eve's taillights disappearing down the driveway.

"Come here." I brush her hair aside and lean in. Before I'm there, she tilts her head, offering her throat to me. *Fucking perfect.* I hone in on my spot: the blackbird's wing that peeks at the base of her neck. First, a quick press of my lips, then I part my mouth to taste her tender flesh. She hums low in her throat and leans into me.

"I like your tattoo." My voice against her neck makes her to shiver.

"I like yours too."

I force myself back a step. "Everything okay with your girl?"

"Yes, she's happy I'm staying here. She hates my place, thinks it's not safe." She picks at the frayed strap of her backpack.

"Why is your place not safe?"

She looks up at me and rolls her eyes. "I live in a studio apartment."

Okay. That doesn't sound so bad.

"Where?"

She blows out a long, defeated-sounding breath. "Right by the garage."

She shifts on her feet, and I know she's holding something back. I tilt my head and wait. Her eyes grow a fraction. *That's right, sweetheart. I'm on to you.*

"Well, actually . . ."

"I'm listening."

"I live above the garage." She's back to picking at her backpack strap.

Nope. I must've heard that wrong. "You live above Guy's Garage?"

She nods.

A wave of anxiety floods my body. "Raven, there's nothing over there but warehouses and vagrants. There's not a decent human being within a ten-mile radius after business hours."

Thinking of her all alone at night in that part of town makes my muscles tense. My mind imagines all the things that could happen to an innocent girl in that part of town after hours. The alley behind the garage is a festering crime spot. There's probably all manner of piece-of-shit lowlifes lurking in the shadows. I'll never be able to sleep knowing she's over there alone. No.

"From now on, you stay here with me," I blurt.

Her eyes flash in shock and her lips part.

I just took this too far.

“What did you say?” Her voice is barely a whisper.

I run my hands through my hair, trying to figure out what the hell is going on in my head. I’m having a hard time believing my own words. Did I just ask her to move in with me? I want this girl, more than I’ve wanted any other girl. There’s no denying that. The protective instinct stirs in my chest, something I’ve never felt for any woman outside of my mom and sister.

“You heard me.”

“Jonah, I’m not staying with you every night. That’s absurd. You barely know me. I mean . . .” She studies me, and I can’t help but think how her confused and shocked expression adds a cuteness to her already gorgeous face.

“I just want to keep you safe, and I can’t do that if you aren’t with me.” I take a deep, steadying breath. That felt okay. Not awkward, like I thought it would. “Besides, you work on the Impala most mornings. It’ll save on gas money.” It’s a stretch, but I’m desperate—also a new feeling for me.

“That’s really sweet of you, b-but I can’t.” Her expression relaxes, and she puts her hands on her hips. “I have to feed Dog.”

This is interesting. I can’t think of a single girl, not one, who would argue with me at my offer to have them sleep in my bed. And did she say she has a dog?

“Dog?”

“Yes. Dog.” Her shoulders square off and she lifts her chin.

She thinks something like having to feed her dog is going discourage me? She needs to get to know me better, which is exactly what I plan on doing once this conversation is over.

“Bring your dog.” I shrug.

“Bring my . . . but . . . I don’t have a dog.” Her forehead pinches between her eyebrows, and I fight the desire to kiss the skin smooth.

Damn, she is really cute.

“You said you had to feed your dog.”

“Right, Dog. My cat. Well, not *my* cat. The cat that lives in the alley.”

I roll my lips between my teeth to keep from laughing. “Let me get this straight. You feed an alley cat that you’ve named Dog, and that’s why you can’t stay with me.”

“Exactly.” She throws her hands out like she’s just made the point of the century.

I lose the battle against my laughter and nearly double over with it. “You’re, without a doubt, the most amusing girl I’ve ever met, Raven . . . uh . . .” I’m not going through this again.

“What’s your last name?”

Her expression falls and her face goes pale. *What did I say?* She rolls her bottom lip into her mouth, raking it across her teeth. My laughter dies and instinctively I pull her into my arms.

“Baby? You okay?”

She exhales and wraps her hands around my waist. “I’m fine. You just caught me off guard.” Her arms grow tight as she hugs me to her. “I guess you’ll find out sooner or later.”

What the hell? What could possibly be so bad about her last name? I guess it could be Manson or Bundy.

“Morretti. My full name is Raven Morretti.” Her words are dull and lifeless.

Morretti? I look past her, squinting into the darkness. Why does that name—*Holy shit!*

Dominick Morretti. Las Vegas’s most infamous pimp. And her mom’s a prostitute. It all makes sense.

Not only have I seen his mug all over the news but I've actually met the scumbag. I've seen him at all our fights, working his girls. He tried to get us to throw down some cash for a night with a Morretti girl.

Raven looks nothing like him with her dark hair and olive skin, but those eyes. It's amazing I didn't make the connection before. The color is so unique, but, where hers are cool pools of Caribbean water, his are death by drowning. My mom always said, "The eyes are the windows to your soul," and looking into Dominick Morretti's eyes, it's pretty clear he ain't got one.

"Jonah?" Her arms grow impossibly tighter around my waist.

She's got to know I know who her father is. Everyone in town knows who her father is. He not only runs the biggest prostitution ring in the state, allegedly, but he also owns half the real estate in town. *And she lives in a studio above a garage?*

"Yeah, baby. Let's get you inside."

I grab her hand and lead her into the house. Not letting go, I lock the door and take her to the couch. I sit down and pull her onto my lap. She stiffens and avoids my eyes.

"Your dad is Dominick Morretti."

Dropping her forehead, she simply nods.

I take a deep breath and look to the ceiling. "I know him, Raven. I know your dad—"

"He's not my dad." Her harsh glare locks on mine before her expression softens. "I mean he's my biological father, but he's not my dad. I don't have a dad."

I pull her to me, and she nestles into my chest, her arms wrap around my waist.

"Well, whatever he is to you, he's no good. I don't want you around him."

She laughs humorlessly. "You don't have to worry about that. He hasn't wanted anything to do with me in twenty years. I doubt he ever will. I'm pretty sure whatever happened between him and my mom was a mistake . . . you know, me." Her final words are barely audible as her voice is muffled in my chest.

Anger pushes its way through my concern for her. I place my hand under chin and force her eyes to mine. "I can't see your life ever being considered a mistake."

Her sad smile rips through me.

"My parents never had a relationship that I know of. I'm not close to my mom, so she's never told me, but it's pretty obvious they have nothing beyond, um, a professional relationship."

Her bright eyes look away for a second as she blows a piece of long hair from her face. "Anyway, can we talk about something else now?"

Her full lips lift into a smile that doesn't reach her eyes. I'm left with a million questions tumbling in my head, but I don't want to ruin the night by bringing up painful memories of her past.

"Yes, we can." I stare at her lips, hungry to taste them again. But there's one thing I need to say before I can put this subject to bed. "Promise me you'll stay away from Dominick Morretti."

"That, I can promise." Her eyes move down my face and settle on my mouth.

I shove both hands into her hair and bring her lips to mine. She eagerly complies, wrapping her hands behind my neck and holding me close to her. She tilts her head and our tongues slide together. Her body shifts on my lap and I moan my approval. Just days ago I thought I could walk away from her. And now, I don't want to spend one night without her.

~*~

Raven

The marble flooring is cool under my bare feet as I stand, looking at myself in Jonah's bathroom mirror. Something's different. I can't put my finger on what it is, but I know I've never been able to see my molars before when I smile. I have a serious case of the perma-grins.

I look down at the cotton t-shirt and sweat pants lying folded in my hands. It hits me again, with no less intensity than before, that I'm spending the night with Jonah Slade. Now my cheeks actually hurt.

Checking out his dark brown, granite counter top with double sinks and mahogany cabinetry, curiosity pushes at me. I question whether or not to snoop in his medicine cabinet. I chew on my lip, staring at the mysterious mirrored door. Just one peek won't hurt.

I cautiously pull open the door as if something might jump out at me: deodorant, shaving cream, razor, all the typical man stuff. Grabbing his cologne, I press it to my nose and take a deep breath. My eyes almost roll back in my head at the woodsy smell that his skin has hinted at before. He never smells coated in fragrance, more like an underlying flavor that runs beneath his natural scent.

Snooping complete, I move to close the door when a gray box catches my eye. I squint and lean forward to read the label: condoms. Wow, extra-large, lubricated, jumbo pack. I slam the door shut and stare at my reflection.

"Well, what did you think you would find?" I hiss to myself. "You know his reputation." I stand back and shrug. "You need to tell him."

Hey Jonah, guess what? Now that you know my mom's a hooker and my dad's a pimp, I have one more bomb to drop on you. The V-bomb. Surely if he can look past the first two bombs that last one should be no big deal. It's not as if I'm not open to eliminating the issue. Candy's words come flooding back. *Stupid little girl.*

I push the feelings of unworthiness to the back of my brain and head for the shower. Stripping down, I hear my inner fourteen-year-old fan-girl screaming, *You're naked in Jonah Slade's bathroom! Eek!* She's not wrong, I think while covering my mouth to stifle my laughter.

Stepping under the water, I close my eyes to enjoy the calming spray. After a minute or two, I grab Jonah's body wash and take a deep breath. It smells like citrus and spice and man all mixed together. I wash up slowly, taking the time to enjoy being covered in his smell and nothing else. While rinsing my hair, I notice just how different our realities are. He has a rain shower head and marble tile, and all my shower boasts is mildew stains and a slow-moving drain.

After towel drying, I finger comb my hair and slide on a fresh pair of panties from my backpack. I pull Jonah's t-shirt over my head. It's huge and hits me just above the knees. I pull on the worn sweat pants, and they slide back down my legs. Frowning, I pull them back up and roll the top in an attempt to tighten them. Still too big. The shirt covers enough, so I ditch the pants.

Slipping out from the bathroom into Jonah's room, I'm met with a vision that has me locked in place. He's shirtless with his back against the headboard. His navy blue pajama pant-covered legs are crossed at the ankles, and the remote is in his hand. He exudes casual confidence.

My eyes consume his body from his colorful arms to his bulging chest and settle on his face. He's staring at me with a hunger that charges the air between us.

"Hi."

"Hi." His eyes narrow on my bare legs.

"The pants were too big." I tug at the hem of the shirt.

Silence.

“So, I decided the shirt would be long enough.”

Still silence.

“I thought it covered as much as a dress would, so—”

“You look amazing in my shirt.” I shift uncomfortably at the gravelly sound in his voice.

“You’re safe with me.”

I let his words wash over me as my shoulders relax and I take a deep breath.

“You want to watch some TV?” He gives me a one-dimpled smile that sucks the breath from my lungs.

Forcing my gaze to his enormous television that hangs on the wall, I step closer to see what he’s watching. “Sure. What—” I gasp and race toward it, stopping only a foot away from the screen.

“Raven—”

“That’s Chip Foose!” I point at the screen while looking back at Jonah who is smiling huge. “I’ve read about this show in *Car and Driver Magazine*. It’s called *Overhaulin’*. They take old cars from people . . .” The sound of Chip Foose’s voice calls my attention back to the show. “’57 Chevy, Bel Air, two door, hardtop,” I mumble to myself, captivated by automotive brilliance.

A pair of strong arms wrap around my waist. “Come back and sit on the bed, baby. You can watch it from there.” A hint of humor laces his words.

Flaming embarrassment. Here I get the chance to be in bed with Jonah, and I’m stuck to a television screen, watching a reality show about cars. *How very sexy and feminine of me.*

He pulls me a few steps backward to the bed. I don’t take my eyes off the screen as he hauls me to the headboard, tucking me into his side. My head against to his chest, I slide my hand over his bare abs and bite my tongue to keep from *Oooing*. His hand moves up my arm and stops to toy with my hair. I sigh in contentment, but quickly remember the heavy weight I need to get off my chest.

“Jonah?”

“Hmm?”

“I need to talk to you about something.”

He lifts the remote, pressing a button that freezes the screen.

“I know your, um, reputation.” His body tightens beneath my cheek and his hand stills in my hair. “Nikki told me that you’ve never had a girl over. Is that true? It’s just, you’ve obviously had your fair share of, um, female companions, so I assumed—”

“Yes. It’s true. You’re the first girl I’ve had in my bed.”

I take a deep breath and try not to chicken out. “Um . . . well, there’s something you should know about me.”

He doesn’t say anything, and I can’t see his face, but his chest has stopped moving.

I squeeze my eyes shut and shove the words out. “I’m a virgin.”

Holding my breath, I bite my lip and await his reaction.

I’m not a total prude. I dated Billy Dryer, and he was the most popular kid in school. We made out a few times until he broke up with me. Guess his parents told him who my mom was, so he thought I’d be easy. I’ll never forget him trying to pull my pants down. When I refused, he said he knew I was a lesbian. A girl working on cars all day had to be gay. He stormed off and left me there under the bleachers alone. I decided I’d rather be a virgin lesbian than the slut daughter of a prostitute.

I’m tossed from my thoughts by the shaking of Jonah’s silent laughter, and my eyes pop

open in surprise.

“Are you laughing?”

His reaction turns into uncontrollable hilarity, not the response I was expecting.

I push myself up and take a minute to enjoy his dimples, wide smile, and shining eyes.

“What’s so funny?”

“Raven,” he says between chuckles. “You said yourself I’ve never had a girl over to my house before. Yet, here you are, in my bed, wearing my shirt, cuddled up in my arms.” He tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. “You don’t get it, do you?”

My confused face confirms that I, in fact, do not get it.

“You, Raven Morretti, are mine. Doesn’t matter if you’re a virgin or an alien. What you’ve told me changes nothing. Not. One. Thing.”

Stunned into paralysis, I let his words take root.

“How’s that possible? Were you not listening when I told you my mom’s a hooker and my dad’s a pimp?” I’m processing his reaction aloud and can’t seem to stop. “Candy was right. I’m a grease monkey, and, considering what my parents do for a living, I’m trash. I’m inexperienced, young, and a virgin.”

Good job, Raven. Talk him out of liking you. Why don’t you go ahead and make him a list of all your unlovable qualities.

It happened so fast I barely registered the movement. Jonah hauled me up the length of his body and sat me face to face with him, straddling his hips. My face dwarfed by his big hands, he holds me until I meet his eyes.

“Don’t ever speak about yourself like that again.” His deep, firm command makes me drop my eyes. “Look at me, Raven.” I do as I’m told. “You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever known. You’re kind, smart, funny, gracious . . . hell, you even laugh at Blake’s jokes. I want *you*. And that includes everything that makes you who you are.”

He wants me. This amazing, powerful, beautiful man wants me. Have I ever felt wanted before? A lone tear rolls down my cheek. His words are a warm blanket wrapped around my heart. Leaning forward, he brushes his lips across the corners of my eyes.

Will he ever understand how much his words mean to me? I’ve never felt important enough to anyone or good enough to deserve this kind of affection. Just days ago, I felt a fissure in the wall I had erected around my heart. With those simple words, he busted it down.

It’s crazy and it makes no sense, but there’s no doubt in my mind. I’m madly in love with Jonah Slade.

Nine

Jonah

I wake up with something soft and warm pressing against the length of my body. My left arm lies flat against the bed, tingling, a sensation like tiny ants tunneling through my veins. My right arm is comfortable and pressed directly against the soft heat. Taking a deep breath, I smell the faint pear fragrance and smile. *Raven*.

So this is what it feels like to sleep with someone. Her back pressed to my front, I nestle my face into the silky waves of her hair and pull her body deeper into mine. What the h . . . ? I flex my hand against a heavy weight in my palm. The feeling registers, immediately making my body tense.

Ah, hell.

Sometime in the night, I shoved my hand up her shirt and am now cupping her left breast. All I need is for her to wake up to me perving out on her in her sleep. I slip my hand slowly from her chest. My fingers skate down the soft skin of her stomach and settle there. Her legs slide against mine as I draw lazy circles at her belly button.

She moans and presses her bottom into my groin in a tiny stretch. I bite back my groan at the feel of her round ass against my throbbing crotch. I don't think I've ever had a hard-on for this long.

Last night, after Raven confessed her virginity, there was no way I could make out with her. At least, not the way I wanted to. The tears in her eyes as she ripped herself apart verbally sealed it for me. I needed her to know that I respect her and that she's more than a shallow one night. We'd kiss during commercials, and at times I thought I could have gotten away with more, but last night was about getting her to see me differently. It was about getting her to trust me with more than her painful family history, with her body as well. And to do that, I had to hold back my appetite for her. Way back.

Besides, holding her against my side with her head on my chest while she watched *Overhaulin'* was entertaining as hell. She went back and forth between mumbling to herself and giving me a detailed history of Ford Motor Company. She'd talk to the television, making her suggestions as to what should be done, and made it clear when she disagreed. I enjoyed watching her as much as I did the show. And the show was cool as shit.

I introduced her to the DVR, showing her how to record the entire season so she can watch them whenever she wants. She rewarded me with a shining smile that I felt in my toes. Her sparkling eyes lit up like I'd just given her keys to a Lamborghini. The fact that I could make her light up like that filled me with more pride than winning my first fight. I spent the rest of the night figuring out ways to earn that smile again.

"That tickles," she whispers with a giggle as she stills my hand at her stomach.

"Good morning." I push my luck and glide my hand up her body to her rib cage just shy of the underside of her breast.

A sharp intake of air and she relaxes.

"How did you sleep?"

"Mmm, really good." She rolls over to face me.

I prop up on my elbow, my head in my hand, and run my fingers down her ribs to where the

sheet lies at her waist and back again.

She touches my cheek with a barely-there brush of her fingertips. "I like these," she whispers, tracing my dimples.

I roll my eyes.

"What? They're cute."

She did not just say that.

"Cute? I don't want to be cute."

I didn't think her giggles could get any sweeter, but her scratchy morning giggles are the best.

"Well, too bad, because you are."

My smile widens at the compliment. It's not that I've never had a girl tell me I'm cute, but everything means more coming from Raven's mouth.

Her eyes move to my arm as her finger slowly traces my tattoo.

"This is really beautiful. Ryan Allen Slade." She reads the scripted name. "Is it a tribute to your dad?"

"Yeah, he loved the ocean so I thought it fitting that the cross rises up from it."

Her fingers outline the swirls of waves then the cross at my bicep, moving up to the sky and clouds. Leaving trails of fire against my skin, her finger follows the pattern to the angels at my left pec. She looks up at me, her piercing aquamarine eyes heavy with sleep, her eyebrows raised in question.

"Katherine is my mom. Beth is my sister." The words come out rushed. I don't want her to think the women's names inked on my body are past lovers.

"And why the blank spot in between them?" Her finger brushes at the unmarked skin over my heart, teasingly close to my nipple.

"I'm saving that for my future wife."

She pulls her hand away like it's been burned and ducks her head. I curse myself for ruining the moment.

I roll to my back to expose my right arm and point to the fiery phoenix.

"This one here I got for a two reasons. First one is obvious." We've talked about me being from Arizona and moving to Vegas after high school.

She lifts her head and nods. I'm thankful to see the awkward moment pass.

"Second is because after my dad died, I was destroyed, like I'd lost everything, not just my dad. Then I started fighting and . . ." I pause, remembering the lost boy I was and comparing him to the man I am now. "It gave me something back. Not so much reborn, but redirected. It gave me purpose, a reason to wake up every day."

Her thoughtful eyes study mine, her eyebrows pinched in concentration. "You found a way to deal with your pain in a healthy way that improved your life."

"Yeah, I guess. Although sometimes it feels like fighting found me, ya know? I could have gone either way. Jail for assault or the UFL."

She sighs and rolls to her back, eyes to the ceiling. "If only everything were like that. It's not easy to do: owning and accepting the pain of our past, the heartbreak, our misgivings, and using them for good. Make our lives better not in spite of it all . . . but *because* of it."

Her whispered words are directed at no one, and I wonder if they were meant more for me or for her. I watch her profile as she continues to inspect the ceiling fan.

It's not the first time that the girl beside me has knocked me stupid with something that comes from her beautiful mouth. As I sit dazed by her brilliance, my mind attempts to piece

together what she's been through. Being the daughter of a pimp and a prostitute in Las Vegas couldn't have been easy. Her dad was hawking women's bodies and profiting from it, even the mother of his own daughter. Revulsion stirs in my gut.

We lie in silence for several long minutes, me lost in thoughts of her, her just looking lost.

Huffing, she turns her head with a sweet smile. "I need caffeine."

And just like that, she's back. These last few days, Raven has opened up to me on her own, always changing the subject when she's done sharing. I want to know more about her, but I'll let her set the pace.

"Are you always this pushy in the morning?" I tease.

A soft pink kisses her cheeks as she buries her head in my chest. I run my hand up her back into her hair.

"I don't think I'm pushy in the morning, but then again, I've never slept over with a boy before."

"Boy, huh?"

Rolling her to her back, I climb above her and bury my face in her throat. Her hands slide into my hair, and she holds me to her. I nip at her neck, eliciting a soft moan that vibrates against my lips. It takes every ounce of my control not to flex my hips into her accepting body. I pull up the hem of her t-shirt and rest my hand against her ribs.

"Jonah, is that your phone?"

I ignore her breathy question as my fingertips brush against the underside of her breast.

"Jonah, I think you should get your—"

I silence her with my mouth, swallowing her unspoken words. She hums and tilts her head, allowing me to delve deeper. I do just that, driving my tongue against hers. As slow as I can manage, I move my hand up until it's overflowing with the weight of her breast. She presses into my hold, molding my hand against her.

"What if it's an emergency?" She breaks the kiss to speak before pulling me back to her lips.

I smile at her eagerness before sucking her full bottom lip into my mouth. Her hands slide from my neck down to my chest as she explores my body with her touch.

"You taste fucking fantastic." I trail my tongue from her lips to her neck with every intention of tasting her breasts.

"The phone. It could be . . . a family emergency." Her clipped words come out between needy pants. Her hands run up again and into my hair sending the opposite message of her words.

I'm kissing her shoulder, her chest heaving against mine. There isn't much that could drag me away from her willing little body. But she's right. And I'm pissed.

"Fuck." I kiss her hard and suck her tongue deep into my mouth letting her know there's more to come. "Later."

With a quick push up, I'm off the bed. She whimpers, her face flushed, a shy smile tugging on her swollen lips. Her face is free of makeup, and her hair is tossed around the pillow in a wavy halo. *Seriously gorgeous.*

"I'm going to kill whoever that is."

Her laughter fills the room making it hard to stay mad. I follow the sound of my ringing cell phone to the living room, hoping the distance from Raven will calm my racing pulse and dull the throb in my pants.

Nabbing my phone off the table, I check the caller ID.

Yeah, he's dead.

"This better be good," I growl.

"Oh shit. Either you didn't get laid last night, or I interrupted your morning piece of ass."

My teeth grind together and I grip my cell. Blake has no idea how close he is to a beat down.

"Blake, you ever talk about Raven like that again, I will rip your balls off and shove them down your throat. I won't tolerate anyone disrespecting her. We clear?"

Is he fucking laughing? What the hell.

"No shit, man." The way he says it, I'm surprised he doesn't follow it with a "Duh!" He chuckles. "Pretty obvious after watching you two last night. Oh, and for the record, I approve."

"Great. Don't know what I'd do without your blessing." I force sarcasm into my words, but can't suppress a smile.

"The Assassin' settles down. I can see the headlines now. Women around the greater state of Nevada flood the streets with tears."

"I'm not settling down. We're just hanging out." I grimace at the sour taste of those words from my mouth.

"Right, dude. Whatever you say."

Subject change, ASAP. "You called for a reason?"

"Well, besides calling to find out if you dipped your—"

"Blake." My tone is heavy with warning.

He's laughing. "Training today is moved to eleven."

"Got it."

"Oh, and, Jonah, I want details."

"Keep dreamin'."

His laughing is coming through the phone in loud bursts. "Just hanging out, my ass!"

"You're an asshole."

Hitting end, I toss my phone to the kitchen island, making it skid. I grab the coffee pot and turn to see Raven leaning up against the kitchen doorway. She tilts her head, flashing me a sexy half-smile. How long has she been standing there?

"Let me guess . . . Blake?"

"Yep, Blake." I fill the coffee maker with water. "How'd you know?" *Or better yet, how much did you hear?*

"I heard the a-hole part when I walked in."

Good. I'm glad she didn't hear the part about us just hanging out. I know it's more than that, but Blake's nosey ass doesn't need to know.

"He really knows how to get you going, huh?"

"It's safe to say Blake knows how to get everyone going." I scoop coffee grounds into the filter, spilling some on the counter. "Except you, you actually laugh at him."

Most girls who laugh at Blake are trying to get him take them home. No way Raven has feelings for Blake. Jealousy, mean and ugly, twists in my gut.

"He's funny." She says it like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

I stop what I'm doing and turn to her, arms crossed at my chest. "How funny?"

She shrugs and comes to me from across the kitchen. "Really funny."

The urge to beat the snot out of Blake comes out of nowhere. A need to protect or mark what's mine overwhelms me. Something primal and male pushes my feet to move across the room and make a point.

I close the space between us, grab both hands full of her ass, and fuse my lips to hers. Her body tenses for a moment, probably shocked by my sudden need, before her muscles melt

against mine. She clutches at my shoulders with a moan that settles behind my ribs. I use my hold on her backside to lift her up on the counter and step between her legs. The heat from her skin sears mine as she presses in close. My hands tangle in her hair, gripping tight and pulling back, opening her to me. Her body relaxes, giving me control. I growl in victory before I break the kiss: no slow sweeps of my tongue to bring her back, just a quick nip at her lower lip.

“Wow.” She straightens out of my hold. With her hands locked behind my neck, she leans her forehead against mine. “What was that for?” She pulls back, her eyes searching my face.

“Wait, was that . . . are you jealous?”

She knows? Of course she knows. I acted like a complete animal.

“I had to be sure.”

“Be sure?”

“Yeah. Be sure that I do it for you.”

Her eyebrows pinch together. “And?”

“Baby, the way you just gave yourself over to me? No question.”

Her eyes grow wide and her face gets red, but she doesn’t deny it. Yeah, I totally do it for her. Blake can live.

I run my thumbs across the heat of her blush. “Do you work today?”

She blinks as if she’s just been released from a spell before her shy smile is directed at me. “I’m on call.”

“I’ll finish up the coffee. You check in with Guy and find out if he needs you in today. If not, I want you to go to training with me.”

“Training with you?” Her hands tense behind my neck. “I mean, won’t you get in trouble if you bring a friend?”

I tuck her loose hair behind her ear before cupping her jaw, my thumb skating along her lower lip. My eyes follow the path of my thumb, remembering what she tastes like. “Friend? Is that what you are?”

She tries to drop her chin. I hold her face to mine, locking her eyes.

“No, at least, I hope I’m more.”

“Yeah, baby, you’re definitely more. So, the answer to your question is no, I won’t get in trouble if I bring you to training. We can swing by your place, feed Dog the cat, you can change and grab some of your stuff for the next couple days.”

A slight tremor runs through her body. “Days?”

I ignore her question. After last night and this morning, with her sexy warm body pressed against mine and waking up to her giggles, her throaty moans, and my hand up her shirt, she isn’t going to be sleeping anywhere, but my bed in my arms from now on. *Or as long as this lasts.*

“Come to training with me. You’ll like it. You might even pick up on a few things.”

“Don’t think I need MMA skills in my everyday life at the garage.”

“True,” I say, twisting a piece of her soft hair around my finger. “But it wouldn’t hurt to know how to break someone’s arm.”

I laugh at her horrified expression.

“You can do that? Break someone’s arm?”

“Come to training and I’ll show you.”

A quick call to Guy confirms that she’s free for the day. She had a hard time explaining why she was over at my house at nine o’clock in the morning, but it seems he bought her excuse that she was here working on the Impala. Their close relationship puts me at ease. In the short time I’ve known Raven, I haven’t seen her talk on the phone to anyone outside of Eve and Guy. She’s

mentioned that she and her mom aren't close. I remind myself to ask her about that later.

Ready for the day, me showered and dressed, Raven properly caffeinated, we head to my garage. She walks to the truck and waits for me to hit the locks.

"Which one do you want to take?" I motion to all of the available forms of transportation.

Stunned, she looks up at me like a kid who just walked through the gates of Disneyland.

"I get to pick?"

"Sure, if you want to."

"Heck yeah, I want to!"

She walks to the Harley without hesitation and hits me with the stupefying smile she did last night. So open, and trusting but also something beyond that. Believing.

I try to ignore the tightening in my chest. "The Harley it is. Grab a helmet."

We climb on, and I try hard not to smile like a complete jackass as she wraps her arms around my waist. The weight of her head touches my back, and I could swear she was hugging me.

There's not a guy out there that wouldn't list having his girl on the back of his bike as one of the best feelings in the world. Her knees are at my hips and the heat of her body at my ass. Yeah, I'm smiling like a jackass all right. At least she's behind me so she can't see it.

Ten

Raven

Fan-freaking-tastic. That's the only way to describe riding on the back of a Harley Blackline with my super-hot, badass boyfriend. The words tumble around in my head, making my stomach flutter, or maybe it's the adrenaline from the ride. My guess is a combination of both.

The sun is shining, and there's a comfortable breeze from the speed of the bike. Jonah's massive body commands the incredible piece of machinery as we twist and turn through the Las Vegas streets. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to drive it myself. I make a mental note to ask Jonah if he would teach me.

He takes the long way to my place, making sure to hit some of the most beautiful parts of town. On a particularly long stretch of road, I loosen my hold on his waist and tighten my knees at his hips. With a quick prayer, I throw my arms over my head, completely free, and howl like a wild dog. Jonah's body shakes with what I assume is laughter, but I can't hear over the roar of the bike. A little embarrassed by my blissful liberation, I wrap my arms around his body and hug him to me.

We pull up to Guy's Garage, and Jonah parks the Harley right next to my Nova. I swing my leg over the bike and dismount while he holds it steady. Pulling my helmet off, I smooth the tussled ends of my hair. Kickstand down, I admire him as he comes off the bike. He exudes confidence and stability, like a man well aware of his body and its capabilities. His red t-shirt hugs his torso, and his jeans are baggy but tight in all the right places. He removes his helmet and walks around my car checking it out. He's seen it plenty of times from a distance, but never close-up.

I study the look of concentration on his face. "Well, what do you think?"

His gaze snaps to mine. "What do I think? I think it's amazing." He bends at the waist with his hands on his hips to look in the driver's side window. "Original interior, stock shifter, steering wheel . . . Raven, baby, you did this?"

I'm back to perma-grin status. My chest swells with pride at the surprise in his voice.

"Yeah, it took me two years saving money for parts and working on it in my free time."

He closes the space between us and wraps his arms around my waist, placing his hands on my bottom. Just like in his kitchen, the simple touch ignites my blood and I feel something I don't feel often. Sexy.

"I'm so proud of you, babe. This," he gestures to the car with a nod, "is incredible. *You* are incredible."

His words penetrate deep into my soul, shaking the useless rubble of the protective wall he destroyed just last night.

Pushing up to my toes, I place my hands on his chest and slowly brush my lips against his. His grip flexes against my bottom. I make another pass at his lips, and another, then open my mouth and allow the tip of my tongue to drag against his full lower lip. He reaches into my hair and tugs gently, angling me to him and taking no prisoners. His lips cover mine, tongue thrusting into my mouth. A groan rumbles against my palms, sending my blood soaring. His kiss is possessive and dominant, and I moan into his eager mouth. Without warning, I feel the sunbaked metal of my car against my back as Jonah pins me there. He grinds his hips into my belly and my

legs go weak. Time passes, minutes or hours I'm not sure, as I lose myself in his kiss.

"We need to slow down before we get arrested for indecent exposure." His wicked grin and hungry eyes have me thinking it's worth the risk.

He holds me firmly against the car until my breathing calms and I regain the use of my legs.

"You okay?" he asks, a wolfish smile tugging at his lips.

"I'm good."

With two steps back, he releases me from his hold, but grabs my hand.

He shrugs one shoulder. "Show me your place."

I head for my apartment in a Jonah-induced fog. Will I ever get used to being with him? Or will I be stumbling over my feet every time we're together.

"Ray!"

Just steps from the alley, I hear the unmistakable call. Guy is standing in the bay, his glare so tight I can't see the color of his eyes.

"Um, I'll be right back." I let go of Jonah's hand only to feel him hold on tighter.

"No. I'm coming with you." His expression is relaxed, but determined.

This should be interesting. Guy has never seen me with a man before, mainly because I've never dated one. And now here I am, walking hand in hand with The Las Vegas Casanova.

"Hey, what's up?" My unusually high voice has Guy's scowl narrowing.

He looks back and forth between Jonah and me, his eyes darting from our joined hands to our faces. "What's going on here?"

"Oh, uh . . . well, we just—"

"Raven and I are dating, sir."

Guy's face goes from pinched and small to wide and slack. "Dating."

"Yes, sir." Jonah pulls me to his side, letting go of my hand and throwing his arm over my shoulder.

I smile up at Guy, who's back to glaring. This time, it's aimed directly at Jonah.

"Didn't know you were the dating type, son."

My heart races at Guy's blunt confrontation of Jonah's reputation.

"Never was. I am now." Jonah's answer is accompanied by a firm squeeze.

I want to jump up and down at the certainty that laces Jonah's words. Instead, I wrap my arm around his waist and hug him to me, smiling huge at Guy.

His face relaxes, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Right then." He points in Jonah's face, putting on his best fatherly expression. "Behave yourself."

Now it's Jonah who's fighting a grin. "Yes, sir."

With a curt nod, Guy walks back into the garage. I exhale the breath I was holding and lead Jonah to the alley. That went well, but if I know Guy, we'll be talking about it later.

We take the stairs to my door, and I watch the playful humor slide from his face. I grab my keys and open the door.

"This is it." I motion for him to enter.

He glowers around the 500 square feet. "It's . . . cute."

I'd be embarrassed if I thought his distaste was due to my poverty, but it's clear in the way he checks out the street lights and the locks on my door that he's concerned for my safety. My heart beats a little faster.

"Make yourself at home. I'm going to change and grab a few things."

Thankful that I hit the laundromat a couple days ago, I pull a black lace bra and panty set, my favorite jeans, and a black tank top into my arms. I step into the bathroom and slide the

curtain closed. Changing quickly so that Jonah doesn't have to wait, I brush on some mascara and swipe on lip gloss. I grab my toiletries and walk back out into my room.

On the way to my backpack, I freeze and bite back my smile. Seeing a UFL Heavyweight on my tiny twin bed makes it look like a Twinkie. I lose the battle and a laugh shoots from my throat. He looks at me like he knows what I'm laughing about and totally agrees.

"Can you imagine both of us in this bed? Or hell, just me?" He looks perplexed while he studies the bed from top to bottom, which sends me into full-fledged hilarity.

"If we stay here, you'll have to sleep on the floor." I manage to say through my giggles.

His hazel eyes darken, his amusement replaced by something tangible and consuming. "Not sleepin' on the floor, babe. I'm starting to think of a few different ways we could fit."

I suck in a breath and try not to fidget as electricity vibrates between us.

Breaking the moment before we set something on fire, I shove things into my backpack. Jonah gets up from the bed and goes to the small bookshelf in the corner of the room. I do a quick mental inventory of what's there, hoping he doesn't find anything embarrassing. Thank God, I got rid of the Kama Sutra book Eve gave me on my last birthday as a gag. Other than a Bible, some romance novels, and a few pictures, there's nothing much to see.

"That's insane," he says with wonder in his voice.

He picks up a small framed picture that I know is of my mom. It's the only picture I have of her. I took it before I moved out, wanting to keep something of her, even if she wanted nothing to do with me. I remember catching her on the couch after she worked late. She had taken a long, hot shower, as she always did after work. She had on a pink, cotton, floor-length nightgown. She was listening to The Temptations, staring out the window at the distant lights of Las Vegas Boulevard with a lost look on her face. I'll never forget how her beauty clashed dramatically with the ugliness she held in her eyes. I grabbed my throw away camera and snapped the shot. She was in such a daze she didn't even flinch. That was two years ago. I haven't seen her since.

"Raven, you look just like her. She's gorgeous."

"Yeah, she is."

My chest burns with heartbreak like it does every time I think about my mom. I absently rub my chest in an attempt to push back the pain. I can't do this right now, going from the extreme high of the last twelve hours with Jonah to this extreme low.

Anyone up for a ride on the bi-polar coaster?

He puts the picture back and turns toward me. There is a kindness in his eyes that makes me feel vulnerable. I look away.

Grabbing my stuff, I remember the can of cat food and head for the door. "Ready?"

He's standing in the same place, his hands shoved into his pockets. I watch as something works behind his eyes, like he wants to say something but he can't sort it out.

With a long breath, he nods and smiles. "Yeah."

* * * *

Walking up to the UFL Training Center doors, my stomach flutters with nerves. The idea of being inside a room filled with guys just like Jonah is daunting and intimidating as heck. He holds my hand as we push through the entrance and I grip him tighter.

Air conditioning and heavy metal hum through the lobby. Bright red couches and sleek side tables line the dark gray walls. At the far wall sits a desk with a striking strawberry blond woman sitting behind it.

Jonah tosses the lovely lady a quick chin lift. Her perky smile fades as her eyes hit me. I give her a small wave of my fingers and suppress the urge to throw her my middle one. I chalk up my aggressive attitude to all the testosterone that drips down the walls like honey.

We make our way down a hallway lined with doors. As we near the end, I hear the vibration of male voices. They get louder and louder until we emerge from the hallway into a massive room.

Clean sweat and the unmistakable smell of man fill the room along with the called-out directions of trainers and grunts of fighters. I slow my pace until a tug on my hand has me moving. He leads me towards the center of the gym where roughly a dozen men are grouped off in various forms of fighting. Some are fighting on a mat while others are punching and kicking bags. A few are taking a break, soaked in sweat and sucking down water, some are on the floor stretching. There is a large octagon in the middle of the room where two men are boxing. The combinations of voices and metal music bounce off the concrete walls and high ceilings, putting a palpable energy in the air.

"Give me your backpack. I'll put it in my locker." I hand it to him without looking away from the activity on the floor.

Slowly, the action stops and the room goes quiet. It's then that I notice all eyes are on me. *Crud.* I look for Jonah but catch his back as he passes through the locker room door.

Facing the room, I lift a hand to wave, my expression probably as awkward as I feel.

"Who are you?" a handsome, older man calls out to me.

I clear my throat. "I'm Raven." I try unsuccessfully to control the shake in my voice.

"That's Jonah's girl. She's cool."

I exhale in relief at the sound of Blake's voice.

He makes his way over to me, and the rest of the guys stare for a minute longer before they resume their training.

"Hey, baby girl. Where's Jonah?"

His shirt is off and his skin glistens with sweat. Yesterday at Jonah's party, he never took his shirt off. I stand staring at the military tattoo that takes up one whole side of his chest, but avert my eyes to his face before I can make out what it says. He's smiling at me in his usual charming way.

"He went to put some stuff in his locker." I chew the inside of my cheek. "Is it okay that I'm here? I wouldn't want to disrupt or cause any problems."

"Are you kidding?" He looks at the guys over his shoulder and back to me. "You just gave these butt holes a reason to show off. They'll probably have the best session of their lives with you here to put up for."

My lips twitch, fighting my smile.

"You laugh even when I'm not trying to be funny. What'd I say?"

I cover my mouth to muffle my giggles. "You said butt holes."

He shakes his head, looks to the floor then back at me. "You ever cuss, Raven?"

My laughter dies as I contemplate his question. *Of course I cuss.* What adult doesn't cuss? Ugh. Who am I kidding? I totally don't. It's not as if I haven't tried. It just always sounds so stupid coming from my mouth.

"Of course I cuss," I lie.

He glares at me with a playful glint in his eye. "Really?"

"Psht. Yes." My palms sweat, and I wonder what it is about this guy that makes me so nervous.

“All right, fine. Hit me with one right now. Give me your nastiest curse.”

Rocking back on his heels, he crosses his bulging arms over his muscular chest waiting.

My mouth falls open at the ridiculousness. I snap my mouth shut and square my shoulders.

“Okay, I will.” I race through my mind pulling up some of the least offensive curse words I can think of, all of them sounding lame even in my head. “It’s just I’m not mad right now and I never cuss unless I’m mad.” I hold my head high and pray like crazy that he’ll be intimidated by my integrity and leave it alone.

His eyes narrow, and his smile grows by the second. “You can’t do it, can you?”

Apparently, my integrity doesn’t intimidate; it instigates.

“Yes, I can.” I say in a high voice that doesn’t even sound like me. What is my problem? Why can’t I just friggin’ cuss? I am not going to let him get the best of me. No way.

“Go for it, baby girl. I’m waiting.”

Girding my proverbial loins, I go for it.

“Shitass!” I blurt then quickly cover my mouth with my hand. My face feels like a Molotov cocktail as the blush takes over my cheeks and neck.

Blake’s face is stoic for two beats before he throws his head back in a booming laugh that gets the attention of every guy in the room. This, of course, does not help my situation. It’s possible, I discover, to have a full-body blush.

“That was fuckin’ awesome.” He bends over, sucking in breath.

“What’s going on over here, Blake?” Jonah’s voice demands as he marches up to us. “Why does my girl look like you just flashed her?”

“Dude, she said, ‘shitass.’ I’ve never heard a *sweet* curse word before.”

He puts his arm around my shoulder and pulls me to his side. “Of course, it’s sweet. She isn’t capable of anything less.”

My body melts into him, and my blush recedes at the safety of his touch.

“Right. You ready to warm up?” Blake says, a whisper of amusement still lighting his face.

“Yeah, let me get Raven set up and I’ll be right there.”

“Cool.” Blake’s eyes move from Jonah to me. He shakes his head. “You’re something else, baby girl.” Walking away, I hear him mumble something that sounds like lucky bastard.

Jonah’s body tenses at my side, drawing my eyes to him. He looks down at me, and I watch the tension leave his face. “You all right?”

“Of course.” Thanks to him.

“Blake’s not so funny anymore, is he?”

I shrug, slide my arms around Jonah’s middle and rest my cheek against his chest. “No, he’s still funny.”

He chuckles and tugs me to move. “Come on. Let’s find you somewhere to sit.”

We walk to a row of chairs, and he tells me to take a seat. A firm kiss on the lips, then one to the side of my neck, and he moves to meet Blake and Owen in the octagon.

Taking in my surroundings, I notice gigantic posters on the walls, each depicting a different fighter. I make my way past each one, studying the fighters I recognize until I land on Jonah’s.

His poster is by far the most enticing. The photo was taken at an angle, his head turned to face the camera. His eyebrows are dropped low making his eyes look black, and I’m transfixed by the fierceness of his face. No dimples or sexy grin, just pure focus. His lethal arms, posed in punching position, look huge as the vibrant colors of his tattoos intensify the cuts of his muscles. A shiver runs through my body and I turn away to find my seat.

I take a chair up close and set my attention to Jonah in the octagon. It doesn’t take long

before I'm gasping for air with my hand covering my mouth to keep from crying out. Watching Jonah in action is terrifyingly beautiful. He moves like a predator, graceful yet powerful. His punches and kicks are controlled as he commands his body. On the mat, as he rolls in a tangle of arms and legs, there's no doubt he was born for this.

"Baby! Come here." Jonah's command is terse with loss of breath.

I look up in horror and point to my chest. *Who me?*

He smiles, nods, and waves me over.

"This is going to be embarrassing," I say to no one in particular as I push myself up and head his way.

"I'm going to teach you an arm bar."

Owen leaves the octagon, giving me a sweet smile. "Good luck, princess."

My eyes find Blake who is covering his mouth, but his eyes give away his amusement. *Oh, real nice.*

Jonah and Blake demonstrate a few times, both of them explaining each step in detail with the clarity of professional fighters. I hang on every word, determined to get it right and not make a complete idiot out of myself.

Their instruction complete, they call me over to try. Lying with my back to the mat, I do exactly what I'm shown. After a few minor adjustments, I have Jonah's forearm in my hands. His arm runs the length of my body down through my legs. His shoulder rests between my thighs and my calves are locked around his torso. I thrust my hips forward.

"Fuck." He makes a pained grunt, but I continue to hold him in place. "You got it."

"I did it!" I could break the arm of a man at least twice my size by a thrust of my hips.

Power surges through me and I'm suddenly flipped. Jonah has his huge body wrapped around me like a boa constrictor, his mouth at my ear.

"Yeah, baby. You did it. I'm proud of you." He whispers before nuzzling my neck and dropping lingering kisses on my earlobe.

I shiver.

"That's my girl." He releases me and pulls me to my feet.

Blake is off to the side of the mat. "This," he indicates by waving his hand back and forth between me and Jonah, "is freaking me the hell out." He waves us off then stalks away.

I shrug my shoulders and look to Jonah who has both dimples out in full force.

"You're not the only one," he mumbles.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Eleven

Jonah

“Still with the same girl. Gotta say, brother, I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Owen and I are in the kitchen at the training center, shooting the shit and powering down protein shakes.

“I wasn’t sure I had it in me either, but here I am, one full week.” Pride warms my chest every time I think about the longest and only relationship I’ve ever had. It isn’t at all like I thought it’d be. She doesn’t bug me to buy her shit, ask me to get her into the most exclusive clubs, or fill my bathroom with her girly crap. I can’t even get her to leave clothes at my house. She’s always tossing clothes in and out of her backpack.

After that first night, she put up a fight about staying over the next two. Until I told her that I’d personally go and feed Dog every morning if it meant having her warm body in my bed every night. And every night since, she tries to leave again, only agreeing to stay once I kiss her until she surrenders.

“You still haven’t slept with her.”

Bringing my cup to my mouth, my arm stalls out in midair and I glare at my friend. “How did you know that?”

He swallows a gulp of his shake. “I didn’t.” A grin spreads across his face. “But I do now.” Fuck.

“Figured you’re keeping her around for a reason. What’s the hold up?”

“None of your fucking business.”

Owen’s deep laughter bangs against my every nerve. I could lie. Tell him that she’s a virgin and I’m holding off until she’s ready. The first part’s true. The last part’s the lie. She’s ready. Her words haven’t said it, but her body has screamed it.

“I’m just surprised, man. You have her in your bed every night. How can you, of all people, not fuck her?”

“Owen.” The caution in my tone forces him to roll his eyes before he studies me silently.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” His words are almost a whisper. “I had a feeling, but I wasn’t sure.”

I toss my empty cup into the sink a little harder than I need to. This entire conversation is pissing me the fuck off. “Sure about what?”

“You love this girl.”

Irritation is sucked from my body along with my breath. *Love her. Do I?*

“As long as I’ve known you, you’ve never even taken a girl out unless it was something UFL related. You use woman to get off, move on, and never look back. And now here you are, looking like you’re about to take me out for asking why you haven’t fu—*had sex* with her yet.”

I’m hearing his words, but still processing his earlier statement. I remain close-lipped.

He starts laughing, then harder, and points at my face. “Yeah, man. That’s the face. You love her.”

“But it’s only been a week. People don’t fall in love in a week.”

“The hell they don’t? I knew I was in love with Nik on our first date. No question.”

We’ve been spending a lot of time together. Mornings are spent working on the Impala until she goes to Guy’s garage and I go train. Nights, she’s back at my house where we cook together,

eat together, watch television together and—*Holy crap*. We're my parents.

Maybe I do love her.

I wipe the sweat from my forehead, feeling suddenly faint. Must be from the intense training session. Yeah, that's all it is.

"So now that we've established that, what's the real reason you're holding out?" He leans against the counter.

He'd never understand why I haven't slept with Raven. Hell, I'm still trying to figure it out. It's not that I don't want to. I want to, badly. So badly, I've had to sit in a cold shower for forty-five minutes after making out with her. Every time we get close, I hold back. The rejection I see in her eyes when I shut her down makes me want to kick my own ass.

"What if I . . . I don't know, screw things up?"

Owen's eyebrows hit his hairline. "Dude, if practice makes perfect, you should have your PhD in sex. Pretty sure you won't screw it up."

"That's not what I meant, fuckwad."

He pins me with his stare. "You're afraid you're going to lose interest after you do it."

I blink my eyes, absorbing his words, and conclude that my friend is a genius.

"Yes, exactly, I'm afraid my fucked-up head will ruin things with Raven."

"This is different though, Jonah. I'm telling you the way you feel about Raven you might as well be a virgin too. This is going to be a first for both of you. Be prepared to have your mind blown, my brother. There is nothing like making sweet love to the girl you feel it for."

I remain silent, mulling over Owen's revelation. He's right. I have a problem with getting attached to people on an intimate level. I always assumed that my hit-'em-and-quit-'em mentality was intentional. That I never sleep with the same girl twice because I don't have to.

But I'm seeing things more clearly. A deep dark part of me whispers that it's because I lost my dad. That getting close to someone is a risk because of the potential pain in losing them. And having sex with Raven, combined with the fact that I'll be her first, will be devastating. She'll probably see it as solidifying our relationship, and I'll subconsciously put her in the I-came-I-conquered file.

Unless Owen's right. *Could it be different this time?* It sure as shit feels different. Fighting has always dominated my brain space, until her. I have to believe my old ways won't fuck this up for me. I have to.

~*~

Raven

On an impulse, and an urgent need to update my lingerie collection as new boyfriend status dictates, I talked Eve into meeting me at the mall. Browsing around Victoria's Secret is a new experience now that I'm shopping with someone in mind. Every piece I pick up, I imagine Jonah's reaction to it. I can picture myself in each one, and in doing so, practically feel his eyes on me.

Things with Jonah have escalated physically, but not to the level I'd hoped. It seems like every time I'm about to beg him to make love to me, he freezes up. He's nothing like his reputation, at least, not with me. I tell myself it's because I mean more to him, but a small voice in my head tells me it's because I'm a virgin. An even smaller, but no less influential, voice tells me that he's not sure about us or more specifically, me.

I hold back a frustrated growl and move to a table covered in panties.

“You’re staying at his place again?” Eve pulls out a pair of blue leopard-print hip huggers and tosses them in my arms.

“Yeah. He wants me to stay with him every night.”

“You’re so lucky. The guy I’m dating won’t even invite me over.”

I look over to see her wiping her eyes with a pair of cotton bikini underwear and then tossing them back on the display table. We’ve been at Victoria Secret for almost an hour, and I’ve been so wrapped up with Jonah, I never even asked about her boyfriend.

“I’m a jerk. Sorry. Here I’m going on about Jonah, and I never asked about, um, what’s his name?”

She bursts into tears. I drag her back and lock us into a dressing room, dropping my arm full of stuff and pulling her into a hug.

“Eve, what is going on? Did you guys break up?”

“No.” She sniffs, and wipes her nose on a pair of panties I *was* going to buy. “I think he’s into me. I mean he tells me he’s in love with me every time we have sex.”

Envy creeps in at the thought that Eve’s getting sex and I love you. To be fair, I’ve known that I’m in love with Jonah since my first night in his bed, but haven’t told him. Could it be possible that he feels it too, but just hasn’t said it?

“So then, why are you crying?”

She looks up at me, and I can see the pain in her eyes. “He’s so secretive. I’ve asked him if he’s married or, like, I don’t know, a member of the Secret Service, but he just laughs and swears it’s just because he’s skittish about relationships.” She straightens her shirt and checks her make up in the mirror.

“I’m sure he’s not married. Hasn’t he gone into your restaurant on the nights you’re working? Surely he wouldn’t show up at the restaurant his girlfriend manages if he wanted to keep the relationship a secret.”

Her eyes drop to the floor. “He only came in the one time. Now we just hang out at my house.”

That doesn’t sound good.

“I wouldn’t think the worst yet. Give him some time. If things don’t get better in the next few weeks, break it off.”

She nods and takes a shaky breath. “Yeah, you’re right. Sorry.” She manages a sad smile. “You want to try any of this on? Might as well since we’re in here.”

I study the pile of lace and satin at my feet. Maybe one of those will be the pair to finally break Jonah’s iron restraint. “I’ll just get them all.”

~*~

Jonah

I’m pulling swordfish out of the fridge to throw on the grill for dinner. Raven says she can’t eat anything that isn’t microwavable at her place. Since she’s been staying with me, I cook almost every night. With my strict training diet, eating out is next to impossible.

Raven’s recent text said she was on her way, and I want to get dinner going so she can eat when she gets here. I shake my head, contemplating what in the hell has gotten into me. I told myself I’d had enough of taking care of people when I moved out of my mom’s house. Nothing

will shove you into a lifestyle of partying and irresponsibility like becoming a man at twelve. When I moved out at eighteen and came to Vegas, I was like a big kid in an adult candy store.

The sound of my phone bumps me from my thoughts. I check the caller ID.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hey, Joey, how are you?"

Rolling my eyes at her nickname for me, I wonder why she didn't just name me Joey. "I'm really good. How about you?"

"I'm great. Just got back from spending time with Beth and the boys. They're getting so big."

I rub my forehead, reminding myself to call my little sister Beth. She lives in Phoenix with her husband Rick and twin boys. Things have been so hectic I haven't stayed in touch.

"Yeah, I need to make a trip out for a visit. I'll do that after the fight."

"Oh, that would be great. She'd love to see you. What have you been up to lately?"

"Just training, getting ready for the fight. I've been working on the Impala I bought last year. I found a great mechanic who's been coming over every day helping me take it apart, clean it up."

I feel guilty keeping Raven a secret from my mom. She's not some dirty indulgence or a passing good time. Even though I've never talked to my mom about the recreational girls in my past, with Raven, things are different.

"Mom, I want to tell you I met someone. It's the mechanic who's helping me with my car. Things are getting serious between us, and I thought you should know."

Silence.

"Mom?"

I check to make sure our call didn't get dropped. Nope, still connected.

"Mom, you still there?"

She clears her throat. "Yes, Joey, I'm here."

Why is she acting so weird? I know I've never had a serious girlfriend before, but I thought she would be off the wall about my finally settling down.

"What's wrong? I thought you'd be excited about my being in a serious relationship."

"Oh, honey, I'm very happy for you. It's just . . . I guess I thought . . . Well, it's just a shock, that's all. I always thought you liked girls."

My eyes bug out of my head and I choke. I cough to clear my voice. "What? Of course, I like girls. Wait, Mom, Raven *is* a girl! Shit, you thought I was telling you I was dating a guy? Fuck me."

"First of all, Joey, you watch your mouth. Second, what was I supposed to think? You told me you were dating your mechanic!"

I laugh so hard that it brings tears to my eyes.

"No. Raven is very much female." My laughter calms. "You'll meet her when you come out for the fight. She's been staying with me, so I guess that will give you guys a chance to get to know each other."

"Oh, honey, that would be wonderful. I can't wait."

"Shit, Ma! You thought I was gay! Fuckin' hell."

"Jonah Ryan Slade, you watch that mouth!"

After giving her the details I've arranged for her flight, I finish up with my mom and go back to preparing dinner. While pulling out some vegetables to grill, I hear the front door open.

"Baby! I'm in here," I yell from the kitchen.

The soft beat of her Converse against the tile floor has me smiling. Her chest presses into my back as her arms wrap around my waist.

“Hey,” she says softly into my back, and bringing on an even bigger smile.

I turn around and wrap my arms around her, placing a wet kiss against my spot over the tattoo on her neck. The pear scent of her hair, combined with the sweet taste of her skin, is a heady mixture. I trail kisses along her jaw then pull at her lips with mine. After a little coaxing, she tilts her head, always eager, but making me work for it. Perfect. My tongue explores, gliding against the roof of her mouth and her teeth. Sucking on her lips, I slowly pull back. We lock eyes, panting and hungry, giving our blood a chance to cool.

She looks past my arm at the fish. “Mmm, is that swordfish?” Her voice carries a different kind of hunger.

“Yeah, you ready to eat?”

“Mm-hmm.”

I grab an iced tea for her, and we head out to light the grill. We settle ourselves at the bar. It’s getting warmer, but the outdoor misting system and ceiling fans make the temperature perfect for eating outside.

“How was shopping?” I grab myself a Muscle Milk from the outdoor cooler.

“Good. How was your day?”

I pop the top off my drink, take a swing, and lean a hip on the bar. “Infinitely better if those bags I heard you drop at the door are pink.”

“How did you know?” She sips her tea that I’ve sweetened and added lemon to, just like she likes it. “Mmm.” She takes another sip.

“Babe, if you keep this up, you’re going to have to take on a sponsor. And I’d like to be the first to volunteer.”

“I only buy the stuff that’s on sale.” She sets down her drink and traces patterns into the condensation on the glass. “I know I don’t make much now, but I will. I have a plan.”

Why am I not surprised? I take a few steps to the barstool next to her and drop down. “What’s your plan?”

She shrugs and drops her eyes to her lap. Her delicate hands knot together, something I notice she does before she opens up about something personal, so I wait patiently.

“Guy said when he retires he’s handing ownership of the shop to me. He has no children of his own, and he knows I love the garage.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow.” I lean back and prop my feet on the bar.

She fixes me with a glare, but the shadow of a smile plays on her lips. “Wow? Is it that hard to believe?”

“Not a lot of women dream of owning their own auto body shop.”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed,” her shoulders slump and she picks at her nails, “I’m not like most women.”

“No, baby, you certainly are not.”

She peers up at me from beneath her eyelashes. “It would be nice to own a business, make my own hours. If I’m ever lucky enough to get married and have kids, it’ll make things easier.” Her cheeks turn pink and she hides behind her tea.

My mind conjures up images of Raven, her belly swollen with a baby. And like the flicker of an old home movie, pictures flash of her cradling a dark-haired infant. Scattered visions of

dark pigtails, training wheels, and ballet recitals manifest behind my eyes.

“Holy shit.” I grind my fists into my eye sockets, rubbing out the fantasy. That has never happened to me before. Never.

“You okay?”

I shake it off, pull it together, and attempt to hide the full-fledged freak out that’s bubbling to the surface.

“Yeah, fine. Just a-a weird headache or s-something.” *I’m fucking stuttering!*

Time for evasive maneuvers. I breathe deep, and fix my eyes on hers. The concern in her face dissolves into an easy smile. I smile back, making sure it’s bright enough to expose both dimples. It’s a desperate move, but it works. She licks her full lips, slowly rubbing them together in anticipation of what’s coming. As I’m leaning in, happy to give her what she wants, the muffled sound of her phone fills the air.

“Whoops, sorry.” She grabs her phone from her pocket. Glancing down at the caller ID, her eyebrows scrunch and mouth goes tight.

“Who is it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t recognize the number.”

“Answer it, baby.”

She nods and hits the answer button before pressing the phone to her ear.

“Hello.” Her pleasant smile quickly fades. Her body shoots ramrod straight, and the color drains from her face.

Twelve

Jonah

What the hell? Blood pumps in my ears, and a mild buzz starts at the base of my neck.

"I'm fine." She's being polite to the mystery caller, but her voice is completely void of its usual spunk.

Alarms fire in my head.

Her eyes snap up to mine and widen a fraction. "Meet with you tomorrow?"

I'm up from my barstool and standing at her side. Less than a foot away, I'm able to make out the voice coming through her phone. I can't hear exact words, but the low mumbles are undoubtedly male. *Fuck.*

"Um . . . I don't know. I mean, why now?" She looks at her lap and rubs her forehead with her free hand.

The man on the phone mumbles on, and she worries her bottom lip. Her eyes hit mine, and a tiny spark of my Raven is back. "Okay, see you then."

She hangs up the phone and stares at it in her hand as if she doesn't know how it got there. Then she looks up at me.

"Who was that?" My voice is calm, but not in a way that provides comfort.

She places the phone on the bar like it's made of glass. "That was Dominick."

Adrenaline rocks my body. My muscles tense. The buzz in my head intensifies with every hammer of my heart.

"He wants to meet with me tomorrow at ten a.m."

"No fucking way."

She pins me with a glare. "Why not?"

How can she ask me that? I told her she needed to stay away from that guy.

"Because I said so." I annunciate every word slowly to avoid roaring in her face, but she still flinches.

"I told him I'd go. I'm going." She says it with such conviction I can't decide if I want to shake her or kiss her.

"Fine. I'm going with you." This woman is infuriating. Why can't she just do what I say? I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes, trying to numb the all-consuming buzz that makes me want to rip Dominick Morretti apart.

"No, he said I have to come alone."

My eyes shoot open before they narrow in anger. "What! Why? Who says that unless they're up to something?" I don't mean to yell, but my fight or flight reaction is kicking in and flight is *not* in my vocabulary. "What the fuck, Raven? I told you I don't want you anywhere near that guy, and you promised you'd stay away from him!"

"I know, I promised but—"

"But what? Do you have any idea what this guy's like? Word around town says he's got his hands in everything, not just prostitution. He's been questioned for murder, drugs, weapons. Shit, Raven, he's only walking free because he's got his money so far up law enforcements ass I'm surprised they don't shit gold."

"Please, stop." She whispers to her lap.

“Stop! Stop what? Your psycho dad calls and wants to meet with you *alone*, and you want me to sit here on my fucking hands and do nothing? God, Raven! This guy’s a criminal.” I pace the around the bar to burn off some aggression. The last thing I want to do is scare her, but fuck. “If you think I’m going to let you meet that dickhead alone, you’re crazy.”

She sniffs and wipes her eyes. *Ah, crap.* I breathe in and out of my nose and count to ten. My heart rate slows enough that it’s no longer throbbing in my ears as I wrangle my wild impulses.

“Baby, I’m sorry.” I smooth her hair behind her ear. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I just lost it for a second.”

She wipes the tears from her cheek. “You don’t understand.”

Closing the space between us, I pull her chin up to look in her eyes. “Explain it to me.”

“Ever since I was a kid, I’d dreamed that one day he would come along and ask for me. Even after I found out what he was, I still wanted him.” Her eyes look away, but I don’t release her chin. “I still wanted a dad.”

Her words shoot through my rage, straight to my heart. I wouldn’t give up the twelve years I had with my dad for anything. And as painful as it was to lose him, I had a dad who loved me. Raven’s never felt that.

Who am I to say that Dominick’s intentions aren’t good? Maybe he does want a relationship with Raven. I’d bet my balls that’s not true, but if I don’t allow her to find out for herself, if I stand between her and the possibility, she’ll never forgive me.

I brush my thumb along her lower lip, feeling it quiver beneath my touch. “Okay, baby. I get it.”

Her eyes smile through her tears and she kisses my thumb.

With a tug, she’s up from her barstool. I wrap my arms around her waist. She locks her hands behind my neck, holding me to her.

“You’ll call me when you get there.” I’m so close to her mouth, I can smell the sweet tea on her breath.

“Yes.” Her answer is breathy and full of need.

My girl. Always so responsive.

She puts pressure on my neck to bring me to her, but I’m not finished.

“And you’ll call me when you’re finished.” I slide my hands down to her ass, drawing her hips closer.

“Mm-hmm.” Her answer comes out on a moan.

“Not when you get in your car, not when you get home, but when you’re walking away, you call me.” I tighten my hold to make sure she understands. I’m not fucking around.

“Yes, Jonah, I’ll do anything. Just kiss me, please.”

“That’s more like it.”

I drop a soft kiss against her lips. She pushes up on her tiptoes, pressing hard against me searching for my lips, but I hold back. She whines adorably, and I reward her by feathering another kiss on her lips.

“Please.”

Her final plea shatters the last of my control. I cover her mouth with mine. My hand slides up her shirt along her spine, desperate to feel her skin. She arches her back, and pulls me in, shifting her weight so that our torsos are touching from chest to hip.

With her body soft and pliable in my hands, the taste of her tongue flooding my mouth, my chest tightens with feelings I’m only beginning to name. She owns me completely. The pull I felt

toward her when we met, waking up with her in my arms, my conversation with Owen, my compulsion to protect her, everything jumbles in my head until need coils in my sternum. Not the usual need that rips at me, but something stronger. It's been seeping in slowly and now crushes me from the inside out.

I hold her to me, hoping the strength in my arms will give me the power to do what I've never done before. Breaking the kiss, her eyes lock on mine, questioning. Even through my nervousness, in this moment, nothing has looked as clear or as obvious.

"I love you, Raven."

She gasps and her body jerks. She looks at me as if seeing me for the first time. Her shaky hand covers her mouth. Her head rocks back and forth slowly in what looks like disbelief. She doesn't say it back and I don't care. I love her. If she's not there yet, I'll wait as long as it takes until she is.

Without warning, she launches into me, our lips fusing together in wild passion. Her tongue slides into my mouth along with a soft moan that shoots to my throat. I tilt her head to plunge in deep, walking her backwards to the closest lounge. I crave Raven in a way that makes the dozen yards to the house seem like miles.

Laying her back, I brace my body above hers to keep from crushing her. I flex my hips into the warmth between her legs. She grinds into me, and I fight the urge to claim her here by the pool. Not like this. She deserves better.

I move to my spot at her neck and feel her racing pulse against my tongue. Her hands slide from my lower back to my stomach where she runs her fingers along the waistline of my shorts. She pulls at my zipper.

"Not yet, baby. Soon, but not tonight," I whisper against her skin before nipping at her earlobe.

Her hands fall away on a hopeless sigh. I nuzzle her neck to avoid the look of rejection that I'm sure colors her face. My body screams to join with hers. To show her how deep my feelings run. But I'd never forgive myself for taking her in my backyard like a cheap party date.

"Baby, I'm sorry. I want you, I do. But you deserve—"

"It's okay. But you said soon. Promise?"

I grimace at the dejected sound in her voice.

My lips skate along her jawline to her mouth. "Yes. I promise."

Sliding my hand against the smooth skin of her belly, she writhes against me. I pull her shirt over her head and take in her bright green bra. My thumbs make firm passes over the sensitive tips through the silk. Feeling isn't enough. I need to see them. I tug the fabric down, releasing her full breasts to the tepid night air. *Fucking gorgeous.*

I kiss the valley between them, breathing in her subtle sweet fragrance. She arches her back in a silent plea. I smile against her eager little body before taking her breasts into my mouth, first one and then the other. The sweet taste of her delicate skin increases my appetite for more.

I pop the button of her shorts, and she lifts her hips for me to slide them down her legs.

"Good girl."

"Jonah—"

"Don't worry, baby. I'll take care of you."

Her eyes flare and she bites her lip. I take a deep breath and remind myself to take it slow. This isn't the *get in, get out* operation I'm used to. For the first time, I'm not thinking of my own needs. Only about taking Raven's body to new places, to express what I feel emotionally through loving her physically.

Her lips curl in a wicked grin as she shimmies off her matching lace panties. I watch in awe as she reveals her perfect body to me. Sitting up to unhook her bra, she removes the last scrap of covering, my gaze held firm by her seductive show. She's completely exposed, and I stare in wonder as she falls back on the lounge, legs parted.

"You're stunning." My voice sounds heavy and rough with desire.

I rip my shirt off over my head and toss it behind me. My lips ache with the urge to taste every inch of her olive skin.

"Hmm, I was just thinking the same thing."

I run my hands along her thighs, her knees falling wide open in response. "Raven, I need to taste you."

She nods her head once, her body yielding to my every touch. *Perfect.*

Taking my time, I kiss the tender skin of her inner thigh. With teasingly long swipes of my tongue, I give her a sample of what's to come. Her heels dig into the lounge, and she pushes her hips up, searching for contact. Just the invitation I need.

I take my first taste and growl in pleasure. *So sweet.* I fight the urge to devour her, wanting to take my time and make it last. She moans and rolls her hips. I look up the length of her toned stomach to see her eyes squeezed shut. *That won't do.*

I back off. "Baby, look at me."

Her eyes lock on mine, passion swirling in their blue-green depths. I slow down, but maintain eye contact. Every hitch of her breath stimulates my need to please her.

This is so different. And more arousing than anything I've experienced in the past. My love takes a front seat to my body's desire for release.

I stare, absorbed in the visual of her mouth dropped open as she pants for breath. Her bare chest heaves with every flick of my tongue. Moans turn into desperate cries and her legs quake. Slow is no longer an option. I want nothing more than to hold her, to feel her against my lips while she falls apart for me. Her hips push and roll, seeking. I lock my hands on her hips, holding her still, and give into her body's demands.

She grabs a fistful of my hair, holding me to her, pressing me deeper. Her voice catches and she calls out my name in release. Moans of pleasure fall from her lips, and the sound sends shockwaves straight between my legs. My stomach tightens, and I flex my hips into the lounge, groaning at the relief in the friction. I continue until she squirms, unable to give her up. With a final, tender kiss, I pull away. She falls back, her body sated and limp.

My girl. Her eyes are closed, and I'm entranced by the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathes. I gently press her legs together, removing myself from in between, to climb in next to her. Moving her hair from her damp face, her eyes flutter open.

"That was amazing." I marvel in the beauty of her satisfied expression.

"I thought that was my line." Her sexy post-orgasm voice vibrates in a way that I feel in my shorts.

I grab a towel from the table next to us and cover her naked body.

"Do you want to go inside?" I trace the delicate angles of her face with my fingertip.

Her mouth tilts to a grin. "I have a better idea."

She pushes herself up off the lounge, leaving the towel behind. With her back toward me, I admire the luscious curves of her bare flesh in the moonlight. She winks at me over her shoulder and, with a small bend of her knees, she jumps into the pool. *Skinny dipping? Hell, yeah!*

Kicking off my shorts, I jump in after her, keenly aware of my killer hard-on that even the cool water won't tame.

She floats on her back, and I shamelessly gawk at her perfect breasts poking out from the water. Catching my stare, she swims over to me in the shallow end.

"It's your turn," she says as she pushes me back to the steps of the pool.

My heart pounds in my chest. Does she mean what I think she means?

"Sit." She directs me to sit on the top step where the water is the shallowest.

Eyes still locked on mine, she pulls my legs apart and crawls between them. Her soft, slick body brushes the insides of my thighs, heating my oversensitive skin. With her knees on the step below me, she props herself up to meet my eyes. Her breasts drip with pool water and sex appeal.

"I've never done this before, so don't expect much." Even in the dim light, I catch the red that colors her cheeks.

"Raven, you don't have to do this."

She places her finger against my lips, silencing further protest.

Was I just talking her out of giving me a blow job? That's a first.

"I'll just, um, go for it, but if I do something wrong, will you show me?" Her innocent eyes implore mine.

"No way you could do it wrong, baby. I'm almost there just listening to you talk about it."

With a nod and a smile, she sits back on her heels. Her wet sexy body glistens in the dark, and I know I'm not going to last long. She looks down and licks her lips, then takes me into her mouth. Sucking in a breath, I dig my teeth into my lower lip to keep from groaning in pleasure. My hands fist in her damp hair, not to control her speed or caress, but in pure animal possession.

To think that I could experience this all-consuming lust, as well as the soul-shackling love that I would die to keep, is life changing. This tiny girl who works on cars, laughs at stupid jokes, and blushes at the slightest flirtation is mine. There is nothing I wouldn't do for her. I would spend the rest of my life making her happy if she'd let me.

So this is love.

My life will never be the same.

I pull her hand from my thigh and wrap it around myself, guiding her strokes before leaving her to it. Her velvety touch striking deep in my core, my hips push off the step. She leans in, the silky push from her breasts at my thighs dropping my head back. Sensations combine with hunger and love, and *fuck*— My stomach tightens, my release coiling in my abdomen. I've got seconds.

"Baby, stop." I lose her mouth as a delirious groan falls from my lips. I unravel in her hand. Her tight little fist continues to pump and the euphoria intensifies. *What the hell?* I'm panting, colors swirling behind my eyelids. My legs tense as I'm rocked with aftershocks. "Oh shit." I blink open my eyes, fascinated that Raven's first blowjob is the most consuming sexual experience I've ever had.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" Her arms are wrapped around her chest, a concerned expression on her perfect face.

I fight what could very well be a goofy smile, and lose. "Hurt me?" I lean in, elbows to knees. "Does it look like that hurt me?"

Pushing off from the step, I meet her in the shallow end. I walk her back to the side of the pool and gather her in my arms. Her muscles relax against my own.

"Baby, this has been the most amazing night of my life. Everything about it is perfect, including that kick-ass blow job you just gave me."

Her giggles erupt against my chest, and I kiss the top of her head.

“I love you, Raven,” I say into her hair.

She tilts her chin up, resting it on my chest. Her wet hair is slicked back, black eyelashes thick with water, and her lips deep red and swollen from taking me. Her stare bores into mine, and I watch something heavy working in her aquamarine eyes.

“I love you too.”

Thirteen

Raven

I'm pulling out of Jonah's garage at exactly nine twenty-eight a.m. I'm second-guessing that third cup of coffee, my hands shake on the steering wheel, and my empty belly churns. There's no way I can eat until this meeting with Dominick is over. Trying to calm my angry stomach, I roll down the window for some fresh air. My mind wanders back to last night in an attempt to soothe my nerves.

Lying in bed, wrapped in Jonah's arms, I found the courage to tell him why I have to meet with Dominick. As a little girl, I'd daydream about him pulling up to our house. He'd have a big box in his hands, wrapped in pink paper. I pictured him kneeling down and telling me how much he missed me. That he'd made a huge mistake in severing himself from my life, and that he was going to make up for lost time. He would beg for forgiveness. I'd finally get the dad I needed.

It's because of that dream that I have to meet with Dominick. Even if it's on his terms, I'll do it. I owe it to that little girl.

Lux, the high-rise condominium just off the strip, comes into view. I take a right into the circle driveway. A valet scurries to my door. On his heels is a tall, broad man, in a black suit. His formal attire at ten in the morning is unusual for a summer in Las Vegas. Is he a lawyer? He looks more like a hit man.

I ignore the valet's proffered hand and step out of my car.

Suit guy steps to me, a forced-looking smile plastered across his wide face. "Good morning, Miss Morretti."

My eyes narrow at him. *How does he know me?* "Um, good morning."

"Mr. Morretti is waiting for you." He motions for me to follow him into the building.

Pushing through the rotating door into the lobby, the smell of floor wax and fresh flowers fills my nose. The intricate-carved, dark wood reception desk and marble floor scream money. I smooth my cotton shirt in response.

We reach the elevator that has only one button with the letters 'PH' on it. As we ascend in silence, I take in the man in front of me. He must be a bodyguard. He isn't as tall as Jonah, but he's almost as wide. Every one of the light brown hairs on his head is stuck in place by a decent amount of hair product. The diamond earring in his left earlobe is far too big for a man's ear.

The elevator comes to a stop and the doors slide open.

"After you." He says it in a way that would be polite if his tone wasn't so condescending. Without reason, I'd say this guy doesn't like me. Now I'm really nervous.

"Thanks."

Stepping through the elevator doors, I find myself in another lobby. This one is smaller, but no less extravagant. At the opposite end is an enormous double door that probably cost more than my car. As I walk towards it, I notice the etched glass doors depict a holy war with angels and demons swirling in a vicious battle. The visual puts a looming dread in the air.

Bodyguard guy knocks twice on the thick glass, making me jump. *Calm down, Raven.* I'm freaking myself out. The door opens, and a petite blond girl wearing a skintight tank top dress and no shoes lets us in. I try to greet her, but her gaze is locked on her feet. I'm taken to an office where I'm told to sit and that Mr. Morretti will be with me shortly.

A large desk looms in the back of the room, only one chair in front of it. *Guess that's for me.* I sit and stare out the floor-to-ceiling window behind the desk. I bet the view from here at night is one of the best in the city.

Minutes pass and my knee bounces. The heel of my foot pounds a fast, rhythmic beat into the floor. It seems like I've been waiting an eternity. My nails are chewed to the quick before I hear the door open behind me. The air gets heavy and the room seems smaller. I don't have to turn around to know that Dominick is walking in behind me.

I haven't seen him in five years, and even then, it was only for the minutes it took for him to drop off a package to my mom. I expected him to look older, but he's exactly the same. His blond hair and familiar aquamarine eyes are set off by his dark tan. A radiant smile lights his face, a charming façade that manipulates without effort.

"Raven, darling, you look exquisite," he says like a proper gentleman.

Warning signals blare in my head, but I brush them off as nerves. "Thank you."

He walks around his desk and sits in his chair opposite me. "You met Vince?" He nods toward the man over my shoulder.

I turn and see bodyguard guy standing in front of the closed doors, blocking any escape. My pulse races.

I should have listened to Jonah. Unease advances into fear. But why? He may not know me, but that doesn't change the fact that he's my biological father. I'm safe. Then why do I feel like running?

I need to get to the point so that I can get the heck out of here as soon as possible. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes." He clears his throat. "I have a job offer for you."

"I have a job, but thank you." I stand to leave.

"Sit!" he barks, making me feel like a misbehaving dog.

Oh God, this is bad.

"I have a job offer for you, Raven. And you can't say no." His previous soft tone is now forceful.

"I don't understand."

Everything I know about Dominick is corrupt. What could he possibly want with me?

"You know, Raven, when I first started in this business, I was around your age. I was young, rich, and drunk with power." He rolls a gold pen between his fingers. "I got bored easily. I knew from the moment I saw your mother she was something special. Everything about her screamed sex: the way she moved, the way she spoke. I'd never met anyone like her. It's as if she were made for the singular purpose of pleasing men. I had to have her." Depravity shines in his eyes.

Saliva rushes into my mouth and panic grips my insides.

"I had to have her, Raven, for two reasons. First, to capitalize on her God-given gifts for profit." He spears me with a glare. "And second . . . to *breed*." The last word he stretches out as a snake would if it could talk.

Breed? Like a dog? I know then I'm looking into the eyes of the devil himself.

"So that's what I did. I used your mother to create another like her. The next generation, if you will, to meet the growing demands of my business."

I don't want to hear anymore. Tears pool in my eyes as I realize what kind of job he's offering me.

"You want me to be a hooker for you." This can't be happening. He wants to sell my body for sex? My own da—no, I can't bring myself to *think* of him as that.

"Hooker is such an ugly word," he tsks. "I prefer escort. But, yes, that's what you were created for. That's why I made you. It's time you fulfill your purpose."

"No! I won't do it. You can't make me do it!"

Tears trail down my face, and I'm pissed he sees me weak.

"I *can* make you do it and I will. I'll give you a couple weeks, say, until your twenty-first birthday. That should give you enough time to tie up any loose ends. Then you'll be moved into one of my apartments," he declares with a wave of his hand like a king on his throne of immorality.

"Fuck you!" I'm scared out of my mind and a little bit crazy, because as the fierce curse flies from my mouth, I can't help but think Blake would be proud.

"Hmm, you're feisty. You must get that from me. Your mother never argued, never fought, and never said a word really." He thoughtfully rubs his chin. "Let me put it to you this way. You will do as you're told, or I will slowly pick off every single person you love."

No, no, no, no!

"You're a monster."

An evil smile curls his lips. "I'll start with that sweet little friend of yours, Eve." My hands and feet tingle and then go numb.

"Then, I'll work my way to Guy and your mother."

Numbness moves up my arms and legs to my abdomen.

"And last, but not least," his voice carries a sing-song tone, "I'll end with that Neanderthal you've been living with, Jonah."

The final blow.

Heart, mind, and soul. Numb.

I'm no longer crying as my body and mind assimilate information. His words spin in my head over and over like a tilt-a-whirl: breed, hooker, everyone I love.

The predicament hits me like a hurricane. In danger of passing out, I grip the arms of my chair. *This isn't happening.* I lean forward and put my head between my knees, hoping to gather my bearings.

"This is Las Vegas, darling. You know how easy it would be to make someone disappear? Bury them in a dirt hole out in the desert? Although, I won't make it quick, I'll have my fun with them first."

"Stop, please. Just please . . . stop." I rock back and forth, my hands fisted in my hair. I hear a low keening sound, and realize it's coming from my mouth. I pinch my eyes closed tight, praying to wake up from this nightmare.

And here I thought he might want to know me. That maybe he missed the daughter he never knew. *How could I be so stupid?*

"Why now? Why not when I turned eighteen?" My voice is pleading and desperate for answers.

"In my business, it's important the girls are of legal drinking age. This helps to avoid unwanted attention from the local authorities. But more importantly, I needed leverage. You're quite the loner, darling: never had a boyfriend, very few friends. I had Guy and Eve, but they weren't enough. Once you starting practically living with the Slade boy, it was time." He straightens his cuffs and twists their links. His gaze swings to mine. "Do you love him?"

I roll my lips into my mouth, refusing to answer him.

"Ah, yes. And it seems you're still a virgin as well."

From behind me, Vince muffles his laugh. Mortification and anger mix, igniting my face in

a furious blush. I'm appalled that he could speak so freely with his own flesh and blood.

"Don't look so shocked. Sex is my business. I can tell by your blush you still retain your innocence. That will work well for me and my business."

Bile burns my throat. I wish I had eaten so I could vomit all over Dominick's pretentious Oriental rug. I hate him for what he's proposing and for what he did to my mom. I want to pounce on him and fight like a maniac. Adrenaline fills my body as I contemplate the risks involved with taking him on here in his office.

Is today a good day to die?

He leans forward, resting both elbows on his desk. His eyes bore into mine, making me recoil.

"Raven, if you fight me, I'll shoot so much heroin in your arm, you won't know what day it is. I'll keep you so addicted you'll be begging for it. You'll live out your days on a street corner, sucking off frat boys for twenty bucks a pop. You come peacefully and be a good girl, you'll have a life very similar to that of your mother. I suppose I could make it even better, seeing as you are my daughter."

"I'm not your daughter!"

He looks down his nose, studying me like a piece of art he's considering buying. "No, I suppose you're not. More like the product of a perfectly executed experiment."

"I would rather die a slow, painful death than work for you." My hands are wrapped so tightly around the arms of the chair that my palms burn.

"Well," he sits back, checking out what I assume to be freshly manicured nails, "that, too, can be arranged," he hisses with contempt.

A defeated whimper bursts from my lips. The horrific sound confirms my lack of options. I don't have an out.

"So you agree? The day after your twenty-first birthday, I'll send for you."

"I thought . . ." My whispered words aren't meant to be heard.

"You thought what, darling?"

I look up from my lap and stare at the man who's just ripped my heart out and stomped on it for sport. "I hate you."

A slow smile stretches across his face. "Very well. I've always been a sucker for a challenge."

I have no memory of how I got back in my car. I don't remember walking, but I don't believe I was carried. All I know is I'm sitting in the valet driveway, stone still, staring straight ahead, wondering where to go and what to do.

And just like that, right when my life starts looking beautiful, it disappears like a mirage in the desert.

~*~

Jonah

"Aw fuck, not again!" Blake throws his arms into the air, and stomps to the bench.

Two o'clock. No missed calls. *Shit.*

Something's not right.

I've checked my phone every thirty minutes for the last three hours, and still no word from Raven. I agreed to let her go meet with Dominick alone this morning, even when everything in

me was screaming it was a big mistake.

"I'm done for the day," I call out to whoever's listening, not bothering to look up from checking for text messages.

"Good. You haven't really been here anyway. You got that fuckin' phone stuck up your ass when we're supposed to be training."

Usually I would jump all over Blake and his attitude. Not now.

I lean against the octagon chain link and try her cell. Straight to voicemail. My team files out and toward the locker room, each one grumbling.

Owen lingers, his eyes on me. "Yo, Jonah. You all right, man?"

"Huh?" I look up from my phone into the concerned eyes of Owen then back and hit send. "Oh, yeah. Fine."

"What's going on? You're preoccupied. Everything okay with Raven?"

Just hearing her name makes me break out in a panic-induced sweat.

"Um . . . I don't know. She met with her dad today, and they don't really get along. I haven't heard from her. I'm worried."

"Oh, that's it? I'm sure she's fine, probably just got to talking and reminiscing about old times. I mean how bad can he be that—"

"It's Dominick Morretti."

Owen's easy demeanor disappears as his dark skin drains of color. We lock eyes. Yeah, now he gets it. Everyone knows Dominick Morretti would walk over the dead bodies of his own children to get to a dollar.

"Let's go." Owen's storms from the octagon.

"Wait! Where are we going?"

He doesn't slow his pace. "We're gonna find her. I say we check her place first."

"I'll grab my keys."

* * * *

We pull up to Guy's Garage and I see Raven's car in the lot. *Thank you, God.* I pop my head into the garage and ask Guy if he's seen her. He tells me she showed up a few hours ago but went straight to her place saying she wasn't feeling well.

My feet move like they're on fire to the alley. I jump up the stairs, taking three at a time. My fist pounds on the door as adrenaline courses through my veins. I need to see that my girl is okay.

"Raven, baby, you there? It's me. Open up."

Nothing.

I knock again.

"Open up, Raven!"

Nothing.

Panic surges and the buzz at the base of my neck shoots to my brain, clouding rational thinking.

"Raven! Open the fucking door!"

I'm about to flip the switch and rip this piece of shit door down with my bare hands, when a firm hand on my shoulder directs me to step aside. Owen is there and he takes my place.

"Princess, it's Owen. You don't open up this door, I'm gonna kick it down. We need to get to you."

Nothing.

Shit! I'm in full freak-out mode. I know Owen feels it rolling off me in waves by the way his eyes dart from my fisted hands to my clenched jaw. I roll my head around on my neck, preparing to bust open the door. Owen takes one step back.

Boom!

Splintering wood flies all around us, the result of Owen's front kick. He steps in and pushes aside the flimsy door that hangs lopsided from its hinges. I push past him and into the studio.

I stop short upon entering and hold my breath. In the middle of her bed, curled up in the fetal position, is Raven. I'd think she was sleeping if not for her soft guttural moans.

Seeing her so broken sobers the raging beast in my head. I go to her and climb in behind her, my front to her back. Wrapping my arms around her tiny body, I bury my face in her hair.

"Baby. Shh, it's okay. I'm here now."

Her body goes solid for a second or two before it's wracking with sobs. Her cries of anguish make me hold tighter as if I can somehow take her pain away by the sheer strength in my arms.

"Raven? Shh, it's going to be okay. I'm here. You're safe. I love you, baby. Come back to me."

My eyes start to burn. The pain in her cries is tangible, making the air thick and hard to breathe.

"What happened? Talk to me."

I kiss her tenderly and encourage her to turn and face me. She does, but only to bury herself in my chest and cry harder. The sight of her tear-streaked face and red-rimmed eyes make me downright homicidal. From the looks of it, she's been crying for a while.

I'm going to kill that motherfucker!

I don't know how long I lay there with Raven in my arms. Her breathing evens out, and she takes a long shaky breath.

"It's over." Her voice is quiet and devoid of emotion. "My life, no matter what happens, is over."

"What do you mean?" I smooth my hand through her hair. "Your life isn't over."

She pushes herself up on the bed. I look to the door and see no sign of Owen.

"What happened?" My voice is sharp with worry. I fight the roaring in my head and focus on keeping my cool. "What did he do to you?"

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and something crunches under my feet. It's a broken picture frame. In the mess of glass and shattered wood is the picture of Raven's mom.

What the hell is going on?

I pull Raven into my lap, and she curls into my body like she was made to be there.

Then, she starts to talk.

Fourteen

Raven

My head throbs as I blink open my swollen eyes. The room is dark except for the dim light that shines through the window. It's evening. I roll from my side onto my back and know instantly that I'm in Jonah's bed. My hand reaches for him, but the cool sheets tell me he's not there. He brought me here after I'd cried myself dry in his arms, snuggled in tight to the safety and warmth of his touch, holding me as if I'd float away if he didn't ground me.

Thoughts of Dominick invade my mind, like an army hell bent on eradicating my hope. Shame and embarrassment strangle any pride I have left. I bury my face in the pillow, pressing in deep, robbing myself of oxygen and welcoming the ache in my lungs. The life I'd built for myself, friends, Jonah, all of it was erased in less than an hour. I'm chained to the ugliness, caged in a nightmare with no chance of escape.

I become a prostitute, or everyone I love dies.

I turn my head and gasp for air, sucking the life-giving oxygen into my lungs. Rubbing my eyes, I try to erase the memories of the pain I saw in Jonah's face. He told me we'd figure it out, that, together, we'd come up with something. *Impossible.*

Reaching over, I click on the lamp. There's a glass of water on the bedside table along with two Tylenol. I grab the pills and toss them to the back of my dry mouth. I swallow against the sting in my aching throat as it draws my attention away from the pain in my heart. The glass drained, I push my legs over the side of the bed, giving my body a second to acclimate to being upright. I'm no longer wearing my jeans and shirt, but I'm in one of Jonah's t-shirts. I pull the fabric to my nose and breathe in deep, his scent a reprieve to my anguish.

Tying my hair in a low knot, I head out to find Jonah. I freeze in the hallway at the sound of two male voices. Jonah's voice is as recognizable as my own, but who is the other? I tiptoe closer and make the voice out to be Owen. Veiled in the shadows, I listen in.

"I have too much to lose. I can't afford to lose everything."

"Dude, I get that, I do. But just give it some time. You might find a way to figure something out."

"What other choice do I have? I have to end this."

"You're going to hurt her."

Silence, then, "I know."

"I don't like it, Jonah. She's been through so much already. She's not going to handle this well. You have to know that." Silence. "All right, at least do it sooner than later. Like pulling off a Band-Aid, just get it over with."

"Yeah, I will."

My heart plummets into an icy black hole. It's impossible to breathe past the constricting burn in my chest. I bend at the waist, hands on my knees, trying not to pass out. My head pounds with the beat of my racing heart. I pray that the numbing will come and ease the ache, but my body takes no prisoners as my stomach coils in agony. I lean my back against the wall, pressing my fingers to my sternum, as if I could physically push back the pain. The slight sting is on my cheeks from the tears I didn't know I'd cried. Hearing about the pain of a broken heart doesn't do justice to feeling the crippling devastation. *This* is a broken heart.

Of course, he's leaving me. Why wouldn't he? Everything he's worked for his entire life is waiting for him. His career is taking off, the title fight only weeks away. That's his priority.

The voice in my head reminds me of what I really am. I'm the daughter of a pimp and a hooker bred for a lifestyle of meaningless sex and money. It all makes sense now. My mother never saw me as her child . . . as a child at all. I'm nothing more than a prized animal—a product they can profit from. Who was I to think I could have a future with Jonah? My future is in that world, not his.

"Hey, how long have you been standing here?"

Long enough for you to destroy me. "Oh, um, I don't know. Not long." My voice sounds like it's been trampled by a herd of buffalo.

He cups my face, wiping away my tears with his thumbs. His warm eyes and empathetic smile threaten to burst the floodgates, so I look past him.

"Baby, you're crying." He dries my tears with his thumbs.

I shrug and force my mouth into a smile.

"Come on. Let's get you something to eat."

He hugs me to his side and guides me into the kitchen. My muscles relax and my pulse slows, comforted by his touch. Apparently my traitorous body isn't aware that Jonah's done with us. Leaning down, he kisses tenderly his favorite spot on my neck then pulls back a fraction to my ear.

"I love you." His warm breath combined with the power of his words make me tremble in his arms.

I finish his declaration with an unspoken, *but we can't be together.* "I love you too."

And I do. That's why I don't mention the conversation that I overheard. I know love doesn't conquer all, that it's not always enough. I know that Jonah has to look out for himself. He can't afford to be wrapped up in my life, and part of me is at peace about that. I want him, but more than that, I want him to be happy—to have a life with a woman who can love him the way he deserves to be loved: a woman free from the ugliness of my reality.

"How you feelin', princess?" Owen asks.

"I've been better."

His dark eyes study mine. "Right. Well, I'm gonna take off." He steps to me and tugs me from Jonah's hold for a hug. His arms linger a little too long, making it feel like a long-term good bye.

He releases me with a final squeeze. I don't miss the look he gives Jonah or what it communicates. He's not happy that Jonah's breaking up with me, but he understands.

The rest of the evening passes like a dream. Only half-conscious most of the time, my mind pounds away at Dominick's words. Plans to escape my fate form in my head, but they all end in one reality. I can't protect everyone. And losing anyone I love is a risk I'm not willing to take.

Jonah treats me like I'm made of glass. He feeds me, bathes me, and dresses me for bed. He holds me in the dark, whispering words of comfort while twisting tendrils of my hair around his fingers.

I want to tell him that it's okay, I understand why he has to let me go, but words fail me. Physically incapable of walking away from him, I choose to take this moment. I wrap myself up in it, absorbing all the love I can from his touch, hoping it will be enough to last me through a lifetime without him.

I open my eyes to a new day. The sun bathes the room in yellow, but I refuse to move. For

the first time, I don't feel Jonah behind me as I do every morning. I try not to think about what's ahead, but live in the moment. And this moment sucks.

Staring at the digital clock on the bedside, I watch the minutes tick by. Sooner or later, I'm going to have to get up and go to work. But leaving Jonah's bed, knowing it may be the last time I'm here, is a mountain I'm not ready to face. I sigh, long and hard.

"You awake?" His voice comes from my back, but he's across the room.

I squeeze my eyes shut tight. Do this for him. Don't make it harder than it has to be.

Rolling over, I see him in the club chair across the room.

"Good morning." I say, my voice feeling a little stronger than yesterday, but no less scratchy.

"Good morning, beautiful."

I sit up and notice that his hair is damp from the shower and he's dressed for the day.

"Where are you off to so early?" My heavy heart drops to my stomach like an anvil.

He stands and makes his way to the bed, plopping down beside me with a huff. "I have some things to do today. Just, um, work stuff."

He's avoiding my eyes. This is it. He's breaking up with me.

"Oh, but I thought you had today off?" I want this to be easy for him, and I know I should just nod and let him walk away, but instinct has me clamoring.

"Yeah, well, I got called in for a meeting. With the fight coming up, there's a lot of publicity stuff." He pushes his hand through his hair then rubs the back of his neck. "I wanted to know if you could stay with Eve tonight."

And there it is.

I swallow a whimper that threatens to shoot from my lips. Blood rushes in my ears distorting his words as he makes excuses about training late.

Unshed tears burn my eyes, but I refuse to let on. *Make this easy for him.* He deserves that much.

"Sure, that won't be a problem. But really, I can stay at my place." *You won't be around to protect me anymore.*

His expression hardens, making his jaw tick. "Raven, promise me you'll stay at Eve's. I can't sleep knowing you'll be alone at your place."

With a nod and a smile, I agree. I have no intention of staying at Eve's, but if it makes what he's doing easier, he can believe I am.

Leaning in, he brushes his lips against mine then kisses my neck at his spot. He pulls back to look me in the eyes and I see something there. Regret? Loss?

"I'll try to call you later."

Try?

"Okay."

Standing with purpose, he walks away.

"I love you, Jonah Slade." My whispered words are said to the door that he closes behind him.

~*~

Jonah

"Come on, Blake, answer the door!"

I've been knocking on his door for the last ten minutes. I know he's home because I saw his Jeep parked downstairs.

I bang on the door again. "Blake, open up!"

I hear him fumbling with the lock and the door swings open. Blake is standing in the doorway, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs. His eyes are half shut and his face puffy with sleep and a possible hangover.

"Fuck, man. Where's the fire?" His voice is rough and laced with irritation.

"I need to talk to you about something. It's important."

"What?" He yawns, scratching his chest. "Dude, it's like six o'clock in the morning."

"It's ten o'clock, idiot."

"Oh, well then, come on in." He gestures dramatically with his arm, and I push past him into his place.

"What the hell happened to you? You look like shit."

"You don't want to know," he says on a groan.

"You alone?"

He stares at me and his eyebrows drop low. "No. Why?"

"I need what I'm about to say to be kept private." My eyes dart to the hallway that leads to his room, then back to him. "You mind sending your sleepover guest home?"

"Fuck. Yeah, hold on."

He disappears down the hall, and I walk to the other end of his living room. Last thing I want is a front row seat to the dismissing of his overnight guest. I watch out the ten-foot-tall window of his modern townhouse and shudder at the show his neighbors must get most nights.

"But, I thought you said you'd make us breakfast," a female voice whines from the hallway.

"Yeah, you said you'd feed us your sausage," says another.

Fucking Blake.

"Change of plans, ladies. Maybe next time."

"Aww." The disappointed reply sounds in unison.

Blake walks to the door with two girls. One stumbles, trying to slip on her high heel, while the other shoves a wad of lace and silk into her tiny purse. I recognize them immediately as Octagon Girls. And I am intimately familiar with both.

"Hey, Jonah." The tall blonde calls out as she passes me in the living room.

I nod.

The brunette tosses me a wave. "Hi, Jonah."

"All right, ladies, thanks for last night . . . and this morning."

He all but shoves them out the door, slamming it behind them.

"Screw you later," he mumbles.

I shake my head. "You're a pig."

"So were you once." He plops down on the couch, still in his underwear.

"You want to get some fucking clothes on?"

He looks at me like I just asked him to wear a dress. "You want to tell me why you're beating down my door at the shit crack of dawn?"

Dropping down in the seat across from him, I fill Blake in on my situation. His jaw locks down as I tell him every detail of Raven's meeting. A whispered curse breaks free when I tell him about how I found her after.

"That motherfucker!" Blake jumps up from the couch to pace the room.

"I have a plan, but I need your help. I know Dominick is part owner of Zeus's. I need you to

get with one of the girls and find out when he goes in there.”

He’s still pacing and hasn’t acknowledged that I’ve said a word.

“Blake. Can you do that?”

He stops and turns toward me. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

Grabbing his phone, he takes his seat back on the couch, this time not slumped over, but tense and leaning forward. “You’re not meeting with that asswipe alone. I’m going with you.”

“No, I have to do it alone. I won’t drag you into this.”

He pins me with a glare. “Drag me into this?” His arm shoots out to point a finger to his wall window. “That girl’s cool as shit.” He points at me. “She’s your girl. That makes her my responsibility too.”

“Blake, anything could happen. You sure you want to get messed up in all this?”

He coughs out a laugh. “Let me ask you something. What’re you going to do when Morretti makes some comment about Raven taking cock for cash, huh?”

I suppress a growl. A low vibration in my spine amplifies to a buzz. My teeth grind together and I scowl at Blake.

“That’s what I thought. You’re going to flip the switch on that dicklick and he’ll shoot your dumb ass and claim self-defense. And where does that leave Raven, hmm?”

I narrow my glare on him.

“Exactly.”

The cocky ass is right. Dominick will most likely try to get me riled up, and I can’t be responsible for what happens if he disrespects Raven.

“You’re right. I’ll need you there. How soon can we get the ball rolling?”

Blake already has his phone to his ear. “Selena, baby, it’s me. I got a question for you.”

Fifteen

Raven

The bay doors slamming shut pulls me from the wiring of a '57 Chevy. The halogen lights of the garage replace the sun that shone in when I started this project.

Where did the time go?

Drowning myself in work is a good distraction from the chaos in my head, but I've lost an entire afternoon.

The awareness of time brings pain to the gaping void in my chest. I haven't heard from Jonah all day. I didn't expect him to contact me, but I hoped he would. I check my phone again. Nothing.

"Wrap it up, Ray."

I grab my tools and find Guy in the back, putting things away.

"Who's on tomorrow?" I ask, tossing my set on a workbench.

He doesn't look up from an assortment of wire terminals. "Cane. Why?"

"I thought I'd come in, you know, um, help out—"

He bangs closed a metal toolbox. "What's goin' on, Ray?" He studies my face. "You've been zip-lipped all day, and from the look on your face, I'd say someone died."

That's what it feels like. I shrug and pick grease from my nails, avoiding his eyes. "Nah, just thought I'd get some extra hours."

"You hurtin' for money?"

"No, it's not that." I just need to stay busy so I don't have time to . . . feel.

His bushy, gray eyebrows drop low, making the wrinkles around his eyes more pronounced. "You and the boy havin' problems?"

I exhale, annoyed at my transparency.

"You could say that. He has a lot on his plate with the fight coming up." Guilt washes over me as I lie. I can't tell him the truth. It's too real.

He leans against a workbench and crosses his ankles. "He tell you that?"

I shake my head. "Our lives are too different."

"And different is a bad thing?"

"You don't understand," I mumble to my feet.

"I'll tell you what I do understand. I see a boy who's lived his life in the public eye for just shy of ten years. He's made his taste in women obvious: quick, easy, and disposable. You step on the scene, he drops it all, stands toe to toe with me, and makes his intentions clear. Differences be damned. The boy's crazy about you."

"Some differences are too big."

"You listen here, Ray. I'm no expert on relationships. Only been in love once. That was over thirty years ago. But I know it when I see it."

"You were in love?" I stare in shock at the self-proclaimed, lifetime bachelor.

"Yep, fell in love with an angel." His eyes get soft. "But she was engaged to someone else."

I don't know what to say, but I want to hear more. I nod for him to continue.

"You know what I did to mess it up?"

"What?"

“Nothin’. And that’s how I lost her.” He reflects in silence for a beat, studying the garage walls. He shakes his head. “I didn’t fight for her. I could have fought, tried to get her out from under her obligation, but I didn’t. Biggest mistake of my life.”

“But she was engaged to someone else. How do you know she would have left her fiancé?”

His face falls, eyebrows low, and he studies the floor. “I’ll never know. That’s what kills me.”

The pain in his voice has me blinking back tears. “Was there never anyone else? After her?”

“I love her. She’s it for me.” He’s not speaking in past tense.

I can’t decide if that’s the saddest or the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard, and yet I’m destined for a similar fate. There will never be another love for me, not like Jonah. I can see how Guy would close himself off, subject to a lifetime sentence of loneliness for one girl. But the difference is that Guy’s love was worth the fight. He didn’t fight for her, but he lives with the regret because she was worth that. Not me.

“Not everyone’s worth fighting for.”

He steps close and places his hands on my shoulders. His blue eyes look deep into mine. “I’ve seen you two together: the way he looks at you when you’re not looking, like you’re the sun and he’s happily stuck in your orbit. Never seen you with a boy before so I can’t be sure, but seein’ you messed up in the head about it, I’m guessin’ you feel the same way. You guys got something special, Ray. Fight for it. It’s worth that.”

His words rock me to the bone. Something deep and instinctual recognizes Guy’s words as truth, but I can’t get past my head: Jonah’s conversation with Owen, him pushing me off on Eve, not calling all day. All arrows point to a broken heart.

My head throbs, and I have an overwhelming urge to be alone. “Thanks, G.”

“You’re welcome. You don’t want to be me, lookin’ back on your life, wishing you could have another shot at something sweet.” He ruffles my hair then steps back. “Now, go get some sleep. You look like hell.”

He throws his arm over my shoulder and walks me to the foot of my stairs. Departing with a wave, I watch him until he disappears around the corner.

The weight of today pressing down, I drag my body up the stairs. A hot shower sounds better and better with each step. The motion light above my door flicks on, and I freeze as my foot hits the top step. Holy crud.

The old door to my apartment is gone, and in its place is a solid, dark wood one with an enormous platinum handle. My jaw falls open as I study its features: a peep hole and three gleaming locks. I grab my keys and finger through the set to find . . . Yep, there it is: a shiny new silver key. Jonah must have slipped it on my key chain this morning. The corners of my mouth lift as I examine the product of his overprotective nature, and just as quickly as the smile comes, it fades. How will I live without him?

I’m able to get myself inside before the tears start to fall. Crawling onto my bed, I bury my face in the pillow and sob. I have to believe there is a tiny chance that Jonah doesn’t want to end things. I can’t go on any other way.

But hope is such a dangerous thing. My heart dared to hope that Dominick would one day come banging on my door, begging for forgiveness. But instead, he killed every dream of a future I had. Hope. It has sustained me through my darkest days, but it also lifted me up only to drop me, breaking me into irreparable pieces. Could I live through that kind of fall again?

Crying jag over, I pull myself up and into the shower. I move through the motions, numb and absent. Dressed in drawstring fleece pants, a tank, and flip-flops, I check my phone. No

missed calls.

I haven't heard from Eve all day, and although I'd planned on ignoring Jonah's request that I stay at Eve's, I could use the company. It must be the new boyfriend that's keeping her busy. Except for the occasional text message and a couple morning phone conversations this past week, she's been unavailable. The few talks we've had have been one-sided. She asks me about Jonah, and I talk forever, but she never talks about herself outside of what she's up to at work. Just thinking about her now is making me miss her terribly.

I dial her number and listen as her voicemail tells me to leave a message. With nothing better to do, I decide to drive over and drop in on her. If she's not there, I can always try her work.

Grabbing my keys, I head to my car with the hopes of finding Eve and keeping my mind off Jonah. I relax as the hum of my Nova and the warm air that whips my hair envelop me. Elton John blasts in my ears, and in that moment, I'm just some girl, not the daughter of a prostitute and a pimp, bred for— Ugh! I slam my hand on the steering wheel and focus on the crooning voice of Sir Elton. I punch the gas, singing at the top of my lungs and hoping to chase away the worst of my demons.

As I pass a strip of fast-food restaurants, I'm hit with the smell of hot oil and french fries. My stomach rumbles its complaint. With everything that's been going on today, I've forgotten to eat. I try Eve's phone again. Voicemail. I redirect my car to hit my favorite drive-thru.

Turning left towards the lights of the Vegas strip, I head down Tropicana. The flashing neon of a club up ahead gets my attention. There's a line of people wrapped around the building. I recognize it immediately as Zeus's Playground, one of the high-end strip clubs in town. Stuck at a stoplight, I look at the club, shaking my head at all the men who are about to drop a week's pay down the panties of a stripper while the little woman is probably home taking care of the kids. Pathetic.

My gaze moves back to the road in front of me when something catches my eye. In the parking lot of the club, I would recognize it anywhere. I squint hard. My head gets light, and the blood drains to pool in the pit of my empty stomach. I fight the impulse to vomit or pass out.

Jonah's truck.

I blink, hoping to clear the optical illusion. The honking of a car horn startles me and causes me to look ahead. The light's green, and I need to drive, but I can't get my limbs to cooperate.

He said he had a meeting.

A quick shot of anger brings my body around, and I press the gas to get through the intersection. With trembling hands, I pull off to the side of the road. I take another hard look. Blake had mentioned this place at the barbeque. It was where he met the girls he brought. All of them, including Candy.

Jonah's in there with Candy.

And just like that, hope has dropped my sorry butt off a cliff.

Panic floods my veins. My breathing is labored, like I'm sucking air through a straw. I shake out my arms, trying to rid them of the numbness taking over, but movement only pushes the sensation into my torso. My heart beats fast—too fast. Terror spreads through my body. I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Oh please, God, not now." I pray aloud with hopes of divine intercession.

An anxiety attack grips my body. Tears stream down my face, and I struggle against the lost feeling that threatens to overtake me. I push against my sternum, willing my heart to slow.

"Come on, Raven. Talk yourself down." I take a breath. "I'm in control."

My eyes fly open at my pitiful lie. Control? That's the last thing I have. My hands grip either side of my head and I rock back and forth.

Of course, he's there. Why would he want to be with me, the future hooker? I close my eyes tightly. The daughter of a pimp. My body shakes. The grease monkey, tomboy. My head pounds. The virgin.

I need to calm down. Stop acting like a helpless little girl. I breathe in deep through my nose and out my mouth, until my mind slows enough for me to think straight. I need to decide what to do now. Should I go confront him? Why? So he can tell me to my face, with Candy straddling his lap, that he doesn't want me? I pull back into the street, almost hitting another car, and speed to Eve's.

Throwing my car in park at the curb outside her house, I walk up the front path. I'm shaking, but still. Pained, but numb. Bleeding, but alive. Consumed with confusion and contradictions.

I reach her door and knock as hard as I can. After a few clicks of the lock, the door opens to expose a very skimpily dressed Eve. Through the small crack in the door, I can see lit candles in the background.

"Raven, what are you doing here?"

"I called. You didn't answer." It's all I can manage without breaking out in a full-body sob.

"Oh, yeah, sorry. I've been . . . busy." She looks guilty and a little ashamed.

Her eyes seem sketchy as she looks over my shoulder to the street behind me. I look to see what's stealing her attention. There, parked in the street, is a black H2. My eyebrows pull together.

I must have missed it when I pulled up. I guess seeing my boyfriend's car at a strip club where his ex-hook up works when he told me he had a work meeting made me unobservant. My arms wrap protectively around my chest and my shoulders curl forward, holding myself together. I might dissolve completely at the slightest breeze of pain.

"Eve, who's at the door?" a deep voice beckons from behind her. My wide eyes lock with hers in shock and silent apology.

"Oh, Eve, I'm so sorry. You have company. I'll go."

Wait, why does that voice sound familiar?

"No, Rave, wait. You look horrible. Have you been crying? What's going on?"

She still hasn't opened the door anymore, but her face shows concern. A large hand curls around her waist from behind, and a tall man comes into view over her shoulder.

Holy shit!

~*~

Jonah

It's nine forty-five and the club is getting crowded. Even from my seat at the bar, it's hard to see through the bodies filling the place. The girls finally got the hint that we aren't here for entertainment. Their advances went beyond annoying to borderline hostile in the last hour. Blake and I finally had to tell them to back off and get the hell out of our way.

"Can I get you a drink, man?" the bartender asks for the third time, irritation lacing his voice.

This kid is pissing me the fuck off. My head swivels in his direction and I drill him with my stare. A beer would do wonders to calm my urge to kill, but there's no way I'll be anything less

than one hundred percent coherent when I face Dominick.

He throws his hands up and takes a step back. "Whoa, I don't want any trouble. But you can't sit here all night and not buy a drink. I'm just following the rules."

I pull a hundred dollar bill from my pocket and toss it his way.

"On second thought," he nabs the cash, "enjoy your night."

I go back to surveying my surroundings.

No sign of Dominick. Selena told Blake that he usually comes in around this time of night to work some of his girls. We've been here for an hour and he's a no show.

"How long do you want to hang out?" Blake asks, his eyes scanning the room.

"As long as it takes. Raven's with Eve so I have all night."

I have fight-night focus. My senses are sharp. Every male voice draws my attention along with every opening door. Adrenaline runs high, as does my determination. I will not leave this place until I meet with Dominick.

I swallow a growl when I feel a small, feminine hand move up my shoulder. Can these girls not take no for an answer? Turning towards its owner, I cringe. I don't need this shit.

"Hey, stranger," Candy purrs, with her fake, over-affected seduction.

I jerk my head in acknowledgement.

Leaning forward, she brings her lips to my ear. "I told you, you'd be back."

"Not in the mood for your games tonight, Candy."

She gasps when I remove her from my shoulder and go back to scanning the room.

"Don't tell me you're still with that trashy little girl," she scoffs.

What did she just say? My gaze swings toward her.

Her puffy lips lift into a satisfied smile. "You never gave me the chance to show you what I could do for you, lover." She runs a sharp nail from my shoulder and down my arm, her eyes following its path. "I'd do things to you that would make you forget that dirty skank's name." She swings a leg over my knee, rubbing against me like some pathetic animal.

I stand and she stumbles back, my sudden movement throwing her off balance. She looks up at me and her eyes grow wide. I would never hit a girl, but this bitch is pushing my buttons. I'm already walking the fine line of my temper. She picked the wrong night to fuck with me.

"One night, Candy. That's all we had and that's all we'll ever have. You need to squash these deluded fantasies you have about us. It ain't gonna happen. Ever. Understand?"

She opens her mouth to speak, but I'm not finished.

"And if you ever speak about *my girl* like that again, I will ruin you. You won't be able to move far enough away to escape the reputation I'll give you. Only job you'll be able to get is shit-pumping port-a-potties. We clear?"

Her eyes narrow and her mouth moves, but for the first time the bitch is speechless.

"Now, leave me the fuck alone."

Face flushed, she spins and storms off.

I lean against the bar and go back to scanning the room. If that speech doesn't get Candy off my back, nothing will. It's then I notice a new group of men standing around a table. One of them has blond hair, but his back is to me, so I can't see his face.

Blake grabs my arm and grins his cocky smile. "It's go time."

He jerks his head in the direction of the light-haired man. A slight shift in the man's position and I see his face. Dominick Morretti.

A low hum of energy coils in the back of my head. My legs move me forward while my mind visualizes taking this prick-ass down. Pressing in through the crowd, I force back my

protective instinct and wrestle with reason. I focus on my breathing and remind myself to stay calm. For Raven.

Don't kick his ass. Not here. Not yet.

An aggressive presence prickles from behind me. I look over my shoulder to see Blake, his jaw clenched and his fists tight at his sides. He's ready to throw down, and I'm grateful that he has my back.

I approach Dominick while he's chatting with a group of businessmen. I catch a second of the conversation that clearly involves selling a few of his women for the night. Imagining for a moment that it's Raven he's selling, the buzz in my head explodes. *Fuck that.* My arms burn to reach out and break this fucker's neck right here and now.

"Lock it down, man. For her."

Blake's words push me forward.

I take the last step, placing me a foot away. "Dominick Morretti. I need a word."

He swivels around and meets my eyes. I'm taken aback by how much his look like Raven's. There's no doubt this is her father. My stomach roils. I don't smile, and I can only imagine that my face looks about as friendly as a rabid pit bull.

"Why if it isn't 'The Assassin.'" He sneers. "Gentlemen, what a treat we have tonight." A slow clap of his hands has the men at the table's attention. "The undefeated contender."

The men at the table acknowledge me, but my eyes burn into Dominick.

He must sense I'm not here for a meet and greet, and he leans in so no one can hear him but me. "I have a feeling I know what, or should I say whom, you want to have a word about."

Blake steps close, placing his shoulder between me and Dominick and making him lean back.

"You want to go somewhere private or would you rather have it out right here? I'm cool either way," I spit through my teeth.

His face turns to stone, his previous bravado gone. He nods to a man who takes his place and excuses himself from the group of patrons. I follow him toward the back of the club.

We're in a dark hallway with doors running along its sides. I follow Dominick to the very last door and into an office. He doesn't move to the desk chair, but instead stays in front of it, leaning against it. There's shuffling behind me and I hear the door close. Two men stand on either side of Dominick against the wall. My senses go on high alert. They're here to protect him against us. Smart.

"Have a seat Mr. Slade and . . ." he looks to Blake with raised eyebrows. "Mr. Daniels."

"How the fuck do you know me?" Blake says from my side.

"I know *everything*, Mr. Daniels. Now, sit."

"We'd rather stand," I snap.

"Suit yourself." He grins and I don't miss his eyes darting to our fisted hands. "What can I help you with, boys? Looking to set up a date? I've got some beautiful girls who would love to spend some time with you, for the right price." Locking eyes with me, his lips curl back from his teeth. "If you'd be willing to wait a few weeks, I can arrange for you to have a new girl. She's never been used before. She'll cost a little extra, the virgins always do—"

"Shut the fuck up," I roar.

"You son of a bitch!" Blake yells at the same time.

Blood drums in my ears. He's obviously provoking me, trying to get me to attack him so he can take me out, leaving Raven defenseless so he can prey on her like the scavenging fuck that he is. I fist my hands against the urge to destroy him. My hands flex so tight, I feel the bite of my

nails breaking the skin. The buzzing in my brain is nuclear. I push through the fog and focus on Raven. My muscles twitch with unbridled fury.

“What do you want, Dominick? For Raven? I’ll give you whatever you want in return for her freedom.”

Dominick leans back and props his expensive loafers onto the desk.

“Whatever I want, huh? Don’t think you have anything I want, Mr. Slade.”

“Name your price.”

“You don’t have enough.”

“Try me.”

He stares at me in silence while spinning his gold pinkie ring with his thumb.

“Ten million dollars, cash.”

Shit. That’s a lot of money. My chest constricts. This is a lost cause. I can’t afford that. If I sell my house, my cars, everything I have in savings . . . dammit, that’s still not enough.

“Or,” he looks at Blake then back to me, “we could make this interesting.” He taps his bottom lip with his finger.

I’d give anything to bust that lip open.

“I’ll tell you what. You want to win my daughter? Throw your title fight.”

His words suck the air from my lungs.

“Fuck me,” Blake whispers.

“You boys must be aware of the odds in this fight. You’re the favorite to win. If I put enough money on Del Toro, and he wins, I could become a very rich man. You lose that fight, I’ll release Raven.”

“Done.” My answer bursts forth without hesitation. I would give up anything for her, including my life’s dream. She’s my dream now.

“I have one stipulation. The fight must go three rounds. You can’t just walk into the octagon with your hands at your side. Make it believable, as if you’re fighting to win.”

Blake steps close and Dominick’s bodyguards follow suit. “That’s impossible. He goes out there to fight. Del Toro’s down.”

Dominick’s eyes stay focused on mine. “That’s what makes it a challenge. Are you up for the challenge, Mr. Slade?”

“I’ll do it.” I can do anything if it means being with Raven.

Blake murmurs a string of foul words while depraved satisfaction shines in Dominick’s eyes. He reaches out to shake my hand. I hesitate.

Rage rides me hard, and I know if I touch this man I may lose it. I picture Raven’s smiling face and take a deep breath. I force my hand forward and shake his, harder than necessary.

“It’s a deal,” he says. “Are we done here?”

“No, one more thing.” I place both palms on the edge of the desk and lean forward, looming over Dominick. His bodyguards step up close, flashing their weapons under their suit coats.

“You stay the hell away from Raven. I don’t want you to contact her, threaten her, or even *think* about her. You got someone on her, you call them off. She’s mine. I’ll do whatever it takes to protect her. Whatever. It. Takes.”

The all-consuming buzz has me shaking with the need to fuck this guy up. Blake reaches from behind me and pulls me back by my biceps. I lean forward on pure instinct.

“Come on, man. You got what we came for. Let’s get outta here.” Blake drags me backwards, my piercing scowl locked on Dominick.

Yeah, good idea, before I kill this bastard.

I rip free of Blake's hold and leave the room.

"Good night, gentleman." Dominick's cackling laughter fades as we walk down the hall.

I'm a bomb, live and loaded, ready to rip the shit out of anyone that looks at me wrong. My muscles coil, pulse racing.

I shove the front door open and hear the satisfying smack as it slams against the exterior wall of the club.

"Easy, man," some douchebag college kid says standing with a group of his piss-ant friends.

I stalk over and step right up in his face. "The fuck you say?"

"Nothing. It's cool." The kid shifts and steps back into the safety of his friends, unaware they've all backed up a good ten feet.

My lips curl. I advance a step.

"Come on. Don't make the poor bastard crap his pants in front of his friends." Blake's tone is joking, but he doesn't move to touch me. He knows better than to put a hand on me when I'm this close to lighting shit up.

Dropping the little punk will make me feel better. Nothing satisfies the beast within like a good street fight—until recently. There's one thing that works even better.

I turn away and hear him exhale a "Thank you, Jesus" as I head to my truck.

"Breathe, brother." Blake's voice comes from behind me.

"Raven. I need her. Now."

Sixteen

Raven

In shock, I stare silently as Eve tilts her head, smiling with affection to the man at her back.

“Raven, this is the guy I was telling you about, Vince. Vince, this is my best friend, Raven.” Eve introduces us like we’re at a dinner party.

Vince leans forward, sucking Eve’s earlobe into his mouth. Her eyes flutter closed and a soft moan escapes her lips. His eyes lock on mine as his lips peel back over his teeth, and he sinks them into her ear.

Eww.

“Nice to meet you, Raven. Eve has told me *a lot* about you.”

That’s why he looked at me so familiarly yesterday. He’s been feeding information about me to Dominick. No doubt Eve has told him everything. I groan as I think of all the things I’ve told her, things I confided in her about my life.

I bet he’s the one who told Dominick that I had fallen in love with Jonah, that I was staying with him every night, that I was a virgin.

Vince is Dominick’s Ass-In-The-Hole.

He had this planned: having Vince stalk me, violate my personal life to gain leverage against me, taking advantage of my best friend, her loving heart and beautiful body, to spy on me. I lock eyes with Vince, but talk to Eve.

“I just needed to make sure you were okay. I hadn’t been able to get ahold of you and I worried.” The words flow without emotion. My mind churns, processing how *wrong* this is. “I’ll let you guys get back to it.”

“Wait, are you sure you’re okay?” Her words come out on a moan as Vince cups her breast right in front of me. I have to get away from here.

“Yeah, I have to go.” I run to my car, wishing I had the strength to tell Vince off. His blatant attempt to make me uncomfortable worked.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, Rave!” Eve yells and I slam my car door shut. My hand hits the lock button and I fire up the engine, my tires squealing as I pull away.

Shaking with uncontrollable force, I grip the wheel tighter. Just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse.

I want to tell Jonah about Vince and wrap myself in the safety of his strong arms until the hurt goes away. I crave his touch like an addict. It doesn’t make any sense. He’s with another woman. How disgusting can I be? Pining after a man who has lied and cheated?

I hate myself for what I am and how I feel. I’m Dorothy, skipping happily down the Yellow Brick Road of self-loathing. Blasting the radio, hoping the comfort of the music will be a decent substitute for the man, I grimace. Skeeter Davis sings “The End of the World,” and for once, I understand her pain.

Waves of despair wash over me. The negative emotion, from my childhood until now, bears down. I want it to end, desperate to release my tortured soul from this doomed life I was born into. I would gladly give up this fight. Maybe Jonah and I aren’t that different. I’ve been a fighter all my life too. But I don’t fight against people. I fight against feeling worthless, ashamed, and unlovable. I’m sick of it, and at this point, I’d welcome death.

Morbid thoughts swirl in my head when I hear the faint chime of my phone. I dig it out of my backpack, grateful for the distraction.

One new text.

Raven, I need to see you. Tried calling but no answer. Call me ASAP. xJ

He must have called me when I was at Eve's door. But why? What could he possibly want after a night with *her*? My phone rings in my hand.

In no shape to drive while talking on the phone, I pull over and check out the caller ID. Tears spring to my eyes as I read the words, "Jonah Calling".

I should throw my phone out the window and go home, but I can't. The pitiful girl in me wants to hear his voice. And why is he calling me now? The phone continues to ring. He could be calling to confess, to end things officially. Or . . . what if he's changed his mind?

Hope creeps back in, an energy that ignores my misery.

I have to know.

I squeeze my eyes shut and press the phone to my ear. "Hello?"

"Baby, hey." I relax against the soothing tone of his words. How did I think I could live without this? "I need to see you. Are you at Eve's?"

"Oh, um, no, she uh, had a date. I didn't want to intrude."

Silence.

"Jonah?"

"You're at your place? Alone?" I hear the accusation in his voice, chasing away the calm. Bitterness burns in my chest, squashing optimism and reviving my broken heart.

How dare he act like I'm a child. He was at a strip club. With Candy!

"No, I'm not home. I'm out. Why?" My clipped words come out harsher than I intend, but oh well.

"Where are you? I need to talk to you."

"You've got me on the phone. So talk."

More silence. I wait.

"Raven, what's going on with you? You sound, I don't know, pissed or something."

Is he joking?

"How was your *meeting*?" I say, my voice laced with acid.

"It was good." He draws out his words cautiously.

Yeah, I bet it was.

"Oh, yeah? Good, huh? I bet it was. I bet it was *real* good." The sarcasm in my voice is so obvious I sound completely ridiculous.

"That's it, Raven, where the fuck are you? I don't know what's going on, but this attitude you're throwing is pissing me off."

"Oh, God forbid."

He growls, and I know I've upset him. *Ha!* Now he knows how it feels.

"You want to know how my meeting was? It was perfect. Better than perfect. That's what I want to talk to you about."

Did he just say that being with Candy was perfect? Better than perfect? That jerk!

"You're a liar!"

"What? What the fuck are you talking about?"

I'm breathing heavy, and anger keeps me from articulating an answer. All I want to do is scream.

"What is it, baby?" His words drip with sarcasm. "You run out of shit to talk? Those sweet

little lips of yours can't keep up with you being a bitch—"

I gasp. Loud. "*What* did you call me?"

"Fuck. That's not what I meant—"

"No, Jonah. You just called me the b-word. I can't believe you just called me that!" The tone in my voice is so high I'm surprised my windows don't burst.

"Baby, calm down."

"Do *not* call me baby. Not after what you've done. Not after tonight." A whine slides up my throat and I burst into tears.

"Raven, you're scaring me. Where are you? I'll come to you."

I whimper and sob, knowing I should hang up, but lacking the power to say goodbye.

"Please don't cry. Look, I'm sorry. It's just been a long day, and I need to see you."

I take a deep cleansing breath as Guy's words flood my mind. This is it. The moment he was talking about. I swallow a shaky breath. I have a choice to make. Fight or give up.

I love Jonah with all my heart. As disgusting as it is, I would take him even now after he's been with Candy. But what kind of a future do we have? Putting his life at risk isn't an option. And fighting for our love will only be prolonging the inevitable. Dominick has me. Besides, the fight takes energy. It takes words and emotions that I've run clean out of. I'm drained in every possible way.

I have no fight left.

"Goodbye, Jonah."

~*~

Jonah

"Fuck!" I launch my phone across the room. It shatters against the wall. I've just destroyed my only way of getting in touch with Raven.

My ass drops to the couch and I rest my elbows on my thighs. I run my hands through my hair like my head is a genie's bottle and I'm begging for my three wishes.

What in the hell just happened?

You called her a bitch, asshole.

What was I thinking? I was pumped up from my meeting with Dominick and sick of being away from Raven all day. I've never seen that attitude from her before. It caught me off guard, and I slipped. But she was pissed before that.

Growling in frustration, I sit back and stare at the ceiling in my living room. This isn't over. I'm not letting her get away with a simple fucking hang-up.

No. She will talk to me and tell me what the fuck is going on. Jumping up from the couch, I grab my keys. I'll drive every street of this city until I find her.

My truck thunders through the streets of Las Vegas. I check everywhere. First Raven's studio, then Nori Pizza where Eve works. The hostess gave me Eve's address so I could check there. After I talk to Raven and give her a firm spanking, I'm talking to Eve. Employees shouldn't be giving out addresses. The way the girl acted, I probably could have gotten her bank account and social security numbers if I'd asked.

No sign of her Nova anywhere. After an hour of circling the city, I go back to her place and wait.

Parked out front of Guy's Garage, I replay my conversation with Raven for the millionth

time. She usually answers the phone with a smile in her voice. This time she was pissed from hello. What could I have done to upset her from the time I left her in my bed this morning?

I watch the numbers on the clock climb. It's just after one in the morning. Rubbing the exhaustion from my eyes, I hear the familiar rumble of Raven's Nova. She's driving like an Andretti. Her car screeches through the turn into the parking lot. I jump out of my truck as she throws the Nova into a spot sideways. She slams shut her car door, muttering something about reinforced steel walls.

I make it to her as she's turning around. She jumps and stops herself just short of running into my chest. I reach to pull her to me. She stiffens, dodging my embrace. Her eyes avoid mine, but I can tell she's been crying.

What the fuck?

"Baby, don't close me out. I don't understand what I did—"

She silences me with a piercing glare.

"Okay, I called you a bi— uh, the b-word. I'm so sorry for that. If I could take it back I would."

I cup her cheek and pray she doesn't push me away. The moment my skin connects with hers, she presses into my hold and closes her eyes. A lone tear makes a path down her face, pooling at my hand.

"Baby, talk to me. What did I do? You were pissed before I called you. When you answered the phone, I could tell you were mad." She leans into my hand. "What you said about my meeting—"

She snaps out of my hold with wide eyes and stands to her full five foot eight inches. Her face is hard, the softness she showed earlier completely erased.

"What's wrong? You want to know what's wrong?" she says with a shaky voice and cold, hard gaze.

I've never seen her like this. She's furious. I reach for her again and she shoves my arms away. I step back.

"I'll tell you what's wrong, Jonah. I was told yesterday by my biological jerk-wad that he bred me for prostitution. Then, my boyfriend took better care of me than I've ever been taken care of in my life, just to turn around and break my fucking heart!"

I flinch at her curse. "Broke your heart?"

"Do you know what it's like to go your entire life never being touched? Never being told that you're loved?" She laughs and her lip quivers as she wipes her tears. "No one was ever there for me. Not when I was sick. Or sad. Never. Can you even fathom the effect that has on a person? They have a term for it. It's called Failure-to-Thrive Syndrome."

She exhales and her shoulders slump. "You want to know the first time I heard the words 'I'm proud of you'?"

My heart cramps with every broken word.

"March 16, 2007. Sick isn't it? I remember the exact day. I was fifteen years old. It wasn't my mom or my dad who said it. It was Guy. My high school shop teacher."

Her eyes glisten with tears. I picture a little dark-haired girl crying alone with no one to comfort her. My hatred for her parents roots deep in my soul. Even now, it's not my Raven standing before me. It's that sad little girl who desperately wants to be loved. Who craves the touch and comfort that only a parent can provide. I want to reach out and hold her, but her arms wrapped around her body in a protective shield.

"Then you come along." Her voice is softer now and she meets my eyes.

I am undone, powerless against her pain.

“You hold me, protect me, worry about me . . . tell me you love me. And the sun shines on me for the first time in my life. I look beyond your past, your reputation, all because I’m so desperate for what you give me. I fell so deeply and madly in love with you I couldn’t see straight.”

I watch the clear waters of her eyes turn stormy and cold. “And then you find out what I really am and you run to her. Not even twenty-four hours after you left me warm in your bed, you go to her!” Her last words break with the cries that assault her body.

Her? I don’t have any idea what she’s talking about, but I hate myself anyway for hurting her like this.

“Raven, baby, you have to listen to me. I don’t know what you’re talking about. *Her?* Her who? I didn’t run to anyone. I’m right here with you.”

I brave a touch and wrap my hand around the nape of her neck. Bending down so she can look in my eyes, I flex my fingers into her skin. “Raven, look at me.”

Her eyes come to mine. The brokenness of her past shines through their aquamarine depths.

“I love you. You’re the only girl I ever want to run to.”

Her eyes narrow, but this time not in anger. This looks more like confusion. “But . . . I saw you. You were there at her club. I saw your truck outside in the lot.”

Shit. I study my feet, but keep hold of her neck. She knows I was at Zeus’s. She thinks I ran to Candy because of everything that happened with Dominick.

It upsets me that she doesn’t believe my feelings for her are stronger than what Dominick has planned. But I know that’s not what made her believe I would run to Candy so easily. Her lack of self-worth is ingrained. My hate for her parents festers and spreads.

I’ll explain, get on my knees and beg if that’s what it takes for her to understand. I’d do anything if it means I get to keep the lost girl I hold in my hand.

“I was at Zeus’s Playground tonight, but it wasn’t for the reason you think.”

Her face is still hard, but the muscles in her neck relax a fraction.

“Blake and I had a meeting there.” I pause a second to make sure she’s still with me. “We met with Dominick.”

“Jonah, why?” She steps close and grabs the wrist of the arm that’s holding her. “He could have hurt you. Are you okay?” She runs her hands over my chest, arms and up to my shoulders, searching for physical damage.

My skin tingles at the touch I was afraid I might never feel again. I take advantage and wrap my arms around her waist to pull her closer.

“Yeah, I’m fine, but can we talk about this inside?” I look up towards Raven’s studio and picture trying to cram myself into her bed. Nope, not happening. “Or better yet, can I take you home now? I’ll explain everything there.”

Her eyes drop to her feet, and she sucks her bottom lip into her mouth.

Please say yes.

She sniffs and wipes the tears from her cheeks. “Okay.”

I exhale the breath I was holding and pull her into a deep hug. Placing a quick kiss on her head, and inhaling the smell of her hair, my heart slows its frantic pace.

Not wanting to let her out of my sight, I walk her to the passenger side of the truck and usher her in. Then I snag her backpack from her car, shut and lock her doors.

The ride to my house is silent. I notice Raven still looks confused, and I grab her hand to rest on my thigh. Her expression softens as I gently run my thumb along the smooth skin of her wrist.

Once home, I open her door and help her out. I swing my arm over her shoulder and she leans into my touch. From my garage, we walk up to the house side by side. I tell myself to give her some space, but I'm not ready to let go of the comfort her body gives mine.

Settling on the living room couch, I bring her a glass of water and sit next to her. She's turned toward me with her legs bent, knees to chest, arms wrapped around her shins.

I run a hand through my hair. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I was afraid if I told you the truth you'd worry or try to talk me out of it. After seeing you yesterday and last night," my jaw involuntarily tightens at the memory of her hurting, "I had to do something. I had to try."

She nods, but remains silent.

I tell Raven about the meeting, careful to expose every detail. When I finish, she stares past me, as if she's seeking counsel with some unseen force just over my shoulder. I allow the silence and give her time to process all the information.

"So, you're going to lose your fight? On purpose?"

"Yes."

"But . . . you've been waiting so long for this fight. How can you give it up so easily?"

"Simple. I've been waiting longer for you."

The best thing that ever happened to me shows up in coveralls and a pair of Chucks when I least expect it. I'll do whatever it takes to keep her.

I lean forward and un-wrap her arms from her knees. Holding her hands, I press them to my chest. "You feel that? Every beat pounding away? You do that to me." I want to groan. I'm so frustrated. How can I get her to understand how much she means to me? I squeeze her hands.

"You're part of me now. I'd do anything for you. I'll fight for your life as I'd fight for my own."

Wonder colors her face. She throws her body into mine and tucks in tight on my lap. I wrap her up in my arms and hold on. I almost lost her.

"I'm so sorry, Jonah. Please forgive me. I had no idea. I thought you had lied about the meeting and that you were leaving me. I heard you and Owen talking about you breaking up with me, and I thought it was because—"

"Hold on." I lean away to look in her eyes. "I never told Owen I was breaking up with you. Where did you hear that?"

"You guys were talking when I woke up." Her gaze swings toward the kitchen then back to mine. "I heard you."

I think back to the conversation and start to laugh. Raven wrinkles her nose, which makes me laugh harder.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Baby, we weren't talking about me breaking up with you. We were talking about my plan to meet Dominick. I knew I was going to have to lie to you about it. Owen wasn't happy about that, thought you'd already been through enough. And he was worried about me coming face to face with him."

The corners of her mouth lift slightly before she burrows back into my chest. "I swear you find the strangest things funny."

"Oh, that's rich coming from you."

"Blake is funny," she says like a petulant child.

I hold Raven, her body relaxed and nestled into mine. I think of how she was neglected as a child. I smooth her hair and kiss her head, wishing I could be enough to fill that void in her soul.

I can't change her past. But I'll damn well keep her safe in the future. After she hung up on me tonight, not knowing where she was, I was driving all over town worried she'd been in an

accident, or worse. That shit ain't happening again.

"Baby?"

"Yeah?"

"That stunt you pulled on the phone with me tonight?"

Her body curls deeper into my lap. "Um, which part?"

"You should know tonight won't be the last time I fuck up. I'm new to relationship stuff, so you can plan on getting pissed at me a lot. But from now on, when you're pissed, you do it where I can see you."

She pushes herself up, her hand on my chest. "See you?"

"You can put up walls and not talk to me, call me every name in the book, throw shit at me, I don't care. But you'll do it *with me* and end every night in my bed."

"But, but—"

"No buts." I wrap my hand around the back of her neck and give her a squeeze. "I've been in fights with guys twice my size, been locked in holds so tight I didn't know if I'd survive, but I've never been as scared as I was tonight."

"Jonah—"

"Driving around town, looking for your car, knowing that Dominick has his sights on you . . ." I slide my hand up and grab a handful of her silky hair. "I can't lose you."

She blinks once then again. "I promise. You'll never lose me, Jonah." She rests her forehead against mine. "Never."

I pull her to my chest and she nestles in.

"No more hanging up on my ass either," I say while I rub her back.

"Okay. As long as you never call me the b-word again."

"Deal."

She sighs and nuzzles her face against my neck. I feel the brush of her nose under my ear. As if touching isn't enough, she breathes in deep, taking a little bit of me inside her. I stifle a groan.

Shifting on my lap, she tempts me with her sexy ass. The sweet fragrance of her shampoo combined with the feel of her soft body permeates my brain. I'm overwhelmed with the burning desire to be inside her. My blood races. The primal man in me wants to stand up and beat his chest, knowing that he's found a woman to claim, to mark her as his own, going places with her that no man has gone before.

"I love you, Raven."

She tilts her head up to look at me. "I love you."

I brush my knuckles against her cheek. "Can I show you?"

Her eyebrows drop low.

"Make love to you, baby." I answer her unspoken question.

Her body goes rigid in my arms and she studies my face. Whatever she sees seems to agree with her. A sexy smile pulls at her lips and damn if that doesn't seal the deal.

Nodding her head slowly, I stand with her still in my arms. She cups my face, her thumbs at my dimples, and places feather light kisses against my mouth. I race to the bedroom, her giggles bouncing against my lips the entire way.

Seventeen

Raven

Locked in Jonah's bathroom, I stare at myself in the mirror. My hands grip the counter and I lean in to study my face: red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes and a wild mane of dark hair framing my pale face.

"Lovely. I look like a zombie. Real sexy, Raven," I whisper to myself.

Even though I took a shower a few hours ago, I decide another one might help to rinse the dead, decaying look from my face. I pull my hair into a messy bun to keep it dry, and stand under the warm water. A good scrub of my face has me feeling human again. I hop out and the reality of what's about to happen has me patting my body dry faster than usual. Butterflies swirl in my belly along with eager anticipation.

A smile pulls at my cheeks, flooding my body with warmth. I push the obstacles from today to the back of my head and lock my worries away. They'll still be there tomorrow. Tonight, it's just us.

I brush my teeth and throw on a new pair of panties I bought on my last Victoria's Secret shopping spree. After I slide the bright blue lace up my legs, I check out my reflection from all angles.

This particular style is called The Cheeky and while checking out my backside, I can see why. The low slung, hip huggers are made of delicate lace that cut up dramatically in the back accenting the full curves of my bottom. I bought these with Jonah in mind. He can't seem to keep his hands off my booty, and I can't wait to see what he thinks of these.

I forgo a bra or tank and decide topless is the way to go. I run a brush through my hair and allow the messy waves to fall in haphazard disarray.

A quick peek into the bedroom reveals lit candles, soft music, but no Jonah. I race to his bed, arms crossed at my chest, and crawl on top. Lying on my stomach, I take deep breaths to calm my nerves.

He has so much experience with sex. What if I disappoint him? He's used to sexually confident women who probably hang from the rafters or stand on their heads. I can't compete with that.

"Stop it. It's going to be fine. You can hang from rafters," I whisper. Muffling my giggles into the pillow, I picture myself in some ridiculous position which only antagonizes my nerves.

Think sexy. No giggling.

I breathe deep, and visions of Jonah quiet my thoughts. I welcome the sultry voice of Ella Fitzgerald and the smell of lightly scented candle wax to soothe my frazzled nerves.

I hear the click of the bedroom door as it opens then softly closes. Still on my stomach, my arms folded under my head, I turn to see him and almost choke.

Jonah's in nothing but a pair of black pajama pants. They hang low on his hips exposing the v of his lower abdominal muscles, dusted with dark hair. *Holy crud*. His inky black hair is spiked with moisture. He must have taken a shower in the guest bathroom. Kaleidoscopic arms, bulging with muscle, tense at his sides, I gawk at his masculine body then settle on his smiling face. His hazel eyes move over me in a visual caress, causing a tremor of need to vibrate beneath my skin.

"Fuck. You look so sexy right now." His deep voice and dirty talk have me trembling.

My eyes lock on his as he crosses the room to the bed.

“You take my breath away.” His penetrating gaze roams over every inch of my form. “Don’t move. Stay just like that.”

I obey, and he disappears to the foot of the bed. What’s he doing?

The mattress dips at my feet just before I feel the warmth of his hands cover my calves. Using them to guide him, he slowly climbs up my body until he straddles my hips. The fabric of his cotton pants brushes my exposed skin. I take a deep breath and relax as the tips of his fingers run along the edge of my panties at my back.

“These are my favorite.” His fingers trace from one hip to the other.

“I bought them just for you. I thought you’d like them.”

“I fuckin’ love ’em.” He flexes his hips into the space between my legs, his blatant arousal making me gasp. “Can’t you tell?”

“Um, yeah, I can.” Nervous giggles creep up from my chest and tickle my throat. *Don’t giggle!*

He traces the line of my tattoo from my hip to my shoulder. My skin tingles and goose bumps break out across my flesh. The bed dips by my head, and he nips at the shell of my ear. I inhale citrus and spice, swirling my senses and igniting a fire in my belly.

“Have I ever told you how much I love your tattoo?” His mouth travels along the side of my throat where he kisses at his spot.

My head tilts to the side to welcome his attention. His soft lips follow the line of birds, gently kissing and licking until he’s back at my hip. A pleased moan rises from my chest.

“You like that, baby?” he asks against my skin.

I arch my back, lifting my bottom up and into his chest. He slides his hand beneath the lace and cups one cheek, squeezing and molding it in his hand while his mouth continues its torture.

“Jonah, I want to see you.” My words finish on a whimper.

“Not yet. I’m not finished playing with you.”

I’m so turned on already I can’t imagine what it’s going to be like when he’s finished playing with me.

His large hands move back up to massage my shoulders with gentle pressure. Having never been touched this way before, my body responds in new and unfamiliar ways. I melt into the bed. A glorious tingling starts at my chest working its way through my veins and heating my blood.

His slow powerful strokes work down my back. I feel small and delicate under his expert touch. Hands, lips, tongue, and teeth, all stimulate my hunger. I’m panting and greedy. My moans combine with the soft music filling the room, creating an erotic symphony.

“Jonah, I can’t take much more.” I move to roll over, but Jonah presses his chest into my back, caging me to the bed with his weight. His arms rest close to my face and I barely hold back the desire to lean over and trace the tattoos on his biceps with my tongue.

“My girl’s eager.” He rocks his hips into me.

An embarrassing whine flies from my lips, and I grind back into him. Intimate parts of my body request, no, beg for his attention.

“You keep that up. This will be over before it begins.” He nips at my neck, soothing his tender bites with slow sweeps of his tongue. “Don’t worry, baby. We’ll get to that. First, we need to talk.”

My body freezes and I twist my neck to look at him.

“Talk? I don’t want to talk.” I sound like a child forced to eat her vegetables.

How sexy is that?

He bites his lip, fighting a smile. “We have to. I know you’re on the pill, so birth control is taken care of, right?”

My face falls into my folded arms to hide my pink cheeks.

“Yes. How did you . . .” Stupid question. He’s seen me take them. “Never mind.”

The only parental thing my mom ever did was take me to get put on the pill at sixteen. She probably thought I’d end up just like her. *Gah! I don’t want to think about this now.*

“Here’s the thing. I’ve never had sex without a condom. I’ve also never made love to a woman before. How would you feel about me not wearing one?”

“Ugh! Jonah, you’re seriously killing the moment here.” I speak my muffled complaint into the pillow.

“What? I’m being thorough. It’s your first time and I want it to be good for you. I think going bareback would be better. But I won’t do it without your permission.”

“Bareback?”

“Without a condom.”

I’ve had fantasies about what my first time with Jonah would be like. In all my versions of this moment, I never had a conversation that involved the word bareback. This reminder of Jonah’s sexual experience to my lack thereof is off-putting. But I love him and I believe he loves me. There’s no doubt in my mind that he has my best interest at heart. He always does.

“I trust you.”

His weight lifts and he falls to my side. I prop myself up on my elbows and look into his handsome, smiling face.

“All right, no more talking.”

On a growl, he leans over and possesses my mouth. His tongue glides along mine, rekindling my need. I tilt my head and press in deeper. My toes curl and my back arches in an attempt to get closer. He sucks my tongue into his mouth and runs his teeth along it as I pull it back. The simple scrape turns my insides to liquid.

More.

The word echoes in my head, sending the message to every nerve cell in my body. He’s consuming me, and I want nothing more than to crawl inside him. His hand curls around the back of my head and he rolls. My legs open to him, cradling his body. He hovers over me, the hard plains of his chest cushioned against my breasts. Flexing his hips, he grinds into me with solid steel and I swallow his moan.

His hands dig into my hair, grabbing it firmly at the roots. A slight tug opens my mouth further and he plunges deeper. With firm pressure he continues to rock against me, building my impending release. My stomach flips with the promise of what’s to come.

Breaking free for air, he kisses down my neck, leaving me panting for breath. His warm mouth closes over the firm tip of my breast. Electricity shoots down my torso to my womb. He switches back and forth, sucking on one while rolling the tip of the other between his finger and thumb. I slide my legs against his, restless and impatient.

“So fucking responsive,” he growls, the rumble of his deep voice against my chest vibrating down my body. “God, you taste so sweet.” He licks and pulls at my breast. “I want to taste the rest of you.”

His words are rocket fuel to my libido. I’m writhing and panting. His hands roam down my torso to between my legs. My body bows off the bed. If I wasn’t so wanton, I’d be embarrassed at my lack of control.

He runs his lips down the length of my body, pausing only to nip at my belly button.

“Mmm, Jonah . . .” I want to say something to communicate how good he feels against my skin, but I’m too lost in the sensation.

Hooking his fingers into the fine lace of my panties, he shreds them with a firm tug. I moan, lifting my hips, and he tosses the flimsy lace to the floor. I’m all feeling and emotion, completely void of rational thought.

He lifts his head and gives me his sexy, one-dimpled smile. This one is similar to the one I’ve gotten before, but better. Way better. His lowered lids and dark glare turn this smile into something different all together, and I’m gone. Completely owned with one look.

I tremble as he places himself between my legs. His eyes lock on mine seconds before he dips down. His mouth presses against me in a probing thrust. My head falls back. Every nerve fires and I’m overcome with desire. His hands still my hips in a display of full carnal domination. Gripping the sheets, I dig my heels into the mattress and push my hips up begging for more. His mouth commands my body, pulling my strings and pushing me on. He slides his hands beneath my bottom to tilt my hips, delving deeper and thrusting harder. Euphoria swirls behind my eyes with every abrasive scratch of his stubble between my legs.

“Jonah, I’m gonna...” My words fade into a glorious moan and I bit my lip.

He pulls back, the cold air hits me hard. I open my eyes to see him braced above me looking intently into my face.

“Why did you stop? I didn’t . . . I was almost . . . there.” My voice whines with disappointment.

“You’re ready.”

He’s not asking, but I nod.

Yes! I’m ready!

He kisses my chin. “You sure about this? Cause, fuck baby, I *need* to be inside you.” He runs his tongue along my bottom lip. “Deep inside you.”

I push my hips up and dig my fingernails into his arms.

“Yeah, my girl’s ready.”

He slides his pants down and kicks them to the floor. I stare openly at his arousal.

This is going to hurt. Bad.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ll go slow.”

My eyes dart to his face. *Did I say that out loud?*

He crawls up my body, eyes fixed on mine. His hands push my arms above my head, weaving our fingers together. In this position, his weight against me, his huge body forcing my legs apart, I’m completely at his mercy. Helpless against his invasion. And totally safe. Warm, silken heat nudges its way in, slowly pressing, forcing me open. Instinctively, my body resists and I press my knees into his sides.

“Deep breath.” He brushes his lips against my jaw. “Relax.”

Taking a deep breath, I concentrate on relaxing my muscles. He pushes in further.

“I love you.” He speaks the words against my neck, feathering kisses against my skin.

He releases my hands, and I brace them against his ribs. His pulse races against my palms. His hazel eyes darken and worry crosses his face.

“What’s wrong?”

“This is it.”

“It?”

A deep pink blush colors his cheeks. My eyes widen.

Oh, IT.

He looks conflicted. "I don't want to hurt you."

I wrap my legs around his hips and use my heels to press him to me. "I'm ready, Jonah. I want this. I want you to be the one to do it. I love you." The confidence in my voice mirrors the feelings in my heart.

He smiles so sweetly that I'm forced to catch my breath.

"Okay, baby. Take a deep breath and blow it out slowly."

My eyes lock on his in determination. Taking a deep breath through my nose, I hold it and nod. I blow the breath out slowly, and when I'm almost out of air, he buries himself completely. A hiss shoots from his lips as he pushes past the final barrier of my virginity. My eyes slam shut at the searing pain.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I love you." Tender brushes of his lips trail from my jaw to my shoulder.

After a minute, I release his hips, my legs no longer able to hold him with their quivering muscles. The burn recedes, leaving behind a delicious fullness.

Past the pain, I focus on Jonah's face: both dimples, full teeth, and shining eyes. Pure male pride.

He cups my face, running his thumbs along my cheeks. "Feel okay?"

"Perfect." I rake my hands into his hair and pull him in for a deep, wet kiss.

"My girl."

His movements start slow, dissolving my discomfort and awakening my hunger. I scrape my nails along his scalp, grasping in desperation. Closer, deeper, harder. More. I don't know what's come over me. All I know is that I need Jonah more than oxygen.

"Jonah, I—"

A gasp robs me of my words as he rocks into my body. Ripples of pleasure shoot up my torso and coil in my chest. I grip his backside with two hands, feeling the flex and release of his muscles as he moves between my legs.

Possession pushes below the surface of my skin. An animalistic satisfaction at being marked, permanently changed by the man I love.

"More." The simple spoken word has him rolling his hips deeper, and thrusting harder.

Yes!

I groan as the tension builds, churning low and ready to burst.

"You're perfect. So hot, and fuck, so tight," he growls into my mouth.

I'm hot and writhing, his words and body mastering mine. Every angle winds me tighter, pushing me higher. I buck against him, searching for release.

A shift of his hips in the right spot and sparks fly behind my eyes. I suck in a lungful of air, my release shooting through my body. My nails dig into his biceps and I call out his name against his lips. He continues to rock into me. And just like an expert guitar player hitting the perfect chord, another explosion of pleasure pushes through me. My heels dig into the bed, riding out my climax. Blissful satisfaction washes over me in waves. I labor for breath, floating down and sinking into the bed.

Is it always like this?

My body hums. I blink away the post-orgasm fog. My limbs fall to the side, sated and heavy.

It's only then that I notice Jonah still moving above me. His colorful arms flex and pulse. His eyes lock on mine, and he bites his bottom lip. I can't resist the urge to taste it myself and push up to pull at the soft flesh with my teeth. He releases it and I suck it deep into my mouth.

He quickens his pace then growls his release. Heat fills my body where the sting has died to a dull ache. I lick and suck at his lips and tongue until his movement slows. He collapses onto my body, and I wrap my legs around his waist, my arms around his neck. We breathe heavy, chest to chest, hearts pounding against each other, until we calm.

“I’m not ready to give you up,” he says against my skin while moving gently inside me.

“I’m not ready to be given up.”

We kiss, this time absent of the heat from earlier. Only gentle touches and whispers of affection.

“Thank you, Jonah. That was better than I imagined.”

His lips brush mine once more before he rolls off of me. I wince as he pulls free from our connection. He falls to my side and wraps me in his arms.

My head on his chest, he takes a deep breath. “Baby, that was incredible.”

We lie in silence, Alicia Keys singing “How it Feels to Fly” and soothing the aftershocks of our lovemaking. The lyrics send goose bumps racing across my skin. Lying here in Jonah’s arms, having given him the only thing of worth that I have to give, I’ve never felt freer. Tears sting my eyes, and I swipe at one that rolls down my cheek.

“Ah, shit. I’m sorry. Was it too rough? Are you okay?” Jonah’s hands are at my face, wiping at the moisture beneath my eyes.

Propping myself up, I look at him and smile. “Do I look okay?”

“No. I mean, of course, you look amazing. But you’re crying.”

He continues to dry my wayward tears. I stop his hands with mine. “I’m fine. It’s been an emotional day.” My fingers trace the tattoo on his chest. “Was it, um, okay? You know, for you?”

He throws his head back in a quick burst of laughter. “Shit, let’s put aside the fact that I’m in love with you. Let’s also not count the fact that being skin on skin, no barrier between me and your hot, wet, gripping—”

I smack him playfully in the arm, my lips upturned and cheeks cramping from the glowing review he’s giving me.

“Okay, all that aside, the way your body responds to mine, the slightest touch or shift in my position . . . Moans of pleasure coming from those gorgeous lips . . . Baby, that was the hottest . . .” His eyes dart to the side as if he’s having a hard time putting words to his feelings. “What we did tonight was more beautiful than anything I’ve ever experienced.”

“I feel the same. I’m glad I waited for you, Jonah. You deserve to be my first—”

“And your last.”

My jaw drops open before I catch it and slam it shut.

Could he really mean what he just said? I’ve heard men do that, say things they don’t really mean after sex because they’re caught up in the moment. He doesn’t look uncertain. He’s not smiling, his mouth isn’t twitching uncomfortably. His eyes are fixed on mine and his face is soft. I don’t have much experience in this area, but if I had to guess, I’d say he looks like a man in love.

My rational side busts out a checklist. He replaced my door, risked his safety to talk to Dominick, hunted me down after I hung up on him, and tonight he loved me, mind, body, and soul.

How could I take advantage of his love by allowing him to give up his fight for me? There has to be another way. My mind is slow with fatigue and sexual satisfaction, but I scroll through possible alternatives. Beyond ending my life, which isn’t an option, there’s only one other thing I

can do.

“Jonah?”

“Yeah?”

I clear my throat, my mouth suddenly dry. “I could run.”

Silence.

“I could just take off and drive to New York or Florida. I’ll change my name and find a job that pays cash. After a while, you could come visit me. You wouldn’t have to throw your fight. I could even get—”

“No.” His answer isn’t angry, but absolute. “That’s no way to live. We’d have to move every few months, constantly looking over our shoulders.”

“You don’t know that. He might just give up when he can’t find me locally.”

Hooking his hands under my arms, he pulls me up his chest and we’re face to face.

“You think Dominick is the kind of man to let go of something he wants? You know he’d come after you, Raven, for no other reason than he doesn’t like to lose. I want you free from all ties, and throwing the fight is the only way. Money is the only language Dominick understands.”

Hot tears pool in my eyes and cool as they cascade down my face. “I’ll never be able to repay you for all you’re giving up for me. I’m afraid that, in time, you’ll resent me.”

“Impossible. The title will always be there. The fight is replaceable. You’re not.”

Closing my eyes, I bury my face in his neck. “I love you.” It’s the only thing I can think of to communicate my appreciation. But it’s not enough.

“I love you too.” He repositions me at his side.

I lean up and give him my lips. It’s in this kiss that two truths penetrate and soak into my soul.

First, Jonah loves me.

And, second, I don’t know what the future will bring, but whatever happens, I won’t be facing it alone.

Eighteen

Raven

I shiver as cool air washes over my back all the way down to my thighs. Surfacing from my deep sleep, I reach for the blanket to ward off the cold when I feel something warm pleasantly teasing my hip. Little by little, the cold is chased away and a tingling heat moves through my body. I blink my eyes open, aware of the slight shifting of the bed and the soft touch that makes its way up my back. *Jonah*. Like last night, he's kissing a trail along the path of my tattoo.

Last night! My eyes pop open as impassioned memories tear their way through my sleep. I lost my virginity. A giggle erupts from my throat.

He smiles against my shoulder. "Tickle?" His deep, gravelly voice against my skin raises goose bumps down my arm.

"Mmm, no. Feels good."

"You're laughing."

Shaking my head, I refuse to divulge my schoolgirl thoughts.

"I didn't think waking up to you in my bed could get any better. But waking up to you, with your hot little body, naked and pressed against mine?" He nibbles and licks at his spot on my neck. "The shit dreams are made of." Groaning, he pushes himself up to my ear. "I hate to leave you like this, but I have a phone interview. Go back to sleep, baby. I shouldn't be long."

"Interview? But it's still dark out."

"Mm-hmm." His face is buried in my neck and his fingers graze my breasts.

I moan and arch my back, pressing into him.

"Fuck." The word rumbles against my skin. "Don't move. I want to get right back to this when I'm finished."

With one last kiss to my shoulder, I feel him get out of bed. I hear him slide on his drawstring pants. "Stupid fucking interview." He shuts the bedroom door behind him.

One deep, contented sigh later, my eyes drift close.

~*~

Jonah

"This sucks," I say under my breath as I drop down into my desk chair in my home office.

I check the clock. Five fifteen in the morning. I sip my coffee and curse my publicist for setting up these interviews.

I'm at my desk when I should be wrapped around Raven. My girl's flawless bare body molded to mine, surrounded by her smell, it was nearly impossible to walk away.

I log into my email and open the one from my publicist. This is the absolute worst part of being a fighter, the publicity shit. Some guys get off on it, but most of us hate it. The radio station interviews are the lesser of the publicity evils. At least I get to do it from home in my flannel pants. If I had my cell I could do this from my bed with Raven in my arms. I shake my head and make a note to get myself a new phone first thing.

Scanning the email, looking for the number, I notice I'm fifteen minutes late. I shrug. Fuck

'em. I made love for the first time in my life to the girl of my dreams. They can wait.

I punch in the number listed on the email. I give the producer my name and wait, my thoughts drifting back to last night. I've never had a sexual experience like that. Owen wasn't fucking around when he said sex was different when you do it with someone you love. And Raven, the girl had zero experience, but damn if she didn't light up like a fucking Roman candle. Those panties, her moaning, body arching, begging for my attention. I groan and readjust my pants.

And here, I thought I'd lose interest? Once would never be enough—shit, a lifetime would never be enough of Raven. She just gave me a taste of what she has to offer, and I'm famished, completely starving for more.

"To all our radio listeners out there, we have a special treat for you today." The voice on the phone rips me from my happy place. "Jonah 'The Assassin' Slade is taking a break from his rigorous training schedule to give us an exclusive interview. His fight with Heavyweight Champion Victor Del Toro for the belt is September fourteenth at Mandalay Bay. Jonah, thanks for taking the time to talk to us."

"Of course, thanks for having me." I roll my eyes.

"Victor Del Toro has been the reigning Heavyweight Champion for over six years. Are you confident that you can beat him?"

"Absolutely. I think my record speaks for itself. I haven't lost a fight yet and don't plan on losing one now." I grimace at my blatant lie because that's exactly what I plan on doing.

"Del Toro has what you call a glass jaw. Can you explain what that is to our listeners?"

"Sure, glass jaw refers to someone who gets knocked out easily. It's Del Toro's Achilles' heel. But the guy is the reigning Heavyweight Champion and has been for six years, so he's no pansy. Weak jaw or not, the guy can fight."

"Now, you, 'Assassin,' have a mean right hook. We can assume that your powerful right hook combined with Del Toro's glass jaw means he has very little chance of winning this fight?"

"No, not necessarily. The key to a great fighter is to know your weakness. He trains to protect his jaw at all costs. I could throw a dozen killer right hooks, but they only work if I land them. He'll be on guard the entire fight."

"Last question, you have a reputation of being . . . how should I say . . . friendly with the ladies? Rumor has it you've been seen around town with a sexy brunette. Our sources say it's Raven Morretti, a local car mechanic." The interviewer and his co-host laugh before finishing. "Is 'The Assassin' settling down?"

No, he fucking did not.

I grind my teeth and my muscles tense. Leaning forward, resting my elbows on my desk, I speak clearly to keep from being misunderstood.

"Not gonna discuss my personal life, guys, but I will say this." My voice sounds low and menacing even to my ears. "You talk about Raven, I'll pay a personal visit to your studio and we'll have words. You get me?"

"Whoa! You heard it here, folks. Sounds like The Las Vegas Casanova is finally settling—"
Click.

Shit. How did I not think about this? This fight is huge for Vegas. She's going to get thrown into the middle of the media firestorm. As if the girl doesn't have enough to deal with already. I need to protect her. But how? I'll make sure we lie low until the fight's over. Briefing Raven on the situation should help to prepare her for what she's up against.

Running away with her and living out the remainder of our days on some deserted island

doesn't sound like a bad idea after all.

I make a few more calls: two for interviews and one for a new cell phone to be delivered to my house. It's eight fifteen, and I haven't heard a sound come out of my room. Raven must still be asleep. I plan on crawling back in bed with her when I hear the water running in my bathroom. Or a shower? I smile as visions of shower sex with Raven infiltrate my mind.

"Don't be an insensitive prick." I shake the wet fantasy from my head. She's got to be sore. I can't have sex with her for a day . . . or two. Okay, a day. Give her a chance to recover.

No way can I go in the room when she's wet and naked in my bathroom. I won't be able to give her a break if I see her like that. Killing time, I pay a couple bills online, check my email, and play a game of solitaire before I head back to my room.

I stroll down the hallway with purpose and a smile. Sex might be off the agenda for today, but I can think of plenty of other things we could do to occupy our time.

~*~

Raven

I open my eyes to bright sunlight. Stretching my arms above my head, my muscles object. *Gosh, I'm sore.* I roll to my back as a smile tiptoes its way across my face.

"This is awesome." I stomp my feet on the bed under the sheet.

The faint smell of coffee crashes my private party. I throw my legs over the bed, gripping the sheet to my naked chest. I search the floor for my panties, and remember that Jonah destroyed them last night. My lips roll between my teeth to muffle my excited squeak. I'll make sure to fit a panty-replacement shopping spree into my schedule this week. Maybe I'll get a few extra pairs of those—

A warm rush of heat seeps from between my legs. My jaw drops open as my hand flies to my mouth.

"Oh no! My period? Crap!"

Wrapping the top sheet around my body, I run to the bathroom and jump in the shower. I do the mental math while scrubbing my body, making sure to be gentle with the tender areas. Ten days early? Impossible. I haven't missed one pill—my breath hitches.

Not my period! No, that would be embarrassing enough. What just happened, on Jonah's fancy sheets no less, is a direct result from last night.

"This is so humiliating."

I can't imagine what the proper protocol is for a girlfriend who bleeds virgin blood on her boyfriend's sheets. One thing's for sure, I need to get those off and get them in the wash before he sees.

Dressing quickly in one of Jonah's T's, I throw my wet hair up in a towel and put Operation Virginity Devastation into action.

I race around the bed and toss the comforter to the ground. Ripping pillowcases off one by one, I pile them on the floor along with the sheets. I'm frantically scooping up the soiled linens when I hear the bedroom door open. Frozen in place, I squeeze my eyes shut.

Darn it!

Head down, I sneak a peek, silently hoping I'd imagined it.

"Hey." He studies the load in my arms, eyes lingering a bit on my legs.

Nope. I'm caught. I hop to standing, losing a few pillowcases on the way, and force my most

innocent grin.

“What’s going on?” He tilts his chin to the sheets in my arms. “I have a maid for that.”

His sexy half grin almost makes me forget my all-consuming embarrassment. Almost.

My mind spins, trying to come up with a plausible reason why I’d be doing Jonah’s laundry. His gorgeous body, uncovered from the waist up, does nothing for my concentration. I run my hungry eyes over every muscular curve.

I blink in a flutter, clearing the optical orgasm. *Concentrate, Raven.* “I, uh, thought I’d help out. Um, do my share since I’ve been living here?” My excuse comes out a question.

Jonah reads me with narrowed eyes. He knows I’m lying.

My eyes dart around the room unable to focus on his penetrating gaze. On a sigh, I drop my shoulders along with the sheets, defeated.

I can’t lie to Jonah. “This morning, when I woke up, I, uh . . .”

He lifts his eyebrows for me to continue.

“When I sat up, I guess gravity or something took over and I . . . um . . .” I drop my face, concentrating on the floor in front of me. “Bled . . . on your nice sheets.” I confess and rub my forehead to avoid eye contact. “I’m sorry. I’ll wash them, and if it doesn’t come out, I’ll buy you new ones.”

I don’t hear him move, but his bare feet move into my line of sight. Standing less than a foot away, he pulls me into his arms. They flex around me and he places a kiss on my head. I relax and snuggle into his hold.

“Let me take care of the sheets. You go get some coffee, and I’ll throw these in the wash.”

He leans back, searching for my eyes. I direct my stare past his shoulder. He cups my cheek, holding my face prisoner, demanding my attention.

“I love you, baby, but I don’t love you thinking that I care about some stupid sheets. I hope it does stain so that every time I sleep on ’em I’ll be reminded of our first time, not that I’ll need the reminder. Last night is burned into my brain, permanently.”

He did not just say that. My cheeks heat and my nose wrinkles. “Eww. That’s gross.”

“What? That last night is burned in my brain?”

I break eye contact to focus on his neck. “No, that you’d want to sleep on sheets stained with my blood.”

His fingers bring my chin up as he bends down. “Not gross to me, baby.” His voice is close and rough. “It’s sexy.” His breath caresses my lips and smells like coffee. My tongue darts out to see if I can taste it. His eyes focus on my mouth and I watch his eyelids drop.

Oh boy.

“I need you to walk away now. Go get your coffee.”

I nod, but my body pushes closer to his.

“You’re probably sore from last night, and I want to give you time to heal. If you stay here, looking at me like that, smelling the way you do, inches from my bed, I won’t be able to let you.”

I shiver.

“That’s right, baby. Coffee. Now.” His demand is gentle, but still no less a demand.

I blink my eyes quickly. “I’ll go get my coffee.”

“That’s my girl. I’ll be there in a few.”

Moving past him, he lightly smacks my butt. Shaking my head, but smiling ear to ear, my mind processes his words.

Not gross to me, baby. It’s sexy.

He really must love me.

Nineteen

Jonah

Raven left for work a few minutes ago. And with her absence came my crushing reality. My scalp is numb from fisting my hands in my hair. Sitting at my breakfast bar, I stare mindlessly at the black granite countertop, as I attempt to sort out the jumbled thoughts in my head.

Throwing a fight isn't as easy as it sounds. I can't just walk into the octagon and stick my chin out. I have to fight. Just not fight good enough to win.

How the fuck am I supposed to do that?

I'm undefeated because I go ape shit when I get hit. It's impossible to reason with the primitive part of my brain. That, along with the roar of the crowd and shouts of encouragement from my team, is a violent combination, a winning combination. Fuckin' hell, if that isn't the problem.

I'm going to have to be completely retrained. I have one week to figure out how the fuck to lose a fight.

I grab my new cell phone that was delivered and punch in a few numbers.

"Blake, meet me at the training center in ten."

Ending the call, I head out.

Blake is a red belt jiu-jitsu master. He earned the name Blake "The Snake" at seventeen when he constricted a guy in a cage fight and had him out cold in less than thirty seconds. If he can't help me, I'm fucked.

I pull up to the UFL training center right behind Blake.

"Hey, man. You ready to figure this shit out?" He heads my way through the lot.

"Yeah. I have a few ideas. Wanted to go over a couple techniques with you. That cool?"

Blake shrugs his shoulders. "Whatever helps. This shit's fucked. Still can't believe you're," he looks around to make sure we're alone in the parking lot, "really gonna do this."

I lean against my truck. "You sure you're up for this? I don't want to drag you into my shit. Not gonna lie though, I could use your help."

He rips his sunglasses from his face and leans in. "Don't start this shit with me. You fuckin' know I got your back. I'll give you that one, but you say that kinda fucked up crap again, I'll kick your ass myself."

I suppress a grin. "Then let's do this." I give him a chin lift and we walk to the center's doors.

Once geared up, we hit the octagon. It's quiet, just a few guys working at the heavy bags a dozen yards away.

"The key is to avoid this motherfucker's jaw like a two-dollar hooker," he says, then cringes. "Sorry, bad joke."

I shake my head, thinking I may just have to slide one solid punch in during this training session.

"Right, I know that, fuckwad. What I want to know is how the hell do I keep from flippin' the switch on his ass when he punches me?"

"Easy. Submissions. Take him to the ground and lock him down. Milk the clock until the ref

breaks it up.”

That’s not a bad idea. If I can get him in a solid hold where he can’t get the ground and pound, I should be able to buy some time.

“That might work. Let’s work on some submissions that keep his fists away from my face.”

Blake nods.

Without time on our side, we get to it. Modifying a few key holds isn’t easy, but we manage to come up with a couple strategies. A few take-downs and pinning techniques will help, but I’m going to need more.

“I need to go at least three rounds, and I can’t just sit on the mat holdin’ him like a newborn baby. The fans are expecting some stand-up. If I keep my punches to body shots during the stand-up, that should help.”

Blake shakes his head. “Yeah, until he strikes back and hits you hard enough to bring out the beast, but not knock you out! I’m telling you I’ve seen you fight. You need to stay grounded as much as possible. Protect your head, and keep that fine piece of ass in the forefront of your mind. Then, pray for a miracle.”

And now, I remember why I’m friends with Blake.

After a couple hours of training, I hear a voice call my name. I peer through the octagon chain link to see Taylor Gibbs, the owner of the UFL. He’s in his usual dark suit, wearing his usual schooled expression.

“Taylor. What’s up?”

“Need a word with you in my office when you’re done.”

“Give me five.”

He nods and walks away.

I turn to Blake. “You know what this is about?”

Blake looks at the space Taylor recently vacated then back to me. “No clue.” He shrugs.

We make plans to continue training tomorrow, and I head to Taylor’s office.

He probably wants to talk to me about the fight, but I feel like a kid called to the principal’s office. There’s no way he could know about my deal with Dominick. Dominick isn’t stupid enough to go flapping his gums. Blake and Raven are the only other ones that know. Blake seemed just as caught off guard as I was, and Raven, well, there’s no way she’s talking.

His no-good assistant isn’t at her desk, so I walk in his office without knocking. It’s an asshole thing to do, but I don’t have the patience for social politeness.

Taylor looks up from his computer screen. “Jonah, have a seat.”

I stay standing. “What’s this about?”

He lifts his eyebrows and nods to the chair in front of me. I sit.

“We just signed a deal for a joint campaign with the female MMA fighting league.”

“Okay. What does that have to do with me?”

“Not much, just a few cross promotions, photo shoots, magazine covers—stuff like that.”

I nod. It’s not uncommon that the UFL use me for promotional shit. I still don’t see why this warrants a visit to the boss’s office.

“I’m going to need you to be seen with their headlining fighter, Camille Fisher. Won’t be much, just the pre-fight formal dinner, and we’ll get her seats by your corner for the title fight. After that, a few sightings out at the clubs ought to do it.”

Pretending to date a girl I don’t even know so that the suits can pull off a campaign? Hell no.

“No. I’m not doing that.”

His eyes narrow and he leans forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “No? Why not.”

“I’m dating someone. I’ll be bringing her to the formal dinner, and she’ll have my seats at the fight.”

With a chuckle, he leans back into his chair, relaxed. “That it? Surely a few dates with another girl won’t bother her. Tell her it’s for work. Besides, have you seen Camille? She’s hot. I’m doing you a favor, my friend.”

What kind of man does he think I am? The kind that fucks girls whose names he doesn’t know without a second thought. Not anymore.

“Look, Taylor, I want to help you out. I’ll do photo shoots, press junkets, whatever, but I’m not cheating on my girl even if it’s staged for publicity. Have Del Toro do it.”

“She doesn’t want Del Toro. She’s requested you personally.”

I shake my head, completely solid, unwavering.

“Who’s this girl who’s got you by the balls?” he asks with genuine curiosity.

My head tilts slightly as I fix my stare on him. “Don’t see how that’s your business.”

“You’ve been fighting for me for eight years, and I’ve never even heard a rumor about you getting serious with a girl. Now, just weeks before your title fight, a fight that is going to make me a lot of money, you get serious?”

I shrug. Where in the hell is he going with this?

“No bullshit, I’m worried. I need you on your game, no distractions. I think it’s in the best interest of the organization for you to put your relationship on hold until after the fight.”

I sit forward, leaning one elbow on my knee. This guy’s got his head shoved up his own ass if he thinks I’d give up Raven to please him.

“Haven’t had a dad since I was twelve, Taylor. Managed to make it this far without one. Don’t need one now.”

“I’m not speaking as a parent, Jonah. I’m speaking as your boss.”

“Don’t remember seeing you dictating who I date in my contract.”

“I can’t force you, but I can advise you.”

“Consider me advised. We done?”

“No. Don’t forget about the press conference.”

“That’s what I have a publicist for. Now, we done?”

He studies my face for a few long seconds then shrugs.

I stand to leave, but turn just before walking out the door. “Let your assistant know I’ll be bringing a date to the pre-fight dinner.”

His eyes dart to mine and narrow a fraction. I smile back before walking out.

Who the fuck does he think he is?

~*~

Raven

“Hey, Dog.” I place his food on the bottom step and scratch behind his ears. He purrs as he eats. I smile at the content sound, knowing I’d be making the same one if I could.

After last night, I’ve been walking around in a perpetual state of contentment, robbing me of my focus.

“Yeah, I know how you feel. Feels good to be taken care of.” I rub Dog from head to tail and back. “Good kitty.”

My phone rings, scaring Dog and sending him down the alley and behind a dumpster.

"Hey, Eve." I take the conversation inside, hoping my absence will bring Dog back to finish his food.

"How are you? I'm so sorry about last night, I felt like shit after you left. It looked like you'd been crying, and I should have sent Vince home and had you stay. What happened?" She speaks quickly, whether from guilt or concern, I don't know.

"Oh, um," I clear my throat, "Jonah and I just had a little fight, but we're okay now. Just a misunderstanding."

I bite my lip and contemplate telling her about Vince. My loyalty to her is warring with my need to protect her.

"Oh, phew. I was so worried after you left. I called your cell, but you didn't answer. Vince kept telling me that you were probably okay. He said if you weren't you would call."

Nice of daddy's little henchman to comfort my best friend.

"How are things going with you and Vince?" I wait for her answer, ready to read into every word, to feel her out before I decide on full disclosure.

"Pretty good. He's still so private about stuff, but now that he's met you, I think he'll start to come around."

Private or big fat, disgusting liar?

I can't sit back and watch her get used. She needs to know. "Eve, there's something I need to—"

"I know what you're going to say, Rave. He's really affectionate, and . . . sometimes it comes across as kinda pervy or whatever. I'm sorry if he made you uncomfortable last night. He says he can't keep his hands off me." I can hear the smile in her voice.

Yuck. I fight the urge to shove my finger down my throat like a surly twelve year old.

"That's not what—"

"Enough about boys. I need my girl time. We're going out tonight. My old waitress from Nori just got hired at Club Six. She said she'd put us on the list and told me if I slip the bouncer a fifty he'd let us in without ID's."

"Tonight? Um—"

"Come on! I'm so sick of the under twenty-one clubs. This is our chance to go to a real club!"

"Okay." Unable to think of an excuse fast enough and also missing my friend like crazy, I agree to go out with her.

"Come over after work and we can get ready at my house."

This has play-dress-up-with-Raven written all over it.

"Sounds great," I say with the enthusiasm of a snail.

"Whatever, Debbie Downer. It'll be fun and besides . . . I miss you."

"I miss you too. See you after work."

Perfect. I'll tell Eve about Vince after she's had a couple drinks. That'll help soften the blow. And being in a public place should keep her from getting too emotional. *Ugh, who am I kidding? This is going to be a nightmare.*

Twenty

Raven

“Time to lock up, Ray!”

At the sound of Guy’s voice, I slide out from under the Honda CR-V. Shifting my eyes to the clock, my jaw drops at the time. Six o’clock. *Darn it!*

It got busy at the garage, and I never got a chance to text Jonah to let him know about my plans for tonight. He said he had to train, but that he was looking forward to having me back in his arms. My body warms all over at the mere thought of more sex with Jonah.

I grab my phone and see I have one missed call and a text.

Training then phone interviews all afternoon. Quick meeting then I’ll be home. See you tonight. xJ

“Ray! Quit draggin’ ass. Shut ’er down.”

“Yeah, G. I heard you.”

Shoving my phone into my back pocket, I close down the garage and race to my studio.

I throw my dirty coveralls in the hamper and strip down to jump in the shower. My foot taps impatiently, waiting for the water to heat.

Crud! I didn’t call Jonah. I wrap a towel around my naked body and fish my phone from my coveralls.

Sitting on the bed, I press send and place the phone to my ear.

“Hey, baby. Where are you?” His deep voice comes through the phone and a smile pulls at my lips.

“Hi. I’m at my studio. It was crazy busy at the garage today, and I didn’t get your text until just now.”

“That’s cool. Grab your shit and come over.”

My finger traces the swirling pattern of my towel at my thigh. “I won’t be able to come over tonight. I made plans with Eve.” My stomach bottoms out. I do want girl time, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want Jonah time more.

After explaining the evening’s agenda, I sit patiently waiting for his response.

“Club Six. Just you and your girl.” He’s not asking. It’s more like he’s saying the words so they sink in.

“Yeah. I’ll stay with Eve tonight because we’ll probably be out late, and I don’t want to wake you.”

“Hm.”

Is he mad?

“Look, here’s the deal. I’m stoked you want to hang with your girl tonight. But you at some nightclub, looking as hot as you are, dressed to kill, without me? No. I’m also not thrilled that you’re putting yourself at risk by going to a club when you aren’t twenty-one. And there’s the DomiDick shit we have to worry about.”

His possessiveness is fierce and I freakin’ love it. My entire body floods with the warm gushy feeling that makes my toes curl and my belly flip.

As a child, no one ever cared what I did. Never cared where I went, who I was with. I never had a curfew, never had the sex talk, the don’t-do-drugs talk. I was treated like an adult on my

own ever since I could remember.

“Baby, you still there?”

“Yeah, Jonah, I’m here.” The low hum in my voice reminds me of Dog’s purr.

“Damn.” His rough and sexy tone vibrates the phone at my ear. “I’ve been thinking about last night all day. Now I get you on the phone and you say my name like that. I have a mind to drag you to my house and hold you hostage. You and Eve will have to reschedule.”

“Jonah.” My voice is thick with arousal.

He groans then clears his throat. “Get dolled up, go out with your girl, and have a good time. Call me when you’re done and I’ll pick you girls up, drop Eve off at her house, and you come home with me. You’re in my bed tonight. Deal?”

Um, gee, let me think.

“Deal.”

“Oh, and there’s something you should know. Your name came up during interviews today.”

My body shoots ramrod straight, and I grasp my towel at my chest. Now my belly flips in an altogether different way. “What! Why?”

“Big fight, lots of publicity. People talk, you know how it is. It’ll die down after the fight, but don’t be surprised if you get approached by paparazzi. Just ignore them, don’t answer any questions, and if you’re alone or scared, you call me.”

Well, crud. This night just went from bad to worse.

We pull up to the front of Club Six and climb out of our taxi. The front walk is lined with people awaiting entrance. Pounding music charges the air as we step up to the VIP line.

Waiting our turn, I fidget with nervous energy and catch my reflection in the window. My strapless, black mini dress hugs every contour of my body. The strappy heels cage my feet up past my ankle, making my legs look impossibly longer. I can’t see my face, but it’s framed by long silken strands of dark hair, flat ironed to perfection. Eve did my make-up heavier than I usually wear, the smoky dark shadow bringing out the strange color of my eyes.

I’m Ravenstein, put together and brought to life for a night of shenanigans.

“Stop freaking out. You look gorgeous,” Eve says close to my ear.

“Ladies. You on the list?” says a large man with a clipboard.

Eve exchanges words and a handshake with the purpose of palming him a fifty dollar bill. The man smiles and looks us both up and down before stepping aside. We’re in.

The strobe lights and black lights make it hard to see, and the booming bass makes it impossible to talk. Guiding me through the crowd, Eve leads me to an outside patio bar. The music is muted out here so we don’t have to yell. We belly-up and order two Cosmopolitans.

“So, how are you and Jonah?” Eve wags her eyebrows.

“Better now.” I can’t control the heat that rises to my cheeks.

Eve narrows her eyes and swivels toward me on her barstool. “Oh my gosh. You did it.” A slow smile creeps to her face, and she starts clapping and bouncing on her seat. “You fucking did it . . . like literally!”

I cover my face with my hands and nod my head. This information will surely find Dominick’s ears in the next day. *So much for your plan to make money off my virginity, eh?*

“Eeeeeee!” Eve jumps from her stool and wraps her arms around my neck. “My girl lost her virginity, everyone!”

Mortification overtakes me as my eyes dart around the bar. Other than a few smiles, almost everyone ignores us.

“Eve, please! Be quiet!” I hiss.

She sits back in her seat and takes a huge swig of her drink. I follow suit.

“Rave, you gotta give me details, girl. Did it hurt? Was he good? Is he . . . big?” With eyes as wide as gas caps, she waits for my answer.

“He’s amazing in *every* possible way.”

She stomps her foot and slaps her knee. “I knew it! I knew he was big.”

I roll my eyes and suck down the rest of my drink. Apparently embarrassment makes me thirsty. I order another.

Details of my night with Jonah begin to flow out at the same pace the liquor flows in. I imagine steam shooting from Dominick’s nose like an angry bull when Vince relays the information. Satisfied with what I’ve given, I decide it’s time to broach the subject.

“What about Vince? What does he do?”

“He’s a consultant. I don’t know what he consults on. Like I said, he’s a private guy.”

More like private eye, I joke to myself and fight the urge to laugh.

“Does that bother you? That he’s a private eye . . . um, guy?”

Whoops, almost turned my private joke public. My tongue feels bigger in my mouth as my words start to slur. I wave my hand to the bartender and motion for another round.

“Yes. It does.” Her face falls and she dabs the corner of her eye with her cocktail napkin. *Here we go again.* Apparently, I’m not the only one feeling the effects of our drinks.

I spin my barstool so I’m facing her. “Eve, aren’t you sick of crying over this guy? The only time you don’t cry about him is when he’s got his tongue in your ear.”

Perfect transition into bad news. I mentally pat myself on the back.

Her arms fly out to her sides. “Ugh! It’s just I feel so close to him, you know?”

Okay, this is good. Let her vent and then I’ll go in for the kill. I nod while gulping the last of my drink.

“I get the feeling that I’m more into him than he is to me. He never talks about himself. I know nothing about him.” She sniffs. “Fucking men!”

Sick of the mastodon in the room that’s sitting right on my lap, I grab a stack of cocktail napkins and slap them down in front of her. Here it goes.

“Eve, there’s something I need to tell you. It’s about—”

“Holy shit, Rave! This is our jam!” Her shoulders bounce to the beat of the music. “Come on, let’s dance!”

“Wait, I—”

She drags me to the dance floor and the familiar voice of Dev singing “Bass Down Low” makes even me squeal.

Darn alcohol has me acting like a stupid girl.

I’ve only been drunk a few times, and the familiar floaty feeling taking over my limbs tells me I’m there. I close my eyes, absorbing the beat of the music, and move with the rhythm. The bass pulsates around me, every tiny hair on my arm responding to the call of the music. I slide my hands from my hips, up the sides of my body and into my hair. I imagine being here with Jonah, his hands all over me. Grinding against each other as the music throbs around us. Kissing in the middle of a crowded dance floor, and tasting the sweat that beads off each other’s skin. So lost in each other that we’re oblivious to everyone around, I skate my fingertips down my neck, imagining that they’re his. Remembering his touch on a cellular level, goose bumps race across my flesh. Flashes of him above me, memories from last night, have me gripping my hair.

There’s no place I’d rather be than in Jonah’s arms, in his bed. It’s time to go.

I open my eyes to see Eve is few feet away. She has become the meat in a dance-floor sandwich. I move to pull her away when hands grip my hips and heat hits my back. I react on instinct, pushing away from the grip and turning around to face the jerk.

A man in a pink golf shirt stands before me. His lips move, but I can't hear what he's saying over the music. Realizing that, he motions for me to come to him. I shake my head and turn to get Eve.

My heart is racing and I stumble, the alcohol making it difficult to control my body. I can't believe I drank so much that I lost myself in my surroundings allowing a strange man to press his crotch to my backside. I'm anxious by the time I pull Eve from between the two guys she's dancing with.

"Whad'da fuck, Rave! I was 'aving fun." Eve speaks to my shoulder with a heavy slur.

I guide her to the bar, and order us two waters. Buzzed and freaked out by the forward guy on the dance floor, I trash my plan to talk to Eve about Vince and grab my phone to call Jonah for a ride.

"Can I get another Cosmoplothian, pleeeese?" Eve's attempt at cunning falls flat.

"I think we should call it a night."

"No!" Her enthusiasm gets the attention of two guys nearby.

I give them my best don't mind her, she's just drunk smile. Mistaking my smile for an invitation, they walk to us. As they get closer I recognize the guy from the dance floor.

Crap.

Tapping Eve on the knee, I alert her to our unwelcome guests.

They're good-looking guys. Not hot-tattooed-fighter good-looking, but more like successful-banker-golfer good-looking.

I try to politely brush them off while Eve gives them death stares, mumbling something about asswads and pricks. It's bad enough that we're in the club at all, but getting kicked out for public drunkenness is sure to draw unwanted attention.

Punching a quick text to Jonah that we'll be out front in fifteen minutes, I look up to see Eve with her arm slung over banker-golfer number one. She teases her finger at the collar of his perfectly pressed shirt. *Guess her anger at men is over.*

"Eve, our ride will be here any minute. What do you say we hit the ladies' room and make our way to the door?"

Totally ignoring me, she runs her hand into Number One's hair and leans in to whisper in his ear. Pink Shirt steps in my space, pressing me back into the bar and blocking my chance for escape.

I flatten my palm to his chest. "Can you please step back?"

"You ran away from me earlier. Can't let that happen again."

The smell of his breath makes my stomach clench. My spinning head, combined with fear and a belly full of liquor, has me tasting bile.

I try to implore Eve for help, but she's face to face with Number One.

Pink Shirt hooks a piece of my hair with his finger. "You're gorgeous." He motions to his friend with a tilt of his head. "My buddy and I have a room at Trump. Looks like your friend and my friend are hitting it off."

He's right. Number One has his face buried in Eve's neck.

He steps closer so that I'm arched back over the bar, my head turned away. He leans to my ear. "What do you say you and me—"

"What the fuck is going on here?" The voice comes from down the bar, but it's

unmistakably male and mad.

Pink Shirt steps back, freeing me, while Number One is yanked violently backwards. Eve shrieks and falls back onto her barstool.

Pink Shirt looks like he's about to run, but sways as if he doesn't know if he should attempt to help his friend.

Number One's down. A man wearing all black holds him by the neck of his shirt and shouts in his face. I can't hear what he's saying, but from the look on the poor guy's face, it's terrifying.

The man in black shoves Number One hard to the ground and turns to Eve. Only then do I catch the face of our knight in shining armor.

My heart races and I break out in a sweat. Stalking towards us with a murderous look on his face, he gets right into Eve's space. Nose to nose, he stares her down as she looks up at him doe-eyed.

"You trading me for a pussy-ass, country-club boy, Eve?" Vince's body trembles with rage. Terror works behind Eve's eyes as she shakes her head.

"Vince, she didn't do anything wrong. Those guys wouldn't leave and—"

He rakes his eyes over me, and my mouth slams shut.

"Mind your own fucking business!" All pleasantries from our first two meetings are gone.

"Vince, please, look at her. You're scaring her," I whisper, trying to control my voice. She's not the only one who's scared.

"Look, you little slut."

I flinch as his insult cuts deep.

"I told you this is none of your business. You wanna make it your business, I can do that. You two are coming with me, and I'll be happy to make it your business . . . all night long."

"You wouldn't . . . I mean . . . Dominick . . ." The vicious smile that breaks his angry expression tells me everything. Dominick doesn't care about me. As long as I'm able to solicit myself for him, he could give a rip about what Vince does to me.

Tears burn my eyes as the reality sinks in. I'm breathing rapidly. The hurried beat of my heart pounds in my ears. I should run, but I can't leave Eve.

He eyeballs me from my boobs to my shoes and licks his lower lip. He wraps his arm around Eve's waist, pulling her from her seat. Her eyes are unfocused as he tugs her close to his side. His free arm shoots to me. The impact of his grip throws my body forward. He drags us through the club. I stumble to keep upright. The crowd of gyrating bodies part as he storms through the dance floor to the club's exit.

With a firm kick, the double doors fly open, and we're in the secluded alley behind the building. I take a sobering breath of fresh air to clear my head. I need to get us free so we can run. But how? Looking around frantically, I search for a way out, knowing I have only seconds before we're locked in his car.

My mind surges with questions. What would Guy tell me to do? What would Jonah tell me to do? And with that comes my answer, loud and clear.

Fight.

Adrenaline floods my veins. Energy strengthens my muscles as I struggle in his grip. I pull against his hold, digging my heels into the pavement. His eyes shoot towards mine and narrow. His grip gets tighter and Eve whimpers.

I twist my arm as hard as I can, and his hold begins to slip. Twisting and pulling, a sharp pain shoots through my shoulder. Desperate to free myself, I push through the ache. Vince stops walking and I yank down. My arm slips from his hand. He grabs hold with his other hand. *He let*

Eve go.

“Eve, run! Run!”

Blinking wildly as if she woke up from a trance, she takes off. Vince has my back, his arm locked around my waist, hand gripped on my throat. Screaming is out of the question as his crushing embrace robs me of breath. I struggle to get free and my vision starts to recede. The sound of heavy footfalls pounding the pavement behind us has me jerking in his hold.

My vision goes black as two words scream in my head.

Help me!

Twenty-one

Raven

One minute I'm choking, desperate for air, and the next I'm on all fours sucking precious oxygen into my lungs. Hearing a scuffle, I turn to see what freed me.

Shock freezes my body. Vince is on his back and Jonah is straddling him. His fists are pounding Vince's face. His colorful arms are blurry with the speed of each blow. The sickening thud of each blow is a drastic contrast to the beauty and fluidity of his movements. Jonah's arms swing with deadly accuracy. But Vince is out, his body flopping from side to side with the power of each punch.

"Jonah, stop. You'll kill him." My burning throat makes my voice a little more than a whisper, not enough to penetrate Jonah's rage.

I crawl to him with trepidation and place myself by Vince's bloody face.

"Jonah, stop. I'm okay. I'm right here. You have to stop now." My voice is gentle, and it's then that his arms slow their gory punishment.

Jonah's body stills, but his chest swells and deflates with deep breaths. Reaching forward, I place my hand on his forearm. His head jerks, and his eyes connect with mine, wild and distant. He blinks a couple times and I see my Jonah return.

"God, baby, are you okay?" His words falter with the power of each breath.

Jumping off Vince, he pulls me to my feet. His eyes move over my body along with his hands.

"I was out front. I saw Eve run from behind the club. I ran as fast as I could. He had you . . . Shit, are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Just a little scared. Where's Eve?"

"I told her to go to the truck and sit tight." He looks back at an unconscious Vince. "Who the fuck is that piece of shit?"

I drop my eyes to the ground, wanting to slap myself. I never told Jonah about Vince. "That's Vince, Eve's boyfriend," I take a deep breath, "and Dominick's right hand."

His eyes grow narrow and his muscles tense. "That motherfucker!"

An echo of Jonah's curse rings off the walls of the alley. The H2 I saw at Eve's the other night is parked there, hidden in a service entrance of the warehouse next to the club. Without a soul around, I'm thankful no one was a witness to what Jonah did to Vince. But I can't help but wonder what would have happened if Jonah hadn't shown up when he did.

"We need to get out of here." I rub my neck and wince as my shoulder protests the movement.

Jonah looks undecided as to whether he should finish the job he started on Vince or get us to the truck. Moaning drifts from the bloodied piece of meat beside us, and that seems to force Jonah into a snap decision. He wraps one arm around my shoulders and the other around my stomach, supporting my weight, and we hurry to the truck.

It's a silent ride to Eve's house except for her occasional apologies for Vince's behavior. I see hurt in her eyes, but not hurt that she just found out her boyfriend is abusive. The pain in her eyes is that of a girl with a broken heart. Will she always be attracted to men who hurt her like her father did? God, I hope not.

We drop her off at her insistence. She wants to be alone, and I don't blame her. She has a lot to think about. Jonah walks through her house, turning on all the lights and making sure she feels safe before she locks herself inside.

Safe in the cab of the truck, I allow myself to feel the weight of what happened. I turn my head to face out the window, not wanting to give Jonah any more to worry about. A silent sob rips through my body as tears of fear, guilt, and anxiety flow down my cheeks. The driver side door slams shut and a warm hand covers mine. I interlace our fingers, hold on tight, and vow to never let go.

~*~

Jonah

"That son of a bitch!" Blake's response to my re-telling of the evening's events mirrors my own.

I grip my phone tighter before loosening my hold, remembering what happened the last time I took out my anger on my phone. To avoid putting my fist through a wall, I force myself to my bed.

"You told him at Zeus's Playground to pull his tails on Raven. I was there. I heard you!"

I don't know if calling Blake was the smartest choice. Talking shit out with Blake usually helps me decompress. Right now, he's just getting me worked up. I sit back and stare at the ceiling, hoping I can calm my ass down before Raven gets out of the shower. The poor girl has had a round trip ticket to hell and back. The last thing she needs is her raging boyfriend climbing the fucking walls like a caged animal.

"I almost killed him. I swear if I hadn't heard Raven's voice begging me to stop, I would have. Seeing that motherfucker with his arms wrapped around her . . ." My sentence trails off as my jaw clenches so tight I'm spitting words through my teeth.

"Sounds like it's time for another meeting with dear ol' dad," Blake says, his voice holding a hint of excitement.

"Yeah, I have to talk to my girl first, get the story on this Vince guy." My head falls to the backboard and I rub my eyes with my free hand. "You should see her arm. All dressed up, lookin' hot as hell, with a fucking bruise in the shape of a man's hand on her arm." The calm that had been slowly moving through my body dissolves into anger. "He had her fucking neck!"

"At least you taught that fucker a lesson. Don't think he'll be messin' with Raven again after you flipped the switch on his ass."

He's got a point. I had to trash one of my favorite shirts because it was splattered with his blood.

"Look, the fight's this week. You and Raven lie low until then. You don't need any more publicity than you..."

My attention is drawn from Blake to the sound of the shower being turned off.

"What the fuck is Eve thinking?" His angry question jerks me back to the conversation.

"Don't know, don't fucking care. This douchebag's been on Raven's ass from the get-go. I'm putting this shit to an end."

"Fuckin' A, brother," Blake says under his breath.

The bathroom door opens and Raven walks out in nothing but a towel. My mind clears of everything that happened tonight at the sight of her wet skin. I imagine drying her with my

mouth as my eyes devour her legs and move over her towel to her arms. Her arm. The angry bruise brings me back in a violent rush.

I glare at the color on her arm. "Gotta run. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Right. Tell your girl to stay strong."

"Will do. Later."

Tossing my phone on the bedside table, I watch Raven put on a short pair of drawstring sleeping shorts, no panties, and a thin tank top. Blinking, I tell myself that my body can wait but the conversation we need to have cannot.

"Baby, come here."

I make room for her on the bed, and she quickly takes her place at my side. Her cheek is pressed to my chest and her finger traces lazy circles on my abdomen. My dick responds immediately. I place my hand over hers to stop the stimulation before I forget my own name and bury myself inside her.

"Um, you're going to have to stop that so we can talk. Shit happens to my body that short-circuits my brain."

I feel her smile against my chest. She pushes her hand out from under mine, down past my belly button. I groan as her delicate fingers slip beneath my shorts.

"I, ah . . ." My mind goes fuzzy and my heart pounds in my chest.

Her soft hand grasps me in a firm hold and my hips jerk in response. *Fuuuck*.

"I know you want to talk, Jonah, and we will. But right now, I need you."

I can't remember what we were going to talk about, and I don't care.

Her hand picks up its pace and pressure. My eyes fix on her forearm as her lean muscles flex with each stroke. The fruity smell from her clean hair makes my mouth water. My lips burn with the need to kiss her.

"Baby, I want your mouth," I say, panting.

She kisses my neck, a tease with her full wet lips that has me achingly frustrated. I wrap my hand behind her neck, sifting my fingers through her hair, then grip tight. She moans.

I bring her luscious lips to mine, taking what I want. Our tongues crash together as I convert my anger from earlier into passion. The feel of her teeth as she nips impatiently at my lips makes me think she's doing the same. My mouth is flooded with her pure, clean taste. I flex my hands in her hair as her sweet mouth moves against mine in a sensual rhythm.

She presses her breasts into my chest and her stroke quickens. I'm fighting not to roll my eyes at the perfection of her touch. Reaching down, I release my button and zipper, freeing myself for her. She smiles against my lips then sucks on my lower lip. I can't help but imagine she's sucking on something else, and I groan.

She breaks the kiss and locks her blue-green eyes on mine. Her eyebrows raise a fraction as if she's asking a question. Then her hand releases me just enough to slide her hand lower.

"Mmm . . ." My head falls back and my eyes slam shut. She's never done this before, and I marvel at her growing confidence. Her gentle play and tender touch are both teasingly sweet and erotic as hell. My stomach muscles contract as I let her explore.

Desperate to feel her, I slide a hand beneath her tank top. Her soft skin is pliable against my rough hands. I cup her firm breast then knead, rolling the tip between my thumb and forefinger. Her sexy curves push and rub against me, enticing my body.

"I want you naked," I growl.

Pushing myself up, I straddle her knees, and pull her tank top off. She sucks in a pained breath and falls back to the bed.

“What’s wrong?”

“My shoulder,” she says with a grimace.

“Shit, baby. I don’t want to do this if it’s going to hurt you.” The thought alone is like dumping ice cold water on my crotch. “I already feel like an asshole not giving you more time to heal after last night.” I sit back on my heels and pray she doesn’t want to stop.

“I can’t explain it,” she says and pushes herself up on one elbow. “All I know is that, after everything I went through tonight, I want to feel safe and cherished. Protected.”

I look into her eyes and watch them brim with tears.

“I want you . . . I *need* you to love me. Please.” She’s beautiful all the time, but the vulnerability in her eyes as she pleads robs me of speech.

I lean forward and she lies back. My tongue licks at the crease of her mouth, requesting entrance. We have plenty of time for rough passion. Tonight, I want to love her at a deliberate pace.

I slip my hand beneath the drawstring of her shorts and she breaks the kiss, gasping at my contact. Her hips move in rhythm with my fingers. I brace myself above her on one elbow, mesmerized by her response: her lip sucked into her mouth, moaning. White knuckles grip the sheets as her hips push and roll against my hand.

Perfect.

Her hands move to her shorts, and, with a lift of her hips, she pulls them down. I do the same, ridding myself of the stifling confinement. She’s naked before me, chest rising and falling erratically, and knees wide in invitation. I caress her thighs, taking in all that is mine. Only mine. She stares openly at my hard-on, making it twitch, and I watch her eyes widen.

From my kneeling position between her legs, I grab her hips and pull her up so her ass is resting on my thighs. I spread my knees, bringing myself lower and pulling her higher until we meet. Her legs wrap around my waist, and I slip my hands below her ass and tilt.

“Jonah.” There’s an edge of concern in her voice.

This is a new position for her, and I’m sure she’s nervous. My chest swells with the knowledge that every position will be new to her and I’m the one who gets to teach her.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ll take care of you.”

Her expression relaxes with a tiny smile.

I push forward, and just like last night, my stomach is gripped with the urge to thrust. *Slowly*. I repeat it in my head. Inch by inch I ease into her. My eyes take in the sight of our bodies connecting. The silky heat, gripping pressure, and visual stimulation turn me into an emotional live wire. I pull out an inch and push in two more. Over and over, slowly until I’m buried deep. I pause and fight the explosion coiling in my body. Think of something else. I go over a list of choke holds. Triangle choke, gator roll, rear naked choke . . . Oh, no, not that one.

The image of my body connected to Raven’s becomes too much. I fall forward, bracing my weight with my arms and straighten my legs. Raven immediately responds to the closeness of our mouths by devouring mine. I move above her in lazy strokes, taking in each sensation. My chest brushes against her breasts with each painstakingly slow thrust. She squirms with impatience beneath me.

“Faster, Jonah. Harder,” she says, grasping at my ass.

“Baby, you’re sore. I need—“

“Take me, please. I want you to.” Her words are breathy and hot as hell.

My body responds by thrusting in deep. I bite my lip to keep from calling out in blissful satisfaction as her gripping heat pulls me in. *Fuck*. She gasps against my neck. I check her face

to see it's not pain she's feeling. It's pleasure. Pulling out slowly, I push in again, harder this time. She moans and coaxes me on.

My girl.

Overwhelming emotion and raw need push my hips deeper. I keep my eyes locked on hers and roll my hips. The sounds coming from deep in her chest take me to the edge of my control.

A familiar twinge in my chest warms my skin as I continue to love Raven. My strokes increase in strength and her fingernails dig into my ass. She meets each thrust with a push of her own. Her dark hair is splayed wildly around her face. She arches back in the way that I know is her signal. She's close.

Not ready for this to end, I roll to my back, keeping our connection. A light sheen of sweat clings to our bodies, her torso lies atop mine. Her face is buried in my neck where she kisses and licks below my ear.

She pushes herself up, straddling my hips. Her eyelids are low, and her lips part as she seems to absorb the sensations of the different position. My eyes roam her body from her hips, up her slightly rounded feminine stomach, to her perfect full breasts. Gloriously naked and towering over me like an angel without wings.

I circle the tips of her breasts with my fingertips, teasing the sensitive flesh. She presses them into my hands and sucks in a breath. Her heavy-lidded eyes sparkle and she begins to move above me.

Her hands brace at my chest, and I continue to caress her breasts. I watch in amazement as she commands her body with practiced ease. She moves with confidence and control, and it's hard to believe she was a virgin a day ago. Her pace quickens. She rolls her hips in bliss-ridden waves. I fight every urge to flip over and pound into her. She shifts, searching it out, desperate for the perfect combination.

I'm so close. Her cries alert me to the fact that she is too. I flex my hips into her. She grinds down hard against me. My toes curl and my stomach tightens.

"Fuck, baby . . ."

"Me too, Jonah . . ."

We're panting and pushing. Grinding and moaning. Her beautiful eyes lock onto mine and bore into my soul. Wound tight, we reach together, pushing toward the edge. Her mouth drops open, and I bite my lip, our orgasms ripping through our connection together.

The shockwaves push through my body, lifting my shoulders from the bed. Her hands move to my knees, bowing her back. I hold her hips in place and continue to grind into her. She throws her head back, calling out my name as we ride out our climax.

Fucking amazing.

Her body falls forward against my chest, pressing her warm, balmy skin to mine. Heavy from the aftershocks of our lovemaking, we lay silently, breathing as one, our hearts beating together.

"Wow," she mumbles against my neck.

"Mmm."

She pushes herself up, resting her elbow on my ribs, and her chin in her hand.

"Is it always like this?"

Beautiful and cute.

"No. It's never been like this. And, yes, with us, it'll only get better."

Her eyes grow a fraction before her lids drop lower. "Really?"

I run my fingers through her hair, from root to tip, the long strands falling against my chest.

“Yeah, baby.”

She bites her bottom lip and softly moans. Her hips start to move again.

I smile. “My girl wants more.”

“Yeah, Jonah,” she says in that breathy way that makes me instantly hard.

“I aim to please.”

After another round of lovemaking, Raven is curled in my arms. Her head rests against my chest and her leg is thrown over my abs. I run my hand through her long, silky hair, twirling it around my finger. My other hand lazily traces patterns on her hip while her finger outlines my tattoo.

“You loved up enough to talk now, or do I need to give it to you one more time?”

She smiles, but doesn’t laugh. “I would love to do it again, but I’m too tired.” The yawn that follows confirms her words.

“Tell me about this Vince guy.”

She huffs out a frustrated breath. “I met him that day I went to see Dominick. He acted like he knew me, but I didn’t think much of it. Guess he’d been milking Eve for information about me for weeks. Then I ran into him at Eve’s. I wanted to tell you, but forgot with everything that was happening with us.”

This all makes sense. Now for the tough question. “What happened tonight at the club?”

She cowers against my chest.

What the fuck?

“We were at the bar after dancing. We had a little too much to drink, and before I knew it, these guys were harassing us—“

“Harassing you? Fuck, Raven! Why didn’t you call me?” My words are flying before my brain has time to consider what I’m saying. *And I wonder why she’s cowering?* Not wanting to lose my shit, I push my anger down and take a deep breath. “Sorry, baby. Go on.”

She continues to tell me about her night. I try not to dwell on the motherfucker that put his hands on my girl then pressed her up against the bar. I swallow the angry retorts that bubble up from my all-consuming frustration. I nod and listen, unsuccessfully suppressing the occasional growl.

“Did he say where he was taking you?”

“No, he called me a slut and told me it was none of my business. He said that if I didn’t shut up, he was going to make it my business, um . . . allnightlong.” Her chin drops again as she ends the sentence in a whisper.

Did she say all night long? He called her a slut!

My head starts to buzz. “He’s fucking dead,” I say with a calm I am not feeling.

“Um, I’m pretty sure you got him back. I didn’t even recognize his face when you were done with him.”

Her body shivers in my arms. I hold her tighter.

“I can’t let this go, Raven. I’m going back to talk to Dominick. If he doesn’t get his boy in check, we’re going to the cops.”

“Jonah—”

“I’ll do this Dominick’s way. I’ll throw my fight. He’ll get his money. But the moment his goons put their fucking hands on my girl . . .”

What? I have no options. I’m the one with everything to lose, not Dominick. The fucker’s backed me into a corner and he knows it.

“We can’t go to the cops. Even you said he’s got them on his payroll. If Dominick feels threatened, he could leak to the media that you agreed to throw your fight. Even without evidence, the rumors could get you banned from the UFL.”

Fuck. She’s right. My mind spins with unanswered questions. The most important thing is to keep Raven calm and safe. That’s where my focus needs to be, at least until this shit is over.

“I’ll talk with Dominick again. He wants his money. I’m sure he’s not pleased that his boy got his ass handed to him tonight. Don’t worry, baby. I’ll take care of this.”

She nods into my chest. “Please be careful.”

“Always. Now go to sleep. We can talk more in the morning.”

“Okay, Jonah. I love you,” she says through another yawn.

“I love you too, baby.”

After shutting off the light, I stare into the dark room. Raven’s breathing shifts to the rhythmic cadence of sleep. I hold her a little tighter, absorbing the contentment I feel from having her safe in my arms.

This clusterfuck with Vince has complicated my deal with Dominick. He needs to know now, especially after I turned Vince’s face into ground beef, that I’m not going to allow him to fuck with Raven. There’s no way—

My thoughts are redirected by the sound of my phone ringing. With a slight lean, I grab my phone from my bedside.

I don’t check the ID, but instead hit answer and bite out a quick, “What!”

Raven stirs, and I rub her arm reassuringly.

“Mr. Slade.”

Adrenaline floods my bloodstream, making my head buzz.

“Dominick.”

Twenty-two

Jonah

I kiss Raven's head before slipping out from under her and into the hallway.

"I see you and Vince had a little difference of opinion this evening," Dominick says, sounding bored.

"Difference of opinion? He assaulted her! He was taking her to God knows where to do God knows what! You call that a difference of o-fucking-pinion?"

The usual buzz in my head has amplified to a roar. I'm vibrating from head to toe.

"I've taken care of him. I'm not happy with what transpired at the club."

"I told you to pull your tails. That was part of our agreement."

"Yes, well it seems Vince has grown fond of this Eve girl. You can't blame a guy for sticking around for a little easy pussy. I'm sure you of all people can understand that."

"I could give a fuck what Vince does with his dick, but I swear to God, if he comes near Raven with it or with any other part of his body again, I will kill him. You get me? I hope like hell you do because I've never been more serious about anything in my life." I pace the living room, trying to keep my voice down.

"I won't apologize for Vince's behavior."

"You want Raven so bad, but you'd let that animal put his hands on her?"

"Vince knows the girl needs to remain unharmed. Whatever his plan was, I'm confident it wouldn't have left any permanent—"

"You sick motherfu—"

"Our deal is still as it was agreed upon at Zeus's."

"Only if you and your men agree to leave Raven alone."

"Mr. Slade, you are in no position to make threats."

"The fuck I'm not. Say it!"

"I will protect what's mine."

"She's not yours!" The intense buzzing between my ears travels down my arms to my fists.

"We will see, Mr. Slade. We will see."

The phone disconnects. My call log lists the number as *unknown*.

"Fuck!" I throw my phone into a club chair across the room. It lands with an unsatisfying thud.

My appetite for beating Dominick to a bloody mess claws at my nerves. I fall to the couch with my head in my hands, fisting my hair, and will my heart to slow.

Fear from tonight comes rushing in. Flashbacks of Vince's arms around Raven flood my mind. What if I hadn't gotten there in time? I shove the question back, resisting the thought of losing her.

She's safe in my bed, where I should be.

I stalk down the hallway to my room and throw open the door. It slams against the wall, making Raven jump then settle.

Shit. Calm the fuck down.

I fight the buzz in my head and crawl into bed with Raven. Her soft body, warm with sleep, curls into mine. A gentle hum vibrates from her lips, the soothing scent of her skin a salve to my

fury. My heart rate slows and the riot between my ears recedes. I haul her deeper into my arms, silently promising to keep her safe and make her mine. Forever.

~*~

Raven

“Hand me the wrench?” Jonah’s big hand reaches out from beneath the Impala, and I slap the wrench into his palm.

We’ve been working on the Impala all morning in an attempt to take my mind off the fact that I haven’t heard from Eve. Hours pass, and still no word. *I can’t just sit here and do nothing.*

I’m assembling the new engine parts when I gather the courage to broach the issue with Jonah.

“If I don’t hear from her soon,” I scrunch my nose and pinch my eyes closed, “I’m going to her house.”

The metallic clank of a tool hitting the concrete floor bounces off the walls. My eyes remain fixed on the project before me.

I hear him slide on the dolly out from underneath the car. “Over my dead motherfucking body.”

I brace myself for an argument. With a determined scowl, I bring my eyes to his, steel in my resolve.

Worry and concern mask his usual easy smile, shattering my will. My shoulders slump and I lean on the workbench. “I’m worried about her.”

He stands and closes the space between us. “I know, baby. But I can’t let you go to her house alone. If you insist on stopping by, I’m going with you.”

I need to tell Eve about Vince, and I don’t want her to get embarrassed having Jonah there. Not to mention he turned her boyfriend into road kill just hours ago.

“No. I need to go alone.”

He wraps me in his arms and I go limp against his chest. “No way.”

I exhale, frustrated, but not surprised. “Jonah, I understand why you’re worried. But really, what’re the chances that Vince will be at her house? He’s probably hiding away with a tube of Neosporin and an ice pack after what you did to him.”

His arms tighten at the mention of Vince. “You aren’t going.”

Why does everything have to be so hard?

I tilt my head to see his face. “What’s the big deal? All I’ll be doing—”

“The big deal?” He lets me go and takes a few long strides back to the Impala. His hands spear through his hair. “The *big deal* is that the last time I let you go somewhere on your own, against my better judgment, you came back *destroyed*.” He leans into the car’s hood, arms bracing his weight, head down.

I step to the front fender. “Jonah.”

He turns his head, a tortured expression on his face. He’s right. I promised him, the night we made love for the first time, I’d never put him through that kind of worry again.

“Okay. I won’t go.”

With a murmured curse, his body weight collapses, and he pushes off the car.

“To her house. I’ll go to her work.” My determination is back, and he must see it in the seconds he studies my face.

“Fine. But only to her work. With plenty of people around. And call me before you walk in and the second you walk out. Understand?”

I grin, overwhelmed by how much I love my protective Jonah. “Okay.”

“I’m serious, baby. If you see—”

My phone chimes with a new text.

Just got your message. I’m fine, just slept in. Come on over. Eve.

I text her back and ask her what time she has to work. We agree to meet there a half an hour before her shift starts.

Jonah’s not satisfied with the plan, but at least he’s not chaining me to his bed for safekeeping, as he threatened. I promised him I’d meet him at the training center after I met with Eve so he could see with his own eyes that I’m okay.

He takes me to work to check in with Guy, looming in the background the entire time like some Adonis bodyguard. We hit my studio to feed Dog and pack some things. He finally left my side so I could meet with Eve, but only with the promise that I’d see him in less than an hour.

I pull into the parking lot of Nori Pizzeria right on time. Walking from my car to the front door, I notice Eve’s 2010 blue Mustang. I do a quick scan for Vince’s H2 and exhale in relief to see it’s not there.

I push through the front doors, and the aroma of garlic and butter make my stomach growl. Wax-covered Chianti bottles sit atop tables dressed in white butcher paper. A few waiters mill about, but no Eve.

“Raven! Hey, haven’t seen you here in a while.” Stephanie’s eyes dart around and behind me before landing on my face. “Where’s the hottie you’re dating?” The enthusiastic hostess flashes a hopeful smile. “Did you guys break up?”

She’s a cute girl, and I’ve never considered myself the jealous type, but my hand tingles with the desire to backhand that ready-and-willing look off her face.

“Mmm, nope. We didn’t break up.” I lay my forearm on top of the hostess stand and lean in. “We’re still very much *together*, if you know what I mean.” I give her a wink and watch the enthusiasm drain from her face.

Yeah, take that!

“Eve in the back?” I don’t wait for an answer and head to the kitchen with pep in my step.

She mumbles something I can’t quite make out as I push through the kitchen doors.

At the closed office door, I pause to refocus before knocking. I have no idea what kind of mood Eve will be in, and I can only hope she takes what I’m about to tell her well.

“Eve? You there?” I rap my knuckles against the door.

Her soft voice tells me to come in.

The room is dark except for a dim desk lamp. She’s sitting in her chair with her elbows on the desk and both hands on either side of her head. Not good.

I take the seat across from her. “Hey, Eve. How are you doing?”

“Humph.”

“That bad, huh?”

She doesn’t reply only drops her forehead to her desk.

“Look, about last night, I’m so sorry—“

Her head flies up, and she locks me in a narrow glare. “Sorry? What do you have to be sorry about? This whole thing is my fault. I keep telling myself that *this guy* will be different. *This guy* won’t hit me or talk shit to me. They all seem so normal in the beginning. Or so I think.” Her head is back in her hands as she rubs at her temples. “God, Rave, I’m so fucked up.”

“Eve, you aren’t . . . effed up.”

Her puffy eyes narrow on mine again, and I decide this is a good time to shut up and listen.

“You know what I did last night after you dropped me off? I lay in bed all night with my phone on my chest, hoping he would call me. I wanted that piece-of-shit to call me and tell me that he was sorry, that he would never scare me again. If he would have shown up on my doorstep, I would’ve taken him back.” She falls back into her chair. “Still think I’m not fucked up?”

No, that sounded pretty screwed up to me. But, I wasn’t going to tell her that.

She’s beating herself up about Vince, feeling as though this is all her fault. If she knew that she was nothing more than a job to him, maybe it would help her to let him go and let herself off the hook.

“Listen, I tried to tell—”

“He held onto you,” she says with a distant sound to her voice.

“What?” I whisper.

“You were pulling away, almost out of his grasp. He *let go* of me. He *held on* to you.” She looks at me with tears pooling in her eyes and shame on her face. “I was jealous.” The tears burst free, creating rivers of pain down her face. “I’m *so* fucked up.”

She buries her face in her hands as her body shakes with sobs. I walk to her side of the desk and kneel down.

“Eve, there’s something I need to tell you. I didn’t tell you before because I was trying to protect you. But, you need to know now. None of this is your fault.”

Her bloodshot eyes lock on mine as I explain about Vince. I tell her about Dominick and what his plans are for me. I keep Jonah’s fight a secret, but I do tell her that Jonah, Dominick and I are working something out so that I don’t have to prostitute myself for the rest of my life. I finish by making it clear that, although I’m sure Vince has feelings for her, his intentions from the beginning were getting information to Dominick, and his holding me last night probably had something to do with that.

The silent minutes tick. Eve stares at the wall just over my shoulder. Her lips are moving, but no sound comes out. Sitting back on my heels, I wait for her to register the gaggle of putrid information I dumped on her.

“That fucking piece of shit motherfucker!”

Stunned by her sudden outburst, I rock back, throwing an arm behind me to keep from falling to my butt.

“Fucking men! Piece-of-shit, no good, dick licking, motherfucking men!” She shoots out of her chair and paces the small space of her office. “That’s it!” Locking her wide eyes with mine, she throws her hands in the air. “I’m done. I’m switching teams. I despise men and from now on will only date women.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary—”

“Urrggh! My dad, your da—um, Dominick, Vince, every other sick fuck that came before him! I’m so fucking mad!” She’s back to pacing.

“Yes, I can see that,” I mumble.

I listen as Eve comes up with every possible combination for every possible curse word, and even some she invents on the spot. Having finally exhausted the English language, she sits back in her chair.

“Are you going to be okay?” I’m grateful to see her previously purple face fade to a splotchy red.

“Me? Hell yeah, I’ll be okay. I’m a lesbian now. I think the question is, are you okay?”

I think about how to answer, wanting to be as honest as I can.

“Yes, I believe I will be.”

And I do. I believe in Jonah and his ability. I believe in his love and his commitment to getting me away from Dominick. I believe in us and our future. That’s all I need.

“Thank you for telling me about Vince. I wish you’d told me earlier, but I don’t know if I would have listened. He really had me fooled.” She shakes her head.

“Just stay away from him, okay?” I lift my eyebrows, letting her know I expect an answer.

“Yeah! Of course.”

I nod, but something deep in my gut tells me she’s doesn’t have the self-control to stay away.

She stands up and wraps me in a hug. “I’m sorry, Rave.”

“I know. Me too.” I pull back, breaking the hug. “I’ll text you later tonight when you get off work. Are you sure you’re okay being alone at your place? Jonah said you’re welcome to stay in his guest room for as long as you want.”

“Yeah.” She waves me off with a flick of her hand. “I’m fine, but tell him thanks.”

“I will.” I walk out the door, but pop my head back into the office. “Don’t kill anyone from the male species tonight.”

“I’ll try not to.”

Leaving the restaurant, I can’t help but sympathize with every man who crosses paths with Eve.

* * * *

“Excuse me, miss? You aren’t allowed in there unless you’re on my list,” a large rent-a-cop says as he taps his clipboard.

I’m stopped just short of the Training Center’s doors. I knew Jonah had some of the local media coming to interview him today, but this is like trying to get backstage at a U2 concert.

“Oh, of course. Um, Raven?” I hope Jonah put me on the list or I’m about to feel like a complete idiot.

He pushes his mirrored aviator sunglasses up the bridge of his nose with the tip of his index finger. His gaze starts at my feet and slides up my body. I cross my arms at my chest as I’m visually violated.

“I’m going to need to see some identification.”

He’s really taking this door security seriously. It looks like someone didn’t make the cut in cop school. I hand him my ID. He looks at his list, checks my driver’s license, studies my face, and is back to his list.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

“All right. You’re all clear.” He hands back my card.

I’m surprised he didn’t need a blood sample. I nod in his direction and push through the doors.

The place is alive with activity. The murmur of voices hums in my ears as I gaze around the lobby. No sign of Jonah. I slide through the groups of people and down the hallway to the main training room. The guys are training as usual, but now they’re surrounded by cameras and news anchors. I push through about a dozen people in suits, most of whom are talking or texting on their cell phones.

Stretching up on my toes to see over their heads, I search for Jonah. I see Rex and Caleb boxing with two trainers I've never met. Owen is talking on camera, a very attractive news anchor wearing a low cut v-neck shirt and a miniskirt, holding a microphone to his mouth.

"Baby girl." I jump and squeak at the sound of Blake's voice at my shoulder.

"You scared me to death." I place my hand over my heart.

His face is serious and thoughtful. No wisecrack come-ons or dirty jokes. He steps into my space, his green eyes boring down on me. "I heard about what happened last night."

"Last night?" Memories of being naked above Jonah flood my mind. My cheeks flame. I smack my head with my palm. "Oh, Vince." Of course, he would be talking about Vince.

"Yeah. Vince." His eyes narrow and jaw tenses. "What did you think I was talking about?"

"Nothing. Forget it." I blow it off with a disinterested shrug and pray the pink drains from my face.

He's still staring. Blake's never serious for this long. His face looks pained as he studies the space just above my head. I look up. Nothing there. What in the heck is he doing?

"Blake, you're freaking me out."

He looks at me, grief working behind his eyes before he blinks it away. "Look, I know . . ." He grimaces and stares at the floor, like he's gathering strength from it. "I know what it's like to have a no-good, asshole for a father. I've lived it. Still living it." He rubs his shaved head. "It's one thing to fuck with your son, but to fuck with a girl?" A half groan, half growl rumbles in his chest. His focus is fixed on me. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, I got your back. And Jonah's. You feel me?"

I rub my lips together, trying to smash the inevitable quiver. Whatever happened to Blake in his past is enough that the simple memory erases the man I know and replaces him with a scared, timid boy.

My eyes burn with forced back tears. This is too much. First Jonah and now Blake. They act like they would lay down their lives to protect me. That's crazy. And unfamiliar. It feels like . . . family.

"Yeah, I feel you."

His eyes sparkle and his cocksure smile returns. He leans toward me with his hand cupping his ear. "I'm sorry. Did you say you want to feel me?" He runs his hands over his chest.

"Anywhere in particular or you want me to make suggestions? There's one place, down—Ow!"

I smack him in the stomach, happy to see the anguish wiped from his face.

He rubs the spot at his belly where I hit him. "We need to get you in the octagon. Damn, that hurt."

I shoulder bump him, and he takes his cue to pull me to his side. I don't say a word, afraid that my voice might show the deep emotions I'm feeling.

"Come on. I'll take you to your man."

Twenty-three

Raven

Two days until fight day.

My mind is focused on installing a new timing belt on the Impala while the lulling voice of Al Green being so in love fills the air. I mentally inventory my progress. White wall tires, a paint job, and she's done.

Bent over with my head under the hood, I feel a tight grip on my hips. Jonah's touch has become a second skin, as recognizable as my own. I smile and gently press my backside into his groin.

"You wanna tell me what it is you're hiding from out here?"

He's managed to figure me out in the short time we've been together. Come to think of it, he seemed to read me pretty well after a few days.

I straighten from beneath the hood on a sigh. His hands slide from my hips to my stomach and I melt into him. His touch in any capacity renders me totally helpless.

"I'm not hiding. I'm processing."

With my hair pulled up high on my head, my neck is at his mercy. He kisses his spot before gently nipping. I shiver.

"You're freakin' out because that formal dinner is tonight and because my mom is coming into town tomorrow." His ability to read me can also be incredibly annoying.

"Yeah." *Can't a girl have a secret?* "I don't do well with parents. What if she doesn't like me? I'm sure she's really protective of you. I mean if you were my son I would be too. It's just . . . I know how my mom feels about me . . ."

I'm unable to finish my thought, not wanting to hear the words out loud. The fact is I'm pretty sure my mom hates my guts. She must blame me for her horrible life. If she never had me, she would have been able to run away from Dominick and have a chance at a real life or love. How could she not hate me? Thinking about it makes me hate myself.

"She's going to love you, baby. She'll be charmed by you just like everyone else."

I wish I had his confidence.

"Besides, you don't know how your mom feels about you. I know her actions show that she doesn't care, but maybe she doesn't know how to show you how she feels. Maybe she thinks you hate her. Hell, you have every right to."

I usually brush off the subject of my mom when it comes up, but something deep inside tugs at me. His love has given me a safe place to fall. I can give him a piece of me. With his chest pressed to my back, I won't have to witness the pity in his eyes. *I can do this.*

"When I was a little girl, I used to sneak into her bed at night."

His arms tense and his chest flexes against my back.

"I would curl up next to her, desperate to feel the heat from her skin. I remember I would slowly inch my hand closer and closer, so afraid to wake her, until I could touch just the tip of my finger to her back or her arm. Sometimes I would just loop a strand of her long hair around my finger."

My voice drops to a whisper as I'm taken back to those nights. I feel small and insignificant. Crushed with sadness, my lungs struggle for a full breath.

"I usually only got a minute or two before she'd wake up. It was as if she could sense me, even in her sleep, like my very presence triggered an internal alarm system that told her to get away. She would make me go back to my bed. Some nights I'd be so angry and desperate I'd refuse to leave." My humorless laughter breaks with emotion. "She would get sick of telling me to get out, and she'd go sleep on the couch. She'd rather sleep on the couch than with her own daughter."

"Baby . . ." he whispers and kisses my head.

"The saddest part is that those nights were the best. I got to sleep the rest of the night surrounded by her smell. I would wrap myself up tight in her sheets and pretend they were her arms. I'd bury my face in her pillow, smelling her shampoo and night cream."

Hot tears drip from my jaw, and Jonah's arms tighten on my waist.

"Anyway, that's the reason I listen to old music. All those old tapes were my mom's. I took them when I left. I knew she'd be mad, but I also knew she wouldn't come for them." I wipe my cheeks and sniff. "Listening to this music, the music she had playing every day of my entire life, it's the only way I can be close to her."

The pressure at my waist is released and he turns me to him. I keep my eyes focused on his chest, not ready to confront the look on his face. His fingers beneath my chin pull my gaze to his. Bending down, his lips softly brush against mine and stay there as he speaks.

"Baby, I promise you that you'll never want for physical contact again." His big, strong hands hold my head and he leans his forehead against mine. "I'll always hold you when you're scared." He softly kisses my jaw. "Comfort you when you're sad." His lips brush against my cheeks. "Take care of you when you're sick." Tilting my head back, he kisses my forehead. He bends down and his hazel eyes narrow into mine. "I'll make it my life's mission to make up for every second you were neglected."

I'm captivated by his stare, which, like his hold on my heart, doesn't let go. I suck in a ragged breath, overcome with emotion.

"I know I say this all the time, but I love you, Jonah. So much."

"I love you too, baby. Thank you for telling me about your mom. There's nothing you need to keep from me. I want to know you, even the stuff you're not proud of."

"Okay."

"My gorgeous girl and her 'okays.'"

I bury my face in his chest, feeling lighter, having released a heavy burden from my past and placed it on the strong, capable shoulders of the amazing man before me.

"Now, as far as the formal dinner tonight goes? You have nothing to worry about. I won't leave your side, not even for a second." His dimples slowly appear as a smile creeps across his face. "I'll even take you to the bathroom with me." He kisses my neck. "That might actually make this stupid dinner worth going to."

I exhale as his playful words bring me peace. And the visual of Jonah and I having bathroom sex also helps to chase away the last of my nerves.

"I can't wait to see you in the dress you picked up."

I roll my eyes, remembering the day he shoved two thousand dollars cash into my backpack to shop. I planned on not using it, until I realized how expensive good formalwear is. I used all of it.

"Besides, if anyone should be worried, it's me," he says.

My brows pinch together and I study his smoldering eyes. "Why would you worry?"

"I gotta worry about all the assholes who'll be sniffing around you all night. Pretty sure

beating someone's ass at this dinner in front of all the bigwigs would be frowned upon."

He's all dimples and beautiful white teeth as he looks from my eyes to my lips. My heart beats wildly and desire floods my veins. I lick my lips in anticipation and run my hands over his muscular chest, thumbing his nipples through his shirt. Feeling the sinewy ripples of his chest, I imagine his naked torso above me. Heat ignites my blood and flips my belly. I look up at him from under my eyelashes.

His smile fades and his eyebrows arch. "Again?"

It hasn't even been a week since I lost my virginity to Jonah, but my appetite for him is insatiable. I can't get enough, and from the frequency of our lovemaking, neither can he.

"Well, I guess if you don't want to, I can just go back to working on the Impala," I say teasingly.

I shift out of his hands and take a step backwards. He hauls me to his torso with a growl, his mouth at my ear.

"Oh, I want to. Seeing you out here, bent over this car, your sexy ass in those short shorts . . ." His words are lost as he possesses my mouth. He bites my lip and I moan against him. "That's my girl."

Bending down, he puts his big shoulder to my stomach and grabs me behind my knees. In one quick move, I'm thrown over his shoulder.

"Jonah!"

He smacks me on the bottom, and my mouth slams shut. I allow the sensations to penetrate my body.

Why does that feel so good?

~*~

Jonah

"It's six twenty-five, babe. You about ready?" I call out to my bathroom door, the same bathroom door I've been talking to for over an hour.

Raven locked herself in there with her dress and a bag full of girl crap and hasn't come out since. I've heard all manner of sounds coming from the other side, but still haven't gotten even the slightest peek at my girl.

"Okay. One more second." She's been telling me one more second for the past fifteen minutes.

I turn toward my full-length mirror to straighten my tie. Slipping my finger beneath the collar, I give it a yank, hoping to give my neck some relief. Monkey suits and a heavyweight's body do not mix. Even custom made, they feel like a glorified straight jacket. I lift my arms and bring them to cross at my chest. The fabric stretches to its limit making me claustrophobic. I can't wait to get this night over with.

The sound of something hitting the bathroom floor gets my attention.

"Shoot! I'm okay!"

I press my ear to the door. "You sure?"

"Yes, I just . . . um, these shoes are really high and your tile is slippery."

It's not right, but the thought of Raven, as hot and graceful as she is, sliding around off balance in the bathroom, makes me laugh.

"Are you ready? I'm coming out," she says, a nervous tremor in her voice.

There's a click from the lock, and I step back. The door slowly opens and the bright light from the bathroom bathes Raven's silhouette in an ethereal glow.

Holy shit. My jaw drops and I stare in awe.

She's dressed in a light purple, floor-length gown that has a slit all the way up the side. Standing with one leg slightly cocked, her entire upper thigh is exposed. My gaze follows the line of her tan leg to the sexiest pair of strappy silver stilettos. The dress is hot, but my mind imagines her in nothing but those shoes. I open my mouth to tell her how beautiful she looks, but the sight of her breasts robs me of the words—their full swells pushed up in offering, begging for my lips. My mouth goes dry.

"Do I look okay?" She runs her palms down the front of her dress self-consciously. Typical Raven. An absolute knockout and she has no idea.

"Baby, you're a vision. I've never seen anything so beautiful in all my life."

Her eyes look down the length of her body then lock on mine. "Thank you." She takes a step towards me then freezes mid-step. "Oh, you haven't seen the back yet."

The back? There's no way the back could be better than what I'm looking at right now.

Her eyes sparkle and she gives me a mischievous grin. Slowly, she turns and my breath catches in my throat.

There is no back.

The birds in her tattoo fly in formation from her hip to her shoulder for all to see. Her hair is tied up loosely in an elegant, messy mass of shiny dark locks, giving me an unobstructed view. My eyes travel the expanse to the two dimples visible above her perfect ass. I reach down to adjust myself in my pants. Suddenly my collar isn't the only thing that's tight.

Placing her hand on her cocked hip, she looks over her shoulder. "You like?"

"I . . . uh, yeah." I clear my throat. "I more than l-like. It's . . . You're amazing. You l-look." To save myself from further embarrassment due to my sudden case of stutter-mouth, I shut up.

Stepping to her, I start at her hip and run my finger along the path of her tattoo. Mesmerized by the softness of her skin, I watch tiny goose bumps follow the line of my finger. I press my lips to her shoulder. She drops her head to the side, exposing the full length of her neck. I ghost a kiss against her skin, followed by my tongue. The combination of her sweet taste and pear smell makes me hungry for what's beneath the dress. My teeth scrape along her sensitive throat, and I bite with gentle pressure. She leans back and a moan bubbles up from her chest, escaping her lips in a purr.

"You are absolutely gorgeous," I whisper against the spot where I bit her.

"Mmm, thank you." Her voice has taken on a breathy quality that has me straining against my slacks. "You look very handsome too. I like the black on black. It reminds me of Clark Kent."

I kiss her neck once more, and pull back. "Clark Kent? He was a dorky news reporter. He wore starched white shirts with bow ties and shit. I think he even sported a pocket protector."

Giggling, she turns to face me. It's then that I notice her face. She usually wears minimal makeup, but tonight it's heavier in all the right places. Her eyes are rimmed with a smoky color that highlights the aquamarine. Her cheeks dusted with pink, and her lips. *Holy hell.* Those lips.

"Wait, I thought Clark Kent was the hot one."

I'm focused on her shimmering, pink glossed mouth as she talks.

"You know the one who wears black all the time and drives the cool car?"

"Huh?" I swallow hard, caught up in the sensory overload that Raven is dishing out in buckets.

She places her soft hand against my cheek. “Um . . . Clark Kent?”

Fuck, that’s right. I forgot what we were talking about.

“Bruce Wayne, baby. Batman.”

“Yes! You’re right. Bruce Wayne. He’s the hot one that all the girls—”

I can’t take it anymore and crash my lips against hers. Her blatant sex appeal and childlike innocence does me in. Her lip gloss tastes like marshmallow and her mouth like peppermint. I suck at her lips, and she buries her hands in my hair, holding me to her.

My girl.

I run my hands over the dress, feeling her nipples pucker beneath the fabric. My hands grip at it with impatience, gently tugging, knowing what’s underneath is so much softer. There’s no way we’re going to dinner. Nothing is as important to me in this moment than getting my girl naked underneath me.

“Jonah,” she says breathlessly between kisses.

“Mmm?”

“The door.”

“Hmm?”

“The doorbell’s ringing. Our ride’s here.”

“Don’t give a shit,” I growl and walk her backwards towards my bed.

Her legs hit the bed, stopping our progression. I hold her hips and grind my now painfully hard erection against her. She tilts her head and deepens the kiss. *Fuck yeah*. My girl, always so ready.

My phone is ringing in my pocket and the doorbell won’t quit. I groan, annoyed, but never give up her mouth. This is happening. Now.

She laughs and presses her palms against my chest. Reluctantly, I pull back.

“Jonah, we need to stop.” Her raspy voice and traveling hands betray her words.

“Not going anymore.” I’m kissing her neck at my spot, hoping she gives up on the idea and gets naked soon.

“It’s a limo, right?” There’s a smile in her question.

I step back to meet her eyes. “Yeah, it’s a limo.” I smile. “Why?”

She shrugs her shoulders and drops her face, her cheeks flushed. I hook my fingers beneath her chin and bring her eyes back to mine, lifting my eyebrows.

Is she thinking what I think she’s thinking?

“I just thought it might be . . . um . . . fun, you know? To make out in a limo?”

My body hums with excitement at the prospect of getting dirty with Raven in the backseat of a chauffeured vehicle.

I grab her hand and lead her to the front door. “Fine. But we’re leaving right after dinner and picking up where we left off.”

“Sounds good to me,” she says through her giggles.

* * * *

“Mr. Slade, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” the limo driver says while looking at us from the rearview mirror. “I’ve been following your career for years.”

Ah, shit. I’m presented with the opportunity to shove my hand up Raven’s dress in a moving vehicle, and we get chatty Charles the limo driver.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate your support.”

Raven rubs my thigh with soothing strokes, and I consider moving her hand up six inches. Would Charles even notice? *Nah.*

“That fight in ’07 against Hollander was incredible. How long had you been with the UFL when you fought him?”

I groan and curse the fact that I represent more than myself at times like these, but also my training team and the UFL. “Four ye—”

“Four years! That’s how many. And three years before that you were undefeated against Santoro!” He slaps his steering wheel, his booming laughter filling the length of the car.

“Yeah, look we were hoping for a little private time to talk about some things. Do you think we could put up the privacy wall, so—”

“My cousin Junior is training with an MMA fighting league in San Antonio. He’s been . . .”

Charles goes on and on, but my focus is on my girl whose face is bright red from holding back laughter. *Hardy fucking har har.*

I decide I’ve heard enough from Charles and tell him we’ll continue after the dinner, but that I need some fucking alone time with my date. *Shit.*

Privacy window up and finally alone, I’m assaulted by her smell. I practically attack her, not that she’s complaining. I almost get my hand up her dress when the limo lurches to a stop. *Shit!*

I tell Charles we need five minutes. Raven checks her face in a mirror, and I think about everything except what I’ll be doing to her later tonight. Great, now I’m thinking about it again.

“You about done? If I don’t get out of here soon, I’ll finish what I started.”

She gives me a sexy smile and tucks a couple loose strands of hair back into place. “I’m ready.”

I laugh, shaking my head at her mixed message reply.

We exit the limo, and holding hands, we walk through Mandalay Bay Hotel’s casino to the elevators. Raven fidgets at my side as photographers snap pictures and people start to gather.

“You look gorgeous, baby.” I try to take her mind off being the center of attention to a bunch of strangers. She blushes and holds my hand tighter.

This dinner is held on the sixty-fourth floor of the hotel in a swanky restaurant called Mix. As soon as we exit the elevator, we’re greeted by an older gentleman in a tuxedo.

“Ah, Mr. Slade. Your party is expecting you. If you’ll follow me, I’ll escort you and Miss . . .”

Her hand locks mine in a death grip.

“Raven,” I say.

“Of course, Mr. Slade. Miss Raven. Please follow me.”

Releasing her firm grip, she leans into my shoulder. “Thank you.” Her whispered words are only for my ears.

I lift her hand, kiss her knuckles, and give her a wink. She never tells people her last name, afraid of being associated with Dominick. His name circulates among the richest of Vegas’s philanderers. And a high-end place like this is bound to be familiar with the name if not the man himself.

We’re led into a private dining room in the back of the restaurant. It’s packed with roughly thirty people from the organization. I feel Raven’s hesitation as we step into the crowd. I spot Owen and Nikki across the room and decide to stick close to them so that Raven will have someone to talk to.

Different people greet me with handshakes and hellos, but all their eyes are on my girl. This is going to be a long fucking night.

Twenty-four

Raven

I'm at one of the fanciest restaurants in town, I arrived by limo, and I'm wearing an outfit that cost more than I make in a month, bought for me by my rich boyfriend.

I'm Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.

How appropriate.

No, Cinderella. I'm Cinderella out with my Prince Charming. Although, I'm pretty sure my Prince Charming would kick the real Prince Charming's butt in a fistfight. And now my nerves are setting up imaginary fights between cartoon characters.

Well, at least it's taking my mind off the fact that I'm totally out of my element. I may as well have written *I don't belong* on my forehead in black eyeliner. Everyone here is either rich, famous, influential, or a combination of all three. I need to pull it together.

I jump as Jonah places his hand on my back. I look up to see a tall man with sandy blond hair and blue eyes eyeing me.

"Raven, this is Taylor Gibbs, the owner of the UFL."

I gather my social graces. I've never seen so many high-powered people in one room. The place is practically vibrating with egos and money.

"Mr. Gibbs, it's nice to meet you. Thank you for having me."

"Raven, it's a pleasure."

He reaches out to shake the hand I've extended. Jonah tenses and pulls me closer to him, tucking me deep into his side. Mr. Gibbs brings my offered hand to his mouth, kissing it softly.

I press deeper into Jonah at the gesture. No one's touch feels welcome, except Jonah's. To keep from embarrassing him in front of his boss, I put on a brave face.

"I'm glad you could make it, Raven." His glare zeros in on Jonah and a whisper of tension charges the air between them.

My eyes dart back and forth between the two.

Jonah's brooding is directed at his boss. Mr. Gibbs smirks at me and releases my hand. I bring it immediately to Jonah's abdomen, hoping that the touch will help shake the creepy from my hand.

Mr. Gibbs starts in with Jonah about who he needs to touch base with at the party when a man walks up behind him. He's as big as Jonah in height and width, but where Jonah's ferocity is inviting, this man's is terrifying. He has dark hair and eyes that look almost black. His face is held in a permanent scowl with a scar over his left eye and one at his chin. He stalks toward us with the grace of a rhino.

"Well, if it isn't my own personal punching bag," he says, glaring at Jonah.

Jonah's grip tightens. "Del Toro. I thought they only allowed civilized people into this place. Not knuckle-dragging chimps like you."

Mr. Gibbs moves between the fighters. "Save it for the octagon, guys. No need to make a scene in front of the lovely Raven."

Del Toro's eyes swing to me and his head tilts to the side. He studies my face and a small smile tips his lips. His expression is animalistic, but not a chimp like Jonah chided. He looks more like a hungry lion.

Now I know what it feels like to be a zebra on the Serengeti.

“Raven, when you get bored with this loser, I’ll show you how a champion does it.” He steps forward, causing Mr. Gibbs to use his shoulder to keep him back.

Jonah growls so deeply that I feel it before I hear it. His eyes fix on Del Toro in the death stare to end all death stares. “You fucking talk to her again I’ll put you in a coma right here.”

Energy from years of animosity rolls off of them in waves. Jonah’s jaw is tense, his icy glare fixed, and his fists balled at his sides. He’s about to lose it. I can’t let that happen.

I put on my sweetest smile and step in front of Jonah, placing myself directly between two of the biggest men I’ve ever seen. “You must be Victor Del Toro. Jonah’s told me all about you. Six years as the Heavyweight Champion.” I whistle through my teeth. “That’s impressive.”

Blinking, Del Toro takes his eyes from a seething Jonah and sets them on me. His face visibly relaxes, but not by much.

“Yeah, it’s impressive, and I don’t plan on giving up the title anytime soon.”

“No, of course not.” I bat at him with a girlie giggle that’s so sweet it makes Del Toro smile. *Great. It’s working.* “About your offer, I can promise you I’ll never get bored with Jonah. But thank you for the compliment.”

“You let me know if you change your mind, sweetheart.” He glares at Jonah one last time and walks away.

There’s a collective sigh of relief from two of the three people left. Jonah’s still seething, but at least his fists are no longer clenched.

“Wow, you have a gift. I’ve never seen anyone who can talk down testosterone-fueled fighters that quickly. Must be those eyes.” Mr. Gibbs winks at me before excusing himself.

Once he’s gone, I turn to a still-frozen Jonah. Pressing my body to the length of his, I slide my hands around his neck. His eyes are unfocused, clinging to the edge of self-control.

“Hey. You okay?”

He makes a sound that’s half grunt half groan. Hm. Not okay. I need to try a different tactic.

I press my breasts against his chest and kiss his chin. This gets me his eyes. Progress.

Making my way from there, I brush my lips against his jaw line slowly, allowing him to feel my breath on his face. His arms wrap around my waist, and his thumbs rub circles on the exposed skin at my back. Now we’re getting somewhere.

I kiss below his ear. “You okay?”

“Better.”

I lean away, but keep my hands locked behind his neck. “That was intense.”

“I want to beat that guy’s ass. I swear, Raven, I don’t regret making that deal with Dominick. I’d do it a million times over,” he whispers. “But, I’m really, *really* looking forward to beating the shit out of that asshole when I get another opportunity.”

I try to comfort him with a smile, but it feels off. My chest aches. Guilt wars with gratitude. How can I do this to him? How can I not?

This must be torture: all this talk about being the next Heavyweight Champion, his undefeated record, and Del Toro antagonizing him. Instead of going out there on fight night, doing what comes naturally, he has to play possum.

I’m grateful for his sacrifice, but I didn’t anticipate how much he would suffer. Turn his back on his instincts. Push down his nature. All for me.

I pull away and he releases me from his hold. His eyes roam the room casually, unaware of the internal struggle his words induced.

My lungs are tight. I can’t breathe. The weight of all that’s happened presses in from all

angles. I turn to a nearby table and lean heavy against the chair. I knew what he was giving up on a hypothetical level, but seeing it with my own eyes, feeling the aggression electrifying the space between them, just made this *real*.

A group of people walk up to us, but I'm so lost in my head I don't pay attention. My mind whirls with excuses to get out of here. Bathroom. I'll just run to the bathroom, gather myself and—*What the hell?*

A gorgeous blonde in a skin-tight, bright red dress is standing way too close to Jonah. I watch in horror as the beauty queen wraps her arms around his neck. In sickening slow motion, she presses an open mouth kiss right on his lips.

Fuck that!

Adrenaline floods my veins.

"Hey!" My body moves before I think better of it and I'm right in her face.

Jonah's wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Get your hands *off* my boyfriend."

She looks me up and down before pressing her body closer to his. Jonah takes a step to the side, but she winds her arms around his waist, sticking to him like a Siamese twin. "And if I don't? What are you going to do about it?"

Even her glare is pretty.

"Step away. Now." My voice shakes, but I stand tall.

Jonah gives her arms a final tug and she releases her hold.

She steps into my space. With her slutty shoes, she's a good six inches taller than me. Her strapless dress reveals cut muscles that are coiled and ready. "Do you have any idea who I am?"

"No. Don't care. But if you touch my boyfriend again, *you're* going to find out who *I* am."

An evil glint touches her crystal blue eyes. "I'm Camille Fisher. I fight for a living. You want to go there. Let's go there."

I'm sick and tired of people messing with me. She may be strong and trained, but I'm fed up and pushed past my limit.

I get right in her face and give her a smile that is most likely all teeth. "I'm Raven, Jonah's girlfriend. And I'm a mechanic."

She tosses her head back, her blond hair cascading around her shoulders, and laughs.

"Mechanic. Scary." She says the last word in a sing-song voice and rolls her eyes. Her body closes in.

"Baby, leave it alone. Let's go." Jonah slides his hand around my waist.

"Yeah, you should be scared." I lean in until our noses are almost touching. "Every time you get in your car, I want you to think about how easy it would be for me to cut your brakes. I'm sure you have some overpriced piece of fiberglass built in some foreign country. Do you have any idea how simple it is to disassemble a car? A few missing bolts and the thing falls apart while you're driving down the freeway."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me, bitch."

Her eyes travel back and forth between Jonah and me.

"Forget it, Camille. Let's go," her friend says from behind her.

"Hey, hey, hey! What do we have here? I love a good catfight." Blake strolls up with a huge grin on his face, like he saw the entire thing and finds it hilarious. "They're way more fun naked, but then again . . ." He scratches his chin and looks at the ceiling before looking back at us. "Isn't everything?"

I bite my lip against a smile.

“Blake, this is Camille Fisher.” Jonah introduces Blake, and I don’t miss that he pulls me back a good two feet as he does.

Camille’s eyes sparkle as she takes in all that is Blake. He gives her a visual once-over, like he’s sizing up a meal. It’s obvious where this will end up tonight.

“Camille, you’ve got quite a mouth on you.” Blake’s double meaning makes me giggle-snort, earning me another glare from the female fighter.

“Come on, baby. Leave her to Blake.” Jonah guides me away from the group, still wiping red lipstick from his face.

“Here, allow me.” I run my thumb along his full lower lip, rekindling my anger at the reminder that another woman pressed her mouth against his. “Where do you think she parked her car?”

He kisses my finger, smiling. “Don’t know. But damn, watching you nut up on that bitch? Tough, gorgeous, and hot as hell.”

I wrap my arms around his waist and kiss him. “There. All memories of her erased.” My fingers absently run along the collar of his shirt. “I don’t know what came over me. My tolerance tank was full and I snapped.”

“Now you know how it feels to be me.”

His words bring my thoughts back to earlier. As pissed as I was at Camille, Jonah must feel that a million times worse facing off with Del Toro. And there’s nothing he can do about it.

“I’m going to run to the ladies’ room. Wash all this red lipstick from my hand.” I hold my hand up, and quickly drop it. I don’t need to wash my hand, I just need a second to shake off my thoughts and get through the night.

“I’ll go with—”

“No, it’s fine. You’ve got people who want to talk to you here. I’ll be back before you know it.”

His questioning stare locks on mine, as if he’s trying to read my thoughts. I avert my eyes, knowing he’ll be able to if I give him enough time.

“All right, find me when you’re done. Or I’ll find you.”

“Jonah, I’m fine. Really.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but I take my chance to leave before he changes his mind. I kiss his dimpled cheek, and slip from the room.

The maître d’ directs me to the restroom at the other side of the restaurant. I welcome the distance and take the time to sort my head. Halfway there, something familiar catches my eye. I stop mid-step and squint. *No, it can’t be.*

Sitting at an intimate table for two is a stunning woman with long black hair and a shimmering gold dress. She flips the dark locks in a playful manner, a bright smile lighting her face. She seems happy and carefree. If I didn’t know better I’d say she looks . . . in love.

“Mom.”

Twenty-five

Raven

It's been two years since I've seen her. Part of me wants to run to her, hoping the sight of me will make her smile. I want her to tell me she's missed me and has been meaning to call, as most moms would do with a child they haven't seen in two years. But I'm frozen in place. Those thoughts are nothing more than the musings of a neglected child—one who wants what she'll never have.

I study her as she sips her wine, her eyes intent on the john across the table. She tilts her head and smiles. The softness in her gaze makes my heart pinch with envy.

I've never been on the receiving end of her smile. Her blank stares, those I know. The way her sparkling eyes go dead when she looks at me, I know that too. And she's certainly never looked at me with love. Indifference, yes. Resentment, maybe.

Love? No.

She wouldn't give me that. But here, for the right price, she gifts these things to a stranger. He's paid for it. He is deserving of it, but not me, not her own daughter.

My breath becomes short. Anger boils my insides. Tears launch their brutal attack without mercy. This time, I don't fight them. I savor the sting on my cheeks as the salty evidence of my neglect consumes me. I welcome the sadness and desperation as it spurs on my rage.

I've been such a fool. Daydreaming about what might be. I have no parents. They used each other to create a sick joke of a human being for their own selfish reasons. I've put up with the neglect and abuse for long enough. No more.

My legs begin a journey my mind hasn't caught up to. Before I know it, I'm standing at their table. My eyes lock on my mom. I sense the curious stare of her date from the corner of my eye, but I wait. I wait to be acknowledged by her.

It doesn't take long before her face turns to me with a polite smile, probably thinking I'm a waitress, and then falls instantly: blank stare, dead eyes.

No smile for me, mom? What a shocker.

Silently, our eyes locked on each other, my lips curl.

"Can we help you?" says the john.

I ignore him and speak directly to her. "How could you?" The acrid tone of my words makes her shift in her seat.

"Raven," she whispers my name like it's a dirty word. Her eyes dart around the room. "I'm on a date. Call me tomorrow and we can—"

"How fucking could you? You smile at him." I point an accusing finger at the john. "But you can hardly stand to look at me!" My fist slams against their table, shaking the china. "Your own daughter."

Eyes on the john, she shakes her head and shrugs as if to say, *I don't know what she's talking about.*

Bitch!

"I'm sorry about this, Mark. There must be some mis—"

"You're sorry, *Mark*?" My glare swings back and forth between Mark and my mom. "You're sorry, *fucking Mark*? You ruined my life!"

Mark jumps from his chair. "Watch your tone! We're having dinner, and if you know what's best for you, you'll turn around and walk out of here. Now."

I have no intention of walking out of here. Not without saying what I need to say.

"Did you know, Mom? Did you know what his plan was for me? Do you have any idea what it's like to have your dad tell you that he . . . that he . . ." I can't bring myself to say it, but the fear showing in her wide eyes tells me she knew. "He's come for me."

Her hand grips at her throat and her face pales. She leans to the side, squinting at something behind me. She wants to avoid what I'm saying. No, not this time.

I get right in her face and point. "You did this to me. Why? You ruined my life. I wish you never had me!"

Her eyes glisten before they drop to her lap.

"That's enough!" Mark grabs my arm and pulls hard.

Unfazed by Mark's tightening grip, I intend on expelling the ugly until they throw me out.

"Do you hear me, *whore*? I wish I was never born!"

"Get your motherfucking hands off her," a low, but authoritative rumble demands from my back.

Mark's eyes move to a towering figure behind me before he releases his hand. I don't have to turn around to know my savior as his strong arms wrap around my waist.

The sound of Jonah's voice and comfort of his touch trigger a sob from deep in my chest. *He's here. Thank God.* I lean into his embrace. I don't know how much he heard, but his presence reminds me of what I have and dulls the ache of what I never will.

"I've got you, baby. Let me take you home."

Home.

Jonah is my home now. He's the only one who ever cared enough to fight for me. He's my family. All that matters now is us.

Jonah turns me in his arms. I bury my face in his chest, and let the emotions overtake me. His soothing words are nothing but background noise to my uncontrollable sobs.

He walks us from the restaurant and back to our waiting limo. The tears begin to dry as I'm placed into the privacy of the car. I'm a mess of nerves, anger, and hurt as verbal vomit flows from my lips like a sorority girl on induction night. Sobs break with roaring words of devastation as twenty-one years of pain finally find release.

Jonah's eyes are wide, watching me kick and scream, throwing out every curse word that comes to mind. I'm not fully aware of what I'm saying, but Jonah flinches as the once foreign words tumble from my lips with ease.

Seconds turn into minutes before my heart rate slows and my muscles relax. Exhaustion sets in. Jonah slides to my side, wrapping me in his arms.

"You finished?" His question is tender and laced with meaning.

Finished crying? Finished with my mom? Finished fighting my future?

Nodding my head into his neck, he holds me tighter.

"I should've gone with you. I never should've let you leave after that shit with Camille." He sounds angry with himself, but none of what happened tonight is his fault.

A new wave of anger flickers at the mention of her name, but there's no fuel left to ignite it. I sink deeper into his embrace.

"Taylor wanted me to be seen in public with her to promote the Female MMA League. I told him I wouldn't do it, but I guess she didn't like taking no for an answer." His lips press against the top of my head. "Don't think she'll be hearing no from Blake."

Camille up against Blake. She doesn't stand a chance.

"I understand. It just caught me off guard. Del Toro, Camille, my mom . . ."

"Crazy night."

I nod.

"Feel good? Telling her off like that?"

My face heats, and I'm thankful it's dark so he can't see it; although, he can probably feel it through his shirt.

"How much did you hear?"

"Everything. You were yelling pretty loud. I'm proud of you, baby." His warm hand caresses my arm, reinforcing his words.

"Proud? I acted like an idiot in there. Made a fool out of myself, out of you."

"You stood up for yourself. Let your mom know what you've been keeping inside for way too long. What you did was really brave."

Once again, he gives, unknowingly filling my emotional cup to the brim. And then some.

"Please tell me no one from your team heard. Your boss? Your publicist? Camille!" My voice grows louder as hysteria returns.

"Shhh, they had no clue. I went to find you and saw you leaning over your mom like a bear about to attack. I told the hostess to give them the message that you were sick and I had to get you home. Did me a favor. I hate those stuffy dinners, everyone blowing sunshine up each other's asses."

The limo slows to a stop. I peer out the window to see we're in Jonah's driveway. Charlie, the limo driver, opens the door and Jonah gets out. I hear him mumbling something about not talking to the media followed by Charlie's emphatic agreement. Jonah reaches in to help me out of the car.

"Miss Raven, it's been a pleasure." Charlie's face looks concerned.

I wipe my eyes and smile. "Thank you, Charlie. It was nice meeting you."

Jonah tosses him a thick fold of bills and a chin lift and guides me to the front door. I beeline it to Jonah's room to take off my dress and wash my face.

Stepping into the bathroom, I flip on the light and recoil at my reflection. Walking closer to the mirror, I tilt my head and squint.

Holy heck.

Black eye makeup marks channel down my face like a road map of mayhem. Blotchy red marks on my cheeks and forehead highlight my bloodshot eyes. I look like a demented prom queen, minus all the blood. And Jonah held me like this, as I screamed every cuss word I could think of.

My hands fly to my mouth. He must think I'm a lunatic.

Words thrown from my hissy fit come rushing back. The memory of Jonah's hazel eyes, wide and set on me while . . . *While I made a total fool out of myself.*

Hysteria swells in my chest. I roll my lips into my mouth and force back the maniacal laughter. A fluttering bubbles up from my chest as I recall my mom's face when I stepped to her table. Laughter explodes, ricocheting off the tiled walls. Mark's face when he saw Jonah has me doubled over. The sorry sack looked like he soiled his briefs.

The intensity of what happened sinks in. I muffle my frenzy into a washcloth, hoping its cool contact will ease the delirium. My cheeks hurt from smiling and I check out my blurred reflection. Crazy eyes, bleeding black tears, huge smile. Pure, certifiable insanity.

I collapse into a torrent of giggles, causing rivers to stream down my face. Tears born of

laughter feel so much better than those born from pain. My jaw aches, but the howl continues to tumble from my lips.

My side cramps. I press against the pain and try to calm down with deep breathing.

It doesn't work.

My stomach muscles contract as I cackle without control. The sound fades in waves as I trade oxygen for lunacy. *Is it possible to die of laughter?*

I sense movement from the corner of my eye. Jonah is standing in the doorway, frozen and staring. Without the breath to speak, I hold up my palm and pray he gets the message. *Yes. I've officially lost it.*

"What the fuck?" he whispers.

I shake my head, pleading with him to stop. If he speaks another word, I'm pretty sure I'll cough up my kidneys from laughing.

He tilts his head, studying me. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

He didn't listen. I squeeze my eyes shut, and soundless laughter racks my body.

"I . . . can't . . . stop." I manage to get out the words before another wave of laughter brings me to my knees.

"Baby?" His lips are twitching like he's fighting the urge to join me in Crazytown.

He closes the distance between us in two long strides and he kneels in front of me. His face is fixed in a sexy half-grin; his eyelids are low and lustful. He grabs my face hard, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to get my attention. My laughter dies under the intensity of his stare. Blood races through my veins and my belly somersaults. Heat blooms in my chest and I lean in.

"There she is," he whispers.

My pulse surges with a furious passion that is anything but funny. Eyeing his full lips, I get closer, pressing my chest against his. My tongue slowly makes a pass along my lower lip, preparing for his attention.

"That's my girl," he growls before his lips cover mine.

Exploring his mouth, desire consumes me. I scrape my teeth along the inside of his bottom lip and swallow his answering groan. All the emotions from this evening are spiraling together to fuel the kiss and ramp up my need. I rip through his dress shirt, buttons bouncing off the marble floor. Pushing it from his shoulders, I run my hands down his rippled abdomen, digging my nails in as I go. His hands tangle in my hair to deepen the kiss. The smell of mint and aftershave permeate the air and seduce my senses.

His hand trails down my arm, leaving a wake of fire against my skin. With a gentle touch, he finds the slit of my dress, pushing the fabric aside at my hip. Still on my knees, I spread my legs in anticipation. He grips my hip then slides his hand down to where I need it most. I groan and roll my hips into his hand.

He stills. I smile.

"All night?" His voice is dark and hungry.

"Yes, all night." My answer is spoken through the satisfied smile that pulls at my lips.

His eyes lock on mine, wide and fascinated.

"What? You didn't expect me to wear panties with this dress, did you? It's too low cut in the back. I had to go commando." Who knew something as simple as not wearing panties could give me so much power? And power over someone as strong and commanding as Jonah is a potent aphrodisiac.

"That would have saved us a whole lot of trouble tonight. If I had known you were naked under that dress, I can guarantee you wouldn't have seen Camille or your mom. Hell, you

wouldn't have seen much outside of my sheets."

I place a soft kiss against his lips and stand. His eyebrows drop low as he watches me with rapt attention. I turn my back to him, but peek over my shoulder and wink. He stares at me, a helpless look on his face.

Yes!

I slip a strap off my shoulder, making sure to keep my eyes locked on his. He licks his lips. I turn and glance over my other shoulder before sliding that strap down. His fists flex against his massive thighs. Inch by inch, I drop the dress lower in a lazy striptease. His eyes glaze over beneath heavy lids as I reveal the backside of my naked body in painstakingly slow steps.

Finally, with the dress pooling around my feet, I step out of the silken fabric. I'm left standing in my high heels. And nothing else.

Jonah rises to his feet. Still with my back to him, I'm attacked by a moment of self-consciousness and cup my breasts to hide them from his view.

He steps behind me. I can feel the heat from his body and smell the spice of his cologne, but he's not touching me.

"Turn around," he demands gently.

My head swivels his way, followed by my body. The clicking of my shoes against the marble floor is the only sound in the room next to my quickened breath.

His eyes take me in from hair to heels. With a feather light touch, he removes my hands from my breasts. "No hiding."

He runs his fingers from my hand, to my shoulder. They continue their journey down my spine to my bottom. I suck in a breath as he traces the line down between my legs and back up leaving a trail of heat that pools in my belly. He walks in a slow circle around me, never breaking his fingers contact with my flesh, skating around to my stomach, my hip, and back while he walks.

His gaze is dark and predatory as he stalks me. Gorgeously sculpted muscles painted in brilliant colors catch and reflect the light. I stare at him unabashed, watching his reflection in the mirror when his circle is complete and he's stopped behind me. His silence speaks volumes while he takes in my form.

"Leave the shoes on." The jagged edge to his voice sends a delicious tremble up my spine.

I turn toward him and grab the waist of his slacks. The evidence of his arousal is pressing against his fly, pushing the fabric past capacity. I run my fingers along his length, feeling steel beneath wool. His hips flex into my touch.

"Jonah—"

"Step back, baby."

I move back until the cold granite presses against my backside. His hands grip my waist and lift, setting me on the countertop. The heat from his kiss and warm hands at my breasts erase the chill of the icy rock against my bare skin.

He presses himself between my legs, gripping my hips with impatience. I fumble with his belt and zipper, his breath escaping on a hiss when I finally release him. I gasp as he slides a hand between my legs, forcing a tremble of need to slither down my spine.

"Jonah, the bed. Now." His barely-there touch and gentle coaxing has me begging for his possession.

A flash of his one-dimple smile and heavy eyelids almost push me to the edge. He works between my legs with magical fingers. With my hands braced behind me, I press against his hand.

“Not going to the bed, baby. I want to watch us.”

His words are confusing, but I’m too lost in the sensations to ask for explanation. My heart races; pleasure coils deep in my belly. A moan falls from my lips. He moves his hand, and I miss it for a second before I feel his heat press against me.

“Yes,” I whisper.

He buries himself deep and captures my mouth. With one thrust, my vision explodes in Technicolor sparks. Tingling shards of ecstasy flood my body. I call out his name, rolling my hips and riding out my release. He covers my neck and shoulder in wet kisses. Caught up in my free fall, I wrap my legs around his waist and rock against him, greedy for more.

“So fucking pretty.” He runs his hands from my hips to my knees and behind him to my calves. “Love your shoes, baby. I want to feel them digging into my back. Wrap me tight.”

A sagging puppet at his mercy, I lock my ankles behind his back. He braces his hands on the counter’s edge, putting distance between our torsos. I watch in fascination as his eyes lower to our connection. I turn to our reflection in the mirror at the end of the double-sink countertop.

The visual of our bodies loving each other in an erotic rhythm has me memorized. His multi-colored biceps contract. Abdominal muscles ripple with every flex of his hips. My body sways in time with each delicious thrust, back and forth in waves.

For the first time, I see myself the way Jonah sees me: sexy, alluring, and even tempting. My long legs, tipped with stilettos, are wrapped tightly around his waist. Our eyes meet in the mirror. No smiles now.

Only scorching fire.

We watch our reflection and the pleasure builds. Our eyes lock in intimacy, liberating us of our need for words.

His gaze drops to my breasts, the driving power making them bounce. He bends forward, taking one into his mouth, and flicking the tip with his tongue. I grind into him harder, desperate for more contact.

A current builds, starting loose in my torso and condensing in my stomach. My lips part to accommodate my labored breath.

He pulls back, locks eyes with mine, and bites his lip. My hands sift through his hair and to pull his mouth to mine. A groan rumbles in his chest. His fingers dig into my bottom, the pinch against the sensitive flesh pushing me higher.

And like a lightning strike, I’m hit. My insides, once liquid, crystalize and shatter in pulses of euphoria. I throw my head back and moan. I fight to stay upright as my body enjoys the blissful indulgence.

He collapses on top of me before I feel his teeth sink into my shoulder. I tilt my head, and he groans against my skin, his body jolting from the power of his release.

My arms shake with the reverberations of my orgasm or from the strain of holding up our weight. He must sense my struggle and lifts his body to pull me to his chest.

Jonah holds me close, running his fingers through my hair while I come down and catch my breath. He places soft kisses on my face before we’re drawn to our reflection.

He smiles. “That was hot.”

I blush and agree. “Blazing.”

“I’m buying you a pair of those shoes in every color they make.”

“They’re 500 dollars.”

“Make that two pair in every color.”

His expression is serious, and I burst into laughter. All of the stress and pressure I’d been

feeling from earlier dissolve to a distant memory.

With a small effort, Jonah lifts me from the counter and places me on my wobbly legs. I look down and notice his pants are still around his ankles. He kicks them off and kneels in front of me. One by one, he slips off my shoes so that we're both standing naked.

He pulls me into his arms. "You doing better?"

"Yeah." I chuckle, remembering the state Jonah found me in earlier. "Guess I just needed the release."

His body shakes with silent laughter. *What is it with his sense of humor?* I pull back enough to show him my confusion.

"Guess you got your release . . . twice."

"Jonah!" I slap his arm and my face flames.

"Ow!" His humor fades and something serious works behind his eyes. "I hate seeing you like that."

"It's okay—"

"No. It's not. I can't wait for this shit to be over. For you to be free of . . ."

I rest my cheek against his chest and sigh. "Me too."

He reaches over and flips on the shower. The room fills with steam. "Come on. I'll get you all cleaned up. We have a big day tomorrow."

"Big day?"

His eyebrows hit his hairline.

My hand covers my mouth as realization dawns.

Tomorrow I meet his mom.

Twenty-six

Jonah

"I think I might puke." Raven rubs her stomach, a grimace etched into her gorgeous face. She's made herself sick worrying about meeting my mom. I couldn't even get her to eat breakfast.

I wonder if any of her nerves this morning are leftover from her breakdown last night. I'd never seen a person go from rat-shit mad to completely unglued. When I overheard her laughing in the bathroom, I realized she'd reached her breaking point. I knew I needed to bring her back—to pull her from her hysterics and place her gently back into her skin.

Her skin.

My dick twitches at the memory of her slowly sliding off that dress, each sliver of delicate flesh, beckoning for my touch—the way her body responded immediately to the slightest brush of my fingers, opening to my unspoken request. Erotic flashes of her legs wrapped around my body flood my mind. Heat radiates from the red marks on my back left by her shoes. Watching the reflection of our bodies tangled together is forever branded into my memory.

A groan bubbles up from my throat, and Raven turns her attention toward me with narrowed eyes, throwing me from my sexy daydream. Her eyes get big at the sound of a mumbled voice over the airport's loudspeaker.

"What'd he say? Was that it? Did they just announce her flight? I think that's her flight," she says, her eyes dart around the baggage claim carousel where we've been waiting for the last fifteen minutes.

Raven bounces on her toes like a kid who has to pee. My lips pull up. "Maybe you shouldn't have had that fourth cup of coffee this morning."

"She's not going to like me. She probably wants you with some sweet, homey girl who, you know, bakes or loves scrapbooking, not a car mechanic who can't even microwave popcorn." She looks around like she's mapping out an escape.

"You kick ass with a microwave, baby. Don't sell yourself short."

She glares at me, but her mouth ticks with the shadow of a smile.

"Baby, she's going to love you. Trust me. Now stop jumping around like a fucking pogo-stick and come here."

I throw my arm over her shoulder and she leans into me. Her muscles relax as my fingers trace along her skin.

"Excuse me, 'Assassin'?"

A tall, awkward boy in the throes of puberty approaches us.

"Yeah."

He shuffles his feet and avoids my eyes. He's taller than Raven, but lanky. His messy brown hair hangs over his black-rimmed glasses. Printed in bold letters, his bright yellow shirt reads *Stephen King is my Homeboy*. I stifle a laugh.

"I thought it was you." He flips a pen in his hand. "I'm a big fan. I've seen all your fights." His voice cracks. "That take down against 'Pit Bull' Perez in oh-nine was the best I'd ever seen. I know you're going to beat Del Toro tomorrow."

Raven gasps, and her grip tightens on the back of my shirt.

"I can't wait to see the look on Del Toro's face when you hold up that belt."

You and me both, kid. Pride in my ability as a fighter and anger for my inability to prove it battle for dominance in my head.

"Thanks, man. I appreciate your support." This kid's got the height and the know-how. From the looks of his worn jeans, ratty shoes, and . . . everything else, I'd guess he gets his fair share of assholes at school fucking with him. That's all any good fighter needs. Fuel. "You know your stuff. Any interest in fighting for the UFL?"

"Humph, I wish." He shrugs and runs the back of his hand across his forehead, making his glasses lopsided. "My mom says I'm too weak for sports." He scrunches his nose to straighten the frames on his face.

"What are you? About a buck fifty?"

"Just about."

"You start training, pack on a little muscle. You'd be a perfect welterweight."

His smile is so big that it looks as if it may break his face. "You really think so?"

"Think so? I know so."

"Wow. Thanks, 'Assassin.'" He stares at me, but his glazed eyes tell me he's in his head. Probably picturing himself as a fighter five years down the road. He blinks. "Oh! Can I get your autograph?"

He hands me a black sharpie marker and turns around, motioning for me to sign his t-shirt.

"Sure, what's your name?"

"Killian."

"No shit?" Great name for a fighter.

"Yeah." The backs of his ears turn bright red. "It's Irish."

I write a quick message on the shoulder of his shirt.

Killer Killian,

No one dictates your future but you.

"The Assassin"

I pop on the cap and hand Killian his pen.

"Good luck tomorrow night." He stands a little taller, his voice more confident.

"You start training, you hear me?"

He smiles, nods, then turns and walks away.

Raven's head burrows deeper into my chest. I instinctively pull her closer. Her arms wrap around my waist and she's no longer bouncing and jittery. "That was sweet. You're great with your fans."

I kiss her head. "Yeah, well, they've been really good to me."

But will they ever forgive me for letting them down?

"He seemed pretty confident that you'd win the fight tomorrow." Her voice is almost a whisper as her arms tighten around my waist.

I school my voice and try to be as convincing as I can. "Look, I don't want you to worry about this fight. Everything will go as planned. I'll get another shot at the title in a year, maybe two. It's just one fight. Okay?" The truth is I'm disappointed I won't be destroying Del Toro in front of a live audience tomorrow. But in this situation, the prize for losing outweighs the heavyweight title.

I search the room again for my mom. We fall into silence for a few minutes until I spot a familiar smile in the crowd.

"There she is." I lift my chin in her direction.

“Ohmygosh, ohmygosh, ohmygosh.” It seems Raven’s calm demeanor was nothing more than an intermission. She’s back to bouncing.

“Joey, my baby!”

My mom rushes to us, dropping her bags and throwing her arms around my waist. At a generous five foot five, she’s been hugging me around the waist since I was sixteen. It’s been a few months since I saw her last, but she looks the same: Dark hair without a hint of gray, styled to perfection. Her stylish clothes, pristine makeup, and designer bag making her seem younger than her fifty-three years. Yep, hasn’t changed a bit.

“Mom. This is my girl, Raven. Raven, this is my mom.”

Pulling back, she takes a side step and grabs both of Raven’s hands. “It’s so nice to meet you, Raven. You’re just as beautiful as Joey described.”

“Nice to meet you too, Mrs. Slade.”

“Please, call me Katherine.”

“Thank you, ma’am . . . um, Katherine.”

With Raven’s hands still in her grasp, my mom looks at me. “You did good, son. She’s beautiful and polite.”

“Yeah, *she* is.” I shake my head. “I still can’t believe you thought I was gay.”

Raven stares at me aghast while my mom shakes her head and smiles.

Dropping her hands, my mom slips her arm into the crook at Raven’s elbow. “Come on, dear. Let me tell you about the time when my Joey was four and he ran around the front yard naked pretending to be a superhero called Super Weenie Man.”

“Shit, Ma.”

Raven giggles.

“Watch that mouth, Joey. You’re in the presence of ladies.”

Grabbing her bags, I walk behind two of the three women I love the most in the world.

* * * *

“Jonah, wait up!”

I’m heading into the training center, after dropping my mom and Raven off at my house, when Blake’s voice causes an about face. I have a quick training session and a short meeting I need to wrap up so I can get back to them for dinner.

“What’s up, Blake?”

“Dude, we got problems.”

We’re standing on the sidewalk outside the training center’s doors, and Blake looks around like he’s checking for snipers.

“Ah, shit. What now?”

“Okay, I was at Zeus’s last night and I ended up hooking up with this new girl, Sherry, or Terry . . . Mary?” His eyes go skyward as he scratches his cheek and shakes his head.

“Whatever. She mentioned that a guy—”

“Zeus’s? I thought you tagged Camille last night?”

His body freezes. “Camille! I can’t believe you unleashed that crazy . . .” He closes his eyes and rubs his temples as if to organize his thoughts. His eyes open and he glares at me. “We’re gonna talk about that, but first the stripper.”

I nod, unable to manage the smile that is wreaking havoc on my face. It’s not often Blake has issues with girls.

“So, the stripper,” he continues, “told me a guy named Dominick had offered her a job as an escort. I guess she thought that’d impress me.” He rolls his eyes. “Anyway, she told me a few of the girls accepted his offer and—”

“You gonna get to the point where you tell me what the fuck this has to do with me?”

“Dude, listen. And stop interrupting. Shit.” He folds his arms across his chest, hangs his head, and blows out a frustrated breath. “I asked her who accepted his offer. She said she wasn’t sure, but that more than a few were interested.”

“So? I don’t give a shit what Dominick does. As long as he leaves Raven out of it.”

“The new girl told me she overheard a convo in the dressing room. Dominick’s hiring for a special job. One that takes place the night of the fight. At The Mandalay Bay Arena. You think that shit’s a coincidence?”

“Maybe he needs some fresh girls for all the high-rollers that will be hitting up the fight. Dominick has to know better than to fuck with me on fight night. I’m going to be making him a rich man.” Or, a richer man.

“I’ve got a really bad feeling about this,” Blake mumbles.

There’s nothing I can say. This whole situation sucks. The only thought that brings me peace is that, by Sunday, Raven will be all mine and we can move on with our lives. I rub my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose to soothe the throbbing headache this conversation has brought on.

“Remind me when I decide to settle down to find a girl without baggage. Preferably one with no family.” He holds up his hand and starts ticking off fingers with each stipulation. “No kids, ex-husbands, psycho dads, fucking skeletons in the closet. None of that shit.”

“It’s gonna take a special girl to put up with your ass, Blake. You got no room to be picky.”

“I’m serious, man.” He points at the ground. “I’d rather stay single my entire life, banging anyone who can keep up, than take on some chick with issues. You can tattoo that on my ass if you don’t believe me.”

The serious mask on his face tightens into a scowl. “Oh, and thanks a lot for pushing that crazy bitch Camille on me last night. I got her in the elevator, just about to do her, and you know what she said?”

I shrug. I’m still pissed at that chick for upsetting Raven, but I have to give her credit for freaking Blake out.

“She said if I wanted to get up in there, I had to prove myself.” His voice pitches high. “She said I had to submit her to the ground before she’d let me fuck her. I’m looking to get off, and she wants jiu-jitsu foreplay. Who does that shit?”

Unable to hold it in a second longer, laughter bursts from my mouth.

“It’s not funny, man. It’s whacked. I had blue balls for two hours before Kerri, or whatever the fuck her name was, at the strip club got me off.”

“I can’t believe you couldn’t get a submission on a girl. Maybe they can open up a spot for you on their team. Teach you a thing or two.”

Blake’s look of disgust only makes me laugh harder.

“Oh, real nice. You’re a dick, you know that?” He stomps off and through the doors.

~*~

Raven

“So, Raven, tell me about your family. Does your mom live here in town?”

Water spews from my mouth. I choke and gasp for air.

“Oh, goodness, honey, are you okay?” Katherine hands me a dishtowel and pats me on the back.

She’s been busy making dinner and filling me in on Jonah’s milestones growing up. The subject change took me by surprise.

“Yeah, I’m good. Thank you. Just went down the wrong pipe.”

“You scared me.”

You think that scared you? Ask me again about my mom.

I’m not happy about opening the closet doors to my soul and revealing my dark secrets to the one person in the world I want to like me. But, I can’t lie to Jonah’s mom either. She’s going to find out eventually, and what will she think then? If I plan on being a part of Jonah’s life, I need to be honest, upfront. What’s that saying? The truth will set you free. *More like the truth will keep you single.* Maybe she’ll forget if I change the subject.

She’s cutting vegetables, oblivious to the fact that I’m about to drop a bomb directly on her sweet head. “So, you were telling me about your parents?”

Too late.

I’ll talk around it. That will give her enough to be satisfied, and I won’t have to tell her the ugly truth.

“My mom lives in town, yes, and so does my . . . um . . . my dad.” Saying the word makes me want to spit to clean out the dirty.

“Are they still married?” Her questions are so casual and every day. Nothing more than a little small talk with the girl who’s dating her son. *Boy, is she in for a surprise.*

Just get it over with! It’ll be easier that way.

I bite my lip, working up my nerve. “Uh, no, they were never, um, married.”

This sucks.

“Oh, that’s too bad. What do they do? For work?” Her eyes are fixed on the task before her, chopping and dumping into a bowl.

“My mom is in sales.” *Please, let that be enough.* My stomach churns. This already feels like a lie.

“What does she sell?”

My shoulders slump in defeat. Might as well get it over with. I check the clock on the microwave. Jonah should be home soon. I wish he were here now.

“Herself. My mom is a call girl.”

Her chopping ceases and she turns toward me, *the* question burning in her eyes. “Call *center* girl?”

I scrub my face with my hand. “Call girl.”

Katherine’s knife drops on the counter with a clang. Her eyes are huge and her mouth moves, but no sound comes out.

I’m not finished yet. “Her pimp . . . well, he’s my . . . my uh . . . he got her pregnant.”

She adds head shaking to the list of silent responses.

“I don’t . . . or, um, never had a relationship with either of them.” I exhale a long breath.

There. I did it.

My teeth rake over my lower lip. I count the tiles on the floor. Silent seconds tick. I prepare for the speech about my being trash and no good for her son. I straighten my spine, ready for her attack on my character. Dragging my eyes to meet hers, I lurch in shock.

Her eyes are the exact shade of Jonah’s. And just like Jonah, filled with compassion. Not judgment. I relax a fraction under their gaze.

“That’s an incredible story.” Her voice is gentle and calms my nerves. “You must have been through a lot growing up. I can’t imagine what it must have been like for you.” She picks up my hand and holds it in hers. “You know what you are, Raven?”

I shake my head *no*, fearing that my voice will break the consoling cocoon her words provide. I’m desperate to know.

What am I?

“You’re like that single wild flower that grows from the crack in the pavement: miraculous growth with no water source or fertile soil. A person walking by would step around that flower to avoid crushing it. It’s not like the field of wild flowers you tromp through carelessly, crushing them under your feet, knowing that the next day will bring a hundred more.”

She pauses to place her hand on my cheek. “You’ve managed a life through your obstacles. It may be a lonely life, but a life nonetheless. Surviving is nothing to be ashamed of. It’s something to be *proud* of.”

She sees me as worthy. Not a weight in Jonah’s life, but special. A miracle.

I want to express what her words mean to me, but can’t organize my emotions fast enough. Tears pool in my eyes. I blink, and they overflow as her speech runs on repeat in my head, leeching out the poison left behind in my soul.

She brings a kitchen towel to my face and wipes my tears. Her kind smile is more than I can handle and I sob.

“Oh, honey.” She pulls me into her arms. I’m completely lost in her embrace. She holds me tight, speaking words into my hair about strength and release.

My cheek presses into her shoulder, soaking her shirt with my tears. I startle when a pair of strong arms pull me away from her. So deep in my sorrow, I didn’t hear him come in. The familiar smell of citrus and spice relax my muscles, and I bury myself into Jonah’s chest.

“Mom. What the fuck happened?” Anger laces his voice.

I can’t see Katherine’s face, but her whispered, “It’s okay, Joey” has him relaxing against me. He takes a deep breath and holds me until I calm.

“Baby?” He kisses my head and rubs my back.

I lean away from Jonah, but he keeps his arms tightly around my waist. I wipe my face, feeling exposed and embarrassed. “Sorry. It’s stupid—”

“No, Raven, don’t do that. Don’t belittle your strength with embarrassment. You have nothing to be ashamed of.” Katherine’s eyes are wet with tears.

I nod and simply say the only thing I can, “Thank you, Katherine.”

Staring at Jonah’s neck, I’m unable to lift my gaze, fearing what I might see in his eyes.

“Hey. Look at me.”

I brave a glance.

He’s smiling tenderly, bringing forth both dimples. “You okay?”

I nod.

“Right.” He kisses my lips, then the tip of my nose, and finally my forehead.

“My son is lucky to have you, Raven. I’m very proud of him, and I’m equally proud of you.”

Warmth floods my chest, flowing into my cheeks and pulling on my lips. I look from Katherine to Jonah.

“You girls have fun today?” He doesn’t take his eyes from mine. His voice is soft and I appreciate the change to a happier subject.

We hang out in the kitchen while Katherine puts the finishing touches on dinner. Jonah

steals pieces of food off the counter and she slaps his hand. For the first time, I see Jonah as a boy while he playfully teases his mom. I laugh as she reprimands him for drinking milk straight from the carton. She fills him in on his sister and her husband. He laughs at the stories about his nephews getting into trouble.

I'm nothing more than a spectator to this beautiful display of family. I watch in silence as envy piggybacks my happiness.

After a delicious meal, I excuse myself to clean the kitchen so Jonah and his mom can have some time alone. Drying the last dish and putting it away, I head straight to Jonah's garage for some quiet time with the Impala.

With my hair pulled back, I plug the iPod into the dock and allow the music to wash through my body, taking with it the multitude of conflicted emotions tumbling in my chest.

Some of the music from Jonah's iPod is familiar, but one song catches my attention. I read the name on the screen as "Halo" by Beyonce. It seems Beyonce knows a thing or two about my situation, as her words become my heart's anthem. I put the song on repeat and turn back to the car to bury myself in work.

Lost in the combination of my work and the music, I jump at the sound of the door opening. How long have I been in here?

"I knew I'd find you here." He wraps me in a hug. His body is warm and comforting.

"I wanted to give you and your mom some time alone. I thought I'd come out here until she went to bed."

He sits on the hood of the Impala, propping his heels on the bumper and pulling me between his legs.

"My mom is in love with you." He tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "She flat out told me that if I didn't marry you she'd disown me. I think she likes you more than she likes me."

My cheeks warm. "She's incredible, Jonah."

"I'm glad you think so. You know, I was kinda hoping that someday she'd be your mother-in-law."

My eyes flash to his and a slow smile pulls at my lips. *Holy crud*. Is he asking what I think he's asking?

"Whaddya say? You feel like droppin' Morretti for good?"

Twenty-seven

Jonah

I'm not breathing. I'm waiting.

She's staring at me like I sprouted horns . . . and a tail.

I just asked her to marry me. Sure it wasn't your candlelight dinner, down on one knee, shed a tear kind of proposal. But it was a proposal. I don't know what came over me. It just came out. I don't regret the words, but fuck. What kind of a dick asks his girlfriend to marry him in his garage? I don't even have a ring.

I've known for a while now that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. I just haven't been able to focus on that. It's been more important that I focus on our immediate future and the fight.

But now, nothing's as important as her answer. Why isn't she saying anything?

I reach out and cup her face, running my thumb along her lower lip. "Baby?"

Her eyebrows pinch together. *Not a good sign.*

With a few rapid blinks, she focuses on me. "What if you win tomorrow night?"

Ah, fuck. Not this again.

No matter how many times I assure her that I can throw this fight, she's never totally convinced.

"I told you I'd lose it. I mean it. Now leave it alone." My words are terse and powered by irritation. I don't mean to be rude, but *fuck*. I just proposed, and this is the shit she wants to talk about?

I push both hands through my hair and take a deep breath. Her soft hand brushes my cheek. I look at her, my jaw cramping and eyes narrowing. She jumps, but quickly recovers, and places a lingering kiss on my cheek.

"I believe you can lose the fight, I do. But what if I say I'll marry you and then something happens? Something terrible, like you get hit too hard and flip the switch on Del Toro? Or what if, I don't know, he does something to forfeit the fight? You want to marry a prostitute? You want to share your wife with the wealthy men of Las Vegas?"

I grimace at the thought. No, I won't share my wife with other men. I'd fucking kill any man who came near her with those intentions.

Her expression goes soft and she nods. "That's what I thought. So what are our options? We could run, take off, live out our married days moving from place to place . . . 'til death do us part."

She brings both hands up to cup my face. "You deserve better than that, Jonah. Your mom deserves better than that."

"I don't want to live without you." Emotions surge within me making my voice rough.

A single tear trails down her cheek, betraying her smile. "And I don't want to live without you. Of course, I want to spend the rest of my life with you." Her expression hardens. "But I don't want to talk about the future. Not until we know, with one-hundred-percent certainty, that we have one."

So that's a yes. Right? A maybe? Shit.

"Nothing will keep me from you. I know what's going to happen tomorrow night. But if

things don't go as planned, I'll take you away. Living a life on the run is better than living a life without you." I wrap my hand around the nape of her neck and pull her face close to mine. "*No one* can keep us apart."

"I love you, Jonah." Her hands run down my shoulders, and chest, settling on my abdomen.

My blood roars from the heat of her touch. I need her to understand that her life means more than my own. I'd give it all away: every dream, every accomplishment. Everything for her.

With a gentle tug, I tilt her head and hold her lips mere centimeters from mine. She closes her eyes and leans in for a kiss. I fist her hair tighter, holding her in place. A moan vibrates deep in her throat. We swallow each other's breath from our parted lips. Electricity buzzes between us. My teeth scrape against my lower lip with the urge to take her mouth. Her eyes dilate and her breath quickens.

She shifts and steps closer. The side of my mouth curls into a half smile. My girl. Always so anxious and ready.

She licks her full lips. Our mouths are so close I can almost taste the moisture her tongue left behind.

"Jonah—"

"Baby, you look so sexy right now."

She closes her eyes at my whispered words. I hold on tighter.

"Holding you like this, putting you close to what you want. It's hot, baby. You shift and rub your thighs together like you're trying to put out a fire."

She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth.

"You press into me, like you're hoping our bodies will melt together."

A whimper escapes her lips.

"Mmm. Love that sound." I flex my hips into her stomach.

Her eyes shoot open and plead with me to end to her suffering. Pissed or begging, smiling or crying, my girl is damn sexy.

My girl.

Dominick's words echo in my head. *I take care of what's mine*. His? The fuck she is. I don't care what I have to do tomorrow night to make it happen, but I will walk out of that arena with Raven under my arm and our entire future ahead of us.

I lean forward and brush my lips softly against her forehead. Her eyes flutter closed. I brush my lips against each of her eyelids, taking my time to savor the soft pear scent of her hair. Finally, my lips hover over hers.

"You're mine, baby. Always."

"Promise me." Our mouths are so close, her lips brush against mine with her words.

My chest cramps at the desperation in her voice. "I promise."

And that's all I can take.

I cover her lips with mine, and she immediately opens to me. Our tongues glide together in gentle strokes. I grab her hair, tilt her head, and delve in deeper. Soft, wet, and delicious. A groan pushes up from my chest and she takes it with an answering moan.

My ass planted on the hood of the Impala, I use my leverage to pull her tight between my legs. Her hands slide under the legs of my shorts and up my thighs. She pushes her soft fingers under the hem of my boxers and my hips roll into her touch. I let go of her hair with one hand and snake my arm behind her back.

"I love you." A storm of emotion and hunger swirl in my chest, making my declaration come out on a growl.

“I love you.”

She pushes her hands the extra few inches to my throbbing hard-on. The muscles in my stomach contract as her touch sends waves of pleasure up my spine. With both hands, she grabs hold and strokes. I’m light headed. Her grip tightens as I rub and tease her breasts over her shirt. I want to go soft. Be gentle. But my hands claw at her clothes, itching to get to her skin.

Closer.

I break the kiss, grab the hem of her gray tank top, and pull it over her head. My eyes go wide at her bright red, lace bra. *Fuckin’ hell.*

I slide off the hood of the car, mesmerized by her breasts as they strain against their lace cage. My hands cup her and squeeze gently. Her head falls back on a moan. I run my thumbs across her nipples watching how they react beneath the fabric.

My hands travel down her tight, flat stomach to the waistband on her shorts. With a swift tug, I pop the button and open to what I know is matching lace panties.

Raven shifts her hips and slides her short shorts down her long, tan legs. My head tilts as I take in her body from head to toe. Each sliver of soft skin, every curve of decadent flesh, all perfect and mine in every way. My eyes linger on the parts of her body I want to get to first, covered in red lace. I lick my lips.

“Your turn.” She motions to my shirt with a tilt of her head.

I want her hands on me. “Uh-uh. You do it.”

Her eyelids are heavy over blue-green pools of liquid heat. She slips her hands beneath my shirt, eyes locked on mine. Her fingernails drag against my skin as she runs her hands up to my chest. I suck air through clenched teeth as the bite of her nails sends pleasure straight down. I raise my arms and bend for her to pull my shirt off over my head.

The weight of her stare on my naked torso shoots heat through my veins. She runs her hand along my arm to my shoulder while her other hand glides down to the button of my shorts. She stops there and slips her fingers inside the waistband of my boxer briefs, brushing against the tip of my dick. My head falls back on a groan. I’m going to explode if I don’t get inside her soon. I reach down to undo my pants.

Her hand covers mine and she pushes up on her tiptoes, placing her lips against my neck. “No, I got it.”

Soft, wet lips part at my neck as she licks and nips while unbuttoning my shorts. They fall to the ground and I kick them off. I press her back against the Impala, placing her sexy, lace-clad ass on the hood. She lifts an eyebrow in question, but her crooked smile tells me she knows exactly what’s about to happen.

She leans back, resting her weight against her elbows. I pin her with my eyes, plant my knee between her legs, and climb up.

~*~

Raven

His body covers mine, pushing me back. My stomach jumps at the thought of our naked bodies tangled together surrounded by the smell of oil and rubber. This scenario has run through my head a few times since I started working with Jonah. I rest my heels on the bumper as Jonah covers my face, neck, and shoulders with hot, wet kisses.

A fantasy come to life.

Just like his spontaneous proposal. Not at some romantic beach local or in some crowded restaurant. But here, in my sanctuary. No cheesy sonnets read down on one knee or even a ring. I don't need that. Any of it. All I need is him.

Sucking and nibbling, he makes his way down to my breast. He continues lapping at my skin before pulling my flesh into his mouth over my bra. The combination of his warm tongue and the friction from the lace make my back arch, pushing me further into his touch.

No one has ever claimed me like he has—stood his ground, willing to fight, just so he could have me. Our future depends on that fight. I may lose my future. I won't take his down with me.

His attention shifts from my breasts, and he kisses down my body. My knees fall apart. He settles himself between my legs, teasing my inner thigh with his tongue. I don't know what's going to happen tomorrow night, but for now, tonight, I am his and he is mine.

Completely.

With one finger, he traces the seam of my panties from my hip down. He slides the delicate fabric to the side and, without hesitation, dives in. A groan rumbles in the back of my throat. He slides both hands beneath my butt, pushing me deeper into his mouth. I rock my hips against him, unable to stay still.

My body ignites at his attention. With the slightest touch he brings comfort and, with a little more, intense ecstasy. But this time there's an extra layer of emotion. Belonging.

A powerful urge to bond rockets through my veins. Power, need, passion all mix into a potent cocktail and I'm overcome with desire to take him. I use my foot to push his shoulder back. He looks up at me, eyebrows pinched, hands up in surrender. Something that looks like concern etched in his face.

I want to give him a reassuring smile. Let him know that everything's okay, but animalistic yearning wins out.

With a quick flip of my thumb, I unhook my bra, sliding the straps down my arms and tossing it across the room. I lie back and lift my hips to rid myself of my panties. His eyes go dark, forehead dropped so he's looking at me from beneath his thick eyelashes.

If I don't move fast, he's going to pounce.

Hopping from the hood, I reach for the waistband of his boxers. He watches as I slide the cotton down his sculpted thighs to his ankles, where he kicks them to the side. In a crouch on the floor, I take advantage of my position and take him deep into my mouth.

"Aww, damn." He groans and rakes both hands into my hair.

I look up from my position on the ground and watch the ripples of his muscles contract with every thrust of my mouth. Here on my knees, in a position of submission, I've never felt more powerful. His body responds to every flick of my tongue, every pull of my mouth. My heart swells with the love I see in his face as he looks down at me.

"Baby, enough." He hauls me to my feet.

My hands on his chest, I press him back to sit on the hood of the car. He's stronger than I am and capable of protesting, but he allows my control. And if I'm not mistaken, I think it's turning him on.

With his back against the hood, I climb above his body, and straddle his hips. He cups my breasts. I give him a moment to play before I take his wrists in my hands and push them above his head. He smiles at me as if my attempt at domination is cute. I give him the wettest, sexiest kiss I can muster, wiping that smile right off his gorgeous face.

"Fuck, baby." He runs his hand through my hair, and rests his hand at my throat. "You're amazing. My sexy, shy girl one minute, sex crazed vixen the—"

I take him in my hand, lift up on my knees, and bury him. He groans so deeply it vibrates our connection.

“Mine.” My possessive claim tapers off into a moan.

And with that, my dominance is over. His hands tangle into my hair and his back leaves the car. His kiss is deep, proving the word I’ve just said.

Yes. I’m yours.

Exultant tears burn behind my eyes. I fight to hold them back. My hips roll in waves and Jonah matches my pace. I kiss his jaw, neck, and shoulder, pushing him back against the hood. Bracing my hands on his brawny chest, I thrust harder, pressing down deep, reaching.

“You’re so beautiful, baby. I love watching when I’m inside you.”

I’m beyond words as pleasure coils in my belly. His thrusts become urgent and powerful, spurring on my frenzy. My body is overflowing with sensations, begging for release.

His eyes spark beneath heavy lids. “Let yourself go, baby.”

My body obeys his command. Tiny explosions fire from low in my belly and shoot up my spine. I grip his shoulders and throw my head back. He holds my hips steady as reverberations rock through my limbs.

Lost in the foggy aftershocks of my climax, our positions flip. I lie flat on my back on the hood of the car, and absorb the heat from where Jonah’s body was. My heels brace on the bumper, my knees fall open. I bring them back up, but lack the strength to keep them there.

Jonah leans down and drops a tender kiss on my lips. I kiss him back with lazy strokes of my tongue.

He straightens and grips my hips. Entranced, I watch the slashes of his muscles roll as he finds his release. He bites his lip, and I gasp at the blissful pinch of his fingers digging into my skin.

His pace quickens moments before he groans my name. Goose bumps race across the planes of his chest and ecstasy floods his face. He slows to a glide, sending delicious sensations to my belly. He falls forward, braces himself with his arms, and kisses me.

This kiss isn’t fast or deep, not a beginning to a desperate end. His lips are firm, molding against mine. We explore each other’s mouths in tender strokes. Patient and meaningful, expressing the love between us with every swipe and passing nip.

He breaks the kiss and looks at me. His eyebrows knit together and he looks over his shoulder.

“How many times has this song played?”

My face heats as I try to think of a way to get out of having to explain my song choice and the fact that it’s been on repeat.

Your iPod must be broken. I accidentally hit a button. I don’t know why the same song keeps playing. Remember, I only own tapes. The list of excuses keeps growing. I settle on indifference. “I think it’s Beyonce.” I shrug.

His eyes narrow at me. *Darn it!* He sees right through me every time.

“Yes, I know who it is. I remember putting it on the iPod for you.” His eyes dart to the side as he listens to the words. He hits me with the deadly one-dimple smile. “I guess you like it?”

I nod and turn my face away. Avoiding his eyes will help the red coloring my cheeks to fade.

“I like this song. It . . .”

“It what?”

The softness in his voice tells me he’s well aware of why I like it. Why does he need to hear

me say it?

I exhale a heavy breath and meet his eyes. "It reminds me of you. You're my saving grace, Jonah. My angel." I wiggle my arms between our bodies and cross them over my chest.

"Happy?"

His teasing smile dissolves. His dimple is replaced by a slight tick in his jaw. He doesn't look angry. More like, confused.

I feel stupid and exposed after my sappy comment. "Can we go inside now?" I hope to get that intense look off his face or at least get me out from under it.

He blinks and his expression softens. "It's funny, this thing between us." He flicks his finger back and forth from me to him. "Every concern or emotion we feel, it's mutual." He laughs in a short burst. "Here you're thinking I'm saving you, when all this time it's been *you* who saved me."

My heart swells to the point that I'm choking on it. "Jonah—"

"I was cold. Dead on the inside from the time I heard about my dad's accident. Never felt anything outside of kicking ass or a killer hit in the octagon. Fighting gave me my breath, but you brought me back to life."

I whimper and cover my mouth.

"This whole time I thought I was living. But the day I met you, the lights came on. You fill me with things I thought I'd never feel again." His hand tugs at my wrist, freeing my gaping mouth. He kisses my lower lip. You're *my* angel, baby."

With my world split in two, ultimate devastation runs parallel to blessed elation. And I'm stuck in between. My future uncertain, staring into the hazel eyes of everything I've ever dreamed about. And more. More than I deserve, but I'm taking it.

I'll hold on with a grip so tight, that even if they take my body, they'll never take Jonah from my heart.

Twenty-eight

Raven

“What’re you doing here, Ray?” Leo walks into Guy’s office as I’m putting my stuff in a locker. “Thought you’d be spending the day with your man? Big fight tonight.”

I suck in a shaky breath. Big fight is right. That’s why I’m here on my day off. Jonah has to go to the training center, and there isn’t enough work left to do on the Impala to keep my head in a good place until tonight.

“Nah. He’s got official UFL stuff to do all day. I’m going to meet up with him after the fight.” I put on my most unaffected face and stroll past Leo into the garage. “What have we got?” I motion to the few cars in the bay.

“You can run a diagnosis on the Tahoe. Said it’s making some clinking noise. Check the alternator.” He goes back to working on a Toyota.

Greatest thing about working with guys, they never ask too many questions.

I start work on the Tahoe, my hands moving through the procedures, but my head wrapped up in tonight. Flutters of nervous energy turn my stomach and tighten my chest. My phone rings in my pocket, making me jump three feet in the air, and earning me a lowbrow look from Leo.

“Hey, Eve.” I greet my friend loud enough for Leo to hear. He rolls his eyes and disappears back beneath the hood of the car.

“Rave. Ugh, I’m so pissed right now.” Her voice sounds genuinely pissed, and she’s huffing and puffing like she’s just run a marathon.

“Why? Are you okay?” I head back to Guy’s office, close the door, and flop down in his chair.

“Hillary came in two nights ago with the stomach flu. I told her to take the night off, but did she listen? Noooo.” She grunts loudly and I hear something heavy drop. “So here I am, forty-eight hours later with six, *six* people short for dinner service tonight. On one of the busiest nights of the summer.”

I know where this conversation is going. My nervous flutter turns into a throbbing pound. She’s not coming.

“I have to work. There’s no way around it.”

Darn it.

“I understand. It’s a bummer, but you’re the manager. What can you do?”

“Um . . . I could kill that bitch Hillary for starters.” More banging.

“What are you doing? It sounds like you’re trashing your house.”

“Oh, what am I doing?” Her voice is high and dripping in sarcasm. “I’m setting up the bar. By myself! I have one bartender tonight. One! Man, I need a drink.”

I rub my forehead. How am I going to get through this night without my best friend?

“Where’s the after party?” Her question gets my attention.

“After party?”

“Well, yeah. Duh. The heavyweight champion throws an after party following a big win. Jeez, Rave, how long have you lived in this town?”

“Right. Um . . . okay.” There will be no big win, therefore, no after party, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“I’ll be off by eleven and I’ll meet you guys out. Just make sure to have Mr. Pecs-n-Abs put me on the list.”

Her mention of being put on the list reminds me of Vince. “Hey, have you heard from Vince?”

Her throat clears followed by an even bigger bang that has me pulling the phone from my ear. “Nope.”

One word answer. Translation: *I don’t want to talk about it.*

“You okay?”

“Fine.”

One word again.

“I’ll text you after the fight.”

“Sounds good. And Rave, I’m really sorry.”

“No worries. I’ll see you tonight.”

I end the call as a new layer of dread falls on my shoulders. At least I’ll have Katherine there with me. He’s going to lose this fight. Everyone will be devastated, but at least I’ll be free for us to be together. That’s all that matters.

I punch out a quick text to Jonah.

Eve called. Emergency at work. She’s not going to make it. (

I’m holding the phone in my hand when it chimes seconds later. New text.

Sorry, baby. Ask Guy? xJ

I never thought to ask Guy. He’d love to go to a UFL championship fight, and I’d love the extra support, even if he has no clue what’s at stake.

Great idea! (I love you.

I’m already dialing Guy’s phone number from the garage line when my phone chimes again.

His ticket will be at will call. See you in a few hours. I love you more. xJ

~*~

Jonah

My drive to the UFL Training Center is silent. Usually on fight day, I surround myself with deep, bass-hitting music. It always helps me to get pumped up, ready to destroy my opponent. Not today. I’m lost in the weight of my thoughts. My strategies for the fight play in my head on an endless loop.

Stay away from the jaw. Take him to the ground, lock him down. Keep moving. Do not get hit in the face.

My pulse pounds with adrenaline for the fight. But tonight I’m amped for a different reason.

After tonight, this mess with Dominick will be over. Raven will be free and clear to live a long happy life.

That’s if I avoid flipping the switch. I’ve never, not once, been able to control it from happening. A groan rumbles in my chest. There’s too much on the line for me to doubt myself. I will control it tonight.

Before I know it, I’m pulling into the lot at the training center. I jump out of the truck and head to the door in a daze. My head is a whirlwind. I focus on my pre-fight checklist to keep my mind off the emotion.

Weigh-in, strategy meeting, warm up, arena.

I quicken my pace through the parking lot as a few photographers snap pictures.

“‘Assassin,’ you ready for the fight tonight?” The reporter has a microphone at the end of his outstretched arm.

With a tug to drop my baseball hat lower, I ignore him and keep walking.

“Is it true that fighters never have sex before a big fight?” another reporter shouts.

Fucking idiots.

“Do you have a lucky charm of some kind? Dirty socks or a jock strap?”

Do they really expect me to stop and give them an answer? I force a smile their way, pulling off a sneer at best.

Pushing through the doors, I’m hit with cold air that prickles my skin. Blake’s sitting alone in the lobby, obviously waiting for me.

“Blake.”

He stands and meets me halfway to the hall. His eyes work the room before coming back to me. “You ready for this shit, man?”

I nod.

“All right, dude. I got your back. We do this as planned, shouldn’t be any problems. You’re home in bed with your girl, naked if you’re lucky, by midnight.”

A grin pulls at my lips. “Got it.”

Blake drops his signature crooked smile and his jaw goes hard, eyebrows dropped low.

“Let’s fucking do this shit!”

He claps me on the shoulder and leads the way into the locker room. My entire team is there huddled in the back, waiting. I’m greeted with fist bumps and chin lifts.

Guilt eats away at my insides. My crew has worked just as hard as I have to get me this fight. They’ve trained with me non-stop, taken punches, suffered injuries, all for me. I’m letting them down by not going out there and giving it my all.

I sit on a bench, elbows on my knees, focusing on the ground. I force myself to pull an image of Raven to the forefront of my mind: her wide, innocent, aquamarine eyes. That’s it. I need to keep my mind right here.

“You ready?” Owen says as he plops down at my side.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I fix my eyes to the floor. It’s a dick move, but I’m hoping he brushes it off to me getting in the zone.

“Good enough. Let’s warm you up and get you to weigh-in.”

My body moves through all of the pre-fight bullshit, but my mind is absent. I pop in my earbuds and listen to music, mentally walking myself through every round. The guys don’t talk to me much, only direct me where to go and what to do. Every now and then I catch a look from Blake. His jaw set, eyes cold, but knowing. We seem to share the same thought. Let’s get this shit done.

We load up into a white van and head to the arena. The streets are lined with tourists, fans, and paparazzi. I’m grateful for the dark, tinted windows and the inconspicuous car that allows us through without hassle. The driver avoids the front entrance and turns down a ramp to a private parking garage where he parks beneath the arena.

Blake turns around in his seat. “It’s show time.”

We unload from the van where we’re met by a man in a suit. He introduces himself as the event planner and takes us to our assigned dressing room.

The space is about half the size of the locker room at the UFL Training Center. Two large leather couches line the walls with a coffee table in between. The floor has been covered with

padded, interlocking mats that provide cushion for a grappling warm up. A heavy bag hangs in the corner, along with some boxing mitts. A small refrigerator sits in the opposite corner, probably stocked with water and a variety of sports drinks.

I drop my bag of gear next to a couch and take a seat while the guys on my team talk to the planner. Blake turns from the group, stalking toward me. His face is hard. Shit. Once he reaches me, his hand motions to his ear for me to pop out my earbuds.

He points to the door. "Motherfucker's sending in chicks."

A woman in this room would cause the exact opposite environment that I need. Before a fight it's all about relaxation. A relaxed mind is a sharp mind. The last thing any of us need is some chick in here kissing ass.

"The fuck you say?"

I shift to the side on the couch to look behind Blake. My team is hovering over the event planner, pointing in his face. The poor suit looks like he might shit his pants. I sit back, shrug, and lock eyes with Blake.

"It's probably just something the networks orchestrated for ratings. They come, they sit in the corner and keep to themselves. They keep the fuck away from me."

"Been fighting here for years and never had chicks in the dressing room." Blake's eyebrows lower over his eyes. "Gibbs knows we need calm before a fight. Why would he agree to this shit?"

"No clue. But lately this publicity shit is leading him around by his dick." First Camille, now this. He seems less about the fight and more about the ratings.

Blake nods then turns back to the team and the suit. I pop in my earbuds, drop my head back, close my eyes, and pull up my girl's face.

The couch dips next to me. I look up to see Blake mouthing something at me, and squint to read his lips.

". . . fucking told you that dick was up to no good."

I catch something out of the corner of my eye that makes me do a double take.

Candy.

What the hell is she doing here? Before the question registers in my mind, it's answered.

Distraction.

Candy and a girl I've never seen saunter around the room, asking if there is anything anyone needs. They're both wearing what amounts to Hooter's uniforms, minus the owl. Their red shorts look like they're painted on and their tank tops look more like sports bras.

Fucking Dominick.

"Wes!" My blood is boiling and I'm itching for a fight. I shake my head, half furious and half impressed with Dominick's play.

If he can't distract me, he'll piss me off enough to want to kill someone then put me in the octagon.

My head trainer turns and walks to me. "What's up, Jonah?"

I stand and meet Wes eye to eye. "I want those girls out of here. Now." My voice is a low growl.

He looks over his shoulder and back to me, his eyes narrow. "Those girls?" He tilts his head, motioning to Candy and her sidekick.

"Yeah, Wes. Those girls." I throw my arms out and look around the room. "Who the fuck do you think I'm talking about? They're the only fucking girls in the room!" Blood pounds in my ears and a low buzz rattles in my head.

“Get ‘em out of here, Wes. Seriously.” Blake’s voice is low and threatening at my side.

Wes steps over to the girls and says something I can’t hear. They both look my way, and I spear Candy with a glare that I hope sends fear through her veins.

Her smile disappears and her eyes hit the floor. The girl with her is going into some long explanation about something and Wes listens. After a few minutes, he makes his way back to me.

“They can’t leave. They’ve been assigned to the room. If they leave, they’re afraid they’ll get fired.”

“That’s bullshit!” Blake turns toward the girls. I grab his elbow.

Fuck it. I don’t have the brain space to worry about this shit right now. I’m falling right into Dominick’s trap by getting fired up. He wants me half-cocked before I get to the octagon. I won’t give him the satisfaction.

“It’s cool, Blake. You just keep that bitch away from me.”

I suit up and hit the heavy bag. Every punch and kick relieves some of the anger polluting my focus. Blake and I move through some grappling techniques, and I feel the last of my tension dissolve.

Dominick thought he could goad me? Wrong.

Feeling back to myself, I go back to my place on the couch. Owen hits me up with the twenty-minute warning. Finally.

Behind my closed eyes, I play memories that make me relax. My dad and I playing ball in the front yard, him hugging my mom in the kitchen when he’d come home from work. Raven’s face alight with laughter, her peaceful expression when she’s deep in sleep—

A small hand brushes my knee then shoots straight up my shorts. My eyes fly open. I grab the hand and still its progression. Pressing it to my inner thigh, I pin the offender with my stare.

Candy is sitting on the coffee table, her body between my knees. She’s leaning forward in her barely-there clothes, her palm against my skin under my shorts. And I’m holding it there with my hand. Fuck.

The room is almost empty except for a couple guys, who are currently being distracted by Candy’s friend.

I rip her hand from my leg and stand, towering over her. “Nice try, bitch. Next time you put your hand on me, I’ll break it.”

She pulls free from my grip, fear working behind her eyes. She schools her features. “Whatever. Can’t blame a girl for trying.”

It’s time to end this.

Twenty-nine

Raven

My knees are bouncing like the pistons on a Ferrari. I have a burning urge to run laps around this arena, but the fear that grips my gut keeps me planted in my seat.

I'm grateful for the executive car Jonah had pick us up. I don't think either of us could drive with these nerves.

The driver made sure to get us here just before the title fight, opting to forgo the opening fights at Jonah's request. He feared they might freak me out. He's right.

Where's Guy?

Last time we spoke, he said he'd be here for the opening fights. He's not.

I grab my phone. No missed calls. I call Guy again. No answer. *Darn it.* Maybe his phone battery died, or he left it at home.

"Still no answer?" Katherine is beside me, her hands folded tightly in her lap. She must be nervous too.

"No." I shove my phone into my pocket. "I can't imagine what's keeping him. He seemed really excited to come tonight."

Katherine rubs my back then re-knots her hands in her lap. "I'm sure he'll be here soon."

My fingers drum against the plastic seat of my folding chair, a furious beat that matches my racing heart. I scan rows of people surrounding the octagon. The crowd hums with anticipation, bloodthirsty. So close to the octagon floor, no doubt I'll be able to hear the thud of fist on flesh at this distance. My stomach plummets.

I check the glowing digital numbers on the clock above the octagon. Eighteen minutes and thirty-seven seconds, thirty-six, thirty-five. They tick down, one by one, just like my freedom. Numbered in minutes. I wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans.

A warm hand stills my twitchy leg. "Calm down, honey. He'll be okay." Katherine misinterprets my anxiety.

Watching Jonah get hit in the octagon will be difficult, but I'm more concerned with his acting skills than his fighting skills.

I nod, smile, and fix my eyes back on the clock. *Where is Guy?*

The seats in the arena fill up quickly as people return from their bathroom and concession stand breaks. The air is heavy with energy and aggression. It could be my imagination, but the smell of blood and sweat seem to linger in the air from the earlier fights. As the main event draws near, the arena comes alive, chanting.

"Assassin, Assassin, Assassin . . ." Over and over, ratcheting my tension.

I wonder if Jonah can hear this from his dressing room. I wish so badly I was with him now, allowing the warmth of his skin and soothing words to comfort me. My arms wrap around my body. He'd hold me close. Probably tell me to breathe and relax. He'd tell me everything is okay and he's going to take me home tonight as his, for good.

Jonah's corner is empty. No familiar faces in sight. I look up the aisle. They must all be in the back with him. The thought brings my heart rate down and the muscles in my shoulders ease up their grip. We'll be together soon enough, but for now it's good he's surrounded by his team. I'd probably only make him worry.

Eight minutes, four seconds.

“Hey, Raven. This seat taken?”

My back stiffens at the grating voice. Candy. Swift air brushes my arm as she sits in the seat to my right. I turn to look at her, certain my face conveys my shock. My jaw falls slack as I take in her clothes. Not clothes, more like a modest bikini.

I’m speechless.

“Hello. Are you Raven’s friend?” Katherine reaches her hand across my lap towards Candy. “I’m Katherine Slade.”

Candy leans in, pressing her hard, fake boob into my arm, making me cringe and recoil. I stare in amazement as an angel and the devil shake hands. In my lap.

“Yes, I am.” Candy’s tone nauseates me. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Slade. I’m also friends with your son. We’re very close.” Her words are said to Katherine, but the way her eyes slide to mine, they’re meant for me. *Bitch.*

“Oh, really, you know Joey?”

“Yes, I do. We’ve been close for a while now.” Her saccharine smile and overly painted face lean towards Katherine. “As a matter of fact, I just left him backstage.”

My heart cramps violently. I lock my narrow eyes on her. She was with him?

“I don’t understand. You were with him just now?” Katherine sounds as confused as I feel.

A wicked smile stretches across Candy’s face, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if she had fangs. “Yes. He’s doing great. A little tense, so I rubbed his shoulders forever.” She draws out the last word as she rubs her hands and flexes her fingers. “My hands are killing me.”

Fucking bitch!

Shocked, I meet Katherine’s eyes. She looks . . . disappointed. She believes Candy. Well, I don’t.

With my elbows resting on my knees, I drop my head into my hands, rubbing my temples. This is not happening. If I get into it with Candy, that will only upset Katherine. But if I don’t call her out, then Katherine will think her son is a low-down, dirty dog. What do I do?

I love Jonah and I trust him more than anyone. Candy is lying. I bet she wasn’t even back there with him. For the first time, the familiar creeping doubt that normally seeps in is absent. He’s putting everything on the line for me tonight. Putting everything he’s worked for aside for me and our future. I’ll be damned if I’m going to let Candy make him out to be anything less than the hero he is.

My shoulders relax and I sit up straight. I turn into Candy’s face as she forces an innocent expression, and fails.

“You know what, Candy?” I’m ready to unleash on the evil slut.

“So, Raven, what are you doing here anyway?” Candy starts talking as if I hadn’t even opened my mouth. “Jonah told me you weren’t able to come. Something about, hm, what was it?” She snaps her fingers. “Oh, yeah, something about getting a new job with your father? Dominick?”

Katherine gasps, and my jaw locks down, making my teeth ache.

How does she know about Dominick? Jonah and Blake are the only two people who know. My head spins. How else would she know that unless she was back there? Talking about me. They would never do that.

None of this makes sense.

Unless?

She’s working for Dominick.

My heart pounds and I want to scream. Adrenaline fists my hands. I can't lose it here. Not in front of her. I won't give her the satisfaction. But one thing's certain: I need to get out of here.

"Excuse me," I mumble and stand to leave.

"Raven?" Katherine stands next to me, her eyebrows pinched together.

"I'm fine, Katherine. I'll just be a minute."

I scoot past Candy into the aisle, grasping my hands together to keep from backhanding her. She coughs to cover her snicker. I whirl to face her, giving up my restraint. *One slap. Then I'm out of here.*

The lights go dark. The room explodes in a fan-crazed roar. I'm frozen in place, unable to see in front of me. A spotlight cuts through the darkness. The top of the stairs illuminates a group of very large men. A man wearing a black shirt that says "Crew" in yellow across his chest ushers me back, telling me to take my seat. Back in place, Katherine grabs my hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to UFL one-ninety-eight." The announcer's voice fills the room.

The crowd roars and my shoulders tighten with tension.

"Six-time Heavyweight Champion, Victor 'The Bull' Del Toro, will defend his title against the undefeated Jonah 'The Assassin' Slade."

A mix of boos and cheers ring in my ears. Katherine's grip tightens. The driving bass of Jay-Z's song "Niggas in Paris" fills the dome-shaped arena, sending the fans into a frenzy. The air electrifies my skin, every hair standing on end.

"Let's welcome our challenger. Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together for Jonah 'The Assassin' Slade." The announcer's voice draws out his name and my body breaks out in goose bumps.

A bright light flashes to the top of the stairs. My eyes squint and burn trying to make out a familiar face. Out in front of the group are Rex and Caleb, but I've never seen them like this before. Their faces are masks of concentration. Their bodies are taut and unforgiving. They descend the stairs with the bravado of well-trained soldiers. I struggle for breath, suffocated by the anticipation in the air.

As the group walks down the steps, each member of the team comes into view. Wes walks behinds Caleb and Rex, then Blake. His teasing eyes and easygoing smile are replaced by determination. I search for Jonah's face in the group. Fans stand on their chairs, yelling and reaching to get to Jonah in the center of his crew. Security guards line the aisle, holding people back.

My hand squeezes Katherine's tighter and I push up on my toes. I get a quick glimpse of the tips of dark mussed up hair.

There he is.

His face comes into view and I'm completely floored. He looks positively deadly and more beautiful than ever. My heart almost beats out of my chest. His eyebrows are low in a fixed state of focus, making his eyes look black. His full lips are held in a tight, straight line, framed by his set jaw. The muscles under his colorful skin seem bigger as they flex under the light. I suck in a breath and throw my hand over my gaping mouth.

I've seen Jonah train and he seemed lethal then. But now, he looks homicidal. I say a silent prayer that this is all an act, because the way he looks now, he'd snap at slightest provocation.

They move down the stairs, passing rows of screaming fans. His team is circled around him protectively. They reach the bottom and walk down the aisle of our section. Then the group stops short. Right at our row.

I'm frozen, my eyes burning and stuck on Jonah's face. He turns his head towards me as if he's responding to my call. His eyes don't search, but land right on my face. Caught in the ferocity of his stare, I hold his gaze. A one-dimpled smile touches his face just long enough for me to see before it disappears and the focus is back.

That's it. He's letting me know that this is an act. I take a deep breath and smile back, huge. He gives me a wink and throws a quick look to Candy. His intense glare makes her cower.

Take that, bitch.

And with renewed hope, I watch the group continue down the aisle and into the octagon.

~*~

Jonah

“. . . sixth time returning Heavyweight Champion Victor 'The Bull' Del Toro.”

Standing in my corner of the octagon, I wait for Del Toro to make it down the aisle. I find my girl in the crowd. She's holding my mom's hand. *Thank you, Mom.*

And why in the hell is Candy sitting where Guy should be? Maybe he couldn't make it? But that doesn't explain why Dominick's slut-bot is in his place.

It was one thing to see Candy waltz into my dressing room like she belonged there, but seeing her standing next to Raven is unsettling. I thought I scared her enough to get her to back off. Apparently whatever Dominick is paying is worth her continued humiliation. Candy spent the entire time in my dressing room, sitting in the corner on a plastic folding chair. Blake even made her and her slutty sidekick face the wall just to make a point.

I force my thoughts back to Del Toro and the fight. Nothing can throw me off my game. Not one fucking thing. Ten minutes. I need to stay up for the first two rounds. After that, game over. My eyes slide back to Raven like they're magnetized.

“Get your head in the fight, Slade. Your girl's still gonna be there when it's over,” says Owen from behind me.

I nod. He's right. I need to focus on the fight and keep the buzzing in my head down to a minimum. Candy works for the enemy, and seeing her so close to Raven makes me wish I'd locked my girl in the bedroom. Maybe I shouldn't have had her come tonight. I could have set her up somewhere, far away from here, until the outcome was determined. But I need to see her face to stay grounded, to control the rage that'll be riding me hard.

Del Toro stands in his corner, giving me the stare-down. I'd give almost anything to knock that confident look right off his scarred face. Almost.

The ref motions for us to meet in the middle of the octagon. He gives us the speech they always give before a fight about no hits below the belt and make it a clean fight. His words may as well be spoken in Japanese as much as I'm paying attention. Instead, I'm locked eye to eye with Del Toro. The ref yells something and then repeats it. It's on the repeat that I hear he wants us to tap knuckles. Fuck that.

“You're going down, you little bitch,” Del Toro growls as he takes his fighting stance.

He has no idea.

I raise my fists and we face off. My blood sizzles with restrained aggression.

The ref waves his hand between us. “Fight.”

Del Toro and I circle each other, sizing each other up, fists at the ready. I focus on his hands, keeping his legs on radar. The crowd roars over shouts from our cornermen. Mine yell, “Take a

hit!” His shout, “Take him down!”

Del Toro turns his fist, palm up, taunting me. “Come on, pussy. Take a shot.”

My jaw grinds against my mouth guard. This cocky fuck thinks I can’t lay him out. I have to let him take me. I mock swing. He flinches. *Yeah, fuck you.*

“Get movin’, guys,” the ref says. “Fans didn’t pay to watch two fairies circling the maypole—Fight.”

No more milking the clock.

I drop my guard. He throws the quick left. I dodge it. The crowd cheers. We circle again, and his right leg sweeps at my feet. I jump back. I feel the buzz in my head. My muscles coil. I find my groove and right jab a heavy body blow. He doubles, winded, but recovers. His fist comes at me. I duck. Shit. If this fight goes to decision, I’d win. I need to get hit.

I rush Del Toro and slam him against the fence, holding him in a clinch. A barrage of punches hammer my back.

My leg snakes around one of his, keeping him off balance. He attempts a knee to my thigh, but my hold locks him down. He tries for a chokehold. I bury my shoulder deeper into his chest. My body constricts around his. The clock ticks on.

“Break it up!” The ref pushes us apart.

Arms raised, I stand back. The ref waves his hand between us. Fight’s back on.

Del Toro comes at me, head down, aiming for my gut. His signature move. He’s going for the take down. The split second before he hits, I check the clock. Thirty-two seconds left. His shoulder slams into my abdomen, taking us both down. I land on my back, my lungs contracting for breath, and he straddles my leg in half guard.

Shit. Not good.

He rears back for the ground-and-pound. I throw my head to the side and cross my arms to protect my face. Blow after blow pounds against my forearms. Pain rockets through my body. The buzz a steady hum in my head. Adrenaline shoots through my veins.

With my free leg, I brace my foot against the mat. The blows continue. Ringing in my ears, the buzz goes nuclear. I need to get to my feet.

My heel digs deep. I thrust my hips, bucking Del Toro off. I’ve got the mount. I pull back, landing a blow that sends blood to the mat. My instincts want blood, but I can’t knock him out. Instinct versus Raven.

A horn sounds and the black-and-white striped shirt of the ref is in my face.

Round one over.

I jump to my feet and head to my corner. My head starts to clear. Shit, that was close. My cornermen shout orders at me while I rinse my mouth out. Blake stands back, and my eyes meet his. He raises his eyebrows and tilts his head. He knows what happened. I came seconds away from flipping the switch. I nod. He holds up one hand, all five fingers splayed. Five more minutes. I need to hold it together for five more minutes. He drops his hand and motions to the octagon.

Round two.

Del Toro’s bleeding. Fuck, I need to get hit more. Focus. Concentrate on the end game. My girl.

In the stands, Raven covers her mouth. She looks scared. Five more minutes, five more fucking minutes and she’s mine.

“Round two,” the ref yells. “Fight.”

Focus. We move close, fists raised. Del Toro throws a hard right. I don’t block it. It connects

with my jaw. Lightning shoots down my neck. The buzz in my head is now a battle cry. I'm gonna kill this fucker.

I hit him with double strikes to his stomach. He steps back, gasping for breath. He comes at me with a quick jab to my ribs. Pain blasts through my side. I double over, but stay on my feet.

We circle each other. He throws a left. I dodge it. He's open. One right hook would knock him out. I punch his ribs. He stumbles. I'm dying to finish this. I could take him down right now. Easily.

My eyes lock on his fists. He sweeps at my leg and connects. Pain throbs in my calf. I hop to regain my balance.

I unleash my restraint, my right fist slamming into his reddened ribs. He grunts and doubles over. My hands drop to my sides with a satisfied smile. Fuck, that felt good. I lock eyes with Raven. Hers widen, flick past me. I spin. His right knee flies up, I move back, but it's too late.

Two-hundred-fifty-seven pounds of force slam into my head.

Pain explodes at my ear. Bright white light flashes behind my eyes. My vision recedes. I stagger. My body hums. My mind empty, but for one thought.

Annihilate.

Del Toro steps into my space. I throw a right. My haymaker connects with the sweet spot on his glass jaw. His mouth guard flies in an explosion of blood and spit. He goes down.

Rag-dolled.

Game over. *Oh, fuck.*

Thirty

Raven

“Ladies and Gentlemen, your new UFL Heavyweight Champion, Jonah ‘The Assassin’ Slade.” The announcer’s words reverberate in my soul, raising the hair on my skin.

He won.

I drop to my seat as everyone around me stays standing. The voices of the fans are slow and slur in my ears. Their faces contort with the force of their excitement. I blink and grip the sides of my chair.

He won.

Katherine leans down and hugs me. My body shakes as she continues to jump up and down. She says something, but submerged in my misery, I can’t understand her. I absently nod, my focus distant, as I force my brain into action.

What do I do now?

I can’t think of anything. Except him. My body aches for him, wanting to be held, to cry in the safety of his arms. Together.

As long as we’re together, we can face what Dominick has planned. It’s not too late to run. I could go somewhere remote, live low for a few years until Dominick loses interest. Tiny sparks of hope flare. That’s what I’ll do. I need to get to Jonah and get out of town. Now.

A jolt from my hip sends me to my feet. I press the pocket of my shorts to feel it vibrate. My phone. Who would be calling me now? I check the caller ID. New text from Guy? Guy doesn’t text.

Hello, Darling. If you want to save his life, you’ll follow Candy. Failure to comply will end him. Slowly. You have five minutes. –D

He has Guy. Holy shit!

That’s why he never showed. Dominick has him. My breath catches on a sob. I grip at my neck and swallow hard. He’ll kill him if I don’t cooperate. I don’t have time to get to Jonah.

“Four minutes and counting.” Candy grips my arm firmly.

I glare at her hand. She’s in on this. Lying bitch.

Katherine continues to cheer as she glories in her son’s victory. Her love for her son shines in her radiant smile. That same love that poured over onto me, even if only for a day. And now it’s over.

Candy tugs my arm.

“Get your fucking hand off me!” My demand is firm, but soft enough for only her to hear. “I’m coming.” I rip my arm from her grip. “Just let me say good-bye.” I don’t give her an opportunity to respond and turn to Katherine.

I let the love in her face reflect in mine and muster a smile before leaning in to be heard over the crowd. “Candy said Jonah wants me back in the dressing room. She has a pass so she can take me back.” I lean back from her to look in her face.

“Oh, of course, honey. You go congratulate our boy. I’ll meet you guys at home.” The pride in her smile aches in my chest.

I throw my arms around her neck and hug her good-bye. “Thank you, Katherine, for everything.” My throat swells as I muzzle the emotion that fights for release.

“Oh, well,” Katherine says, seeming surprised by my sudden burst of affection. “Thank you for making my Joey so happy.”

Released from the hug, she smiles, her face shadowed with concern. I nod with a smile then face Candy. My smile dissolves.

“Okay. Take me back.”

My legs are heavy as I trail behind Candy up the stairs. We pass through the double doors and into a long hallway.

This is it. I’m being kidnapped. But my life is a small price to pay to ensure Guy’s safety. Katherine and Jonah’s safety. I should have known better than to fight destiny. Fight Dominick.

We stop at a single door. Nausea claws at my stomach. A rowdy group down the hall walks towards us. I wonder if it’s Jonah and the guys headed back to their dressing room. If he saw me with Candy, he’d never let me go. Panic surges in my veins. If he sees me, Guy dies. I drop my gaze, my hair hiding my face.

Two quick knocks and the lock clicks. Candy moves forward and I follow through, head down.

Once in, I turn my focus to the room. The door slams behind me, and I’m plunged into darkness.

I gasp. My hands reach out for something to hold onto.

“Hello, darling.”

I whirl around toward the direction of the door. My body slams against something solid. Arms wrap tightly around me. I struggle against the hold. Deja vu stills my body and stifles my scream. Why is this so familiar? Flashes from the night in the parking lot of Club Six spark my memory.

Oh God, no. Vince.

“Fancy meeting you here.” Vince’s low chuckle vibrates against my back.

“No. Dominick, please don’t do this.” I search desperately around the room for a face to plead with, but the dark is too thick. “I won’t run. Just please, leave Guy alone.”

Vince tightens his hold. Air is pushed from my lungs on a whimper.

“And I’m supposed to take your word for it?” Dominick laughs and brushes his hand against my cheek. “Don’t you worry, Raven. I will take what is rightfully mine. What I created. You can’t run far enough or hide deep enough to escape me.”

I jerk my head aside, away from his touch. Vince shakes me roughly then loosens his grip.

Responding to his words with pure instinct, I suck in air to yell. A soft cloth is pressed to my face. Stinging vapors pull deep into my lungs, my eyes roll back in my head. I kick and jerk. I’m going to die. My muffled screams echo in my ears. Darkness creeps in. Jonah, help me. Then, everything goes black.

~*~

Jonah

A tornado of applause whips and swirls around my body. Static roars in my ears along with my hammering heartbeat.

Del Toro is down. The ref yells, “Knockout.”

Failure rocks me, weakening my knees. I drop to the mat. Only a minute and a half left in the round, and I would have had it. I watch in slow motion as my team climbs the chain link.

They rush toward me, faces alight with victory.

I search out the one member of my team still standing on the outside. Blake. His glare meets mine. Whatever he sees brings life to his body, spurring him into action. He hops the fence, pushing his way through people. I'm detached, a bystander in my own skin. My conscious mind struggles with reality. It ended so fast. I just . . . snapped. I won the title, but lost the prize.

Desperation brings me back. Voices go from static to clear as I regain my senses. I need to find her. I sit back on my heels. My eyes magnify the faces around me, like binoculars, bringing into focus my surroundings. I search the crowd. A mob of people block my view, jarring me from all angles. They yell, patting my shoulder. My back. My head.

"Find her." The mumbled words are a weak command to my body.

Blake drops to his knees in front of me, his hands on my shoulders, forcing my attention.

"Do not lose your shit, man. Lock it down, you hear me." His voice is commanding, his words a touchstone to my sanity.

I hold his eyes and fight against the tide of crippling emotions that pull at my soul.

"There ya go. Hold your shit, man. Stay focused on me."

I look at him, but don't see him. Instead visions of my future flicker through my mind. Raven in white. A little girl with aquamarine eyes and my dimples, pigtails and pink ballet shoes. My girl in my bed, every night, forever. Everything I just lost.

Blinking away the burn, I swallow hard. I lurch forward, on all fours, fighting the rising bile. A stabbing pain rocks my midsection, and I spit my mouth guard to the mat.

"Don't do this now, man. Not here."

"I lost her." My voice grates against my throat as I force out the words. I can't believe it. I couldn't save her.

"No. *You* don't lose. 'The Assassin' does not lose." He grips my shoulders, pulling me to my feet.

Breathing deep, I force a nod. My skin feels tight surrounded by people in my space. I need to get out of here. I can't think straight.

I need Raven. To touch her and remind myself that she's real and . . . still here. Her birthday isn't until tomorrow. We have a few hours to get out of town. Disappear. At least until we can come up with a better plan.

On a visceral quest, I push through the crowd. No faces, no familiarity, just bodies. Obstacles that stand between me and Raven.

At the octagon's perimeter, I search the arena, scanning the crowd. Where is she?

A microphone is shoved in my face. "'Assassin,' how does it feel to be the new UFL Heavyweight Champion?"

"No questions." Blake's voice draws my attention. He tilts his head towards the octagon's exit.

From there, I scan the seats where Raven was sitting. People crowd around the octagon. Security pushes them back. My eyes pick apart each person, and, still, no Raven.

"Where is she?"

Blake grips the chain link, focused and scanning. "They're gone. They were right there." He points to the row of seats they were in just seconds before the fight ended.

My hands rake through my hair. No. This cannot be fucking happening. My aching muscles contract as my fists tighten. She couldn't have gone far. I continue to scan the area, hoping her face will appear in the crowd. Still nothing. I'll pick this entire place apart, one motherfucker at a time, until I find my girl.

“‘Assassin!’ Great fight! Can you tell us what it feels like to have won—”

Blake shoves the reporter in the chest, sending him back and landing ass to mat. “No fucking questions.” Blake towers over the downed reporter before turning back to me. “Shit.” He sounds annoyed as if the guy was nothing more than an obnoxious mosquito.

He looks over my shoulder.

“There’s your mom.” Blake’s voice rises above the roar of the crowd. I follow his stare.

She’s standing at the floor of the arena, on tiptoes, eyes searching. In a few long, purposeful strides I’m in her space.

“Mom, where’s Ra—”

“Oh, Joey, you were great! Congratu—” She moves to embrace me, but I catch her wrists, forcing her eyes to mine.

“Mom. Where’s Raven?”

Her smile falls and her eyebrows pinch together. “Raven? Honey, Candy took her back to your dressing room, just like you asked her to.”

Dread drops in my stomach, threatening to bring me to my knees.

“Fuck me. I knew that skanky-ass ho was up to no good,” Blake says from behind me.

Mom’s face pales and her eyes implore mine. “Jonah, what’s going on?”

My feet burn with unspent energy. I don’t know what the fuck’s going on. But I’m sure as shit going to find out.

I race up the stairs two at a time. Weaving my way through the crowd, I shove people aside when they don’t move fast enough. I burst through the double doors and run down the corridor to my dressing room. My foot hits the door with the force of a battering ram, splintering the wood frame.

“Raven. You in here?” I rush through the room in search of my girl. But even as my hopeful eyes continue their search, I know she’s gone. This was Dominick’s plan all along. Send Candy in for distraction and extraction. Like placing the last piece into a puzzle, everything now makes sense.

I flip the coffee table upside down. “Fuck!”

Raven is in the hands of a madman. My hands rip through my hair. I should have known Dominick would pull some backhanded shit. Now my girl is with a psycho who uses his own daughter as a pawn in his sick games.

Resolve burns deep in my chest. My heart pounds with intent. The buzz between my ears throbs and floods my body. My veins surge with revenge in lethal potency. A plan forms in my head. My lips curl as my teeth clench.

I’m going to get Raven back tonight. I don’t care who I have to kill to do it.

~*~

Raven

I float in a void, a black hole, tossed on waves of dark smoke. No feeling. Just . . . nothingness. A faint sound taunts me. Calling me to its comfort. I want to move towards it, but can’t grip consciousness enough to move.

An urgency to fight the dark fuels my blood. I push against the fade. The sound gets louder. The soothing vibrations tickle my ear as I try to place it. The sound is as familiar as my own name. I concentrate harder.

An engine. A small one, sedan maybe.
I push harder and hear a moan deep in the distance.
Is that me?

The engine is joined with the rhythmic beat of music. I strain to hear it and surface from the murky depths. Feeling returns to my body in sections of warmth like a hot towel lying on bare skin. I orient myself. I'm on my side. My eyelids are heavy as I push to get them open.

I wiggle my fingers and roll my wrists. They're tied together. My mind struggles to place myself. I remember Katherine. My heart cramps. The fight. Jonah. The text. Candy.

Fucking Candy!

Adrenaline fuels my muscles and I force open my eyes. I'm in the backseat of a car. The driver is a man; that much I can tell from the back of his head. No other passengers. I swallow what feels like razor blades. How long have I been out? I clear my throat to speak, getting the attention of my driver. His head whips around and I muffle a scream.

I'll be happy to make it your business . . . all night long.

"Good morning, sleepyhead. Have a good nap?" His wicked laugh crawls over my skin, making me curl into myself.

Faced forward, he tilts the rearview mirror, his eyes on me. They glow in the light of the dashboard. He looks demonic.

"Where—" I clear my throat. "Where are you taking me?"

His reflection glares at me. "We're going on a little road trip."

"What happened? Where's Jonah?"

"I have an idea. Why don't you go back to sleep or pretend to be asleep so I don't have to hear your voice? Or better yet, you shut your fuckin' mouth, or I'll climb back there and shove something in it."

Tears burn my eyes and my throat clogs with emotion. I nod and vow to keep quiet for the rest of the trip.

An orange glow draws my attention. I peer through the gap in the front seats. A clock. The numbers ground me—give me something to hold on to. Just like before the fight, I watch the minutes tick away, along with my future. As the minutes stretch by, I make myself sick. Every imaginable horror comes to mind. Jonah doesn't know where I am. I'm alone with someone who hates me enough that killing me would be kind.

As many times as Jonah has swooped in like an angelic warrior to rescue me, my predicament is impossible. No one will help me now. If I'm going to get out of this, I'm going to have to do it myself.

The car turns. I tilt my head to look out the window from my back seat bed. My view is a wall of pine trees. We're in the mountains, and from the sound of the creaking suspension and gravel assaulting the wheel wells, on a dirt road. After another twenty minutes, the car slows to a stop.

Vince exits the car, giving me seconds of relief before the back door swings open and he grabs me by my bound ankles. He throws me over his shoulder like a dead animal. It's completely black outside. Darkness like I've never seen having lived in the city my whole life. There's a source of light ahead that penetrates the night. Vince heads toward it. He walks up a few wooden steps before we go through a door and into the living room of a cabin.

He turns left and I'm airborne. My wrists bound, I'm unable to break my fall and my head slams into something solid. Stabbing pain pierces my skull and I swallow an agony-riddled cry. Warm liquid oozes down my face, pooling in my ear. My vision swirls.

Vince's footsteps against the wood floor disappear behind me.

I squint against my throbbing head. I'm on a couch with wooden armrests. I worm my body around and face the direction we came in. Plain wood flooring and log walls are all I see. This place isn't set up for a long-term guest. More like a place for a weekend hunter. And here I am tied up like prized kill. How ironic.

A door slams shut, making me jump. My muscles coil tight, every sound amplified. Heavy footfalls sound down the hallway getting louder. Closer.

Please, God. Help me.

Dominick and Vince appear from the mouth of the hallway. Their fine suits and coiffed hair are a morbid contrast to the natural wood of the cabin.

"Raven, darling, I'm sorry about your head. Vince is great muscle, but tends to be a bit brutal."

Vince smiles and licks his lips.

"As I'm sure you've figured out, your boyfriend won, or lost as it was, so now you belong to me." He kneels and places his lips just inches from my ear. "Between you and me, win or lose, I had no intention of releasing you."

My eyes burn. I stare at the man before me whose eyes are identical to mine. The man whose blood runs through my veins, and I feel nothing but pure, concentrated hate.

He reaches into his pocket, and with a flick of his wrist, he's holding a knife. I kick and pull at my restraints. No!

"Calm down." He sounds bored and not at all impressed by my fight. He points the knife, gently pressing the tip into the soft skin beneath my ear. "You be a good girl now or I will cut you. Do you understand?"

I nod frantically, forcing the tip of the knife farther into my skin. A whimper leaks from my lips. He watches as a trickle of blood makes a trail down my neck.

"So beautiful." He swipes at the blood with his fingertip and puts it in his mouth. "You are going to make your Daddy a very rich man."

Every inch of my body shakes in violent bursts. He slides down the couch to my feet and cuts my binds. Then follows with my wrists.

I flex and roll my ankles and wrists. Sitting up, my head swims. I steady myself, blinking away my nausea. Something tickles my cheek. I swipe at it and see blood on my hand. *I'm going to be sick.*

"Dominick, may I use the bathroom?" My voice quakes with fear.

He tilts his head and studies my face. I focus on his neck so he can't read my intentions in eyes. He must be satisfied with what he sees and nods.

I push up, ignoring my sore wrists and throbbing head, and search for a bathroom. The first door in the hallway is open. I rush in, shut the door behind me, and try to find the lock. Dammit! No lock.

Panic and fear collect in my stomach, sending me to the toilet and on my knees. I gag and cough, arching my back with every painful heave. Bile-flavored spit coats my dry mouth, making me retch harder. The smell of my own blood flips my stomach again. A violent heave rocks my body until my stomach surrenders. I try to catch a breath, allowing the tears to fall freely. I sob with my head resting on the toilet seat. My hand does a quick search of my pockets for my phone. I knew it wouldn't be there, but desperation has me grasping anyway. I'm stuck. Out of options.

What's going to happen to me?

Thirty-one

Jonah

“Open the door!”

Nothing. I knock harder.

“Dude, calm down. You’re gonna scare the piss out of her.” Blake’s leaning against the brick wall outside Milena’s house while I bang the fucking door down.

I pound wood again. “Milena. Open up!”

Blake’s expression sours with disapproval. “Yeah, Milena. Open up for the enormous scary guy beating the shit out of your door.” He tacks an eye roll onto his sarcasm.

Shit. He’s right, but we’re running out of time. Dominick has my girl, and she could be getting farther away with every minute that passes. They could be in fucking Mexico by now.

After leaving the arena, we went straight to Raven’s place. We let ourselves in with the spare key I kept after having her door replaced. It didn’t take long for us to find what we were looking for. Who knew an old bank statement would mean more than the Title belt. Finding that felt like winning the lottery and being the first man on the moon all wrapped up into one. The address on that statement led us here.

Milena. She’s our only hope. If this doesn’t work, I don’t know what else to do but go to the police. And if Dominick finds out, which he will with all the moles he’s got planted in the department, Raven’s as good as dead.

Resolve thickens my blood and brings my fist back to the door. I hold it back and breathe. Calm. Just one minute of her time is all I need. I flex my fist and knock lightly.

Nothing.

I swear to shit if she doesn’t open this motherfucking door, I will bust the fucker down and drag her ass out. Ah, hell. So much for calm.

“Milena, it’s Jonah. I’m. . .” I squint against the vicious buzz pounding in my head. “He’s taken her. Do you know where he would have gone with her?” My forehead rests against the door. “I need to find her tonight. Just, please, open the door.” Seconds of silence feel like hours. What am I going to do?

A click of a lock jolts me back. The door cracks open. Milena’s eyes are cautious as she peers out just beneath the protective chain. My breath catches in my throat. She looks so much like Raven. I rub my chest to squelch the burn.

“He took her?” Her voice is soft and carries the hint of a Latin accent.

“Yes. From the arena.”

She stares through me with unfocused eyes.

“I need to know where he might have taken her. Anywhere you think he might be. Addresses would be great, but a general vicinity is fine too.”

She blinks and meets my eyes. “Come in.”

The door closes enough to unhook the chain and opens slowly. I walk in with Blake at my heels. Milena’s eyes widen when she sees I’m not alone.

Before I can introduce Blake, he’s in her space.

“I’m Blake.” He extends his hand to her. She places her small hand in his, but locks eyes on me. I nod.

Her shoulders drop along with her eyes. “Milena.” Her apprehension isn’t unexpected. I imagine working for a man like Dominick hasn’t instilled much trust in men.

“We’re going to need your help in getting our girl back. You up for that?” Blake must’ve come to the same conclusion, his voice the equivalent of kid gloves.

“Mm-hm.” She nods and Blake releases her hand.

As crude as he can be, the guy has a side that evokes trust, especially in women.

“Please, sit down.” She motions to a couch in the living room. We head in, but I’m too antsy to sit.

I survey my surroundings, surprised by the lack of hominess. The house I grew up in has family photos all over the place, along with knickknacks picked up from family vacations and trophies won by my sister or me. This place feels more like the waiting room of a doctor’s office than a home. Cheap, decorative art hangs on the walls, matching throw pillows arranged on a couch that looks like it’s never been sat on. And Raven grew up here? My chest cramps.

“Milena, I know you don’t know me.”

She backs into the couch and sits, her hands obsessively picking at the hem of her sweater.

“But, I’m in love with your daughter. I need to get to her. I can’t call the police—”

“No.” Her eyes focus on me, her one word confirming that the police won’t do shit.

“Right. You’re the only one who can help me. Please.”

She stares across the room. I turn to Blake. He points to his watch. We’re running out of time. Milena has retreated into herself. It was just like the photo Raven took of her the day she left home.

I squat to her eye level. This woman has caused the girl I love more pain than I can stomach. I see-saw between wanting to scream at her and wanting to worship at her feet. She holds the key to my future.

“Look, I know you and Raven have . . . issues. And I don’t know what you’ve been through or why you did the things you did. But I know your daughter. She doesn’t want this life. If you feel anything for her, if you care for her at all, then please help me.”

Her gaze swings to mine. “There is a place. In the mountains. He takes some of the girls there after . . .” She looks to her lap. “Girls in my profession sometimes get pregnant. He takes them there to have the procedure done and for recovery.”

My stomach lurches. That sick-ass motherfucker! These girls, scared out of their minds, he takes to a non-medical facility so some hack doctor can scrape out their insides. I rub my head to numb the buzz that roars between my ears.

“It’s where she was born.” Her voice is just a hair above a whisper. But the words ring like they came from a bullhorn. “The cabin. He’ll take her there.” Her eyes bore into mine with an intensity that I can’t argue.

“Where is it? Do you have an address? Name of a town?” The questions roll from my head in rapid fire.

She jumps to her feet and heads to the kitchen. Seconds later, she returns with a piece of paper and a pen. Frantically, she starts sketching.

“It’s off the Interstate towards the ski resort. You’ll pass through a small town with a diner on the side of the road. The sign looks like a wagon wheel. After that, maybe fifteen minutes or so, there will be a turn off on the right-hand side. Take that until you hit a fork in the road,” she explains while drawing it out. “Right at the fork and follow that.” She hands me the paper. “It’s the only thing out there. You can’t miss it.”

I bolt through the living room to the front door. Blake meets me there, door open and

waiting.

“Jonah!”

I stop and turn to Milena, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Bring her home safely, and,” she looks at the floor and my heart breaks as the gesture reminds me of Raven, “tell her I love her.”

“When I bring her back, you tell her yourself.”

~*~

Raven

The dark is contagious. It spreads from the simple absence of light to something bigger. Something that seeps in through your eyes and multiplies until it takes you over. Starting with your mind, it works its way through until it extinguishes the last spark of hope you have hidden deep in your heart.

Everything is dark. The moonlight spilling through the window is only bright enough to illuminate a square on the dirty floor. The smell of wood rot matches the creeping dread that fights to become my only companion. But I won't lose hope. Not yet. Sooner or later, their guard will drop. I'll run and live in the woods like that boy who was raised by wolves. If it means having my life back, Jonah back, I could do that.

I've watched the moon square move across the floor. Dark stains pepper its surface. Is that blood? What happens in this room? I race to the window and push up on the lever to open it. It doesn't budge. Again. Fear floods my body. Air rushes in and out of my lungs in erratic bursts. A sob crawls into my throat. I hold it back. I won't let him win. I push it down, numbing myself from the inside out. Detach. Separate my mind from my body. That's the only way to survive.

I lie back on the bed, the only piece of furniture in the room. Calm, deep breathing, eyes closed. I imagine the bed beneath me is Jonah's. He's next to me, his arm thrown over my stomach. My heart rate slows. His breath kisses my cheek as he whispers how much he loves me. My muscles relax. He twirls a strand of my hair around his finger. The corner of my mouth lifts.

Footsteps. I'm thrown from my fantasy. My body sits up ramrod straight, eyes wide.

Each step is tentative, like someone sneaking down the hall. They sound close as the wood floor creaks outside my door.

My heart races. Could it be Jonah?

I rush to the door and press my ear to it. The knob to the door jiggles and twists. I walk backwards until my legs hit the bed. Hope and relief surge through me in waves.

Tears build at the joy of seeing Jonah again. My skin itches for his touch. I'm practically bouncing on the balls of my feet. The door inches open, revealing the tall, dark figure of a man.

I squint into the dark. “Jonah?”

“Nope, but you can go ahead and pretend. Won't bother me at all.”

Vince. My stomach plummets. Terror snakes through my veins.

He shuts the door behind him and locks it with a key. With a slow strut, he comes toward me. He passes through the moonlight square, illuminating his face. His eyes work my body, making his intentions clear. I want to scream, but dread freezes my most primitive reaction.

“You thought I could let you go after what your boyfriend did to me in that parking lot?” He runs the tips of his fingers from my shoulder down to my breast. “It's payback time.”

No. My head moves from side to side, unable to articulate the words. Fear, exhaustion, and

anxiety get the best of me.

He shoves me onto the bed. I scurry backwards as fast as I can. He grabs my neck, pushes me down, and climbs on top of me. I whimper. It's not much, but it gives me hope.

React, fight, something.

"You be quiet and I'll take it easy on you. If you fight, I'll enjoy that, but you won't."

Holding my wrists together over my head with one hand, he reaches down and unzips his pants.

Oh God, please no.

He pins me to the bed with his hips. I kick and buck to get out from under him.

"Fight it is." He licks my neck and bites my earlobe, hard. "This'll be fun." His breath smells like liquor. I turn my face to avoid it.

"Stop." It's weak, but as the word comes out so does the will to survive. "Get off—"

His hand silences me. My arms ache. My struggle is pointless.

He presses himself between my legs. Twisting and tugging, I try to rip my arms from his grip. Pain rips through my elbow. The only thing keeping him from his goal is my shorts. His weight crushes my body. He anchors me tighter to the bed. His mouth crashes against mine, drowning my screams. I fight and thrash, forcing myself deeper into the bed. *Jonah, I need you.* My mind screams for him to burst through the door.

Break his arm, baby. Arm bar. Remember, Raven. Fight.

I squeeze my eyes shut as Jonah's voice stills my racing thoughts. Tears trail down my temple. It may be panic or some innate survival response, but my lesson on the arm bar comes back in brilliant clarity. I can do this.

That's my girl.

Waiting for the opportunity is going to be the hardest part. I need to stop fighting so he can free his hands. I breathe deep and stop squirming.

"Change your mind? Not going to fight me anymore?"

I shake my head no.

"Yeah, I knew you were a whore."

He slides his hand over my breast to the button of my shorts. With one hand, he pushes them down my thighs. Unable to get them past my knees, he lets go of my wrists and sits up.

Opportunity.

I say a prayer for strength and move quickly. I grab his right wrist with both hands. His eyes dart to mine. I throw my leg over his arm, straddling his shoulder. He jumps in surprise. Bracing my weight on my shoulder blades, I cross my legs at my calves. His arm runs the length of my body, from knees to chest.

He struggles and grabs at me with his free hand. "You little bit—"

One powerful thrust of my hips turns his words into a scream. I pull his arm tight and flex my hips deeper into the hold. I feel and hear a sickening snap at his elbow. Vince howls in pain. I did it.

With a tight hold, I refuse to let go. I keep my hips thrust forward and he continues to yelp. Power surges through me. He's crying out for me to release him. I'm locked down with an unrelenting grip. He kicks and hollers on the bed.

Light pours into the room, blinding me. I push my hips harder, making Vince cry out. Something wraps around my neck . . . hands. They clamp down, choking me. I gasp and writhe. My vision adjusts to the light. I stare into the blue-green eyes of Dominick. His face is red with anger, jaw clenched tight.

And he's not letting go.

Thirty-two

Jonah

My truck eats up highway as we blaze down the interstate. Hands vise-gripped to the wheel. Eyes scanning. Exit signs fly by in a blur of green and white. Blake is silent beside me. His head dips to the hand-drawn map then forward and back again.

I play out my strategy. No more polite conversation and deal-making. I know Dominick won't give up Raven easily. Not after what he went through to get her. He had this planned all along, including hiring Candy to do his dirty work. I should have known.

Inwardly, I berate myself for buying into his bullshit. How could I have been so stupid? Well, that shit ain't happening again. There are only two ways this confrontation will go. Dominick beaten into a bloody pulp, left begging for his pathetic life, or Dominick dead. And I'll have to accomplish this while keeping Raven safe, or more importantly, alive. *Fuck*.

"Turn left here." Blake's direction calls me from my thoughts.

A quick turn and we're on an unpaved road. I hit the four-wheel drive and lay heavy on the gas. Dirt and rocks spit from my back tires as we weave through the narrow mountain roads. My eyes focus on the path ahead.

"Fork in the road." Blake points ahead.

I don't have to look at the map to know which way to turn. Milena's handwritten instructions are branded in my mind.

"Pull off. Park in the trees." He drops the directions on the dash and grabs the handle for a quick exit.

"Pop the box and grab my Eagle." I toss him the key to my glove box.

Within seconds the cold metal of my fifty-caliber Desert Eagle warms my hand.

I check the clip. Fully loaded. We hop from the truck and hustle back to the dirt road. I shove the gun into my waistband at my back.

We jog down the tree line, making sure to keep to the shadows. The cool mountain air invigorates me. It's close to two in the morning. The title fight was only a few hours ago. It feels like ages. I should be exhausted, but I've never felt more alert.

We cross to the other side of the road where a small light shines like a beacon through the trees.

"That's got to be it." I don't wait for Blake's response, and take off toward the light.

The rickety A-frame cabin stands alone in the mass of pine trees, a one-lane dirt driveway leading to it. It's small, probably two bedrooms at most. This shit shack looks like it's made of scrap wood and spit. If I weren't convinced Raven was inside, I'd drive my truck full speed through the front fucking door.

We step closer, cautiously keeping to the dark in the trees. She has to be here. Some deep part of me whispers she may not be, but I choose to ignore it. This is my only chance of getting her back.

Something catches my eye from the side of the shack. I creep closer, tucking in behind the trees. *Bingo*.

"They're definitely here." I motion to the hundred-thousand-dollar Benz parked in the trees next to a black Lexus sedan.

“What do you want to do? Just knock on the door and start busting caps in his pompous ass?” Blake’s idea would usually make me smile, but there isn’t a hint of humor in his voice. He’s dead fucking serious.

“Let’s check out the windows first, try to get an idea of what we’re dealing with. If I can’t get a handle on what’s going on in there, I’ll kick the motherfucking door down.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Blake moves toward the cabin.

I grab his shoulder, needing to say something before we do this. “Whatever happens in there, you get her out. Understand?”

His eyebrows drop low. “If shit gets ugly, I’m not leaving you—”

“Don’t worry about me. Just get her out and far away.”

Blake puts his hands on his hips and drops his head, a string of curses flowing in a whisper.

“Promise me.”

He meets my eyes, his jaw tight. He shakes his head.

“Blake, please.”

His gaze swings to the treetops for a second then back to me. “All right. I’ll get her out.”

“Good.” I nod. “Now let’s take this fucker out.”

We run low to the ground to the cabin. I motion for Blake to take one side of the shack, whispering for him to check the windows. We’ll split up and meet in the back.

I edge up under the first window and peek inside. An empty living room. No furniture except for a wooden-framed couch. The embers from an old fire smolder in the fireplace. My eyes scour the area. No sign of Raven.

With my back to the wall, I slide to the next window. It’s frosted glass, probably a bathroom. I press my ear to it. Nothing.

In a few more steps, I’m at the back of the cabin. Blake is just rounding the opposite corner. We meet at a single window, our backs against the wall on either side. The low vibration of angry voices rumbles against the glass, but the words are indecipherable. With a nod, we glance inside.

“Holy shit,” Blake whispers through clenched teeth.

It’s dark in the room, but light from the open door is enough to illuminate the scene. Vince and Dominick surround a small bed. They’re hunched over, like vultures picking away at their prey. I don’t have to see who they’re holding down to know who it is.

Adrenaline shoots through my body, injected by a rocket launcher. The roar of my pulse pounds between my ears. An instinct to kill rushes down my spine, juicing up my muscles. My skin vibrates with lethal energy.

Get the fuck off her!

I need to draw them away, redirect their attention. I grab my gun, point it at the assholes. *No*. I can’t risk hitting Raven.

With a flip of my hand, I use the gun’s butt, and smash the window. Glass shatters, cutting through the silence and causing Dominick and Vince to spin around.

“Well, fuck. I guess it’s on now.” Blake’s words ring from behind me as I race to the front door.

I kick it open. The walls rattle.

Pop.

Light flashes. I stumble back. Pain explodes in my shoulder and down my arm. I blink, pushing against the nausea and agony that threatens to take me down. The fucker shot me.

“Shit. You okay?” Blake’s question is nothing more than static to my main concern.

Where is she?

I scan dimly lit room, blinking away the floaters from the flash of gunfire. Standing at the mouth of the hallway is Dominick and Vince. Both with guns raised. Vince's is smoking.

"No, Jonah!" Raven's voice comes from the hallway. *Thank God, she's alive.*

The confirmation sends renewed strength to my mind and muscles.

I straighten from my tortured huddle, sucking air through my teeth. *Fuck, this hurts.* Then point my gun with my good arm. "Let her go, Dominick." My voice sounds stronger than I feel.

"You broke into my home, Mr. Slade. I could kill you right here, in cold blood, and get away with it." Dominick's voice cracks with anger or frustration. I'm not sure.

"Dominick, please don't." Raven's appeal ends on a whimper.

Is she hurt? I search in her direction, but can't make her out in the dim light. She's blocked in the hallway behind the bulk of the dickclicks who brought her here.

"Not true, asshole. In order to get away with it, you'd have to stay alive. And I can promise you, if I go down, so will you." My aim is steady, head clear. I breathe deep and heavy, working past the pain.

"Well, we can put that to the test, although, I'd rather not have to deal with hiding dead bodies tonight." Dominick's tone sounds genuinely put off.

"Cut the bullshit." I step closer, making sure to speak slowly so he understands. "I will not leave this place without her."

His lips curl back over his teeth. "Oh, but you will. We made a bet. You lost."

Waves of failure wash over me. "You had no intention of letting her go, did you? If I'd lost the fight, you'd just walk away?"

A chuckle rumbles from deep in his chest. "Brains and brawn. Impressive. And here I thought you were just a dumb jock."

I fucking knew it. This guy plays by his own rules. I can't believe I fell for it.

My injured arm moves on its own accord to steady my aim. "You're de—" *Dammit.* Pain blazes at my shoulder.

Vince snorts with laughter. "Not so strong now, are ya? You may have taken me down in a surprise attack at the club, but I dare you to come at me now."

Blake pulls a large hunting knife from the back of his pants. He spins it in his hand before he takes a fighting stance. He gives me a quick chin lift and focuses on the men across the room.

"Let me go." Raven pushes at her captors, trying to get past.

My blood screams to get to her, to throw her over my shoulder and kill anyone who stands in my way. It's my only option. I move. Dominick yanks her to his front, his gun at her head. I stop mid-stride.

"Not one more step, Slade." His gun is pressing against her temple, her head turned away from the weapon, eyes screwed shut. Her chest heaves with heavy breaths or possible hysteria.

I push the urge to kill down deep. Right now, I need to make sure she's unharmed.

"Baby?" I need to see her eyes, read in her expression that they didn't hurt her. *They better not have hurt her.* "Baby, look at me."

My gun is on Dominick. His on her. Vince's moves back and forth between Blake and me.

"Jonah . . ." Desperation laces through my name as her words trail off. She blinks open her eyes and turns toward me.

Her stare is wild, the aquamarine almost glowing against their red rims. A large, bleeding gash cuts through her eyebrow. White-hot fury explodes deep in my chest. Visions of what could cause that kind of wound flash before my eyes. None of them good. I mentally shake away the

possibilities of what would've happened if we hadn't gotten here when we did. Going rat-shit crazy won't help anyone and may jeopardize her safety. I need to focus on keeping her safe.

I lock eyes with her, hoping to God she sees something there that makes her listen. This shit is about to get ugly, and I need her as far away from it as possible.

"Baby, are you hurt? Anywhere besides your head?"

She shakes no. "I want to go home. Jonah . . ." Hysterical cries burst from her lips.

My stomach twists. "I know, baby. I'm here to take you home." I pin Dominick with a glare. "Let her go."

"Not a chance." Dominick pushes the gun harder into Raven's head, making her wince.

My finger twitches against the trigger.

"You don't know what they did . . . W-What they were going to . . ." The sound of her soul-shaking sobs rip through the small room.

"I'm finished talking, Slade. Walk away. Now. Or she dies."

I ignore Dominick. "Raven, everything's going to be okay." The look of terror in her eyes has me inching closer to comfort her.

The movement sends Dominick's gun in my direction. *Good.*

Vince closes in. Blake follows suit. Tension boils in the air like acid. It's a four-way standoff. Whoever shoots first, wins.

Blood drains from my shoulder in a steady drip. My vision blurs at the edges. I need to end this before I pass out. "Raven, baby." I stagger a step. *Shit.*

"He tried to rape me." Her words are spit at Vince.

Dominick drops his head with a muttered curse.

My eyes are drawn to her shorts, opened and unzipped. *Oh, fuck no.* Fire flares in my gut. My vision returns with crystal accuracy, but all I can see is blood. I should have ended him that night in the parking lot. He may think he knows what pain is, but I'm about to give him a lesson in agony.

I swing my aim to Vince, step close, point blank range.

"I'm going to fuck you up, you no-good piece of shit." My words shake with the force of my anger.

"You better start apologizing, asswipe. My friend here's about to put a bullet in your brain." The rage in Blake's voice tells me he's walking a thin line of control.

Vince and I face off. My gun to his face, his to my chest. I'm vaguely aware of the other people in the room, but right now I've got sniper vision and Vince is in my crosshairs. Kill first, explain later.

"Just fucking end this, Dominick." Vince's gun shakes in his hand. I notice he's not using his other arm to brace the weight of his weapon, but instead has it cradled to his body. "Give me the go ahead to take this guy out. It's the least I could do after what that whore did to my arm—"

I lower my gun to his groin.

Pop.

"Aargh!" His scream of agony has him dropping to the floor along with his gun. He curls into the fetal position whimpering.

I kick his weapon away. "I warned you."

Blake scoops it up and aims it at the miserable mound of flesh on the floor. "Won't be using that tool ever again, eh Vinnie?"

Vince writhes once and then goes still. Probably passed out.

"Big mistake, Slade." Dominick shouts and the sound of Raven's cries fill the room.

I swing my gun toward him. His arm visibly flexes around her waist, making her gasp for air. I take aim, but feel my confidence draining along with the blood that flows down my arm.

"You don't get it. She's mine. You want to shoot me? Go ahead. But if I die, I take her with me." He moves toward the door, dragging Raven with him.

I move to block him. It's a risk, but after everything, I don't believe he would kill her now. He thrusts the gun hard, forcing her neck to an awkward angle. *Fuck.*

Losing her once was a pain worse than death. I will not lose her again. I take another step.

"He's gonna kill her, man." Blake's words speak to the raging beast in my head.

My shirt and jeans are soaked in my blood. I fight for consciousness. Blinking hard, I force myself to think clearly. Plans, ideas tumble in my head. My head feels heavy on my shoulders. I'm running out of time. There's only one option left.

"Fine." I lower my gun to the ground, then stand, palms forward in surrender. "You win."

"You too." Dominick motions to Blake to drop his weapons.

"Jonah?" Blake's eyes dart from my shoulder to my face, asking the question, *Have you lost your mind?*

I nod for him to drop his weapons. He shakes his head.

"Do it. He'll kill her." I hope my voice sounds desperate.

Blake drops his weapons and gives me a I-hope-you-know-what-you're-doing look. *Me too.*

Dominick tries to move past me. I stagger into his path, blocking his way.

"Wait. I just need to say one thing before you go." My words are a string of slurs.

I shut down my rational thinking. Or what's left of it. I'm firing on pure instinct. Using the one thing that has yet to fail me. I'm going to fight.

My head drops forward. Weakened from loss of blood, I gather my remaining strength. I'm not looking to beat him, only to buy enough time for Blake to get Raven out of here.

Dominick moves his gun-holding hand around her waist, and digs in his pocket for something. Car keys maybe.

Raven's sobs tighten my chest, making it hard to swallow.

Hang in there, baby. I have a plan.

"No time for parting words, I'm afraid. If you boys will get the fuck out of my way, my daughter and I—"

"She's *my* daughter!"

~*~

Raven

My mom is here. She said I'm her daughter. The ferocity of her words shakes the deepest corner of my soul.

"Milena." Dominick's voice sounds bored, but his muscles tense at my back. "What the fuck are you doing here?" He looks between her and Jonah. "You brought them here?" He aims the gun at her. "You stupid, bitch!"

She doesn't flinch.

"I won't let you take her." She steps closer, her back straight, conviction burning in her eyes. "Let her go."

"And if I don't? What are you going to do about it?" He shakes with laughter. "Look at you. You're pathetic and weak."

“Not anymore.” Her voice is firm, not the slightest tremble. “I’m not that naïve girl anymore.” She pins Dominick with a glare. “Do you remember that night? Twenty-one years ago to this day. Just a few yards from where we’re standing.”

I was born here?

His grip loosens and he leans toward her. “Of course, I remember. You gave her to me then. You didn’t want anything to do with her. Wouldn’t even hold her.”

I twist my neck away from his devastating words. Heartbreak slashes through my body, threatening to drop me to the floor.

“Raven?” My mom’s voice is tender.

Her soft expression contradicts the torture that works behind her dark brown eyes.

“I’m so sorry. I’d lost my parents.” She exhales a quick breath and drops her head. “I couldn’t bear to lose you too. It’s no excuse. I know that now.”

Tears stream down my face as her public apology seeps into my soul.

“You ungrateful bitch, I’ve given you everything. You were nothing when I saved you from your shitty life.” Dominick shouts across the room, throwing his words like weapons.

She sneers in his direction. “I would rather live a thousand lives with nothing than the one I’ve lived with you. You used my fears against me to get what you wanted.” Her voice cracks. “Raven was my baby.” The room reverberates with the emotion behind her words.

Her baby. Warmth blooms in my chest. I stare, shock and amazement freezing my voice.

“But she was never mine, was she? You made that clear from the beginning.”

Goose bumps race over my skin. She was protecting herself. This whole time I thought she hated me.

“I created her—”

“She’s a human being, Dominick. You’re messing with people’s lives. She doesn’t want this.” She takes a step towards us, her shoulders tall and her expression fearless. “Let her go.”

She’s here. Fighting. For me.

Dominick’s gun stays aimed at her. Blake and Jonah stand close, muscles tense, eyes darting.

She lifts her chin in defiance. He’s going to kill her. And she’s willing to die to free me.

I can’t let that happen.

I fight the tears that brim in my eyes. It took strength for her to come here and risk her life. I won’t repay that with fear. I’ve waited my entire life to feel my mom’s love. And now that I have it, I refuse to lose it. We can fight to save each other.

“Your time is up, Milena. And who better to replace you than your own daughter.” He runs the cool metal of his gun down my cheek. “She looks like you. Moves like you.” He grabs a handful of my hair and pulls it, making me cry out. “She probably even fucks like you.”

“Piece of shit!” Jonah’s voice rumbles through the room.

“You stay the fuck out of this, Slade.” Dominick points his gun at my mom.

“Don’t worry, darling. I’ll take good care of her.” He kisses my cheek. I lean away from him. His grip tightens. Gun cocked. “Good bye, Milena.”

Jonah moves fast. I’m thrown to the floor. My head smacks the hardwood. Pain lances through my skull, and bright stars flash behind my eyes. I struggle to sit up, blinking. Jonah has Dominick on the ground. They push and pull for the gun in a deadly tug-o-war.

Oh, God.

Blake pulls me up. “Baby girl. Let’s go.”

He drags me to the door, hooking my mom around her shoulders, and pushing us out.

“No!” I squirm in his hold. “I’m not leaving him.”

Blake’s biceps tighten. He’s too strong. “Please, Blake. Let me go!”

He drags us down the stairs. Every step escalates my need to run back.

“Can’t. I promised—”

“Please, Blake! I won’t lose him.” I’m kicking and flailing.

His steps slow.

“I can’t live without him.” I continue to claw at Blake’s arms. I will never give up my fight for Jonah.

A deep groan rumbles from his chest. “He’s going to kill me.” His words are mumbled beneath his breath.

And then I’m free. My will to save Jonah burns in my muscles as I sprint toward the cabin.

I dart into the room. Jonah and Dominick are still locked in a vicious battle. I slide across a slippery pool of Vince’s blood.

There’s commotion, yelling. I look up to see Dominick’s gun pointed at Jonah’s face. I need to move faster.

A gun. I scurry on all fours. Blood covers my hands. Tears blur my vision. I fumble with the weapon. Crawling toward the fight. Jonah locks eyes with mine. His features twist in undiluted panic. Dominick’s arm gets loose. The gun presses below Jonah’s chin. *No!* The gun slips from my grip, I scramble for it with shaking hands. I get it, raise my hands to aim, and pray I’m not too late.

Pop-Pop-Pop.

Thirty-three

Raven

The room is still. Pain radiates from my arms, seeping into my shoulders. People are yelling, but it sounds as if I've got cotton balls in my ears. Muffled and incoherent. White noise rings in my head, along with my hammering heartbeat.

I push myself up. The weight of the gun drops from my hand. Dominick is down. His body still. His chest void of the rise and fall of breath.

Dead. I killed him.

Someone pulls at my arm. They want my attention, but I can't look away from the morbid scene before me. Out of the corner of my eye I see Jonah. He's sitting up. Blake is shouting in his face, but I can't hear what he's saying.

Jonah's gaze swings to mine. The red blood splattered on his face is a gory contrast to his pallid skin. His eyebrows are low and his face pinched. I watch his mouth move, able to make out the single word. *Baby*.

My breath hitches. It's over. I'm free.

As if summoned by my thoughts, he rushes to me and I'm in the safety of his arms. The gentle sway of his body rocks me, and I clutch his blood-soaked shirt. He cups my cheek with his good arm, holding me to him. I feel the pressure of his mouth against the top of my head. His lips move against my scalp, but his words are vibrations. I pull away and watch his lips.

I love you.

A smile tiptoes across my face.

I love you too. My lips move, the cadence of my voice hums in my throat, but I can barely hear it. He pulls me back to his chest.

I can't force myself to look away from Dominick, his expensive-suited corpse lying in a pool of his own blood, a grim reminder of what I've done. What I had to do to save Jonah and my mom. And myself.

I search the recesses of my heart for regret, guilt, horror. Nothing. I've just killed my dad, the man responsible for my life. And all I feel is . . . relief.

~*~

Jonah

"You guys okay?" Blake walks up from my truck to the steps of the cabin where Raven and I sit.

As soon as I could, I dragged Raven out of there. It was the only way to get her to stop staring at Dominick's dead body.

I haven't left her side, except to run in and clean Dominick's filthy blood off my face.

"Better. We're starting to get our hearing back." I run my lips along the top of Raven's head, breathing in deep. "You make the call?"

"Yeah. Made it on my way to the truck. They should be here soon." Standing on the lower step, Blake leans against the banister. "Need anything?"

I give Raven a squeeze. “Baby?”

She shakes her head.

Milena is sitting on a rock nearby, but she keeps her distance, probably not sure how Raven feels about her. What she did tonight redeems her in my book. I owe my entire life to Milena. But ultimately, forgiveness is Raven’s to give.

Minutes tick by before sirens and bright lights descend on us. An ambulance, fire truck, and a handful of police cars pull up to the cabin. Paramedics and cops unload in a hurry until we’re surrounded by uniforms.

“Mr. Slade, I’m Kevin.” One EMT that rushed out from the back of the ambulance meets us on the steps. He pulls back the fabric of my shirt to examine my shoulder. “Can you walk?”

“Yeah. Take care of her head. I’ll wait.” I motion to Raven who is slumped against my good side.

Kevin sidesteps and pulls back Raven’s hair to check out her forehead. “Ma’am, are you injured anywhere else?”

She glares at me, but doesn’t argue. “No. Just the cut on my head.”

A smile pulls at my lips. I look forward to a lifetime of dirty looks from her.

“All right. Mr. Slade, let’s get you into the ambulance and get some IV fluids started. I’ll have Roger come and take care of . . .”

“My wife.” I glare at Kevin. “Make sure Roger knows.”

The sound of Raven’s giggle is better than any pain medication.

“Yes, sir, Assassin. By the way, great fight tonight.” The eager EMT is a fan. *Good to know.*

“Yes, it was.” I lock eyes with Raven. “Best fight of my life.”

Kevin puts his hand out to help me up. I’m tired and dizzy from blood loss, but this guy looks like a noodle in scrubs. I shake him off and push to standing. *Oh, shit.* Gripping the handrail, I squeeze my eyes shut, willing the vertigo away. Raven presses into my side, using her body as support until my head stops spinning.

She walks me down the few steps to the dirt. I pull her in for a hug before we’re dealt with by our assigned EMTs.

The angry mark above her head is no longer bleeding. I run my knuckles down her cheek, grateful that a cut is all they got on her. “Get your head taken care of.” I kiss her longer than I should for the audience we have, but fuck ’em.

A team of EMTs rush into the cabin. Roger scurries up with some kind of a field medical kit and gets to work on Raven’s head.

I drag my body to the ambulance where Kevin asks me to climb inside.

“Mind if you treat me out here?” There’s no way I’m letting Raven out of my sight. It should be comforting being surrounded by cops, but with Dominick’s far reach, I need to stay alert.

“Oh, I don’t—”

I spear Kevin with a glare that has him nodding.

“Yeah, sure thing, ‘Assassin.’ I’ll just pop a stretcher up here.”

“Thanks.”

Kevin moves some equipment to just outside the ambulances back doors. He moves around my shoulder doing some shit. I don’t pay attention, but instead keep my focus on my girl. I pull my eyes away from her to watch them wheel Dominick’s sheet-covered corpse from the cabin. Vince is next. It looks like they’ve got him awake and talking. *I should have aimed higher.*

A cop with a note pad asks me questions. I answer them until he’s satisfied and walks away.

He moves to questioning Raven next. Milena jumps to her side.

“Hey, man. How’s the shoulder?” Blake plops down next to me at the back end of the ambulance.

“It’s all right.” I’m not concerned about my fucking shoulder.

Both Milena and Raven talk and nod as they most likely retell the night’s events. I wish I could hear what they’re saying.

“She’s going to be okay, ya know.”

I don’t take my eyes off my girl. “How do you know that? She just killed someone.”

Blake shrugs. “Cops said they’d been looking for something on Morretti for years. The guy’s operation was locked up tighter than a Royce Gracie shoulder hold. This little situation was the Golden Goose taking a big fat dump right in their laps.”

I don’t say anything, but God, I hope he’s right.

“Guess ole Vinnie started singing like a canary the second they got him conscious. Fucker gave away everything. Even told them he roughed up Guy and stole his cell phone.”

“He roughed up Guy? Is he okay? Wait, does Raven know?” I watch Raven. Her body language is relaxed. They must be finishing up.

“Yeah, he’s good. A few bruises and a gnarly concussion. That’s how they got Raven out of the arena. They sent her a text from Guy’s phone. Fucking assholes. Threatened to kill him if she didn’t cooperate with Candy.”

The name grates on my nerves. “And what about her? They gonna arrest her?”

He leans back, crosses his arms over his chest. “Yup. She’ll go down for kidnapping and whatever else the prosecutor can scrape up.”

I exhale a long breath. Guess keeping Vince alive was a good thing.

“Don’t you let her cry one tear for that dick.” Blake looks to the ambulance that holds Dominick’s body then back to Raven. “She’s a sweet girl, and sweet girls feel shit for shitty people. Don’t let it eat her up inside. She saved your life.”

I turn a glare on my friend. “Yeah, she did. And don’t think I’ve forgotten about your broken promise, ass.”

“Dude, she forced me. I got her out, but she threatened to tell the women of Vegas that I’ve got a needle dick.” He throws his hands up in mock surrender. “I can’t let that happen. I’ve got a reputation to uphold.”

“How hard is it to keep a fucking promise?”

He shrugs, but has the decency to look embarrassed. “Your girl can be persuasive.”

“Dick.” I chuckle and turn back to Milena and Raven, making a mental note to take it out on him in the octagon once my shoulder heals.

“Milena’s fucking hot as hell.” There’s a smile in his voice.

I glare at him, but can’t help the curl in my lips. “Are you seriously talking about my girl’s mom? Sick fuck.”

“What? I know hot when I see it, and Milena’s smokin’.” He stands and holds out his hand. “Keys. I’ll follow Milena home in the truck and bring it by in the morning. I’m assuming you’ll be riding down the hill in this.” He motions to the ambulance. “I’d offer to take Raven home, but knowing you, you ain’t letting your girl out of your sight for . . . well, ever.”

I toss him my keys. “Thanks, man.”

He looks away and nods. Guy code for, *no problem, you’d do it for me*. Fuck yeah, I would.

Blake turns on his heel.

“Hey, B. You keep your dick to yourself around Milena, ya hear?”

He stops, looks to the ground, and shakes his head. He continues walking and turns over his shoulder. “I don’t do chicks with kids, remember?”

I laugh to myself and watch as Raven finishes up. She turns away from the group of police who frantically fill their note pads and heads in my direction. She has a blanket from the EMT wrapped around her shoulders. The head wound is clean and covered with a butterfly bandage.

Standing, I pull her into my arms. “Hey.” I push the blanket down to kiss her neck at my spot. “You okay?” She curls in tight, just like she always does, as if she was carved from my own form.

“Yeah. I’m great.” The smile in her voice is unmistakable.

“Mr. Slade, it’s about time we get going,” Kevin says from inside the ambulance.

“Come on. Let’s get this over with so we can go home.” I move to help her inside the vehicle.

“Oh, no, she can’t come.” Kevin wags his finger as I one-arm lift Raven into the ambulance. “But if she wants to, she can meet . . . you . . . um . . .”

Raven and I are inside, settled on a stretcher, completely ignoring his rant.

“Well, okay. I guess she can come.” He must finally realize that he’ll be riding in another vehicle before she does. Smart kid.

“Thanks, Kevin.” I pull Raven into my arms and kiss her head. “I appreciate your flexibility.”

Raven’s body jumps with silent laughter as she hides her smile in my chest. I wrap her up tighter, thinking about how close I was to losing this. Losing her.

The ambulance fires up and we head back to Vegas. Raven’s breathing slows to the rhythm of sleep. Even with my shoulder on fire, tired as hell, and minus a shitload of blood, I don’t sleep. Instead, my mind conjures plans—plans for the future we now have sealed. And I’m not wasting a single second.

“Kevin, I need you to do me a favor.”

“Sure thing, ‘Assassin.’”

“I need to make a phone call.”

~*~

Raven

Beep-Beep-Beep.

The gentle sound brings me back to consciousness. I blink several times into the dark before lifting my head from my warm pillow. I observe my surroundings, thankful to see the lights of medical equipment rather than log walls. I’m not in the cabin, but in the hospital with Jonah.

My head swirls with the events from this morning. The cops told me that Guy was safe. They even gave me a phone so I could call him. He apologized for not being at the fight to protect me. I reassured him that Dominick was out to get his way, no matter what.

Katherine showed up and sat with my mom while Jonah was poked and x-rayed. The doctor said that the bullet went straight through without injuring anything vital, but they had to do surgery. Three hours later, we were put in a private room. I assured Katherine and my mom that I was okay. There was no way I was leaving Jonah’s side. I traded my bloody clothes for a pair of clean scrubs, crawled in bed with Jonah, and fell asleep.

A yawn crawls up my throat and I lie back down in the crook of Jonah’s uninjured shoulder.

“Good morning.” His sexy, sleepy voice does delicious things to my body. Even laid-up and hospitalized, he’s irresistible.

“Good night, you mean.” I walk my fingers to his abdomen, pulling his hospital gown up to slide my hand against his rippled muscles.

He reaches for my face but drops his hand with a groan. “Shit, that hurts.”

I look up at him and smile. “Looks like you’re going to have to keep that hand to yourself.”

“Not a fucking chance. Come here.” His demand is firm and sexy.

I lift my face to his and brush my lips against his chin. “Thank you, Jonah. Thank you for finding me.”

“And thank you for saving me.”

My cheeks heat and I bury deeper into his chest.

“How’re you holding up? You know, with everything?” His hand traces soothing patterns on my back.

“Um . . . I’m good. I feel like I should feel something, ya know? Guilt or . . . remorse. I just don’t.” I huff out a breath. “The cops said this morning that no charges are being filed. Justifiable homicide and all that.”

“You want to talk about what happened with Vince?” His muscles tense against my body.

“Not much to tell. He tried to—”

A deep growl rumbles in Jonah’s chest.

Yeah, probably best to skip to the end. “You told me to break his arm. So I did.” I hear the words, and even I think they sound crazy. But it’s the truth.

“I told you?”

I circle his belly button with my finger. “Yeah. In my head. You told me to fight. You said *arm bar*.” I shrug. “You weren’t even there yet, and you were protecting me.”

“I’ll always protect you.” He hugs me to him. “Not that you need it. My girl’s tough as nails. I’m proud of you.”

Inwardly, I smile. I’m proud of myself.

“Fuck, I wish I’d killed that son of a bitch.”

“Nah. He deserves to live the rest of his life behind bars. Death is too easy.”

He laughs in a quick burst then groans. “Ugh, remind me not to do that again.”

Starting at his neck, I trail soft kisses to his jaw. “Poor baby.” I push up to meet his eyes. “I love you.”

His hand slides up my back into my hair. “I love you too. So much.”

He takes my lips in a brutal kiss that I feel in my toes. I moan into his mouth as our tongues glide against each other. Desire floods my veins as I explore his mouth. His strong lips dominate mine, molding them to his will. I roll his nipple between my thumb and forefinger. He groans and his hips flex off the bed.

Pushing up, I press my breasts into his chest, tilting my head and delving deeper into the kiss.

He breaks away with a hiss. “Fuck.”

The whispered curse sends me back and sitting up. “Shoot, did I hurt you?” I touch him and jerk my hand away, afraid of hurting him again.

“No, but if we don’t take this home, I’m afraid I’ll be forced to give the good doctor and his unsuspecting nurses a visual aid in sex education.” He shifts and adjusts the blankets to camouflage his arousal. It doesn’t work.

A giggle bubbles up from my chest, and my hand covers my mouth. Something rough on my

finger rubs against my lips. *What the heck?*

My mood sobers as I examine my hand, palm down, fingers splayed. It's on my ring finger. A gold band composed of tiny diamonds with one large round diamond in the center. The setting is old-fashioned, understated, and absolutely perfect. I stare in awe.

The cool air burns my eyes. I'm unable to blink. I force my eyes to Jonah who's smiling his thousand-watt smile: all teeth, two dimples, and shining eyes.

"Jonah?" I whisper, my eyes asking the question my words can't form.

"The ring was my mom's. My dad gave it to her when they got engaged, and she wore it every day, until this morning. She brought it by when you were sleeping." He pulls my hand to his chest and nimbly spins the ring on my finger.

"Raven, I fell in love with you the second I saw you. I thought I had my life mapped out, thought I had it together. Then you came along and flipped my world on its head. You make me want things I never knew I needed. This ring is more than a symbol of my love. It represents family. Our family. The one we'll build together. You said you didn't want to talk about our future until you knew we had a future to talk about. Well, now we do. So? Will you marry me?"

Our family. Our future. Now that we have one.

He stares at me, his eyebrows raised. I taste the salty tears as my lips curl at the edges. A slow smile creeps across his face.

I study the perfect ring then lock eyes with him. "Okay."

His face splits into a smile. "Okay." He kisses me deep and hard, possessive.

My insides turn to liquid. I explore every curve of his rippled stomach, and his muscles flex beneath my touch. My nails dig into his skin and drag down lower, until they're under the blankets that lie across his hips. He flexes into my touch, showing me what he wants. *Me*.

"Oh, one more thing." He breaks the kiss enough to speak, but his words are said against my lips.

An embarrassing whimper escapes at the loss of his mouth. "Yeah?" I lean into him.

He rubs his thumb across my aching lower lip. "Happy birthday, baby."

The words are barely out before I'm on him again. Desperation takes over my rational mind and I pull at his gown. *Too many clothes*.

A voice clears from the end of the bed, popping the love-driven sex bubble we'd created. I curl into Jonah's body, hoping to disappear from whoever caught me making out with my injured boyfriend. Fiancé.

"Well, well, well. Looks like someone's feeling better," Blake says from the foot of the bed, motioning to the pile of thin hospital blankets at Jonah's crotch.

I say a quick prayer of thanks that it's Blake and not Katherine. "Hey, Blake."

"What's up?" Jonah acts unaffected as he twirls a strand of my hair.

"Just came back from the police station. Dominick's operation is under intense investigation. Thought you two would like to know Vince and Candy are going to be looking at the inside of a jail cell for the foreseeable future."

Jonah and I take a collective breath.

Blake grimaces. "Vinnie should be the most popular guy in his cell block. They couldn't save his dick so they gave him a pussy. Boys in prison should love that."

"Blake!" I attempt to sound offended, my hysterical laughter ruining any chance I have of being taken seriously. Besides, that's the least he deserves for what he did to Eve, me, and probably loads of other women who weren't lucky enough to get away.

"I see you got a decent piece of ice there on your finger, baby girl."

I hold up my hand and admire the ring again. “Yeah.” Jonah kisses my head at my breathy reply.

“Right on. I’ll leave you two lovebirds alone.” He holds up his hand. “Word of caution, the doc is on his way in to check on your shoulder. You might want to keep Mr. Moby on the down-low.” He looks at the bed then back at us. “Looks like it’s too late for down-low, so . . . under wraps.”

“Dude, you mind keeping your eyes off my dick?”

He flashes his cocky smile. And even in the arms of the man of my dreams, his smile makes me giggle like a teenage girl. He winks then turns on his heel and heads through the draped dividers.

“Catch you two later. Got a hot little nurse who’s waiting to give my dick an oral exam.”

I laugh hard, trying to keep my body from shaking at its intensity. “He’s so funny.”

“Yes, so you’ve said.” Jonah’s deadpan tone makes me grin.

“Ooh, are you jealous?” I touch the end of his nose with my fingertip.

“Hmph. No.”

I slide my lower lip out in an exaggerated pout. “Oh. That’s too bad. I was going to prove my feelings for you . . . physically.” I kiss the sensitive skin below his ear.

“Is that right?” I can hear the smile in his voice.

“Mm-hm. I like you jealous.”

“Get used to it, baby.” He groans when I pull his earlobe between my teeth. “You know you’re mine now? To have and to hold ’til death do us part.”

“I do.”

Epilogue

Two months, five days, and twenty-two hours later . . .

Jonah

“Forty-two *million* dollars?” Owen’s palm slams on the bar, his jaw slack, eyes wide.

I pop the bottle cap and place the fresh beer in front of him. “Projected. It’ll take awhile to liquidate all of Dominick’s properties.” We knew Dominick was loaded with dirty money, but finding out about his multiple luxury high-rise condos and commercial properties was a surprise.

Rex leans in, his pierced eyebrow raised high. “No shit? What’re you guys going to do with all that money?”

“Y’all should buy one of them private islands. Like Oprah.” Caleb motions one of the caterers over and pops a bacon-wrapped shrimp in his mouth.

“Forty-two million dollars.” Owen repeats himself, sounding no less shocked. “Fuck the island. Kick some cash to your boys, man.”

“Dominick Morretti dies and you guys get all his money? Fuck . . .” Rex shakes his head. “I wish my dad was a dead-piece-of-shit pimp.” He throws back the dregs of his beer.

“Raven was his next of kin. It’s her money. She’s got plans for it.”

Caleb stands from his barstool. “Between her money and your money, y’all could buy up half of Vegas.”

“Nah. My title-fight winnings look like pennies in comparison.” I flex against the stifling confinement of my jacket. I can’t wait to get this tux off. Raven is excellent with formal-wear removal. My blood heats and has me searching her out.

She’s on the dance floor that the party planners put in my backyard. Blake spins her around, her white wedding gown swirling at her feet. The strapless top pushes her breasts up in an enticing way. I absently tug at the collar of my tuxedo. It’s loose, reminding me that I took off my tie and unbuttoned the top button while ravishing my wife in the limo on the way home. I can’t wait to peel that dress off her.

“So what’s she going to do with all that money?” Owen pulls me from my fantasy.

I take a swig of beer. “She bought her mom a house. And she started Raven’s Nest.”

“Yeah, I know that, but what about the other thirty-something million?”

“She plans to funnel it all into the foundation as it comes in.”

I look for Milena in the crowd. Since that night at the cabin, she’s been the kind of mom Raven’s always wanted: attentive, loving, hands on. The other day, I walked in to find them flopped on the couch watching *Overhaulin’*. Their eyes were riveted to the screen while Milena twirled a strand of her daughter’s hair.

Between Milena, my mom, and Eve, Raven has been able to get Raven’s Nest open and running. The foundation provides rehabilitation, job training, housing, and counseling for prostitutes getting out of the business. The place is already packed with the girls from Dominick’s stable.

“That’s some cool shit, man.” Rex toys with his lip ring.

“What’s cool shit?” Her voice draws my attention. No longer the girl who can’t curse, Raven can drop bombs with the best of them. She strolls up with Blake at her side.

"I believe they were talking about me, baby girl." Blake grabs a beer. "Don't know if you've noticed, but I'm cool as shit."

Caleb stands from his barstool and pushes it toward her, offering her a seat. "We're talking about Raven's Nest."

Blake plops down on the barstool, earning a glare of Caleb. "Thanks, dude."

She steps in beside me, champagne in hand. A slight blush colors her cheeks. "Oh."

I wrap my arm around her tiny waist and hug her to me.

"You're in the running for sainthood with that move, princess." Owen shakes his head.

"Don't know if I'd be able to give away that kind of money."

Eve slides in between Blake and Rex at the bar. "Raven's not about money. Hell, she'd give away every last cent if it meant taking care of someone else." She grabs the open beer I just set down in front of Caleb and takes a swig. "Thanks, Caleb."

"Shit, man," Caleb mumbles in frustration.

Raven sips her champagne and shrugs. "That money isn't mine. It belongs to those women. They sold their bodies and he reaped the benefit." She checks the clock and turns back to the guys at the bar. "I'm just giving it back to them."

The guys all grumble to themselves, probably still shocked that Raven didn't keep even a few million for herself.

Eve shakes her head, a knowing smile on her face. "Anyone up for a twirl on the dance floor?" Her eyes rake across the available dance partners. "Come on, Blake."

"Shit, woman. I just got off the dance floor. Give a guy a second to reboot." Blake kicks back, resting his feet on the bar.

Eve's face lights with a wicked smile. "Ah, yes. That's right. Most guys can't go all night long. The weak ones lack, ahem, stamina." She looks at me. "How about you, Jonah? You look like the kind of guy who—"

"That's for shit." Blake jumps to his feet. "I got way more stamina than he does." He motions to me with a thumb over his shoulder. "Dance floor now, woman."

Eve winks at Raven and takes off with Blake.

I turn Raven to me and pull her in for a hug, chest to chest. The guys redirect their attention to the TV. I run my finger along her bare shoulder and up to her neck, pushing her long hair to her back. "These earrings your mom gave you look amazing. They're almost the same color as your eyes." I kiss her neck at my spot.

She touches the diamond and aquamarine studs. "She told me they were my grandmother's. I love them. They're perfect. This whole day has been perfect." She smiles. "I still can't believe we got married by Liberace."

"Hey, you chose him. We could have had the Asian Elvis, or the Marilyn Monroe drag queen."

She laughs and leans into me. I wrap my arm around her and kiss her head.

"It was the rhinestone suit that got him the job. Every single inch of that thing was covered."

"Only in Vegas."

"Did you see Guy dancing with my mom? I think he's got the hots for her." She scrunches up her nose in an adorable way.

"It was nice of him to give you away today. He's a good man. Milena could do worse."

Her huge blue-green eyes look up at me. "You don't think . . ."

I shrug, my lips twitching. "They'd make a cute couple."

"Eww. That'd be like—"

“Like your mom and your dad hooking up.”

Now it’s her turn to shrug. “Good point.”

“Did you save me a dance, Mrs. Slade?” My whispered words in her ear cause her to tremble. I trail a line of kisses down her neck.

“Um, sure.” She tilts her head, opening up for me. “But it’s five.”

I pull back and lock eyes on her. “So?”

She looks to the sixty-inch flat screen hanging on the wall behind me. Her forehead drops a fraction, and she looks up at me from beneath her batting eyelashes.

“Even on your wedding day?” I cross my arms over my chest. I have every intention of giving this girl anything she wants as long as we both shall live. But I do enjoy watching her squirm.

“Hey, you’ve been watching ESPN. Same difference.” She finishes with her hand on her sexy hip.

I lean in and kiss her forehead at my new spot. The slight scar that slashes through her eyebrow does nothing to mar her gorgeous face. “You win.”

With a flip of the remote, I switch ESPN to her show. She kisses each of my dimples and finishes at my lips.

“Overhaulin’? Fuck yeah! Coolest wedding reception ever.” Caleb rounds the bar for a better view.

“Oh wow.” Raven sips the last of her champagne. “It’s a ’66 Ford Fairlane GT.” She doesn’t take her eyes from the screen.

Overhaulin’ on her wedding day makes her giddy. So easy to please.

I wrap my hands around her waist and hoist her up to sit on the counter. She kicks her white, Chuck Taylor clad feet back and forth.

Owen leans in, his head resting on his hand, eyes to the TV. “Who’s this Chip Foose guy?”

My lips fight a smile as Raven goes into a detailed biography of the automotive designer. I hand her a fresh glass of champagne and a piece of wedding cake the waitstaff passed out earlier.

“Ooh, yum.” She takes the glass and a bite of wedding cake. “Thanks, honey.”

I groan at her calling me honey and kiss the frosting from her lips. She started doing that after the night at the cabin. I thought nothing could sound as good as my name from her lips. I was wrong. “You’re welcome, baby.”

“Uncle Jonah,” Eric and Aiden call in unison from the pool. The six-year-old twin boys jumped in about an hour ago.

I leave Raven to her show and walk to the pool’s edge. “What’s up, rug rats?”

“Come swimming with us,” Aiden says before disappearing underwater.

“Yeah, do that thing where you throw us across the pool to the deep end.” Eric spins in a circle, making speedboat sounds.

“Boys, your uncle can’t swim tonight. He has guests to entertain,” my sister calls, walking toward me.

“Your mom’s right, guys. But I promise I’ll swim with you all day tomorrow. Deal?”

“Deal,” they answer before swimming off to the other side of the pool.

Beth leans into my side and I throw my arm around her shoulder.

“I’m really happy for you, big brother. I gotta say I never thought you’d settle down.”

I laugh and give her a squeeze. “You’re not the only one.”

“She’s really special, Joey. I’ve only known her for two days and I’m in love with her.”

“She has that effect on people.” I kiss her head. “I’m glad you guys are here. I know it was

short notice.”

“We wouldn’t miss it for anything.” She sips her drink. “I will say it was a rather short engagement.”

I nod. “When God hands you a gift, you don’t push it away and tell him ‘later’.”

She smiles up at me. “Dad would be proud of you. You’ve grown into an amazing man. Just like him.”

Emotion burns my eyes. I swallow hard, absorbing the weight of her words and let the silence speak for me.

“I’m going to go find my husband and make him dance with me.” She breaks the silence, and with a quick hug, she walks away.

I turn back to watching my girl from a distance. She laughs in the center of a bunch of muscle-head fighters, as if she was born to be there. I’d like to think she was.

My heart swells with pride. There’s just a shadow left of the shy auto mechanic that walked into my house with her head down. This courageous woman confronted her life head-on. Faced her demons. And won.

And she’s not hoarding that strength, but choosing to share it with others. Giving them a chance to beat back the circumstances of their lives and bend it to their will. I’ve never seen that kind of beauty. Until now. And she’s wearing my ring.

~*~

Raven

It’s late. I don’t know what time it is. I’m swaying on an empty dance floor with my husband. Our guests are long gone, leaving us alone at last. Jonah’s strong arms and broad chest cradle me to him. Content and relaxed, I replay the day in my head.

My mom helping me into my dress, wrapping me in her arms, telling me she loves me. It’s as if Dominick’s death cut some invisible tie that held her back, and now she’s able to love freely, without restraint or fear of loss. To love me the way she’s always wanted to. Or possibly to show the love she’s always felt.

Guy walking me down the aisle. His snort and eye roll when he saw the flamboyant impersonator, only to get tears in his eyes when he gave my hand to Jonah.

And my Jonah. The intensity of his stare as he said his vows. As if hearing the words weren’t enough, he wanted me to feel them.

Our first kiss as husband and wife, his hands traveling down my body to cup my bottom in front of everyone. Okay, that was a little embarrassing—hot—but embarrassing. My body didn’t hate it. That was obvious when I had to hold onto Jonah as I waited for my legs to start working again.

It was perfect. Every single second.

Jonah’s sister and mom have been staying here with us, but they insisted on getting hotel rooms for the night. We had the option of getting the hotel room, but decided we’d rather spend our first married night at Jonah’s house—our house.

So here we are, alone beneath the stars, locked in each other’s arms. Jonah’s heart beats against my ear. We stop and kiss then go back to the gentle sway. Time stands still.

“Baby?”

“Mm-hmm?” I swallow a yawn.

"I'm ready to take you to bed now." He stops moving as if to punctuate his words with a stop-dancing-and-get-your-ass-in-our-bed exclamation point.

My pulse quickens and excitement wakens my body. I stop swaying and look up at him. His eyelids are dropped low with want. I inwardly smile at my effect on him. I lock my hands behind his neck and push up on my tiptoes while pulling his mouth to mine.

Electricity hums between us as our lips connect. Sparks explode beneath my skin with every touch. Ever since the cabin, everything between us is more intense, like we're sucking every second out of life as we feast on each other's bodies.

His hand slides up from my waist, over my ribs, and stops just beside my breast. I moan and arch my back in an attempt to get him closer, but his hand stays put.

With long, deep pulls, I suck his tongue into my mouth. His answering groan tells me he's at the edge of his restraint.

He dips down, scooping me into his arms and heads for the house, never breaking the kiss. The spice of his cologne, all masculine and sensual, liquefies my need. My fingers sift and grab at his silky hair, pulling him down.

Two steps into the house, he stops and lays me on the couch.

"Can't wait." His husky voice vibrates against the tender skin of my neck.

I toe my shoes off just before he pushes the skirt of my dress up to my waist. A groan rumbles in his chest as he takes in what I'm wearing beneath my wedding gown. I prop up to my elbows, enjoying the view of Jonah on his knees studying my bridal lingerie.

"Do you want to see the rest?" My voice is deep and dripping with desire.

He caresses my legs, every swipe of his callused hands sending heat straight between my legs. "There's more?"

With a teasing kiss, I stand. Giving him my back, I unzip, and slowly peel the fabric from my body.

A hiss slips from between his teeth as my dress drops to the floor. *He likes it.*

I peek over my shoulder to see him sitting, his eyes fixed on my bottom.

He stands up and steps into my space, so close I can feel his heat against my skin. "Turn around."

I do just that, but step back, out of his reach.

With a slow sweep of his gaze, I'm trembling.

His eyelids drop low and a predatory glint flashes across his eyes. "Come here, Mrs. Slade."

My legs burn to obey his every command. But I withhold. "Uh-uh. You're going to have to come and get me."

His eyes lock on mine, fire burning behind their hazel depths. He tilts his head to the side, eyebrows raised. Yeah, he likes the challenge.

"You want to be chased." He steps toward me.

I step back.

Like a shot, he moves, swiping at me with his powerful arm. Anticipating his move, I wheel around and dash toward the hallway. Excited giggles bubble up from my chest, flying out on a squeal. I make it to the hallway entrance before his strong arms wrap around me from behind.

"Gotcha." The word is spoken at my ear.

I moan in response. He carries me the few short steps to our bedroom door. He releases me, and I flip around. His eyes are dark and hungry. My stomach flips and drops low.

He advances on me, and with every step forward, I take one back. My legs hit the bed. He closes in. I roll my lips, eager for his contact. He traces the top of my white corset with a barely-

there touch. My breasts push against the lace, overflowing at the top. He trails his fingers down the center of each breast where the dark-skinned tips show through the delicate fabric. He circles them with slow, agonizing motions.

I part my lips to accommodate my quickened breath. He cups my breasts, finally giving them the attention they so desperately need. Bending down, he sucks my nipple into his mouth, a torturous ecstasy that drops my head back with a moan.

“Jonah.” The urgent plea falls from my lips.

His hands move down the ribbing of my corset to my hips. He slides his fingers beneath the barely there fabric of my g string. My body warms as he loves me with his touch.

Feather-light kisses cover my neck as he slides his hand into my panties. A moan catches in my throat. My legs wobble.

“Lie down, baby.” His words are spoken against my skin, my body obeying his command. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him as his fingers push me to the edge of my control.

I lie on the bed. He pulls my panties down to my knees, but doesn’t take them off. They’re stretched taut between my bent legs, keeping them from falling wide open.

He works between my legs, my body bending to his every whim. I need more. I pop my breasts from their lacey restraint and arch my back, offering them up to him.

His eyes lift and widen. “Greedy little wife.”

I roll my hips against his hand, affirming his words.

His mouth locks around my nipple. Blood races through my body, muscles clenching in euphoric satisfaction as I cry out my release. Weak with satiated bliss, my legs strain to fall apart. He continues to nip at my breasts.

I grab at his shirt, pulling at the buttons.

“You first.” He rolls me to my side and unlaces the crisscross ribbon at my back, removing my corset. I kick off my panties, and he pulls his white dress shirt from his body.

I suck in a breath as my eyes take in the circular scar at his shoulder. The evidence of his heroism. His bravery worn like a badge, forever imprinted on his skin, like his tattoos. A smile tugs at my lips as I study his newest. Right over his heart, my name in script with beautiful black wings extending from either side.

“I love you, Jonah.”

He doesn’t answer with words, but instead kneels between my legs. My knees fall open wide. He moves over me and lies in the cradle of my legs, the fabric of his dress pants rubbing against my bare flesh.

He braces his weight above me with his muscled arms. “I want you off the pill, baby.”

“Huh?” I’m not sure what my face looks like, but it feels as if it’s gaping.

“I know it’s soon. But, since when do we do things on a timeline? I want to start our family.” He kisses my neck then bites me gently. “What do you say?” His mouth continues its torment.

“Mmm.”

“That a yes or a no, baby?”

A real family. One that we make together. “I’m ready.” I flex my hips.

With shining eyes and his two glorious dimples, he gives me a smile that nearly stops my heart. “Really?”

“Yes.”

Without another word, he releases himself from his pants and in one thrust, buries himself completely. I lock my legs around his hips, our chests pressed together so tight I can feel his

heart beat against mine. His hands cup my face and I place my hand on his jaw.

He moves, slow and beautiful, loving me in a gentle rhythm that brings tears to my eyes. His gaze locks on mine, and the affection pouring between us threatens to overwhelm me.

I watch the pleasure build. His perfect white teeth dig into his lower lip. His eyes fight to stay open against the mounting frenzy. Pleasure coils deep my belly. I arch my back and dig my feet into the mattress.

I don't want it to be over too soon. I lock down his hips with my heels.

He stops and takes a deep breath. "No need to hold back, baby. We have forever."

Forever. The word echoes in my head and I release him to move.

I'm free. Free to live happily with Jonah. No more threats to our future. Free to fly.

His pace quickens, and his muscles tighten with each stroke. I lift my hips, searching for more, deeper, harder. Passion, trust, and love spiral together until it explodes from my body, and I cry out his name. He groans into my neck, biting down on my shoulder and his pace intensifies. With one last thrust, his body relaxes onto mine.

Our chests heave in unison, the soft moans from the aftermath of our love-making fill the room.

He slides in and out in lazy strokes. "Sorry our first time as husband and wife was . . . um . . . fast. I blame the dress. And the stuff you had on under it."

I run my hands through his hair, forcing him to look at me. His shy smile makes him look younger and almost embarrassed. "We have forever, remember?"

He closes his eyes and leans into my touch. "Yeah." His eyes flutter open and he turns to look over his shoulder.

"What?" I lean to the side and look down our joined bodies to the end of the bed. "I guess someone's feeling left out."

Dog is curled up in a ball at Jonah's feet. He gives us a sleepy meow.

Jonah turns back, shaking his head. "I can't believe you talked me into bringing that thing home."

"Jonah. He's my responsibility. I couldn't just leave him to fend for himself like some kind of—"

"Alley cat?"

"Ugh. You know what I mean." I give Jonah a playful shove and he rolls off and to my side. His fingers draw invisible patterns on my stomach. "I'd be sick if I moved away and no one was there to take care of him. Everyone needs someone."

"I never thought I'd have anything in common with a mangy cat." His lips curl at the edges. "We both need you." He moves from my stomach to my forehead to trace my scar. His smile falls. "I almost lost you."

"No, never. I would've fought. However long it took. I'd never give up until I was free. You're my life, Jonah. My family, my love, my best friend. Nothing, not even destiny, could keep me from you."

He leans forward and brushes his lips against mine. "Okay."

~The End~

A Note to my Readers

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Prologue

It's almost midnight, but I can't sleep. The pounding of adrenaline still floods my veins. Riding high on the rush from earlier today, I stare at my ceiling while Iron Maiden's "Wicker Man" blares through my headphones. My fingers drum against my Discman in perfect time with Nicko McBrain's snare hits.

I force my mind to the mundane world of freshman year of high school, finals, and which cheerleader I'm asking to the homecoming game, but even that doesn't calm me. My thoughts keep going back to this afternoon. I breathe through the rush of excitement.

It was stupid. Sneaking around made it more exciting, but if I get caught... No, next time I'll take better precautions. I can't risk—*Boom!*

My bedroom door flies open and slams against the wall. *Oh shit!* I rip off my headphones and jump to my feet. Light pours in from the hallway. Shadows of men, hunched low to the ground, filter into the room. My heart slams against my ribs, and icy fear rockets through me. I try to run, but strong hands seize me at every limb.

"No." I buck hard against the hold. *This can't be happening.*

"Fighting will make it worse." A man, his face masked by the dark, tightens his grip.

It's a dream; it has to be. My head spins, and I search for consciousness. *Wake up.* Pain from the violent hold on my body confirms my fear. This is real. My legs shudder with each panicked breath.

"Help!" I lean toward the open door, praying my parents can hear me.

A shove to my legs drops me to my knees. I try to punch, but a man pulls my arms tight behind my back. The cool metal of handcuffs surrounds my wrists.

"Dad." My voice cracks. "Mom, Braeden." I thrash. My shoulders burn. "Let me go."

I don't understand. Where is everyone? Did these guys get to my family first?

Dread and fear chip away at my strength. I swallow against the ache in my throat. I'm outnumbered, outmuscled, and overpowered, but I refuse to sag into their hold.

"What did you do to my family?" I can barely hear my own words over my heaving breath.

"Hang in there, kid," says the man at my back, too casual to be comforting.

This is bad. "Take whatever you want. I won't call the cops, just let us go."

The dense silhouette of a man fills the doorway. I squint into the darkness, fearing the worst. Is this the one who'll finish me off? He steps farther into the room, and I drop my head back to see his face.

Oh, thank God.

"Dad." I try to break free, to get to him, but I'm held in place. "Help me, they're holding me." The words tumble from my lips before what's going on around me sinks in.

I stop struggling.

My dad's not helping me. And the men who busted into my bedroom don't seem surprised to see him. My blood turns ice cold, and a chill runs through my body.

He's sending me away.

"Dad?" I search his face for compassion but find nothing close. "Don't do this."

He warned me this would happen. Threatened to send me off if I didn't stop.

A flash of what my future holds lies in the compassionless faces that study me now. Trained monkeys who live by orders, brainwashed to give up their free will. That's what he wants from me. *Fuck no.* I jerk hard, and my joints burn in resistance.

"Stop fighting, son." My dad steps closer and squats to eye level.

The spice of his cologne rolls my stomach as my vision adjusts to his nearness. His military-approved haircut only makes his square jaw seem more angular. His mouth is a rigid line held so tight that the muscles in his cheek jump. The usual dark green of his eyes looks almost black, and I struggle to hold his stare. He studies me for a few seconds then grimaces. Even though it's a look he gives often, it's still upsetting.

"You crying, Blake?"

"No, sir." I sniff back the tears that burn behind my nose and try to hide the fear that pollutes my veins.

"The hell you aren't, son." He shakes his head. "And herein lies the problem." His words are mumbled. He pushes to standing then paces back and forth. "I won't tolerate my teenage pussy-ass excuse for a son crying like a girl."

The room fills with the snorted laughter of the soldiers holding me. Even as my cheeks flame, I ball my hands into fists, and my muscles go rigid. My tears dry, and the roar of my pulse thunders in my ears.

"As if that shit you do in your free time isn't gay enough, now I got you crying?" He's not asking a question.

"I quit, sir. I told you that." I stare at the floor and hope he doesn't see my lie. The truth is, I can't quit. His threats to send me away and to beat the urges out of me haven't cured me. I'm helpless against the draw. But how did he find out? I was so careful.

He steps in front of me, and I can feel his eyes on my head. "A liar and a pussy." He's on the verge of losing his temper, and experience has proven, that's never a good thing. "You're just like your mother."

My mom. She's the only one who knows. My head struggles for clarity. Why would she rat me out?

Then, I notice her small figure just outside the doorway. She watches helplessly, her hands wrapped around her stomach and her shoulders shaking in silent sobs. Present, but completely powerless.

I try to lock eyes with her, but I can't see her features well enough in the dark room. "Mom, why...?" My questions freeze on my lips. She won't have anything to say. She never does when it comes to him.

I've always been the strong one, taking every blow in my dad's verbal assaults with my chin held high, proving that I can handle it. It's the best way I can protect her.

I suck in a deep breath and throw my shoulders back. If she thinks I'm okay, then she'll stop crying. Convincing her that I want what he has planned for me will make this easier on her.

"There's no looking to your mommy to save you. Not this time. How long has she been lying for you, Blake?" When I don't answer, he shoves his steel-toed boot into my shoulder.

I rock back but refuse to fall. My usual plan is to diffuse his anger by apologizing and stroking his ego. But here, in the middle of the night, being held by a team of my dad's men, with the knowledge that where I'm going I'll be free of his daily taunts... I'm done eating his shit.

His intimidations may have worked on me before, but I'm not his puppet, jumping with every pulled string. Heat coils behind my sternum and stokes the smoldering embers kept hidden

for years into a flame. I drop my gaze to the green shag carpet and breathe deeply, allowing my anger to fester.

“It was only a matter of time before you got caught. This sneaking around behind my back won’t be tolerated.” He crushes tracks in the rug with his combat boots just like he stomps through life, breaking spirits and leaving victims in his wake. First my mom, now me, and my brother will no doubt be next.

“My men here are gonna take you to a place where soldiers are made. Won’t have a choice but to man up around this crew. You hear me, boy?”

Rage pulses from my chest, through my veins, and coils my muscles.

“I asked you a question, faggot. Answer me.” His demand for my cooperation echoes off the walls.

I cringe at the sound of my mom’s whimpering. He won’t be ignored. One chance to cooperate is all I get. It’s all any of us have ever gotten. I’m pushing him too far.

For the first time, I don’t care. My breath hits hard, and my nose flares to keep up with my intake of oxygen.

“Answer me, you sorry son of a bitch!” He puts the sole of his boot to my chest and shoves. “Weak, just like your mother.”

My body lists, but I’m numb to his abuse. I tilt my chin up and lock eyes with him, glaring so hard my eyes burn. “She’s strong enough to put up with your shit.”

He smiles and laughs, but nothing about his expression says he thinks it’s funny. “Little momma’s boy. Still holding on to that woman’s apron strings. Pathetic.”

Those words, like lighter fluid to my resentment, kindle the flames into a raging inferno. My teeth grind, and fury shreds through me.

My dad waves me off with a flick of his wrist. “Get him out of my face.”

“Yes, sir,” his minions say in unison, taking orders from the colonel like the good little disciples that they are.

They’d probably slit their own throats if the order was given.

That will never be me.

I’m pulled to my feet by my biceps and walked to the door. My mom hurries out of the way to let us pass. She’s clutching her robe to her neck, her usual pretty face splotchy and wet with tears. Her light brown hair looks as if she’s been running her hands through it for hours. My chest clenches at the pain I see in her eyes.

I lean back. “Hold on.”

They ignore me and continue to move me through the house.

“I just want to say goodbye.” I dig my bare feet into the carpet.

“Duke?” Her soft-spoken calling of my dad’s name brings us to a stop.

The asshole rolls his eyes, but he waves off his men. “Stand down.”

She takes a few steps toward me but stops just shy of arm’s length. “Blake...” Her chin quivers, and tears shine in her blue eyes. “I’m sorry.”

Shame twists in my gut. “It’s okay, Mom.” I should have never involved her in my sneaking around. “Don’t cry. I’ll be all right.”

She moves close enough to cup my cheek. She no longer hugs me because my dad said it makes us weak. “Be strong, Blake.”

No *I love you*, but instead, *be strong*.

It’s harsh, but this is what we’ve come to. In order to thrive in this family, we need to conform. And strength trumps emotion.

I work my mouth into a smile. “Always.”

My dad must have given the nod, since a hand clinches my elbow. I say goodbye to my mom then allow myself to be guided through the house. I don’t see my brother anywhere, but chances are he’s been ordered to stay behind a closed door. He’s much better at obeying than I am.

I’m push-walked out the front door. It’s a cool night. The wet ocean air whips and curls around my face, and I take my final breaths of it, knowing that I’ll be in the desert soon. My dad leads us to the open double doors of a black van. Once there, a hand from behind puts pressure on my head, trying to get me to duck and climb in.

I force my spine straight so they can’t fold me into the van. “Sir, one thing before I go?”

My dad looks down at me through narrowed eyes. “What is it? You’ve got a long drive ahead of you.”

I step close, grateful that my last growth spurt put me just a few inches shorter than him. “I just want to say...” With a quick step back for momentum, I slam my forehead into his nose. Stars dance behind my eyes.

He doubles over with a howl, putting his hands to his face. Blood pours through his fingers.

A smile curls my lips. *Damn, that felt good.* The quick high dissolves as I’m pulled back and shoved face first to the concrete driveway. The rough soles of combat boots press into my back and hold me down, crushing my ribs.

My dad groans and stumbles on his feet. “Hold him up, boys.” His pained grunt makes whatever’s about to happen totally worth it.

I’m hauled up by my T-shirt and shoved forward.

His face is red, colored by fury and blood, and inches from mine. “‘Bout time I taught you a lesson.” Standing back, he raises his fist.

Knowing the unavoidable is on its way, I decide to leave him with a parting thought. “Fuck you, Dad.”

Pain explodes in my jaw. The world spins and goes black.

Fighting to Forgive

About J.B. Salsbury

J.B. Salsbury is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona with her husband, two sassy daughters, and her boxer dogs.

Her love of good storytelling led her to earn a degree in Media Communications. With her journalistic background, writing has always been at the forefront, and her love of romance propelled her career as an author.

She spends the majority of her day behind the computer where a world of battling alphas, budding romance, and impossible obstacles claws away at her subconscious and begs to be released to the page.

For more information on her books, or just to say hello, visit JB on her website, Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

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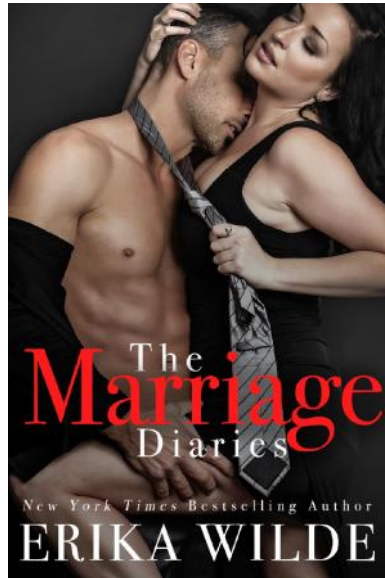
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The Marriage Diaries

by Erika Wilde



The Awakening

A diary entry from Jillian Noble:

I love my husband. My sexy, alpha, ex-Navy SEAL. He still does it for me, but after nineteen years of marriage, our sex life has become routine. Some might call it vanilla. With our sons grown and out of the house, I'm ready to reinvent our relationship. I want more than ordinary sex. I'm ready to explore the forbidden and erotic, with a little kink and no more holding back.

Now, if I can convince my husband to give in to his own dark desires, all my fantasies will come true.

The Office Visit

“Come on, Jill, you can do it. It’s not as though you’ve never seduced your husband before.”

Sitting in her parked car, Jillian Noble exhaled a deep breath and waited for her encouraging pep talk to take effect and ease her nerves. Biting absently on her bottom lip, she stared up at the glass and chrome building where her husband’s security consulting firm, Noble & Associates, resided on the twenty-eighth floor of the San Diego building. It was nearly two in the afternoon, and with Dean’s silver Aston Martin Vantage coupe tucked neatly into his reserved spot, she knew he was in his office.

Now, it was just a matter of her gathering up the courage to saunter into Dean’s domain and show her husband of nearly twenty years that she wanted to shake up their sex life.

At the age of thirty-eight, as well as being an ex-Navy SEAL who regularly trained with the men he hired to work for his security firm, Dean was still a gorgeous, virile man who enjoyed sex just as much as she did. But years of her focusing on raising their two sons along with being a wife and mother, and Dean working crazy long hours to ensure his security company was a success, well, the intimacy between them had become too predictable and routine. Somewhere along the way, they’d lost the intensity, the excitement and spontaneity, and she wanted all that back again... and much, much more.

Now that both boys were away—one in college and one enlisted in the Navy—and it was just her and Dean, she was ready to make the two of them a priority and revive their sex life in a major way, and take them both places they’d never dared to go before. Dark, erotic places she instinctively knew her husband had shied away from because he feared there was a part of his abusive father lurking deep inside him, and his biggest fear had always been that he’d go too far and hurt her.

With all her heart and soul, Jill knew her husband would never physically harm her, despite his own doubts. He’d never, ever, laid a hand on either of their two boys, not even when she, herself, wanted to strangle one of them for their idiotic teenage antics. Instead, Dean had taken the quiet and direct approach in disciplining their sons—starting with a strict discussion about right and wrong, and then he’d doled out their punishment, which usually included some kind of hard labor that gave them plenty of time to think about the stupidity of their actions.

Simple, but always effective.

A small smile curved the corner of her mouth. She’d be lying if she didn’t admit that Dean could absolutely be over-bearing, possessive, and a bit controlling at times, but in their nineteen years of marriage, he’d never given her a reason not to trust him, in all ways.

Today would be the defining factor in their marriage. In the past, just as things got interesting in the bedroom, he’d pull back and gentle his touch and soften his words. The romance of making love had its place, but she wanted the raw, primitive man she knew Dean could be. And if it took a bit of coaxing to get him to release that staunch control of his and let go of all those fears holding him back, well, she figured she might as well have fun giving it her best shot.

Exhaling a deep breath, she stepped out of her Chevy Suburban and headed toward the building, her four inch black stilettos clicking on the paved walkway, then the marbled floors inside the lobby. Reaching the elevators, she stepped inside and punched the button for the twenty-eighth floor.

On the flight up, she battled the nerves fluttering in her belly, the ones that made her question her sanity for going through with her outrageous plan. But then the double doors *whooshed* opened and Gail, the firm's long-time secretary, glanced up and greeted her with a genuine smile.

Now that Jill had been seen and recognized, there was no backing out now, so she walked into the plush reception area and stopped at the older woman's desk.

"Good afternoon, Jill," the other woman said, as warm and welcoming as always.

Jill smiled and tried to act casual, even though she was feeling anything but calm inside. "Hi, Gail. I'm here to see Dean. Is he available?"

"Absolutely. He's in his office." Gail reached for the phone on her desk. "Would you like for me to let him know you're here?"

"No, I'd rather surprise him," Jill said, stopping Gail before she could announce her presence and she lost the element of throwing her husband a little off kilter. Gaining the upper hand in any situation didn't happen often with Dean, and this was one time it would definitely work to her advantage.

"I'm sure he'd like that." Gail waved a hand toward the back offices, giving Jill the silent go-ahead.

She walked past Gail's desk, belatedly realizing just how close the secretary was to the other offices. Just behind the reception area was a large conference room, and she recognized the deep male voice talking as Dean's partner, Brent "Mac" MacMillan.

She glanced surreptitiously inside as she passed and saw the back of Mac's broad shoulders, and three other big, buff, good-looking men who worked security detail for the company. They were standing straight in a row with their feet braced apart and hands clasped behind their backs in a stance she recognized as military trained.

Because Mac commanded their attention as he issued instructions for their next security detail, none of the three men acknowledged her, though their intuitive gazes definitely tracked her progress as she strolled by. The men Dean and Mac hired were all ex-military—tough, bad-ass, alpha men like her husband. Silent, always aware, and incredibly intense. Only the absolute best of the best for Noble and Associates.

She continued on her way. To the right was Mac's currently empty office, and to the left was her husband's. His door was halfway closed, and she knocked on the wooden surface before slipping inside and making an appearance.

He glanced up from the paperwork he'd been perusing, his dark, sable brows still furrowed in concentration. As soon as he saw her, his gray eyes flickered with surprise, then quickly shifted to concern. Because she knew him so well, she caught the subtle tensing of his body, that vigilant awareness that something was off.

"Hey, baby," he said, his calm tone belying just how alert he was. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is just fine," she rushed to reassure him, before his over-protective demeanor took over and derailed her plans. She understood his worry—she didn't stop by the office often, and never without calling him first. Of course he'd think the worst.

She closed the door and pressed in the lock to assure them privacy, which didn't escape his notice. Knowing the rest of her plan succeeding now relied on Dean's response to what she did next, she bolstered her confidence one last time and slowly strolled toward him.

She put an extra sway in her hips, and tugged loose the tie on her wrap-around dress. She allowed the fabric to flutter open in front, just enough to tantalize him with a smooth expanse of thigh as she walked. Predictably, his gaze immediately dropped to the flash of skin, and the last

of her nerves gave way to anticipation.

“I want to get your opinion on something I bought today,” she said huskily.

He never cared about what she purchased for herself, but then again, she rarely spent frivolously or excessively, even when he encouraged her to spoil herself. They were well-off now, his company worth millions, but when they’d first married right out of high school with a baby on the way, saving and budgeting had become a habit for her—one she was just learning to break every once in a while. After today, she hoped to have a reason to continue to splurge.

“I went to Sugar and Spice today to visit Raina, and I found something I thought you might like, but I wanted to be absolutely sure.” One of her good friends, Raina Beck, owned Sugar and Spice, an adult boutique that carried gorgeous lingerie, high end sex toys, and other erotic novelty items.

Dean was well aware of that, too.

He leaned back in his leather chair, regarding her with undisguised interest and a whole lot of heat in his eyes. “You definitely have my attention,” he drawled in that low, sexy timbre that still had the ability to make her shiver like the infatuated girl she’d once been with him. Still was, actually.

She came around the side of his desk and stopped a few feet away, then released the belt on her dress, which opened completely. A shrug of her shoulders, and the material slid down both of her arms and pooled around her black stiletto heels, leaving her clad in nothing more than a push-up bra with just enough lace to cover her hardened nipples, and matching G-string panties—both in red, his favorite color on her.

She heard the breath rush from his lungs as he took in her skimpy, barely there attire. “Jesus, Jill,” he said, his voice sounding shocked and strangled, though his intense, molten gray eyes glowed with appreciation.

Her stomach tumbled with desire. Her figure wasn’t model perfect and she no longer possessed a young, nubile body. She’d given birth to two kids and while she watched her weight and did yoga five times a week, she had full breasts and curves that were soft and supple and womanly. And right now, with him devouring her with his gaze, she felt sexy and incredibly exhilarated.

She skimmed her fingers along the lace edge of her bra, then trailed them down her belly to the thin band of her panties. “Do you like it?” she asked oh-so-guilelessly.

“Hell, yeah, I like it,” he growled deep in his throat. “A lot.”

He’d yet to touch her, and that’s what she wanted most of all. He was watching her as if he wasn’t certain what to expect because this was so out of character for her, so she didn’t hesitate to show him. Stepping between his spread knees, she braced one hand on the armrest so she was leaning over him, grabbed his deep purple tie with her other hand and pulled his mouth closer to hers.

“Good,” she breathed against his lips. “Because I bought it with you in mind.”

She slid her mouth against his, feeling his initial surprise, which thankfully didn’t last long. With a groan that sounded like the sweetest of surrender, he buried his fingers into her hair and did what he did best... he took control of the situation.

His mouth claimed hers, firm and insistent, his tongue hot and demanding as he deepened the kiss. She moaned softly, resisting the urge to crawl onto his lap and let him have his way with her, which he no doubt expected, because she always let him lead and bent to his will.

Not that having Dean in charge was a bad thing, but today was all about switching things up, being adventurous and spontaneous, and showing him she wanted *more* sexually. That she was

open to a whole lot more than sex in the bedroom, and there were fantasies she wouldn't mind fulfilling with him.

She kissed him back just as passionately, feeling the hunger growing in him, the molten need... and then, abruptly, he grasped her hair tighter and pulled her head back, ending the kiss. Breathing hard, he stared into her eyes, looking dazed, a little confused, and excruciatingly aroused by her bold and brazen behavior.

"Jillian... what the hell are you doing?"

His voice was soft and dangerous, a subtle warning that he was on edge. Clearly, he was fighting the urge to give in to the lust burning in his gaze because they were in his office, with co-workers just beyond the closed door.

Yeah, she'd definitely thrown him off balance, and she liked having that advantage.

"I'm seducing you," she said, and gave him an equally alluring smile. "Is it working yet?"

He took the hand she'd braced on the chair and flattened her palm against the hard length of his erection bulging the front of his slacks. "What do *you* think?"

"Oh." Her eyes widened in feigned innocence, and she gave his thick shaft a firm squeeze. "I didn't mean to get you so hot and bothered."

He raised a dark brow, amusement and daring etching his ruggedly handsome features. "Now that you have, what are you going to do about it?"

His gruff demand sent swirls of sexual heat spiraling straight down to her stomach. This was what Jill wanted, for Dean to play along and allow the fantasy to unfold into hot, tantalizing reality. She let her lashes fall half-mast and licked her bottom lip, summoning the words she'd never, ever, said to him before. "I'm going to suck your cock and make you come."

Dean's mouth opened, then snapped shut again, his jaw tense. Her husband was rarely at a loss for words, but her candid, explicit reply rendered him shocked and speechless. The slow burn of excitement in his eyes, however, assured her that he was fascinated by her brazen transformation.

Thoroughly enjoying her newfound power, she knelt between his spread legs and began unbuckling his belt, anxious to make good on her promise. He watched her through hooded eyes, his breathing deepening as she unbuttoned his slacks, opened the zipper, then tugged his pants and boxer briefs low on his hips so that his fierce erection sprang free.

Knowing he still needed to be presentable for the rest of the day, she pushed the hem of his shirt up to his chest and out of her way, and couldn't resist the urge to lean forward and place a hot, wet, open-mouthed kiss against the taut muscles just below his navel.

"Oh, fuck..." he rasped, like a man on the verge of insanity.

Smiling to herself, she trailed her damp lips lower. The intoxicating masculine scent of him aroused her, and the taste of him—all hot, hard male—saturated her senses and made her insides clench with need.

Gripping his shaft firmly in one hand, she wrapped her lips around the swollen crown of his dick, taking him into her mouth just a few excruciating inches. She swirled her tongue along the tip, then took him deep, until her lips touched the base of his cock and the sensitive head rubbed enticingly against the back of her throat. She swallowed, wrenching a groan of pure ecstasy from him.

She slid him in and out of her mouth, stroking him with her tongue and adding just enough suction to keep him on edge. His hand cupped the back of her head, but he didn't push or thrust into her mouth the way she knew he instinctively wanted to, the way *she* wanted him to. Didn't grip her hair tight and use a little force to make her give him what he needed the most. He held

back, always in control, when she was dying for him to dominate her and take whatever pleasure he desired the most.

Another time, she promised herself. For now, she made his orgasm her ultimate goal. She continued blowing him, increasing the friction of her fingers along the hard column of flesh, and deepening the wet suction of her mouth as she doubled her efforts to make him come. His entire body tensed, and he gasped a warning, tightening his fingers in her hair to pull her head away.

She refused to release him. His hips jerked wildly, and she felt the tell-tale pulsing of his cock in her mouth give way to a surge of warmth that she didn't hesitate to swallow. With a hum of feminine power and delight, she finished him off, until she'd wrung him dry and he sagged back against his leather chair, dazed and temporarily wasted.

She remained kneeling in front of Dean, back arched slightly, hands resting on her thighs, waiting patiently for him to recover, because she wasn't done seducing him just yet. He glanced down at her, and she watched as his gaze darkened as he took in her very subdued, obedient-like pose, something she suspected would rouse him all over again.

Oh, yeah, he liked her subservient demeanor. A lot. They'd never played at being dominant/submissive, but there had been enough instances in the bedroom when he'd displayed just enough aggression to give her the indication that he was on the cusp of tipping over into a more authoritative role sexually, yet was denying his true nature and had been for years.

But exploring those D/s themes was for another day, another time, when they weren't confined to his office with the possibility of being interrupted.

Still wearing her red lacy bra, G-string, and fuck-me stilettos, she rose to her feet and leisurely skimmed her hands down her stomach, smiling to herself as his sinful gaze tracked the direction her fingers were heading... right into the waistband of her panties.

"I have another surprise for you," she said huskily.

"I don't know that I can handle another surprise," he said, though he hadn't looked away from where her fingers had disappeared.

She laughed softly. "Oh, I think you can."

Hooking her thumbs into the thin strings at the sides of her hips, she pushed her panties down and let them fall away, revealing her freshly waxed mound.

He groaned his appreciation, and she teased him a bit more, grazing the tips of her fingers along the smooth, newly naked flesh. He'd always wanted her to go completely bare, and she'd never had the nerve. But she had to admit that getting a full Brazilian wax had been quite liberating.

He flashed her one of his patented bad boy grins... the same one she'd fallen hard and fast for back in high school. The same one that still had the ability to make her weak in the knees now.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think today was my birthday."

She tipped her head to the side, letting her long dark hair tumble sexily over her shoulder. "Would you like to see... everything?" she teased.

"*Hell, yeah,*" he said without hesitation. "Sit on my desk, spread your legs, and show me."

His demand ramped up her own excitement. Pushing aside the papers and files he'd been perusing when she'd arrived, she lifted herself up onto his desk, so that her legs were dangling. But she didn't give him the view he'd asked for... not just yet. He was still sprawled in his leather chair, much too far away, his body deceptively lax.

She crooked her finger at her husband. "Come closer. You're too far away and I want to make sure you get a *very* good look."

“You’re fucking killing me,” he muttered, though there was unmistakable humor in his voice as he rolled his chair closer.

Before she could open her legs, he wrapped his long, strong fingers around one of her ankles and placed the stiletto heel on the leather armrest of his chair, then did the same to her other leg, spreading her indecently, shamelessly wide.

“Do *not* move your feet,” he ordered as he sat up in his chair, which brought him intimately close to the crux of her thighs. “Lean back on your arms so I can see every smooth, waxed inch of you.”

She did as he asked, bracing herself on her forearms and exposing herself even more to him.

His nostrils flared, and his eyes blazed with lust as he looked his fill. “That is so fucking hot,” he said as he slowly traced a finger along the lips of her sex, which were now hyper-sensitive to his touch. “You have such a gorgeous cunt.”

His coarse words, spoken so reverently, thrilled her, made her feel giddy with the knowledge that he liked what he saw.

His fingers dipped into her core and spread the slick moisture along the folds of flesh, all the way up to her aching clit, stroking her slowly, expertly. She bit her bottom lip as her thighs began to quiver, while he glanced up at her face, taking in the thick fall of her hair, then the swell of her breasts nearly spilling from the scrap of lace barely covering them.

“You’re so soft, so smooth, and very, very wet.” He pushed two fingers back inside her body, sliding his thumb against that sensitive nub of flesh once again, teasing and tormenting her.

“Sucking you off does that to me,” she managed to reply, and it was the absolute truth.

“I think I need to return the favor,” he said, and moved even closer. He draped her legs over his broad shoulders, then dipped his head and trailed moist, suckling kisses up the inside of her thigh.

Watching him go down on her was so decadent and erotic, how he closed his eyes as he nuzzled his way toward her pussy, the way he blew a hot gust of air on her wet folds, and that first leisurely lick of his tongue that made her body jolt in shock before he settled his mouth completely over her and sucked her clit.

The surprising scrape of his teeth added another dimension of delightful bliss. She moaned out loud as pleasure, fast and fierce, lashed through her. Unable to support herself any longer, she laid back on his desk, her back arching off the surface as his tongue continued to flick and swirl and his long fingers pumped deep inside her, heightening the searing, relentless sensory assault.

Her body tingled with needs so intense she felt as though she was going to explode. And then she did. Her hips bucked against his tenacious mouth as her orgasm crashed through her, stealing her breath for a moment before releasing it in a soft, keening cry. Tremors quaked through her, one after the other, and she rode the wave for as long as it lasted.

Her climax had literally left her reeling, and she was vaguely aware of Dean lurching to his feet. Wrapping his strong arms around her thighs, he hauled her bottom to the very edge of his desk, then slammed into her with such shocking force she felt as though her world had tipped on its axis.

She sucked in a startled gasp as he began to thrust, impaling her hard and incredibly deep. Each rapid plunge of his hips shoved her higher and higher onto the desk, until she felt as though she was going to slide off the other side.

Eyes wide, her arms flew out to her sides to grab *something* to hold onto for the wild,

unexpected ride, and ended up knocking over a photo frame and some kind of paperweight. Both landed on the floor with a loud thud and clatter—enough noise to draw attention from anyone outside the office.

She cringed, but Dean didn't stop moving. His arms banded around her thighs, keeping her legs wide open so he could watch as he pumped in and out of her in long, solid strokes. The man was very visual, and he liked to see *everything* as he fucked her.

The intercom on his phone beeped, followed by his secretary's concerned voice. "Is everything all right, Mr. Noble? I heard a loud noise and wanted to make sure everything is okay."

"Everything is fine, Gail," Dean replied in a surprisingly normal voice, even as he surged into Jill once again with a grinding motion of his hips that forced her to bite back a telltale moan. "My wife accidentally knocked a few things off my desk."

Jill's face flamed in mortification as he disconnected the call and smirked knowingly at her.

"You are so bad," she said, trying not to laugh.

He slowed the rhythm of his thrusts, as if wanting to savor the pleasure, his own gray eyes glimmering with humor as he met her gaze. "Would you have me any other way?"

"No," she replied honestly, because she wanted to see a whole lot more of this incorrigible bad boy who didn't hesitate to screw her in his office, with people right outside the door.

"I also didn't expect you to get hard again." She smirked right back at him, though she loved that she'd turned him on that much.

"That's what going down on *you* does to *me*." He licked his still damp lips, the lazy in and out of his shaft making her restless for more. "I love the way you taste. Like ripe juicy peaches and cream. I could eat you for hours."

A full-bodied shiver coursed through her, and her inner walls clenched tighter around his shaft. The man certainly had a way with words.

"Show me your breasts," he murmured.

There wasn't a front clasp on her bra, so she lowered the straps down her arms until the panel of lace fell away. Knowing how much he liked watching her touch herself, she cupped both mounds of flesh in her hands and squeezed them together, then tugged on her nipples until they turned into hard pink pebbles. She rolled them between her fingers, and flicked the taut, sensitive tips with her thumbs. The quickening of his thrusts told her how much he enjoyed the show.

"What do *these* taste like?" she asked, her voice a sultry, playful purr.

"Like sweet cherries," he drawled huskily.

Reaching up to him, she slid her fingers into his silky hair and drew his mouth down to her breasts, the length of his strong, muscular body now pressing hers more firmly into the hard wooden desk. "Lick them."

He dipped his head and slid the flat of his soft, velvety tongue over her aureole, then nipped at her with his teeth and sucked her into his mouth. The hot, wet sensation shot an arrow of desire straight down to where they joined, where his thrusts were picking up pace and becoming more insistent. More urgent.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and slid her hands beneath his shirt and up the slope of his spine, urging him on. With a low, feral growl, he lunged upward and kissed her, sealing their lips and buffering her soft moan of need.

His hot mouth devoured. His wicked tongue pillaged. Roughly, he shoved his hands through her hair, wrapping the long strands around his fingers, holding her captive as he ravaged her

mouth with the same edgy, desperate way he took her body.

Deeper and deeper. Harder and faster.

Her fingernails dug into his muscled back as he plunged, again and again. Everything about him was hard and strong, all primitive, animalistic, carnal male. The incredible power of his passion sent another orgasm rippling through her body, and thank God he still had his mouth locked tight over hers or else her scream of pleasure would have undoubtedly been heard by all.

Dean was right behind her with his own release, a guttural groan vibrating from deep in his chest as his body jerked hard against hers. He collapsed on top of her, both of them breathing fast as they tried to calm their racing hearts.

In time, he lifted off her and straightened, his clothing as askew and rumpled as his hair. He helped her off his desk, picked up her discarded clothes from the floor, and handed them to her.

“Go ahead and use the bathroom to get dressed,” he said, nodding his head toward the private quarters connected directly to his office.

She disappeared into the luxurious bathroom, decorated in sleek black tile and chrome accents. She cleaned up and put her panties and dress back on, then glanced in the mirror above the sink. Bright blue eyes, a few shades darker than her normal sky blue, stared back at her. Her lips were swollen from Dean’s kisses, and her complexion was flushed with sated passion. She ran her fingers through her disheveled hair, incredibly pleased with the way her visit with her husband had played out. His response had been better than she’d imagined.

She stepped back into his office and found him sitting in his chair, all tucked in and zipped up. His hair was still ruffled from the way she’d clutched those thick strands in her hands just minutes before, and she loved that he wasn’t like one of those prissy metro-sexual males who had soft, manicured hands and untouchable hair that was always in place. Dean was a man’s man, rugged and alpha and secure in his masculinity, without any excess trappings. He was bold, confident, yet always a gentleman.

Those more gallant, honorable qualities had their time and place, but just as men preferred a lady in public and a whore in private, Jill had come to the conclusion that she wanted a rake and a libertine in the bedroom, and all of the down and dirty, risqué acts that came with her husband being an assertive, demanding lover. And in order to get what she desired, she had to ask for it. Demand it. Take it as her due as Dean’s wife.

His gaze met hers, and while his body was relaxed, there was a slight crease between his brows that told her he was analyzing the situation, and her. It was difficult to tell what he was thinking, because he was good at hiding his feelings and emotions. She wanted that to change, too.

“Come here,” he said, and held his hand out to her.

Placing her fingers in his warm palm, she let him pull her toward him and guide her so that she was sitting across his lap. He wrapped one arm around her waist and settled his other hand on her thigh, exposed by the opening slit of her dress. His touch was hot but gentle, as was the look in his eyes as he met her gaze.

“Care to tell me what that was all about?” he asked.

His tone was curious, and Jill knew this is where everything was about to change. That being open and honest with him would either make their relationship stronger, or break their marriage. Depending on how he viewed her bold request.

“I thought it was obvious,” she said with a flirty smile. “It was all about putting some spontaneity into our sex life.”

He arched a dark brow. “You’ve never been impulsive.”

True. She was more practical by nature, having been raised by conservative, wealthy parents who always had a plan for everything... including their daughter's future, which hadn't included Jillian getting pregnant at the age of seventeen by a defiant, rebellious boy from the very low income, and rough neighborhood on the outskirts of Austin, Texas. She'd been the quintessential good girl, until Dean and all his arrogance and swagger had coaxed her to take a walk on the wild side with him.

He'd been so mysterious and exciting, yet incredibly sweet and gentle with her, and it hadn't taken long for the two of them to fall in love. Even as a teenager, he'd faced his responsibilities like a man, including his commitment to her and their unborn child.

Though her parents had insisted Jillian put their baby up for adoption, she'd refused and married Dean on her eighteenth birthday at the local courthouse—just five days before he left for Navy basic training. And that's when she'd learned to finely hone those practical, sensible qualities, because she was now a wife and months later, a mother to a baby boy.

Their second son arrived fifteen months later, and with Dean serving an eight year term as a Navy SEAL, being impulsive was something that hadn't really fit into their lives for the past nineteen years.

Now it did.

"Having two grown boys always running around the house, along with their friends, made spontaneity difficult," she admitted. "But now that they're both gone, maybe it's time to shake things up... and try new things."

He frowned, and she could see the glimmer of concern in his gaze. "Are you unhappy?"

"With us, as a couple?" She shook her head adamantly and placed her palm against his jaw in reassurance, liking the slight stubble already forming there. "No. I love you, Dean. More now than ever."

The worry in his eyes ebbed, and she continued. "I just sometimes think that with us getting married at such a young age that you and I haven't been able to explore other things to enhance our sex life."

The corner of his mouth twitched, enough to tell Jillian that she'd captured his interest. "Define other things," he said.

"Being impulsive, like today in your office, instead of both of us crawling into bed at night, exhausted and doing the same old thing," she said, injecting a bit of teasing into her voice. "Making love with you is always amazing, but you have to admit it's become very... routine, and vanilla."

"Vanilla, huh?" There was no disagreement in his tone, just speculation of the word she'd used to describe their current sex life. "So, what would you call what just happened here in my office?"

She grinned. "A mocha hot fudge sundae with sprinkles and a cherry on top."

He chuckled and nuzzled her neck with his soft, damp lips. "The cherries were *especially* good."

She shivered in delight at his playfulness, and caught the hand that was skimming its way up her thigh, knowing if those skillful fingers reached their destination this conversation would be over... and she wasn't ready for it to be over, not yet. When she walked out of his office, she wanted to know that they were both on the same page, and wanted the same thing.

"I'm being serious, Dean." Threading her fingers through his hair, she tugged his head back so he was looking into her eyes again. "I want to explore different things and push our sexual boundaries. Any fantasies we have, any toys we want to try, role playing, dirty talk, I'm open to

it all.”

“Do you want kink?”

He asked the question tentatively, as if the possibility interested him, but he didn’t want to push something she wasn’t willing to explore.

“Yes, I want kink.” Because with him, a man she trusted unconditionally, she knew anything out of the ordinary would be erotic and exciting. “And I want you to stop holding back during sex.”

She felt him tense, as if she’d caught him in some kind of lie. “What makes you think I am?”

“Because you’re my husband and I know *you*. And I can feel it.” Before he could deny her claim, she went on. “Sometimes, when things get a little rough, or interesting, you pull back because you’re afraid you’re going to take things too far or hurt me. I can handle you being rough and dominant.” In fact, the thought of being under his command excited her.

“What if you can’t handle it?” The gruff bite to his voice belied his deeper concerns. The ones he feared the most.

“Then you have to trust me to tell you so,” she replied gently, but firmly. “*You* need this, and want this, just as much as I do.”

He didn’t argue or deny the truth. Before she could say anything else, his intercom buzzed and Gail’s voice drifted out. “Mr. Noble, your two o’clock appointment is here.”

Dean glanced at the clock on the wall and swore beneath his breath. “Put Mr. Loren in the conference room, and let him know that I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Will do,” Gail said, and disconnected the call.

“Shit.” Dean scrubbed a hand along his jaw and gave Jillian a stern look. “You made me forget all about the meeting I had scheduled for this afternoon with a very important client.”

She should have told him she was sorry, but honestly, she wasn’t the least bit contrite about seducing her husband. “Then I guess I should be going.”

She stood up, and so did he. Just as she turned to walk around his desk, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her back around again. His heated gaze roamed over her disheveled hair, then her face, and he smirked that confident, cocky smile of his.

“You do realize, don’t you, that you look like you’ve just been fucked.”

She didn’t miss the possessive inflection in his voice. Already, she sensed a change in him, a darker edge that excited her. “I feel like it, too,” she said, unable to deny that she was very tender in the most delicious places. “Do you think anyone will notice that you had your way with me when I walk out of your office?”

“I’m sure they will.”

And he wanted them to! The rogue.

He jerked her toward him, and she stumbled on her stilettos and fell against his unyielding chest with a gasp of surprise. His mouth came down on hers in a hard, deep, aggressive kiss that claimed, consumed, and branded her. The connection was sizzling hot, and brimming with erotic promise.

Just as abruptly as he’d kissed her, he let her go. “I’ll see you at home later this evening.”

There was a definite command in his words, as if he expected her to be waiting for him—which, of course, she would be. She’d taken a huge leap of faith with her husband today, revealing wants and desires that had been denied for too long. Now she just had to wait and see what hand Dean would play when he came home from work tonight.

Be Careful What You Wish For

While a pot of creamy beef stroganoff simmered on the stove for dinner, Jillian went about slicing and dicing vegetables for a salad, expecting Dean home any time, since he'd texted her a while ago to let her know he was leaving the office shortly. She always liked having a hot meal waiting for him, and he always seemed to appreciate the effort.

She loved to cook... especially in the gourmet kitchen Dean had insisted she have when they'd drawn up the specs for their custom built home. For the first fifteen years of their marriage they'd lived in middle income neighborhoods before finally being able to afford to build the house of their dreams. And while she'd never complained about their modest lifestyle and had learned to budget their money well during those leaner years, she knew that Dean had big goals, and that had included being a self-made man and being wealthy enough to give Jillian every luxury he thought she deserved.

Those were the things that drove him on a daily basis. It never mattered how much she assured him that she was happy, so long as she was with him and the boys—for Dean, he measured his success in what he could provide in material objects, because of his own impoverished childhood.

But what he didn't realize was that the things he'd given her that were most precious were not tangible items or valuable assets. She might have been raised by filthy rich parents who'd given her every advantage until she'd married Dean, but he'd provided unconditional love, security, and happiness. Emotional things that money could never buy. His strong work ethic had allowed her to be a stay-at-home wife and mother, and she loved taking care of her boys and Dean. Making sure that they were happy made her feel complete.

Smiling to herself, she dumped the cubed tomatoes and cucumbers into the salad bowl, then turned to stir the pot of stroganoff when she caught sight of a male figure out of the corner of her eye. She gasped, even as she realized it was Dean who was leaning against the door jamb, startled by the fact that he'd managed to come into the house so silently.

Then again, the man was a trained SEAL, and the element of stealth and surprise was something they, and he, excelled in.

"Jesus, Dean," she said, exasperated, as she turned off the burner on the stove. "I didn't hear you come in from the garage and you startled me. When did you get home?"

"A few minutes ago."

And clearly he'd been quietly watching her, studying her. His stance was deceptively casual, contradicting the burning heat in his gaze as it raked over her, taking in the tank top and form fitting yoga pants she'd changed into after taking a shower a few hours ago. When his stormy gray eyes met hers again, he looked agitated and dear Lord, she felt... aroused.

She swallowed, uncertain of his true mood, yet sensing an undercurrent of change in the air, and that excited her, too. This restless, mercurial man was very different from the relaxed one she'd kissed good-bye this morning as he'd left for work, and she welcomed the transformation, and everything it implied.

"Is everything okay?" she asked. Clearly, it wasn't, and she was dying to know what was going through that sexy head of his.

"Hardly," he bit out, then pushed off the door frame and slowly strolled toward her, predatory like. "Do you realize how badly your visit today disrupted my entire afternoon?"

He didn't appear angry, but he was definitely perturbed. He continued his stalking approach, and she took a tentative step back, until her spine came into contact with the edge of the granite counter top and she couldn't retreat any further.

Did you not make it to your meeting?" she asked.

He stopped in front of her, braced his hands on either side of the counter so she was trapped between two very solid surfaces, and leaned in close. "I made it to the meeting just fine," he said gruffly. "But I couldn't think straight for shit, and Mac had to handle most of the contract details with the client because he clearly noticed I was... *off*."

Dean was a man with extreme control and focus, despite any distractions, and to know that she'd shattered his concentration was a very heady sensation. "What was the problem?" she asked, much too innocently.

"*You* were the problem," he confirmed softly, irritably.

He stood just inches away, not touching any part of her—not yet, anyway—and it took so much effort on her part not to arch her restless body against his, to rub her aching breasts along his chest and wrap her legs around his hips. She inhaled the scent of his cologne, which wrapped around her like its own caress, increasing the sensual hunger building deep inside of her.

A muscle in his jaw flexed as he continued his rant. "Even after you were gone, I couldn't stop thinking about the bold way you walked into my office and sucked me off, how you so brazenly spread yourself on my desk for me to fuck. All afternoon, I had the smell of you on my fingers, and the taste of you in my mouth. When I should have been working, I was instead thinking about your waxed pussy and how incredible it felt, which made my dick hard at very inconvenient times."

Her mouth twitched with a triumphant smile, which he didn't seem to appreciate, at all. "I'm sorry."

His gaze narrowed on her face. "I don't think you are."

She bit her bottom lip, knowing that they'd just come to a fork in the road... and this moment could go one of two ways. The conversation could end with flirty banter, or she could open the secret door to all the things she craved with her husband.

For her, it was a no-brainer.

She lifted her chin a few inches, just enough to display a show of defiance. "If I've been so bad, maybe you ought to spank me."

The carnal heat that flared to life in his eyes singed her, and his entire body went absolutely still. "Do *not* tempt me," he said, his voice a low, dark warning.

Oh, he had no idea the *temptation* he was up against, or just how persistent she could be in order to get what she wanted, too. "If I was a bad girl today, I should be punished."

He grasped her chin in his fingers, forcing her to see his fierce expression. "You're playing with fire, baby."

Another ominous threat she had no intention of heeding. "Maybe I want to get burned." Such a cliché, but so true. She knew he could make her burn *so* good.

His expression took on a dangerous edge, the kind she suspected had instantly coerced many a man to comply with whatever demand he'd issued. But there was nothing about Dean that she feared, and there was nothing he could do or say to make her back down or retreat.

"Spank me," she whispered huskily. "I *dare* you."

The challenge in her voice, her words, tipped him right into the palm of her hand, just as she'd anticipated. Her husband thrived on thrills, risk and adventure, so how could he say no to one of his own wife's challenges?

The tight clenching of his jaw eased a fraction. "We're not doing this without a safe word." She automatically shook her head. "We don't need one."

"Yes, we do," he countered resolutely. "If this is the way you want to play, then having a safe word is non-negotiable. It's a deal-breaker, Jillian."

Clearly, this was one area where he absolutely would not compromise. She trusted him, but he didn't trust himself. He needed the reassurance that she could put an end to the act anytime with a carefully chosen word, so there was no confusing playful, breathless begging with the need for him to truly *stop*. For him, a safe word meant she was completely serious.

The fingers on her chin tightened. "Choose one, Jillian."

She heard the make-or-break tone of his voice. If she wanted this—and Lord, did she ever—she had to comply. It was a small concession to make to gain his cooperation. "Mercy."

His mouth twisted with wry amusement. "Appropriate enough, I suppose."

"I thought so."

He finally released her. "Come," he ordered firmly, then turned around and headed for the adjoining family room, obviously expecting her to obey him without question or argument.

After checking once more that she'd turned off the stove, she followed him. He sat down in the center of the wide couch, and motioned for her to stand a few feet away from him. He pulled on the knot of his tie, loosening it from around the collar of his shirt so he could slip the strip of fabric over his head and off, then set the tie on the cushion next to him.

"Take off your clothes," he ordered as he released the top three buttons on his shirt, exposing the sexy hollow of his throat and a glimpse of his chiseled chest. "All of them."

She adhered to his request, all too aware of him watching her with hooded eyes as she stripped off her tank top, then her yoga pants. Unhooking her bra—a more practical beige one than the red lace she'd worn earlier today—she tossed it to the floor, then added her silk bikini panties. His darkening gaze took in her full breasts and hardened nipples, then drifted down to her bare mound, endlessly fascinated with her smooth, hairless pussy.

He said nothing as he looked his fill of her naked body, but the erection forming beneath the zipper of his pants spoke volumes and attested to just how affected he was. She stood still, her entire being vibrating with excitement as she awaited his next instruction, allowing him the opportunity to direct the scene about to unfold, however he felt necessary.

With a quiet restraint, he slowly, leisurely unbuckled his belt buckle, then pulled the long, thin strip of leather from the waistband of his slacks. He smacked the strap against his palm, as if testing the strength, the weight, the force of the *sting*. A sinful smile curved his mouth, and her stomach executed a little flutter at the thought of him using the belt on her tender, untried bottom.

He placed the belt next to the tie, then patted the couch cushion next to his right leg. "I want you to kneel right here."

She moved forward and did as he asked, and as soon as she was in position he put his hand around the nape of her neck and gently guided her down so that she was lying flat across his thighs with her bare butt arranged on his lap. Her upper body and face rested comfortably on the sofa cushion, and she had to admit that she felt incredibly vulnerable in her current face-down, ass-up position. But she wasn't afraid. Just... a little anxious about what to expect this first time.

"Hands behind your back," he ordered.

Unsure what he intended, but very curious to find out, she placed her hands at the small of her back. She felt his silk tie on her skin as he looped the soft fabric around and between her wrists a few times, then tied it off in a loose knot with a small bit of give—just enough so that

she could relax her arms and shoulders with ease.

Then he picked up the belt. She tensed, preparing herself for the crack of leather, but he merely stroked the supple strap along the curve of her bottom, teasing her with the possibilities.

“Relax, baby girl,” he murmured seductively, speaking the sweet endearment he’d chosen for her back in high school. “I don’t think you’re quite ready for the belt. Not on your virgin backside, anyways. But I do have another use for it.”

He wrapped the strap around her upper thighs and buckled the belt so it was secure and tight and she couldn’t move her legs apart at all. With both her arms and legs bound, he truly held all the control.

This wasn’t the first time that Dean had tied her hands up during sex play, but restraining her legs was new. They’d just traveled into bondage territory, and she had to admit she liked the element of induced subservience. It fed into her own forbidden fantasies, of being helplessly dominated and forced to endure every pleasurable thing her husband did to her.

But that didn’t mean she wasn’t a little nervous about that first smack, and her racing heart proved it. As if sensing her unease, he gently glided his left hand down the slope of her spine, petting her like a skittish kitten he wanted to calm. His right hand caressed the back of her thighs, his mellow, feel good caresses lulling her into a state of relaxation.

Only when her entire body was soft and yielding did he issue the first smack to her ass. She gasped in shock at the initial sting of pain radiating across her bottom, which he immediately soothed with another delicate caress, making the anticipation grow once again before he slapped her other cheek. Either that, or he was waiting to see if she’d use her safe word before he allowed himself to go on.

It wasn’t going to happen.

Trussed up as she was, she couldn’t move, could only endure the sweet, delightful punishment he doled out. He continued to repeat the process, and eventually the biting jolt of pain gave way to mild discomfort, then a pleasant burning sensation that made her pussy throb with excitement and need.

He executed another breath stealing strike of his palm, and this time his fingers followed the slit of her ass all the way down between her secured legs. The moment his fingers touched her aching sex, a rush of moisture spilled out of her, coating his hand and her thighs.

A low, deep, primitive growl escaped him as he wedged two fingers deep inside her. “You’re fucking drenched.”

Proof of how much this scenario aroused her, just in case he had any doubts. At this point, she was so keyed up she knew it wouldn’t take much more for her to orgasm—she was already nearly there—and she squirmed on his lap and lifted her ass a little higher in desperation. “Oh, God, Dean. *Please*,” she begged.

Her disobedience earned her another sharp slap. “Be still!”

Oh, Lord, she tried. She bit her bottom lip and forced herself not to move, but everything inside her clamored for release. For every spank he issued, he gave her pussy equal attention, his fingers dipping and exploring and stroking her swollen nether flesh until she was on the edge of climax before he retreated once again.

Her juices flowed, and he spread the slick moisture all the way back up between the crevice of her buttocks, his fingers stopping on that forbidden pucker of flesh, adding a bit of pressure, while his other hand kneaded her sore, tender bottom.

His touch *there* was so foreign and unexpected she stiffened, even as other parts of her mind and body wondered what it would be like to experience back door sex. It was a heady thought,

and one she wasn't opposed to.

As if reading her mind, he said, "Someday, I want to fuck you here."

"Yes," she whispered, granting him permission for whenever he was ready to explore that particular fantasy.

He groaned, and executed one last smack to her warm, tingling bottom before his fingers delved back into her body and began thrusting in earnest. But this time, he placed his thumb against that uncharted territory, and gradually pushed the tip in an inch, then another. The dual penetration overwhelmed her with a barrage of erotic sensations, heightening that clawing need as the pleasure became so intense she could barely breathe.

She started to pant. She resisted the urge to beg once more, certain he'd stop the decadent torment before she could climax. He was completely and utterly in control of her body, her every response, and she was helpless to do anything but surrender to his provocative ministrations.

She would have thought him immune if it weren't for his own harsh breathing, and the thick prod of his shaft against her hip. He was rock hard, and she took satisfaction in knowing that he was just as turned on and on fire as she was.

While his fingers continued to fuck her and drive her wild, he administered one last hot, searing slap to her ass, which sent her careening over the precipice of a stunning, mind-bending orgasm. The ecstasy was so intense and all-consuming she screamed her pleasure as she came, harder and longer than she ever thought possible.

Her mind spun, and she was vaguely aware of Dean pushing her hips off the couch so that her knees were on the floor and her upper body remained on the sofa. Standing up, he quickly removed all his clothes then moved behind her, straddling her still bound legs so that his hard, muscular thighs bracketed hers.

He tugged on the tie wrapped around her wrists, releasing her hands but kept the belt intact around her legs. She groaned in relief and stretched her arms out in front of her. Knowing she was in for another wild, rough ride, she closed her eyes and curled her fingers around the back of the couch cushion for something to hang onto, and waited in anticipation for him to fill her up.

She felt the smooth head of his cock run down the crease of her ass, stopping momentarily at the place where he'd been touching just moments ago before sliding lower, where she was wet, swollen, and incredibly sensitive from her orgasm. He slid slowly inside her, but once he was buried to the hilt, he exhaled a raw groan, grabbed her waist, and began thrusting in earnest.

With her thighs strapped together, the fit of him was tight, and she could feel the length of his cock rub along the folds of her sex with each rapid stroke. A multitude of sensations assailed her... the heavy weight of his balls slapping against her thighs, the hard grind of his hips against hers, the friction of his pistoning cock pumping in and out of her.

Now that her hands were free, she was able to arch her back and tilt her hips, allowing him deeper access. She clenched and unclenched her inner muscles around him and tossed her head back as she moaned her pleasure, coaxing him to feel as much as she did.

That discipline of his finally snapped, and with an unrefined curse he moved over her completely, pressing his chest against her back and burying his face against her neck, claiming her in a wholly primitive, ruthless way.

He slid one hand between her legs, his fingers gliding across her clit, his touch just the right combination of rough and delicate strokes. His other hand twisted in her hair and turned her head, forcing her mouth to meet the demand of his.

His kiss was hot, potent, and tinged with a desperate hunger that delighted her. His desire and lust became her feminine power, and she reveled in it, and what she could do to *him*. Their

tongues dueled and his strong, muscular body strained against hers, each slam of his hips driving his shaft deeper than she ever thought possible. His long fingers plied her clit with exquisite finesse, and the tension spiraling tight inside her finally gave way to a climax so violent she nearly blacked out.

He waited until her body was shaking, writhing, and coming apart beneath him before he granted himself the same pleasure. The low, animalistic growl that escaped him vibrated against their still fused lips as his big body shuddered, hands clutching her backside almost painfully as he came with a loud, unrestrained roar, then collapsed against her back, breathing hard.

Her own heart raced, the aftershocks of the sexual blast still rippling through her body, and his. After a while, he pulled out of her and removed the belt from her thighs, then pulled her up onto the wide, spacious couch with him so that they were laying face-to-face, chest to breasts, her legs entwined with his. She sighed, unable to remember feeling so physically and emotionally sated and content after such a vigorous round of sex.

He lazily skimmed a hand down along her side, tracing the indent of her waist and the curve of her hip, then settled his palm over her bare bottom, which was still warm and sensitive from his spankings.

His grey eyes were dark and uncertain as they stared into hers. "Are you okay?"

She knew what concerned him, that he was worried he'd taken things too far, too fast. "I'm good," she said with a smile. "And before you ask, everything about what we just did was freakin' fantastic."

He raised a dark brow, a more playful side emerging. "You liked being tied up and spanked?"

"I loved it." She placed her hand on his cheek, not afraid to admit just how incredible the power of passion and emotion between them had felt during the act. And now, in the aftermath, she also loved the intimacy, the communication, the connection they were forging. "I liked being spanked by you, and those other things you did, especially knowing it turned you on just as much."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a sinful smile. "Yeah, it did turn me on."

She laughed. "You're so easy," she teased.

The hand on her bottom caressed its way back up her body, until his fingers were threading gently through her hair. "So, what next?" he asked.

"Anything and everything." With him, nothing was off limits, and there wasn't anything she wouldn't at least try. "Surprise me."

"*That* I can definitely do," he murmured, the deep, seductive inflection in his voice making Jill shiver with anticipation.

She couldn't wait to see what happened next.

The Beast Unleashed

Later that night, while Jillian slept peacefully in their bed, Dean sat in his home office/library sipping a shot of Macallan single malt Scotch while contemplating how his wife's seduction today, and her request to add some spice to their sex life, had opened up a whole Pandora's box of illicit possibilities.

Jillian had no idea the true tendencies he'd held back for so many years for fear that she'd think he was depraved or perverse. But in truth, there were many kinky, erotic things he'd imagined doing with her and to her, and restraining her and spanking her tonight was just the mere tip of the iceberg. There were many more dark, carnal fantasies he wanted to indulge in with her.

Today, she'd tempted the beast within him, roused and awakened that buried need to control and possess, and coaxed him out to play—and his vibrant, sexy wife had enjoyed every single aspect of his dominant behavior.

He smiled to himself as he finished off his drink. Jillian had given them both permission and free rein to explore their fantasies. Now, there was no turning back from all the erotic pleasures awaiting them.

The Seduction

A diary entry from Jillian Noble:

Seducing Dean was much easier than I'd expected. He'd enjoyed our tryst in his office, and I loved the way he'd opened up and took control when he came home later that night. Who knew that getting spanked could be so thrilling and arousing?

Already, I sense a change in my husband, a sexual awareness that keeps my body in a constant state of anticipation whenever he's around. The way he looks at me is hotter, like he's imagining all the things he wants to do to me now that there are no boundaries between us.

I can't wait to see how far he's willing to go in order to pleasure us both.

Patience and Restraint

I made reservations for dinner at Bertrand at Mister A's. Be ready to go in two hours. Tonight, you're mine.

Jillian read the text message from her husband and shivered in anticipation. Short, brief, and to the point. She loved that Dean was being so spontaneous, and she especially liked the possessive slant in his message, which meant there was more to this evening than a romantic meal out. She also appreciated the advance notice, which meant she could take her time getting ready.

She headed up to the master bathroom. After getting undressed, she shaved her legs then ran a hot bath, adding a generous amount of jasmine botanical oil to soften and scent her skin. She piled her long, thick hair atop her head, and once the Jacuzzi tub was filled she immersed herself into the steaming bath, closed her eyes, and let the silky warmth soothe her body. In time, drowsy and relaxed, she dozed off until the most delicious, decadent dream slowly cajoled her awake again.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty," a deep voice whispered huskily, while a large, strong palm curved around her breast beneath the water and skillful fingers plucked at her nipples, making them harden into stiff points.

She moaned softly, struggling between waking up and wanting to see how the tempting fantasy ended. A talented thumb swirled around her sensitive areola before a very masculine hand gently squeezed her breast.

"Open your eyes, baby girl."

Dean's voice beckoned to her, as did the fingers lazily trailing their way down her stomach and around her navel. With effort, she blinked her eyes open and stared into her husband's handsome face. He was sitting on the tiled step beside the tub, his shirt off, half of his tanned arm beneath the surface of water. She frowned, her mind gradually processing the fact that he was home, that she'd fallen asleep, and she wasn't ready for their dinner date yet.

She quickly sat up, nearly sloshing water over the side of the tub. "Oh, my God. Am I late?"

His big hand grasped her thigh, holding her in place when she would have tried to stand up. "No, I'm home early. I wanted to take a shower and shave before we go out, but I came in here and found you taking a nap, looking so sweet and peaceful, and I couldn't resist coaxing you awake."

She settled back down into the silky, scented, now luke-warm water and smiled at Dean. "I'm definitely awake, but I wouldn't mind being coaxed a bit more."

He arched a dark sable brow, a glimpse of humor dancing in the gray depths of his eyes. "You're becoming a shameless hussy."

"You bring out the shameless hussy in me." And since he was her husband, she could be as promiscuous as she dared, which was such an incredibly freeing sensation. "I think you need to finish what you started."

His fingers brushed along the inside of her thigh in a teasing caress. "Do you now?"

"Yes, I do." She opened her legs wider in invitation and moaned when two long fingers slid inside her core and his thumb rubbed oh-so-enticingly against her clitoris.

"Such a demanding, bossy thing." He inclined his head, staring at her thoughtfully for a moment before his expression took on a darker, more commanding edge, the one that made her

pulse flutter and her body come alive. "I think you need to learn patience and restraint, and tonight, I'm going to teach you that very important lesson. That good things, like orgasms, come to those who learn to wait."

He curled his free hand around the nape of her neck and tipped her head up, just as his mouth came down on hers. His kiss was slow and deep and breathlessly sexy, the kind that seduced not only the mind, but every erogenous zone in her body. His tongue slid against hers and withdrew, then thrust in again, while his fingers adopted the same lazy in-and-out rhythm in her aching sex.

And like the shameless hussy she was, she moved wantonly against his hand. Her back arched, lifting her breasts out of the water, her nipples tightening as the pleasure built, and built, and built toward a spectacular climax, contradicting his statement that he was going to make her wait.

She gasped against his lips, on the verge of coming... and then his touch, and his mouth, were completely and utterly gone, leaving her bereft and deprived. Those nerve endings he'd roused screamed for release and she couldn't contain the mewling sound of disappointment that escaped her.

Opening her eyes, she stared up at Dean and the smug satisfaction curving his sensual mouth. "You did that on purpose."

"Patience and restraint," he reminded her as he stood up, the outline of his hard cock visible beneath the fabric of his pants.

Brazenly, she skimmed her hands down her stomach and toward her still throbbing pussy as he watched, knowing she could easily finish herself off without his help. Just a few strokes against her clit would be enough to give her body what it desperately craved.

His gaze narrowed and his jaw clenched tight. "Don't you dare give yourself that orgasm I know you want so badly. I'll give it to you when I feel you've earned it."

Jillian shivered at his stern, uncompromising tone. She was so very tempted to disobey, just to suffer whatever delicious consequence he'd dole out, but decided to play this game his way. For now. Clearly, it was going to be a very long, and exciting, night.

"By the way, I laid out what I want you to wear tonight on the bed."

"Oh. Okay." That announcement surprised her, since he'd never selected clothes for her before. She was curious to find out what he envisioned for tonight.

Seemingly convinced that he had her cooperation, he turned away and stripped out of his pants and boxer briefs. Gloriously naked, he turned on the shower, then stepped into the spacious marble and glass enclosure. Since she had a great view of her smokin' hot husband, and he had such a beautiful body, she relaxed for a few minutes longer in the tub and watched as the water sluiced over his muscular chest and down his toned backside.

He washed his hair then soaped himself up, and she was very tempted to join him so she could scrub his back... or stroke the impressive erection he was still sporting, she thought with a pleased smile. After rinsing off, he reached for the shaving cream and absently glanced her way.

Seeing that she was still lounging in the tub, he rapped on the glass and frowned at her. "You need to get moving," he ordered like the drill sergeant he probably was with the military men who worked for him. "I don't want to be late for our reservations."

She rolled her eyes, knowing they had plenty of time. But Dean was a man who liked to be punctual, and Lord forbid they were a few minutes tardy. Then again, if it earned her another spanking...

Sighing to herself, she stood up, got out of the tub, and leisurely dried off with a fluffy

towel. After wrapping it around her body, she did her make-up, then rearranged her hair into a loose topknot on her head, leaving a few strands free to frame her face. While Dean finished shaving, she headed into the bedroom to see what attire awaited her.

He'd chosen one of her "little black dresses", one she didn't wear very often because of just how little, and blatantly sexy, it was. The front was actually very modest, with a high neck and long sleeves... but it was the completely backless design that was the true show-stopper and never failed to turn male heads as she walked by. The shimmering stretch fabric molded to her body, and the hem reached mid-thigh. There was no bending over in this dress unless she wanted to flash her girly-bits to everyone.

At least he'd picked out full coverage underwear, instead of a thong or G-string. But the black lace was flimsy and see-through, and considering she couldn't wear a bra with the dress, she ought to shock him and go full-on commando, she thought with a wicked grin. Seriously, though, she was grateful he was *allowing* her to wear panties, and put them on before walking over to her bedroom vanity table and selecting one of the fragrances she only wore on special occasions because it was so expensive.

She picked up the crystal decanter filled with Clive Christian perfume, and dabbed the stopper at the hollow of her throat, behind her ears, between her breasts, along the pulse points in her wrists, and lastly, at the back of her knees. The heady, luxurious scent of jasmine and vanilla swirled around her, potently seductive. She stepped into her dress and was adjusting the long sleeves and hem when Dean strolled out of the bathroom, a towel tucked around his hips, then disappeared into the walk-in closet to change.

She fastened the stiletto heels Dean had chosen for her—black leather straps encrusted in sparkling crystals that criss-crossed over her toes and wrapped around her ankles—and had just finished putting the bare necessities into her little handbag when he came out of the adjoining closet, immaculately dressed in a pair of pressed black slacks and a white linen shirt he'd left open at the collar. She was actually disappointed that he wasn't wearing a tie tonight.

He came up behind her, his gaze meeting hers in the gold filigree mirror framing her vanity table. "You are so beautiful." He strummed his long fingers down her bare back, making her shiver and her nipples pucker tight against the fabric of her dress. "But I think your outfit is missing something."

"A bra?" she asked wryly.

He laughed and pressed a warm, damp kiss to her bare shoulder. "You don't need one. Your breasts are perfect."

No, not perfect, but at least they still had some "perk" left to them and were full enough that they didn't droop. But she knew her unruly nipples were going to be a problem tonight, much to Dean's enjoyment, no doubt.

Moving away, he opened the top drawer in his armoire and withdrew a black velvet box with a distinctive jeweler's name imprinted on top, then came back to her. "*This* is what's missing," he said, and handed her the unexpected present.

Eyes wide with surprise, she took the box, but didn't immediately open it. "What is this?" she asked curiously.

Tonight wasn't a special occasion, and while Dean was a generous man, he rarely bestowed lavish gifts for the hell of it. Not that she was complaining, but it told her that he'd put a lot of thought into tonight... from the restaurant he'd chosen, to what he wanted her to wear, to the spontaneous gift he'd purchased for her.

He shrugged a shoulder, looking both boyish and incredibly irresistible. "It's for you to wear

and both of us to enjoy.”

Interesting choice of words, she thought.

Dying to know what was inside, she opened the lid and gasped when she saw a gorgeous strand of pink-hued freshwater pearls nestled in black satin. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest as she stared at Dean in awe and delight. “These pearls are absolutely stunning.”

“So are you.” He lifted the necklace from the box—an incredibly *long* strand of pearls that had to cost a small fortune—then walked behind her again.

He placed the necklace over her head, then wrapped the rope of pearls around her neck twice, so that there were two layers cascading down her bare back. She looked at her reflection. From the front, it appeared as though she was wearing a pearl choker, or a luxurious collar, and while she’d seen many women wear long strands in just this fashion, knowing that Dean had chosen this specific style for her gave Jillian a sense of being *owned*. Especially when he gave the necklace a gentle tug and she felt the slight tightening of the pearls against her throat—as if she was wearing a leash and he was her master.

Tonight, you’re mine.

The reminder made her insides go liquid with a forbidden kind of longing.

She lifted her gaze and met his in the mirror, the wicked gleam in his eyes causing another rush of heat to arrow straight between her legs. Oh, he knew *exactly* what he was doing, and had bought this necklace for precisely that impression. He’d put conscious thought and consideration into the gift, which made her wonder what other sexy, erotic predilections traveled through that mind of his.

She had her own secret, naughty fantasies and desires, so it was only fair that Dean had his. But now, with their agreement to explore the more unconventional side of sex, they were able to openly share and enjoy those new, exciting scenarios together. And so far, she liked where this night was headed.

“Don’t forget the matching earrings,” he murmured, brushing his fingertips along her spine one last time before moving away.

Exhaling a deep breath, she slipped the pearl stud earrings into her lobes, then picked up her clutch purse from the bed. “I’m ready to go.”

They drove Dean’s silver Aston Martin Vantage coupe, which was a nice treat for Jillian since she was used to driving around in her big Suburban. She loved the close quarters of the sporty two-seater, the sleek, powerful ride it provided, and how the interior smelled so masculine, like warm leather and her husband’s own essence. Everything about the car was sexy and arousing, and perfect for a date night out with Dean.

When they arrived at Bertrand at Mister A’s, Dean valeted the car, then tucked her hand in his as they walked into the restaurant. It was early evening, and the place was already busy, but since he’d made reservations they were immediately led to their table. As they followed the hostess, Dean splayed his hand against the base of her spine, his touch hot and unmistakably possessive.

Jillian was very aware of the pearls dangling down her back and brushing intermittently against her bare skin—like the stroking caress of warm fingers—and despite her best efforts, the sensual sensation caused her nipples to peak against the fabric of her dress. Couples glanced up at them as they walked by—the women to admire Dean, and men being the visual creatures that they were, their appreciative gazes unerringly dropped to her full, unrestrained breasts, which only made her more aware of her tight nipples.

Admittedly, those bold stares did give her a little thrill and boosted her confidence, but she

was more concerned about what Dean thought of those men blatantly ogling her. She glanced at his face, but his unreadable expression gave nothing away.

“Here’s the private table you reserved, Mr. Noble,” the hostess said, stopping at a cozy booth tucked away in a corner away from the other diners. Their table faced the floor to ceiling glass windows encasing the restaurant and gave them a spectacular view of downtown San Diego. The only lighting was a single candle on the table, which cast flickering shadows and gave the atmosphere a romantic, sensual glow.

“Thank you,” he said, and smiled at the younger woman. “This is perfect.”

Jillian slid onto the leather seat, and was surprised when Dean sat *across* from her, instead of beside her. She would have preferred a more intimate seating arrangement, where she could touch him and vice-versa, but he clearly had other ideas.

The hostess handed them their dinner menus and a wine list, then announced the night’s specials before leaving them alone to peruse their selections. A few minutes later a waiter arrived to take their order—baby lamb chops for her, braised prime beef for Dean, and a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc for them to share. Once their server returned with the wine, poured two glasses, then moved on to another table, Jillian glanced at Dean and contemplated the best way to pose the question she wanted to ask.

His eyes met hers and a slight smile curved his lips. “Something on your mind, wife?”

It was unnerving how well he could read her when his shifting moods were far more difficult to decipher, especially when he made a conscious effort of hiding his emotions, like now. But the uncanny ability to read other people without revealing his own agenda is what had made him such a formidable Navy SEAL, and now, a respected security specialist.

She glanced around, and assured that their table was far enough away from everyone else’s and that nobody could eavesdrop on them, she decided to appease her curiosity. “Doesn’t it bother you having other men stare at my breasts?”

He stared at her breasts. “No. I told you that you have great tits.” He gave a casual shrug, even as his eyes darkened with a simmering heat. “Besides, I like knowing that all those other men are lusting over what’s *mine*, while I’m the lucky bastard who gets to take you home and fuck you.”

His raw words thrilled her, and she couldn’t help but glance around to make sure no one else had been privy to his explicit statement. Grateful that their table was far enough away from the main diners to guarantee complete privacy, she met Dean’s gaze and delved a little deeper into this fascinating conversation. “So, you like me being on display?”

He took a slow drink of his wine before replying. “It definitely adds an element of excitement to know other men want you, but it also brings out my possessive side, too, along with the primal need to bend you over the table and stake my claim on you right here and now so they know you belong to me.”

She shivered at the slight threat in his tone, which was softened by the humor glimmering in the depths of his smoky gray eyes. “I’d rather not get banned from our favorite restaurant, so thank you for sparing me that awkward scene.”

“For now, anyways,” he said in a sexy, lazy drawl. “The evening is still young and I can think of more than one way to make sure you realize exactly *who* you belong to.”

She already belonged to Dean... heart, body, and soul, but she knew he wasn’t questioning her emotional commitment to him. No, his words were laced with a tempting eroticism that had her pulse racing. Clearly, he was playing a role and creating a fantasy, and his aggressive behavior fit the parameters of tonight’s theme of her being “owned” by him.

The cool pearls he'd wrapped around her throat were also a subtle, silent reminder that Dean was the one in control, that she was his to command, and she'd willingly do his bidding. She wasn't submissive or complacent by nature, but there was something about surrendering to his provocative demands that filled her with a heady sense of anticipation and excitement. Pleasing him, arousing him, was her ultimate goal... even if that meant being a slave to every one of his desires.

"By the way, it looks like next week's business trip to Chicago is going to be longer than I'd originally anticipated," Dean said, changing the tone of their conversation. "I'll be gone at least seven to ten days."

She'd been expecting him to be gone a week, max. "Why so long?"

"The political summit was extended," he said, leaning back in his seat as his fingers absently stroked the stem of his wine glass. "I'll be arriving with my guys a few days before the summit starts to set up security detail and surveillance, and it'll take us a day or two afterward to break things down."

Jill never liked when he had to take business trips, especially now that the boys were gone, but she knew and accepted that it was part of his job. Dean and Mac were very "hands on" when it came to their affluent clients, especially the high ranking officials and Fortune 500 executives who retained their protective services. All the men that Noble and Associates hired were elite ex-military professionals who were capable and intelligent, yet Dean always liked to be present at the bigger events to diffuse any potential issues or problems that might arise.

As much as she'd miss Dean, having him out of town presented Jill with the perfect opportunity to take advantage of an idea she'd conceptualized and wanted to make a reality. "While you're gone, there's something I'd like to do," she said tentatively.

His gaze turned curious. "What's that?"

She bit her bottom lip, because she honestly didn't know how Dean would feel about her suggestion. "I was thinking about turning our basement into a playroom."

When they'd built their house, they'd finished off the basement, making sure that the spacious area was equipped with a heating and cooling system, insulation, and lighting just in case they'd ever decided to make it into a useable living area, but because the rest of the house was so large, the room had always remained vacant. Now, it presented the perfect place for the two of them to use as a personal, intimate escape.

Amusement flickered across Dean's expression. "So, you want pin ball machines, a PlayStation, and other games to play with?"

He was being deliberately obtuse, but she saw the unmistakable interest in his gaze. "No, I want a private place for us to *play*."

"Define your version of *play*."

She rolled her eyes, knowing Dean knew damn well what she was referring to. "*Sex games*," she said candidly, so there was no misconstruing what she wanted, just as their waiter arrived with their meals.

Her face flushed with embarrassment as the other man set their plates of food in front of each of them, but if their server overheard her explicit declaration, he had the good manners not to show it. He topped off their glasses with the Sauvignon Blanc, and after making sure there wasn't anything else they needed, he left them alone again.

Before Dean could say anything, Jill forged ahead with her ideas and plans before she lost the nerve. "I love our big sleigh bed, but I want a four poster with slats for restraints, and a place for toys, and extra room for different things you might like and enjoy. And there's this Tantra

sex chair that looks interesting, but I certainly don't want it in our bedroom for the boys to see when they visit."

Dean laughed, the sound deep and robust. "Holy shit. Who are you and what happened to my wife?"

"Your wife is ready to expand her sexual horizons, as you well know," she said with a bit of sass, then took a bite of her lamb chop, which was perfectly prepared. "I've been doing some research on the internet, and there's some fun and sexy things I want to do and try."

"I've been doing some research of my own," he said, his tone taking on that dark, delicious edge that never failed to elicit a sharp, electric response from her—and made her wonder what kind of sexual games had piqued *his* interest. "And I wouldn't mind having a private playroom for us to use."

Thrilled to have his approval, she shared some ideas she had in mind while they finished their dinner. The young woman who'd helped Jill decorate their current house also specialized in creating fantasy bedrooms, and she'd already had a brief discussion with Stephanie about how they could transform the basement into a classy, decadent den of iniquity. Dean listened to her suggestions as he finished off his meal, but like most men, he didn't have a lot of decorating tips to offer.

"So, what do you think?" she asked enthusiastically.

Setting his fork and knife on his empty plate, he smiled indulgently at her. "Baby, I trust your taste and your judgment. You have my permission, and carte blanche, to do whatever you'd like to turn the basement into our playroom."

She beamed at him, and couldn't wait to call Stephanie to get started on her new project. "Thank you."

Their waiter appeared, cleared their plates, and returned to see if they wanted anything for dessert.

"I'll have the lemon layer cake," Jill told the server, which was her favorite.

"Just coffee for me," Dean said.

"You don't want dessert?" she asked once the waiter was gone, surprised that he hadn't ordered his usual—vanilla bean Crème Brûlée.

"Don't worry about me. I'm getting dessert," he murmured seductively.

During dinner, the atmosphere between them had been light and casual, but there was a distinct change in him now. There was no mistaking the seductive vibe radiating from him, or the intense heat in his eyes that was nearly tangible.

"Take off your panties and give them to me," he said.

His blatant, unexpected request made her head spin. "W-w-what?" she stammered, certain she'd misunderstood him.

The corner of his mouth twitched with barely perceptible amusement. "You heard me."

His voice had taken on a dark, authoritative bent, one that told her things were about to get very interesting—if she followed through on his command. She glanced furtively around, thankful that no one was paying any attention to them. The dining area was dim, lit only by candlelight, yet the thought of shimmying out of her underwear in a public place, where she could easily get *caught*, left her feeling a little breathless.

"We're in the middle of a restaurant," she pointed out unnecessarily.

"We're at a corner booth against a wall and I have a perfect view of anyone who might come this way, including our waiter. Do it *now*, Jill, and don't make me ask again or there will be consequences to pay later."

He was dead serious. Jillian wasn't afraid of any consequence he might dole out, but she was more intrigued and yes, excited, about what he had in mind for her now, and how far he'd take things. The element of getting discovered mid-act definitely increased the thrill, even though she knew that Dean would never let that happen. But just knowing that the possibility existed made her heart race a bit faster.

Thankful for the linen tablecloth that draped across her lap and afforded her a modicum of privacy, she reached down to the hem of her dress and inched up the fabric to the tops of her thighs, until she was able to hook her thumbs into the elastic band of her panties and pull them down. It took some wriggling and finesse to get the underwear all the way down her legs and around the spiked heels of her shoes, but she managed the feat. Crumpling the evidence in her fist, she glanced around once more to make sure the coast was clear before extending her offering across the table to Dean.

He held the delicate panties in his masculine hand, out in the open, upping the stakes of someone noticing that he'd filched her underwear. His fingers rubbed along the silk, and seemingly finding something that delighted him, he smiled wickedly at her. "They're damp."

Mortification rippled through her. "That's *your* fault for all the touching and sexy talk back at the house, and the orgasm you *didn't* give me. Now *please*, put them away!"

"Poor baby girl," he mocked, humor dancing in his eyes as he ignored her request and instead brought the black lace up to his nose and inhaled. "I love the way you smell. Like vanilla, jasmine, and desire."

Oh, my God. She was going to *die* of pure embarrassment!

He tucked the scrap of fabric into his pants pocket just as their server arrived with her dessert, and his coffee. Dean took a few drinks of the dark, rich roast and let her enjoy three bites of her luscious lemon cake before he continued with his sensual torment.

Beneath the table, he wedged one shoe, then the other, between her stilettos and pushed her legs wide apart, and kept them braced there so there was no possible way she could close her legs, even if she tried. With her dress still bunched high around her upper thighs, she was completely open and exposed. Cool air touched her bare flesh, and she carefully set her fork on her plate, preparing herself for whatever he intended to do next—if it was even possible to guess his next move. Ever since their agreement to spice things up, Dean was full of surprises when it came to what he wanted and desired. Then again, *predictable* was boring, and she was coming to thoroughly enjoy the unexpected where he was concerned.

Anticipation built inside her as she waited for him to do or say something, while he looked so relaxed sitting across from her, so gorgeous and sexy and she *so* didn't trust that challenging glint in his eyes. With good reason...

"Touch yourself," he murmured.

The provocative dare made her stomach do a little flip. The smirk curving the corner of his mouth told her that Dean didn't think she'd have the nerve to follow through with his bold request considering where they were, but she wasn't about to disappoint her husband. And if she drove *him* a little crazy in the process, all the better.

He took another sip of his coffee, watching with interest as her right hand lowered to her lap. She arranged the tablecloth accordingly, then skimmed her fingers along the crease of her thigh, until she reached the apex, where she was already spread wide. Feeling exceptionally naughty, she embraced her inner temptress, met Dean's heated gaze, and slid two fingers along the soft, bare lips of her pussy, damp with the same moisture that had coated her panties.

She purposefully let her lashes drift to half-mast and exhaled a soft, teasing sigh. His fingers

tightened around his coffee cup, and his jaw visibly clenched. *Good*. There was no reason why he couldn't be hot and bothered right along with her.

"Are you wet?" he asked in a low, rough growl that made her nipples tighten and peak.

She nodded, stroked a little deeper, and let a barely audible gasp escape her lips. "Yes," she whispered. "Very wet."

His nostrils flared. "Prove it."

She wasn't quite sure what he meant. "How?"

He leaned his upper body across the table, the flickering candlelight accentuating the primal hunger simmering in his smoky gray eyes. "Let me taste you. *That's* my dessert."

She shivered at his assertive tone. It wasn't a polite request... it was a direct order, and she was helpless to deny him what he wanted... what *she* wanted, too. She brought her hand back out from beneath the table and extended it toward him, the tips of her fingers glistening with the evidence he'd asked for. He grasped her wrist in a tight hold, his thumb pressing against the main artery pulsing there as he pulled her hand closer. His gaze did a quick sweep of the area to make certain no one was watching before he parted his lips and sucked two of her fingers into the warm, silky cavern of his mouth.

She shuddered and moaned, much louder than she'd intended. Liquefied heat rushed to her core, and damn him, she couldn't even press her thighs together, or cross her legs to help appease the throbbing ache in between.

"Delicious," Dean said, and with one last swirling lick of his tongue between her fingers, and a few arousing nibbles to the tips, he let her go.

Three seconds later, their waiter was standing tableside while Jill tried to contain her flustered composure. He refilled Dean's coffee, and smiled at the two of them. "Can I get either one of you anything else?"

Dean withdrew a credit card from his wallet and handed it to the server. "Just the check, please."

While Dean handled the bill and signed the receipt, Jill finished her lemon cake, all too aware of the fact that he *still* had her feet anchored securely apart beneath the table.

She pushed her empty plate aside and glanced at Dean, anxious to be alone with him so they could *really* get to some down and dirty action. "Are you ready to go?"

"Not quite yet," he said, his features taking on those incorrigible bad boy traits that never failed to make her a slave to his every whim. "Since you're nice and wet, I want you to make yourself come. Right here and now."

There was no shock or surprise this time—and what did it say about her that she didn't even hesitate to touch herself again?

Shameless hussy.

Yeah, she was feeling bold and brazen and reckless enough to see just how much Dean could handle. With each scenario or fantasy they explored, it was getting easier and easier to let go of her inhibitions with him, to take things to the extreme knowing that pure bliss would always be her reward. It was like an erotic power play between them—and she didn't mind being the one in control every once in a while.

Holding his gaze, she caressed her fingers along those intimate folds, trusting him to stop her if someone came their way. She circled and rubbed delicately, reawakening the bundle of nerves in her sex. Her clit throbbed in response, and she applied just the right amount of pressure, stroked in precisely the right way, and recognized the tell-tale signs of a gathering orgasm.

She bit her bottom lip to keep from groaning out loud, her head tipping back as a familiar tension coiled tight in her belly, then spread lower in a promising flutter of pleasure...

"Fuck. *Stop!*" Dean hissed in a strained voice.

Certain they were about to be interrupted, she immediately ceased touching herself, which effectively, and abruptly, stopped the impending climax she'd been on the very precipice of enjoying.

She swallowed back a moan of disappointment and instead inhaled a deep breath, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do to quell the need still pulsing between her legs.

She waited for someone to walk past their table, but it never happened. In fact, a quick glance around told her that there had been absolutely no threat of being discovered.

She narrowed her gaze at Dean. "You did that on purpose," she accused softly. "I was *so* close."

"I know." He smiled wickedly, but there was no missing the strain of his own arousal etching his features. "Patience and restraint, baby girl. I told you earlier that *I'd* be the one to give you tonight's orgasm when you've earned it."

Yes, he had, and it just went to show her that *he'd* been in control of this scenario all along, not her.

"*Now*, I'm ready to go." He slid out from his side of the booth and extended a hand to Jill to help her out of her seat.

Fortunately for Dean, the lighting in the dining area was very dim, and his slacks were dark, which helped to conceal the bulge of his erection. Tucking her hand in his, he led her through the restaurant and outside to the cool night air where they waited for valet to deliver his car.

As he navigated the streets toward home with his gaze on the road and one hand gripping the steering wheel, he reached over with his free hand and skimmed his fingers up the inside of her thigh and beneath the hem of her dress, trailing heat and promise in their wake. Immediate need spiked through her, and she opened her legs to him, knowing at this point it wouldn't take much to make her come and hoped that was his plan after making her suffer back at the restaurant.

She should have known better.

His long fingers slid along her swollen, sensitive folds and slipped a few inches inside her, knowing exactly what to do to bring her to that breathless crest before easing off and leaving her wanting so much more. He teased and retreated, over and over again, as if proving to her that *he* was truly the one in control of her pleasure tonight.

It didn't take long before she was nearly panting, her body so primed she wanted to wail in frustration—but she refused to give him that satisfaction. She clutched the edge of her leather seat, her hips undulating, her body arching in an attempt to grasp that orgasm he kept just out of her reach.

Between driving and fingering her, the man was a master at multi-tasking. With each skillful stroke she grew wetter, more excruciatingly aroused, until the need to come finally got the best of her and she decided to make things happen herself.

Just as two digits dipped inside her core once again, she grasped Dean's wrist and pushed his hand firmly against her pussy, forcing his fingers to penetrate her all the way up to his knuckles. Her body clenched around the invasion of those fingers, and a flood of moisture spilled over his hand.

The position of his arm was a little awkward for Dean, but she definitely got his attention. He swore explicitly and the car swerved as he turned sharply into a dark, deserted parking lot. He

had to remove his hand to put the car into park and turn off the ignition, but then he was back, his right hand now gripping the upswept hair at the nape of her neck and his other diving back between her legs.

He thrust two fingers deep inside her and jerked her head back, making her scalp tingle. His face loomed in front of hers, dark and intimidating. "So fucking impatient," he growled roughly.

A hint of amusement softened his tone, even as his eyes blazed with animal heat and lust. God, he was so freakin' hot like this. So strong, alpha, and dominant, and she loved that she'd provoked such tempestuous passion from him.

"Make me come, Dean," she pleaded.

A raw groan rumbled out of him, and he sealed his mouth securely over hers, coercing her lips apart so he could kiss her hard and relentlessly deep. The thrust of his tongue matched the same steady, driving rhythm of his fingers. His thumb found her clit, pressed and rubbed, and the slick friction was exactly what she needed to send her reeling. Her climax was intense and sublime, and she went limp against her seat as he released her.

He moved back to his side of the car, his hands going to the waistband of his pants. She heard the hiss of his leather belt in the quiet, shadowed confines of the car, the rasp of his zipper as he quickly pulled it down, then the rustle of his shirt as he hastily pulled it out of the way.

"Suck me off, Jillian. *Now.*"

His voice was harsh and filled with an urgent demand that excited her. She was more than happy to return the favor, and by the time she released her seatbelt and leaned over the console to go down on him, his thick, jutting shaft was waiting for her.

She curled her fingers tight around the base of his cock. Pre-cum seeped from the tip, and she slowly licked it away and playfully swirled her tongue over the swollen head, teasing him, just as he'd teased her all evening long.

"*Suck me,*" he ordered sharply, and for the first time in their marriage, he didn't give her a choice. He wrapped the pearls draping down her back around one of his fists until the strands tightened against her neck like a collar, and splayed a strong hand against the back of her head to push her mouth *down*, forcing her to take him all the way to the back of her throat.

She moaned, greedily sucking him as he guided her lips back up the length of his cock before he thrust back in again. His breathing escalated and his hips jerked as he increased the rhythm of each deep stroke as he fucked her mouth, faster, harder, wilder. With the pearls constricting against her neck and his palm controlling the bobbing of her head, she let him take what he wanted, what he needed, and she willingly gave it to him until he finally erupted with a loud, unrestrained roar of satisfaction.

She took everything Dean had to give, until he eventually let go of her head and released the pearls, then collapsed against his seat like a man who'd just had his world rocked in a major way.

She pushed back and grinned up at him. "That was *so* hot," she said, licking the taste of him from her bottom lip. "Patience and restraint is *so* over-rated."

He peered down at her through half-mast lashes and grunted, caveman like. "We'll see about that. We still have the whole night ahead of us and I'm not done with you yet."

Jillian couldn't even imagine that Dean had the energy for more, but the one thing she was beginning to realize about her husband, his stamina had returned with a vengeance. And she planned to take full advantage of it.

Pearls are a Girl's Best Friend

As soon as they arrived at home, Dean took Jill's hand and veered in the opposite direction of their bedroom, instead leading her toward his office/library. An odd choice, she thought, but didn't question his preference and silently followed.

Now that they'd taken the edge off of their desires back in that deserted parking lot, she was feeling much more relaxed. But even though the frantic need that had consumed them both had ebbed, there was an air of determination about Dean that increased her awareness of him, and how the rest of the evening would play out.

There was no telling what he had in mind, and not knowing what lay ahead for her added a thrilling element of suspense that kept her libido humming and her body teeming with sexual tension. She loved how he was gradually revealing true aspects of himself and was finally giving into those darker passions she always knew simmered beneath the surface. It was getting easier for him to take what he wanted, to be aggressive and demanding and be confident in the knowledge that she enjoyed every single thing he did to her.

In just a short time they'd already explored a few erotic fantasies and some kinky behavior that paved the way to more explicit adventures. Spanking her had been enjoyable for the both of them, and his use of force in certain situations was a huge turn on for her. And now, she had his agreement to create a private playroom for the two of them that she couldn't wait to fill with all sorts of sexy things for them to do and try.

They entered his office, and he let go of her hand, leaving her standing in the middle of the room, which smelled like rich, dark leather and the faint scent of his cologne. He didn't turn on the main overhead light, but instead switched on the desk lamp for softer lighting before returning to her.

He grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tipped her face up to meet his serious expression. "After that stunt you pulled in the car, I really ought to bend you over my knee and let you feel the sting of my leather belt across your ass."

Her pulse tripped with way too much excitement. *Oh, yes, please*, she thought, but held back her brazen comment.

"Do you think, from here on out, that you can do what you're told?"

She nodded. "Yes."

His gaze narrowed, as if he didn't fully believe her promise. Considering her show of defiance in the car on the drive home, she didn't blame him for being skeptical.

"I won't tolerate any further disobedience tonight, and there will be consequences for your insubordination, understand?"

She really was going to try and be good. "Yes."

The corner of his mouth twitched with a flicker of amusement. "Yes... what?"

Her initial confusion gave way to understanding, and she gave him what he seemed to want from her, which also established certain roles between them. "Yes, *sir*."

He skimmed his thumb along her bottom lip, dipping just inside to dampen his finger. "I like the way that sounds coming from you, so soft and breathless."

Jillian was starting to feel *very* breathless. She knew Dean was used to hearing the respectful moniker from the men who worked for him all the time, but there was no mistaking the sexual connotation of her husband insisting *she* call him "sir". The one word established him as her

master and put her into the position of submissive. In this kind of setting, she'd surrender to him any way he wished.

He released his hold on her chin. "Take off my shirt," he ordered.

Divesting him of any of his clothing was a pleasurable task she didn't hesitate to perform. First, she unbuttoned the cuffs of his sleeves, then slowly, leisurely repeated the process all the way down the front of his shirt. Once the fabric parted, she pushed the crisp material over his broad shoulders and down his arms, until the garment fluttered to the hardwood floor at his feet.

Unable to resist the urge to touch the sheer perfection that was his chiseled chest, she lifted her hands and splayed them on his pecs. The taut muscle beneath her palms flexed, but before she could skim her hands along his abdomen and explore further, he caught her wrists and stopped her descent.

"Did I say you could touch?" he asked gruffly.

She shook her head. "No... sir."

"Take off your dress," he said brusquely.

He let go of her hands and took a step back, giving her space to strip, and him enough room to watch her get naked. She pulled the shoulders down and slowly peeled away her dress. His gaze turned to molten heat as the fabric slithered down the rest of her body and pooled around her shoes, leaving her standing in front of him in just those decadent pearls draping down her back and her feet strapped into the crystal encrusted stiletto heels.

"You look like a sex kitten," he murmured and moved close again.

She stood still as he trailed his fingers down the slope of her breast and rubbed the pad of his thumb across her hardened nipple. An uncontrollable shiver rippled down her spine as those skillful fingers continued their sensual caresses along her stomach, then lower still. Holding her gaze, he delved between her thighs and stroked her nether lips, making it very clear that he could touch her whenever, and however, he wanted.

"You're so fucking beautiful, every inch of you," he said, his soft tone reflecting his appreciation as his fingers pushed a little deeper, just enough to tease her. "And right here, you're so soft and wet." He leaned in, pressing his mouth against her ear as he whispered provocatively, "I can't wait to bury myself deep inside your pussy and feel you come around my cock."

Her breathing hitched and she turned her head, dying to kiss him, but he merely skimmed his lips along her jaw, avoiding her mouth completely—proving that he was definitely in charge tonight.

"Take down your hair," he commanded.

It was extremely difficult to concentrate on the task when the hand between her thighs was doing such wicked things to her—rubbing her clit, stroking her sensitive flesh, and making her body desperate for another orgasm.

With shaking fingers, she managed to pull the clips from her hair and the silky, disheveled curls cascaded down her back and around her shoulders. She shook her head to loosen the strands, which caused her breasts to jiggle and the pearls to sway along her spine, adding to the excruciating awareness coursing through her.

His hand fell away, leaving her frustratingly aroused. "Get on your knees," he said, his voice husky and low.

Kneeling in front of him, she lowered her bottom so it rested on the legs folded beneath her, then placed her hands, palms down, on her thighs. He tunneled his fingers into her hair, gripping it tight in his fist at the nape of her neck, and tipped her head up to meet his hot, hungry gaze.

“Good girl,” he praised her, clearly pleased with her acquiescence.

Directly in front of her, his thick erection strained against the front of his slacks, and she so wanted to pleasure him like this—on her knees in a submissive position with him holding all the power and control. He seemed to consider it for a moment, then untangled his fingers from her hair and walked away toward the wet bar, his gorgeous, bare back to her as he poured himself a double shot of his favorite Scotch from a crystal decanter.

She remained where she was, growing inwardly impatient as he settled into a large cushioned chair across the room. Legs sprawled wide, he stared at her, as if contemplating what to do next—though she was certain he already knew. Cool, calm, and collected, he took a drink of his Scotch, set the glass on the table next to the chair, and finally spoke again.

“I want you to crawl over to me on your hands and knees, *slowly*,” he instructed.

Oh, my. Here was her chance to unravel Dean’s staunch composure a bit, to tempt and tantalize him. Positioning herself on her hands and knees, she started moving toward him at a leisurely pace, her legs stretching out behind her as her palms slid along the polished wooden floor. Emboldened by the tell-tale clench of his jaw as he watched her approach, she put an extra sway in her hips and gave him a sultry, seductive, I-want-to-eat-you-up smile.

The pearls around her neck fell forward, bouncing against her bare breasts and brushing across her sensitive nipples like a lover’s caress. She felt incredibly sexy and a little slutty crawling toward Dean in nothing more than pearls and fuck-me stilettos, and reveled in the raw hunger transforming his features. She skimmed her tongue across her bottom lip, delighting in the feminine power that was hers for the moment, even though she knew it wouldn’t last long.

Reaching his chair, she came to a stop and resumed her kneeling position, awaiting his next order.

“You’re quite a tease.” He took another long drink of his Scotch, his gaze hot and searing as it met hers. “Strip off the rest of my clothes.”

She did as he asked, starting with his shoes, then his socks. She rose up between his spread legs so she could reach the waistband of his trousers, and quickly unbuckled his belt, then lowered the zipper over the granite column of his erection. She pulled off his pants and boxer briefs simultaneously, and he helped the process by lifting his hips so she could easily drag them down his thighs and long legs.

A soft sigh of appreciation escaped her as she took in the sculpted body he kept in tip-top shape. Wide shoulders tapered down to a narrow waist, and his lean, muscular thighs provided a perfect frame for the jutting length of manhood between. Her fingers itched to touch his cock, but she curbed the impulse. Just barely.

Dean crooked a finger at her. “Come up here and sit on my lap, facing me.”

She stood back up and sat astride his thighs, her knees tucking against his hips. He pulled her forward a few more inches, deliberately nestling his rigid shaft against the swollen lips of her sex when she’d much rather have him buried deep inside. Hopefully, soon.

He lifted the long strand of pearls up and over her head, removing them. “Put your hands behind your back,” he murmured.

She followed his command and he reached behind her, looping and knotting the long strand around her wrists until her hands were secured tight together. The position of her arms pulled her shoulders back and thrust her breasts forward, closer to Dean’s face.

“Lift up on your knees.”

Again, she obeyed, rising up so that she was poised over his cock. She fully expected him to push inside her, but instead he pulled the last of the pearls between the crevice of her ass and

down along the soft folds of her pussy, so that the cool, smooth beads rolled against her ultra-sensitive flesh like an intimate kiss. With the rest of the length, he wrapped and twisted the strand around the base of his erect penis, looping it twice so it hugged his erection like a make-shift cock-ring. The man was so full of surprises and more innovative than MacGyver, and she was impressed with his clever use of the pearls.

“Now, I want you to sit on my cock,” he said, grasping her hips to guide her downward. “Slow and easy.”

She sank onto that thick column of flesh, straddling him completely, taking all eight inches until he was seated to the hilt and the pearls created a cache of erotic sensation between them. She loved how the strand of pearls connected them, how those lustrous beads gave them both varying degrees of pleasure. For her, the pearls massaged her clit with the slightest movement, and she rocked her hips forward, gasping as a new, provocative kind of friction added to the delicious torture.

Dean growled in response and grasped her waist to stop her lap dance, his gray eyes darkening like an oncoming storm. “Don’t move until I say you can,” he bit out roughly. “Do you understand?”

So, he was going to prolong the sensual torment. “Yes, sir.”

Satisfied that he had her cooperation, he let go of her and dipped two of his fingers into his glass of Scotch on the side table. Once they were dripping wet, he spread the liquor onto one nipple, then the other, before leaning forward and sweeping his tongue across the beaded crest in a long, slow lick that made her entire body shudder and her head fall back on her shoulders. Filling both of his hands with her breasts, he squeezed the soft flesh as he licked each nipple, swirling his tongue around her areole, then sucking her deep inside his hot, wet mouth.

She moaned, and despite his order to stay still, her back arched, pushing her breasts more fully against his lips. The position caused the pearls to tug along her bottom, to rub against her aching sex, and tighten around his cock in a delightful way that made him groan, too.

Her disobedience earned her a sharp nip of his teeth on her nipple, and shockingly, that sting of pain made her pulse deep inside, making her even more restless, incredibly aroused, and beyond desperate to *move*.

He released her breasts and once again soaked his fingers in the Scotch. Eyes latched onto hers, he blazed a wet trail down her stomach, over her mound, then delved between her spread legs. He stroked her clit, using the pearls to increase her pleasure, while making her slick with moisture and need.

“Oh, God, Dean...”

Just when she would have tipped over the edge, he stopped caressing her. Removing his hand, he lifted his damp fingers to her lips.

“Taste yourself,” he ordered huskily, and pushed two long fingers into her mouth, giving her no choice but to comply. She sucked lightly, savoring the combined flavors of the Scotch’s smoky oak undertones and her own unique essence. His pupils dilated as she continued to swirl her tongue and felate his fingers.

With a low, deep rumbling sound that reverberated in his chest, he pulled his hand away and slid his palm around the nape of her neck, bringing her mouth to his for a kiss. She expected the merging of their lips to be as wild and feverish as she felt inside, but Dean did the exact opposite. He kissed her slow and deep, the kind of joining that made her melt against him, inside and out.

Even though their bodies were intimately fused and she could feel him throbbing deep inside of her, neither one of them moved. It was an incredibly erotic sensation being filled so full, yet

denying the basic need to gyrate against him, to feel his length sliding in and out of her and driving her to the precipice of the orgasm simmering just beneath the surface.

It had been a very long time since they'd indulge in prolonged foreplay, and he'd managed to not only heighten her sexual anticipation, but tonight had forged an intimate connection between them—not just physically, but emotionally, too. Her soul felt possessed by him, her heart and body his for the taking.

In time, his hands traveled down to her hips and he began a slow rocking motion of their bodies that mimicked the escalating hunger of their kisses. She let him set the pace, let him make love to her at his leisure, knowing it was just a matter of time before the growing ecstasy and need between them became more than his body could deny.

The thrust of his tongue became more aggressive, and the grip on her waist tightened as his hips jerked upward, plowing into her harder, faster—driving so deep she gasped and groaned against his ravenous mouth. The hands secured behind her back moved restlessly, causing the pearls to tug and pull, elevating the friction around his cock and against her clit and pushing them both to the point of no return.

They climaxed simultaneously—a glorious, decadent, earth-shattering explosion unlike anything in recent memory. The force of their release ripped a raw, primitive groan from Dean, and Jillian came with a soft keening cry of pure joy. When the intensity ebbed she collapsed against his chest and buried her face against his throat, both of them gasping for breath.

“Holy shit,” Dean rasped against her cheek. “That was—”

“Phenomenal?” she supplied for him.

“I was going to say fucking amazing, but phenomenal works, too,” he said, his tone filled with humor. He reached behind her and with a few well-placed tugs on the strand of pearls, he managed to release her hands.

She groaned in gratitude and gingerly eased her arms back in front of her, and placed her palms on his chest.

“Are your shoulders and arms okay?” he asked, clearly concerned that he might have hurt her.

“They’re fine,” she assured him. Truthfully, they were a little stiff from being trussed up for so long, but it wasn’t anything she couldn’t handle.

She lifted her head from the crook of his neck and met his very sated expression. “You like restraining me, don’t you?” Between him tying her hands when he’d spanked her and again this evening with the pearls, bondage was becoming a common theme with him—one she enjoyed, as well.

“Yeah, I do,” he admitted huskily.

“Why?” She was curious to hear his explanation, to know the reasons why having her at his complete mercy excited him so much.

He absently skimmed his fingers up and down her spine in a feathery caress. “Because it forces you to relinquish complete control, to let me do whatever I please so you don’t have a choice and no desire remains hidden,” he replied honestly.

Ahhh, but she knew she *always* had a choice—along with a safe word he’d immediately heed. That was the safety net that allowed her to let go of her own inhibitions, to make herself vulnerable to him in ways that deepened the emotional bond between them.

“I like being restrained,” she told him, just in case he had any doubts.

“I know,” he said, much too confidently.

She laughed at his arrogance and shifted on his lap, feeling the smooth strand of beads roll

between their still connected bodies. "Thank you for the pearls," she said, a smile tipping up the corner of her mouth as she stared at his handsome features. "Whoever coined the phrase that diamonds are a girl's best friend clearly had no idea just how pleasurable pearls could be. I didn't realize they had so many uses."

"Oh, you have no idea," he murmured incorrigibly as he gently pushed her disheveled hair away from her face, then trailed his fingers along her jawline. "Maybe next time I'll push them deep inside of you and pull them out slowly, one by one, while going down on you and making you come."

She shivered at the intoxicating thought. "Maybe I'll let you."

He chuckled softly. "What makes you think I'd give you a choice?"

She rolled her eyes but didn't argue, instead opting to let him believe that he was the alpha male in their marriage. "I'm going to miss you next week while you're gone for work."

"I'll miss you, too," he admitted in a gruff tone before lightening the moment with a grin. "But you know what they say about absence making the heart grow fonder."

"And the sexual anticipation stronger," she added, waggling her brows lasciviously.

His gaze heated with agreement. "That means by the time I get home, you're going to be in *big* trouble."

"Oh, I do hope so," she breathed against his lips before sealing that promise with a kiss.

Watch Me

Dean walked into his hotel suite after a long day of security and surveillance at the political summit Noble & Associates had been contracted to attend. So far, the event had been straightforward and routine for him and his men, which was just how he liked things to go—without any unplanned disturbances or incidents for the high ranking officials they were hired to provide protection for.

He shrugged out of his suit jacket, then tugged at the restricting tie around his neck, loosening the strip of fabric so he could pull it off—reminded, as always, just how useful a tie could be when it came to restraining his wife and just how much she enjoyed being bound for his pleasure. A necktie was a nice, safe start to bondage, as were pearls, and now that he knew just how much being constrained turned her on, he couldn't stop imagining all the other kinky things he wanted to explore with her, and do to her.

The possibilities were endless.

In the past few weeks since Jillian had walked into his office, stripped for him, and blown his mind with her seduction tactics, his wife had become an insatiable temptress straight out of his deepest, most private fantasies—uninhibited, risqué, and open to all sorts of provocative, exciting adventures. After nineteen years of marriage, he was having the hottest, most passionate and erotic sex of his life with a woman he couldn't seem to get enough of.

Damn, he was a lucky bastard, he thought with a smile.

He knew the emotional component between them was a key element to this new sexual odyssey they were embarking upon, as was Jillian's trust that allowed her to surrender herself completely to his carnal demands. As a woman, she was strong and capable in everyday life, but as his wife, he liked that she was willing, and eagerly so, to let him take control in the bedroom.

Because of her coaxing, he could feel a piece of himself that he'd always held back gradually rising to the surface, encompassing deeper, darker needs he'd denied for much too long. It was as though she instinctively knew about those wicked desires of his, and wanted to explore all those nuances with him. Jillian's acceptance and understanding, along with her own secret fantasies she was gradually revealing, made it so much easier to embrace his more dominant nature and give them what they *both* wanted.

With each sexual encounter they role-played, they went a bit farther, testing all those boundaries that they'd never dared to push past before. Their sex life had always been pleasurable, but now it was intense and incendiary and addicting—and his wife was his drug of choice. The more he had Jillian, the more he wanted her, and being physically away from her for ten days was killing him.

He'd talked to Jillian on the phone every night since leaving for the summit, filling her in on the day's events and listening to her ideas about the new playroom her girlfriend was helping her furnish and decorate while he was gone. Tonight, he wanted more than casual conversation, and apparently, so did Jillian, because she'd sent him a text earlier that afternoon with a suggestion he hadn't been able to resist: *Skype with me tonight?* He'd replied with an unequivocal *yes*, then had spent way too much time imagining how to best take advantage of the situation.

He had a few sexy ideas in mind, and he powered up his laptop while he stripped off the rest of his clothes and pulled on a comfortable pair of gym shorts. It was past ten at night in Chicago, and the two hour difference made it eight o'clock in California, which was right around the time

they normally talked by phone.

As soon as his computer was finished booting up, he sat down in an armchair, propped his feet up on the footstool, and set the laptop on his thighs. He clicked on the Skype icon on his desktop, and as soon as the program was open and he could see that Jillian was already online, he sent a message to her to connect the call. A few seconds later, her pretty face appeared on his screen.

She was lying casually on her stomach on their bed, her laptop in front of her, a happy-to-see-you smile on her lips as his own image appeared on her monitor. “Hey, baby,” she greeted him. “How was your day?”

“Busy, but good,” he replied. “How about yours?”

“Same here. Stephanie and I found the most amazing four poster bed for our playroom,” she said, her eyes alight with excitement. “It’s hand-crafted by a local artisan who also makes pieces of erotic furniture on the side, so the bed frame has quite a few *extras* build into the design. I can’t wait for you to see it.”

He smiled, enjoying her enthusiasm. “Just make sure it has slats or posts for me to tie you to the bed,” he said wickedly.

She laughed, the sound light and teasing. “Oh, it most certainly does. And they’re strong and thick enough to keep you restrained, too,” she added with a bit of sass.

He arched a brow, realizing that she might have her own in-control-fantasy in mind. “You have to pin me down first before you can tie me up, baby girl.”

“I’m definitely up for the challenge; though I have a feeling you wouldn’t resist *that* much.”

No, it wouldn’t be a hardship to be the recipient of whatever pleasures his wife might inflict on him while he was restrained, though he didn’t want her to think he was *easy*. “You’ll have to wait and find out.”

“I bought something I want to show you,” she said, and moved off the bed to retrieve the item.

She returned a few seconds later and sat down, cross-legged, on the mattress in front of the laptop, her gorgeous hair falling haphazardly around her shoulders. He noticed she was wearing one of his buttoned up linen shirts that he wore for work, which she did occasionally when she wanted to get his motor running. She knew how much it turned him on to see her in his shirts—it was like a male, territorial mark of possession on his woman—and he wasn’t immune to its effects now. She’d deliberately left the top four or five buttons undone to give him a glimpse of something red and lacy beneath, and with her legs crossed, the hem barely reached mid-thigh, providing him with another risqué flash of matching red panties.

Holy hell. His dick responded accordingly, growing hard from the mere sneak peek.

“Isn’t it just stunning?” Jillian asked, yanking his gaze from between her legs to the item she was holding for him to see.

He hadn’t known what to expect, but the fact that she was showing him a vase totally threw him off. Sure, it was pretty enough—obviously a hand blown glass piece with deep purple and green swirls in the pattern and a wide scalloped rim, but it was a *vase*. He honestly didn’t give a shit, but Jillian looked so delighted with her purchase that he didn’t want to deflate her adorable enthusiasm.

“Nice vase,” he said, trying to inject some kind of interest into his voice. “Is that a hint for me to bring you home flowers more often?”

“No,” she said, laughing. “Technically, this *is* a vase, but I didn’t buy it for flowers. It’s to keep in our new playroom and for us to fill with all our secret, private fantasies. We can each

write them down, put them in this decorative vase, and blindly pick one when we need some inspiration and be surprised by whatever we've chosen. What do you think of that?"

"I love the idea," he said, truly intrigued by the concept. "But just for the record, you're all the inspiration I need."

She grinned flirtatiously. "Ahhh, that kind of flattery will get you everywhere, Mr. Noble."

He chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind, Mrs. Noble."

She reached behind her and set the vase on the nightstand, then glanced back at the webcam, her features taking on a soft, sultry expression. "So, tell me, Mr. Noble. What fantasy do I inspire for you?"

Where did he begin? He'd harbored quite a few erotic ideas when it came to his wife, most of them illicit and shocking, but decided to save those for their new "fantasy vase", and opted for something more relatable, but equally hot.

"Do you remember when we went to dinner and you asked if it bothered me that other men were staring at your braless breasts?"

She nodded. "Yes, and you said that you liked knowing that all those other men were lusting over what was *yours*, while you were the lucky bastard who gets to take me home and do me."

"I believe I said *fuck* you," he corrected, his tone laced with amusement. "But yeah, that's all part of a fantasy I've had about you. I've thought about taking you to a night club wearing something really sexy and watching you dance and flirt with other guys and turning them on, all the while knowing I'd ultimately be the one to bury myself deep inside your sweet cunt."

Her lips parted in surprise—at his explicit words or the suggestion, he wasn't sure.

"You wouldn't get jealous watching me dancing or flirting with another man?"

The intrigue in her voice assured Dean that she wasn't opposed to the idea, and that notion made him hotter than hades. "Hell yeah, I'd get jealous," he said gruffly. "And possessive, and I'd have to stake my claim in a way that would make it very clear exactly who you belong to."

Her chest rose and fell with a deep breath, drawing his gaze to the opening in the shirt she wore and the red lace teasing him like a red cape to a bull. "I like that fantasy," she admitted, her voice soft and aroused. "I'd do that for you."

He was beginning to appreciate that there was probably very little his new, adventurous wife wouldn't try with him, and that was a very heady, powerful realization. "Your turn to share a deep, dark fantasy," he said shifting the tables on her—because he was dying to know what thoughts and images got her off.

She bit her bottom lip, and he watched a delightful pink flush tint her complexion. Her hesitation made him all the more curious. "Come on, sweetheart," he cajoled in a lazy drawl. "Spill your secrets."

"I've always had a stranger/captive fantasy," she revealed, her voice husky as she stared into the webcam. "Like an intruder who breaks into the house, ties me up, then coerces me to surrender to whatever he wants or desires."

Jesus. Dean hadn't seen that one coming. His blood heated in his veins as his mind conjured up those erotic images, of being the stranger who stalked her, and eventually captured her, then bent her to his will for his pleasure. The scene was all about danger, a bit of roughness, and *consensual* force, but her fantasy played right into those dominant urges of his and appealed to him just as much.

She sighed and her legs shifted restlessly beneath her, causing the hem of his shirt to slip a bit higher on her thighs. "All this talk about fantasies is getting me hot and bothered," she said, her tone taking on a seductive quality. "I wish I was there with you right now."

“What would you do if you were?” he asked, giving her the opportunity to take the direction of this conversation any way she wished.

“Anything you asked,” she whispered.

She tempted him beyond reason, making him wish he could reach through the laptop monitor and pull her through the portal separating them so she was really there with him. Since that was impossible, he opted for the next best thing. Skype sex.

“You can do something for me now,” he said.

She tipped her head, blinking oh-so-innocently. “What’s that?”

“Pleasure yourself while I watch.”

“How about we make it mutual?” she suggested, an irresistible smile curving her lips. “I want to watch you, too.”

He groaned, not sure he’d last long once he started stroking himself. “Okay,” he agreed, then added a small qualifier. “But let me watch you just for a little bit first, before I join in. And take off the shirt so I can finally see what you’re wearing beneath.”

She came up onto her knees, and careful to stay in full view of the webcam, she started slowly unbuttoning the shirt, until the two sides finally separated. She pushed them apart, then shrugged her shoulders, letting the material slide down her arms to reveal a red bra and matching panties.

A whole lot of blood rushed south, tightening his groin with a nearly painful throb. Both undergarments were made of sheer, wispy lace, more to tease than to cover any essentials. Both pieces were unlined, enabling him to see her skin beneath, along with the dusky rose hue of her aureoles, the taut pink nipples, and her bare mound. Her thighs were pressed together, way too prim and proper for this scenario.

“Spread your knees for me, baby,” he said, his voice already reflecting a deep rasp of hunger. “Pretend I’m not even here and touch yourself in all the ways that feel good.”

She widened her sitting position, giving him a clear view all the way up the vee of her legs, to that scrap of scarlet lace that was already damp with her own desire. Staring straight into the webcam, as if she were making direct contact with his own gaze, she slipped the straps of her bra off her shoulders and let them fall down her arms, until they caught at her elbows.

With one hand, she pushed one of the lace cups aside, exposing a full, gorgeous breast. She caressed the supple flesh in her palm, circled her finger around the crest, then pinched her nipple between her fingers. Her soft gasp was nearly his undoing, until she trailed her other hand down her stomach then into the front panel of her panties and moaned, long and low, as she touched herself intimately, losing herself in her own sensual gratification.

His dick felt like granite and strained against the fabric of his gym shorts, demanding the grip of his fist, which he could no longer deny. Setting his laptop on the footstool in front of his chair, he made sure he still had a clear view of Jillian on the monitor. He quickly removed his shorts, then leaned back and situated himself so she could see all of him, too, on her end. The laptop’s camera provided her with a sweeping look of his naked body, from his thighs to the top of his head, and everything in between.

He took his cock in hand, his thumb skimming over the pre-cum seeping from the swollen head to spread the lubricant down the hot, hard length of his erection. Through lashes that had fallen half-mast, Jillian kept her gaze on her own monitor, her breathing turning to a pant as she watched the up and down motion of his fist as he jacked off to her very provocative show.

Beneath the lace, she continued to stroke herself while her other hand squeezed her breasts and her fingers plucked her nipples, tugging on the pebbled flesh in a way that made him think

that she just might enjoy the pinch of nipple clamps. The thought made the muscles in his stomach clench and caused his cock to jerk in his tight grip.

“*Dean,*” she whispered raggedly as her back arched and her head fell back, her intimate touch growing more frenetic as she concentrated fully on the sensations moving through her body.

He felt like a voyeur watching his own personal porn flick starring his sexy wife, and the incredible vision of Jillian lost in her own pleasure was so fucking hot and erotic he knew he wasn’t going to last much longer without erupting like a freakin’ volcano. His balls drew up tight and his thighs tensed, bracing for impact and the searing release simmering just beneath the surface.

“*Come,* Jillian,” he ordered in a low growl.

She whimpered her need, her hips gyrating faster against her fingers, then her entire body shuddered as her orgasm rocked through her. In the throes of ecstasy, she cried out, unashamed and uninhibited, and it was an incredible sight to behold.

Oh, fuck, yeah. He pumped his cock with firm, rapid strokes, and a deep groan ripped from his chest as he gave himself over to his own robust climax. The hot splash of his release jetted onto his stomach as he came so hard he heard ringing in his ears and his heart felt as though it was going to burst from his chest.

He sagged back against the chair, feeling completely and totally wasted. With effort, he reached for the box of tissues on the table next to his chair and cleaned himself up, then put his gym shorts back on while Jillian made herself more comfortable on their bed.

When he was done and his laptop was settled back on his thighs, he glanced at the monitor to see that she’d propped herself against the headboard with a few pillows plumped behind her, and the comforter was now pulled up to her waist. She was still wearing the red lace bra, but the cups were now covering her breasts, offering her a modicum of modesty.

She adjusted the angle of her webcam so that it was more focused on her face, which was flushed pink and glowing from her recent orgasm. “That was pretty fantastic,” she said on a soft sigh of satisfaction. “We definitely need to do that more often when you’re on one of your trips.”

He couldn’t agree more. “Yeah, and now I know *exactly* what you do when I’m not there.”

A sinful gleam shimmered in her eyes. “You don’t know *everything*. Do you remember that vibrator we bought a few years ago to play around with?” she asked suggestively.

He held up a hand to stop her and groaned. “Do *not* torture me with the details or I’ll never be able to sleep tonight.”

She laughed softly. “Don’t worry, it’s a poor substitute for you.”

He grinned. “That’s good to know.”

Dean knew most men would feel threatened knowing that their wives used a vibrating toy without them, but he was confident enough in his masculinity, and certainly open minded enough, to realize that a vibrator came in handy for a woman when a guy wasn’t around to provide the real deal.

“I can’t wait for you to get home,” she said wistfully. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you, too.” He wanted to sleep in his own bed at night, curled up against Jillian’s soft, warm body. “I’ll be home soon, baby girl,” he said affectionately.

A few more days, and then he’d be able to fulfill the chase and capture fantasy she’d shared.

The Taking

A diary entry from Jillian Noble:

After being gone for nearly ten days on a business trip, Dean is coming home today and I can't wait to see him. I've missed him and our time together, though that night we turned up the heat on Skype was definitely hot, thrilling, and fun. I love being uninhibited with Dean, and I certainly enjoyed watching the effect I had on him, too.

The new playroom is almost done. Just a few more final touches and we'll be able to fulfill all sorts of sinful fantasies and indulge in an assortment of erotic kinks. I'm getting excited just thinking about all the possibilities.

Hide and Seek

I'm on my way home. I want the house dark. Hide from me, but when I find you, no matter how hard you fight or resist me, I'm going to fuck you. Hard. Safe word: Mercy.

Jillian sucked in a quick breath as she finished reading Dean's text, her entire body vibrating to life at the realization that her husband was about to take the stranger/captive fantasy she'd divulged to him just a few nights ago and make it a reality. Knowing she only had a matter of minutes to turn off all the lights and make herself scarce before he arrived, she hurried through the house and plunged it into complete pitch black.

Just as she switched off the final lamp in her small reading nook she heard the garage door leading into the house open then close again with a soft click. Her heart leapt into her throat and she froze, waiting for her pupils to adjust to the sudden darkness so she could move without bumping into anything and alerting *the intruder* of her location.

"Honey, I'm home," he murmured in a low, taunting tone of voice that made her shiver.

Remaining still and quiet, she listened to the light tapping of his steps against the hardwood floor, thankfully heading in the opposite direction. Then the sound ceased and she was pretty sure he'd taken off his shoes to give him a better advantage. It also made it more difficult for her to determine where he was, too, which increased the anticipation building inside her.

Feeling much too vulnerable in the tiny room with nowhere to hide, she moved to the doorway and glanced down the long hallway leading to the main rooms. From what she could see the corridor was clear, and on bare feet she silently made her way to the living room. The entire house was dark, shadowy, and eerily quiet, giving it an ominous feel that enhanced the fantasy of a stalker intent on playing a provocative game of cat and mouse with her.

She reached the living room and was debating whether to duck behind the couch or head to the master bedroom on the opposite end of the house when a large silhouette stepped into her view. Despite knowing this was all a pretense, her mind registered *stranger*, and with a shriek of panic she whirled around to bolt away.

He lunged after her, and she was no match for his speed and agility. Jillian's breath squeezed out of her lungs as he banded his strong arms around her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides and lifting her feet off the floor so she was suspended with no way to escape. A crazy combination of fear and excitement spiked through her and she thrashed her legs, landing a swift kick to his shin. He grunted upon impact, and with a deep-throated growl he set her back on the ground, spun her around, and pushed her up against the nearest wall.

She continued her struggle to escape, but he was so damn strong and so well trained—in martial arts and as an ex-Navy SEAL—that her efforts were futile at best. He grasped both of her hands and pulled them behind her back so they were trapped against the wall and the small of her spine, then he wedged a hard, muscular thigh between hers so she couldn't move her legs. His hips and chest pinned the rest of her body, rendering her completely immobile as he brought his shadowed face so close to hers that she could see the clench of his jaw and the heat and lust glittering in his eyes.

This was *her* fantasy, but he was just as turned on by the scenario. Clearly, he was enjoying the control and power inherent in the situation, along with her coerced obedience, but she wasn't about to surrender so easily, even as she remembered his explicit text: *No matter how hard you fight or resist me, I'm going to fuck you. Hard.*

The inevitable made her pulse race, and she jerked against him, trying to twist her way out of his hold, but his superior physical strength kept her firmly in place. She caught a glimpse of a cocky smile as he secured both of her wrists in one of his big hands, then lifted his other hand up to her face. He framed her chin and jaw with his fingers, forcing her head back against the wall as his mouth came down hard on hers.

The kiss was unapologetically rough, brutally possessive, and it rocked her to the core and set her on fire. His firm lips pushed hers apart and his tongue thrust inside, delving deep and claiming her mouth in a way that declared, *you are mine*. She could taste his hunger, could feel his rising need, even as he maintained complete control of her and the forced seduction aspect of her fantasy.

The hand imprisoning her jaw slowly slid down the column of her neck in an unyielding caress before his fingers encircled her throat, exerting just enough pressure to restrict her breathing for a few seconds and make her imagination run wild. Before full blown panic could take hold, he loosened his grip and continued skimming his palm along her heaving chest until he reached the first button on her blouse.

With an animalistic sounding growl, he ended the kiss and lifted his head, his ominous expression sending a tremor through her and placing him right back into the role of stranger. Gripping one side of her blouse, he yanked hard—once, twice, three times—savagely ripping open her shirt. She gasped in shock, her eyes widening as tearing fabric rent the air and she heard the distinct *ping* of her buttons skittering across the hardwood floor.

With her hands still locked behind her back and his lower body restraining hers, she was helpless against his assault, and the smug look on his face told her he knew he had the upper hand, too. He roughly pulled down one side of her bra, exposing a breast, and didn't hesitate to lower his head and take the plump flesh between his parted lips. His tongue flicked across the stiffening crest, his mouth sucked *hard*, and then his teeth bit down on her burgeoning nipple.

White heat shot through her like an electrical charge, both exhilarating and frightening in its intensity, and she cried out, riding that sharp edge between true pain and exquisite pleasure. Instinctively, she bucked her hips against Dean's in an attempt to somehow escape the sweet, agonizing torment he was inflicting, but his big, muscular body didn't so much as budge. There was no breaking away until he allowed her to.

While his mouth, tongue, and teeth continued to tease her nipple, he reached between their bodies and unsnapped her shorts, then unzipped them a few inches until he had just enough room to push his way inside her panties and shove his hand down between her spread legs. He gave her only seconds to process his touch before he thrust two long fingers deep inside her, stealing her next breath right along with her sense of time or place as he fucked her with those same fingers, mercilessly deep and shockingly rough.

Her inner muscles contracted shamelessly around the thick, ruthless invasion. His tongue flicked across her stiff nipple as he pressed his thumb against her throbbing clit, rubbing and circling, making her forget that she was supposed to put up at least a token fight. Her head fell back against the wall, and she whimpered as his mouth released her breast.

His warm, damp lips skimmed a path up to her neck, the light stubble on his jaw abrading her skin in the most delicious way. "You're so fucking wet," he growled against her ear. "You like this, don't you? Being trapped, your hands restrained, forced to endure a stranger's touch."

Oh, yes, she did. It was a heady fantasy come to life. "No," she said with a shake of her head while trying to inject a believable amount of distress into her voice.

"Liar. Your mouth says one thing, but your soft, wet cunt says something altogether

different.” He pumped his fingers into her and dragged them back out slowly, and even *she* could feel her body’s reluctance to let him go. “You want this.”

Yes, yes, yes. “No,” she rasped.

He lifted his head and stared at her face, his gaze dark and piercing. His features were shadowed, making it much too easy for her to believe that he truly was an intruder intent on making her his captive. “I’ve been watching you, following you for weeks, thinking how good it’s going to feel when I bury my cock deep inside your tight pussy,” he murmured huskily, effectively creating a scenario of her being stalked by him. “Now that I have you, I’m going to spread you wide and take you hard, and you’re going to accept everything I have to give. It’ll go much easier for you if I have your cooperation, but either way, I *will* be fucking you.”

His erotic promise intensified the fantasy, made her pulse trip in anticipation. “I’ll be good,” she pleaded softly. “Please . . . just release me.”

He gradually and oh-so-excruciatingly slowly removed his fingers from her body, and she had to bite back a whimper at the loss of his touch. He eased away from her, a wicked smile curving the corners of his mouth. “Get on your knees and suck my cock,” he demanded brusquely.

Clearly, he expected her to drop to her knees and obey, but what was the fun in being docile? Taking advantage of the space between them, she shoved hard at his chest, catching him off guard so that he stepped back to catch his balance, giving her the few precious seconds she needed to flee. She bolted sideways and came up short as he grabbed a handful of her blouse, jerking her to a stop. Trepidation took hold, and thinking fast she straightened her arms so that her top slid completely off, leaving him holding the torn fabric as she dashed toward the opposite end of the house in just her bra and unsnapped shorts.

She didn’t look behind her as she darted into the last available room—his office—and headed toward his large, sturdy, mahogany desk outlined in the dim room. Ducking into the cubby beneath the desk, she pulled his leather chair back into place to conceal her hiding spot. Wrapping her arms around her up-drawn knees, she inhaled slowly, trying to calm her erratic breathing while remaining utterly still and quiet.

Long minutes passed and the dangerous thrill of being caught escalated as she strained to hear movement in the room, but the man was stealthy, and it wasn’t until he rounded the desk and she saw the shadow of his legs and bare feet that she knew it was only a matter of seconds before he discovered where she’d hidden.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he cajoled in a soft menacing tone that sent all sorts of wild shivers up her spine. The chair rolled away from the desk and he crouched down, his gray eyes glittering with satisfaction when he found her huddled beneath. “*Gotcha*,” he murmured, a wolfish, I’m-going-to-eat-you-up smile curving his lips.

Feeling trapped, her heart seized in her chest then started beating at a galloping pace. A mix of panic and adrenaline spiked through her, and she scrambled to her hands and knees, crawling as quickly as she could out of the cubbyhole to get away. She didn’t make it very far before a large hand clamped around her ankle and pulled hard, flattening her body to the decorative rug. An automatic scream tore from her, and even though her mind knew it was Dean who’d grabbed her, the fantasy was potent enough that the implied danger made her frantic to escape him.

Like a barbaric caveman, he unceremoniously dragged her around to the front of the desk on her stomach, while she desperately reached out to grab hold of something, *anything*, to bring him to a halt so she’d have a better chance to break free. She latched onto the sturdy leg of the desk and when he realized what she’d done, that he couldn’t pull her any farther, he released her leg.

Her reprieve lasted only seconds before he flipped her onto her back and straddled her waist, pinning her to the floor with the solid strength of his thighs.

Panting for breath, she bucked her hips against him and tried to twist and turn, but he merely smirked at her efforts to dislodge him. Frantically, she pushed at his shoulders, and he caught her flailing hands and secured both of her wrists in one of his hands with his long fingers, leaving his other free to reach into the front pocket of his pants and withdraw a long, thin, plastic zip tie.

He was going to tie her up!

Obviously, he'd planned for this, had known all along that he'd restrain her before fucking her. He stretched her arms high over her head and above the thick wooden leg of the desk then secured the plastic tie around both of her wrists so that there was absolutely no chance left for her to escape. Jerking off her shorts, he tossed them aside and sat back on her thighs so she could no longer kick her legs, either. With her flat on her back, her body in a prone position, she was his prisoner, his captive, and she was completely and utterly helpless to whatever he wanted to do to her.

"You're a little hell-cat, but now I've got you *exactly* where I want you," he murmured as he traced a finger from the lace cups of her bra, down the center of her bare stomach, to the elastic edge of her panties.

Excitement and apprehension warred within her while raw tension radiated from him. Moonlight shone through the window behind them, illuminating his gorgeous features and the intense and powerful look in his eyes. Straddling her body and looming above her, he looked so formidable and intimidating and oddly enough it was the scent of his cologne that reassured her, made her feel safe in a potentially terrifying situation . . . until she noticed he'd pulled something else from his pocket that added another level of danger to the fantasy—a tactical and very lethal military knife he kept in his car for emergencies.

With a flick of his thumb, and a soft clicking sound, a frighteningly wicked-sharp blade appeared, glinting in his hand. Shock and hysteria collided inside her, paralyzing her body and vocal chords and making her feel way too vulnerable and defenseless. He didn't move, didn't say a word as he gazed down at her . . . and after a moment she realized that he was waiting for some kind of cue from her before proceeding.

Instinctively, her safe word leapt into her throat, but she swallowed it back, firmly reminding herself that this was Dean, her *husband*, and ultimately she trusted him. This wasn't about pain, but pleasure . . . and she had to admit that fear and desire were a potent mix.

She exhaled the breath she'd been holding, her body's acquiescence all the consent he needed to know he had permission to continue.

"Do *not* move," he commanded gruffly as he slowly, carefully lowered that wicked dagger toward her chest.

He flattened the cold steel blade against her sternum and slid it upward, slipping it between her breasts and beneath the front stitching of her bra. Jillian's pulse quickened and she bit her bottom lip, remaining completely motionless as he'd ordered. With one smooth, skillful movement, he sliced away the gusset as easily as if the closure were made from mere threads.

The cups of her bra fell to her sides, exposing her full breasts to the cool air and his heated, hungry gaze. As if mesmerized by the sight, he dragged the blunt side of the knife across her tight nipple, the scraping sensation more erotic than she ever would have believed. Chill bumps rose on her skin, until every part of her tingled with awareness. She moaned softly as he repeated the process on her other stiffened crest before skimming the blunt edge of the knife down her stomach, then to her hip, where he sliced away the flimsy fabric of her panties. He tugged hard

on the lace material, tearing it the rest of the way off her body.

“Oh, fuck, *yeah*,” he said appreciatively, his voice low and gravelly as he one-handedly closed the knife and set it on the floor a safe distance away. With his knees bracketing her thighs to keep them together, his fingers returned, boldly stroking across her belly before he flattened his palm against her mound and pushed his thumb between the slick folds of her sex, pressing and rubbing against her aching clit. He stroked and teased her, making her writhe and arch toward his touch as he drove her straight toward an explosive orgasm . . . then stopped.

He pulled his hand away, and when she opened her eyes and looked up at him, he smirked at her.

“You’re making this way too easy for me,” he said, schooling his expression into something darker and more ruthless as he shoved her legs apart and knelt in between. He removed his shirt, and his hands went to the waistband of his pants as he unbuckled his belt, then lowered the zipper over the massive bulge straining to be released. “*Fight me*, baby girl,” he taunted her, once again creating that illusion of danger and distress. “Make me work for it.”

He was right. She was being way too passive when this fantasy was all about *resisting* him. With her legs now temporarily freed, she didn’t hesitate to plant her foot against his bare chest, and with a swift shove she propelled him backwards. The move was so quick and unexpected that he landed on his ass, but he recovered immediately—and it wasn’t as though she could go very far with her hands all trussed up around the leg of the desk.

With a spine-tingling growl he lunged back at her kicking legs, his hands clamping around her calves then gripping her knees. The play of power between them began in earnest as he attempted to spread her legs again, and she did everything she could to dislodge him. He was back to being a rough, savage stranger hell bent on dominating her, and it didn’t take long before he was wedged tight between her thighs again, his hips pinning hers to the floor, subduing her body and her struggles.

She was panting from her efforts, her chest rising and falling rapidly as he reached between them, his knuckles grazing across her sex as he freed his erection from his briefs and positioned the head of his cock against her core, where she was so incredibly wet and welcoming.

In the next instant he was rooted eight inches inside her, her shocked gasp and his harsh groan mingling as he moved completely over her, lodging his shaft deeper still. She squirmed beneath the heavy weight of his body and he slid his hands between her back and the carpeted floor, skimming his palms upward until his fingers curved around her shoulders and he had the leverage he needed to hold her in place so he could fuck her *hard*.

His stormy gray eyes bore into hers as he plunged into her tight heat, again and again, his hips pistoning in quick bursts, his thick, rigid cock driving deep with an untamed force that was both raw and primitive. His jaw clenched and his nostril’s flared, the intensity of his expression so erotically beautiful as he rode her in a relentless, forceful rhythm that left her breathless and absolutely helpless to do anything but be a vessel to his lust.

She’d unleashed a beast, and this fantasy allowed the man he always tried to keep under control to have free rein with his own dark desires and needs. This fiercely aggressive side to her husband was both frightening and exciting, but she’d wanted this, had *asked* for it, and there was no stopping the rush of pure ecstasy he was hurtling them both towards.

Closing her eyes, she wrapped her legs tight around his waist, submitting to his dominance. Reveling in the full force of his passion, she surrendered to the violent possession of her heart and soul that made her completely and utterly *his*. The wildness of his thrusts escalated as he ground his pubic bone against her clit, adding just the right amount of pressure and friction to

send her tumbling over the edge and into a full-bodied orgasm that ripped a hoarse scream from her throat.

She spasmed around his shaft, her inner muscles milking him, and he buried his face against her neck and groaned her name as he came, too. He slammed into her, the searing flood of his release filling her as he climaxed.

Everything about their joining was tumultuous, explosive, and elemental on so many levels. It was physical and emotional bliss in its most exposed state of intimacy.

Lovely, pleasurable aftershocks twitched through her, and she felt his heavy breathing against her neck, stirring her hair. She tried to move her arms to touch him, but the uncomfortable pinch of the plastic tie he'd used stopped her short and made her wince, reminding her that she was still anchored to the leg of the desk.

"Dean . . . I need you to release my hands," she said.

"Oh, shit," he muttered, and immediately lifted off her and reached for the pocket knife he'd put aside. He sliced through the bindings, grabbed her hands, and gently rubbed at the red marks the stiff plastic had left on her wrists. "Jesus, did I hurt you in any way?" he asked, a frantic edge to his voice as he saw the faint welts on her skin. "Dammit, Jill, that's what the safe word is for!"

Clearly, he was worried he'd gone too far in fulfilling her fantasy, that he'd crossed those imaginary boundaries in his own mind that he was so careful not to surpass with her. "I would have used the safe word if I'd needed to, but I didn't," she assured him.

He compressed his lips together, but she saw the tenderness in his gaze. To see his concern, to know how much he cared about her well-being in the aftermath of such a barbaric mating, she fell deeper in love with him in that moment. Despite what had just happened physically, the intimacy, the trust and connection—it was all there, stronger than ever. And that's what mattered the most to her.

"You didn't hurt me in a bad way. I'm fine. Really." The tension gradually eased from his body, and she smiled as he helped her to sit up straight. "But you did ruin one of my favorite bras," she teased lightly.

"You can buy a dozen more," he said unapologetically.

He stood up, and taking her hand in his, he pulled her up onto her feet, too. She swayed slightly from the sudden rush of blood to her head, and he swept her up in his arms and carried her out of the office and down the darkened hall toward their bedroom.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and sighed at his gallant gesture, unable to remember the last time he'd carried her like this—as if she was the most precious thing in the world to him. She cuddled into his chest, absorbing the warmth of his body and inhaling the decadent scent of clean sweat and down-and-dirty sex that clung to his skin.

"I can walk, you know." It was a weak protest, because she loved how safe and secure she felt in his embrace and didn't *really* want him to put her down.

"Really?" He raised a seductive, incredulous brow. "If you can still walk after that, then I didn't fuck you nearly hard enough."

She shivered, not from the cool air on her naked body, but from the veiled and sexy threat in her husband's tone. "Trust me, I'm plenty tender and sore, in the best way possible." The muscles in her thighs ached from his rough and uncivilized thrusts, and she was sensitive in delicate places.

Once he reached their room, he finally set her back on her feet by the side of the bed. Turning the nightstand lamp on its lowest setting, he pulled back the covers and lightly smacked her on the ass. "Get into bed," he ordered.

She crawled up onto the mattress and reclined on her side, watching as Dean quickly stripped off the rest of his clothes. He was so gorgeous, every naked inch of him, and she could stare at him for hours admiring all those masculine lines and contours that made him so virile and impressively male.

He slid onto the bed beside her and pushed her onto her back, half draping his body across hers so that his chest pressed against her breasts and one of his muscular thighs nestled between her legs. He absently threaded his fingers through her hair, spreading the silky strands on the pillow beneath her head, his inquisitive gray eyes searching hers.

“Did it excite you, being chased through the house, knowing I was going to eventually catch you and have my way with you?”

She nodded, her stomach tumbling as she remembered all the conflicting feelings she’d experienced. “It was thrilling and frightening, because the house was so dark and you were so . . . aggressive. And seeing you holding that knife . . . that was incredibly intense,” she admitted softly.

“But you didn’t use the safe word.” His tone was curious as he skimmed a finger down to her breasts and drew lazy, sensual patterns around her hardening nipple.

“Never had a reason to use it,” she replied honestly, enjoying the slow hum of desire Dean was once again igniting deep inside her. “I trusted you and knew you’d never hurt me. That’s what made the encounter so hot and erotic.”

His eyes glowed with masculine satisfaction. “You liked being captured and forced to submit to a stranger.” It wasn’t a question but rather a statement of fact.

“Only because I knew it was *you*. That made all the difference.” She reached up and pushed away a thick lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead. “You far exceeded my expectations in fulfilling my captive fantasy, and now I can scratch that scenario off my sexual bucket list.”

“Me, too.” He grinned.

She blinked up at him in surprise. “That was a fantasy of yours, too?”

“Yeah, I just didn’t know it until we were in the middle of role-playing,” he said, giving her nipple a gentle tug she felt all the way down between her thighs. “It gave me quite a rush chasing you in the dark, knowing that once I found you I was going to have my way with you.”

His confession fed into that dominant streak he was beginning to whole-heartedly embrace. He liked being the one in control sexually, and she was okay with that—though the idea of being in charge every once in a while did appeal to her, too. “I think I need to return the favor.”

Amusement etched his features. “You’re going to stalk me, tie me up, and force yourself on me?”

She laughed and shook her head. “No, when you least expect it, I’m going to fulfill *your* fantasy.”

He cocked his head, his eyes brightening as he obviously recalled their Skype conversation a few nights ago. “The one where I take you to a night club and watch you flirt with other men, all the while knowing *I’m* going to be the one to take you home and fuck you?”

“Yep, that fantasy.” She smiled, feeling his shaft hardening against her thigh as he thought about how fun and sexy that scenario would be. “You know, I have to admit that I expected your first night back from your business trip to end much differently. Not that I’m complaining about our surprising, and very satisfying, reunion.”

He propped his head in his hand, staring down at her, his other hand still caressing her breast. “What did *you* have in mind?”

“The new playroom,” she said, unable to prevent the genuine excitement infusing her voice.

“Everything was finished today.”

“Really?” He looked equally enthusiastic.

She nodded. “Yes. And it’s pretty amazing, if I say so myself. I have big plans for you in that playroom, Mr. Noble, but now you’re going to have to wait until tomorrow.”

His smile immediately turned into a frown, and he swore beneath his breath. “I need to be at the office for most of the day.”

Disappointment curled through her and she actually pouted—something she rarely indulged in. “It’s a Saturday, and you’ve already been gone for ten days.” She hated to complain, but she’d thought they’d have the weekend together before he returned to work on Monday.

“I know.” He winced, appearing honestly contrite. “Trust me, there’s nothing I’d like better than to spend the day with you, especially in this bed or the new playroom, but Mac and I have had this intense training session for our guys scheduled for months.”

She sighed. “I understand.” And truly, she did. Keeping the men who worked for his security firm in sharp mental and physical shape was a priority for Dean and Mac.

“Tomorrow night, I’m all yours,” he promised as he strummed the tips of his fingers along her stomach in a teasing caress and dipped one into her navel, circling lazily.

She’d thought he’d exhausted her physically, but considering the way her body tingled anew, his touch was like carnal magic, effortlessly arousing her all over again.

“I can take you to dinner—”

“I don’t want to go out,” she said, cutting him off. “I’ll make dinner here and make sure you’re well fed, because you’re going to need a lot of stamina for what I have in mind.”

He smirked, a cocky smile that was loaded with that bad boy charm she’d fallen for back in high school. “Stamina doesn’t seem to be an issue for me lately. Just being near you makes me hard as granite.” He moved his hips, rubbing his impressive erection against her thigh to prove his point. “It doesn’t matter that I just fucked you twenty minutes ago. It’s like I can’t get enough of you.”

Her heart raced, that she still had the ability to make her husband of nineteen years crazy with lust and need. All for her. “I like that.”

“I think you’ll like this even more.” He rolled on top of her, settled his hips between her spread thighs and pushed inside of her soft, welcoming body until he was buried to the hilt.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and moaned as he filled her full, then gradually adopted a slow, sensual, in and out rhythm that made everything within her vibrate with renewed desire. “Oh, yes,” she said on a delighted sigh. “This is nice. Very nice.”

“It’s fucking perfect,” he agreed, and rubbed his nose alongside hers, the gesture so incredibly sweet and intimate. “God, I missed you,” he breathed against her lips, then sealed his mouth over hers for a deep, lush kiss that matched the lazy undulation of his thrusting hips.

While the unrestrained way he’d taken her earlier had been wildly exciting, making love with Dean was absolutely beautiful and sublime. The blissful way his body worshipped hers and the slow, erotic tangle of tongues fed their hunger for one another, and kindled the growing heat between them. There was no mad rush to orgasm, just a drawn out languorous pleasure that was wonderfully relaxing and breath-takingly glorious—and their mutual climax, when it finally sent them both over the edge, was all the more stunning for it.

Afterward, Dean rolled to his back, pulled her against his side, and covered them both with the blanket. Resting her head on his chest so she could listen to the steady beat of his heart, she cuddled into the warmth of his body and released a content sigh. Between the amazing sex and multiple orgasms, Jillian allowed herself to fall into a deep sleep, knowing that she was safe and

secure now that her husband was back home where he belonged.

The Playroom

Dean leaned back in his leather chair in his office at home and took a deep swallow of Scotch, trying like hell to be patient while he waited for Jillian to finish cleaning up the kitchen after the dinner she'd made. Time seemed to drag by, or maybe he was just anxious to move on to the next phase of their evening and therefore every minute seemed like an eternity.

For a man who prided himself on his restraint and control, he had to admit he was curious as hell about the playroom his newly adventurous wife had put together for the two of them to enjoy. Just imagining what she intended to do to him tonight, and what those "big plans" she'd promised entailed, had him intrigued and already half hard with anticipation.

He smiled to himself as he swirled the amber liquid in the cut crystal glass. He loved the changes in Jillian, and her newfound confidence and sensuality, along with her openness to try all sorts of exciting and kinky things, definitely blew him away. Over the past few weeks they'd grown closer, both emotionally and physically, and while he'd always desired Jillian, his need for her was now like a living, breathing thing . . . consuming his idle thoughts and bringing out a possessive side to him that she seemed to like, a lot. Last night's stranger/captive fantasy had confirmed as much, and fulfilling that scenario for her had been hot as hell for him, as well.

"Are you ready to see the playroom?"

Dean had been so lost in his thoughts he hadn't heard Jillian step into the office, and that was saying something considering how alert he normally was. She stood just inside the door, wearing a lavender summer dress with a row of pearl buttons down the front, and no shoes on her bare feet. Her long hair was pulled into a ponytail, her make-up was minimal, and even at thirty-seven she looked as young and fresh-faced as the sweet, innocent girl she'd been when he'd dated her in high school.

She'd stolen his heart way back then, and he could easily say she *still* owned him, body and soul. Even after nineteen years of marriage.

He finished the last of his Scotch, set the empty glass on his desk, then stood up and walked toward Jillian. "I've been ready since the moment I got home."

A sultry smile, filled with all sorts of erotic promises, curved her full lips. "Anticipation is a very powerful thing."

The low purr of her voice was like a stroke straight to his dick, tenting the front of his jeans. When he reached her, she splayed a hand to his chest and pushed him back a few steps, until he was pressed against the wall—quickly establishing who was going to be in control tonight. She smoothed her palm up around to the back of his neck, then pulled his head down to hers until their lips meshed and the silky heat of her tongue slipped inside his mouth to tangle with his.

He let her set the pace of the kiss, a slow, deep seduction that was better and more decadent than any after-dinner-dessert he'd ever tasted. Settling his hands at her hips, he pulled her in close, aligning their bodies in all the right places and pressing the thick length of his erection against the notch between her thighs.

She exhaled a soft, dreamy "mmmm," and ended the too brief kiss. She looked up into his eyes, the irises dark with desire. "I've been thinking about you all day long, and all the things I'm going to do with you in the playroom," she whispered as she grabbed one of his hands and slipped it beneath the hem of her dress, guiding his flattened palm up her thigh while watching his expression. "It's been so hard resisting the urge not to touch myself and ease the throbbing

ache, because I'm saving it all for you."

When they reached the barrier of her panties, she pushed his fingers beneath the elastic edge, and *oh, fuck*, she was absolutely drenched, her cunt so soft and silky it made his entire body pound with the need to give her the pleasure she'd denied herself all day long.

She moved her lips up to his ear, her warm breath caressing his throat on the way. "I can't wait to feel your tongue right here," she said, pressing two of his fingers against her clit before sliding them lower, until the blunt tips entered her body a few tantalizing inches. "And your cock deep inside me *here*."

Beyond aroused by his wife's explicit words and brazen attitude, a ragged groan rumbled in his chest. "I'm more than happy to oblige you, right here and now," he said, meaning it.

She shook her head and pulled his hand from beneath her dress. "As tempting as your offer is, I think tonight it's *your* turn to learn all about patience and restraint."

Those damning words, the same ones he'd used on her the night he'd taken her to dinner and spent the entire evening tormenting her sexually, came back to taunt him now. The tables were turned, and she was going to make him suffer—and he was totally up for the challenge.

"I want to hear you beg tonight," she said, the notion of him at her total mercy obviously appealing to her in a big way.

Amusement coursed through him, because he'd never in his life begged for anything. "You can certainly try your best," he replied, invoking a deliberate dare in his voice.

She laughed, the sound filled with pure, female determination. "Oh, you have no idea what my *best* is, but you're about to find out."

She took his hand and led him out of his office and down the hallway, just past the kitchen to the door that led to their basement. It looked like any other door in the house—white and inset with panels—except there was a small white box mounted beside the door frame. She pushed the cover up, revealing a key pad beneath, and punched in a series of numbers that unlocked the door with a soft "click".

She flashed him a sassy grin. "The code to release the lock is our wedding anniversary. Month, day, and year. If you don't remember the date, you don't deserve to gain access to our playroom," she teased him.

He chuckled. "It's a date I'll never forget."

"Good. I decided to put a lock on the door because I didn't want the boys, or anyone else, to accidentally find our little den of iniquity."

He appreciated her foresight and caution because he couldn't imagine having to explain their *playroom* to their grown-up sons or guests.

She opened the door and flicked a switch on the wall inside, and a row of elegant antique sconces topped with red crystal globes lit a pathway down the flight of stairs, giving the impression that they were entering a secret chamber. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon beckoned, and when they finally reached the cool interior of the basement, Dean was blown away by what greeted him—and how much she'd accomplished in the time he'd been away on his business trip.

The original stark white walls had been painted a warm shade of beige to match the new plush carpeting, but the main color scheme was a deep, dark, amethyst. The carved wooden bed she'd bought was draped with purple silk sheets—no comforter since he didn't think they'd be sleeping much on that mattress—as were the cases on the pillows. Splashes of red throughout the room offset all the purple, including the abstract paintings and the sconces on the walls that provided the room with a dim glow of red that was incredibly erotic—as were all the smoky

mirrors hanging in strategic places that would make them voyeurs to each other's pleasure.

She'd transformed the spacious underground room into a seductive haven that both stunned and aroused him.

"Wow," he said, trying to take it all in. "This playroom is beyond anything I thought it would be."

She smiled, clearly proud of her efforts. "I take it you like it?"

He nodded. "Oh, yeah."

"Well, this is just a start," she said, caressing her slender fingers over the silk bed-sheet in a way that made him eager to feel her hands on *him*. "As you can see, there's plenty of space down here to add other things as we like."

A few stimulating items sprang to mind, like the addition of a sex swing or wall restraints, but for now, he could easily make do with the basics.

She strolled toward him then brushed a soft kiss along his cheek. "Go ahead and look around while I change into something more . . . *appropriate*."

He watched her walk into the bathroom she'd also redecorated in the same alluring shade of purple, more than a little tempted to follow her inside and just take her right there on the sink, or in the shower, or up against the wall. But he was too intrigued to discover what she deemed *appropriate* for this situation to give into that urge.

She closed the door, leaving him alone to explore their new playroom. He stepped up to the bed—the one she'd purchased from a local artisan who commissioned erotic furniture—and skimmed a hand down one of the substantial, hand carved posts. The frame itself was sturdy, with thick, individual slats running along the lower portion of the headboard, perfect to withstand the tug and pull of restraints, while the top piece was inlaid with those same smoky mirrors she'd placed throughout the room.

He glanced up, catching sight of his image in the reflective glass in the overhead canopy, and grinned as he imagined watching their bodies writhing on the bed as he fucked Jillian.

Very nice.

Exhaling a deep breath, he continued his tour, curious to see what was inside the matching armoire positioned in one corner near the bed. He opened the double doors and found a flat-screen TV and a DVD player just in case they wanted to watch some adult entertainment as foreplay—or maybe they'd make their own sex tape, he mused. The drawers below were filled with the few basic sex toys they'd played with prior to Jillian's request to be more adventurous, and there was plenty of space to store many more new, kinkier devices.

He closed the armoire doors and approached the hand-blown, decorative glass vase that Jillian had shown him that night they'd Skyped. The one she'd bought for the two of them to fill with their personal fantasies so that when they wanted inspiration or the element of surprise they could blindly pick one and act out the proposed scene. He noticed that there were already two folded pieces of paper inside the wide rimmed vase, and he didn't hesitate to jot down his own wicked suggestion with the pen and small pad of paper she'd left right next to the vase. When he was done, he folded the note into a neat square then dropped it into the vase just as he heard the bathroom door open behind him.

He turned around, took one look at Jillian's sexy dominatrix outfit, with her hair soft and disheveled around her face and shoulders, and felt as though he'd been delivered a swift punch to the solar plexus—leaving him dazed and unable to speak.

He'd seen his wife in provocative lingerie dozens of times, but nothing like *this*. A tight red satin and lace corset hugged her mid-section, pushing her voluptuous breasts up so that they

nearly spilled from the confines of the bustier. The one-piece garment cinched in at the waist and flared out at her hips, giving her a lush, curvaceous centerfold figure. Matching *barely there* panties covered her mound, while sheer red stockings encased her long, slender legs, all the way down to a pair of red stilettos with a five-inch heel.

She stood with her feet braced apart, and it was the interesting object she held in her hands that eventually captured his undivided attention—a black leather riding crop that she was casually smacking against her palm. Everything about her demeanor was commanding and assertive, unnervingly so for a man who preferred the upper hand in the bedroom, yet he was completely captivated by this bold and confident woman before him.

Lust twisted through him and his cock rose to the occasion. He was so screwed, in more ways than one. “Oh, fuck me,” he muttered, finally able to speak.

A triumphant smile tipped the corner of her mouth as she strolled toward him, closing the distance between them. “If you’re a good boy, maybe I will,” she said, caressing the leather tip of the crop down the burgeoning seam of his jeans.

Anticipation and excitement mingled through him, along with a healthy dose of respect for that crop she was wielding. “And if I’m bad?” he dared to ask.

“Corporal punishment, of course.” She very lightly tapped the sturdy flap against the swell of his erection to give him a taste of said punishment, and damn if his dick didn’t harden even more.

She circled around him, dragging the crop along his ass, his thighs, keeping him tense and on edge as to where she might smack next. Much to his relief, and maybe a bit of disappointment, she didn’t use it on him again.

Standing in front of him, she met his gaze, a delightful mix of satisfaction and heat brightening her beautiful green/gold eyes. “Tonight, you’re all mine, to do with as I desire,” she instructed, clearly enjoying her more dominant facade. “You’re my slave, and you’ll address me as *mistress*. You’ll do as you’re told or suffer the consequences, understand, *slave*?” She emphasized the request with another firm slap of the crop against her palm.

God, she was so freaking hot that he had to curb the impulse to pounce on her, pin her to the floor, and show her all about *consequences*. Instead, he assumed the role she asked of him and replied accordingly. “Yes . . . *mistress*.”

“Although, if things get too intense, you can use the safe word we’ve established.” Her too sweet voice held just a trace of provocation.

He smirked, knowing there wasn’t anything she could do to him to make him cry uncle. However . . . “I have a feeling you’ll be making me *beg* for mercy before the night is through.” Not use it as a safe word.

“Oh, you have no idea, slave.” A secretive smile curved her lips. “Now take off all your clothes.”

He toed off his shoes first and removed his socks, then pulled his shirt over his head and let it drop to the floor while she watched. He stripped off his jeans and boxer briefs together and caught her staring at his already raging erection. She licked her lips, and he swallowed a groan, wondering for the first time if he’d truly be able to withstand whatever she planned to do to him. If he had the ability to be obedient and complacent, when those characteristics went against every fiber of his alpha-male being.

“Very nice,” she murmured appreciatively as her eat-him-up gaze roamed his naked, aroused body. “Get on the bed and lie on your back,” she ordered in a curt tone.

He hesitated for second, struggling against the more dominating emotions swirling inside

him, then turned toward the bed—and sucked in a quick breath as she snapped the leather crop against his bare ass, which left a stinging, burning sensation in its wake that actually made his cock twitch, shocking him with the knowledge that he was clearly *aroused*.

Stunned, he stopped mid-movement and glanced over his shoulder at Jillian, raising an incredulous, *what-the-fuck* brow. What the hell had he done to instigate *that*?

In return, she arched a haughty brow right back at him and swatted his other cheek, just to show him who was in command. “Do as I say the first time, slave. Any disobedience will earn you the wrath of this crop in much more tender places.”

She was enjoying herself, and the power she wielded, *way* too much. Unwilling to test her threat, he climbed up onto the mattress and positioned himself on his back, as she’d instructed. She walked over to the armoire and came back a few seconds later with restraints.

“Hands above your head,” she said.

He lifted his arms, and one by one she secured each of his wrists to the slatted part of the headboard with a strip of soft velvet rope she must have purchased while he’d been gone. Her knots were loose so as not to chafe his skin, but what she didn’t realize was that her bindings were flimsy enough that one good hard tug would release him. But for as easy as it would be for him to escape, he wasn’t about to risk her displeasure when the nearest target for her crop was his straining-at-attention cock.

She casually strolled along the side of the bed, trailing the leather tip of the crop along his body in a soft, seductive caress that was a complete contradiction to the sting of pain he knew that little whip could inflict on a moment’s notice. Over his chest, across his taut belly, and down his thigh she stroked, until she finally reached the foot of the mattress.

“Spread your legs,” she directed as she tapped the inside of his knees with the crop before sliding it all the way up to his balls.

Eyeing just how close that damn crop was to his man parts, he quickly obeyed, planting his feet wide apart.

She moved up onto the bed and settled on her knees in the space he’d just made for her, then reached out and gripped his erection in her hand. Squeezing the hard column of flesh tightly with her fingers, she rubbed her thumb over the drop of pre-cum beaded on the sensitive head and smeared it down his shaft. His hips bucked in response to her ministrations, and she smiled up at him like a tempting Cheshire cat.

“Would you like me to suck your cock?” she asked huskily.

“Oh, hell yeah,” he said, the eager words slipping out before he could stop them.

She gave him a mock frown and punished his impudence with three consecutive swats to the inside of his thigh, where the skin was most tender. *Fuck*. His entire body jerked involuntarily, but what started out as shocking bites of discomfort gradually gave way to a tingling sensation that added to his already aroused state.

“Where are your manners, slave?” she asked, scolding him for being so rude, though she couldn’t completely hide the humor in her gaze. Clearly, she liked tormenting him.

“Yes, *please*, mistress,” he said politely.

“That’s much better,” she said, caressing her cool fingers over the hot spot she’d created on his thigh, her touch both soothing and highly stimulating. “I’m going to suck your cock, but you may not come. Do you understand?”

The wicked gleam in her eyes didn’t bode well for him, but what man refused an offered blow job? Not climaxing was a matter of mind over matter . . . and he prided himself on his control in intense situations. This would be no different. He could enjoy the pleasure of Jillian

giving him head, without going off like an inexperienced teenaged boy.

He nodded his agreement, and she bent over him. The moment her warm mouth enveloped his dick his pep talk disintegrated into smoke, because it was clear from the get-go that she intended to test his limits. Her tongue swirled along the length of his thick shaft as she took him deep, until the tumescent crown pressed against the back of her throat and he was completely engulfed in all that silky, wet heat. She made a sweet, hungry, “mmm” sound that rippled along his cock, then slowly withdrew, sucking on him as if he were a cherry flavored popsicle on a scorching-hot summer day and she needed every bit of moisture she could draw from him. His blood thrummed in his veins as she devoured him, again and again, the tight circle of her fingers pumping his erection while her sinful mouth and velvet tongue drove him to the brink of insanity.

His breathing turned harsh as he valiantly tried to maintain a grip on the orgasm threatening to erupt. Desperately needing to distract himself, he glanced up at the mirrored canopy above the bed, which added a whole new erotic element to the situation. He was tied down, sprawled naked on the bed, with Jillian positioned on her knees between his legs while her head bobbed up and down as she sucked his cock. The tumble of her dark hair and the bright red corset were a vivid contrast to her creamy skin, and he couldn't tear his gaze away from her heart shaped ass perched high in the air, wiggling back and forth in a way that told him she was rubbing her own thighs together to ease the ache in between.

The visual and physical stimulation overwhelmed him. He was her slave, all right. A slave to her passion, her hunger, her heart and soul. This woman, *his wife*, owned every single piece of him. Driving need pounded at him, and he decided whatever punishment she doled out for his insubordination would be well worth the unparalleled ecstasy he was about to experience.

His hips thrust of their own accord to the rhythm she'd set, forcing him deeper as he mindlessly fucked her mouth. Release beckoned, and all he could do was feel the incredible sensations building within him, tightening his belly and simmering in his balls until he couldn't hold back any longer.

His eyes rolled back, his hands curled into fists, and his entire body arched as his orgasm slammed through him. He roared like a savage warrior as he came in a hard, throbbing rush, and she took all of him, sucking every bit of essence from his cock until he had nothing left to give.

Utterly wasted, he went slack on the mattress, his chest heaving as he tried to regain his equilibrium, which was extremely difficult to do with Jillian trailing hot, open-mouthed kisses over his stomach, then higher. She moved up and over him, and he pried his eyes back open just as she straddled his chest then lifted up on her knees, only inches away from his face, giving him a clear view of the crotch of her panties. The silky material was soaked through, and the scent of her own need and desire filled his senses, making his limp cock stir to life again.

God, he was so fucking easy when it came to her.

“I really should punish you for coming when I specifically told you not to, but I'll give you the chance to redeem yourself by returning the favor,” she said meaningfully, and released the clever Velcro strips at the sides of her panties so she didn't have to slide them down her legs. She tossed the fabric aside and dipped her fingers through her wet, gleaming pussy, spreading the smooth, bare lips of her sex apart so he could see *everything*.

Christ, she was absolutely *killing* him.

“Look what sucking you off does to me,” she said teased huskily.

Dean couldn't have looked away, even if someone were holding a gun to his head while ordering him to do so. She touched herself, gathering all that honeyed heat onto one of her

fingers before spreading that slick moisture along his bottom lip.

“Taste me,” she commanded, and pushed her finger into his mouth.

Greedily, he sucked the tip, then the entire length, the heady, exotic flavor of her dancing on his tongue. Too soon for his liking, she withdrew her finger, her lips curving into a vixen-like smile.

“Would you like more?” she asked.

“Yes, please,” he replied, not giving a damn how enthusiastic he sounded.

Satisfied with his response, she moved higher, adjusting her knees on either side of his head so that she was poised right above his mouth, but instead of immediately giving her what she wanted, he decided to impart the only bit of control he had over the situation.

Turning his head, he nuzzled her inner thigh, breathing a hot rush of air over that tender, sensitive skin that made her shiver and her anticipation rise. “Tell me what you want, mistress,” he murmured, making *her* ask for the pleasure she craved.

Keeping in character with her dominant behavior, she clutched a fistful of his hair and turned his head, positioning his mouth against her sex. “Lick me, slave.”

Her assertive demeanor and words fueled his excitement and he didn’t hesitate to obey. He stroked his tongue along her slit in a series of long, leisurely laps that made her breath hitch in her throat and her back arch.

“Suck my clit,” she rasped.

He closed his lips around that bead of flesh, flicked his tongue over the hardened nub, and suckled, softly at first, then increasingly harder, deeper.

A soft, ragged moan escaped her, and her legs trembled. “Fuck me with your tongue.”

Her explicit demand shot through him like a hot poker, and he thrust his tongue inside her core, again and again, until she began the slow, desperate grind of her pussy against his open mouth. He glanced up the length of her body, expecting to find her eyes on him, but instead her heavy-lidded gaze was transfixed on the mirrors on the headboard that reflected back on the two of them, her face flushed and her lips parted as she stared in fascination at the erotic image of him going down on her.

“Oh, God,” she gasped helplessly, her voice intoxicated with desire and lust. “Make me come. *Now.*”

She was soft, hot, and delicious, and he could eat her for hours, but her command ruled him, and he gave her what she wanted. He doubled his efforts—licking, feasting, and sliding his tongue over every inch of her until her thighs tightened around his head and the first quake of her climax began then completely overtook her. She went wild, crying out as she bucked and writhed and flooded his mouth with the luscious nectar of her orgasm.

When the last of her tremors faded away, she scooted down, sat astride his stomach, and collapsed against his chest in a boneless heap. She buried her face against his neck, her breathing erratic, and he gave her a few moments to regain her strength while he wallowed in the egotistical male gratification of her complete and utter satisfaction that he was solely responsible for.

“Are you okay?” he asked after a while.

She lifted her head and he didn’t miss the tempting spark in her eyes that promised even more debauchery. “I’m perfect, but far from done with you.”

Thank God, because he was rock hard and raring to go again, his cock one huge, monumental, pulsing ache between his thighs. He thought for sure she’d release his hands, but she kept him tethered to the headboard as she moved off the bed and looked for something in one

of the armoire drawers.

He couldn't begin to imagine what more she had planned, but it didn't take long to find out. She returned, and he groaned as her fingers fondled his straining dick then frowned when he felt an odd pressure tighten around the base of his penis. Curious to see exactly what she was doing, he raised his head and glanced down to find that Jillian had secured some kind of device to his man parts that he assumed was a cock ring, since they'd never used one before. Already, he could feel the restriction of blood flow, increasing the size and thickness of his erection.

"What the hell?" he muttered, unsure how he felt about having his cock manacled.

She gave him a smug smile, letting him know she had him by the balls in more ways than one. "Obviously, you can't be trusted not to come, so this cock ring will keep you good and hard until I'm ready to let you orgasm again."

Holy shit. He watched as she straddled his hips then slowly lowered herself onto his burgeoning shaft, her body seemingly liquefying around him like molten fire until he was seated to the hilt inside her. She didn't move right away, but instead unhooked the front of her corset, all the way down to the bottom. Once the lingerie came undone, she tossed the contraption to the floor, leaving her gloriously naked except for her stockings and stilettos.

Lust and desire flushed her skin an enticing shade of pink, and the sight of her full breasts and erect nipples made his mouth salivate for a taste. Tipping her head back so that her hair cascaded down her spine, she rocked against him, and he closed his eyes and instinctively thrust upward to match the movements of her body, pushing and sliding into the tight clasp of her sheath.

The sharp, stinging snap against his nipple electrified his nerve endings, a swift reminder that he was still under her command, and his hands yanked reflexively on his restraints. He bit back a string of curse words while he waited for the pain to recede. Damn, he'd forgotten about the crop!

From her position on top of his cock, Jillian arched a brow down at him as she tapped the leather tip against his stomach. "Did I say that you could fuck me?"

She sounded so imperious, every inch the mistress to his slave, and even though he wanted to rebel and take charge, he let her indulge the rest of her fantasy. For now.

"No, mistress," he replied, forcing a humble, obedient note to his voice for the sake of the illusion of power she'd created between them. And that's all it was—an illusion—because he just realized that those velvet ropes she'd secured around his wrists were gradually coming undone. At any point, he had the ability to turn the tables on his wife . . . but not just yet. He was enjoying this playful and sexually confident side of Jillian way too much to steal her thunder.

"This pleasure is for me, not you," she said as he lowered her hand down to where their bodies were joined, her fingers fiddling with the cock ring circling the base of his shaft. "Do *not* move. All you get to do for now is watch."

A second later, the device began to buzz, making him realize that this toy had a built-in vibrator. His entire cock began to hum, the warm, tingling sensation adding to his already sensitized dick, yet the rubber ring kept any kind of orgasm at bay, just as she'd intended. Curbing the impulse to thrust took monumental effort, especially when she started riding his cock in a slow, sensual, rocking motion that added yet another element of heat and friction to the mix.

With a delightful sigh, she cupped her full breasts in her hands and rolled the taut nipples between her fingers, her body moving fluidly, gracefully, on top of his erection. She pressed down, letting the vibrator make contact with her clitoris, then dropped her head back and moaned

as she lifted back up again, all the way to the plump head of his cock before seating herself again and grinding her pussy against the thrumming implement.

He watched everything in abject fascination – the way her body undulated against his in an erotic lap dance, the way her hands caressed her breasts, and the radiant look of bliss transforming her beautiful features as she rocked harder, faster, on top of him in shameless abandon.

Who *was* this bewitching woman? She was his *wife*, he thought with awe. His gorgeous, seductive, wildly uninhibited wife, and he loved being a spectator to this emerging, sexually confident side of her personality.

She started to pant, and he knew she was getting close to coming, like he was aching to do, but couldn't because she had him by the balls, literally. All he could do was *feel* . . . the clasp of her pussy, the wet, suctioning heat, the mind-blowing friction. The cock ring had him full to bursting and prolonged the agonizing pleasure, tempting and teasing him with the promise of a release of Herculean proportions once the contraption was removed.

But it was her orgasm that came first, and she cried out as she gyrated against the vibrator, her entire body shuddering above him while inner contractions pulsed around his enormous erection. The muscles in Dean's abdomen tightened, and he gritted his teeth until he couldn't take the torment any longer and his control snapped.

He tugged on his flimsy restraints, once, twice, *hard*, and the velvet ropes unraveled, freeing him. In one smooth move, he flipped Jillian onto her back, and she gasped in shock as he loomed over her, her wide eyes taking in his ferocious expression. She'd had her fun, and now it was time to remind her who was truly in charge.

He pinned her beneath him, spreading his knees wide to force her legs apart while the tip of his cock pressed against her soft, wet opening. "Take off the goddamn cock ring so I can fuck you the way I *need* to," he growled, a note of desperation to his voice. "The way I've been *dying* to."

An unexpected smile touched her lips and her eyes shimmered playfully. "Are you *begging*?" she asked oh-so-sweetly.

It was more of a *demand*, but he wasn't about to split hairs when the end result would be the same, so he gave her what she wanted to hear. "Yes, I'm begging."

Her radiant expression turned triumphant, and she reached between them and removed the tight rubber band encircling his shaft. The release of pressure was so immense he groaned, but lust and need still pounded through him, and with a hard, driving thrust he planted himself balls deep inside her. He almost lost it the moment her soft, heated depths sheathed his too sensitive cock, and he knew he wasn't going to last long at all.

He surged into her, over and over, and she wrapped her long legs around his waist, locking her stilettos at the base of his spine and tipping her hips for better, deeper penetration. She arched into him, her nails digging against his back, marking him, and he felt the electrified scraping sensation all the way down to his groin. She breathed into his ear then sucked on a patch of skin on his neck, sending him straight into orbit.

Heat pulsed from his balls to the tip of his cock as his orgasm blasted through him, ripping a hoarse, primitive, beastly howl from his chest. The pleasure was so intense, so powerful, that he could have sworn he'd passed out as he collapsed on top of her.

His senses returned sometime later at the feel of Jillian stroking her fingers up and down the slope of his back. Lifting his head took effort, but he managed to look down at his wife's very gleeful expression and bright cheerful eyes that were filled with way too much mirth.

“You actually *begged*,” she said, and laughed huskily.

He grinned at her, letting her have her moment of sheer delight before letting her know that while she might have won this battle, he intended to win the war. “Just remember, sweetheart. Paybacks are hell.”

The Temptation

A diary entry from Jillian Noble:

The playroom was a huge success, more so than I ever could have predicted, and playing the role of dominatrix to my sexy husband was incredibly fun and thrilling. He might have been uncomfortable at first being tied down with me in charge, but it didn't take Dean long to get into the fantasy. Last night was erotic, exciting, adventurous, and all the things I hoped it would be.

Who would have thought that hot sex and fulfilling fantasies would not only awaken our deepest, most illicit passions, but also bring us closer as a couple? The physical pleasure between us is undeniable, and the emotional intimacy is only making our marriage stronger on every level. I'm learning that unconditional trust is the key to satisfying every single one of our desires, and there isn't anything I wouldn't do to increase Dean's pleasure, and my own.

Sweet Revenge

I have a few errands to take care of. I'll be back in a few hours and when I return I expect you to be ready to do exactly as I say.

Dean's parting words earlier that Sunday afternoon played through Jillian's mind long after he'd gone, wreaking havoc with her ability to focus on anything that required concentration because she couldn't stop speculating about what those *errands* might entail. Judging by the wicked grin he'd given her as he'd left, she was fairly certain her husband had come up with a fitting retribution as payback to making him her slave last night in their new playroom.

Her stomach tumbled at the thought. Knowing Dean, and how much he was enjoying the erotic games they were now engaging in, she prepared herself to expect the unexpected. She'd been married to Dean for nineteen years and knew him better than anyone else on a soul deep level, but when it came to sexual fantasies and kinks she was discovering that her husband had a penchant for bondage and discipline, which tied directly into that dominant streak he'd suppressed for their entire marriage . . . until she'd given him permission to explore that assertive side to his personality in the parameters of their bedroom.

Or in this case, the playroom.

In an attempt to make the time pass faster, and to keep her occupied until Dean returned, she headed into the kitchen and baked a couple dozen sugar cookies then put together two separate care packages to send to each of her sons—one who was away at college, and the other in the Navy. Just as she finished washing the dirty dishes she heard the rolling garage door open then close again. She turned around as Dean entered the kitchen, carrying a large black gift bag she instantly recognized as belonging to Sugar and Spice, the adult boutique where she'd purchased her dominatrix outfit and the cock ring she'd used on her husband just last night.

While the outside packaging was discreet, there was no doubt that the items tucked inside the bag—the items Dean had selected and bought—were anything but demure or straight-laced.

A familiar sense of anticipation shimmied through her, spiraling through her stomach and settling between her thighs as he closed the distance between them. "I see you went shopping," she said, trying not to sound too enthusiastic.

"I did." Much too casually, he set the bag on the counter next to where she was standing, and smiled at her. "I stopped by Sugar and Spice and picked up a few things for you, and me. Your friend, Raina, was very helpful with her suggestions about what you might enjoy the most."

His voice was husky and confident, and Jillian's pulse skipped a beat. Raina knew plenty of her fantasies, and while she knew her friend wouldn't spill her secrets, that didn't mean Raina wouldn't possibly direct Dean toward some of the more risqué items in her adult boutique that had intrigued Jillian.

"What did you buy?" Dying to peek inside his bag of tricks, she stood up on tip-toe and skimmed her fingers along the top edge, hoping to get a glimpse of what was inside.

He playfully smacked her hand away. "That's for me to know, and for *you* to find out. Eventually. I wouldn't want to spoil the element of surprise. Suffice it to say, I think you'll enjoy tonight's payback."

Leaving the bag on the counter to taunt her, he turned and headed toward the refrigerator. He opened the door, peered inside, and pulled out the bottle of whipped cream flavored Vodka she kept chilled for an occasional muddled strawberry martini. The sweetly infused alcohol made

the drink taste like a strawberry shortcake dessert with a slight kick.

He grabbed a small cut crystal tumbler from her china hutch then returned, setting the glass on the counter and filling it with an inch of the clear liquor.

“Since when do you drink my girly vodka?” she asked curiously, especially when his tastes always ran toward smoky, expensive scotch.

“I don’t,” he said as he recapped the bottle. “This is for you.”

“Me?” She frowned, not understanding why he felt the need to pour her a drink.

“Just one shot of vodka,” he murmured, a bad boy glint in his eyes as he moved to stand in front of her, just inches away. “I want you relaxed and accommodating for what I have in mind.”

Amusement warred with the thrum of arousal already sifting through her veins. “Don’t you mean you want me obedient and submissive?” she retorted with way too much sass.

“Oh, you’ll be those things, too,” he assured her in a lazy, sexy drawl as he touched the rim of the glass to her lips and slowly, but firmly, tipped it upward. “Bottoms up, baby girl.”

Ensnared by his mesmerizing gaze, she let him pour the flavored vodka into her mouth. The liquid was initially cold and sweet against her tongue then grew hot, generating a burning trail of arousing heat down her throat as she swallowed. The alcohol settled into her stomach like a warm ball of fire and gradually spread outward, toward her extremities.

The one shot wasn’t enough to get her drunk or dull her senses. Quite the opposite, actually. Her nerve endings seemed to tingle as the liquor worked its way through her system, subtly stimulating every one of her female erogenous zones. Definitely intoxicating, in a purely sensuous way.

“Good girl,” he praised, and placed the empty glass in the sink behind her.

Sliding a warm hand behind her neck, he lowered his mouth to hers. His lips were initially soft then grew more demanding as he opened wider and deepened the kiss. He stepped closer, aggressively pressing her back against the counter with the sheer strength of his body aligned to hers.

He felt so good—the crush of his chest against her breasts, the thick length of his cock nestled at the crux of her thighs, and the hand he’d skimmed down over her jean-clad bottom that was now kneading her butt. His long fingers followed the seam running down her ass until he reached her cleft. He rubbed her through the denim, while seducing her mouth with his deep, luxurious, make-out kisses—the kind that made a woman willingly drop her panties and spread her legs because she wanted to feel that skillful mouth elsewhere.

She moaned against Dean’s damp lips, her hips rocking into his firm, knowing touch, increasing the pressure and friction against her clit. Just when she was on the verge of unraveling, he moved his hand back up to her waist and lifted his mouth from hers.

Her fingers tightened on his shirt as she tried to contain her whimper of disappointment, but failed.

Staring down at her upturned face, he licked his lips slowly, sensually. “You taste like sugar cookies and whipped cream,” he murmured huskily as he dipped his head and nibbled his way up the side of her neck. “I want to eat you up.”

“Yes, please,” she said, her voice breathless. At this rate, she didn’t even care if they made it to the playroom. She was already aching, pulsing with the need for him to finish what he’d just started.

He chuckled against her ear. “Already begging. You’re so easy.”

And apparently, completely shameless as well. “I’ll be as easy as you want, so long as you make me come.” *Preferably, right now.*

He drew back, a dark brow arched in feigned surprise. “Don’t I always?”

“*Eventually*, yes.” She sounded perturbed, even to her own ears.

The hand at her hip skimmed beneath her T-shirt, his warm fingers feathering up her abdomen until his large palm engulfed one of her breasts and squeezed hard, making her wish she wasn’t wearing a bra. “This was just a warm-up, a little tease of what to expect once I have you in the playroom.”

She remembered how she’d withheld his orgasms, how she’d made him delirious with the need to come before allowing him that pleasure, and wondered if he’d make her suffer the same fate—one she had mixed feelings about. “Are you going to keep me on edge all night?”

“No, I’m not going to torture you like you did me,” he said, though she wasn’t certain she believed him. “You’ll be happy to know that I plan to make you come, and often . . . with my fingers, with my mouth, with my cock, and possibly a few other ways.”

Her imagination ran wild as to what those *other ways* might entail, because she’d yet to find out what he’d bought today at Sugar and Spice.

He removed his hand from her breast, leaving her nipples tight and aching, just like the rest of her body. “I’m feeling very generous—”

“And obviously very presumptuous about your ability to make me come so many times in one night,” she goaded, letting her sexual frustration get the best of her.

“Challenge accepted, baby girl.” An abundance of humor and self-assurance laced his deep, seductive voice. “Let’s see how many orgasms I can wring out of you tonight, how many different ways I can make you come. But just know this . . . every one of those orgasms is going to be on *my* terms, not yours.”

Jillian’s heart raced, because she knew just how well her husband toed the fine line between pleasure and pain, and how much he enjoyed inflicting both sensations. How he so effortlessly brought her to the precipice and kept her there until she was pleading for release.

But it was the smug look on his face right now that prompted her to be a little reckless with her words, even though she knew better than to provoke him when he clearly had the upper hand tonight. Then again, maybe it was the shot of vodka that was making her so brazen, and her tongue so loose.

“Don’t disappoint me,” she retorted impudently.

He braced his hands on the counter on either side of her waist and leaned in close, his expression dark and dangerous enough to make her question her decision to be so impulsive and bold. “I’m thinking I should have bought a ball gag at Sugar and Spice for your smart mouth,” he said in a calm tone that belied the flash of threat in his gaze. “Then again, I’m all about improvising if I need to, so you’d better think twice about being so defiant.”

Shock rippled through her. “You wouldn’t dare gag me!”

He lifted a hand and slid the pad of his thumb across her lower lip, looking much too intrigued by the idea. “Oh, I definitely *would* dare, so don’t tempt me.”

Picking up the black bag he’d left on the counter, he stepped away from her. “I want you in the playroom in ten minutes,” he ordered succinctly. “Get undressed and put on your red silk robe. I want you completely naked underneath. Don’t make me wait.”

With that, he turned and walked away. Not wanting to waste any time, she went to the master bedroom and stripped off her clothes then covered up with the crimson-red silk robe Dean had indicated. The cool, smooth material slid along her bare skin like a lover’s caress, and her nipples tightened against the luxurious fabric, as if anticipating the touch of Dean’s fingers, the wet heat of his mouth. *Soon.*

Shivering at the decadent thought, she cinched the silk sash around her waist in a secure knot then ruffled her fingers through her unbound hair and added a bit of cherry Chapstick to her lips to keep them soft and moist. Not wanting to be late, she headed to the playroom, punched in the security code to unlock the door to their newly furnished basement, and made her way down the carpeted stairs.

A sense of pride filled her at how well her decorating ideas had come together and just how erotic this room had become with its deep, dark purple hues and smoky mirrors—definitely a sinful escape from the simplicity of their master bedroom and what had become a very predictable sex life. This was a place where they could shed inhibitions and do or be anything they wanted.

Last night, she'd indulged in a sexy, fun, dominatrix fantasy that had been immensely satisfying for her, but this evening was all about Dean's desires. And *holy crap*, right now her gorgeous husband was standing at the foot of the carved wooden bed, transformed into a dark, commanding *Dom* just by the sheer virtue of his intimidating stance, imposing presence, and a hard, virile body that exuded power, control, and authority.

Her mouth went dry and her knees went weak as she took in the total package. He was shirtless, and the form-fitting black leather pants he wore reinforced the image of a man in charge of tonight's play. The soft, lambskin material molded to his lean hips and muscular thighs, and instead of a zipper, the crotch of those pants laced up with leather ties for easy access.

But it was what he held in his hand that captured her full attention . . . the same leather crop she'd used on him last night. He struck the tip against his palm, and she literally jumped in place at the thought of that strip of leather snapping against the same tender places she'd smacked on his body.

Oh, shit.

A perverse, mocking smile curved his sensual lips as he strolled toward her. The sconces on the wall cast a red glow throughout the room and illuminated his handsome features. Without a shirt on, the muscles along his abdomen rippled, and her pulse began to throb a heavy beat.

The crop made a hissing sound through the air as he slapped it against his leather-clad leg. "Does this crop make you nervous?" he asked as he slowly circled around her, making her entire body tense with the anticipation of what he might do next.

She lifted her chin a fraction, refusing to admit that she *was* a bit anxious. "No."

Stopping behind her, he leaned in close, until his chest touched the silk covering her back and his lips brushed the shell of her ear. "No . . . *what?*"

"Sir?" she guessed, remembering his preference for that title when they were role playing.

He moved to her side and nodded his approval. "This crop should make you *very* nervous. You never know when I might use it, or where." To prove his point, he snapped the leather tip against the back of her bare thigh.

She gasped, her body jerking in response as that sting of pleasure/pain traveled straight to her sex. "Wh . . . what was that for?" she asked, frowning at him.

He raised the crop and dragged the leather patch along the curve of her breast where the silk lapels of her robe overlapped then flicked it along her rigid nipple. "Are you questioning me?" he asked in a dangerously low voice that both unnerved and excited her.

She quickly shook her head before he could deliver another punishing swat in more tender places. "No, sir."

"Good girl," he murmured, and set the crop down on the night stand next to the bed. "You'll

be relieved to know that I don't intend to use this crop tonight—not unless you give me a reason to have to punish you. I just wanted to be sure that you knew what it felt like against your bare, sensitive skin.”

And now that she had first-hand knowledge, she wasn't about to give him an excuse to wield it again.

“I have much more pleasurable things in mind for the two of us. Go into the bathroom,” he said, indicating the adjoining bathroom.

She wanted to ask why, but knew better than to question Dean. Knowing she'd find out his reasons soon enough, she did as he ordered and walked into the spacious bathroom with her husband joining her. The large shower stall to the left had been modernized and upgraded, with luxurious shower heads and a sitting bench. A new granite sink and counter tops had been installed, along with a long length of mirror that allowed anyone in the shower to see his or her reflection. Just like the playroom, the bathroom was sensual and very self-indulgent.

He stopped her in front of the vanity and stepped behind her. The closeness of his body radiated a smoldering heat, as did the gaze that met hers in the reflection in front of them. “Since you seem to have a fascination with all the mirrors you had installed, let's put them to good use.”

She still didn't understand why he'd chosen the bathroom when the four-poster bed had a mirrored canopy and headboard that gave them many variations of viewing angles. “There are plenty of mirrors out in the playroom.”

“True, but this one is much more up close and personal.” He slid his hands around her waist and untied the knot of her sash. “I want to make sure you can see everything I'm about to do to you, and watch your own response. I don't want you to miss a thing.”

She bit her lower lip as he pushed the robe off her shoulders. The silky fabric slid down her arms and fell to the floor around her bare feet, leaving her completely nude and feeling strangely vulnerable and exposed—even though Dean had seen her naked hundreds of times before.

But this was different, standing in front of a mirror with her husband watching over her shoulder, his gaze taking in every inch of her unclothed body. She liked to think she was confident in her nudity, but when she was forced to really look at herself—like now—without the diversion of wearing sexy lingerie or dim lighting to hide her imperfections, those deep-seated insecurities about her less-than-flawless body ran rampant.

She was soft and curvy, with full breasts that had lost their “perk” a long time ago, but the moment his big, warm hands slid along her stomach, all her uncertainties fled. His seductive, reverent caress spoke volumes, as did the thick, leather-clad cock pressing against her bottom. There was no fabricating that kind of insatiable desire. Closing her eyes, she leaned back against him, succumbing to the pleasure of his touch as his hands skimmed their way upward, to her breasts.

He didn't let her hide long. He gathered her breasts in his palms, squeezing both mounds as he whispered in her ear, “Open your eyes, Jillian.” He waited until her lashes fluttered open and their gazes connected in the mirror before continuing. “Just look at you. You are so fucking beautiful.”

His raw language, his honest declaration, made her melt.

“You have the softest lips.” He nuzzled her cheek, his breath hot and damp against her skin. “And the prettiest, most irresistible mouth that knows exactly how to drive me crazy with wanting you. I love the way you kiss me, and especially the way you suck my cock.”

His explicit words painted vivid images in her mind, and a moan of need escaped her throat as he continued seducing her senses.

“You have such great tits,” he praised huskily as he stroked and massaged her breasts. “I love the way they sway and bounce when I’m fucking you. It’s hot as hell and makes me so goddamn hard.”

Oh, wow, she hadn’t known that.

“Your nipples are so responsive, so sensitive. They’re like hard cherries, so plump and sweet to suck.” He rolled those taut buds between his long fingers then tugged hard on the stiffened tips, causing that twinge of pain to arrow straight down to her clitoris.

She gasped, both shocked and excited by the throbbing sensation gathering between her thighs.

He chuckled knowingly, the sound low and wicked as he continued to tweak her nipples, supplying another electrifying jolt of pleasure to her sex. “You like when I pinch your nipples, don’t you?”

She nodded, unable to lie. “Yes.”

“I should have bought some nipple clamps today, too, but we’ll save those for another time.”

Ahhh, something new and erotic to look forward to.

He released her breasts and splayed his hands on her upper thighs. His thumbs grazed her smooth, waxed pussy then pressed steadily upward and inward. Those two fingers slid along the slick, inner lips of her sex, teasing and tormenting her.

He exhaled a long, slow gust of breath along her neck. “We haven’t even talked about how much I love your cunt,” he murmured, the sound of his voice filled with unbridled hunger as he penetrated her with two long fingers and used his thumb to rub her burgeoning clit. “You’re so tight and hot, so creamy, and when I’m buried deep inside you, it’s like I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

She shuddered in need. Tossing her head back against his shoulder, she pushed her hips against the fingers fucking her, desperate for at least one of the orgasms he’d promised her earlier. “Dean, please, make me come.”

“I’m getting there, baby girl. I promise.” To her disappointment, he removed his fingers from her body then grabbed her wrists and pressed her palms against the cool granite surface in front of them. “Arch your back, and keep your hands flat on the counter.”

She did as he ordered, her head automatically dropping forward, her eyes closing once again.

“No.” He slid his hand through her hair, gripping the strands tight to pull her head back and force her to look at her wanton reflection—her body bent over, breasts heavy and full, and hips pushed back in a fuck-me position.

“Do *not* look away,” he commanded in a deep, dark voice as he released her hair and caressed his hand down her spine and over the curve of her bottom. “Not unless you want to feel the sting of that crop against your ass a dozen times.”

She swallowed hard, watching as he opened one of the vanity drawers and pulled out a tube of lubrication and what appeared to be an odd-shaped vibrator-type toy that was short, but smooth and curvy, with a flared end—and a small remote. Items he must have stashed there before she’d come down to the playroom.

He wedged a knee between her thighs, nudging them apart. “Spread your legs for me. I have more pleasurable plans in mind for that sweet ass of yours. Something I’ve been dying to do for a very long time.”

She suddenly understood exactly what that toy was—an anal plug—and her stomach clenched at the thought of that toy invading such a forbidden place. As instructed, she widened

her stance, and his right hand returned between her legs, his fingers lightly fondling her pussy. With his free hand, he picked up the toy, pressed a button on the remote, and the gadget buzzed to life. Slowly, leisurely, he ran the pulsating tip down her spine, increasing her anticipation of what was to come. He followed the crease of her ass all the way down to meet the touch of his fingers.

The moment the vibrator made contact with her sensitive clit, she jerked hard and nearly came right then and there. It felt like a hundred tongues lashing at her, and Dean quickly moved the toy away before she could splinter apart. He dipped the toy inside her sheath, again and again, until she was panting and moaning and willing to do anything for the orgasm he held just beyond her reach.

“You know what I want, don’t you, baby girl?” he growled against her ear as he set the vibrator on the vanity, turned it off then added a generous amount of lubrication to the silicone plug.

Oh, she knew *exactly* what he wanted to do with the toy . . . and she wasn’t about to deny him that fantasy, even if it wasn’t *her* thing. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Relax and breathe,” he instructed as he pressed the well-lubricated plug against her anal opening, slowly at first then more firmly, giving her no choice but to accept the foreign object.

She moaned as the rounded head stretched and burned its way past the tight ring of flesh, until it was seated completely inside her. It filled her full, pleasantly so, and wasn’t nearly as bad as she’d thought it would be. In fact, it was quite arousing.

“Oh, fuck me,” he rasped in appreciation. “That is so goddamn hot.” He lifted his gaze to meet hers in the mirror, his irises dark with lust as he pushed the plug deeper still. “As soon as you’re ready, I want to take you here, just like this.”

Oh, God. She could barely handle the plug—she couldn’t imagine Dean’s sizeable cock invading that snug entry.

He switched the remote back on, and the toy pulsed to life, stimulating nerve endings she didn’t even know existed. Moving behind her, he pressed the heated length of his body to her backside, still wearing those leather pants she wished he’d strip off so she could feel the hard ridge of his erection inside her, too. He gently encircled her neck with one hand to hold her head up so that her face was right next to his, while his other hand disappeared between her legs again, stroking her sex, reigniting her need with skillful expertise.

“Jesus, Jillian, *look at you.*”

She looked at her reflection, seeing herself through Dean’s eyes. Seeing herself as a beautiful woman, wild and provocative and completely *his*. Her face was flushed with desire, her lashes half-mast, and her lips were parted to accommodate her ragged breathing as his fingers and the vibrations of the toy worked in tandem to escalate her climb toward release. Her hair was a disheveled, sexy mess, unbridled passion etched her expression, and the way Dean touched her, possessed her, wholly dominated her . . .

“You’re fucking gorgeous,” he growled huskily, his lips grazing her cheek while his fingers strummed her clit in a way that beckoned her body to climax. “Come for me, baby girl. *Just like this . . .*”

His command catapulted her right over the edge. Her entire body trembled then exploded in a heated rush that ripped a helpless cry from her throat. The orgasm was like a flame searing along a fuse, spreading electrical shocks of pleasure through every inch of her . . . until he finally switched off the vibrator, allowing the sensations to recede—though he left the plug in place.

She moaned, her knees going weak, and he caught her up in his arms and carried her back

out into the playroom. He laid her down on the bed then left her to retrieve some things from the armoire. Returning with newly purchased restraints, he straddled her waist and buckled a soft leather cuff, lined in plush faux fur, around one of her wrists. He looped the attached chain around a sturdy wooden slat in the headboard then secured her other hand so that her arms were stretched above her head and there was no escaping the cuffs the way he'd maneuvered out of the velvet ropes she'd used to tie him down last night.

"Perfect," he muttered, and trailed his fingers down her arms, lightly tickling her skin, raising her awareness of him all over again.

He moved off the bed and gently rolled her over so that she was on her stomach. "Get on your knees so your ass is up," he ordered.

She was still so boneless from her orgasm, and must have taken too long to do his bidding—which wasn't easy to do while being shackled. He smacked her ass, hard, and she gasped in shock as the plug jarred within her, reminding her of its presence—as if she could forget.

"Now," he said, his sharp tone holding just enough threat to make her scramble into position.

There were so many mirrors in the playroom, there was no avoiding her reflection—her upper body pressed to the mattress, her cheek against the cool silk sheet, arms pulled tightly above her head, and her butt raised high in the air. She should have been embarrassed, but the image of her in such a helpless, submissive pose for her husband both intrigued and aroused her. While in the bathroom she'd been reluctant to watch, now she couldn't look away. She wanted to witness every dominant, aggressive move he made, wanted to watch the way he claimed her in such a dark, primitive manner with her restrained solely for his pleasure.

He walked around to the foot of the bed. "Spread your knees wide apart."

This time she was quick to obey, parting her thighs so that she was bared to him, in a way she'd never been before. The mirrors enabled her to watch him, too—the way his eyes darkened and his jaw clenched as he looked his fill of her pink, glistening flesh, and his own fascination with that wicked object he'd inserted into her rear.

He pressed a button on the remote in his hand, and she moaned as the vibrating mechanism turned back on, tingling along her sex and stimulating another round of restless, maddening need.

He moved up onto the bed and knelt behind her, his hands quickly going to the ties securing the front of his leather pants and the bulge straining against the closure. "I had a few other things I wanted to do to you tonight, but my cock is about to burst and I have to get inside of you."

He sounded desperate, and just as eager as she was to feel him plunging deep inside of her, filling that space that ached for him. His erection finally freed, he rubbed the head of his cock along her slick folds before finally pushing inside her, hard and fast and balls deep.

She cried out, the sensation of being filled in *both* places at once shocking her senses. It was like taking two cocks at once—incredibly erotic and overwhelming at the same time.

"*Oh, fuck,*" he breathed, clearly just as stunned by how much tighter she was, as well as the tingling vibrations licking along his shaft.

He gave her a moment to adjust to the dual penetration, but not long. Grasping her hips, his fingers digging into her flesh, he held her firmly in place as he thrust into her—long and slow at first then gradually harder, deeper, rougher. His entire body bristled with tension, and she instinctively pushed back against him, trying to alleviate the pressure building within her.

"That's it, baby girl," he said, his voice low and strained and resonating with carnal hunger. "Push your ass up against me and take it deeper. Fuck yourself on my cock."

His explicit words, the raw and primitive demand, made her hotter, wetter, and she surged

back into his driving thrusts, impaling herself on his shaft as he'd directed. Again and again. He twisted her hair around his fist, using the long strands like reins to guide her, to control her movements as he pounded into her. To give them both the leverage they needed to get as deep as possible.

The way Dean handled her was all about possession and compliance, a savage, primitive mating that stripped away every inhibition and truly put him in command. The escalating heat was immense as he undulated his groin against hers, as she ground her hips rhythmically against his to increase the friction between them.

She looked into the mirrors again, captivated by how magnificent Dean looked in his element . . . so aggressive and dominant. Taking what he wanted, yet making sure her pleasure was just as great as his. His skin was damp, the corded muscles in his neck and arms bunching and flexing with each powerful thrust. His expression was merciless and fierce, like a warrior, and his eyes were so dark they looked pitch-black as he glanced down and watched his thick, veined cock piston inside her.

The sight of Dean in the throes of lust, his own urgency increasing, combined with the vibrating plug and the feeling of being full to bursting, was all too much for Jillian to withstand. Straining against the bonds shackling her wrists, she bucked against his hips, and with a low, feral growl he drove so far inside her that her whole body shook with the impact, creating a firestorm of sensations that sent her reeling and her blood pounding through her veins.

She screamed his name as her entire being seemed to come apart at the seams, the ecstasy rippling through her so intense she nearly blacked out. She convulsed around his cock, and he pulled her tighter against him as he slammed into her one last time. His entire body arched, his hips jerking as he came long and hard and deep.

He groaned and collapsed along her back, pressing her completely into the mattress, his breath hot against her neck. Too weak and sated to move or protest, she buried her face against the silk sheet. His cock still pulsed inside her . . . or was that the toy still on vibrating mode?

She was so sensitive, everywhere, and the internal buzzing was no longer arousing, but rather annoying. "Turn off the damn remote, Dean."

He lifted his head from her shoulder and chuckled, groping for the device he'd tossed on the bed. "I was wondering why my cock was still twitching."

She laughed, too, and was grateful when the humming ceased. Dean rolled off her, unbuckled the wrist cuffs so her hands were free once again, then drew her into a spooning position. He draped an arm loosely around her waist and nuzzled his face against her neck.

"Thank you," he murmured, the humble words of gratitude surprising her.

"For what?"

"For walking into my office and announcing you wanted to spice up our sex lives," he said, and not easily for a man who didn't normally voice his feelings and emotions. "For being open minded and letting me have my way with you, like tonight."

She skimmed her fingers down his strong, hair-roughened arm, loving the contrast of his masculinity to her softer, more feminine traits. "Just to be fair, you've let me have my way with you, too," she teased.

"Not nearly as fun," he said grumpily, clearly not liking the role reversal.

She smiled to herself. "You just like having all the control in the playroom."

He braced his head on his hand so that he could peer down at her, a dark brow raised much too arrogantly. "You haven't complained. Not once."

"That's because I'm too afraid you'll gag me," she replied, deadpan.

He blinked, looking totally taken aback and concerned that he'd gone too far with his ball gag threat. "Seriously?"

"No," she assured him, and he visibly relaxed. She turned toward him and stroked her hand along his chest, the light texture of hair just enough for her liking. "I like you being all macho and aggressive and alpha-male. It's hot."

A devastatingly bad-boy grin canted his mouth, the same one he'd used to seduce her back in high school, but now she knew just how potent and compelling everything about Dean Noble truly was.

"Good, because now that you've coaxed the dominant beast out to play, he's not going anywhere any time soon."

Jillian wouldn't have it any other way.

Dean's Fantasy Fulfilled

At nearly nine in the evening, Dean walked into the house, tugging his tie loose as he started toward the master bedroom to strip out of his power suit, and to find his wife.

It had been a long Friday at work, and an even longer week of late-night meetings and negotiations to lure a high-profile client to sign on with Noble and Associates' security team. But all the over-time at the office had been well worth it. Dean and his partner, Mac, had sealed the deal and now held a multi-million dollar contract to provide security for the president of a transnational corporation.

He should have been exhausted, but the adrenaline rush of triumph had him on a natural high, and he knew it would be a while before the exhilaration ebbed enough for him to truly relax. Then again, he was more than willing to burn off some extra energy in the playroom with his wife . . .

"Jillian?" he called out.

"I'm in here," she replied, her voice leading him in the direction he'd been headed.

He strolled a few feet into their bedroom and came to an abrupt halt the moment his gaze landed on her. He'd expected to find Jillian in a pair of sweats or her pajamas, but instead she was wearing a dark pink, form-fitting dress he'd never seen before—and he *definitely* would have remembered a sexy outfit like this one.

The low, rounded neckline revealed a mouth-watering amount of cleavage, and the sheath-like design hugged her curves like a lover. The hem of the dress ended mid-thigh, and the five-inch stiletto heels, with multiple straps that wrapped around her ankles, elongated her legs and seared images of them wrapped tight around his hips as he thrust deep inside her . . . with those fuck-me shoes still on her feet.

She'd styled her hair in those soft, disheveled waves that he loved, making her look as though she'd just tumbled out of bed after a long, hard ride on his cock.

He exhaled a harsh breath that did nothing to ease the tight knot of need gathering in his belly, and lower. "Where are you going dressed like that?" His attempt at a casual tone came out as more of a demand.

"Now that you're done with negotiations, you and I are going out tonight." She flashed him an irresistible smile as she crossed the room in front of him on her way to the dresser, where she slipped an array of gold bangle bracelets on her arm. "You've been working late all week, and I want a fun night out."

Her sultry perfume billowed around him, the soft, seductive scent making him harder than he already was. "I'd rather stay home and fuck you in those stilettos you're wearing," he said, point-blank.

She laughed, the sound throaty and much too enticing. "Later. I promise. You have fifteen minutes to shower, change, and be ready to go, or I'm leaving without you."

Like hell she was. She wasn't going anywhere dressed like *that*, without him.

He took a quick shower, and because she'd put a time limit on him, he didn't bother to shave the slight stubble shadowing his jaw. He brushed his teeth, quickly dried his hair, and changed into a pair of black jeans and a black dress shirt. In less than ten minutes, he was back in the bedroom and good to go.

Jillian propped her hands on her hips and pouted at him. "That's *so* unfair."

He pushed his feet into a pair of black leather loafers. "What is?"

"It took me over an hour to get ready," she grumbled good-naturedly, "and you look drop-dead gorgeous in just a few minutes' time."

"Just one of the perks of being a low-maintenance kind of guy." Grinning, he closed the distance between them, slid an arm around her waist, and pulled her close so their bodies aligned in all the right places. "However, just for the record, your efforts haven't gone unnoticed. You look stunning and sexy as hell."

She twined her arms around his neck, her gaze warming at the compliment. "Thank you."

He dipped his head and placed a soft, suckling kiss on her exposed neck, and she shivered in response. "You look *so* sexy, I'd rather just have you all to myself tonight," he breathed into her ear as he skimmed a hand down to the short hem of her dress and teased the tips of his fingers along the inside of her thigh.

She moaned, but instead of melting into him as he'd expected, she pushed his hand away and stepped back out of his embrace. "Nice try, but you owe me a night out. I've been patient and understanding all week while you worked late at the office, and I deserve to be rewarded."

He could think of a dozen different ways to *reward* her, none of which required leaving this bedroom, but she was intent on getting her way, and honestly, there was little he could deny his wife.

"Okay, let's do this," he said indulgently, figuring the sooner she got all her restlessness out of her system, the sooner they'd be back home and he could have her soft and willing beneath him.

"Trust me; you're going to enjoy yourself tonight, too." Promises and a bit of excitement glimmered in her eyes as she grabbed his car keys from the dresser then sashayed toward the bedroom door. "Come on. Let's go. Oh, and I'm driving tonight," she tossed over her shoulder.

He followed after her while processing her announcement that *she* was going to be sitting in the driver's seat, literally and figuratively, he was beginning to realize. Clearly, Jillian had something planned, and the evening's events were already thought out. He was just along for the wild ride.

She'd only driven his Aston Martin a few times, and never with such purpose and exhilaration. He watched as she expertly navigated the road in the sleek sports car, with one hand on the wheel and the other on the gear shift. Her fingers wrapped around the wooden knob, and her thumb absently glided over the smooth, rounded top—and there was no doubt in his mind that she was deliberately evoking mental images of her stroking something more phallic.

He had to admit that Jillian looked smokin' *hot* driving his car, in a tight pink dress, five-inch heels, and her full breasts pushed up even more by the seat belt strap across her chest. Sitting in the low-slung leather seat had bunched the hem of her dress up high, and every time she shifted the gears the sleek muscles in her thighs flexed oh-so-temptingly.

There was a newfound confidence about her tonight, in the way she handled the vehicle and even in the way she'd handled *him*. The slight smile curving her lips hinted at secrets she'd yet to reveal, and it suddenly dawned on Dean that he had no idea where she was taking him so late on a Friday night.

"Care to let me know where we're going?" he asked.

She cast a quick, teasing glance his way. "It's a surprise."

He frowned, not liking her answer. "You know I don't like surprises." At least not ones that he couldn't anticipate or figure out ahead of time. He liked being prepared and ready, and not knowing what awaited him not only went against that rein of control he liked to maintain, but

also left him feeling too uncertain and antsy.

“Trust me,” she said. “You’re going to like this surprise, so stop sulking like a little boy who isn’t getting his way, or I just might have to spank *you* for a change.”

“I’d like to see you try,” he said arrogantly.

She laughed, unfazed by his words, or tone. “Big, bad Dean. You are *so* scary,” she said, clearly mocking him. Clearly unafraid of him or his threats.

The corner of his mouth twitched, but he refused to let her see him grin and ruin his big, bad reputation. So, instead, he settled back into his seat and waited *impatiently* to find out their final destination.

A relatively short time later, they were driving through San Diego’s Gaslamp Quarter, and Jillian finally pulled up behind the few cars waiting to valet park at the Stingaree, an upscale, exclusive night-club. So *not* his thing.

The car’s windows were rolled up, but he could hear the loud music pouring out of the entrance as people entered and exited the establishment. A long line of people stood alongside the building, waiting for a chance to get inside. Considering the late hour and the crowd, there was little chance they would make it *into* the club.

He was more relieved than disappointed.

“Jillian, the line to get in is a mile long,” he pointed out, hoping to convince her to head back home instead of wasting time hanging around for the next few hours. “The only way we’d get in tonight is being on the guest list.”

“Which we are,” she said as she eased the car up one more spot and flashed him a bright, I-got-it-covered grin. “Raina made a phone call for me, and all we have to do is check in with the bouncer at the front door and we’re in.”

Damn. He frowned out the passenger-side window, trying not to let his defeat show.

She wriggled in her seat, and he glanced over to see what she was doing. He stared in confusion as she reached beneath the short hem of her dress and skimmed her panties down her legs and off—not an easy feat in such cramped quarters.

What the hell was she doing?

She dangled the hot pink lace thong in front of him. “Hold on to these for me, will you?” she asked, her tone much too nonchalant, as if she stripped her panties off in public all the time.

He was so stunned and thrown by the unexpected action that he was rendered momentarily speechless. When he didn’t immediately reach for the scrap of fabric, she dropped it into his lap and pulled up another notch in line. A young man dressed in an attendant uniform jogged toward their car.

“You really should put those away before the valet opens the door,” Jillian suggested, amusement in her voice.

He snatched up the panties and shoved them into his jeans’ front pocket just seconds before the driver’s-side door opened and the kid, who was right about the same age as his sons, offered Jillian a hand to help her out of the seat—and all Dean could think was *Jesus Christ, she isn’t wearing any underwear and we’re about to head into a crowded, rowdy night club!*

He quickly got out of the car and met up with Jillian as she headed up to the entrance. Sure enough, their names were on a guest list granting them access to the exclusive mezzanine level, and the bouncer unhooked the red rope and let them pass through.

Dean tried one last time to get his wife to change her mind, using the only excuse he had left. “Jillian, you know I don’t like to dance.”

“I know, and I don’t expect you to,” she said over her shoulder as they followed a club host

up the stairs to the mezzanine level, and away from the massively crowded main lounge. “You’re here to *watch*.”

Watch *what*? Other than her ass—which was bare beneath that short dress—as they climbed the stairs to the second floor. She was being much too vague, and it was starting to unnerve him. “Jillian—”

They’d reached the mezzanine level, and she turned around, cutting him off before he could voice his concern. “This is where we part ways, and you enjoy the show.” She gave him a little finger wave and strolled toward the bar, drawing the attention of too many men in the area.

He stared after Jillian, her words, and their meaning, slamming into him full force. He was here to watch *her*, and the *show* she was referring to was the fantasy he’d revealed to her a few weeks ago . . . *I’ve thought about taking you to a night club wearing something really sexy and watching you dance and flirt with other guys and turn them on, all the while knowing I’d ultimately be the one to bury myself deep inside your sweet cunt.*

Holy shit. She was really going to go through with it and bring to life a hot scenario he’d only played out in his mind. The *idea* definitely intrigued and turned him on . . . yet as she slid onto one of the vacant seats at the long bar and ordered a drink, and a cluster of men sitting at a nearby table ogled her like vultures eyeing fresh meat, Dean questioned his sanity for letting any of it actually happen.

Then again, Jillian had obviously put a lot of thought into tonight, and he wondered if flirting with another man gave her a secret thrill, too.

Willing to see how things played out, Dean headed to the opposite end of the bar and sat down on a stool that gave him a clear view of Jillian, because he didn’t intend to let her out of his sight. The male bartender delivered her glass of white wine, while the server at his end of the bar poured Dean a shot of premium scotch.

It didn’t take long for one of the guys, who’d been watching Jillian since the moment she’d strolled across the room, to break away from his pack of friends and approach her at the bar. The blond-haired man came up beside Jillian, his own drink in hand, and started talking to her. Dean had never mastered the art of reading lips, and he was dying to know what the other man was saying that put a bemused smile on her face.

Dean shifted restlessly in his seat and exhaled a deep breath. The guy hitting on his wife was at least ten years younger than Jillian, but at thirty-six, she was still extremely beautiful, with youthful features and a *real* woman’s body—and clearly the guy was appreciating her assets because his eyes kept straying to the full, soft breasts displayed by the low-cut neckline of her dress.

Jillian turned more fully toward her admirer and gracefully crossed her legs—*thank God!* They continued to chat, laugh, and flirt while Jillian finished her glass of wine. All harmless banter, until the blond Adonis boldly placed his hand on her bare thigh and leaned in close to say something in Jillian’s ear and Dean nearly came unhinged.

She wasn’t wearing any goddamn panties!

His fingers tightened around his glass of Scotch and he forced himself to stay put, which took extreme effort. *Did the guy not see the fucking three-carat diamond on her ring finger?* The one Dean had given to her on their tenth anniversary to replace the thin gold band she’d worn since the day he’d married her at the tender age of eighteen. The Harry Winston bauble was damn hard to miss, considering it nearly blinded Dean from where he sat across the room. She’d done nothing to hide the wedding ring, so obviously the Adonis didn’t give a shit that she was married.

The guy said something else then inclined his head toward the stairs that led down to the main lounge. Jillian nodded in agreement and slid off the wooden seat, allowing the guy to escort her to the dance floor. Dean quickly downed the last of his drink, tossed a twenty to the bartender, and followed the two of them at a discreet distance. By the time he reached the clear glass railing framing the mezzanine level, they were already down below, engulfed in the sea of people dancing to the pulsing beat of the music.

From the second level, he had a straight-on view of the two of them, and it was both arousing and agonizing to watch Jillian dance with another man. Her body moved fluidly, sensually. Her hips swayed, her head fell back, and she put her arms above her head and executed an erotic shimmy that made her partner's eyes glaze over with lust.

The Adonis reached for her, put his hands on her waist, and spun her around so that Jillian's backside tucked right up against his groin. He began dirty dancing with her, grinding his hips against her ass, and a red haze of fury filled Dean's vision. He prided himself on being calm and controlled. He wasn't a violent man, but at the moment he wanted to kill the other man for touching Jillian so intimately.

He'd had enough, seen enough. A possessive rage clamored inside him as he made his way down to the main lounge then onto the dance floor, pushing his way through the throng of party revelers to get to his wife. His angry reaction was stronger than he ever would have imagined, confirming the knowledge that he wasn't the kind of man who could *ever* share. Jillian was *his*, and only his. And always would be.

He reached the two of them and shoved the man away from Jillian, making the crowd part around them. "Get the fuck away from her," Dean yelled above the music.

The guy stumbled back a few steps then bristled and puffed his chest out when he saw Dean, prepping for a fight.

Dean was more than ready to swing a fist or two. His entire body was filled with a tension that badly needed a release. This close, Dean was bigger than the other guy, stronger than him, and trained to *kill* with his bare hands. Yeah, he definitely had the advantage.

"What the hell?" the Adonis shouted back irritably.

Jillian's eyes were wide and startled. "Dean—"

"She's with *me*," Dean growled menacingly and stepped in front of Jillian in an unmistakable territorial gesture.

Seeing the dark, murderous expression on Dean's face, and realizing he was no match for him in size and strength, the other man put his hands up in a truce-like gesture. "I swear I didn't know, man!"

Dean almost felt sorry for the other man, except the Adonis had blatantly ignored the fact that Jillian was clearly spoken for. He grabbed Jillian's wrist and thrust her left hand up into the guy's face. "She's wearing a goddamn wedding ring, asshole," he pointed out furiously, knowing that his temper was on the verge of really exploding. "Are you fucking *blind*?"

By now, the people around them had stopped dancing and had become spectators. The Adonis's face had turned red in embarrassment. "Sorry, man," he said, his tone sincere. "Nothing happened."

Dean glared, his hand curling into a tight fist he wanted to plant against the guy's chiseled jaw. "Damn right nothing happened!"

Jillian tugged on his arm, trying to pull his attention away from the other man. "Dean, let's go," she said, the distress in her voice finally penetrating the fog of outrage clouding his brain.

A part of him acknowledged that he was being irrational, but the jealousy burning in his gut

had turned him into a raving mad-man, and he absolutely *hated* the loss of control. Before security came to diffuse the situation and escort them out, Dean clasped Jillian's hand in his and pulled her toward the exit. Once they were outside, he handed his valet ticket to an attendant, and a few minutes later his car arrived.

Jillian remained quiet until they were secluded in the car and he was on the road back to their house. His hands wrapped tightly around the wheel, his knuckles nearly white from his unrelenting grip, and his jaw was clenched so hard his teeth were grinding. He couldn't remember ever feeling this angry, this hot-headed, this *possessive* of his wife.

He was undeniably infuriated, but he was also bristling with heat-fueled lust and desire, and those intense, conflicting emotions were wreaking havoc with his mind and body. Need sizzled over his skin, adding to his internal battle to claim Jillian, to brand her, to make certain there wasn't a question in her mind that she belonged to *him*.

"Dean, are you okay?" she asked, her tone hesitant and worried.

"No," he bit out. "I'm fucking *livid*."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her wince. "I thought you wanted—"

"Do *not* say another fucking word," he bit out, and immediately felt bad for snapping at her. His foul mood wasn't Jillian's fault. He *knew* that. He'd openly shared tonight's fantasy with her, had told her how much it would turn him on to be a voyeur while she flirted with another man, knowing he'd be the one to fuck her later, but he'd never expected reality to be so agonizing to watch. Never anticipated the twist and slicing pain of fear to nearly shred him apart—because good God, what if she'd *liked* having another man's hands all over her and he suddenly wasn't enough?

The thought made him insane, and he couldn't get home fast enough to reclaim what was his, to dominate every inch of Jillian and make sure that it was *his* scent that was imprinted all over her, inside and out, by the time he was done with her.

The moment they stepped inside the house, Dean pushed her up against the nearest wall, pinning her there with the muscular strength of his body. Bracing his hands on either side of her head, she looked up at him, her gaze wary and uncertain in the darkened shadows, and he asked the one question he couldn't get out of his head, no matter how hard he tried.

"Did you like him touching you?" he asked, his voice a low, feral growl.

"Yes," she admitted, very hesitantly, but honestly. "It was different and fun, but I kept thinking about *you*."

"What about me?" he demanded.

She licked her bottom lip, her gaze bright with excitement, making Dean realize that his barbaric attitude was actually turning her on.

"I kept thinking about how good it was going to feel when you finally fucked me like you promised," she whispered, seducing him with her words. "It made me so hot knowing you were watching, that you were probably hard and thinking of all the different ways you wanted to take me once you had me alone. Thinking of *you* made me wet, not him."

He groaned, silently relieved by her admission.

Thrusting his hand into her hair, he twisted the strands around his fingers and pulled her head back, so that her mouth was just inches below his. "You weren't wearing any panties," he said gruffly, still unable to believe she'd shucked them only seconds before they'd exited the car.

"That was just to make things more exciting."

He pushed his hand beneath the hem of her dress and lightly traced the swollen, saturated folds of her sex, just enough to tease and torment her. "The thought of him touching your cunt

made me goddamn crazy,” he muttered.

Her breathing deepened as he drew lazy circles around her clit. “I . . . I wouldn’t have let that happen.”

“Me, either,” he said fiercely. “Why do you think I stopped things when I did?”

She laughed softly, huskily. “Yeah, um, about that, you acted like an uncivilized caveman.”

“I don’t give a shit. That’s my right as your husband,” he said, tightening his fingers in her hair and tugging on her scalp so hard that she gasped. “You’re *mine*, Jillian.”

She moaned helplessly. “Yes.”

“Your body is *mine*,” he said, and thrust two long fingers deep inside her.

She inhaled sharply, and her hips instinctively jerked forward. “Yes.”

“Your orgasms are *mine*.” He glided his thumb across her clitoris, adding just enough pressure and friction to make her tremble with a need only *he* knew how to appease.

Her eyes darkened with desire as she rolled her hips, seeking the release he was holding just out of her reach. “Yes.”

He skimmed his lips up to her ear, his breath hot and damp against her skin. “I own you, Jillian. Heart and soul,” he said harshly, not caring how possessive or barbaric he sounded.

“Always,” she whispered, her reply heartfelt and true.

“I will fucking kill any man who dares to touch you without my permission.” His tone was ruthless, his threat real. “You belong to me. Only me. Do you understand?”

She lifted a hand and touched his face, forcing him to look into her beautiful, honest eyes.

“Yes, I’m yours, Dean. There’s only ever been you. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted or needed, in every way. There will never be another man who excites me as much as you do.”

Incredibly humbled by her declaration, Dean took her mouth in a soul-deep, tongue-tangling kiss that professed just how much he adored her. That he’d never be able to get enough of her. He pumped his fingers deep inside her body and caressed that hard nub of flesh, stoking her internal fire until she was dripping and writhing against his hand with the need to come.

He gave her body what it craved. She splintered apart, and he swallowed her unraveling moan. Her thighs shook, and her internal muscles clenched tight and hot around his fingers as she climaxed.

When he was done extracting every last bit of her orgasm, she sagged against the wall, her knees buckling. Without hesitation, and proving he was the barbarian she’d accused him of being, he hoisted her over his shoulder caveman-style and carried her to their bedroom.

“Seriously, Dean?” she said, laughter in her voice as her upper body bounced against his back.

“Oh, you have no idea just how seriously *uncivilized* I can be,” he said, and swatted her ass, hard, eliciting a startled yelp from her.

Once they were in the bedroom, he set her back down on her feet and easily slipped into the role of aggressive alpha-male. He wasn’t even close to branding her tonight, to claiming the body that was made for his pleasure. When he was done with her, she would be utterly and completely satiated and marked by him.

“Take off your dress, now, before I tear it off you,” he ordered as he stripped off his own shirt then removed his shoes and socks. “I want everything off but your heels.”

Heat and excitement flared in her eyes as she quickly got rid of her dress then her bra. She stood before him, gloriously naked, those stilettos accentuating her long legs and making his dick pulse with lust.

“Sit on the bed and lay back, so your legs are dangling over the edge.”

Jillian did exactly as he instructed, and he strolled over to her, drinking in the sight of her all spread out for his enjoyment, her face flushed a soft shade of pink. Her hair was disheveled around her head, and her plump breasts were full, her nipples tight. Her stomach was curved and soft, and her mound was still waxed and bare. He couldn't see in-between her legs, couldn't look his fill of her gorgeous pussy because her thighs were closed much too primly, and he rectified that problem immediately.

He pressed his hands to the knees bent over the edge of the mattress and shoved them wide apart, a little more roughly than he'd intended. She gasped in shock but didn't fight him, didn't try and deny Dean what he wanted. She stared at him so trustingly, and that need to possess her swirled inside of him once again. Fierce, dominant emotions rose to the surface, heating his blood and thickening his cock.

He slid his splayed palms up her thighs, spreading her legs even more, until she was completely, indecently exposed to his avid gaze. He inhaled her musky scent, and his nostrils flared as the drugging essence of her seeped into his pores. "This is *mine*, Jillian," he said, and moved in to claim what was his.

"Yes," she breathed, and gasped when he pressed his open mouth against her sex.

His tongue parted her folds, hot and assertive, and he feasted and sucked on her as if she were a sweet, succulent, juicy peach. She cried out, both of her hands gripping fistfuls of his hair while her hips jerked against his determined, single-minded assault to make her come.

It didn't take long. His mouth devoured and pillaged, his tongue hit all her hot spots, and her entire body arched and shuddered as he sent her careening straight into ecstasy. She screamed hoarsely as she rode the intense waves of her orgasm, while his cock pulsed painfully beneath the confinement of denim.

Before she had a chance to fully recover, he flipped her over onto her stomach, her five-inch heels on the floor making her the perfect height for him to fuck from behind—just how he wanted it. Primal and animalistic. He tore at the buttons on his jeans, finally freeing the massive length of his cock while Jillian widened her stance and arched her hips to accommodate him better.

He dragged the head of his cock along her drenched pussy, but didn't thrust into her. Instead, he daringly glided the slick, moist tip of his erection between the cheeks of her ass, all the way up to that forbidden place he'd yet to claim. He'd expected her to protest, or maybe redirect him back to that safety zone, but instead she pushed her bottom against him and looked over her shoulder, her gaze heavy-lidded as she surrendered her body to him.

"Do it, Dean," she said huskily. "Take me the way you want to, the way *I* want you to."

He released a heat-filled breath. Her permission was like a precious gift, the pleasure of which was all for him. It was like taking her virginity all over again, and he was determined to make this so good for her, too.

He dipped his fingers into her cunt, using the thick, creamy moisture to liberally coat the length of his cock and to ease his way inside her ass. Satisfied that she was well lubricated, he positioned the tip of his shaft and slowly, gradually pressed forward. He was much larger, much thicker, much longer than the anal plug he'd used on her, and he immediately felt her body's resistance as the broad crown breached her.

She stiffened and moaned, her fingers curling into the comforter beneath her.

"Relax, baby girl," he murmured as he smoothed a hand down the slope of her spine, gently petting her, soothing her. "Just breathe and don't fight it. I want this to be so good, for both of us."

Eventually, the tension in her eased, allowing him to continue. He pushed in slowly, with more restraint than he ever believed possible when he was dying to be buried to the hilt. Holding on to her hips, he advanced inch by inch, watching as she took *all of him*, until he was fully embedded inside her.

He groaned, low and deep. Oh, fuck. She felt so tight and hot gripping him. His balls ached, and his dick was so engorged and rigid he had to forcibly resist the urge to rut into her like a savage beast.

But this wasn't just about him, and he leaned over her back, aligning their bodies and nuzzling her neck to give her time to adjust to the burning sensation of fullness.

"You feel so fucking amazing," he whispered into her ear as he pried her hands from the bed covers. He stretched her arms above her head and entwined his fingers with hers, pinning her completely beneath the strength and weight of his body. "Are you ready for me to fuck you?"

She turned her head to the side, her lashes fluttering closed. "I'm . . . I'm not sure."

He kissed her cheek, her jaw, the corner of her mouth. "I'll go slow, baby girl," he promised in a too-strained voice, and unable to wait a second longer to claim her, he finally *moved*.

He rocked gently against her bottom, slowly withdrawing before sliding into her again. The next thrust was a little harder. The one after that harder, and deeper, still. Each flex of his hips wrung a louder groan from her throat, and eventually, gradually, she softened beneath him.

"Oh, God, Dean . . ." Unexpectedly, she lifted her ass against his groin and pushed back onto him. Moaning, she arched her neck while rolling her hips in a sweet little grinding motion that made his eyes roll back in his head and shattered his control.

Knowing he was close to coming, he released one of her hands and slid his fingers between her legs, manipulating her clit with just the right amount of pressure and friction to set her off again. She began chanting his name like a prayer, and he powered more firmly into her, increasing in speed and force.

As soon as her cries of pleasure rent the air he gave himself over to his own searing orgasm. He threw back his head and howled like a primal, mating wolf as he emptied himself inside her, satisfaction and pleasure pummeling his body.

Utterly wasted, he fell against her, his chest blanketing her back and his face buried in the crook of her neck.

"*Mine*," he grunted for good measure, and felt her laugh beneath him.

The Decision

A short while later, Dean lay in bed with Jillian curled against his side, her head on his chest, an arm draped across his waist, and her legs tangled with his. Her breathing was deep and even, peaceful and content, and while his body and mind were exhausted after everything they'd done, he couldn't sleep.

He couldn't stop thinking about tonight, and how his incredible wife had so boldly fulfilled not just one of his fantasies, but two. But after watching her flirt with another man, he had to admit that some fantasies were better left to the imagination, rather than played out in reality. He was grateful that Jillian had been open-minded enough to give him what he'd said he wanted . . . but she was *his*. He loved her, adored her, and tonight's scene at the club solidified the fact that only *he* had the right to touch her. For him, that point was non-negotiable.

Damn, but he was a lucky man, and he was so pleased that Jillian had taken the initiative to add a bit of spice to their sex life. As a result, their marriage was stronger, their intimacy closer and deeper, and there was a level of trust between them that paved the way for something else he had in mind. Something that had always tempted him, but he'd never believed that Jillian would agree to.

Until now.

Their twentieth wedding anniversary was next month, and there was a very special present he wanted to give his wife . . . but it was also something that would test the bond they were forging, while pushing their erotic limits. It was a gift that would either intrigue Jillian and enhance their sexual bliss, or she'd flat-out refuse his proposition.

Either way, he'd respect her decision.

* * * *

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Chapter One

“I can’t believe you’re getting a drink with me instead of going home to your wife. Don’t *even* tell me that there’s trouble in paradise.”

Dean grinned at his best friend, Brent “Mac” MacMillan, who sat on a bar stool beside him at a local joint they frequented after work to relax and unwind. Though, admittedly, ever since Jillian had shown up at Dean’s office weeks ago and propositioned him with spicing up their sex lives, he’d spent a helluva lot more time at home with his wife, than hanging out with the guys.

“Trust me, the only reason I’m sitting here with you instead of being at home with Jillian is because I have a huge favor to ask.”

“Anything,” Mac said sincerely. “Just ask and it’s yours.”

Dean knew he spoke the truth because they’d always had each other’s backs. They’d met in the Navy and served in the same SEAL platoon and were now business partners at Noble and Associates, the security firm that Dean and Mac had established when they’d retired from the military a few years ago. The two of them had started the company doing oddball security gigs, but with their training and experience they’d quickly become a prominent, multi-million dollar firm specializing in executive protection and corporate threat management.

Becoming a successful, viable corporation had taken a lot of time and dedication on both their parts, but all the blood, sweat, and leaner times had been well worth the sacrifice. Dean couldn’t imagine any other partner than Mac. He was the brother Dean never had, and the one person he trusted implicitly.

Dean took a drink from his bottle of beer before getting to the point of the conversation. “Remember a few years ago when you asked if I was interested in an invitation to The Players Club?” The Players Club, a huge, massive estate located outside of San Diego in the hills of Fallbrook, was an exclusive, members-only society that catered to the erotic and forbidden. The only way to get inside the private, elite mansion was by invitation only by a current member, which Mac was.

“Yeah, I remember,” Mac replied, a hint of curiosity tingeing his drawl. “And I distinctly recall you turning down the offer saying it wasn’t Jillian’s thing. Has that changed?”

“Possibly.” He’d never brought up the subject of The Players Club to his wife, but considering how open-minded Jillian had become, he figured it was a good time to introduce yet another fantasy he’d entertained for years. And with their twentieth anniversary coming up, it seemed like the perfect gift, for the both of them.

Mac studied Dean for a moment before realization dawned. “Does this have anything to do with that day when Jillian dropped by your office, the two of you spent some time alone, and she left with a big smile on her face and looking a bit disheveled?”

“Noticed that, did you?”

A knowing smirk curved the corner of Mac’s lips. “Along with the fact that you couldn’t concentrate on shit after she walked out.”

Dean laughed, unable to deny his friend’s claim. He had very fond memories of that day in his office—the day that changed so much between him and his wife, for the better. “Jillian has decided that with both the boys grown and out of the house, it’s time to focus on us and making

our sex life more interesting and daring.”

“And how’s that working out?” Mac asked before finishing off his beer.

“Fucking fantastic.” Dean grinned. He wasn’t one to share details, but he had to admit that even beyond the phenomenal sex, they’d become closer as a couple. Their relationship was more intimate, their interaction on a daily basis more fun and flirty.

“Lucky bastard,” Mac muttered begrudgingly.

“What are you complaining about?” Dean asked, amused by his friend’s envious statement. “You always have some hot bombshell ready and willing to warm your bed.”

“Not the same thing.” Mac sighed as he absently wiped away the condensation on his beer bottle with his fingers. “You’re lucky because your marriage has lasted nearly twenty years and you still seem to be enjoying a smokin’ hot sex life. Do you know how rare that is?”

Realizing which road they were suddenly traveling, Dean grew serious. “You tried really hard to make your marriage work, Mac. You just rescued the wrong woman, and you never should have married her.”

Mac’s lips thinned, as they always did whenever they talked about the one woman who’d ripped his heart out and stomped on it for good measure. “I’m done rescuing. Period. It’s not worth the fucking hassle or emotional turmoil.”

Dean didn’t argue, and just hoped that the *right* woman came along to change Mac’s mind someday. But at the age of thirty-six, Mac was set in his ways and certain he was better off a bachelor who kept things simple and temporary. And being a member of The Players Club offered him easy, uncomplicated sex with a woman who enjoyed the same level of kink that he did.

“So, do you think Jillian is ready for a place like The Players Club?” Mac asked, effectively changing the subject off him and his failed marriage.

“I think she could be, yes,” Dean replied. “She’s become more adventurous lately, so I’d like to give her the option of accepting the invitation, or not, though I’m *not* interested in swinging or sharing.” As he’d already learned that night she’d taken him to a night club, that point was absolutely non-negotiable.

“Trust me, there’s something for everyone at The Players Club,” Mac said, obviously speaking from his own personal experience. “And there are certain basic rules, and everyone abides by them or they’re immediately banned. Nobody’s going to touch Jillian.”

“Not if they value their lives,” Dean said, meaning it.

Mac chuckled and pushed his empty beer bottle across the bar. “Are you sure she’ll be okay?” he asked, concern lacing his voice. “And I’m not referring to just the sexual atmosphere, but the fact that she’ll know people there. Like me, and a lot of our other guys.”

Dean had already thought about that. “You’ve already assured me that there is a confidentiality clause in the contract that everyone signs, so I’m assuming that whatever happens at the club, stays at the club?”

Mac nodded. “Yes, and for those clients who don’t know you, there are no last names exchanged to protect your privacy, as well.”

Which was all very reassuring to Dean. “Then it’s up to Jillian and how comfortable she is with everything.” She would be the deciding factor, because he wasn’t going to put his wife in situation that made her uneasy.

“Fair enough,” Mac said in understanding. “I’ll make a call and you should have the invitation in a few days.”

“Perfect.” Just in time for their twentieth anniversary. “I appreciate it.”

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